

SALVAGED



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“We salvage the bones of our lives every day,
through small tragedies and big tragedies.”

— *Jesmyn Ward*

SALVAGED: Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Anthology
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NONFICTION

EDITORS' CHOICE

Imperfect Machines

Joyce Hinnefeld

I have my mother's hands. When I stare at my hands now, at age sixty, the likeness shocks me. Like my mother's, the joints of my fingers are swollen, stiff and painful in the early morning— particularly the fingers of my right hand. The rings on my right hand bump up against the knobby centers of my fingers, as my mother's narrow wedding band and tiny diamond ring once did on her left. I watched her hands at work for many years—kneading bread, rolling pie dough, crocheting afghans and pillow covers, and deftly feeding slippery synthetic fabrics below the pounding needle of her last Singer machine, the one I remember best because it was the one on which she tried to teach me to sew.

I also have a number of things that belonged to my mother, who died in May 2011 at age eighty-six. Several essays written in her tidy, delicate longhand on pages of lined paper, from her years in a small rural high school. Lots of old photographs, some of them of her, including a colorized portrait—also from high school—in which her brown hair is darkened, her lips ruby red. Crocheted baby sweaters, handmade quilts, lace doilies, five-year diaries from her years as a young mother, recording loads of laundry washed, pies baked, hot summer nights when she and my father and my three older brothers slept outside in the backyard. And a spare closet full of items that she sewed, first for herself and then for me.

I gleaned most of these items during two rounds of sorting and clearing of the house where my three older brothers and I grew up and where my parents lived for sixty years, in a small town in southern Indiana. The first round, in which my brothers, sisters-in-law, and I divided or disposed of many of my mother's things, happened at my father's insistence, after she died. The second was more recent, following my father's death in March 2018. That

time we emptied the house completely, and I brought still more of my mother's things home to my house in eastern Pennsylvania.

The human hand is a perfect machine until it isn't. Like other machines, it ages, and breaks down. Ruth Brandon, author of *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance*, sees a true inventor's imagination at work in both the sewing machine and the typewriter, each of which devised a more efficient—and completely different—means of accomplishing a task that was formerly much more cumbersome, performed by slow, unreliable fingers gripping a needle, or a quill or pen. Even work done with the aid of machines, though, can exhaust a human hand. Besides sewing, my mother worked as a secretary for much of her adult life; she sewed *and* she typed, gradually stiffening and wearing out both her hands.

She sewed happily, even serenely; sewing, for my mother, was a reprieve from the endless rounds of cooking, cleaning, laundry, and ironing that filled so much of her time. I can still see her, adjusting her glasses and leaning in to thread the machine, then aligning pinned sections of a dress or blouse, lowering the lever that positioned the needle, spinning the wheel at the side of the machine and putting her foot to the pedal below it. She guided the fabric—always something brightly colored, often floral, if she was sewing for herself—below the rapidly moving needle, producing a quick and perfect seam.

I have another, later, memory, from when she was still living at home with my father but using a walker to make her way through the first-floor rooms of the house because she'd been falling, at random and unexpected moments, for several years. This time she is sewing by hand, and what she's making are tiny articles of clothing for my three-year-old daughter's Barbies—a formal gown, a bikini, several skirts and tops. Did she use patterns for these? I don't remember. She'd have had some still, probably, from almost forty years before, when she sewed Barbie clothes for me.

In this memory my mother smiles and laughs, chatting with my daughter at the kitchen table as her stiff and swollen fingers

maneuver the tiny needle through fabric scraps my father has brought up from the basement. Her face and belly don't yet display the roundness brought on by the steroids she'll eventually be prescribed—the ones that will also make her diabetic. She's probably in pain, though she says nothing about that. She would have gotten the diagnosis of polymyositis, a rare autoimmune disorder, at around this time. But she still wanted to make doll clothes for her granddaughter during one of our visits from Pennsylvania.

Until I was a young woman, she made a lot of my clothes. I still have two of the dresses she made for me and that I wore to work in Chicago in the mid-1980s—but stopped wearing to work when I moved to New York in 1987. There's a photo of me from around that time, wearing one of those dresses and seated next to my mother in front of the Christmas tree in my parents' house. One of my brothers has that photo and a number of other ones from one of the countless albums stacked on shelves in my father's study during our final round of clearing the house. Maybe he'd scan them, he said, piling the albums on the floor with the good intentions most of us start with when emptying out our deceased parents' houses.

But eventually, when you're sorting through sixty years of your Depression-era parents' lives, exhaustion overtakes you. You have jobs and families to return to. You've already made three runs to the Goodwill drop-off center ten miles away that day. The people from the auction house are coming in two days, and the realtor needs a clean and empty house to list. And so a number of those photo albums, and a lot of other things, ended up in a twenty-foot dumpster parked in the house's driveway. Including, I fear, my mother's last sewing machine.

The dress I'm wearing in that photo hangs in my closet more than thirty years later, along with a random assortment of other articles of clothing that my mother sewed for me. A tiny baton twirler costume. A pioneer girl dress from our Indiana hometown's sesquicentennial celebration in 1966, when I was five. Cheerleading uniforms from junior high. My high school *Fiddler*

on the *Roof* costume, a gathered skirt and matching blouse, along with a vest made from a deep blue velvet not likely seen in any turn-of-the-century Russian shtetl. And a couple of jackets—one a wool blend, one cotton broadcloth—that were in keeping with the styles of the time but remind me, now, of the suit jacket David Byrne wore in *Stop Making Sense*.

The construction of every one of these items, down to every finished seam and every perfectly positioned shoulder pad, is impeccable. Most people would need a tailor to get a dress or jacket like the ones my mother sewed for me, and there would be a word for it: *bespoke*. One of a kind, made singularly for the person who would wear it.

The dress I'm wearing in that photo is made from a fabric with a bold black-and-red herringbone pattern—but not wool, something slicker than that, a bit shinier and softer to the touch. It's a lovely dress, made from some sort of synthetic blend in a form-fitting shirtwaist style, hemmed to just below the knee and belted at the waist with a black faux-leather belt. It also has shoulder pads. I always think of this dress and the one hanging next to it in my closet now—this one more of a traditional herringbone, black and white, a wool blend, a bit shorter and best worn with black heels and black, semi-sheer stockings—as my Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl* dresses. I worked in Chicago for two years after college, and I wore those dresses regularly back then. Only when I moved to New York did I stop wearing dresses my mother made for me—except, apparently, when I returned to Indiana for Christmas and put on a dress my mother had made for me once again, to wear to church with her and for a photo taken in front of the tree.

My mother was a meticulous sewer. But the word *sewer* sounds wrong; the proper word would seem to be seamstress. But how can I opt for as archaic and gendered a word as that? Try finding other options though. *Tailor*. (Tailor, we all know, is male.) Tailoress. Dressmaker. *Dressmaker* also sounds weirdly gendered. And why is that? Only designer works for either gender, and as perfectly constructed as those dresses are, they were not designed

by my mother. Everything she sewed for me was made by using a purchased pattern.

I still think you could call both of those dresses hanging in my closet bespoke though. They're one of a kind—made from a widely available commercial pattern, true, but with a unique and carefully chosen fabric, and sewn specifically for me. Which makes the fact that by the time that photo in front of the Christmas tree was taken, I'd stopped wearing those dresses—except on trips back to Indiana to see my parents—seem kind of thoughtless and cavalier to me now. Someone, at some point, must have let me know that dresses sewn by my mother weren't quite right for someone living and working in New York. That those dresses, lovingly bespoke or not, were in fact a little embarrassing. Eventually I wore mostly clothes with labels (not designer ones) bought from stores like Daffy's and The Gap.

Funny, now, to recall my younger self feeling more confident in a dress straight off the rack. Made far away, no doubt by someone laboring under dreadful conditions, for pennies. Though ready-to-wear wasn't quite so cheap back then, and stores like H&M and Old Navy weren't yet open in the U.S. And no one was wearing yoga pants and a nice t-shirt to work, much less logging onto a laptop in the sweats they'd slept in. (Not that I'm averse to this; not needing a work wardrobe has been an undeniable boon of online teaching and meetings, for me.)

In my memory, my mother sewed exclusively on machines from the Singer Company. I never thought to ask why. I suppose I saw this as a choice like others in our home. Ford, not Chevrolet. The St. Louis Cardinals, not the Cincinnati Reds. The *Louisville Courier Journal*, not the *Indianapolis Star*. Democrat, not Republican—though the latter hadn't been true for my mother's family, who'd remained loyal to the party of Lincoln, as she sometimes reminded us, when others got on board with FDR and the New Deal. There was a logic to each of these choices, I suppose, though I never asked about it. I know my father admired Stan Musial. I once heard my grandmother, his mother, say that even

the chickens on their farm refused to roost above layers of the Republican *Indianapolis Star*. And I now know that the Singer Company out-marketed, outlasted, or bought out its various competitors, dominating the sewing machine market until the 1960s.

Isaac Singer patented his version of the sewing machine in 1851, but Elias Howe actually came first, patenting his lock-stitch machine using double thread in 1846. There'd been others before them: sewing machine-related patents for the German Charles Weisenthal in 1755, the British Thomas Saint in 1790, the French Barthelemy Thimonnier in 1830. It was American inventor Walter Hunt who actually devised the crucial lock stitch, the thing that made a successful sewing machine—one that could produce something other than the easily unraveled, hand-sewn chain stitch—possible.

When, in 1838, Hunt proposed to his daughter Caroline that she begin a business manufacturing corsets using his sewing machine, she declined because, as a Quaker, she was concerned about the harm such a machine would do to the thousands of poor women who earned their living as seamstresses. Hunt apparently didn't argue, and thereafter lost interest in his sewing machine. Meanwhile, after some years of fighting in the courts, Isaac Singer and Elias Howe joined as part of a sewing machine “patent combine,” or monopoly, comprising Singer, Howe, Wilson & Wheeler, and Grover and Baker, in 1856

Sewing machines were marketed to middle class men for their wives, though most were sold to garment manufacturers. In theory this was a development that would improve the lives of many women—middle- and working-class alike. Sewing machines meant the end of the dreadful pay and hours of “shirtwomen”—women who stitched shirts by hand, mostly in their homes. “With fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red,” wrote Thomas Hood in a poem, “The Song of the Shirt,” published in the British magazine *Punch* in 1843, “A woman sat, in unwomanly rags, / Plying her needle and thread— . . . Sewing at once, with a double thread, / A Shroud as well as a Shirt.”

While a middle-class husband might spend \$125 to purchase a sewing machine for his wife in the mid-nineteenth century (and the Singer Company made early, and canny, use of installment payment plans), no poor shirtwoman could afford such an extravagance. Instead, businessmen bought the heavier models manufacturers produced for tailor shops—in bulk, for around \$100 apiece—placing them in lofts and factories and hiring former shirtwomen as laborers. And so the clothing sweatshop was born.

The sewing machine was perceived as a “machine for women”—a machine even a woman could understand. Though I have to say that I still struggle to understand the complex mechanics of a sewing machine, despite several long-ago years of attempting to learn to sew, first for 4-H projects undertaken with help from my mother, then for home economics class in eighth grade.

One big difference in using a machine to do your sewing was the placement of the eye of the needle: no longer at the top, wider part, but instead at the narrow tip. Thread wended through this needle's eye meets up with additional thread rising from below, often arriving by way of a shuttle connected to a buried bobbin, and together these produce the crucial double-stitches, and a rapidly produced seam. A straight one if you can control the needle's speed and hold the aligned edges steady. I can still feel that tug, the sudden pull on the fabric when you turned the start-up crank on the side of the machine and pressed your foot to the peddle below, launching the needle on its piston-like up-and-down journey and then controlling its speed with the pressure from your foot. It felt a bit like driving a car.

