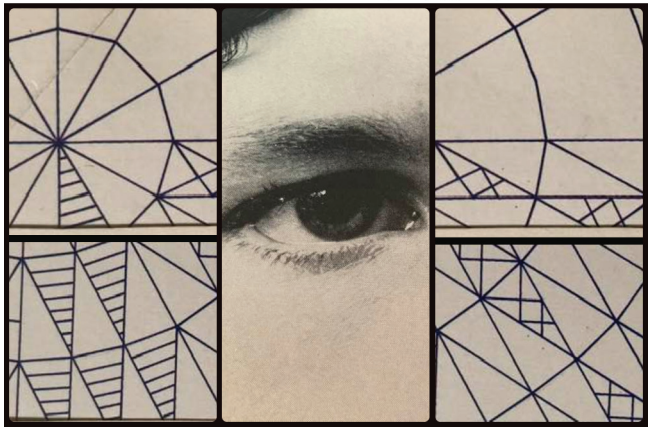
DISTURBANCES



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"No one is so brave that he is not disturbed by something unexpected."

— *Julius Caesar*

DISTRUBANCES: Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Anthology

Prose Editors:
Susan Bono, Dan Coshnear, Jo-Anne Rosen, Linda Saldana, Nick Valdez

Poetry Editors:
Amanda Yskamp, Mark Tait

Cover art by Amanda Yskamp

© 2025, Jim Beane, Jane Laube Boch, Ann Calandro, Ed Davis, Frank Diamond, David Hadbawnik, GTimothy Gordon, Peter Grieco, Stan Kempton, Joseph Kierland, Ted Morrissey, Melanie S. Smith, Don J Taylor, Pamela Wynn

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FICTION

Honorable Mention, 2024 Prose Collections

Streets With Trees

Jim Beane

Thirty bucks a day my Papi pays me to help him paint on Saturdays and Sundays. Thirty bucks. Big deal. I hate working on the weekends. I can make ten times that much running dime bags for Edwin, but here I am, half asleep at 5 a.m., waiting for my "wake up" call to go to another job I don't like and don't want. Papi's clueless to these feelings, of course. Right before he shakes me awake, I jerk rigid into a sit-up position and bug my eyes out. He jumps back, sees it's a joke, and acts like he's having a heart attack. Then he presses his big face close to mine.

"Stop fooling, Ernesto," he says. "Out of bed."

Papi stays so serious, man, he never loosens up. When I hang with my friends, he calls it "looking for trouble" and works hard to make sure I can't. He fills every day with work and on weekends fills mine with the same. I'm in school during the week, or at least he thinks I'm in school. But mostly I'm hanging out with Edwin and my friends.

Papi can't track me. Once he's home from painting houses all day for the Kelly Brothers, he's too exhausted to pay much attention to me. I operate on my own. He insists we eat and clean up together every night. But afterward he goes to bed early, and I'm left alone to make my own decisions. He won't let me quit school. He has dreams for me, and school makes dreams come true, he says.

Monday through Friday we wake up at 5 a.m. Papi leaves for work by six. He wakes me again as he's leaving, but I go back to bed and sleep through the morning. He never misses a day of work and never checks on me when he's working. I deleted the messages the school leaves on his machine about my absences. But today is Saturday. It is 5 a.m. again and I am wide awake. Tomorrow is Sunday and I'll be awake at 5 a.m. again. Seven days a week, 5 a.m. Total torture.

"Suckers get up at 5 a.m.," Edwin tells me. "And going to school's a waste of time unless you're moving weed." Edwin talks loud in front of the rest, and we all want to be like Edwin. He carries a big wad of money and wears the coolest clothes. All the girls love his ass. They think he's a big deal.

"Tell your old Papi you got plans tomorrow," Edwin tells me. "Tell him yo no trabajo or some shit."

Uh, right.

"We'll hook up later," I tell him. "Burn it up all night long."

Edwin rolls his eyes. We bump knuckles.

"Uh-huh," he says. "But after you get off from work with Papi." He folds his hands and rests his cheek on them like an angel praying, punking me. Anybody around laughs.

But right now, Papi is home, and there's no getting around getting out of bed. I sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. The cracked tiles on the floor are cold. Papi clears his throat. I look at him and he stares at me. Then he shakes his head and mumbles something I don't understand in Spanish before he disappears into the bathroom. I listen to his stream hit the water in the toilet. My head is dizzy from smoking too much weed last night. I drop back on the edge of my bed.

"You think your pal Edwin is getting up for work?" Papi shouts.

Edwin is sleeping at five on Saturday morning like every other normal person on the face of the earth.

"What you think?" Papi yells out. He acts like working at some crummy job nobody else wants is some sort of privilege.

"How's school?" he asks and walks past, drying his hands on a towel.

"School's for chumps," I say.

"Don't say that." He raises his hand to smack me, but he never hits me, it's an act. "And use good English. How do you expect to get ahead when you talk like some chuco? Live the dream. You wear a tie. You sit at a desk. What you think about that?"

I walk over to the kitchen sink and run cold water over my wrists.

"Alright, alright, hurry up, hijito, let's go."

Just say no, I think. Do what Edwin says. Say you are sick of working on Saturdays and Sundays, sick of getting up when it's still dark. Tell him you're sick of trying to live his dream. But instead, I wilt.

"Back off," I say in the lowest whisper.

"What's that?" he says.

"Nothing."

"C'mon then, hurry up. The day is slipping away."

His paintbrushes are arranged on the dinette table. Their bristles are combed free of paint and hang over the plastic edge like thick mustaches. Papi picks them up one at a time and fingers the bristles. He drops the ones he likes in a bucket and sets the bucket with the tarps and tool bags by the door.

I take my time, knowing he won't leave the apartment without me.

Outside on the street the neighborhood is waking up. Apartment lights are flicking on, and trucks are racing off to work. An old pickup passes us. Three men are bunched in the cab, and the driver beeps his horn. Papi waves. Old women on their way uptown to clean rich people's houses crowd the bus stop. The streetlights are on. We walk behind our building where Papi parks his truck. He unlocks the doors, and we climb into the old Ford.

Papi weaves his pickup through the city until we are cruising through a much different neighborhood than ours. The streets are lush with giant trees and flower gardens line sidewalks wide enough for two to pass without bumping. The houses are huge, the lawns are perfect, and the cars are new. Edwin's right: money makes it happen, and the more green you got, the more happening it is.

Papi hands me a crumpled piece of paper with a bunch of scribbling on it.

"Directions," he says. "We want Maple Avenue, what's the turn?" He pokes at the smoothed out paper I hold in my hands.

"Left at Willow, go two blocks. Right on Sycamore, go three

blocks. Then left on Maple."

Papi squints at the intersection a half block ahead. Deep creases gather in the skin at the corners of his eyes, and gray streaks through his hair. For the first time I notice the skin beneath his chin is sagging. But he still looks like that guy in the movies, you know, the handsome one, plays Zorro, just a little more used up.

"What the first turn again?" he says.

"Willow, Sycamore, then Maple."

"Too many damn trees."

"Yeah, broken bottles and rocks are way better," I say. "More scenic."

He laughs and slaps my knee with his open hand. His nostrils flare and he breathes in deeply.

"Smell that?"

"What?"

"Smells like dinero."

Papi's chin nods up and down, and he snaps his fingers. His face gets serious. He scans the houses and takes everything in. Every house is fresh, proud, kept. Nothing needs paint.

"You see any numbers?" he says. "You think with all this money they'd have numbers on their houses."

I point to a house on the right side of the street with brass numbers next to the door. They run up and down as big as dinner plates and match the scribbles in my hand. The house is big, like something you see in a magazine while you're waiting to be seen at the clinic. Two Mercedes, cotton-white with gleaming gold accents, sit side by side in the driveway.

Papi parks the truck against the curb and kills the engine. He glances in the rearview, slicks his mustache, then drops out his door to the street and saunters up the walk. At the doorbell he rings once and waits a few seconds. Peeking in the door's sidelight, he pushes the bell again. A woman opens the door and surprises him. She is hidden from my sight by Papi's bulk, but I can see she closes the door. Papi spins around and faces me. His hands are jammed in his pockets.

A man rounds the corner of the house in a big hurry. Papi steps off the porch, walks toward him, and extends his hand. The man raises his hand, but it's to check his watch. He is a head shorter than Papi and wears a crisp white shirt and pressed black pants. His hands move too much when he talks, and he carries too much belly.

Papi's hands remain behind his back while the other man yaks away. When he's finished getting in Papi's face, he turns away from Papi and disappears beyond the corner of the house. Papi stands still as a statue for a moment. His eyes follow the man's back. He kicks the ground, shakes his head and stares at the ground. Finally, he turns to me and lumbers back toward the truck. He looks concerned as he leans in my open window.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Money," he says. He runs his hand through his hair and spits to the curb.

"People with money control us. They believe they deserve better than everyone else." He glances toward the house. "This man wants us to work for less than he agreed to pay on the phone in order to get me to driveway the hell over here."

He reaches across my chest and flips open the cardboard toothpick box on the dash, plucks one from the rest, and sticks it in the corner of his mouth.

"So?" I ask.

"So?" He repeats what I say but his tone is sharp, not the way he speaks to me.

"Aah…" he says and pushes off my door.

He's right about money. People that have it sure as hell live better than us. More they get, the better they live. Edwin's just getting started.

Papi starts up the truck and drives us around the corner into the alley snaking behind the houses. When he stops, he parks so close to a vine-covered fence, I need to climb out his side.

"Never block an alley with your truck." He's told me that at least a hundred times. "People get pissed. Bad business getting people pissed."

Woven vines arch over the pathway between the two garages where we park.

"Use the tunnel to get in," Papi says. He unloads two stepladders, a couple of paint pots, rollers, different nap roller covers, the bucket of brushes, and some tarps at the tailgate. I ferry the stuff into the tunnel of vines that leads to the rich man's yard. When the tunnel ends, I stop and stare at the maze of stone walks and gardens. A rectangular reflecting pool as big as Papi's pick-up sits in the center of the yard. The black surface mirrors the morning sky. All the landscaping, and I mean all, is trimmed like a barber's cut. There's a shade roof covering a stone patio between the house and garage.

The man I saw out front is seated at a glass-topped table beneath the roof. A thin trail of smoke dribbles from the cigarette in his hand. He raises his head a brief second and rattles the newspaper, checks his watch, and stubs his smoke in a glass ashtray. When he stands, he pushes his chair away from the table with the backs of his legs like he's annoyed at the interruption, then tucks the newspaper beneath his arm and leaves in a fluster. He does not look at me.

At the reflecting pool he stops and reaches into his pants pocket as if he may have forgotten something. When he pulls his hand free, a small object comes out of his pocket and falls into the lush grass beside the pool. He continues on without noticing and enters the house through a set of sliding glass doors. The lights inside the house go dark.

I walk to the reflecting pool like I'm having a look around and see a cigarette lighter shimmering in the grass. The house is dark, and I drop to one knee pretending to tie my shoe and snatch the lighter. When I stand, it slips into my pants pocket and sinks to the bottom. Edwin pays good money for this kind of bling. I duck into the vine tunnel and trot back to the alley to grab another load.

Papi gives me crap about taking too long but that's okay, so long as he suspects nothing. We tarp the table and chairs and start scraping the wood ceiling. A couple of loose flakes fall away. Papi works off a ladder, digging the tip of his pocketknife into the wood. If it's soft, he digs it out and fills the hole with wood filler. When he sands the patch after two coats, the hole totally disappears under primer. Papi takes pride in his work; nothing slips by him. A couple of hours later, we're getting ready to lay on finish paint.

By then I need to pee and stick my brush in the thinner before I start toward the house.

"Where you think you're going?"

"Bathroom."

"Pee?"

I nod yes.

Papi jerks his thumb toward the alley.

"What, we can't go inside?"

"That's right. Go in the alley."

"Neighbors'll like that. Good for business, right?"

"Don't be smart, just go do your business."

I stalk off to the alley to pee.

When I return, the woman who answered the front door is talking with Papi. Her hair is pulled back tight to her head, and a thick braid streaked with gray hangs between her shoulders. She wears a long, brown dress and a string of unmatched stones around her neck. Her skin is smooth and glows like caramel. She holds a tray in both hands. A water bottle and two glasses sit on the tray and wobble slightly as she talks.

"Mister Segundo is gone for a few hours," she says to me. "If you need to come inside for the toilet, you may." She pronounces her words with care, like the teachers at school. Her eyes dart past me to the tunnel of vines leading to the alley.

I look down, embarrassed, but take one of the glasses from the tray and thank her. She tells me her name is Rosa, and I like how she smells. She and Papi start talking again. Their Spanish is too fast for me to follow, but I understand, when she laughs loud and touches his forearm, that she is flirting and so is he. She looks a little like the picture of my mother Papi keeps scotch-taped to his truck visor.

The sliding glass door thumps open against its jamb and the sound it makes startles the three of us. The man from earlier,

Segundo, appears in the open doorway. He is talking to himself and walking slowly along the stone path, scanning the ground.

I slide my hand inside my pocket.

He stops at the spot in the grass where he dropped the lighter. Carefully he crouches and spreads a few blades of grass apart with his fingertips. He glances in my direction, and I look away. His eyes narrow to mean slits. The hairs at the back of my neck stand. My fingers fiddle with the lighter, and it surprises me by springing open with a click. I ease it closed against the cushion of my thumb.

Papi places his empty glass on Rosa's tray. He forces a tired smile and walks to the paint bucket where we have left our brushes. The man bends down and examines the grass. After a few seconds, he turns to my father on the ladder.

"You there," Segundo says.

Papi takes his time laying off the paint he'd just rolled on. Then he turns to the man.

"Yes, what is it?" Papi says.

"I am missing my lighter."

"It is lost?" Papi asks.

Segundo scowls at my father. "What do you think?"

Rosa is next to me. She takes my glass, her eyes fixed on the two men. Her lips draw together in a thin, smileless line.

Segundo rises from his crouch. He looks like a dog straining at the leash.

"You have it," he says and points at my father.

Papi places his hands against the small of his back and presses against his spine. He looks at the grass at Segundo's feet. After a few seconds he lifts his head and speaks.

"I do not." He looks bewildered by such an accusation.

"Don't pretend. My gold lighter is gone. Stolen. You have stolen it. You, or that boy." He looks in my direction.

"You are wrong, we don't have your lighter."

"No. I'm not wrong."

Papi runs his hand through his hair and strokes his mustache.

Drop it. Nobody will notice. Papi raises his eyebrows and

glances at Rosa. He smiles and nods toward the house. She leaves without a word.

Segundo shifts his stance and takes two steps toward my father. His fists clench at his sides, and he settles his weight into his thick legs. He does not look as soft as I first thought.

"Mexicans," he says and spits. "Give me my lighter. I know you have it."

"You know nothing about me," Papi says. "I don't steal."

"Liar," Segundo says.

My fingers close around the lighter. My mouth is suddenly dry, my breath a thousand miles away.

Segundo circles to Papi's left. In our neighborhood fights happen fast and fierce. But here, in a perfect neighborhood where trees crowd the streets, all that matters is money. Money pays lawyers, and lawyers walk all over people like Papi.

Segundo raises his hand and points his finger as if he intends to poke my father in the chest. Papi swats the rude man's hand away.

"You'll regret that," Segundo says.

"Pack up, Ernesto. We are done here." Papi doesn't look at me when he speaks.

Segundo kicks the stepladder. It crashes on its side.

"Now, Ernesto. Pack up, I said this day is finished." Papi's voice is much louder than normal. He grabs the fallen ladder and sets it upright with one hand, slamming its feet on the tarp.

A sudden breeze rustles the garden plants, and ripples float across the black mirror pool.

"You are not leaving with my lighter," Segundo says. "The police will be called."

Papi's cheek muscles tighten. His hands flex and a blue vein as thick as a pencil rises on his forehead.

"I don't have your lighter."

"Thief. Liar and thief."

Papi steps forward. He clenches his fists.

Segundo sees he has pushed the wrong man too far and starts backing away. At a safe distance he holds his cell to his ear and

talks into it. Then ducks inside the sliding glass doors.

"Goddamn the rich," Papi whispers. "Let's go, there is nothing more for us here."

We pack in a hurry, without speaking, and chuck our gear into the truck's bed. When we are done Papi grabs me by the shoulder and kneads my collarbone. He brushes the hair from my eyes.

"Forget about him," he says. "Forget what he says. He is wrong about us. We earn our money. We own our dreams. We do not need to steal from him."

I say nothing. Papi looks toward the tunnel of vines.

"Let's go, it stinks around here." He nods toward the driver's side of the truck for me to get in. I see in his eyes that he would never believe his son could steal. And it is clear I am his dream and that he works like a dog so I can have my own dreams.

"What?" he says. "You like it here with all these goddamn trees? Vamonos, let's go home, where we belong."

I walk around the back of the truck, and when I pass the tailgate, where my father can no longer see my hands, I toss the lighter into the vines.

Papi fires the truck up and clicks on the radio, loud, and swivels the dial until he lands on a mariachi station. Streams of afternoon sun burn through the Ford's windshield. By the time we get to our neighborhood, Papi is grinning again. He slaps me lightly on the arm with the backs of his fingers and points out a young chuco not much older than me crossing the street in front of us holding a small child's hand. The child carries an ice cream cone. A glob of melted ice cream falls from the child's cone to the hot asphalt, and without missing a step, the chuco bends to the street and scoops the melt with two fingers. He plops the ice cream back on the child's cone and smooths the drips away with his thumb. The child holds back tears and licks the cone.

Papi turns the radio up loud and kisses the tips of his fingers. He touches my mother's picture and shifts the truck into gear as the light turns green.

Appaloosa

Ed Davis

A man sits in a garden with the sun slowly rising through the trees at the edge of his property. Still wearing his blue funeral suit beneath a flimsy overcoat, he's cold but not quite freezing here on the last day of March. He's spent the night in the garden, drifting in and out of consciousness, because he can't face the silence awaiting him inside.

Rotating his stiff neck, Hal takes in the remains of all that they planted in the garden in the five years they were a couple. Both widowed, he and Alma found each other late, in their sixties, became inseparable. Then they'd found and fallen in love with this old boarding stable, especially Alma, an equestrienne in another life, although the horses were long gone. Despite their children's objections, they'd cashed out some investments to buy the place and didn't look back.

His gaze travels to the bare rose vines climbing the trellis. He'd always disliked their funereal scent, but they'd been Alma's favorites. There were plenty of roses at her funeral yesterday, especially from her son Charles, who'd treated Hal as if he were somehow responsible for his mother's death. Hal asked his own daughter, living in Ireland, not to come.

He tilts his creaky neck, fixating on the Japanese maple he purchased for Alma's seventieth. She'd adored its sharp auburn leaves, its compact size. In the dimness, he can barely make out its tight buds, though the branches are coming into focus with each advancing degree of the sun. How long until its warmth reaches him here on his chaise lounge beside her empty one, where they'd sat, hand in hand, the day of her diagnosis. Better to be numb—and dumb—a silent statue, a deformed gnome, in this place that, given another month, would erupt into chaotic beauty.

That might be as hard as facing the empty house had been last night. Several neighbors had volunteered to return with him,

but he'd convinced them he'd be all right, promised to call if he wasn't. A loss so large, he decided, made it perfectly permissible to lie. He and Alma never lied to each other, never denied they were old and wouldn't live forever. But with his bad heart, he'd expected to go first. *Oh Alma.*

So many fine memories shared at the service. Shakily, he'd told how, when he'd proposed, standing beside her at Somerset Falls, she'd squeezed his hand. "There's no need. Our souls were wed the first time we kissed—remember, on the elevator our first Valentine's Day together?"

Her lips had been honey and velvet, her breathing quick, her scent floral, her hand behind his cap, smooshing it forward, blinding him. He silently begged the lift's cables and gears to slow—but they sailed upward to the restaurant, along with his blood pressure. Their mouths were still melded when the door opened on the purple-haired teenage girl who grinned. "You two are so . . ." She waved her bangled wrist to catch the word. "Timeless." They laughed before parting as friends.

Forever afterward, when they kissed—even a brief buss on the cheek—he'd whisper, "timeless," and she'd smile, validating their unspoken vow.

Snapping back to the present with a bone-jolting jerk, he observes the sun has set ablaze the upper branches of the Osage orange at the edge of the field where horses formerly pastured. And, as often happened on mornings while he brewed Alma's English Breakfast tea, a random song begins in his head. It's George Harrison's tune about winter's surrender and melting ice.

Eventually the song segues into cardinals and robins trilling.

When he hears hooves pounding afar off, Hal at first thinks it's just blood throbbing in his temples, product of sleeplessness and his grief hangover. Then, squinting, he discerns across the field a black-spotted Appaloosa with cream-colored flanks, thundering toward the woods. A voice, near his ear, whispers: "You're riding through woods on your Appaloosa stallion . . . bluebells are out and the sky is clear blue." Paul McCartney's last words to his wife Linda before she passed. Hal had read them and wept just after his first wife's passing; apparently, they'd become inscribed in his mind.

He closes his eyes against the dawn. When he opens them, the dream stallion is, of course, gone. But something's changed. Why has he never witnessed their garden coming alive at sunrise before today? If he had, he'd've known that death doesn't last here. Growth proliferates among weeds. Roses persist through ruin. Bulbs gestate like fetuses in underground wombs. Trees wait for sap to circulate.

Ghost horses gallop in the upper pasture.

Hal coaxes his cold fingers back to some semblance of life. Someday he'll sink them again into the garden's giving ground, despite—or even because of—death's necessity, death's hope. For now, he'll stand, lean on the back of Alma's lounger till his legs firm up, then amble inside, make himself breakfast and begin again.

Sup?

Frank Diamond

I be trippy about this journal from the get-go, and that get-go was just yesterday when I open this Word doc and then zombied out. Lost in the sauce. I ask if I can just use a dig recorder or a video app when I get a new blower. That way, you know, I talk my thoughts out.

But they tell me to type this shit down cause a teacher at BrightFutures School for juvies — the Brights — think I got writing talent, which def ain't what the teach at the norms school say, the one who call me unliterate. But how to start?

Yo journal! Sup?
Yo JJ! Sup wid you?

Something like that, then?

But that why I seriously cranking gears cause this be like talking to my own damn self. And I write too white. I *am* white. But I don't want to *write* white. I lose points for that in the hood.

So, this not the way I talk. Know that. Who should know that? Me. JJ — Jonathan Jackson. JJ from Kill-A-Delphia. But I already *do* know that. That's why this so Ohio, like I be shading me. Who listening? Who talking? Same JJ, but not the same JJ.

"That's actually a profound observation," the Brights shrink tell me. She gas me up, conveying that spilling the tea this way help me figure things out.

Fuck she talking about?

Aunty Liz tries giving me the lowdown. "Your counselor is saying that you have — and that we all have — various levels of consciousness."

Fuck *she* talking about?

Aunty Liz lays this on me in the living room when I come downstairs early one morning. It's winter, right after the holidays and outside the dark holds firm. She set aside her Bible and I'm

shook cause Aunty Liz never let anything interrupt her prayer time or, as she call it, her lifeline.

She used to be a junkie. She say she still a junkie, just that she won't be chasing the tiger this *particular* day thanks to God's love.

Whatever.

I never seen her have a day that she didn't call *particular*, but those times when she frowns through the hours and her lips be a line and she looking like she arguing with somebody in her noggin might be a tell that she busting a gut.

That morning, I start rappin' before I actually see her sitting on the living room couch and putting in her request to the spirit in the sky. This only happened twice before — me accidentally interrupting — and on those two other times she holds up her hand like a crossing guard and says "come back in a few minutes." But not this once.

I say, "Levels of consciousness?"

"You're just 14, JJ."

As if I forget.

"I can explain a little, but I'm no counselor," say she.

Aunty Liz a nurse. I give a sort of goodbye wave to shut this off cause come right down to it, I don't really give a shit. But she not finished.

"We were just discussing you, JJ."

We?

I hit mute, but she play it through.

"Me and the Lord, JJ. I ask that grace finds you. That the Spirit moves you."

Well Aunty Liz *is* church; heads out every Sunday. So, I'm not *that* surprised she say this. But up until this here talk, props to Aunty Liz cause she never, ever try to missionize me, and good thing, too. I outgrow Jesus like I outgrow Santa.

I hear the van that takes me to the Brights pull up and for once I think that's *my* lifeline.

"Gotta bounce, Aunty Liz."

She ain't my real aunt. Still, she tells people I'm her nephew cause it's just easier than explaining. She black — like raven black

— and because I'm white, people think she marry in; that Aunty Liz be somebody who take the plunge with a brother or sister of one of my white parents. But ain't like that.

Aunty Liz sponsors Moms in Nar-Anon but Moms relapse every other week, and when that asshole landlord wants to street me, Aunty Liz swoops in and now I live with her in this big old house in the Logan section of Brotherly Love.

Aunty Liz trying to be my legal guardian but DIE-FUST not so sure cause of her baggage. That DYFS and that how I pronounce it, journal. So, for Aunty Liz, it's fill in them forms, wait a month or two, meet with the DIEF, more forms, another wait, another meet. Meanwhile, I be living with her cause the DIEF swamped. By the time they decide, I'll be 18 and on my own anyway.

———

Yo journal! Sup?
Yo JJ! Sup wid you?

We be reading this Anne Frank diary in English class and Anne Frank pretend like she be writing to a friend named "Kitty." Teach already give up the ending, so we know it depressy. Hitler kill her when all that shit happen.

Me? I ain't never gonna let homies near this. They will put the kibosh on it. Maybe even merk me. Because writing shit down gets you in trouble cause you never know what the cops will use against you, or how they connect dots that ain't there and somebody doing time cause you spill.

And Anne Frank put a date on all her journal entries. At first I was going to, but then I forget. Then I remember, but then think maybe that not the best way to go. Like a lot of this shit I write about, I really don't know when any of it happen exactly. Plus, a lot of it never *did* happen. I make it up. Fiction. *Kaboom!*

But if I had to give this journal a name that I pretend I writing to…. Well, first off, I wouldn't write "Dear." Fuck that come from anyway? Mine be like "Yo Drake!" Or "Yo Jay-Z!" Maybe "Yo Eminem!" But prob not Eminem cause he white like me and

the JJ who I "talk" to right now might think that the JJ writing this is a poser.

This computer spellchecks and grammars, but I unspellcheck and ungrammar. "Gonna," like I write up above? Grammar wants "going to" but that's not how I yak.

Keeping it real.

So, I stick with "Yo journal? Sup?" I know that incorrect English. Well, incorrect white English, anyway. It should be "what is up with you." No, scratch that. Should be something like "Drake, my good fellow. Allow me to provide you with an update on my comings and goings."

I know "wid" ain't no word. Know it should be "because," not "cause." But the Brights shrink say write like I talk to a friend. I do use the quote marks, though. They kinda dope. Italics dope, too.

The Brights shrink yesterday asks, "Do you wish to talk about your family, JJ?" She jaws through her nose like she got a cold, and no, I sure as hell don't wish. Fam straight up awkfuncional.

Like I say, Moms tweeks. Beginning, middle, and end of story. She appears, ghosts, appears, ghosts. Detox, relapse, detox, relapse. They even send her on a grippy sock vacation. Twice.

Moms call herself a tattoo artist and she all inked out: arms, legs, back, front, prob on places I don't want to visualize. She not always like that. I see pictures a few times of her when she young. They be stashed in a drawer in that one apartment, cause she don't want to be reminded.

I can see it Moms — barely. No ink. Not scrawny, like she be now. But not no chunker, neither. Blue eyes and blonde hair. I even find like newspaper and magazine ads with Moms. Yeah, she be modeling. Long time ago, but still, it her.

So, why she hit the skids?

"Because your mother sustained a very serious back injury pole vaulting in junior college," Aunty Liz explain. "Spinal fusion. Diskectomy. Four operations and she's still in pain. She said no more operations. They gave her OxyContin."

And when the docs stop the Ox, Moms switch to horse and Pops her connection. My earliest recall is of Moms hands shaking, or of her and Pops zonked on a couch and maybe I be crying but nothing wake them. They argue like nonstop when not stoned and Pops hits her. Pops a girl-beater. I too little so I can't kill him. She never leave him, even after he hit me those times.

I try to account for all she been through. That Moms not always be the Moms I know now. The Moms I know most of my life. The hopeless Moms. The streets Moms. "Skank." "Critter." Yeah, I hear what assholes say. I just want to become invisible. She never really hurt me, cept hurting herself *is* hurting me.

Yo journal! Sup?
Yo JJ! Sup wid you?

Earlier this week Moms come around again swearing she clean, but Aunty Liz not fall for it and stop Moms at the door. Moms smelly and look greasy and banged up from wherever she been or whoever she been with. Her hair look painted on. No coat. She prob sold it. Just some ratty looking sweater she picked out of somebody's trash. She want cheddar, like always.

Aunty Liz say no.

As they be jawing, Moms spots me over Aunty Liz's shoulder. "Hello my baby!" Meltdown time. Moms always close to crying. Then, to Aunty Liz: "You ain't going to let me hug my own son?"

"Mm-mmm," say Aunty Liz. "Not today."

I back into the kitchen out of sight. But I can still hear.

"I'll make some calls," Aunty Liz tell Moms. "Go stand by my car. I will drive you."

When Aunty Liz come into the kitchen for her coat she don't look at me.

"Nothing ain't changing," I say.

"Who's nothing?"

She know what I mean, or who I mean. She jangle her keys, gives me a quick look as she wrestles into her coat.

"Saint Augustine said 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.' And he was black!"

And off she go, riding Moms out of my life for the millionth time and I lately wish it be the last time.

So, that Moms.

And Pops? He what they call a ward of the state since killing somebody in a bar fight. They call it manslaughter. Yeah, he in the big house for a long time. And he go full-on Aryan nation. Everything be N-word this, N-word that, N-word the other.

Now, I sometimes use the N-word with my bros to fit in cause they use it all the time, but I need to be cagey about it. I drop it the wrong way at the wrong place, someone opens a can of whoop-ass on me. I don't ever visit Pops. He departed far as I'm concerned.

That's the lowdown on my parents so no wonder money always scarce. I got no cell, bro, so I might as well journal til I get me some Benjamins somehow for a new blower. Cause Aunty Liz put all kinds of stops on this computer. No porn or chats or games or even email. No nothing, bro.

Damn.

My life's vanilla enough as is, bro. They always want to know why. Why I do this, why that, or why the other. Simple. Don't want to die from terminal boredom.

Cars?

Yeah, I do drive, but it ain't legal. (That's when they juvie me up; when I boosted for the third time. Well, that and dealing.) I *will* try boosting again, since I *am* juvie and can't be big-housed. But word: I ain't taking no girl out on no SEPTA bus. I wait til my parole expire.

Girls?

I got girls who like me, hundred percent, but I don't like them, cept just as friends. (Maybe.)

But wait. I know all this already. I already know everything that I just wrote down. Know it before I write it down cause I

already noodle it. Still getting used to this. Still waiting for some pushback but it don't come cause who be doing the pushing back?

Yo journal! Sup?
Yo JJ! Sup wid you?

Aunty Liz house only five blocks from the old apartment and I still see the posse on the sneak cause Aunty Liz works all sorts of shifts at Einstein Medical Center. It's a dicey neighborhood, but I'm drawn to the roll. I don't exactly dip out, but I don't always let her know what I'm up to neither. But she sus it out.

"This continues and you're out of here, JJ," she warns.

But she never follow through, cause she feel that somehow she let Moms down instead of the other way round, which is how I testify.

She will indeed throw my ass out for anything connected to drugs, though. But luckily, I left that life behind. Or I should say it left me behind. For now.