During our first round of house clearing seven years before, my father had asked us to please dispose of all the boxes and bags of fabric scraps and old patterns that were moldering away in the basement. And so we did. I've since regretted getting rid of so many of my mother's things that day, though what would I do, now, with all of her old tissue-paper patterns, each folded and tucked inside its paper envelope with the cartoon-like image of a sleek model wearing the dress or pantsuit or jacket on the cover, under the name Simplicity or McCalls or Butterick? (*Sell them on Ebay!*)

screams a frustrated librarian friend—a quilter—in the margins of a draft of this essay. *Donate them to a library!*)

Ebenezer Butterick made the first graded, or sized, sewing patterns, and patented these in 1863. But it was Ellen Curtis Demorest, publisher of *Demorest's Monthly Magazine and Mme. Demorest's Mirror of Fashions*, owner of a dressmaker and millinery shop and promoter of employment opportunities for both Black and white women, who made the first commercial sewing patterns available in the U.S. She did not patent her patterns though, which is why I never saw her name atop one of the envelopes in my mother's vast collection, and only recently learned who she was.

Demorest was an exception. Fair employment, then as now, was not foremost in the minds of most clothing manufacturers. And the sewing machine, which did present women with more money-making opportunities than ever before, also enabled their horrific exploitation, as we know from accounts of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire up to the 2013 collapse of an eight-story garment factory in Bangladesh that killed over 1,000 people, mostly women; from our uncomfortable awareness of the global wage slaves in China, India, and elsewhere who have long made our affordable, and essentially disposable, ready-to-wear clothing; and, more recently, from what we may have learned about the women in southern Italy and elsewhere, sewing “made in Italy” designer items in their homes for wages that harken back to the lives of nineteenth-century shirtwomen.

Fortunately for me, even though I dropped sewing and eventually quit 4-H altogether, my mother continued to buy the patterns and the fabric, and she did the sewing for me. A new sewing project gave her something to look forward to, she told me once. Particularly when she was the mother of three little boys between the ages of six months and six years, in the mid-1950s.

“Sometimes I felt blue,” she said—a significant admission from my mother, who understood that feelings were real and gave others the space to have them but rarely, short of a few moments of hidden tears or especially vigorous banging of pots and pans as she made

dinner, betrayed what *she* might have been feeling to us, her children. “So I’d get started on sewing something new. And that helped.”

The lives of both of my parents were nearly unimaginable to me as a child; they’re even harder to imagine, or depict, at this twenty-first century moment. They were the grandchildren of German immigrants and children of the Great Depression, from small and not especially prosperous farms in an out-of-the-way county tucked into the southern hills of an out-of-the-way state, long before the age of red state fury—which may be, at least in part, why I’m suddenly regretful over all the things I’ve forgotten or given or thrown away. Why I seem to have turned nostalgic for a world I don’t fully recall and can’t quite summon.

Sometimes, as a child, I played dress-up in some of the formal gowns that my mother had made for herself when she was a young woman. Back then it never occurred to me to ask where, in the rural corn- and soybean-belt town where we lived, my mother wore these elaborate, bare-shouldered, tulle-and-taffeta confections. But some years later, when I was in college, she told me: she’d made those dresses to wear to the high school prom—which she and my father, who taught agriculture and science classes at the local high school, often attended as chaperones.

It broke my heart when she told me that because I was, by then, snidely dismissive of things like the high school prom. How sad, I thought, that she was still making herself dresses for the prom as a married woman, not an ingenuous high school student. But my mother did not find it sad or strange that she made herself lovely gowns to wear to the prom, even as a young mother of three. Everyone made their dresses for prom, in her experience—and prom was the single occasion, in the world she’d lived in all her life, for dressing up in a formal gown. I have one of those gowns in my closet, too; it’s made of yellow silk and tulle, with pleated and stitched netting placed demurely atop the snug and strapless bodice.

My mother’s last sewing machine, a portable one, gathered dust in the basement during the seven years between her death and the death of my father, when we finally finished the job of clearing out

our family home. I say “we,” but when it comes to the basement, I must acknowledge that I did very little of the clearing and cleaning of that space, which had depressed and irrationally frightened me for years. For a while it was just an unhappy workspace—home to the ironing board, the sewing machine, the washer and dryer.

And why *did* my father inherit my first-floor bedroom as his “study,” once my brothers had all left for college and I moved upstairs, while all those domestic tasks were relegated to the basement? By the time I was reading Virginia Woolf and regularly asking questions like that one, my mother had begun falling, the washer and dryer and ironing board and new Bernina sewing machine had been moved to a room added on to the kitchen, and the first-floor bathroom had been reconfigured to allow space for her walker, and eventually her wheelchair.

During those last days of emptying the house I only went down to the basement a couple times, to gather the few things I wanted and to follow along as the auction house representatives made their rounds and told us what they would take to sell. I could have sworn they said they’d take that Bernina sewing machine. So I took a last photo, one that seems to have gone missing from my phone, and told myself to be realistic; my car was full, I wasn’t going to start sewing. I had nowhere to put a sewing machine that I wasn’t going to use. Then, a month after I got back to Pennsylvania, as the date of the auction of the items from my parents’ home approached, I had a sudden change of heart. But when I called to ask if I might make a distant bid on my mother’s last sewing machine, the man I spoke to searched their massive warehouse, then called back to say he couldn’t find it anywhere. Which probably meant it had ended up in the dumpster in the driveway.

I have no idea what that machine would have sold for, had it made it to the auction. I have no idea what I would have been willing to pay to get it back. Women I know who sew and quilt tell me that my mother obviously knew what she was doing, switching from a Singer to an Italian-made Bernina by the time she bought her last machine. Late-model Singers, they say, are mostly junk.

“It can be disconcerting to discover that the scenes of [your] youth are less idyllic than you remember,” say the writers of an online essay on the Merriam-Webster site, “just as it can be when realizing that a word such as *bespoke* might refer to something other than clothing.” In recent years *bespoke* has been used to describe pizzas, wines, vacations, web content, and more. It’s been used so much that its meaning may be shifting again, from custom-made or artisanal to—at least in certain circles—prepackaged, overdone, mass-produced.

If you live long enough, a word might come to mean its opposite in your own lifetime. That can be disconcerting—as can looking at the lives of your deceased parents from the vantage point of middle age. The word *nostalgia*, coined by a seventeenth-century Swiss medical student, originally meant homesickness. To be nostalgic was to be sick for home—longing for a home that no longer exists. That maybe never existed.

What is it that made me long to shed the past for so much of my life and then decide, suddenly, to cling to it after my parents’ deaths? What has turned me nostalgic when, in an era of simplistic and disingenuous reverence for a mythical past, I absolutely do not want to be? Why, after happily turning my back on a task like sewing—deeming it domestic, and gendered, besides finding it difficult and boring—do I so regret having lost my mother’s last sewing machine? Why do I have a closet filled with arguably bespoke clothing, some of it wrinkled and yellowing with age, its fabrics thinning and fraying, never to be worn by anyone again?

And why in the world, people ask me when I talk about these things, do I feel guilty for having eventually stopped wearing dresses that my mother sewed for me, and for not having held on to her last sewing machine?

The answer, I know, is that I actually feel guilty about other things. Like the fact that other people—first my father and then, when he was no longer able to do it, the nurses and aides who worked in my parents’ hometown nursing home—took care of my ill and aging mother. I feel guilt, and regret, and I continue to

mourn the loss of both of my parents. I am also trying to understand how to live in a world that seems to be speeding, ever faster and more recklessly, toward its own thoughtless demise, blithely unaware of, or uninterested in, certain realities from its history, as well as from its present, like who makes its cheap clothing, not to mention who takes care of its growing population of ill and aging and dying people.

I am trying to stay conscious and to understand these things now, especially, as a woman. As a daughter mourning the loss of her talented, unappreciated, sometimes blue mother. As a mother whose own daughter is entering adulthood. And so those dresses and costumes that my mother sewed continue to hang in my spare closet, taking up space I could use for other things, like the items I loaded into my car and drove back from my parents' house on that final trip in the summer of 2019: photos, diaries, school mementoes, bits of handmade lace, a crumbling ivory comb—almost all peculiar choices that make sense only to me. They're in boxes stacked in a corner of the room where I type but do not sew. With fingers, like my mother's, that grow stiffer day by day, pondering a sadness that I'm only beginning to recognize, and to name.

Allegheny Brush Heap

David Blackmore

I am eight years old when my father saves himself the first time, by moving us from a rambling Craftsman in a leafy Pittsburgh suburb to the squat clapboard box three hours north on the edge of the Allegheny National Forest.

Dad is thirty-one at the time, and he is having his midlife crisis early. What he tells us kids is that he isn't comfortable with the ethics of his successful career as a young stockbroker. He also tells us that he doesn't want to be one of those dads who miss their sons' little league games because they are stuck at the office downtown in Gateway Center. He wants to spend time with us, and what better place to do that than in the woods that surround his and my mom's small hometown of Kane, Pennsylvania? We will be safe from the dangers of urban life and will thrive in the clear, brisk air of the Allegheny Mountains, he promises us.

What Dad tells his friends but doesn't tell us kids—and what I will only learn thirty-five years later, on the day he dies—is that he has always wanted to retire to Kane, but he knows it is unlikely he will make it to retirement age. The diabetes he has been living with since the age of thirteen means if he wants to spend time clambering through the woods with his three sons, he'd better do it while he's still young.

A sensitive boy, effeminate and a bit snobby, I am not at all sure that this move is a good idea. I feel plenty safe in Thornburg, where oversized Arts and Crafts bungalows dot a wooded hillside five miles out from downtown Pittsburgh. We have plenty of woods to play in, sloping sharply behind our houses down to the railroad tracks and the muddy Chartiers Creek below. We also have frequent trips into the city, exiting the Fort Pitt Tunnel to the sudden, magical vista of the Golden Triangle's metallic towers, and then down the river and up the hill to Oakland, where we can walk among the bones of ancient dinosaurs at the Carnegie

Museum of Natural History and select that week's new books to borrow at the Carnegie Library.

But Dad decides we will move during the summer of 1973, and Mom agrees, despite her own deep attachment to Thornburg. The five of us traipse around the Kane area, looking at potential new homes, and I am decidedly disappointed by the local housing stock. Just a few houses in town are built from brick or stone, and none of these is up for sale. All the houses we look at are eighty-year-old two-story clapboards with narrow windows and utilitarian trim, the only significant architectural variable being whether or not a house's original clapboards have been covered by aluminum siding, which tries but fails to mimic the wood underneath.

We are beginning to despair when someone tells Dad we should go check out the old Riegel house in Sergeant, a tiny village four miles outside of Kane. We drive out Route 321, passing several clumps of modest "factory houses," which my mom explains were built for workers in factories that have long been shut down. With some difficulty, we find the unmarked dirt road "after the three houses on the left and just before the three houses on the right." After a brief descent, we cross a gurgling stream on an earthen bridge before the road curves back deeper into the woods. To our left is a deep, dark forest of towering evergreens. On the steep grade to the right, a canopy of delicate green maples and beech allow dapples of late-day sunlight to filter down to the riotous understory of ferns and moss and baby trees. About a quarter mile farther, we park in the gravel lot in front of the house.

The house is a large, squat rectangle with white clapboard walls and a green-shingled hip roof. The roof has a narrow brick chimney and a single narrow dormer that houses not a window but rather permanently closed shutters. Tacked to the front of the house is another rectangular box, a porch of dark green wooden shingles. The porch has been closed in by one of the house's previous owners, white clapboard filling the area above the shingles, except for one squat window on each side and a simple wooden storm door in the middle. The main body of the house has uniformly narrow

rectangular windows placed at rather large intervals from each other, their wooden frames painted black. Everything about the house seems designed not for any kind of aesthetic interest but instead with the dogged, single-minded determination to keep out cold winter air.

By the time I have decided the house is not interesting enough even to be ugly, Dad is walking back up the hill, saying, "This is it. This is the house." It turns out the gurgling stream we had crossed on the earthen bridge continues parallel to the road and flows right through the yard of the house, and Dad is sure that the stream is full of trout. Mom protests quietly that we haven't even seen the inside of the house yet, but she is weakening under the infection of my father's enthusiasm, and she begins peeking in windows to see if the house might have a little more character on the inside than it has on the outside (it doesn't). Meanwhile, my younger brothers are already down in the stream catching crayfish, and I know then that this is where we will live.

Dad and Tommy and I move first, so that we can start the new school year at Chestnut Street Elementary, while Mom stays back in Thornburg with toddler Pete to sell the old house. Dad has traded in his racing green Mustang fastback for a beat-up Econoline van so that we can move our belongings one weekend at a time, and we spend the first month sleeping bachelor-style on two twin beds pushed together in the dining room, I in one and my dad in the other, with five-year-old Tommy sleeping lengthwise across the bottom of both beds.

Dad is a man of many enthusiasms, and in these early years in Kane most of those enthusiasms take us even deeper into the woods than the dark hollow where the sturdy, dull clapboard house sits. We fish for elusive brook trout in the spring, pick blackberries in summer, collect and identify colorful leaves in fall, and cross-country ski in winter from our car left near the top of the mountain to a backwoods tavern at the bottom.

Most of Dad's enthusiasms involve food in one way or another, which leads to a few culinary mishaps along the way, like the time he is inspired by natural food guru Euell Gibbons to experiment

with edible wildflowers. The violets he adds to the fancy omelet have little effect on the flavor but turn the eggs an electric purple. When a suicidal pheasant flies smack into the window above the kitchen sink, Dad says he will make us pheasant under glass, but by the time he meticulously plucks the healthy-sized bird, he realizes that its carcass is so small that it will be more like pheasant under martini glass. Then there is the winter he invests in all the equipment needed to tap maple trees, including an antique gas stove so that we can slow boil the sap down in the dark basement. After weeks of plodding through muddy melting snow to collect our harvest each day, and after days and days of watching the sap boil, we learn that the maples on our property are not in fact proper sugar maples and that we kids much prefer the smooth blandness of Aunt Jemima or Mrs. Butterworth.

Through all our adventures in the muddy woods, I can't help but notice the stone and metal ruins that seem to lurk everywhere beneath the fern-carpeted understory, evidence of some sort of mysterious earlier civilization. The largest and most noticeable ruin is the red clapboard structure leaning perilously onto the railroad tracks a hundred yards farther down the unnamed dirt road from our house. Peering through the dirty windows of this crooked depot, we identify a huge, decommissioned meat cooler and an old-style general store with a bank of postal boxes labeled "U.S. Mail." More mysterious is the wood-paneled office with the sign "Otto Chemical Company" hanging outside. How, we wonder, does one make chemicals in the middle of the woods, and why is there no factory visible anywhere?

Amateur archaeologists, we learn to identify industrial and domestic ruins in our wanderings through the woods: Half-buried railroad tracks lead us to a large tin shed where a perfectly preserved steam engine is parked for posterity. A rainbow glint in the mossy concrete under our feet might signal a half-buried glass brick or electrical insulator, remnants of the glassworks closed long before we were born. Rusty metal can appear anywhere: ten-foot-diameter tanks, pipes to nowhere, antique oil wells that are still pumping away.

The domestic remains feature stone steps to nowhere, or perhaps to a crumbling, half-buried stone foundation. They tend to be lined up in rows, not unlike the rows of still-extant "factory houses" scattered here and there throughout Sergeant. Clues to a domestic past can also be found in signs of flora inappropriate to the overgrown forest: a wormy apple tree here, a German Iris there, a patch of foxglove or brilliant blue lupines never seen in wilder parts of the area.

My personal favorite ruin is a magical stone pool on the hillside above the glassworks, whose solid walls dam a cold stream from higher up the hill. We climb the uneven concrete steps, pass through the unlocked chain-link gate, and come upon clear, cold water in which darts the brown brilliance of a school of brook trout. Dad doesn't let us fish in this pool, though, telling us it would not be a fair battle with the fish, who are trapped here and have not learned how to protect themselves from various types of predators, unlike the wilder trout in the streams. Fishing here, he explains, would be a kind of cheating on our part; we could not be proud of catching a fish in this pool because doing so would not demonstrate any particular skill or smart strategy or dogged persistence on our part.

Concurrent to my growing awareness that the nature surrounding us is not quite as pure and unspoiled as Dad has advertised comes the gradual realization that small-town life is not always as safe as it claims to be. To his friends in Pittsburgh and other cities, my dad is fond of reciting the local police report, identical almost every single day in the *Kane Republican* newspaper and on radio station WKZA: "The police report that they have nothing to report." Kane residents shudder at news reports of muggings, murders, and auto thefts in places like New York City, and they brag of leaving their houses unlocked when they go on vacation, their keys in the ignition while they sleep at night.

But as I lurch from sissy-boy childhood toward awkward adolescence, I find myself lying awake for hours each night, vigilant to the threat of monsters who lurk in the huge closet in my tiny

bedroom. For the first year or so, I see shadows of vampires waiting for me to drift off so that they can sink their barbed teeth into my delicate neck. Then there's the brief period when the shadows take the form of John Wilkes Booth, sneaking up from behind to assassinate me in the Ford Theater of my bedroom. Scariest of all, though, is the few years after I spend a lazy summer afternoon thumbing through photos in the book *Helter Skelter*, which my older cousins have left casually on the floor of the back seat of Aunt Gay's Pontiac Bonneville. By the end of elementary school, I know that vampires don't exist and that presidential assassins do not set their sights on small town sissy boys, but serial killers like Charles Manson and his followers are real; they can appear anywhere, following a logic that only they understand. One could be right there in my closet, waiting until the moment just after I have fallen asleep to strike.

By seventh grade the locus of my fear is no longer what I imagine at night in my own bedroom but rather what I experience each day in Kane Area Junior High School. What had earlier been casual disdain for the ways in which I did not live up to local standards of masculinity hardens into something more vicious and more unrelenting. I make the mistake of hanging out with Fred Leseker, the school's most notorious sissy boy. My classmates—mostly the boys but some girls as well—fall into the ritual practice of shouting out “Davey boy! Faggot!” each time they see me, followed invariably by what is known locally as a “growler”: They grip my downy chin in their tightened fist and twist as hard as they can.

The growlers and the faggot chant follow me everywhere through the waxed linoleum hallways and the lunchroom and study hall, most often when teachers are not around but sometimes when they are. (They do nothing.) It happens every day, multiple times per day, until one day in May when I just can't take it anymore and I knock Sean Lindstrom's fist off my chin, and that is the last growler. I also dump Fred Leseker as a friend, and I resolve to do everything in my power to muzzle those parts of me that my classmates find so offensive. I chant to myself: I will become...I

will become...I will become...a normal boy...a normal guy...a normal man.

By the time I lead the graduate procession across the stage of the Kane High auditorium, I have learned to repress the most stigmatized of my predilections, but I can't wait to get out of that town. My first steps of freedom take me to preppy havens in Upstate New York, but then I transfer to Harvard and discover that city life is most definitely the life for me. The lessons of Kane Junior High and the growlers are hard to unlearn, so it takes about five more years for me to find my bearings, but once I lose my virginity at twenty-two to a pretty white boy from Tennessee, there is no stopping me. I live in gay ghettos, I study queer literature, I fall in love with a few men and in lust with many others.

In this new, adult life, I live in eight cities on three continents, from Cairo to Los Angeles to São Paulo to my long-term home in Jersey City, straight across the Hudson River from the World Trade Center. I get mugged a few times, but in all these cities put together, I am called “faggot” fewer times than in a single lunch period at Kane Junior High. I feel safe, and I do not miss the mud.

To save himself the second time, my father must retrace his steps in the opposite direction, traveling this time from the house in the woods back into the heart of Pittsburgh. By 1994, Dad is in his early fifties, and his kidneys have been ravaged by forty years of living with type 1 diabetes. A transplant seems the only way to give him more time with us, and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center is on the cutting edge of transplant science. When he finally gets the call, Dad rushes to Oakland, where surgeons wait with not just a kidney but also a pancreas harvested from the abdomen of an unlucky motorcyclist.

The salvaged kidney saves Dad's life and grants us ten unanticipated years with a relatively healthy father. His body rejects the pancreas, though, so Dad continues the familiar ritual several times a day of pricking his finger, testing the blood on a hand-held

monitor, and sticking an insulin syringe through his loose khaki pants straight into the flesh of his bony thigh.

By the summer of 2008, Dad's "new," recycled kidney has itself been ravaged by his disease, and complications from a second failed pancreas transplant attempt have made things worse. Now all of us are called back to Pittsburgh to see him through open heart surgery, progressive amputations, and, worst of all, weeks at a time in a smelly old mansion in Shadyside repurposed as a renal care nursing home. Almost always my mother is at his side, and Tommy is often there as well, while I check in daily from Jersey City. However, the week when I would normally be celebrating Gay Pride in New York, Mom and Tommy have other things they need to take care of, and so I head to Pittsburgh to look after Dad.

My week at the renal care center with Dad is a quiet one, with none of the major setbacks we have all become so used to. I sit there with him, helping him when he needs it, and we send each other silent messages as he improves slowly day by day. The message from me to my Dad is simply that I am there. He is in a bad place, and I have left my life to come and take care of him. This lets him know what perhaps neither he nor I had been sure of before: that he is one of the most important men in my life, maybe the most important. The message Dad sends to me is that he appreciates this, that he is happy to learn it, or at least to have it confirmed. He is proud that I have become not just a principled and respected academic but also a caring person who will look after his sickly father for a week in a smelly nursing home in Pittsburgh.

That summer, as my father is dying, I spend more time with my family than I have since I left Kane twenty-six years earlier, and, in particular, I get to know my brother Tommy better. Tommy and I talk about his work as a forester in the Kane area, unusually slow in 2008 as the local economy shifts from timber to the rapidly expanding fracking industry. "It's a real shame," he tells me, "that the timber market is collapsing just when most of the forest around here is coming to maturity. Since the whole area was basically stripped to nothing by the time the National Forest

came in in the twenties, all the timber is coming of age at more or less the same time, about eighty years later."

What?!!

I ask Tommy what he means by everything being stripped, and he tells me that, yes, the timber and chemical industries basically clear-cut the entire Allegheny plateau region in the years leading up to 1930. When the Forest Service came in and bought up half the area's land on the cheap in 1923, there really *was* no forest to speak of, just a wasteland of stumps and scrub and hardly any deer. The forest we know—both the Allegheny National Forest and the privately owned mountainsides that surround it—has all grown up out of that brush heap over the past eighty-five years. The profitable hardwoods like black cherry and red maple that the timber industry so prizes have only been able to thrive due to the open sunlight of the widespread clear-cuts, creating a new, carefully cultivated generation of trees that bears little resemblance to the aboriginal forest of hemlock, pine, and beech.

The more I learn about the Allegheny brush heap, the more the forest residues of my childhood start to make sense, and the more I feel like I have caught my dad in a big lie. Yes, one can manufacture chemicals in the middle of the woods, but only by devouring those very woods. The forest I had grown up in isn't so "natural" after all. It is hardly unspoiled, if the whole region had been reduced a hundred years ago to an industrial brush heap. It is hardly wild, if the make-up of the forest has been intentionally manipulated to favor species that had been only minor players in the "original" woods. It is all a big fraud: I hadn't grown up in some kind of virgin wilderness, but rather in the middle of a giant tree farm that worked to mask a history of massive environmental destruction.