I used to plug for a dealer in Germantown. He call me Amby, for Ambassador to White People. Easy money. Good money. And I leave no crumbs. He like me cause maybe I use once or twice but it don't trap me and he don't work with junkies. But cops shut him down anyway and he's birding in the same cooler Pops at. He gone all Muslim on me so he and Pops sure as hell ain't vibing if they even ever figure out that they both know me, which they prob won't.

Yeah, I feel a little bad about dealing, but not mondo guilt. They head they way regardless, and if they don't score off me they score from somebody else, prob dipping from a bad batch that would have pegged them out nasty. Do bartenders feel heavy cause some of they customers killing themselves fast or slow with the hooch?

Luckily, Aunty Liz got friends galore: work friends, recovery friends and heaps of church friends. But no boo far as I can tell. A grown daughter on the West Coast who don't speak to her and

won't let her see her grandkids. And — almost forget — two ex-husbands, both dead.

The daughter's initials are L.V. I sus that out cause that what Aunty Liz write in marker between number 8 and 9 on the alchy detox sheet magnetized to the fridge. You know them 12 steps? She highlight one part.

8. **Make a list of all the people you have harmed and be willing to make amends to them.**
9. **Make direct amends to such people, except when to do so would injure them or others.**

In the margin, she write: "Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe." Sure, I Google it, and no surprise. Aunty Liz def got this thing for Saint Augustine.

Yo journal! Sup?
Yo JJ! Sup wid you?

Aunty Liz turned 52 this week. She thin, though she loves to cook and eat. She sprints full-on through each day. I get three hots and a cot. No, not a cot. My own room, not just a mattress next to some rusty-ass radiator. And the food is nice. I'm not hangry all the time. So, it be Gucci for now. And I do try to rectify in my own way, but it never last.

"Let the counselor help you," Aunty Liz say.

So, journal, it be me and you.

"Wrestle with it," the Brights shrink say.

But I don't wrestle *it*. I wrestle *me* — JJ.

Brights shrink fall back on "you can do anything."

They all hand you that bullshit. All these people on my case to not go hoodlum. No, I can't do *any* thing. Maybe some things. And most of the things I can do — like using correct English? — I don't want to do, so I ain't even gonna waste the time. Plus, I don't trust do-gooders who make things worse.

"You gonna drop this journal on my sworker?" I ask the Brights shrink.

I get out of juvie hall a few months ago.

She flips a squint and talks about confidentiality again like I'm supposed to ignore the ginormous loopholes. You know the ones: Confidential unless she thinks I can be a danger to myself or others or … whatever.

"Don't worry," she say.

I do worry, though. I'm thinking lots of dudes can be a danger to theyselves or others at any time. Dudes who never spend even one minute in juvie. Brainiacs who wake up one day and just start drilling. You do hear about that shit.

Brights shrink say, "You absolutely do not have to share it with me or your social worker."

She about 35 and sit like she got a broomstick up her ass, ready to bolt the hell out of the room. Got these big Coke bottle glasses, and she blinks like a goldfish. Pictures on her desk — probably fam — face her.

I must look thrown cause she adds that writing will help me sort things, but maybe she be capping.

"Or we *can* discuss whatever you discover."

"Discover?"

"Just continue trying this, JJ."

She cheugy, looking for some cannon event, but ain't gonna happen. So, I do this for the plot. Pretend that this just ain't me writing to me.

She one of the people who need to sign off on me getting the fuck out of the Brights so I can go back to a district school, be with the basics. Explore my horizons, like they say.

"JJ, have you ever thought about what you might want to be when you grow up?" she ask.

"Be?"

"An occupation. It's not too soon to at least try to imagine yourself as an adult and what you might be doing with your life."

"You mean a job."

Aunty Liz that night tells me, "A job, yes, that's part of it."

I don't know why, journal, that I even tell her what happen between me and the shrink. I never do that. Still, I don't tell Aunty Liz everything that go on in this day's session.

Like I hear the other night one of the bros in the hood come home from Middle East and seem to be doing fine but then he ups and sewerslides with a gun.

So, that's prob why I say it; that I tell the Brights shrink that I think I might have PTSD. But she stomp right on that. Only time she ever go salty. Tells me about bros that fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, or cops or firefighters and says that they have PTSD. True PTSD. Asks if I have flashbacks, nightmares and … well, she got this list and tells me I def don't got no PTSD.

I can tell she a vet, the way she talk, and I'm tempted to salute for laughs, but hold cause all of a sudden the tears flow down her face and *drip, drip, drip* onto her desk. Sort of tears you might see from somebody bawling at a grave or something. But her look don't change cause she too savage. She don't notice until finally she do, and waves me out.

"Same time next week then, JJ," she say.

I want to say something but can't. I look back once when I get to the door, and she got her head on her arms like the kids in kindergarten do at nap time.

"Close the door, please," she say.

I do.

Yo journal! Sup?
Yo JJ! Sup wid you?

Sup wid me? Everything change! Everything! And changes still coming. I don't know where all this change be heading neither.

Somebody call Aunty Liz landline the other day when she not home? I know right off it be a cop. This lady talk cop-talk. Low voice. Flat voice. Seen-it-all voice. Bit beaten down voice. I tell this lady that Aunty Liz not here and she give me a number

for Aunty Liz to call and I memorize it, write it down when the cop over-and-outs.

This happen when I bounce home from the Brights Thursday afternoon. Aunty Liz not due for another few hours so I leave the message on the coffee table. I *would* have just texted her if someone just give me a blower, but Aunty Liz always say she get around to it, but somehow never do.

One of the posse say he'll get me a burner on the sly. And that's where I go Thursday after I leave the message for Aunty Liz. To meet my main man. But he don't got it yet.

He tell me news from the hood. Who in juvie now. Who getting out soon. Who dealing. Who not dealing. Who think they be getting a sport scholarship. We just yak — meandering — and it feel good.

I get home, and Aunty Liz car in the driveway.

When I come in, she usually call: "That you JJ?"

Not this time, though.

It be dark and Aunty Liz like the light. I know right off something up. I be shivery, feel the blood pump in my neck.

I peek about the corner into the living room and I see Aunty Liz legs spread like they do on someone who get shot. Them white nurse shoes pointing opposite directions. Her head back on the couch eyes on the ceiling.

"Aunty Liz!"

"What?"

Groggy. I flick on the lights, stand over her. I poke her shoulder.

"Aunty Liz!"

"JJ." Then a long sigh like people do in movies when they take they last breath. "Sorry, JJ."

Then I see the spike on the couch next to her, with the sling. On the coffee table be the cotton, the spoon, the lighter, her phone, and the note I leave earlier with the cop number.

I do something I never done before and never thought that I'd ever do. I grab Aunty Liz cell and call 911. I call cause I know

the look of an addict about to peg out. I call and try to answer all them stupid questions.

"Is she conscious?" *Yeah, she awake.* "Can you put her on the phone?" *Ain't that awake.* "Is there anyone else there?" *No.* "Could you repeat the address?" I do. Three times. "Her name?" Twice for that one. "Your name?" Again, twice. "How do you know this person?" *I live here.* "Are you her son?" *She my aunt.* "Where exactly in the house is she?" *Like I tell you. The living room.* "Don't hang up Jonathan. And keep talking to her. Tell me if she doesn't respond."

I put the phone on speaker, lay it back on the coffee table. I shake Aunty Liz shoulder again. "What happen Aunty Liz?"

Aunty Liz slap my hand away. "Just let me be!"

"Don't fall asleep, Aunty Liz. Keep awake."

"I'll never get to see her again!" Aunty Liz cry out.

"Who Aunty Liz?"

"What do you mean *who*, JJ?"

"Who?" I ask again though I begin to sus it out.

She moan, "My child. My only child. My beautiful baby girl. She cut me off. Don't talk to me. Can't blame her."

I hear the sirens. And as they close in, I pull more from Aunty Liz. The phone call from the cops that afternoon had been about her daughter dying from a brain aneurysm. (Had to Google that.) Sudden. Just like that.

"Only 34 years old," Aunty Liz moan. "I thought I had time. That the wound could heal. I pray and pray that she forgive me. That she and her husband…. Her husband! The funeral! He won't even let me go! I know it!"

Her cellphone crackles. "Help's almost there," the dispatcher say.

Aunty Liz too quiet. I shake her again.

She whimpers, "Saint Augustine."

"What Saint Augustine say, Aunty Liz?" Just to keep her talking.

Her eyes pop open and she say, "God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart."

Another one for Google.

"What else he say, Aunty Liz?"

Aunty Liz say, "I don't know and I don't care. Listen. I'll be gone for about 30 days, JJ. Maybe more. I am so sorry."

I forget my next exact words. I try to tell her that it's really not her fault what happen to her daughter.

"How would you know?" Like she gonna smack me upside my head.

"I *don't* know," I say.

Aunty Liz say, "The sin of pride, JJ. The sin that sneak into heaven itself. Every time you think you got it all figured out, God comes along and sweeps everything off the table and says, 'You don't know nothing.'"

I say, "You told me that God never gives you more than you can handle, Aunty Liz."

"Well, turns out that that's a lot of bullshit isn't it?"

I don't say nothing. Can't think of nothing *to* say. The sirens stop. They here. I let them in and they clamoring and working fast. They stick Aunty Liz with Naloxone right off and then lift her onto the gurney.

"Pray for me, JJ!"

"I will, Aunty Liz," but that's bullshit too cause I don't pray. But what am I going to tell her? No? Part of me, word, wishes I could believe. Like how Aunty Liz does or Moms, when she not relapsing.

A lady cop who talk like a sworker ask Aunty Liz if there be any adult who can watch over me until Aunty Liz get back ("And you *will* get better, ma'am!"), and Aunty Liz say something that I can't hear because they wheeling her out. In a minute, the sirens start again and then fade. I slump on the couch, suddenly tired as if I just dead lifted.

Another lady cop with a face like she eating lemons stay with me. She stand by the front window shaking her head every few seconds, maybe disgusted wid Aunty Liz or maybe disgusted wid me or maybe just disgusted wid life.

"Yo," I say.

She don't answer.

"Yo."

No answer.

"Yo miss."

Nada.

"Yo police officer."

She slow-turn to me.

"What now?" I ask.

She slow-turn away.

I about to press when I hear footsteps coming up to the door. I figure it might be the sworker-like cop come back to ask me more sworker-like questions but in steps Moms.

She not gushy like usual.

"Hello, JJ!"

I don't know what to say. Moms glow up.

The foul cop say, "let's go into the other room," and Moms follows.

———

Yo journal! Sup?
Yo JJ! Sup wid you?

BREAKING:

I be staying here in Aunty Liz house with Moms ever since. Been three weeks since that night.

Moms *still* my Moms and it ain't impossible for them to take me away from her, but it be hard especially since she fixed for now and her sworker clear her. There so much bad shit going on in this city that it just be easier for them to let some things ride.

"You clean," I say.

"I'm still a junkie, JJ. But I don't intend to use on this particular day."

This don't come out the way it come out when Aunty Liz say it. Moms shout. She loud when not using. Like someone who not that good a musician banging a keyboard making noise.

So, it be day-to-day. It be like that for Aunty Liz, too, though I never, ever expect her to relapse.

That be that. Except the story continues and they still be twists. Even now, as I be journalling. Even now. There's me, the JJ writing this down, and there's the other JJ, the one I writing this down for. But Aunty Liz and the Brights shrink talk about layers of consciousness. *Layers.* There somebody else here. I feel eyes on me. Is it another JJ?

The other day Moms put a magnet on the fridge.

Propior Est Tibi Deus Quam Tu Tibi

"What language that?" I ask.

She give me a smile that seems to belong to somebody else's face. A smile like she don't live like she live, see what she see. Smart person smile. Reminds me of the Brights shrink smile.

She say, "Google it" and I do.

It mean, "God is closer to you than you are to yourself."

Guess who that quote from? Or sort of from. They be different versions on the Web.

Like I say, as I write in this journal I feel those eyes on me but don't really know who it be.

Here's the thing of it. I feel those eyes even when I not journaling. I feel them even in my dreams. They show up in dreams they have no business being in. I don't tell the Brights shrink about them. That might make it harder for me to get back to the norms school.

Here's the other thing of it. Sometime calm wash over me almost like everything going be OK though I know that bullshit. And sometime panic strike and I think about what I hear about hell.

Other night I wake up shouting, "Let go of me!"

Moms don't hear. She in the front bedroom. Aunty Liz bedroom. Like she not on planet earth cause when Moms zonks she zonks deep, at least when she kicking.

And those eyes upon me right now, journal JJ. They on both of us. Both of us layers. They come into focus and they blink slow, waiting, waiting, waiting. What does it want from me? From us?

Only one way to find out.

Sup?

EDITORS' CHOICE

Honorable Mention, 2024 Prose Collections

Minder Root

Stan Kempton

> "Each person has their own *minder root*. Particular to them and them alone. It's out behind us in the bayou…waiting."
>
> *—Judeline Laguerre, 1862*

When the first baby was planted in her belly at fifteen, Viera's momma made her take it out to the swamps. It was nothing but a little thing when born, squirted out on the bathroom floor beside the toilet four months premature.

"That's why it needs to go," Momma said, not giving notice to her blubbering. "It ain't cooked all the way. See! Not cooked, Viera."

Momma absently waved toward the hall where the baby still wiggled on the bathroom floor. Momma's eyes looked tired, having that anemia all up in her blood. She told Momma that she wanted to try and keep the baby. Momma said it wasn't no squirrel.

"I told you about what lives in that mist," Momma said. "I's sat right here at this table. Right where I'm sitting now and you up in that chair over there. I's told you to stay clear as long as you could. But I's suppose the heat rose up between your legs and you couldn't help yourself, could you now? And besides, the thing ain't cooked. Won't live through the night. So go on and do what you got to do. Viera!—child I need you to look at me in the eyes—there you go. Wipe your nose and listen to me. When you're out there in the reeds, you need to look hard and long at that thing. Watch it for a spell before sending it off. You got to commiserate with them details so you know, so you can remember, from here on out, what sort of misery your body can bring you just like it did with me."

Viera could barely feel what she carried in the blanket. It stopped moving the minute she had balled it up, pulled it in close

to her chest, and carried it outside. A salty sheen coated across her skin, and the late afternoon sun winked through the branches like some forgiving witness. Even the ground obliged, lifting her off the dirt a few inches because her feet didn't feel the earth, gliding over leaves, around the side of the house, down a narrow path lined with water oak and palmetto. She went to a place where the sky opened and the reeds scattered like whiskered droplets.

The feel of the water on her ankles revived Viera, and she was surprised where she had ended up. She hunted in the waters for the right resting place; her fingers incessantly stroking the blue twill of the blanket before squatting.

Brown tannins in the water turned the shallows into a thin hue of copper, but it was clear enough to see her feet, the dead-soaked leaves she stood upon as well as the blue coloring of the blanket when she extended her arms and let her package go.

The blanket floated briefly before sinking. The waters owning it, playing with the fabric, opening the edges, making angel wings only to have them fold back on itself as the blanket settled to the bottom. There it sat below the water not a foot deep as if it weren't even gone.

Frantically, she moved out past her calves and pushed the blue blanket further. The same angel wings, the same reversing folds when it settled. But when it finished, the gift still glowed right below the surface.

Her eyes made more tears. A stranger's moan quivered from her lips as parts of her soul seeped from her heart. It was animal pain: primal, hideous, not of this earth. It was no wonder that other thing paid her a visit. No bigger than a hand and about as narrow as a thumb, an odd-looking root, stark white and coated with tan follicles, floated out beside her half-submerged face as she toyed with the thought of drowning herself.

She sat up as if prodded to do so, water dripping from her wet shirt where she was invited to lean close to this visitor who seemed desperate to get to her. When close enough, the root rolled on its back showing her a tiny face of a baby. The face projected from the root's side, and if the root had legs, she was sure it would have crawled up into her lap.

Above her, tree branches flexed when tickled by the wind. And the cicada made the only kind of music that mattered. It was a chorus of tears rolling down her cheeks, but all those broken things inside her urged her to eat this root who had a mind of its own. Maybe it was something she felt the root could fix in her life or was something that could mindlessly end it.