By the middle of August, I am back in Pittsburgh one more time, staying in the UPMC Family House with my mother and helping her keep track of Dad's constant redeployments between

the various hospitals and units that cling to Pitt's steep Oakland hillside. One quiet afternoon, I am alone with Dad in the medical ICU, feeding him the last slice of a homemade blackberry pie dropped off by good friends. I cut off each bite carefully for him, wanting to make sure that the last bite would be what my friend Jack refers to as the "choice bite"—that one (last) bite that includes the perfect mix of one's very favorite parts of a particular meal or dish. Dad notices that I am doing this, and it delights him as only the carefully calibrated appreciation of good food can. We discover that even though we don't like our pie made the same way (he prefers it bitter, and I like it sweet), we have exactly the same idea about what makes for the choice bite of a piece of pie: a tiny piece of the crisp outer crust drenched in the mush where the filling meets the lower crust, with one single berry thrown in the mix.

Dad dies a few nights later while Mom and I are sleeping at the Family House. After I call my brothers and a few close friends, Mom and I pack up her SUV and I drive her home to Kane. There, before doing anything else, I rampage through the old clapboard house, grabbing every medical supply and device I can find and banishing them to the dark back corner of the basement. Then I step out into the brilliant cool sunlight and look up at the towering spruce and pine, and I cry and cry and cry.

On a brilliant August afternoon one year later, the whole family gathers on the bank of Wilson Run, the cold stream that had made my father so certain this was the house for us thirty-six years earlier. While the rest of us watch from the mossy stone ledge that protects the yard from the stream, my brothers walk solemnly through the woods and then down to the large, flat rock under the old steel bridge that connects to the pine forest on the other side. Honoring Dad's aspiration that he be reincarnated as a brook trout, they unpack the plastic bag of ashes from its neat cardboard box and then cut the bag open with one of his good cooking knives. Both holding a corner of the gallon-sized bag, they dump the ashes into the fast current and then stand there silently as the ashes head downstream.

I am surprised by how voluminous the ashes become once they are in the water. I didn't even think they would be visible by the time they traveled the thirty yards to where we are sitting, but I am wrong. The narrow flow spreads into a wide cloud of dark gray presence, which then flows downstream like a sky-cloud on a clear but windy day.

FICTION

Leaning Too Far

Michele Alouf

Erin tosses the brochure on the floor of the passenger seat, where she sits prisoner to a hangover and the mercy of a friend. “Each New Day—sounds like a cult or an ashram where the Swami is actually some orange-turbaned guy named Phil from New Jersey.”

Meg keeps her eyes on the road. “It’s not a cult or an ashram.”

“Where the hell is this place?” Erin surveys the stretch of brown corn stalks followed by a gang of emaciated cows and a half-burned farmhouse with a *No Trespassing* sign. “So much for a Starbucks on every corner. I need coffee,” Erin pleads, replacing her snark with childlike woe. “And some more Band-Aids for my knees. Look at me. I’m a mess.”

Meg doesn’t look. She’s fallen for her best friend’s signature pout for years and won’t give in this time. She thanks God Erin survived last night with just a few scrapes.

“We need to stop somewhere. I’m hemorrhaging. If I die, you get my boys, and they’re horrible little people. They almost took out the babysitter at the Y. They can take you out, too.”

Meg loves Erin’s crazy boys, who dart and bang around like pinballs. Erin jokes she’s willed them to Meg along with their guinea pig, SpongeBob PigPants. It’s part of her schtick that her ex isn’t a stand-up dad, but Meg knows he swoops in whenever wine o’clock becomes a three-day bender. He also canceled a trip with his fiancé to watch the boys while Erin “gets help.”

“Pass him or turn down a side road,” Erin complains about a slow truck of doomed chickens. “Or take me home.” Feeling better, she backpedals on her vomit-induced vow to go to rehab. “I don’t need to sit in a circle of sad sacks. It was just a bad night.”

“Do you remember playing beer pong with your neighbor’s college kids? How about falling out of their rec room window trying to make a trick basketball shot?”

“I got some net,” she snickers, “and a *few* scratches. Other moms were there drinking, too. I don’t see them being forced into a cult.”

“I’m not forcing you. It’s your decision. Each New Day says the program only works if you admit you have a problem.”

“My only problem is a lack of caffeine. I think a store’s up there on the right.”

As Meg slows down, she mumbles, “It doesn’t look very promising.”

Other than a rusty gas pump and a mountain of worn tires, the dirt parking lot is empty. The store’s lean-to roof leans too far on one side. Erin and Meg stand, staring with tilted heads.

“Everyone does that,” a twiggy-limbed teenager says, stepping onto the porch. A buggy screen door slams behind her. She folds her pale arms and leans on a rotted post. “It’s a crooked roof, not the eighth wonder. If I had a dollar for every one of you, I’d have fixed it by now. Guessing you want coffee? Come on. I’m not serving you out here.”

Erin and Meg fall in line behind the girl in cut-offs. Her tee says, “Jesus loves you, but I’m his favorite.” There’s not another soul inside the store. The girl tells them to sit at a folding table by the counter while she makes a fresh pot.

“Weird,” Meg whispers as they look around. A cooler filled with beverages, jarred pickled eggs, and tubs of “Aunt Bea’s Chicken Salad” hums loudly on the back wall. The shelves are sparse—a brick of Wonder Bread, peanut butter, rat poison, and some disfigured Hostess treats that remind Erin of the sad hodge-podge she sometimes packs in her boys’ super-hero lunch boxes. She’ll do better, she promises herself as she spots a much-needed box of Band-Aids.

They sit at the table, and the girl comes back with coffee. Up close, she seems older, with marble gray eyes fixed on a shaky Erin. “Y’all want some of Aunt Bea’s chicken salad?”

“Sure. Who’s Aunt Bea?” Meg asks.

“My guardian. She died last year. Got hit by a truck—crossing the road to get the mail.”

“I’m sorry. That’s awful,” Meg said.

“Stupid place for a mailbox.” The girl shrugs. “It’s like people booby trap themselves.”

“What about your parents?” Erin asks.

“Guess some people are better off without them.” The girl shrugs again and walks away.

“I need to pee,” Meg says. “Then, let’s go. We can take the chicken salad with us.”

Alone, Erin puts fresh Band-Aids on her knees. She doesn’t need rehab. She needs to go home, kiss her sweet boys, and ease up on drinking. Hearing the cooler’s hum, she walks over to grab some water. Instead, she spies a purse-size, screw-cap bottle of glistening white wine. A few sips to cure her hangover won’t hurt. Wrapping her fingers around the cold, metal door handle, she feels the girl behind her.

“I had you pegged.”

“Excuse me?” Erin says, turning her head to look at her.

“As a recruit for drunk mommy boot camp. You don’t look as bad as most of those puffy, yellow ones on their way in. I hardly recognize them after. All grins and glow—ordering tubs of Aunt Bea’s to take home and hugging on me like I’m their long-lost child. I don’t know what they do at that place, but if had a dollar for every person that came back better than new, I’d—”

“Have fixed the roof by now.” Erin releases her grip on the cooler door.

Pulling out of the dirt lot, Megan leaves it up to Erin. “Which way?”

Erin looks back in the side mirror at the girl standing alone on the porch. She points to the right and closes her eyes as the girl disappears in clouds of unsettled dust.

Honorable Mention (2022 Fiction Collections)**Redemption***William Cass*

I met my wife for dinner to celebrate our thirty-seventh wedding anniversary at a new place in downtown San Diego that we'd heard good things about. I'd retired from my museum archivist job several years earlier, but Alice still did a ten-hour shift three days a week as a social worker at a hospital for medically fragile children, and since our anniversary fell on a work day for her, we decided to meet at the restaurant afterwards. She also needed to stop at the Target that anchored a mall near her disabled brother's apartment and get a few things to drop off for him on the way; Ed was able to live independently but relied on her assistance a couple of times a week. Because of those delays, I'd made our reservation for six-thirty, late for the two of us.

The restaurant was at the end of the Gaslamp Quarter, a neighborhood catering to nightlife and tourists amidst hotels, the convention center, and the bayfront. It was low-lit and small, quaint in an unpretentious sort of way, its dozen or so tables all full at that hour. I was already seated at ours against the far wall nursing a glass of Chardonnay when Alice arrived. As soon as she came through the doorway, her troubled expression told me all was not right with her. I stood when she reached me, we kissed briefly, and then settled into our seats across from each other.

I poured her some wine, lifted my glass, and said, "To us."

"Yes." She forced a smile and touched her glass to mine.

I waited until we'd both drunk before asking, "Okay, what's wrong? Something with Ed?"

She stiffened a little. "He's fine."

"Work?"

"It's nothing." She shook her head and looked around. "This place is nice. Cozy."

I studied her eyes; they were what I'd fallen in love with about her first: tender, thoughtful, caring. I reached over and placed my hand over hers. She used her fingertips to curl ours together but didn't look back my way. A waiter came by, set down menus, and told us about the specials.

Alice thanked him, let go of my hand, and lifted her menu. "So," she said, "what sounds good?"

"Heard him tell another couple that the salmon special was his favorite. Apparently, only tonight's chef makes that creamy dill sauce."

"Sold."

I watched Alice slide the menu to the side of the table and take another longer sip of wine. The flickering candlelight from the jar between us looked lovely on her finely-drawn features. When I moved my head to interrupt her gaze, she managed another smile, then blew out a breath. I took her hand again.

"Come on," I said. "Tell me."

"It's silly."

"Better out than in... isn't that what you social workers say?" I rubbed my thumb over hers. "Talk about it so we can enjoy our anniversary dinner."

She raised her eyebrows, blew out another breath, then said, "Well, there was an incident at Target. It was all over in a matter of seconds, really. Done before I could even think." She shook her head.

"Go on."

I watched her lower her eyes, then raise them again to me. "A man and I were waiting for the elevator on the second floor, just the two of us. He was maybe thirty, a little disheveled in one of those hooded sweatshirts with a pouch. In retrospect, he did seem flighty while we waited... kept pushing the button like that would make it come more quickly. He was holding a package of underwear."

She took another sip of wine, it seemed to me, in reluctant recollection. I said, "Okay..."

“So, the elevator finally came, and we got on, just the two of us. I stood on one side, he was on the other, and as soon as the doors closed, he began tearing the underwear package apart. I looked straight ahead but could see him clearly enough from the corner of my eye as he stuffed three pairs of men’s briefs into the pouch of his sweatshirt. Then he just dropped the packaging on the floor. I froze; I couldn’t believe it. Maybe two seconds later, the elevator reached the first floor, the doors opened, and he was gone. I stepped out with my stupid basket of socks, laxatives, and printer paper for Ed, and everything seemed unreal, like I was floating or something.” She made a gesture as if shooing away a fly. “The man had disappeared, no sight of him. One employee passed by me in a store vest, then another, and I did nothing, said nothing. Finally, I got my bearings, found my way to the check-out, paid, and left. But I felt horrible. Awful. I mean, what had just happened?”

“You saw a guy steal some underwear.” I gave a small shrug. “Probably couldn’t afford them, knew he could stash them secretly that way in the elevator.”

We looked at each other while she grimaced. “And I did nothing about it. Nothing.”

“What could you have done?”

“I could have said something to him. Offered to pay for those things. Told someone when I got off the elevator.”

“You were in shock. You reacted like almost any of us would have.” I gave her hand a squeeze. “Honey, it was a ten-dollar package of underwear.”

She looked away and shook her head. In a quieter voice, she said, “I give training to new staff at the hospital about how important it is for them to report if they see colleagues stealing – gloves, medications, syringes, anything. And, yet, I didn’t do a thing myself in that same situation. I brought my items to the cashier, paid for them, took them out to my car...had at least ten minutes to consider otherwise...and then drove away.” She looked back at me and shook her head again.

“Forget about it,” I told her. “In the grand scheme of things, you didn’t do anything wrong. You hear me?”

I made the sort of nods I hoped looked assured, but she didn’t respond. I looked at her with those eyes and tried to fill my own with all the love I felt for her at that moment. I gave her hand a last pat, then refilled our wine glasses. A moment later, the waiter returned, and we both ordered the salmon special.

As dinner went on, Alice allowed me to steer our conversation to more pleasant things and seemed to recover herself. I got her to join me in trying to remember what we’d done on our previous anniversaries, but neither of us could recall even the most recent third; we both laughed at that. She brightened like she always did when we talked about our two sons, their families, our grandkids, when they might come to visit again. She told me that a doctor on her unit had gone on one of those river cruises on the Rhine we’d long dreamed of taking and had loved it. I kept my smile tempered; I had the tickets I’d bought as an anniversary gift for us to do that in the spring waiting for her to open in a wrapped box at home. Only during an occasional lull in our eating or conversation did I see her eyes hint at their previous troubled state.

We splurged on a piece of mud pie to split for dessert. When we’d finished and I’d given the waiter my credit card, Alice excused herself to use the restroom, and I let my eyes travel slowly around the restaurant. They paused at an older woman sitting with a man at a table near the door, and through the clutter of bodies in that crowded space, she seemed to be staring directly at me. It took a long moment for me to recognize her after all the years that had passed. Like mine, her hair was much shorter and had gone gray, but there was no mistaking the face and that hard, even glare I’d grown accustomed to at the end.

We’d met at the start of our second year of college in northern California and had quickly become one another’s first loves; we were both virgins at the time. One winter night, the condom I was wearing broke. Nine weeks later, once she’d made the decision, I went with her to a clinic she’d located in San Francisco that would give her an

abortion. It was then that I'd first encountered the look on her face that I now saw. I saw it again often afterwards when I broke things off with her, haltingly and badly, leaving her heartbroken, crestfallen, aggrieved. Several months later and out of the blue, she called one evening and asked for my help with a broken front door lock at the cottage she was sub-letting from a professor on sabbatical. When I finished fixing the lock, I turned around and found her standing naked a few feet away. She extended a hand, I took it, and followed her into the bedroom. I had no protection with me that night, but thought I'd pulled out in time. I was all but sure I had.

I felt myself blinking in the restaurant's dim light as her glare diverted from me and softened as she turned to the man she was with when he spoke to her. He wore a tweed sport coat with a convention center identification-badge lanyard dangling from his neck. Even from the side, I also recognized his worn, gentle face; I admit I'd googled her a few times over the years and had lingered a bit over photos of the two of them. I knew he was her husband and had distinguished himself during a career in the Pacific Northwest with environmental non-profits; she'd spent time during one of their early stops running a health food store, but then had become a research librarian, the sort of job I smiled over when I came upon its revelation because it seemed to suit my memories of her so well. The man touched his lips with his cloth napkin, folded it neatly on his plate, pushed himself up from their table, and moved towards the door. Before she joined him there, she gave me a tiny nod along with a final taut, measured glance, and then they were gone, the door yawning closed behind them. A kind of flush had spread over me. I swallowed once hard, then again.

I was startled when the waiter appeared at my side with our check in a leather folder. He set it in front of me, then handed me a customer receipt that was folded in half.

"A woman asked me to give you this note." He pointed. "Another diner at that table by the door. She just left."

He moved away as my wife replaced him, and I slid the note into my pants pocket. Alice lifted her sweater off the back of her

chair, and I became vaguely aware that she'd applied a bit of lipstick and gathered her hair at the nape of her neck in a manner she knew I liked. She smiled and said, "Ready?"

I nodded, hurried with the bill, then took her hand when she reached it towards me. Somehow, getting to my feet was an unexpected struggle. We weaved our way through the tables and outside, then around the corner to the parking lot. I walked her to her car, which was just a few spaces from my own. We stopped at her driver-side door in a yellow pool of light from a streetlamp on the sidewalk next to us. Alice wrapped her arms around my waist, and I did the same.

She looked up at me and said, "That was very nice."

"It was," I heard myself say. "See you at home?"

She kissed my cheek and opened her door. "In a little bit. Have a quick errand first."

I felt myself frown. Alice got into the driver's seat, started the car, but left the door open. She said, "I'm going to run back to Target. Still enough time before they close. Tell someone what I saw."

I knew by the quiet resolve in her eyes, as familiar as my own reflection, that there was no point in trying to change her mind. Her lips had closed into a thin, tight line. She raised the hand closest to me in a short wave, closed her door, then backed out, and drove away. She didn't look back, but I waited until her taillights had disappeared thirty or so yards away as she passed by the front of the high-rise hotel across from the convention center. An elegant glass elevator, its interior brightly lit, bisected the hotel's center and had just begun making a slow ascent. I could see the two passengers in it clearly, the woman whose note I held in my pocket and her husband. He was fiddling with his cell phone, but she was looking down at me. She was too far away to read her expression, but I didn't need to; her countenance was as erect and impassive as the streetlamp by my side. I tilted my head up watching until the elevator engulfed itself in other buildings' shadows as it approached the middle of its rise.

In its abrupt absence, I found myself thinking back to that evening of her door repair and how I'd crept out of her cottage after she'd fallen asleep. I ignored her phone messages asking to see or talk to me again when they began a month or so afterwards, telling myself it was time to end things for good. At first, the messages came frequently, but they eventually waned, then stopped altogether. Not much later, I heard she'd moved away and transferred to a different school. I knew nothing about her second abortion until I happened upon her older brother, also a student at our college, at the campus bookstore where he slapped my face before snarling the news. After he stormed away, I just stood alone in the aisle in horrified shock and disbelief... first, ashamedly, at the preposterous odds, and then at the numbing realization of the immense hurt she'd had to endure again. Even worse this time, and with me nowhere to be found. But I never tried to contact her afterwards. Not once, not ever. And until a few short minutes ago, I'd never seen or heard from her again.

When the elevator finally re-emerged out of the shadows empty of any passengers, I took the note out of my pocket. It held a single sentence in handwriting that sent a jolt of intimate familiarity through me even after all those years. It said: "I've forgiven you."

Something inside of me broke off and fell. A siren wound off in the distance towards the bridge, and the ferry belched its horn to signal its next bay crossing from downtown. I stood still in the streetlamp's milky glow and thought about Alice heading back to a place to try to undo a questionable wrong she somehow felt responsible for while an older couple, a good-hearted conventioner and his wife, found their way to their mid-span hotel room across the street. Each of our lives was largely behind us now. Whatever window for redemption we might have left remained unknown, but one thing was for certain: it was closing fast. Our last octave approaching, if not already arrived. And like the glass elevator I watched heading up into the night sky, there was no denying that it was growing smaller and smaller, diminishing with each passing day.

The Setting of the Sun

Julie Dron

Wen-suing met Jirou in Taipei.

"Come to Tainan," Jirou had pleaded. "We need translators! Those fishermen, they can't speak Japanese, like you!"

Jirou had a vibrant personality that was intoxicating. A Japanese chef, who had sailed to Taiwan through a storm (he claimed) to take over his uncle's busy restaurant in the business district of Tainan. Wen-suing had laughed, and his parents had been angry when he told them he was leaving the family tea business. They accused him of being irresponsible, but he didn't care. He had packed his gramophone, his 78s, his books and clothes and moved to Tainan, which lay beneath the Tropic of Cancer, was fiercely hot in summer, and where the food was so much sweeter because of the fields of sugar cane.

The song "Rainy Night Flower," sung in his native Taiwanese, warbled and crackled as the needle glided across the undulating surface of the record. Melancholia dampened Wen-suing's soul, as he recalled the joy of youth, to be part of the arty crowd of poets and musicians during that golden age in the 1930s, when he first arrived in Tainan. It had been heady indeed and alive with possibilities, when Japanese and Taiwanese culture fused, and they were drunk and high on their idealistic hopes for the future. He removed the record from the gramophone, it was no good, reminiscing like this, those days were well and truly over.

He needed to see Jirou, he could put it off no longer, and he noticed that darkness was now creeping over the city. He walked through the dusty back alleys, avoiding the crowded main streets, until he arrived at the restaurant. He spotted Jirou through the window, dressed in a kimono. Although Jirou was small and plump, with fists full of chubby fingers, he had a gracefulness about him. He could prepare sushi deftly like a magician, weave nimbly between

tables, had a sharp memory, could memorize customers' names, their preferences. He was popular with ladies, despite his apple shaped body, because of his confident geniality but had never married because, he would laugh, he was too busy and overworked.

Wen-siung was about to step inside, then seeing two Japanese military officials, he hesitated, and feeling suddenly nervous, took a step back. Imaginary lines had been drawn in the sand. The mood of the country had changed.

Jirou spotted Wen-siung hovering in the doorway and called over his shoulder to someone in the restaurant, "Just ten minutes!" He wiped his hands on his stained apron and hurried to join Wen-siung. They moved to the bench next to the bottle tree, and Wen-siung was aware of the odour that was peculiar to Jirou, an evocative odour that detailed Jirou's life and personality more than simple words could. Soap imported from Osaka that hinted of tar and sulphur spas; a variety of fish, triggering memories of ocean voyages; stale tobacco and beer, surprisingly pleasant reminders of late night gatherings; sweat from long work hours. Wen-siung knew that Jirou's hair also smelt of steam and rice, even after it had been washed, and the oily smell of the sea would also linger after long steam baths. Jirou leaned towards Wen-siung, his warm greasy hand over Wen-siung's long thin fingers, holding his hand steady as he lit his cigarette from Wen-siung's. Then they moved apart slightly but close enough to feel the heat from each other's bodies.

They sat beside each other, watching the scene before them with a sense of unreality, as if in a faraway dream or a movie theatre. The raucous noise from the restaurant, the singing of the geisha, the steam that poured frantically, white and ghostly, from a vent in the kitchen, the string of red lanterns that dangled and waved in the evening breeze. The knowledge that it was coming to an end.

"My parents want me to return to Japan." Jirou turned to look at Wen-siung, white-faced. "They feel it's no longer safe here. I'm leaving next week. You understand."

Wen-siung felt his insides twist in agony, but he understood, blinking furiously to stop the tears falling.

"I thought, when things settle down, you could come to Japan!" Jirou tried to sound upbeat, positive, but his words fell flat through the smoke that curled from his mouth. He threw his cigarette to the ground and pulled a slip of paper from his apron pocket.

"Here, my address, I'll wait." He pressed the folded paper into Wen-siung's palm, squeezing his hand, not wanting to let go.

Wen-siung felt a sudden dizziness, as Jirou held his hand, a deep icy fear as waves of blackness washed over his body like a tsunami. A sudden certainty, that they would never meet again. But he didn't want to acknowledge this fear, tried to tell himself he was being overdramatic, as he gripped Jirou's hand.

Jirou, openly crying now, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, hugged Wen-siung close.

"The address, please, we'll meet again, when all this is over. Promise."

"Yes, I promise. Dear Jirou." Wen-siung smiled.

Jirou rose abruptly; he could stand it no longer. He walked to the restaurant, shoulders hunched, without looking back.

Wen-siung returned home, taking Jirou's scrap of paper from his pocket. He smoothed the creases, noting the spidery writing, the greasy thumb print, the smell of oil and fish, and placed it carefully within the pages of his diary. He knew it was time to return to his family's tea farm in the mountains outside Taipei. It was no longer safe, Tainan may be targeted by American forces, he had been warned. He began to pack with a sadness so deep he could hardly breathe.