The *minder root* broke easily in her mouth. With eyes squeezed shut she chewed fast. Bite after bite, fighting with the burst of bitter tasting water laced with grit. Deep breaths fought back the impulse to spit but she pushed herself on until swallowing the rest. Her tongue was coated with a little heat like droplets of Tabasco sprinkled in her mouth. But the fire quickly died, and with its departure so did a weight. Viera perked up as if just noticing her wet clothes and the bayou she sat in. She got to her feet, then checked around her as if she were forgetting something.

"It was just here," she said aloud, turning over her hands, then searching where she was sitting. "It was something lost, but I can't remember—"

Confused, she looked further out into the waters. All she saw were those things that only lived in the bayou. Nothing there belonged to her.

Honorable Mention, 2024 Prose Collections

Farewell Mr. Farley

Stan Kempton

Damian nudged Marcus and told him to get ready. It was the second time the maroon-colored Buick with tinted windows and original hubcaps had rounded the corner. Damian didn't have any customers with that particular Detroit make and model and, being who he was and where he was sitting, he reached behind him, gripping a pistol wedged between his blue jeans and skin.

Marcus did the same. But Marcus was fourteen. He wasn't smooth in how he armed himself, owning a pair of eyes that were two inches wide and unblinking with fear.

They watched from the bottom step as the Buick cruised over potholes and uneven pavement as if it were stalking something. Three years back, James Bell was given shriveled legs and incontinence when he caught a bullet in a drive by. James showed himself enough in the neighborhood to be a reminder about that dark poetry.

When the Buick came to a stop directly out in front of their stoop, Damian defiantly raised his chin. He bowed up, stepped closer, and yelled, "What the fuck do you want? What?"

The Buick inched a little further into an empty parking space. With the engine shut off, an old white man emerged from the car just as slowly as how he'd been driving it.

Damian let go of his pistol.

Marcus boldly dropped off the stoop and said, "I do believe this cracker has lost his way."

The old man was long in the tooth and bore the resemblance of a grandfather who was still in possession of a pocket watch. Wearing brown slacks from the seventies and a white pin-striped collared shirt, he held the ownership papers to a large head that made him hunch over. Despite the ravages of time, he still had

a full set of hair upon his scalp, but it was very white and thin, and his pale skin was speckled along his cheeks with liver spots. Standing several inches shy of six feet, the old man shuffled over and was careful to balance over the curb.

"Listen here young men," the old man said, pointing with his crooked finger toward the house they sat in front of. "I was wondering if you live here?"

Damian smacked his lips, shifted like he was bored and said, "You see me sitting here, don't you?"

"You know," continued the old man like he had the rest of the day to chitchat, "I used to do the same thing, sit right there on that very stoop."

Marcus settled against the house genuinely interested. "You used to live here?"

"I surely did. Nineteen hundred and forty-two. Lived here for ten years, maybe more. Played stickball right on these streets. My dad worked that way," pointing toward the river, "over at the docks. He was a good father, hard, but fair. Used to treat me and my brothers and my sister Chloe to a Snoball once a week." A glint sparked hard and nostalgic through the old man's eyes. The soft icy flavors of the Snoball massaged more memory out of him, telling them about his mother baking bread, rolling pasta, growing fresh herbs in the backyard garden. He fondly spoke of the kitchen smells seeping outside from all of these houses around here.

"It was like a blanket thrown over the whole block," the old white man explained. "The heavy spice would get trapped in the humidity and linger till morning."

The old man paused as if he were waiting for something, then stepped toward Marcus, shook the youngster's hand, told him he was Jacob Farley, and then extended his hand toward Damian.

Damian ignored the gesture. He looked down the block. After a minute, he casually brought his attention back to the withered white hand extended his way.

"It's nice and all," Damian absently said. "It really is something hearing about yesteryear. All those good ole days you white people

yammer on about. But those days are gone. This is our neighborhood. This is my stoop now. And having you standing here, it makes some people around here nervous. Marcus is nervous, ain't that right?"

"I am nervous," Marcus parroted.

"See," Damian declared. I tell you what, why don't you and your stories climb back in your ugly ass Buick—"

Marcus laughed. "It is ugly."

"Yes, it is," Damian confirmed. "A white man's ugliness. Hell, I should charge you a restocking fee for having to put Marcus's nerves back in place. Creeping in on our street like you just did, getting out and telling us old timey stories."

A black cat, one of a dozen who claimed this territory, slithered around the corner of the house and meowed. In and out of Damian's legs the feline purred, and without looking, Damian tenderly stroked the cat's head as he watched Mr. Farley bringing out his wallet.

"Keep your money old man, it was a joke. I ain't gonna to charge you. Just get in your car and leave."

"Oh," Mr. Farley said and nodded at his wallet, "but here's the money anyway, I want to pay you for your time."

"My time?"

"If you don't mind, I would love to walk through the old place," motioning toward the house. "Memories and all."

Marcus pushed off the side of the house and looked in the open wallet. Damian did the same, seeing Mr. Farley beginning to pluck a twenty from a wad of other twenties a quarter-inch thick.

Damian shooed the cat away and looked down the block at a thin woman, a very thin woman, wearing a cotton spaghetti strap top, pink hair rollers, a thigh-high skirt and flip flops. She anxiously stood there near the stop sign rubbing her anemic-looking arms, shuffling in place, all the while sending glances Damian's way.

Ignoring Mr. Farley and his wallet, Damian motioned for Marcus to go and tend to her needs.

"But hey…bro, wait!" Damian instructed. "Tell that bitch those favors she hands out with her mouth ain't good anymore. Make her pay. After that, go to the gas station and get me a Slurpee."

"What flavor?"

"Coke is the only one to get." Damian watched as Marcus causally moved on down the street, then turned back to this Mr. Farley and his wallet and said, "Make it forty old man, and I'll personally give you the grand tour."

Without a word, another twenty was handed over. The extra money made Damian feel generous. He held the screen door open and offered up his arm to the old man for balance.

Mr. Farley trailed into the near empty living room, and like a blind man, painted a mental picture by raising his hands. The old man restored the previous furniture from thin air, talking about the sofa and chair or where a hutch had been. He brought back the China dishes, landscape paintings, doilies, a coffee table with rugs and all the other horseshit luggage white people have.

But Damian couldn't see any of what Mr. Farley restored. Damian only saw a broken couch, Xbox controllers tossed to the threadbare cushions beside a toppled Popeyes' chicken box. A flat screen TV hung from the opposite wall, and in the corner, a fold-out card table precariously balanced poker chips. The floor was the original pine and wore the brunt of hard living in the gouges and scuffmarks riddled across the surface, as well as the hard living up on the walls and ceiling where the paint chipped and the stucco cracked.

Mr. Farley went through the kitchen. It was just as stripped down and bare as the room before, having only the necessities of a microwave and refrigerator. But Mr. Farley was quick to point at things that weren't there: his mother in an apron, and his father reading a newspaper at the table as he smoked on a cigarette.

Going up to the second floor, Damian slowly trailed behind, and when Mr. Farley wandered into the first bedroom, Damian leaned against the doorframe. The place was as neglected as the rooms below, housing nothing but a lone mattress on the floor and a blanket.

"You know," Damian dispassionately said, smacking his lips, "I was thinking about that fee you gave me on the way up the

stairs, and what I'm thinking now is, I believe a better payment plan would be in both our interest."

Mr. Farley had circled out in the middle of the bedroom, hunting for his ghosts that lived there. But hearing what Damian broached, he faced Damian and said nothing, just stared.

"I guess what I'm trying to say," Damian continued, "seeing how much you're enjoying bringing the past into the present, it's only fair you donate a little more to your emotional cause."

Mr. Farley squared himself as if ready to accept the consequences. "This was my sister's room," he said, searching the space around him.

"I don't give one shit about what bedroom was which, or about what piece of furniture went where—this ain't your place. Not anymore. So yeah, that's how it's gonna go down for you, old man," and motioned with only a few fingers for Mr. Farley to bring out his wallet.

"So, this is a shake down?"

"I don't know what that means." Damian puckered his lips and sucked in a breath. "I call it more of a redistribution of wealth. That's how I see it. That's what's happening over here on my side of the room. How can it be stealing? It ain't stealing. All's I'm doing is getting back what people like you stole from people like me in the first place."

"You mean white people?"

"Yeah, white people, black people, you don't see another fucking skin color here! Do you?" Impatient with the rhetoric, Damian flung his arm out toward Mr. Farley and told him he was tired of playing around, "Just pull the rest of your stolen money out and hand it over."

"Or what?"

"What did you say?" and he quickly straightened and came away from the doorframe.

"What if I don't hand over the money," Mr. Farley innocently asked, "what then?"

The question fleshed out those consequences Damian knew all too well. It was those same tumbling moments that roosted on the

shoulders of James Bell before the bullet and wheelchair paid him a visit. It was that dark poetry, short and long all at the same time.

Damian quickly extracted the pistol. Damian dealt drugs. That's what he did. He didn't shoot seventy-year-old men in his grandmother's house. But he was made to come here as if every lynching, for the past three hundred years, had sent out an invitation.

"You thought I was kidding, didn't you?" Damian said, pushing the gun's barrel closer to the old man's face until Mr. Farley bumped his head against the back wall. "From the start, you saw me as some no good loudmouth nigga. So here I am! Just like you made me. Your Boogie Man has arrived."

Mr. Farley had an awkward expression tittering between hope and fear, but instead of shooting him, Damian popped the old man across the face.

The punch drew blood. A thin red stream dripped from Mr. Farley's nose like a broken faucet, leaking across his lips and splattering on his shirt.

Stowing the pistol back between his blue jeans and skin, Damian pressed his forearm against Mr. Farley chest as he searched for his wallet. Finding nothing in the back pockets, he probed the front ones. Coming up empty, Damian pushed the old man into the wall.

"What are you, some sort of magic man?" Damian asked. "What did you do with your wallet?"

"I hid it when you weren't looking."

"You hid it?"

Damian smirked and paced the room. He told the old man he was gonna beat the location out of him. But Mr. Farley told Damian he didn't have to beat him, "I'll tell you where the wallet is, and even give you the keys to the Buick, but I need you do me a favor first."

"A favor."

"You have to promise me you'll do it."

Damian shuffled. "What do I got to do?"

"I want you use that pistol you've been threatening me with and finish the job."

It was as if Mr. Farley had been clinging to something the whole time, and now Damian could see the release. The old man suddenly looked exhausted. His eyes were lifeless gullets, and his skin was almost transparent. Gravity came with a vengeance, making Mr. Farley slide down the wall to the floor.

It hadn't been a week since Damian's grandmother passed in this very room. She was in her queen size bed, surrounded by all the furniture she had collected in a lifetime, and then like vultures picking clean any meat off a bone, she and her keepsakes were taken by sisters and brothers, leaving Damian—for a limited time—with a broken-down empty house.

Damian flung the pistol on the bed and told Mr. Farley to do it himself.

"But I can't. I just can't do that."

"So, you figure you would come over here and let a nigga do the dirty work. For what, a handful of twenties and an ugly-ass Buick?" Damian shook his head. "Nothing's changed, old man. You's white and I'm black and each know their places. 'Yes-em master, I'll clean up your mess, shor-eh-nough. I'll take that weight off of you. I'll go to prison for the rest of my life so you can get some peace.'"

Tears streamed in those hardened grooves on the old man. Mr. Farley looked like the smallest creature he had ever seen. Damian backed out of the room, then returned with a wad of toilet paper and knelt beside him. He wiped away the blood on the old man's cheek.

"Why you want to die?" Damian whispered.

"No one's left," Mr. Farley blurted, and his voice cracked under the stress of being forgotten. "No one to see me off when the cancer finally takes hold?"

Damian nodded at what he heard. He stared down at his own hands and then at those of Mr. Farley. How many of his kin, stretching back three hundred years, have also been forgotten. So many of the nameless hanging like fruit from a tree; so many robbed of land. That's where the dark poetry was read.

"Where did you hide your wallet and keys?" Damian asked.

Mr. Farley laboriously shook his head. "Will you do it for me?"

"Where's your fucking wallet?"

"On the refrigerator."

Damian went downstairs and returned minutes later. He again knelt in front of Mr. Farley, grabbed under the old man's armpits and helped him to his feet. The wallet was returned to Mr. Farley's back right pocket, and the keys were slipped into the front of his trousers. Then Damian put a small pistol—a different one then his own—into Mr. Farley's wrinkled hands.

"This is for you, Mr. Farley."

"I told you I—"

"Shh, listen to me, you got yourself a pistol without bullets," Damian said. "You want someone to do this for you, I know of some people who will do it for free."

Damian leaned back on his haunches and called 911. He stared straight at the old man. He looked past the blue eyes and white skin and into his privileged life Damian could only imagine. And when he told the 911 operator about a man with a gun threatening people, he didn't feel any regret.

At the front door, Damian explained the way to raise the gun. "Not like this," Damian solemnly instructed, and showed Mr. Farley how he shouldn't point it toward the sky but straight out. "Point it right back at them like you have something to say."

Staring out the window, Damian watched Mr. Farley standing on the sidewalk; the pistol he'd given him was still in his hand. Damian knew what was coming. They would roll up in here with their lights on and their sirens blaring. Maybe they would send two cars, maybe more, and would converge from different sides with doors opened and pistols leveled. They might say to *put down the weapon*, then again, they might not. It all depended on what the old man did. Then again, it might not depend on anything at all. They might decide to empty their clips into the old man for

good measure, or they might exercise a little restraint. Who could know? Policies varied.

And it was that varied policy Damian worried about most. It was a policy he'd only heard about and didn't want to see. He could take the blood spilt on the sidewalk—he'd seen enough dead brothers in the neighborhood to stomach the old man's body sent through the meatgrinder—but he didn't know if he could bearto witness how those same cops, who wouldn't hesitate to take a nigga down, would see the white skin on the old man and do nothing.

Damian checked the time on his phone. Mr. Farley had been out there for thirty minutes. "Shit, they might not even show," Damian whispered.

He looked behind him at his grandmother's house stripped of everything. He didn't know how much longer he had here before the house was sold out from under him. And like Mr. Farley, he too attempted to see those things that had once been here, those good things when he was small: how his grandmother watched him, cooked for him, told him stories. But Damian's nostalgia was interrupted with a gunshot.

Damian jumped and quickly ran to the window, then rushed outside on the steps. Smoke rose from the barrel end of Marcus' gun. Awkwardly laid out with one arm stretched over his head and the other one twisted backward underneath, Mr. Farley didn't move. From around the old man's white scalp blood pooled.

"Marcus! You dumb nigg—"

"He…he raised his gun right at me," Marcus pleaded. His voice was shaky as his limp hand still clutched to the pistol. "Shit! What did I do? What was I supposed to do?"

From streets over the sirens rose up like wolves on a hunt. Marcus had those eyes again, two inches wide and unblinking. Damian could tell how the fourteen-year old's heart raced in his chest because Damian's beat the same way. It was that thumping that must've always drummed in their people's chests just before their feet stepped off the plantation, or even now when those same feet stumbled into a white neighborhood.

From many directions, the sirens descended. Damian looked at the frightened boy. A whole window on their history was in that one look. Marcus told the boy what he had to do, what they've always done.

"Run nigga! Run!"

And never look back.

The Minotaur

Joseph Kierland

Scattered weights, jump ropes and leather headgear seemed forgotten in the heavy smell of sweat and liniment. Motionless punching bags hung like stalactites along the stained walls and overturned spit cans. In the center was a squared boxing ring with a pair of abandoned leather shoes under a stool in the Champion's favorite corner. The ring itself rose above the debris like a pagan altar amidst empty lockers and jumbled benches. Yesterday it was filled with the murmurs of an expectant crowd watching the Champion prepare his mind and body for the struggle ahead. Talk of body punches, hooks and combinations had turned to the odds on which one will win the gaudy belt tomorrow night. It was quiet now. Gamblers, wise guys, and reporters had all gone back to the city, awaiting the brutal ritual that will only last about sixty minutes, or less, in another squared ring far from this ancient place.