It was many years later when he discovered it, unpacking boxes, that had gathered dust during the war years and beyond. He felt a painful joy, when it fell from the pages of his diary, long forgotten. Yellowed brittle paper, spidery writing, an oily thumb print. A street address in Hiroshima.

Author's note: This story was inspired by Hikuisu Restaurant in historic Tainan, a very old Japanese restaurant which survived the war and is now a tourist attraction.

The Land Where Her Ancestors Live

Julie Dron

She saw him walking towards her, along the narrow path between the sunken rice fields. White shirt, smart pants, pale skin. He looked out of place. Observant, she noticed his polished shoes were already scuffed from the soil and felt she was to blame, comparing her dusty feet in worn sandals. The small temple where she waited had been built next to the banyan tree that was now hugging the makeshift building in its deathly embrace. A long time ago, when her family first arrived from Fujian, they had erected this structure, placing the ashes of their ancestors within. The aroma of incense clung to the walls, dark from centuries of prayers and offerings, ghost money swallowed by the flames for the afterlife, rising as dancing black sparks on the upward current and falling as ash.

He stood before her now, as she leaned against the doorway. The air was heavy with water that trickled down her face, her long straight black hair clinging stickily to her neck. She wondered how he always looked cool and well-pressed, even in the afternoon heat and humidity.

“Why?” he asked her. “Why didn’t you turn up for the exam?”

She knew she had disappointed him; he had encouraged her, even met with her parents. They had beamed as he had praised their youngest daughter, what a bright student she was, he said, and they listened, proud yet sad. Sad, because her four older siblings had already left the small farm in search of pastures new, university or business or marriage, traveling abroad, returning at odd times, the pretense of dutiful children, itching to leave at the earliest possible opportunity, relieved that their youngest sister was still at home, absolving them from guilt. They would arrive with gifts and bright clothes, pleasing their parents with their presence and laughter and grandchildren, talking about old times, sitting around the table on low stools, uncomfortable. Then as soon as they had convinced themselves that their parents were fine, and

anyway they had handed over cash to help out, they would leap up in a flurry of excitement, throw their belongings into the trunk or back seat of a cab, sometimes not even packing, so eager to escape, noisy like the cicadas that sang throughout the wet summer months, then disappearing, the house afterwards still and silent.

She noticed her teacher’s quick glance around the tiny dark room where their ancient culture stubbornly persisted, statues of the gods blackened by soot. The thin spiral of rising smoke always conjured up images of death and celebration in her mind, intertwined as if in an infinite loop. He had told his students many times he didn’t believe in ghosts, sneered at superstitions, wanted his generation to move forward and away from the crazy old traditions. She had smiled, in awe, had returned to the small farm after class, looking at her parents, wishing they were modern like her teacher with his spotless ironed clothes and clever words.

She faced him as if uncurling from her inferiority complex, no longer intimidated by his knowledge of the world, of which she knew little.

“I changed my mind.” It sounded arrogant, she thought, disrespectful, so she softened her voice, looked at her feet, instead of staring at him boldly in the eye.

“You are the brightest student we’ve had for years. You could have won a place at National Taiwan University!”

“I’m grateful, for your help. I’m sorry.”

“Why. Why did you change your mind?” He relaxed now. It was done. The exam and hopes of university had passed. He had wanted to help her escape this tough life in the rice fields.

She crossed her thin arms and wondered whether to tell him the truth.

Perhaps he would laugh if she told him that one day last week, while sweeping the house, she had felt a hand rest on her shoulder, yet the room was empty. It had been strangely comforting, the hand of her grandfather, she guessed, whom she had been close to when he lived. She could feel his presence, real, beside her. Walking outside, shielding her eyes from the bright sunlight, she saw her

parents ankle deep in the water, bending over, small and wiry, brown and wizened from the tough outdoor work, wide-brimmed bamboo hats, moving slowly but purposely through the damp field, taking small steps, unhurried. The flat low-lying land stretched before her to the ridge of rugged mountains in the far distance. Then she sensed the centuries of ancestors, who had slowly and purposely walked through the fields before them. Through poverty, through war, through occupation, they had remained steadfast to the land. She knew, if she left, the last child, the land would probably be sold. Aware now, this responsibility was on her shoulders, this continuity, this fine thread that lay between the living and the dead, the future and the past. There was only this moment in time. She understood, finally, that this was all that mattered.

She looked up at her teacher again.

"I need to help my parents," was all she said, simply.

He sighed, removing his glasses to wipe his face, and she noticed his wrinkles, his tiredness; saw his humanness for the first time. They watched silently together as a little egret glided close, white with golden slippers, piercing the air with its long slender bill, until the moment was disrupted by his phone, demanding his attention.

He replaced his glasses, no longer vulnerable but brisk.

"There's still next year, don't give up. Think about it, then come and see me."

She nodded, her arms still folded, "Yes, yes I will." They both knew she was faking her enthusiasm. He turned to leave, returning along the narrow path to the crumbling road where his scooter was parked, disappearing into the distance, while the egret circled and landed gracefully on a branch of the banyan tree.

Catch and Release

Brenda Jacobsen

My foster father, Mr. Holiday, dreamed of fishing lures and sinkers. Of the ones who spit the hook, he said. He collected bucktail jigs for striped bass and feather hooks for mackerel. On weekdays, depending on the tide, he went fishing in the middle of the night. To fish on the pier alone and smell the slate-laden air was a pilgrimage for him.

Upon his return he slept for a short time, then woke me up for school. He told me of his strange nightmares. Often they were about me running from an unruly toothy shark.

"It's an absurd dream, Fiona," he said, pouring us bowls of Cheerios. I see you as one of my own. In fact, I quite enjoy our chats," he said as I stuffed my lunch and joy inside my backpack.

Then he changed his clothes and threw his damp attire on the floor beside the washer. I had mentioned to his daughters how kind their dad was to me. They told me to back off and leave him alone.

"Leave those, Fiona," he said pointing at the washer. The wife or my girls will do my laundry." I smiled and felt special.

"Wait until tonight," he said, "when I am fileting my 32-inch striped bass. This house will stink worse than *ye old fish market*." Then he left for his accounting job wearing his wrinkled white shirt and salmon-hued tie in the shape of a fish.

Later, standing on the back porch, I watched him flipping the bass from side to side on a cutting board.

"Offshore fishermen have the best jobs," he said. "And they do not suffer from seasickness. I can't say the same for myself. I get weak and nauseous, and need my buddy's hand to help me stand," he said, staggering towards me and laughing.

"I get it," I said, placing both my hands on his burly arms, lingering longer than I should.

"Take a look at the tide chart," he said, handing me a folded piece of paper. My patience for rows of black squiggles was

non-existent and his aimless chatter left me disappointed.

"I'm leaving for a week of training on the expansive ocean," he said.

Worried for his safety, I asked him, "Should you be on the water when a storm is coming?"

"Don't worry about me," he said, holding up his catch. "Look at this baby," he said, snuggling the stout fish against his chest like a toddler embracing a stuffed animal. Then he plopped it on the makeshift table and raised his knife over his head, the tip glittering in the sun. Whack! Off came the head. He pushed the slippery puck into a dutiful plastic bowl. The fisheye glared back at me as if possessed. Shutting my eyes, I met my mother's raging face.

Off came the fan for a tail with a quick swipe of the blade. Mr. Holiday started drooling with pleasure as he sliced open the snowy belly and revealed the flesh attached to strands of unmistakable bloody guts. Standing close, I hoped to see a glimmering treasure like a gold ring the fish had eaten.

"What a beauty," he said, caressing its rough silvery skin. I wondered if those words were for me. Did he ever tell his daughters they were beautiful?

Sometimes he brought home gifts from work: fluorescent post-it pads or a container of gum. Once I gave him a box of chocolates but he left them untouched. I consumed them in my room. He spent his evenings watching sports and texting a friend on his phone. He said it was work-related but I wasn't sure. I sketched his face on paper and pretended I was doing homework.

The next day I said, "We are good friends."

He said, "The fish last night sure had a lot of bones."

A week passed and the time arrived for his expedition. He lied through his easy smile and ran off to the Florida Keys with his receptionist. I thought about his love of fishing and wished he'd given me and his daughters the same rapt attention.

I called my social worker, who assigned me to a foster family two hundred miles away. They were cosmopolitan and lived near an ocean. Later, I fell for a pattern of dating older married men

while carrying a small-scaled iridescent hope the next man would stay forever. Not one of them abandoned their partners. Instead, they let me go.

Years later, Mr. Holiday discovered I lived in Seattle and sent me long letters of adoration. I thought about unpublishing my address. I heard he had returned home alone and resumed his number crunching inside a windowless office. Estranged from his family, he lived above a tire shop where the smell of rubber simmered like tar on a hot street.

Honorable Mention (2022 Fiction Collections)**Peasant Child***Lita Kurth**(after Montaigne)*

I watch the pink baby gorge at my mother's breast. His beautiful cradle sits in the center of the room, an altar. I run to Mama and claim the other breast.

"No," she tells me, kind at first, then stern. She pushes me away, her gaze turning to him, Milord-baby. "Now you must suck from the nanny goat," she says and leads me outside to the tan and black goat. I cry.

Angry days pass. Papa is gone to the war. Milord-baby stays. His satin-lined crib is always washed. When Milord-baby cries, Mama stops the spinning wheel; she stops stirring oats for our supper and rushes to feed him.

But now Nanny knows me. When I fall and hurt myself, she looks up from her grazing, ready to butt. When I'm hungry, I call her. She comes and stands, gently chewing while I suck her teat, clutching her short, rough hair. Her foreign yellow eyes regard me and mean me well, stranger though I am. Anyone who dares hurt me will feel her horns like stone on wood.

Today a man in a beautiful uniform came on horseback. He gave coins to Mama. Coins will buy a cow, Mama says. Coins will bring a priest to teach me letters. Cold coins. I wait while they grow in a leather bag.

Fall comes. Milord-baby has a cough. All through the night his weak voice wails, and Mama whimpers prayers, puts a cool wet cloth to his forehead.

When I come near, she shouts, "Go away! Go away!"

I slam the door and cry and wet my worn pants. I go out to the shed where the goats and tools are sheltered. Nanny ambles

over to see if I'm okay. She has hardly any milk, hardly any hay.

In the evening, a man comes that I've never seen before. He swings down from his horse with a black leather bag. He leans over the crib where sweat flattens Milord-baby's gold curls. Mama gives the man coins she has saved in the bag.

A day later, Milord-baby kicks his feet. Mama eats again and smiles at me. I turn from her and run to the barnyard.

Spring comes and Milord-baby crawls, looking for me with his big eyes. He makes a loud sound when I walk in the room. I look in his big eyes and whisper, "Stupid baby." He raises his arms and shouts with joy. Stupid baby.

Gorgeous in silk and velvet, he toddles in a silly, bobble-headed way, and mimics Nanny's "Baaaa." It makes Mama laugh. I laugh too.

Out in the yard, Milord-baby sees me nursing from Nanny and wants to nurse too.

"No!" I say ferociously. "She's *my* Nanny!"

Mama lowers my fists, but for once she doesn't let Milord-baby have what he wants. She offers him her breast, but he cries.

When she goes to tend the garden, I say "No!" again sternly and glow with happiness when he sits down and cries.

Summer passes. Milord-baby calls out my name. I dance in front of him to make him laugh. I give him a stick to dig in the ground. When Mama isn't looking, I take some of his special food, his honey-bread, his meat. He watches me with happy eyes. I give him a clam-shell I find by the creek. Joyfully, he bangs it on his silver plate.

Now Milord-baby can make his way to the toilet pail and pull up his pants by himself. He wants to follow me to the creek when I go to fetch water, but Mama says no. Once when Mama was busy, I let him carry a wooden bowl and help me feed the chickens. "Chick, chick, chick," I say, flinging the crumbs so they fall wide, and he says, "chick, chick, chick" and flings exactly like me.

Autumn comes and frost. Milord-baby has soft, warm clothes with fur edging, and shoes. I wear my wooden clogs. Mama makes

me a woolen cloak, dark blue. Milord-baby wants one too. I swirl my cloak and stare at the buckles on his shoes. "No," I say.

Mama says, "Be good to Milord-baby."

One day, a beautiful carriage rumbles up, shiny doors and shining horses jolting across our yard. Nanny kicks her heels and scampers away. Men in beautiful clothing step down. One drives the coach, one holds the door and leads the horses, one talks to Mama and carries Milord-baby's cradle and dishes and clothing out to the carriage.

I stare amazed at their uniforms. The last one gives a heavy bag of coins to Mama and takes Milord-baby's hand.

Milord-baby pulls away, frantic, reaches for Mama.

"Hush, Milord-baby," she says, "hush. You're going for a ride. Look at the beautiful horses."

The horses stamp; their harnesses jingle. The sunlight catches the brass. How I long to go where Milord-baby is going. "Can I go too, Mama?"

"No, my son."

I stare with hate at Milord-baby and the carriage I'll never ride in.

While Mama is talking to the coachman about the bridge, Milord-baby bolts across the yard. Attendants chase him, catch and carry him to the carriage. I smile. They put him in and close the door. He stands on the seat and pounds at the window, screams in his silks, wails. The carriage wheels grind and thump over small rocks and tree roots and then the horses' hooves pick up a faster rhythm and the rumble erases Milord-baby's wail. We watch the carriage until it disappears beyond the hill, and all we hear are chickens clucking, Nanny's "Maaaaa," the wind in the trees.

I stand beside Mama, holding her skirt tight in my fist. "Will Milord-baby come back for supper?"

"No, my son."

I run outside and call for Nanny. I put my arm around her neck, and we walk to the creek. No one toddles after me. Something cries out from a tree above the water. But it's only a bird.

Take the Shot

David MacWilliams

"Send it," the spotter lying next to Mike said.

The lieutenant crouching low several feet behind Mike said, "Shoot the fucker."

Seven hundred yards away, the center of mass moved. The target's heart slipped in and out of Mike's crosshairs, partly obscured by a bicycle the target was trying to repair on the far side of the dirt road. Mike pressed his finger pad against the trigger, felt the warm smoothness in its curve, but he didn't fire. Instead, he watched the target through his scope.

It was a bearded Afghani in his mid-fifties. He troubled Mike because the man didn't match the description of the target he'd been assigned. The target should've been younger. This man was about the age of Mike's dad, who was surely sound asleep at that moment, thousands of miles away. The Afghani wore a white tunic stained with sweat and dust, and a turban with one loose end that continually fell across his face while he tried to reseat the bicycle chain onto the sprocket-wheel. The man fiddled with the chain, leaning the top tube of the frame against his forehead as he crouched down, unwittingly keeping the bicycle between himself and the business end of Mike's sniper rifle. The man would drop the chain and lift his hands as if he were arguing with the bicycle. He would wipe the grease on his tunic, wag a finger at the bike, then try again to tug the chain onto the sprocket's teeth, the whole time flipping the loose end of the turban out of his face like he was swatting a pesky fly. Once he angrily squeezed the rear tire with both hands, appearing to punish the bike for being so stubborn. The man's frustration and the way he scolded the bike reminded Mike of how his dad would fuss with his ancient Ford F100. Yeah, he thought, his dad would be sleeping now, with Mike's son and wife asleep in the next room of the old ranch house. Mike clenched his eyes shut, saw the image of his wife and son sleeping in their

beds—warm, at peace, and far away. A nightlight would be glowing in the corner, illuminating his wife’s cheekbone and an eyebrow shaped like a comma. He took a breath and opened his eyes again.

A small, battered Nissan pickup rattled past the Afghani. He waved his hand, maybe asking for a ride, but the driver leaned out the window and said something that must have been offensive. The bicycle man shook his fist. A sedan sped by headed in the opposite direction, kicking up a cloud of swirling rust-colored dust, obscuring him for a moment. The man raised his fist at the sedan, too.

“Take the shot, goddammit. Before the whole damned village drives by.” The lieutenant peered through his binoculars. He lowered them from his eyes, lifted them, then lowered them again. His voice rose a little higher in pitch. His voice would do that when he got stressed and felt the platoon wasn’t responding quick enough. “That’s our target. Take it out.”

At his shoulder, Mike’s spotter, a kid named Terry, whispered urgently. “Jesus, Mike. Just send it.” Mike looked at Terry. Terry’s face was flushed from the heat and from nerves. He was a good soldier, but fidgety. Not a good trait for a spotter. “What are ya waitin’ for, Mike?”

Mike had wanted to teach his son to hunt, as his dad had taught him, before he would deploy that January. Because what if he didn’t come back? He took his son out just before Thanksgiving. They climbed to a tree stand, the one he and his dad had built long ago. He was crouching behind the boy’s shoulder, with one gloved hand lying lightly on the small of his son’s back. It was a Gore-Tex glove, the kind he wore in the army. He’d given a similar pair, a little too big, to his son on his birthday the month before. The boy had just turned ten. He wore one glove on his left hand, but his right, with the index finger hovering above the trigger, was bare. Mike had told him to take the glove off his trigger hand for safety’s sake. “Got him in your sights?” Mike asked.

“Yeah,” the boy whispered, and his voice quivered slightly. Mike knew the boy was trying to control his voice, to speak evenly.

“So let out half a breath, and keep both eyes open, and when you’re ready, squeeze, don’t pull.”

“Okay,” the boy replied, and let out half a breath, but still he didn’t fire.

Down field, the buck lifted his head and snorted into the chill morning air. Its breath rose and disappeared in a vapory mist. The buck stood in a clearing, framed by the pines and the bare aspen branches. The animal was a beautiful sight, Mike thought. The muscles in his heavy shoulders rippled as he bent again to the wet grass. He was an 8-pointer and would make a fine first trophy.

The boy lifted his finger from the trigger and rested it outside the trigger guard as his father had taught him. He bit his lip. “Do you think he knows we’re up here?” Mike’s son asked.

“No Ben, he’s got no idea.”

“Sergeant, do you need a fucking invitation to follow orders?”

“No sir,” Mike replied.

“Then follow goddamned orders and take the target out. Now.”

Mike stared through the scope. He twisted the magnification ring ever so slightly, tightening the focus. He could almost see his father’s face out there, decades ago, the smudge of grease on his chin, the pursed lip as he peered under the hood of his Ford truck. “Mind of her own,” his father would say, shaking his head and sighing. “If it ain’t one thing, it’s another.” He always said this part with a grin. He loved his truck the way a cowhand might love his horse. Its breakdowns were just a part of its ornery personality.

“Why doncha buy a new one, Dad?” Mike asked him on a winter morning when he was ten.

“And give up on the old girl?” His dad shrugged and patted the faded hood. “We been through too much together. I drove you and mom home from the hospital in her when you were born.”

“I am ordering you to kill an enemy combatant. You hear me?”

Terry whispered again through clenched teeth. “Jesus, Mike. He’s just a fuckin’ towel head. You’re gonna get us both slaughtered.”

Mike ignored him and looked sideways over his shoulder at the lieutenant. “Sir, the man is fixing a broken bicycle. He ain’t the target Terry and me were assigned. He’s just fixing his bicycle.”

A doe emerged from the brush about ten yards from the buck, and after it, a fawn.

“Looks like the buck’s got a family, Dad.”

“Maybe.”

“What if I miss and hit the fawn?”

“You won’t miss, son.”

“I might.”

Mike eased back an inch. The ball of his foot had started to ache, and his ankle made little cracking sounds when he shifted his weight from it. He could feel the warm blood pulse back into his cold toes.

“You cold, Ben?”

“I’m okay, Dad.”

“You know that buck ain’t gonna wait for you to shoot.”

“I know.”

“So you gotta take the shot.”

“He’s got a family.”

The lieutenant scoffed. “I don’t give a damn. That son of a bitch is the mission you’ve been assigned to. A threat. Eliminate it.”

“Yes sir.”

“Send it Mike, for chrissakes.”

The Afghan man raised his hands once more to the heavens, apparently pleading with some higher power for help with his unwilling bicycle chain. A quarter mile further up the dirt road, just cresting a hill before descending towards the man, two young bareheaded men on a skinny motorbike spluttered into view, trailing dust. Although he couldn’t hear them, Mike could see that they were laughing. Two kids on a motorbike. An angry man in the crosshairs. His dad sleeping soundly thousands of miles away, while in the next bedroom, his son also slept deeply, taking nearly silent breaths, his wife in the bed next to the boy because both were afraid for Mike, and outside the bedroom window, a battered old short bed pickup.

“Do it quick,” the lieutenant said, his voice grim, under control now.

Mike squeezed the trigger.

The buck bolted into the underbrush unscathed, and the doe and the fawn leapt sideways and vanished. Mike saw the splintered tree limb above where the buck’s head had been, exactly where his son had aimed. The boy laid the rifle down. A slim sliver of blue smoke drifted from the tip of the barrel. He was biting his lip again and did not look at his father.

“Sorry, Dad. I missed.”

“I know, Ben.” Mike pressed his palm against his son’s back and had a thought, that he wished he would never have to remove it.

The Letter

Madeleine McDonald

“But you never actually got divorced, did you, sweetie?”

A crackly phone line and the unfamiliar Australian twang could not disguise the impatience in her voice.

“Donna, I have seen neither hide nor hair of your brother for two years. Good riddance.”

“You can’t change facts. You’re his next of kin. There’s no-one else.”

The legal expression hit me like a punch in the gut. Donna steamrolled on. “We don’t want you to be out of pocket. Heavens, no. You just tell the funeral director to send the bill to Tobes. No expense spared.”

That was one matter where I agreed with my late, unlamented husband. His elder sister had rammed her Australian husband’s prosperity down his throat for years. Her Christmas cards showed photos of a spacious house, sunlit swimming pool, his and hers treadmills, and their growing children on growing ponies.

Donna was still talking. “Like I said, sweetie, it’s not convenient for us to come over right now, and it is your legal responsibility.”

Two days later, I unlocked the padlock the police had put on Matt’s door after the ambulance crew broke in.

Deep breath. I could do this.

I drew back the curtains to take in Matt’s whole life, encompassed in one tawdry rented room, a life ended by painkillers. It was typical of Matt that he somehow overdosed on over-the-counter flu remedies. “We’re treating it as an accident, love,” a sympathetic policeman had told me. “It happens. People swallow them like sweets.” That figured. Matt was always impatient, wanting immediate results.

Might as well get on with it. Mollified by Donna’s largesse, the landlord had promised to send a van to collect Matt’s leavings, and I intended to be in and out as quickly as possible. I shook out

the plastic bags I had brought with me. A clear one for anything important. I would post his phone and paperwork to Australia, and Donna could get off her treadmill-toned arse and deal with it. Black bin liners for everything else.

Why do some women marry the wrong man? If I knew the answer, I would make a fortune. Did I think I could change Matt? Perhaps. Matt was one of life’s losers, although when I met him I thought he was a talented guy who needed a push in the right direction. Was my biological clock ticking? Perhaps. Did I sorry for him? There I stopped and gave myself a mental shake. It was impossible to be sorry for someone who brought problems on himself.

I cleared the cupboard above the sink of a random assortment of plates and mugs. It also contained a half-empty bottle of whisky. That could come home with me.