A shrill voice, like a sharp left hook, rushed from the far side of the cavernous room. "WHERE THE HELL IS EVERYBODY?" a wiry little man shouted in a high raspy voice and burst into the gym squeezing new leather luggage in both fists. A glinting gold crucifix bounced under his open blue Hawaiian shirt as he looked around the gym in a panic. "THOSE CLEANUP GUYS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE HERE AN HOUR AGO," he yelled into the emptiness, dropped the luggage, and swiped at his nose with a tissue. "AND WHERE'S THE CHAMP?" he shouted in a quick jabbing way and looked surprised no one answered him. "AND WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU, HAROLD?" I GOTTA GET THE CHAMP INTO TOWN FOR THAT FUCKING WEIGH-IN!"

A large round-shouldered black man carrying several orange athletic totes, and his own beat-up overnight bag made his way into the gym. He started to say something but the little man just kept talking. "You got all his bags, Harold? I don't take chances

anymore. Two of everything's my new motto. I've turned into a fucking Boy Scout with hay fever," he said, waving his damp tissue. "I hate trees, the fucking grass, and that goddamn lake out there. I need a good hit of bus fumes to straighten me out."

"Hey, Renz," Harold managed to get in before another rush of the little man's tirade started up again. "You up for taking on any new boys?"

"I'm always looking for new blood. Bring the kid around. I'll run him through some stuff and let you know if he's got anything," Renzo mumbled, wiping his nose.

"I meant me!" Harold said, dropping the bags. "I thought we could do a few bouts together," he said, taking a few quick shuffle steps. "I'm ready to fight again."

"Yeah, sure," Renzo replied, with a wave of the wet tissue. "We'll talk. Right now I got to find those goddamn cleanup clowns...and the limo guy. We'll never make the weigh-in at this rate."

"I need a manager," Harold said quickly.

"Jesus, you had a whole week for this. I got things going on here, man."

"But I need to know now...before you go."

"Still think you got a few fights left, eh?"

"I got years, Renz. Years. I can feel it."

"Call me in a few days after the Champ finishes with Montoya. We'll do contracts...the whole schmeer."

"I knew you was a right guy, Renz," he said, picking up the totes again.

"Forget those bags. That's the limo guy's job. I'll get his ass moving. TELL THE CHAMP I'M OUTSIDE," he yelled, and headed out under the exit sign like a sudden gust of wind.

Harold looked around, sat down in one of the folding chairs at ringside and stretched his legs to ease his morning stiffness. It had been almost five days since he showed up. He'd felt slighted at first when the Champ didn't recognize him, but once he did they talked and drank like old times. Good scotch and the Champ drinking his

special vitamin water. They drank to those days when they struggled to get the rent for some dump they shared on Lenox Avenue. Harold never had to tell the Champ that he needed a job. He just handed him a roll, and said they were "winding down for the Montoya fight," and told Renzo to give him something to do. It felt like old times.

Harold leaned over, opened one of Renzo's orange totes and pulled out a few rolls of half-inch tape. From another bag he took out a couple of mouthpieces and stuffed them into his own bag, checked the room again and went back for a pair of boxing gloves he'd seen Renzo shove into the bottom of another bulging tote. He didn't think it was stealing because he'd need all the equipment he could get for his comeback. By the end of the year he'd be in shape again. All Renzo had to do was book him a few bouts and he'd be back in the game.

"How would you take him, Harold?"

The deep voice seemed to come out of nowhere and resonated through the cavernous room like a growl. He raised his hands in a clumsy way that made him look like he was frightened or had done something wrong. He couldn't see the Champ in the deep shadows and wondered how long he'd been standing there and if he saw what he'd taken out of Renzo's bags.

"Champ? That you?" he asked, still not seeing him.

"How would you take him, Harold?"

The voice came at him again and he caught a glimpse of the Champ in his pinstriped suit, light blue shirt, and red tie. His brown skin glowed in the dim light as he headed for the ring with that hypnotic walk that riveted a crowd.

"Take who?" Harold asked.

"Montoya," the Champ said, brushing past him.

"The big Cubano?" Harold asked, slipping into a hunched fighting pose. "I'd crowd him. Keep him off guard. I'd go easy in those early rounds. Take him out into deep water past the fifth, sixth, maybe even the seventh round. Make him fight your fight."

"Sounds like you been figuring this one," the Champ said, jumping up onto the ring apron.

"Yeah," Harold answered with a short laugh. "Just remember, you got what he wants, Champ. All you got to do is look for his weak spots."

"I did that the last time we fought. I won, but it felt like I'd fought a tank. He's got no weak spots."

"Everyone's got to be wobbly in there some place."

"You wobbly, Harold?"

"Aren't you, Champ?"

"No," the Champ replied.

The punching bags along the wall swayed imperceptibly as the Champ stared back at Harold with those dark eyes that pierced through a man. He took off his jacket, folded it, and draped it over the ropes. "This whole game's got its weak spots," the Champ said. "Hiding yours and finding the other guy's is really what it's all about."

"You talking about fighting or those fancy threads you're wearing?"

"The threads are just one of the wrinkles. You've got to look good or they won't believe you're the Champ. Blue and gray's for the TV cameras. The latest style is to let them all know I'm still the one on top."

"You mean like that last Montoya fight?" The Champ stared down at him. "I figure you made that fight close so you could get the crowd back for another shot. Make him look good...pick up another bundle on the rematch."

"I don't carry anybody. Never have, never will," the Champ said, slipping through the ropes and into the ring. Harold laughed in a loose, nervous way. "You earn every inch in this game. This isn't Wall Street, or Main Street. It's Blood Street with black and white trunks. When you're up in here you do the heavy work." He threw easy jabs and danced across the flat expanse of the sweat-stained boxing ring. "Montoya's weak spot is that he thinks he knows more about me than he really does. In this game that's a weakness that can get you killed."

"How you figure that, Man?" Harold asked, climbing up into the ring with him.

"That kid, Montoya," the Champ said, doing a quick dance step along the ropes. "He's inside the numbers."

"Numbers?"

"All those numbers that make up the game, Harold. They're everything. I crawl inside those numbers every time I step through these ropes. It's the numbers that take you through the maze," the Champ growled, moving out into the middle of the ring.

"You talking money numbers?"

"I'm talking the only numbers that matter," the Champ said, dancing around the ring throwing quick combinations into the space between them.

"You're talking crazy, Champ."

"I'm talking ten rounds. Fifteen rounds. Three minutes each. One minute rest. My measurements. His measurements. The odds. The hours. The days. The weights. The big-ass cash register and those next three minutes again. They're the only numbers that count," the Champ said. "They talk to me. I'm so inside them I can't get out anymore. They're part of me. Montoya's in there too, and I got him figured." He began to shadow box around the ring. "It's when you're outside that makes it hard to figure," he said, shuffling from side to side, pursuing an imaginary opponent.

"What do you mean...outside the numbers?"

"My wife. The kids. The lawyers, the limo guy, those dumb reporters, even the referee," he said. "They're all outside."

"But you said you're caught inside."

"You got it," the Champ said, dancing across the canvas. "Up here in the ring...I understand things," he said, stopping in front of Harold. "Sometimes I even get lost in them and that's when the confusion becomes clear. The order. The numbers. They come home...and everything falls into place again."

For a moment, they just stared at each other in the middle of the ring. "I think I know what you mean, Champ," Harold said. "About being inside the numbers. I remember a kid that could tell exactly when the round would start, when it got to be half over, when it would end. Like some kind of clock was in his head. This kid could

even guess your weight and was never off more than a pound or two. It was hard to beat that kid. Then one day he just walks out. Never comes back to the gym again. He quit. Never could figure that kid."

"That's cause you think a guy is inside but he's really outside. That's the guy that'll burn you," the Champ said.

"But Montoya's in the numbers...isn't he?"

"Montoya's deep inside. I don't worry about him," the Champ said, brushing against the ropes and heading back to the center of the ring again.

"If it's not Montoya...who else is there?"

"You," the Champ said. "I worry about you."

"Me?"

"You're outside, Harold...and dangerous."

He never saw it coming. The Champ just laid it out there and danced away, his body shifting under his shirt and tie, jabbing the air. "I know you went looking for work over at Montoya's before you came here," he said. "I knew it even before you showed up. That kind of talk runs fast between training camps. Fact is, we were expecting you."

"Hell, yeah," Harold said. "I went over to Montoya's looking for a sparring job. I figured it'd be a lot easier sparring with him than you. Just trying to protect my end a little and not get hurt."

The Champ stopped bobbing and weaving. "But you ended up here, didn't you?"

"The kid didn't have any work, so I figured—"

"He had plenty of things for you to do though. The minute he saw your eyes he could tell you were outside and scratching to get back in."

"I ain't outside nothing. I'm ready to go again."

"What kind of numbers did you get, Harold? A hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand?" The Champ picked his jacket up off the ropes and slipped back into it. "What kind of money did he give you, Harold?"

"You're talking crazy," Harold said, taking a short step back towards the edge of the ring. "Ask Renz," he said, pointing toward

the exit. "He's waiting for me right now. He knows I'm straight. Ask him!"

"Renzo's been onto you ever since you got here," the Champ said. "He knows who you been calling...and what you been dealing."

"He just told me he'd represent me. Get me some fights."

The Champ buttoned his jacket, straightened his tie, and started for the ropes. "Renzo knew what you were after and gave it to you. He let you think we were worried about that dumb left-hand combination of Montoya's. He also told you I'm out of shape and can't go past ten. You forgot the basics, Harold. It'll take Montoya about five rounds to figure out I can go the distance. That's when he'll try his dumb left-handed combination and I'll be waiting for it. You gave him what we wanted... no more no less."

"You got it wrong, Champ," Harold said, staring into those dark, deep eyes. " The Cuban kid's gonna whip your ass. And after that he'll fight me. And I'll nail him cause I got him figured. I got him cold!"

"Not if you're out of the numbers, Harold and you been out for years."

"That's bullshit! I'm the guy you could never get by, you sonofabitch," Harold snapped. "We used to be friends before you stuck me on some back burner."

"The Champ isn't allowed to have friends. When they hand you that belt it's like being shoved into a dark, lonely cave where you just wait to fight again and they wouldn't let me work up a sweat over you. You're not worth it anymore."

Harold moved across the ring toward the Champ in a quick shuffle. "You're lying!" he shouted. "You gave that Cuban cock two shots but you never once looked my way. You kept me down!"

"You're the only one keeping you down and it's been that way for a long time."

Harold shifted his feet and hooked his fist upward. The Champ took the punch but didn't move. A soft cry came out of Harold as he swung out with both hands, his fists hitting the Champ's chest.

"Don't fight the numbers! Take them as they come! ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR! Harold's arms began to weaken, his legs slipped away on him, and he had to hold on to the Champ's arm to keep from falling. "I should have taken you out a long time ago," the Champ said, as Harold tried to swing at him again. "SIX. SEVEN. EIGHT. NINE." Harold's knees buckled and he dropped to the stained canvas. "TEN!" the Champ called. "It's over! Get out! Don't come back!"

Renzo's squeaky voice yelled up at him, "CHAMP, YOUR HANDS! YOU CRAZY? YOUR HANDS! I told you to stay away from him. He's a loser...all wrong!"

"He's finished," the Champ said as Renzo checked his hands. "The numbers just ran over him like he wasn't even there."

"WHAT NUMBERS?" Renzo yelled, but the Champ had already started to hear them clicking in his head under the sharp blare of a car horn. "It's the limo guy, Champ. We got to go."

The Champ stepped over the man sprawled at his feet, slipped through the ropes, went out past the punching bags hanging along the walls and into the numbers.

The Navigator

Don J Taylor

Ten in the evening. Yes, 2200 hours precisely, on Saturday the fourth of January 1901 the regulars in the Café Cadena would confirm at the enquiry. That's when they heard the first explosion. The second followed about fifteen seconds later. They knew right away that it was artillery fire and so were puzzled when no detonations followed the firing of the shells.

"Blanks," said Joe Abela, addressing his fellow whist players.

"Or Duds," suggested Tony Quintano, who was ex-Royal Navy himself. "We fired off plenty of *them* in that business down at Buenos Aires in eighty-eight."

They left the table and shuffled outside to see what was happening, going as far as the terrace in front of Our Lady of Fair Havens, from where they could make out the riding lights of a battleship.

"She's *HMS Devastation.* I watched her berthing from the veranda earlier. Her first time in Valetta I believe," said Joe.

The wind dropped a little. They heard the clatter of boots on the ship's deck and shouted orders. A noisy scuffle, and then silence.

"Very odd," said Joe, pulling his scarf tighter round his neck. "Let's go back in, it's turning chilly. I'm sure we'll read about it in the paper tomorrow."

The friends had lost the appetite for cards, so they finished their brandies and bid each other goodnight.

As Joe got into bed his wife asked about the noise she heard earlier. "It sounded like thunder," she said.

"Some crazy matelot, I guess, Almira. Playing about with the guns," he said. "Nothing for us to worry about." He kissed her on the forehead, laid his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

EXTRAORDINARY ACTION — of an Insane Bluejacket

> *News has been received of a singular occurrence at Malta. About ten on the night of January 4 two guns of the battleship Devastation, in Malta Harbour, were suddenly fired… It was shortly ascertained that a young midshipman, who had lately joined, suddenly became insane, got below, and forced open a magazine, took two charges, rushed on deck, and fired a 6-pounder quick firing gun before he was secured, and removed... Fortunately both charges were blank, for the gun was actually pointing on Valetta.* [1]

John Wylie, Glasgow merchant, hoists his son Billy onto his shoulders; elevated above a sea of ladies' bonnets: pink, peach, mauve, lilac; a frothy softness punctuated by an unruly jumble of black stove-pipe hats. On patent-leather tip-toe, the gentlemen stretch for a better view.

Billy can just make out the bearded figure at the top of the gangplank. The man raises a uniformed arm, dark blue, banded with gold, and waves to the crowd. His left hand rests on the gilded hilt of his sword. The ship is *en fete* with pennants of every color.

A skirl of a whistle and Billy sticks his fingers in his ears. To avoid falling, he presses his knees into his father's sides. He sees masts and rigging; flags ascending like eager birds in the breeze; lights blinking code from ship to ship; over a hundred, no, *two* hundred, spread across the bay. From a forest of funnels nutty black smoke smudges the sky.

All at once, great guns rise in unison to make the salute: *Boom. Boom, Boom*, spitting fire and smoke. The noise rolls across the wide estuary, resounding back and fore between the green hills of Clyde, from Greenock to the Cowal shore. Billy's insides tremble with fear and pride all at the same time.

"Stop squirming, boy," says his father. "Look Billy, there's the Prince of Wales. See, see him now…*there*. Sit at peace!" and he nips Billy's leg. Hard.

"He's over-excited Johnnie. Leave the wee lamb be…he's only six, for the love of God." Elspeth Wylie's languid voice trails away.

"He must learn to behave like the man he'll be."

His father's words, only half-understood, perturb Billy. He can learn, he knows. He is the quickest in the school room, but where is the book to study? He wriggles and slithers to the ground into the swaying groves of grey and black flannel, drifts of chiffon and whispering silk; the scent of Eau de Cologne, starch, camphor, tobacco, the reek of old men. John screws the collar of his son's sailor suit in his fist, holding him like a dog on a leash.

There is a cheer, and the muffled ripple of gloved applause. Another cheer, and a long blast on the flagship's horn.

The crowd shifts like kelp at the tide's turn, leans forward for an instant, and gently recoils. Small groups re-form as the mass loses its identity; families and groups of friends coalesce and start back along the Esplanade. Billy walks by his father's side.

"His Royal Highness looks well in uniform," says the pale lady with the purple ostrich feather.

"Stouter, though, than in the newspapers," asserts an army captain in khaki.

Another: "So glad to be a Briton!"

And so the chat flows, relaxed and easy, like the lazy eddies caressing the great piles of the pier.

"Very like his mother."

"Kingly, I thought."

"Too long to stand, though, even to see the Prince of Wales."

"Such ships, such a Navy."

"The Kaiser builds two for every one of ours."

"We must watch our time. The train goes in ten minutes."

"Oh, we're taking the steamer back to the Broomielaw. We'll get another look at the fleet that way. Worth the extra two shillings, I'd say."

"Will we see you at the Kirk tomorrow?"

"Now, be sure to remember me to your mother."

"Good night."

"Good night."

"A grand day."

"Yes, grand."

John Wylie takes a swig from his silver flask and says, to no one in particular, "Aye, it's fine to have such a Navy. And proud a man would be to serve in her." He puffs out his chest and shows to advantage his canary-yellow silk waistcoat.

Billy slips his hand snugly into that of his father. For *this* moment it fits perfectly. As the clouds part, Billy feels the warmth of the evening sun on his face; he sees his course ahead. He says: "I'll be a sailor too when I'm grown, Papa."

John looks down at his son and gives the briefest of smiles. He spots a business acquaintance in the crowd. "There's Sir Archie, from Matheson and Yuill! I'll go and say 'hello.' Elspeth, mind the boy."

> "*City professional gentlemen and merchants who can afford the time and expense are now bent on country residence all the year round. The evenings in Glasgow, unless on rare occasions, have no charms for them: they prefer the pure air and wooded knolls of the country to the din and smoke of the city… Dullatur is situated… on the brow of a slope to the south east of Kilsyth… from the summit of the hill there is a prospect all around and objects can easily be recognized with a powerful glass, from the tall stalks of the Townhead of Glasgow to the steamers on the Firth of Forth…*"[2]

On the brilliant white linen of the breakfast table- a package wrapped in blue paper. Billy unties the string, neatly coils it, and slips it in his pocket.

Two novels: A copy of *Treasure Island*, inscribed,

> *To my Dearest son—my one true consolation, Happy Twelfth Birthday, your ever-loving Mama.*
> *6th June, 1895.*

…and a copy of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*. The cover shows a ghostly lady in a white dress, pointing; a gentleman in a bowler, his cane tucked tight beneath his arm; behind them, shadowy woods under a quarter moon. She looks so lonely, thinks Billy.

Papa's already off to his warehouse in the city; ladies' shawls, baled, ready for consignment across the Empire. Catalogues, correspondence, checks, orders and profit, the essentials of his trade.

That evening, Wylie takes a sherry before dinner with his wife.

He lifts a copy of *Pearson's Magazine* from the ottoman. The cover illustration shows an outlandish object like a great insect, with spidery arms and legs. The heading reads, "*The War of the Worlds"* and the caption: "Slowly a Humped Shape Rose out of the Pit."

"Good Lord, Elspeth," Wylie says. "What trash."

Elspeth looks into the face of the Pekinese in her lap, speaking in a baby-voice, as though the dog and she are alone. "Johnnie doesn't like the stories Mummy reads, Patsy. All he likes is his business, and his golf and…" she glances towards the pantry door and back at her husband "…oh maybe there *is* something else he likes."

Wylie returns her gaze and says nothing. There is a wan cast on her cheek. Gone is the rosy glow she had when they first met. On the death of his father, Wylie had sold the family plantation, slaves and all, to come new from Jamaica to Glasgow. With his legacy, and an introduction to the Duncan family, Glasgow magnates big in the West India trade, Wylie was set fair to make his way in the second city of the Empire.

When they first met in her father's lofty Greek-Thomson drawing-room overlooking Great Western Road he was intrigued by Elspeth Duncan's quiet charm. Her Celtic beauty (quite the fashion at the time), the rich auburn tresses, and those hazel eyes, antidotes to the garish colors of Montego Bay. The family connection would help to progress his business prospects. But he came to know that Elspeth was a retiring woman, her good looks had given a false impression of authority. What he took to be a maidenly modesty was in fact a deep-rooted shyness. She avoided social contact, apart from, he noted, with domestics and the lower sort of person. She would not mix at the tennis or golf club with people of worth and interest. She preferred her trashy magazines; escape to a world of fantasy (Martians indeed!), or to muddle around in her clammy fernery, like some fey fairy, escaping the real world.

"Can you not stop that infernal dog from snuffling and slavering?" and he raps his empty glass down on the table.

After dinner, Papa says to Billy, "Step outside, Admiral Wylie."

In the stable yard, lashed atop the spare gig sits a wooden dinghy. Mickey, the stable-boy, is leaning against the curve of the bow, staring straight at Billy, all the while stroking the varnished wood that glistens in the sinking sun. Bess, the parlor maid, said Mickey was nothing but a dirty Irish navvy, cursing and thieving at every chance. But when the master is at home, he's on his best behavior.

"A business associate of mine had no need of her. So…I thought you might…" says Pa. "Clinker-built, so strong enough, I'd say."

"Thank you, Papa."

"Mickey, go you and take Master Billy down to the canal and try her out."

"I can manage myself," says Billy.

"Nonsense. Let Mickey row. You, Billy, can be the navigator. Just like Mickey's father, eh?" And he winks at the lad who looks up, grinning at the rooks cackling high in the sycamores.

Papa forms a sort of tube with his fingers and makes a piping-whistling noise, like Billy heard at the Review of the Fleet, and shouts, "prepare to receive aboard Admiral Billy Wylie RN! Make sure that you don't drown Master Wylie here when you take him out, Mickey."

Mickey harnesses Daisy the sheltie to the gig. Her shoes slide on the road, the brae's that steep. They take the track below the wood they call "The Shore," though there was no sea, nor a loch here, only the canal. Billy holds Tess's cheek-piece, his knuckles press against her rough coat, her jawbone hard and moving beneath the skin.

Mr. Spence the Geography master said that four hundred million years back there *was* a sea here. The lime and the sandstone that rattled every day in trucks down to the canal-wharf was the bed of that sea; warm and full of creatures. In the museum Billy sought out the fossilized bones of a creature that had swum in it, with great daggers of teeth to tear the flesh of the other strange animals too slow or too timid to escape.

Mickey and Billy slipped the boat into the canal. Mickey took the oars and rowed east towards Craigmarloch basin. *The Gypsy Queen*, the pleasure steamer out of Glasgow, passed in a flurry of smoke and splashing, making the dinghy bob. There was the smell of tobacco and whisky, mingled with the reek of wild garlic and the sweet hawthorn blossom seeping from the woods. The skirl of a fiddle somersaulted over the breathy chords of a squeeze box.

Billy says: "It is getting dark. We've gone further than we ought to. We should go back."

But Mickey says, "*Wheesht*. Dinna be a fearty. Wait til you see what's at 'The Bungalow,'" and his eyes have a gleam on them.

The sun is down, and the wake of *The Queen* shows creamy in the darkening. She reverses engines. Her screws churn, backing in to dock at the tea rooms where the dancing has already started. Mickey rows the dinghy in among the rushes opposite. They sit quiet, oars shipped, watching the factory lassies dance in the yellow gas light that flickers, and the men spooning with them and laughing, arms round waists. On the veranda the girls' eyes shine beneath the colored lanterns, and some, with the buttons on their blouses loosed, lean forward, their bosoms glow palely in the gloaming. The lads press their bodies up against them. Mickey with his hand down his pants and working it like he was scratching the most awful itch, and then he shuts his eyes and grunts. The funny feeling in Billy's tummy. Then Mickey shakes his hand in the water. He makes Billy swear not to say a word or he wouldn't take him out in the boat again, and though he doesn't *want* to go in the boat again, he swears.

Billy's bedroom in the tower: the pictures of our battleships, *Her Majesty's* Ships: Formidable, Illustrious, Implacable, Irresistible, Renown, Repulse, Resolution, Revenge, Royal Oak, Royal Sovereign, Triumph, Vengeance, Devastation. Pennants and charts, blueprints, stories and drawings from *The London Illustrated News*. His room the highest in the house, but not like the garret where Bess the maid sleeps, with just the one sloped window. Billy's room looks out on all sides like the bridge of a great ship of the line, and he can see the sea to the east and the factories in Glasgow on the other side.

He wishes for *Devastation* to be his first posting.

———

White
Red-1
Yellow-2
Green-3
Brown-4
Blue-5
Pink-6
Black-7

Clack, clack, balls rolling across the green cloth; bump on the cushion. Clack and click, into the pocket. Billy knocks on the billiard-room door.

"Enter"— his father's voice.

Snooker, new from India, so Papa, *must* have it. The balls of ivory, hard; they touch but never, never leave a mark. One hundred and forty seven- the most you can score in a break; fifteen reds and all the colors. Nobody got beyond fifty-five yet. Place the white on the spot or, in the 'D'. Blind Pew gave Long John Silver the black spot.

"Play, Billy," says Pa. "Pink into the top pocket."

He's tall enough now to reach the table without the footstool.

"It's time to talk about your future. The Headmaster tells me you're fair at the mathematics and trigonometry. But you don't get

on with the other boys. That angle's too sharp it'll not do. Oh well, there you are, it's in. You'll not mix with the lads in your class, he says, and you've missed sports three times this month. What do you have to say?"

"I'm not sure Papa. I like the mathematics. I can make it work, but the other subjects their too…too…*foggy."*

*"*You'll not prosper in business if you can't get on with others. It's not *about* counting, we have clerks, drudges, who fill the ledgers with numbers, for that. A man of business needs vision. He needs to work with people, to *command*."

"Then I warrant that I'm not for business, Pa."

The black hangs on the lip of the pocket and slips in with a final click.

"What *then*, laddie?"

"I thought you fancied I would join the navy, Papa."

"Your grandfather served his country. Right enough. A soldier, a hero at Waterloo."

Wylie strikes the white up the table, off the cushion, and fires a red into the top pocket. White, recoiling, loses momentum slowly.

"Maybe the navy *would* suit," says Wylie.

"You called me 'The Navigator,' Papa. You gave me the boat."

When Billy turns fourteen Papa signs the Admiralty papers.

Billy tells Mama. She lies on the couch in the conservatory overlooking the garden, her medicine on the Chinese table. She hugs him; the smell of her breath sweet and deadly, and, "Oh my darling child, would you leave me, here alone with him, to sail the seas?"

And Billy says:

"I will write, Mama, once a week and Papa will be proud of me and not scold you. You and Papa can come when I pass out of the Naval Academy, and you will admire my uniform and my shiny sword flashing in the sun on the parade ground, and there will be a Marine Band."

But still tears streak her cheeks.

And Papa says at dinner, "your son is to be a sailor, he will learn the navigation so that he is not lost somewhere east of Java." He winks at Bess who clears the soup plates. She curtsies and, blushing, says, "let's hope not, Sir." Billy minds a boy from the Smithstone cottages drowned in the harbor at Hong Kong the year before. Mickey said that Bess was sweet on him.

Thirty six hours on the train to the Naval Academy and across the Solent to Osborne House. The King himself had given over the stables to the navy for the training of cadets. The classrooms smell of horse piss, and Billy thinks of Daisy. He takes to the navigation because it's mathematics and he had been Top of The Class in math and trigonometry. He aligns and turns the protractors and the set squares and the compasses, with their sharp points pinning the paper to the board, and the dividers, sextant and parallel rules; calibrated, exact, precise.

Cocooned in his hammock slung from the hay racks, Billy hears the sea breaking below the cliffs; like the noise of the burn at home. The sound of shadows talking. He remembers nights in the tower: the water rushing down the glen to wash the dust from the coal at the colliery. But you couldn't tell if it *was* the water you were hearing, or if they were arguing again. Him shouting, Mama crying and pleading with him, and the stink of drink on him.

The night before he left them forever Billy heard Mama scream. He crept out to the top of the stairs. Mama naked in the hall, and *him* pulling her back from the front door. Her belly swollen and stretched like a balloon, and between her legs—a strange hairy triangle.

He wondered if all women have that. Bess, who was too pretty, her skin so soft-looking and smooth, to have that ugly lump between her legs? Or Mrs Hogg, too, that had the shop in the village. And the lassies at the dance-hall?

Bess's door opened behind him and he saw her pale face peer over the bannister, down into the gloom of the hallway …and *he* looked up and shouted, "get back in your blasted room, girl." Her door slammed shut. From the shadows he dragged Mama into the Morning Room,

and she fell onto the red Turkey carpet moaning all the while.

And the next day Doctor Griffiths called and saw Mama in her bedroom. Bess kept her eyes lowered at breakfast and did not look at Papa. She touched Billy's shoulder as she passed. Billy heard her sniffing behind the pantry door. The doctor said that Mama could not see Billy before he took the train. "She's been through enough already," he said, checking his watch and slipping it back into his waistcoat pocket. Billy left her a note to say that he had gone.

When he got to Osborne, a letter:

Dear Billy,

I am so sorry, my dear, that I was unwell when you left. I would so liked to have seen you trigged out properly in your uniform. I am a little better now. Bess is a great support to your father and me. She is kept busy running to the chemist for me.

I fear I will miss the Tennis Club carol service.

I hope that you might be back at Norwood with me at Christmas,

Your loving Mama

John Wylie laid the open copy of *The Kilsyth Chronicle* on the table before his wife. "Is this the so-called church where you waste your time?" he asked.

Elspeth reached for her spectacles, as if to read the article he pointed to, though she knew already what it contained.

"Allow *me*," he said, '"…extraordinary scenes have been witnessed in connection with special services in the Westport Hall.' That's the place -the miserable hole with the stink of the butcher's yard and offal at the back, is it not?"

He read on, '"All sects and creeds were represented; the acknowledged Christian, the avowed infidel and the thoughtless scoffer found a seat.' Huh! 'Christ was in the meeting just the same as on the Sea of Galilee.'

"Good Lord, you and that blasted church of yours, crammed with stocking-weavers and shop girls. 'Speaking in tongues.' What trash have you been taking on? Eh? Do you hear me woman? It's the asylum that you should be in, not some ruin of a hall in the Westport with four hundred other deluded souls."

Elspeth spread her fingers wide upon the table. She gazed out to where the sun was setting beyond the bare beech trees. At least the gloom would hide her tears when Bess came in to light the lamps.

Norwood
Victoria Road
10 December 1900

My Dear Billy,

I hope this finds you well, and safe in the Lord.

I said in my last letter that I have attended the Westport Hall these last three weeks. Great things have come to pass there. On Friday the Holy Spirit fell on Mr. Murdoch and he spoke in a new tongue. The fire fell, and thirty people were prostrate on the floor under the power of the Holy Spirit, and among them, myself, your own mother. Blessed!!!

I am now uplifted as never before and my sorrows are melted as the snow from a dyke in the spring sunshine of our Lord Jesus' love.

We have named our humble meeting-house 'The Church of God, Kilsyth," as our forefathers in Christ named their places in Corinth, Antioch or Thessalonica. I pray your ship might visit these holy places.

I rejoice in the Lord, and pray one day you too will know the joy I have found.

Your loving mother,

P.S. Daisy had the colic. Mikey gave her a powder and she is better now.

HMS Collingwood
Portsmouth,
20th December 1900

Dear Mother,

Thank you for your last. I am sorry father's business keeps you from attending my passing-out parade. I hoped he would be proud of me. My passes in the examinations have been at the highest level.

I find, however, that I am not best suited, perhaps, to Navy Life. I have persevered at Osborne, and now here at the training school, as I have made a promise to you and Papa. But the life here is difficult for me. One is never at peace- always people, always noise, talking, talking, shouting, banging; the crack of the guns till you can't hear.

Mama, I can no longer be a sailor.

There, I have said it.

A black cloud hangs over me and only you and Papa can relieve me of this. Let me come home. I have lost my way and don't know where to turn. I beg you to persuade Papa to consent. I would not ask this huge favor were I not desperate,

Yours,

Billy.

Norwood
Victoria Road
24th December 1900

My Dearest Son,

I read your last with great sadness. It is such a pity to hear that your childhood dream has come to naught. From your infancy you were set to be a sailor. I feel sure that these feelings of yours are likely to be short-lived.

I have not shared your request with your father. He is so occupied at present with business, and I fear that it would anger him to introduce such a subject.