Moving on, I threw grubby bedding into bags, followed by sweaters, shirts and underpants. Matt had never been a vain guy.

The letter was in a metal cigar case, in a drawer that also contained his spare reading glasses. The paper was dog-eared, the creases worn, as if it had been unfolded and refolded many times.

My very own Matt, I’m writing to you tonight because I can’t wait until next week to say how much I love you. Next week will be our first anniversary. The first of many, my dearest. I want us to grow old and grey together. Isn’t it wonderful that together we are more than the sum of you and me?

Dumbfounded, I skipped to the signature: The name Andrea meant nothing to me. I read her last paragraph again.

Do you remember our second date? When we met in the park? You didn’t know I was watching, and I saw you punch the air and jump over a puddle. I knew, I just knew, that you wanted to jump right into the

puddle, like a toddler, and make a splash, for the joy of living, and the joy of coming to meet me. My heart exploded with the joy of meeting you. That was when I decided to marry you. Happy anniversary, my dearest Matt.

Who was this Andrea? What had gone wrong?

I tried to think. Matt had never, ever mentioned her name. Even when we split up, when I accused him of being an emotional cripple, and he accused me of being a control freak, he had never compared me to some previous love. But the letter looked far too old for her to belong to his life after me. Just in case, I scrolled through his phone. Andrea was not listed in his contacts.

I washed out a glass and poured myself a whisky. Some time later, I poured another. By then, I had decided it didn't matter who she was. It didn't matter if she came before or after me. What mattered was that someone loved Matt. Loved him truly, in a way I never did. If he inspired such devotion, he wasn't the loser I thought he was.

Humbled, I looked at the bin bags stacked against the wall, waiting for the landlord to collect them. An hour earlier, the debris of Matt's life had seemed pathetic. Not anymore. Someone loved him. That alone justified his place in the world.

Whatever had gone wrong, Matt deserved dignity and privacy. Donna and Tobes, secure in their perfect Australian life, need never see the letter.

I raised my glass in the direction of the square of sky visible through a grimy window. "Here's to you, Matt, wherever you are. Here's to you, Andrea, whoever you are."

As an epitaph, it seemed inadequate. I listened for an answer, a sign. Then tried again.

"Night night. God bless." The words echoed my grandma's comforting goodnight kiss in childhood.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs but they went past the door without stopping. A hum of traffic came from the street below.

It was time to go.

I left the whisky bottle on the table.

For the landlord.

For Matt and Andrea.

POETRY

Trust Account

Lynne Burnett

Call the moon earth's bald accountant
tallying cheap lunacies while turning
a blind eye to secret purchases made of
those we profess to love, and you'll never
reach for it, life too crazy and unfair.

Then, a part-time father might make it
his mission to have you see differently—
maybe because he balanced the books for
a transit company, his paper moon: the fullness
of something gained, nothing owed.

Inside that circle—fat beginnings,
a wishing well of anything goes.
His window to the inner worlds,
the crystal ball of a third eye that
once opened, could never be closed.

Hang me *that* moon, daddy, and he did,
when I loved another at my own expense.
Nailed it right inside my head
so the darkness there wouldn't swamp me.
Made me a lantern, he did.

Bold tides of faith sway fate, he said.
And made my heart a night train
steaming down a moonlit track
all the crossing signals down,
my mind—a field of shadows revelling

in the sudden gleam of lives not realized.

Take your time, he said, fingering his
shirt buttons as he weighted *take* and *your*.

Do something with your life is what

I heard, heard it sad inside the wise.

How to Stop a Glockenspiel

Heikki Huotari

In order to dad dance one needs a modicum of awkwardness, a modicum of awkwardness not feigned. Were I of sentiment grammatically and anatomically correct and incorrect respectively, i.e., were I an isotope, I'd celebrate my half-life every second day. I'd cross the time line, lights and bells be damned. Take it outside, that thought. The continent at night extrapolates to no extreme. I'd pick a hat, pick any hat, then act as if I had no hat. Forlorn, but having chosen to be born, the narcissist adopts a god. That god says, Start your infinite-regression engines gentlemen. The centers of your circles have receded so your circles locally are indistinguishable from straight lines. The Butterfly says singing is but inefficient breathing therefore most great apes rely on the geometry of the great chain of being that they're part of. Great apes say that privilege is a function of inherent worth. The lily is above the law so everything the lily says is to the lily's credit. If I did it Frank Sinatra's way then Frank Sinatra did it my way and the only way to stop a bad guy with a glockenspiel was with a greater glockenspiel.

13 Ways of Describing a Car Wreck

Laura Sweeney

- I. Permit. Gravel lot.
The Oldsmobile loomed large as
the Oak before her.
- II. Her sister screaming
as she white knuckled the Dodge
around the raccoon.
- III. County route. Black ice.
Skidding the Pinto into
a White Fox Road ditch.
- IV. The Ford. Summer of
Batman. Sprayed for the Derby.
Like the Batmobile.
- V. Purple Passion. Gunned
engine. Fiaro. Fiasco.
Drunken tomfoolery.
- VI. Sprained neck, bruised tailbone.
Wrangled out of the Buick by
a spurned ex-lover.
- VII. The Chevy in flames.
An oily rag. No suspects.
Charred little spinner.
- VIII. Gma's Olds swerved into
a sweetcorn stand. T-boned by
an elderly man.
- IX. The silver Camry
rear-ended on Lincoln Way.
One more MRI.
- X. Walgreens on Wall Street.
J-Walker. Three car pile-up.
Camry in-between.
- XI. Ex-con steals Camry.
Drapes jasmine over mirrors,
needles under seats.
- XII. The Toyota's found
in Springfield. Abandoned by
a hoodlum's joy ride.
- XIII. The Fox & Hound loans
a Ford Escape. Nothing wrong.
Yet. Lucky thirteen?

About the Authors

Michele Alouf is an empty-nester who lives and writes in Richmond, Virginia. She is currently working on her first novel and a graduate degree in creative writing and literature from Harvard Extension School. She has also worked as a teacher for children with disabilities, owned a yoga business, and was a writer and editor for a local magazine.

David Blackmore was born in Pittsburgh. He spent the first half of his childhood in the Pittsburgh area and the second half in the small town of Kane, Pennsylvania. He received an AB in English from Harvard and an MA and PhD in English from UCLA. After many years of teaching English and Latin American studies at New Jersey City University in Jersey City, David is returning permanently to Pittsburgh in 2023 to coordinate the first-year writing program at Chatham University. Most of David's previous publications have been scholarly in nature, but he is hard at work on his book-length memoir *Chemical Works Road*, so stay tuned...

Lynne Burnett's publications include *American Journal of Poetry*, *Arc Poetry*, *Blue Heron Review*, *Calyx Journal*, *Comstock Review*, *Crosswinds*, *CV2*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *IthacaLit*, *Malabat Review*, *Mockingheart Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *Ristau*, *River Styx*, *Tamsen*, *Taos Journal of Poetry*, *Wordrunner eChapbooks* and several anthologies. A Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee, she won the 2016 Lauren K. Alleyne Difficult Fruit PP, 2019 Jack Grapes PP and was a finalist for the 2022 Montreal International PP. Finishing Line Press published her chapbook, *Irresistible* in 2018. Visit her at <https://lynneburnett.ca>

William Cass has had over 295 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. He won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*. A nominee for both Best Small Fictions

and Best of the Net anthologies, he has also received five Pushcart Prize nominations. His first short story collection, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories*, was published by Wising Up Press in 2020, and a second collection, *Uncommon & Other Stories*, was recently released by the same press. He lives in San Diego, California.

Julie Dron lives in Taiwan and began writing in her sixties. Short listed with commendation Scottish Arts Trust Flash Fiction, published in their anthology *Beached*. Also published in *Blink-Ink*, *Secret Attic*, Wicked Shadow Press anthology *Abominable* and CultureCult anthology *Cosmic Contact*. Published in online magazines *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Syncopation Literary Journal* (vol 2), *The Wild Word* (issue 73) and *Shorts Magazine* (vol 4). “The Land Where her Ancestors Live” was long listed in Oxford Flash Fiction summer 2022 but unpublished.

Joyce Hinnefeld is the author of two collections of short stories, *Tell Me Everything* and *The Beauty of Their Youth*, and two novels, *In Hovering Flight* and *Stranger Here Below*, along with other stories and essays. She is an Emerita Professor of English at Moravian University in Bethlehem, PA, and the founder of the Moravian Writers’ Conference; she now works as a Program Facilitator for Shining Light, an organization that provides reentry programming for incarcerated people throughout the U.S.

Heikki Huotari attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. Since retiring from academia/mathematics he has published poems in numerous journals and in five poetry collections. His manuscript, *To Justify The Butterfly*, won second prize, and publication, in the 2022 James Tate Chapbook Competition.

Brenda Jacobsen was born in London, Ontario, and resides in Norwalk, CT. She has immersed herself in writing since June of 2021 when she participated in a six week online writing workshop with Natalie Goldberg. Both a student and a trained Amherst Writers & Artists affiliate; her local communities include the

Purple Sofa Writers and Westport Writers Workshop. Her work has appeared in *FlashFlood*, *Pathos to Play Anthology*, *National Flash Fiction Day*, and *Amherst Writers & Artists* blog. She has also led therapeutic art programs in healthcare, taught elementary school, and played the bagpipes.

Lita Kurth, MFA-Rainier Writers Workshop, has published in three genres, fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. “Are We Not Ladies” was nominated by *Watershed Review* for Best of the Net, 2017 and “Fish Genesis” was nominated by *Rabid Oak* for Best of the Net, 2019. “This is the Way We Wash the Clothes” (CNF) won the 2014 Diana Woods Memorial Award (*Lunchticket*). Her creative nonfiction “Pivot,” and short story, “Gardener’s Delight” (Dragonfly Press DNA) were nominated for Pushcart Prizes. She is co-founder of San Jose’s literary reading series, Flash Fiction Forum. A sampling of publications: *The Millions*, *Atticus Review*, *Brain, Child*, *Main Street Rag*, *Microfiction Monday*, *Concis*, *Rappahannock Review*. Her first, but not yet published novel, *The Rosa Luxemburg Socialist Strip Club* was a semi-finalist for the 2019 Faulkner-Wisdom contest and has been a finalist in several others. One piece has been accepted for publication: “The Revolutionary’s Brother” in *Flashbackfiction.com*. She is also completing a book of creative writing prompts.

David MacWilliams earned his MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Ashland University, Ohio in 2011. His essays have appeared in *Pilgrimage*, *Mason’s Road*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and elsewhere. His fiction has appeared in the *tiny journal*, *Too Well Away*, and *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*. He was a reader for *Riverteeth magazine* and now reviews nonfiction books for them. This story derives from an exercise he began at the Writers Studio of New York City.

Madeleine McDonald lives in chilly Yorkshire, England, and finds inspiration walking on the empty beach. Her published work ranges from newspaper columns to romance novels, by way of Shakespearean sonnets and radio stories. Her short fiction has been

published in various anthologies and journals, including *Mslexia*, *The Healing Muse* and *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*.

Laura Sweeney facilitates Writers for Life in Iowa and Illinois. She represented the Iowa Arts Council at the First International Teaching Artist's Conference in Oslo, Norway. Her poems and prose appear in sixty plus journals and ten anthologies in the States, Canada, Britain, Indonesia, and China. Her recent awards include a scholarship to the Sewanee Writer's Conference. In 2021, she received an Editor's Prize in Flash Discourse from *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*; Poetry Society of Michigan's Barbara Sykes Memorial Humor Award; and two of her poems appear in the anthology *Impact: Personal Portraits of Activism*, which received an American Book Fest Best Book Award in Current Events category and finalist in the Social Change category. She is a PhD candidate, English Studies/Creative Writing, at Illinois State University.