I commend you to prayer, and to trust in the Lord Jesus,

Your Affectionate Mother.

Sunset at 20.20. Wind in the North East. Tug, tug, tug she pulls against the hawser. The crowbar from the artificer's store, wrapped in oilcloth, heavy in my hand; back pressed against the cool steel of the forward bulkhead. Blanks— no one will die; but at least they'll notice.

Three bluejackets clatter down the gang-plank and climb into a gig waiting on the quay. Out for a Saturday night on the town. The echo of hooves moves up the steep street leading to the old city. Now, only the slap, slap, slap of the waves against the hull. Wait.

Screech of metal as the magazine hatch yields.

Quiet!

The hum of the C-deck generator.

Two dozen six-pound shells; domed brass noses gleam in the light from the companionway. Eggs in a box. Two into the bag, gently, over my shoulder, and climb the ladder. Kneel before the rapid-fire gun, port-side.

Open breech block.
Check for obstructions.
Insert round.
Close breech.
Pull lanyard.
Eject cartridge case.
Repeat.

The mass ended, Joe Abela steps out from the dim womb of Our Lady's into the bright Sunday morning. The cool air, refreshing

after the cloying incense; the honeyed stone reflects back the soft warmth of the sun. Joe lights a cheroot. The preacher, Fr Vincent, is an old fool. But it's good to be out, and the singing was beautiful. People asked fondly after Madam Abela and sent their best wishes. Her legs, he explained, wouldn't allow her to walk as far as the church these days.

He stops off at Tony's shop for his newspaper, two honey rings, and a box of the special Egyptian dates that Almira likes. Yes, it's such a beautiful morning that he takes the longer way round by the ramparts.

Below him sits the warship, the scene of last night's incident. On board a door slams shut and the Master at Arms, with two ship's corporals, frog march a midshipman along the deck. The sailor, his wrists bound in irons, is bundled down the gangplank into a Black Maria. No more than a boy, thinks Joe.

Something to tell Almira over coffee, then. It might almost be warm enough to sit on the veranda. She'll like that.

He thinks on what might have led the youngster to such a desperate act; how his parents' hearts would be broken, their hopes for him in ruins. Their own son, Albert, in Vancouver. Doing well, he tells them. But still, how they worry, looking every day for a letter. Joe takes out his handkerchief and wipes a tear from his eye. That wind! There's still a bite in it.

1 *The Scotsman,* 6 January 1901

2 *The Evening Times,* 5th August 1876, quoted in *The British Architect and Northern Engineer,* 11th August 1876

NONFICTION

Tipping Point

Jane Laube Boch

"See these?" the radiologist asks. The screen is a landscape of black with pockets of fluorescent white. Highways and intersections lit up like a neural network. The satellite photo of a city at night. The clearer discrete bodies—grains of rice or salt—hide close to the surface, popping from the mammogram, while goosebumps pop from my exposed skin.

She points at the image showing a grouping of calcifications on the lower inner area of my left breast. Other calcifications form a line along a milk duct. These tiny grains have thrown our family's winter break into havoc, whirling around a breast biopsy three days before Christmas. Next week, a stranger will tell me if I need treatment. If I have cancer. If I could die.

Funeral procession. Police escort the line of cars through city streets toward the cemetery. The rain worsens to squall-like conditions. Golf umbrellas hover while your husband steps into the surge to share the burden of the casket, ferrying Grandma to her resting place without any cover for himself.

The staff explain the process for the stereotactic biopsy. My special chair will move forward for the mammograms, then backward to collect the tissue samples, and up and down as the nurses adjust it for height. Seated in the chair, I study the mammography machine with its odd tilt, its arms horizontal, both screens displaying *90*. It looks out of kilter—like me, unbalanced by fear. If I have cancer, how will I tell the kids?

Today's challenge. Fulfill your promise. Play your violin, which will always be *her* violin. You have played it since middle school. You've practiced the songs she picked for her service.

Two internet stock photos are fixed to the machine, frameless. The waterfall in a lush forest could be a photo from my own album. My body untenses, recalling slow-paced hikes through the Hoh Rainforest and rambles along dirt footpaths to hot springs. Cold, then squashing, calls me back to the now. They compress my flesh into the machine. I force my breath, contracting abdominal muscles in Ujjayi-style exhales to keep the growing panic at bay.

When my sons were little, we spent hours manipulating clay with the Play-Doh fun factory. Remove fresh clay from small tubs. Massage it, flattening it into the compartment. Squeeze handle, forcing out red, blue, and purple shapes. My breast tissue presses in, the handle lowers and squeezes it through the outlines at the other end: long star-shaped tubes and skinny noodles. Lime green, yellow, eggplant, scarlet.

Photo memory. You smile with Grandma but inwardly fume at the shadow of her death on such a day. One block away, under brilliant July sun, the waves crash—reforming the sand-scape with each tide.

The mammography machine spins. The digital numbers change as the arm whirls. The wheel of fortune: spin to claim your prize.

Weather alert. Heavy rain. Accumulation over two inches. "Rain" is too gentle a word. The forecasted weather event will be cruel and aggressive. Torrents pouring from the sky will drown the minister's words, make him pause the graveside service. No thunder—just constant drumming, a stampeding on the tent, testing its stability and water resistance. Testing your resilience.

After the mammogram, my nurses distract me with conversation. Pain—the needle with the numbing agent enters the inner bottom of my breast, drawing me out of dread for the future and into the immediate moment. Yes, I feel the numbness. If only they could numb the fear.

Your fingers get cold before you play. Loss is glacial, ice-cold in your veins. Both the ice-covered mountain to be climbed and the crevasse, a fracture whose depths are treacherous. Unseen.

Do I feel the next needle? No—wait, yes. *That hurts*, I blurt, even though my mouth is set hard, not wanting to form the words, forbidding me to tell the secret. The radiologist adds more numbing agent. When she inserts the core needle again, it is pressure—and something more, but not quite pain. I don't see the blood, but I know—there is a lot of bleeding. I sense it—the scarlet. I inhale and hold. They can have my blood, but not my breath. Did Grandma go through this? When she was diagnosed at eighty-seven?

Drawn from a spiritual source, vibration and frequency channel a transcendent reality. You play a note that rings—it resonates with clarity and pitch. You have opened a conduit to the divine, and now, to Grandma Agnes. Your breaths are full, more connected. To each other, to the notes. To her.

I draw breath again. They put me under "light" compression for another mammogram. My attendants step away, the machine whirs and spins again, so that the digital numbers change. They capture an image of the first site and the titanium marker—it has fallen out.

I stare at the waterfall and squint at something I can't identify. Leaves? A snake? Why would there be a coiled snake in a picture of a serene waterfall, meant to be an object of focus—a Drishti?

Resentment at irrelevant details. She was secretary for twenty-five years in a church no longer open, no longer holding funerals, not even hers.

They tilt me back, away from the machine, and I face the ceiling. A nurse pushes, compresses, forcing out as much blood as possible, to prevent future bleeding. There is wiping and cleaning and bandaging and cheering me on. "Are you all right? You're doing great!" Am I all right? I focus on the waterfall, on the spray on my face, on the force drumming into the stream below.

I don't feel great. But I'm not lightheaded or dizzy. Neither do I feel relief. Or anything at all. The numbing agent is working its magic, casting its spell. I'm not here. I'm immersed in the waterfall.

Funeral music playlist. *Lara's Theme from Dr. Zhivago. Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee. The Church in the Wildwood.*

I didn't know my grandmother had found a lump. I didn't pace, worried, imagining the worst. Not yet. They only called me after they knew, when she had already decided on a double mastectomy.

You must do this for her, when she gave so much to you. With every bow stroke, vibrate the air in the funeral home with beauty.

Site number two. First the mammogram. They clean the area and inject more numbing agent. Then the core sampling, like in a meteor movie or a geology lab. "Still okay?" they ask.

Your family rushes from the joyless room that mimics a church sanctuary. No pause to greet friends, no *"Thank you for coming."* There is a schedule, a deadline imposed by the cemetery for beginning the graveside service. The living world dictates its will where it does not belong.

Picture her, shaking her head. She lived over ninety years, abiding by the world's time constraints. Even her death is governed by them. Her life was drained in months after the cancer returned. Grieving her, the world makes clear, is on a timetable, too.

Inside, I am carved out. Empty. Later, I'll examine my breast—bruised lime green, grape, and crimson—and cry, pouring out the anxiety. For now, I nod that I'm okay. They sweep my chair to the side and tilt me back. The nurse starts her compression work again.

You are the violin with its hollow interior. How long can you play, now that she's gone? Will the bittersweetness mellow into a tinged joy? The loss is too sharp for now, but you hope that eventually, the emptiness will allow for sound again, giving space for resonance. For peace.

Once I'm out of the chair and dressed, I step close to the waterfall photo behind the Play-Doh fun factory. It's neither a snake nor leaves. It's fungi. Shelf-like mushrooms that cling to a rotting log. Seemingly invasive but forming their own ecosystem. Useful decomposers, ancient inhabitants of the Earth.

I touch my finger to the fungi captured by the camera.

Run your hands over the wood's polished roughness, inspect the bridge's positioning and straightness. Caress the marks scratched into the chinrest before Grandma's time, the cool metal of the rose embellishment on the tailpiece.

Was there ever any purpose, any use for cancer cells? I hear the waterfall, the downpour's drowning rhythm on the tent at the graveside five years ago, echoing the resonance of the notes I played. Followed by the overpowering morning sun from the previous summer, when Grandma told me—before her cancer came back, the sky a deep blue—when she fixed me with sea-green eyes. *You know you're going to play at my funeral.*

Turning to leave, I catch a glimpse of a reflection in the plastic of the mammography machine. A shadowy hint at something more than myself. A remembered, lingering note. *Goodbye, Grandma.*

Camp Beginnings

Ann Calandro

Once school was over for the year, my parents sent my younger brother and me to Camp Dahlia for the cooler air and outdoor activities. In the city, I was in demand when kids picked teams for playground games. Ricky, my brother, wasn't, because he didn't run as fast as I did. When teams were chosen, I made sure he was picked whenever I was. At Camp Dahlia, I didn't have to watch out for him. Everyone was picked for a team. I could just have fun.

There were rules for campers and counselors. When one boy threw a ball at another boy's stomach, he had to apologize. When one counselor grabbed a grilled cheese sandwich from a camper's reaching hand, the next morning she was gone. Every day had a schedule, and everything we did was fun. In the evenings our counselors pulled out their guitars and played folk songs. This was the 1960s, when folk music was everywhere. We didn't know what the songs meant, but we knew they were mysterious and sophisticated, which is what Harriet, my best friend at camp, and I wanted to be. Right now, we didn't like boys, and we certainly didn't want to kiss them, but maybe someday we would, like the girls in the songs on the radio. We pondered the lyrics with the precision of scholars, but we came no closer to understanding their meaning. Who was Suzanne? Why would she take someone down to a place by a river? We yearned to be adults, because adults knew everything.

Harriet and I thought that adulthood happened instantaneously, like walking from one room to another. We were both eleven. As an adult I would understand the songs. I would take the subway by myself. I would know the answer to every question. I would paint pictures to hang in a museum. I would write a novel that everyone would read and love. I would have a boyfriend in a leather jacket. He would run his fingers through my long straight hair that parted in the middle. (Never mind that my short curly

hair didn't part in the middle.) I would toss my hair over my shoulders. (It didn't toss.) I would wear mascara and lipstick. I would be beautiful. My boyfriend would kiss me, and I would kiss him back. He would have a big brass bed and sing Lay Lady Lay as I smiled up at him, waiting for something wonderful to happen. Harriet felt the same way, except her boyfriend would wear a blue jean jacket, and she wanted to be a famous scientist.

"Girls! Flashlights out! Stop whispering!" We giggled one last time and stopped talking.

On the last morning of camp, Harriet and I vowed eternal friendship and promised to return to camp as best friends the following summer.

"Let's write every week!" we vowed, hands on our hearts. We hugged each other until we boarded our designated buses for home.

The next summer I didn't see Harriet, because Ricky and I were sent to Camp Beginnings. My parents drove us there, hugged us good-bye, and told us they'd be back in a month to bring us home. Camp Beginnings looked like Camp Dahlia, only smaller. The lake was smaller, the cabins were smaller, and there weren't as many trees or campers. I didn't mind that it was smaller. My counselor seemed nice, and the other girls were friendly. The first thing I didn't like was breakfast—a bowl of watery oatmeal topped with a few sour blueberries, delivered with a crash by a frowning elderly lady named Cook. I ate it and looked around for more—bread, fruit, juice, potatoes, even a second serving of oatmeal, but my counselor, surprised when I asked her if there was anything else, said there wasn't.

"There's a canteen where you can buy candy and soda in the afternoon, if you have pocket money."

"I don't have pocket money."

"Then ask your mom or dad to send you a care package. Some of the campers do that."

"OK," I said. I was hungry all morning, but at lunch I put extra meat and cheese on my sandwich, and no one stopped me. During quiet time after lunch, we stayed in our cabin to rest or

write letters. I wrote to my parents and asked them to send food right away.

"Please send lots of dried fruit and nuts and candy!" I didn't have high hopes for the candy part, but I mentioned it anyway. "There's not enough food here! It's not like Camp Dahlia!"

Camp Beginnings was confusing. There were things to do, but they were not planned activities. We could swim in the lake under the bored gaze of a teenaged lifeguard, but there were no rowboats or swimming lessons. We could hike, but the counselors never wanted to come with us. There were balls and jump ropes we could use, but there were no organized games. Sometimes we watched a movie or played charades, which I hated. There were no marshmallows or ghost stories. There were no guitars. When I asked my counselor what else there was to do, she asked me what I wanted to do.

"I want to draw or paint or learn to swim better."

"I think we have coloring books," she said. "Let's go find them." I told her I was too grown up for coloring books.

"So just hang out with the other girls. When I was your age, I liked to braid my best friend's hair. Braid Andrea's hair and then she'll braid yours. That's fun."

It didn't sound like fun or like camp to me, but I didn't know what to do or say. Counselors were grown-ups, weren't they? I wanted to be at Camp Dahlia, where every day had a schedule, and the counselors did the activities with us. I wondered if Harriet was at Camp Dahlia this summer. Did she have a new best friend? Back in the cabin, I asked Andrea if we could braid each other's hair, and she agreed. Andrea slept on the bunk above mine, and sometimes she cried in the night. One night I asked her what was wrong, but she didn't answer.

At Camp Dahlia, the boys and girls did activities together, but at Camp Beginnings they did not. I saw my brother only at meals and sometimes at a movie or charades. Girls and boys were not allowed in each other's cabins. My days fell into a boring routine: watery oatmeal, a swim by myself, a walk with the girls in my cabin, lunch, and sitting in the cabin with the other girls

all afternoon, eating candy they bought from the canteen. We braided each other's hair and experimented with our counselor's makeup. Our counselor usually left the cabin in the afternoon. She always said she had a counselor's meeting. One of the girls had a transistor radio, and if we found a station playing music, we'd sing along and dance. When our counselor returned, we went to dinner, giggling when we saw boys in the distance. Sometimes I saw my brother drifting behind the other boys, his head down.

"Ricky!" I called when I saw him, but he never looked up. One time I veered toward him, but Andrea called me back, reminding me that we weren't supposed to mingle with the boys.

"You'll get in trouble."

"For what? I'm just saying hello to my brother."

"I don't know. It's a camp rule. The counselors would get mad."

One evening, when we returned to the cabin, there was a package from my parents with dried apricots, nuts, and some small bags of candy. I immediately ate most of the dried apricots. They made me think of home.

"I have candy!" I whispered to Andrea. "I'll give you some after lights out."

"OK, good!" she said. "Let's wait until everyone is asleep."

Finally, when everything was quiet, I tapped the bottom of Andrea's bunk. She put her hand over the side. I put a bag of M&Ms in her hand.

"Thank you," she said. I heard her tear it open. I opened a bag for myself. We ate in silence.

"These taste so good. I love chocolate! Who sent the package to you, your mom or your dad?"

"They both sent it."

"Don't they live in separate places? Don't you have two bedrooms and switch between two homes?"

"No, we all live in the same apartment. They're my parents."

"You're so stupid! Why are you here? Everyone here lives with their mom or their dad because their parents are divorced! This

is a camp for divorced children! Don't you know that? It's not for children like you!"

She leaned over the bunk and threw M&Ms at me.

"I don't want your stupid candy from your stupid married parents! You shouldn't be here! They're not divorced!"

I lay frozen on my cot while Andrea hurled M&Ms. Why were Ricky and I at a camp for divorced children? Eventually I fell asleep. In the morning, I braced myself for trouble, but Andrea ignored me. I walked behind her and the other girls to breakfast, listening to them talk. After breakfast I went swimming After lunch, while the other girls huddled around the transistor radio singing "Please Mr. Postman," I put some candy in my pocket and went to find Ricky. I saw him on the lawn, watching some boys play kickball. I stopped, half hidden by a tree. Ricky was at the edge of the group, using a long stick to scratch the dirt.

"Hey stupid!" a boy called to him. "You wanna play kickball even though you're so bad at it?" Ricky shook his head no. The boys resumed playing, ignoring him.

"Ricky!" I hissed. He turned. I beckoned him over. He walked slowly, dragging the stick. His face was caked with dirt, and his shirt and shorts were filthy.

"What's wrong with your face? Aren't you washing it? Why are your clothes so dirty? Don't you change them?"

My brother shook his head no.

"I hate it here!" he said, starting to cry. "The boys are mean. My counselor doesn't stop them from teasing me. I want to go home! I didn't come tell you because we're not supposed to talk to the girls! I want Mom and Dad!"

"Come to my cabin when everyone goes to dinner. I'll help you wash your face. Here, take this." I handed him the candy. He tore it open.

"Don't forget, Ricky. Come to my cabin right before dinner." He nodded and went back toward the boys. I went back to my cabin. The other girls were still listening to music and dancing. Our counselor wasn't back yet. She always told us she had a counselor's meeting in the afternoon, but one of the older girls said our counselor had a boyfriend whom she met in the woods. No one noticed that I had gone out. When our counselor returned, it was time to go to dinner. I said I had to use the bathroom and would catch up.

Ricky came, and I took him into the bathroom and washed his face with my washcloth, but the dirt was so thick he looked like a zebra when I was done—stripes of clean skin against stripes of caked, dampened dirt.

"It's not working," I complained. "Your face is too dirty."

"I don't care," he said.

"I'm going to call Mom and Dad, and they'll come and get us," I decided. "I'll take some quarters from my counselor's drawer. There's a phone in the main building. Go to dinner now. If anyone asks where I am, tell them I'm in the bathroom." He nodded. After he left I ran to the main building and called my parents.

"You have to come get us," I told my mother in a rush. I wasn't sure if campers were allowed to make phone calls or how many minutes I had before the operator cut in.

"What's wrong?" she said, sounding alarmed.

I spoke quickly. "It's Ricky! He hates it here! He's not washing his face! I don't think he's changing his clothes! The boys are mean to him! I tried to wash his face, but he's not allowed in my cabin, and it didn't work anyway because his face is so dirty, and this camp is for children with divorced parents! We shouldn't be here! You're married! It's not a good camp like Camp Dahlia! It's not the right camp for us! I don't like it either!"

"What? I didn't know any of that! A camp for divorced children? Oh, for heaven's sake! Your father and I will come get you early tomorrow morning," my mother said. She started to say something else, but the operator cut in and disconnected us. I didn't have any more quarters, so I walked to the dining hall and took the long way to my table so I could whisper in Ricky's ear. He was sitting at the end of his table, drawing lines in a clump of mashed potatoes with his fork. He still looked like a zebra. Nobody was talking to him.

"Mom and Dad are coming tomorrow morning," I whispered. He turned his face toward me.

"Really?"

"Really."

"They were dumb to send us to this stupid camp," he said, stabbing his mashed potatoes.

I went to my seat and thought about my parents. They knew lots of things. They knew all the subway and bus routes. They knew how to cook. They helped us with our homework. They read books and magazines and newspapers. They had gone to college and graduate school. They took care of us and my grandparents. If they said they were going to do something or be somewhere, they kept their promise. They didn't litter. They told us to be careful and to look both ways every time we crossed the street. They told us not to talk to strangers. They answered our questions. They sent us to Camp Dahlia. They knew we would have fun at Camp Dahlia because it was a good camp. Why did they send us here, to Camp Beginnings? It troubled me that I didn't know the answer. Weren't adults supposed to know everything? After dinner I told my counselor my head hurt, and I didn't want to play charades. Instead, I lay on my cot, thinking. My head didn't really hurt.

"I'm not playing those stupid charades ever again," I told the sky. "And at home I'm eating as much as I want for breakfast. I want pancakes. And I'm not sending my children to a stupid camp like Camp Beginnings." When my counselor and the other girls came back, I pretended to be asleep. When Andrea whispered, "Good night," I pretended I didn't hear her. I was leaving tomorrow, even if no one else knew that.

My parents arrived during breakfast the next morning, and Ricky and I were summoned by loudspeaker. We packed our bags, went back to the office, and got into the car. No one said goodbye. My father drove us away from camp, onto the highway. My mother kept turning around to ask if we were OK.

"Yes, just starving," I said. We stopped at a diner, and my father washed Ricky's face in the bathroom. Then we sat in a booth with red seats that stuck to our legs and ate pancakes like wolves. My parents ate slowly while they talked softly to each other. When I was done eating I took a deep breath and looked out the diner window, where cars were whizzing by, heading to and from the city. My mother saw me looking and said, "Ready to go home?"

"Yes!" I said. Ricky threw his arms around my mother and buried his head in her stomach.

"Yes!"

"OK, then," my father said. "Let's go. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll be home."

Ricky fell asleep. My mother turned the radio on to the classical music station she loved. My father drove carefully, like he always did, leaving space between our car and the car in front. That was one of the things he knew and told me—not to drive too close to the car in front. He also held the wheel in the "10 and 2" position. I felt comforted watching him and thinking of things he and my mother knew. There were questions I wanted to ask my parents, but I couldn't find the words. My thoughts spun without end.

—Mom and Dad sent us to a bad camp. They wouldn't do that on purpose. They must have thought it was a good camp. Why did they think it was a good camp? Did someone tell them it was a good camp? Someone must have told them it was a good camp. Maybe the owner of the camp told them. Why did they believe him? He lied. Children aren't supposed to lie, so why can adults lie? Does he feel bad he lied? I don't think he feels bad. Why doesn't he feel bad?—

I looked at the back of my mother's and father's heads. They knew a lot of things, but they didn't know everything. They didn't know that Camp Beginnings wasn't like Camp Dahlia.

"You're grown-ups, but you don't know everything," I muttered. "I wanted to go to Camp Dahlia again. Harriet probably made a new best friend." My mother turned around.

"What, honey? Did you say something?"

I crossed my arms and glared at her. My mother sighed.

"Rest now," she said. "We'll be home soon. Next summer, you can go to Camp Dahlia. But only if you want to go to camp at all."

I didn't answer. I turned my head to the window.

Now I sit next to my mother's hospital bed, holding her hand and listening to her talk. Some of what she is saying makes sense. I tell her everyone is fine, her granddaughters are doing well in college, my husband works remotely most days, they all will visit her soon. I remind her that Ricky will visit tomorrow. I play classical music for her from my phone.

"There are twenty-six hours of music on this phone," I tell her. She marvels that so much music can be stored on a phone. She asks me if I remember her records and the stereo.

"So many records," she says. "So heavy to move." I tell her I remember them. She dozes and wakes. A phone rings in the hall and awakens her.

"There's the phone! You called from the camp! I shouldn't have sent you and Ricky there! There's the phone. You called me on the phone. You said we had to pick you up right away. What was the name?"

"Camp Beginnings."

"That was a grown-up thing you did. I was so proud of you."

I blink back tears. My mother never said she was proud of me for calling. I didn't want to call her. I wanted to be a child at Camp Dahlia. When we got home from camp that day, my mother took our dirty clothes down to the apartment building's laundry room. Then she and I walked to the library for books. I was still angry and wouldn't talk to her. Later I went down to the playground, and when I came up for dinner, I wasn't angry anymore. We ate dinner. I listened to her play my favorite music on the piano. We never talked about Camp Beginnings.

"It's OK, Mom," I say gently. "You didn't send us there on purpose. You and Dad must have thought it was a good camp. It's fine. I'm fine. Ricky's fine. You know what's funny? I thought that becoming an adult just happened, like walking through a door. At Camp Beginnings, I had to be an adult to call you, and I didn't want to be an adult. I wanted to be a child. But there's no door. There are only roads that go back and forth forever." I look at my mother. She's dozing again. I stop talking. I sit there, holding her hand, which is light and pale as cotton candy. How much time does she have left? After my father died, I reminded myself that my mother was alive. As I sit by her bed, I watch that door finally open. It's not a door between childhood and adulthood. It's a door between having a parent and being an orphan. Why did I think I'd get older and my parents would stay the same? We sit there, my mother and I, her hand in mine, while Rachmaninoff plays his Elegie on my phone. I listen to my mother breathe.

T.J. Eckleberg's Corner

David Hadbawnik

Excerpt from
Dolores Park: A Memoir of the 1990s Bay Area Art Scene

There were many days when C. Horner emerged like a mole from the subway tunnel, fell in line with the others who shoved their tickets into the turnstile slots and were in turn spit out through the clicking machines, was conveyed up to the street by the endless escalator, and emerged to walk past the usual hoodlums sitting on the cement block by the alley and the frail waifs crouching along the chain-link fence that enclosed the Mission Library branch, begging for change. He crossed the street in a daze, the sun dazzling him through the mist blowing in over Twin Peaks, turned the corner on 23rd St. for the home stretch, and passed by his favorite character, T.J. Eckleberg, who sat in his customary spot on the sidewalk outside the corner convenience store.

T.J. Eckleberg, as Horner had secretly named him, was a dark, miserable-looking man who stationed himself there every day, seemingly only to watch Horner pass by. He was always there; he always wore a frazzled nylon jacket and surrounded himself with a sprawl of ratty clothes in plastic bags; he was always reading a book. He never failed to glance up into Horner's eyes as he passed, but the man was too proud to ask him for any change. Only once had he done that, and it had been an odd day, a Saturday, which somehow didn't seem to count: Horner, caught in a reverie as he paused before crossing the street, had felt a tug on his sleeve; turning, he'd found himself looking into the face of Eckleberg, who simply held out an upturned hand, as if demanding the return of a cigarette lighter from someone who'd borrowed it. Automatically, Horner had shoved a hand into his pocket, fished out a crumpled dollar bill, and slipped it to Eckleberg, who accepted the money silently and sat back down in his spot. Aside from this unusual

exchange, no look or nod or grimace of acknowledgment had ever passed between them, although they clearly had grown familiar to one another.

It was a standoff. C. Horner merely walked by, pressing his own dark brown eyes into Eckleberg's soft brown eyes (soft; and yet flashing with silent defiance), only so far, and no farther. Perhaps Horner looked a little more deeply into them one day; the next day, a tad less. It was as though there was an impenetrable cataract between them, as though they viewed each other through a film, and it was preposterous that anything more should pass between them than these mysterious, completely impersonal, yet oddly intimate glances… Yet Horner maintained the fantasy that one day — he would know when the time came and simply do it, with no premeditation — he would simply approach Eckleberg from a different angle, one which prevented the man from looking up and throwing the cataract between them. True, he could never be approached from behind. Perhaps that was the whole reason he sat with his back to the wall, guarding his peripheries jealously. Nevertheless, Horner would slip beneath his radar and sit right down next to him on the sidewalk, say hello and begin talking with him, just as though they were old friends who had arranged to meet here.

Perhaps that was Eckleberg's secret: He had arranged to meet a friend here long ago, years ago. At that time he'd had a home, and a family, he was an entirely respectable member of the community; a welder, a fruit-seller at the market. Yet his son — could it have been his son? — had never shown up. Still, he dragged himself out to wait for him every day, reading a book, his clothes and his skin wearing against the cement and bricks, looking up into the face of everyone who passed, hoping for a spark of recognition, since he had long ago forgotten what his daughter — was it his daughter, then? — looked like. Daughter? Mother? Wife? God? But Christ himself hadn't had to wait this long for someone to recognize him. For Christ had been holy — angry and anguished, but clear. Nowadays, saints are cracked mirrors, unable to show anyone to

themselves except in distorted, fragmented reflections. Or so it seemed to Horner, although he didn't think about it much at the time; only passed quickly, passed under the gaze of Eckleberg on his way home from work, from the store, from the movies, on his way home, always on his way home and always in a hurry. Passed under the silent verdict of that gaze — a judgment all the more harsh for its utter indifference.

Sometimes as he continued on, now crossing Guerrero, just one block from home, a strange weariness overtook Horner, and he had to resist the urge to collapse right there on the street, like a marathon runner who had endured 26 miles and yet could not muster the energy for the final four hundred yards. He would redouble his effort, and with a final push go that last block, through the door and up the stairs, only to let the weariness catch up to him at last in his bedroom doorway, where it hurled him onto the bed in a mindless heap. There he languished, napping or reading, waking up later for a drowsy meal that plunged him even deeper into exhaustion. He'd read some more, or make a feeble attempt at writing, before going to bed, sometimes as early as 10 o'clock.

But one particular Friday, he strode out of the subway tunnel exhilarated. He dropped a dollar into the velvet sack of the accordionist whose eerie playing filled the underground with the sounds of a carnival. Her rising wail seemed to lift him up to the street even more surely than the escalator, to claw at him like a hand from the grave and tug him down even as it thrust him up and out. He passed by the hoodlums, passed by the frail waifs hugging the fence, crossed the street shielding his eyes from the sun's dazzle, passed by Eckleberg with his usual blank look — an even draw, this time. Something was different today, he did not feel like collapsing on Guerrero only one block from home, in fact he felt like walking faster and faster, breaking into a run and speeding right past the corner of 23rd and Dolores until he reached the top of the hill at Chattanooga and simply took off flying—

It was an enormous vitality that surged through him. A poetry. And he knew that in this state he could write and write and write…

but it was fragile and precarious, and he had to carry it forward with a single-minded determination and plunge it into his work, or else it would soften, dissipate, and frazzle off in a thousand different directions. In this mood, he might squander the energy on a long, animated conversation — with Margaret, or with Sonny, or with a stranger on the street. Or he might sit down as he used to do in his Austin days and drink it away in gulps from a bottle of bourbon, drown the gleam in his eyes until there was nothing left but a sodden leer. He had to be especially wary of phone calls and women's eyes. He wished he had Odysseus's crew alongside him to lash him to the mast of his own being as he sailed through the irresistible sirens of phone calls and women's eyes. He could already see it in the eyes of the women he passed as he rushed onwards — as they glanced up, they could recognize the ecstatic energy flashing on his face, and some of them recoiled as if he'd touched them. He must appear a fool, an idiot, almost a maniac. What he imagined as a sexual spark might be horrific and menacing to them. Horner knew that he was far too animated to stop and try to talk to any of the women he passed, and he wouldn't know what to say to them even if he did. But he could easily take his energy and dole it out in dribs and drabs as he wandered the streets for hours on end, grinning at every face he saw. Or he could stagger home, shrug off his coat, and snatch the phone out of its cradle, dialing up anyone and everyone and spewing his words out into space.

In the end, Horner could not write. Not in any sort of focused, organized way. His sense of perspective and proportion was all wrong. He could not find the right distance, could not approach his subject matter from the right angle. He could see it, sitting right there, waiting for him to breathe on it and bring it to life. But something wouldn't allow him to breathe.

He was me. I was him. At least, that's what my memory tells me. It's hard to believe as I observe C. Horner from the distance of however many years, crawling helpless as a beetle over the corrugated surfaces of San Francisco, looking for love, looking for

friendship, looking for *something*, always looking for something. I want to reach out and help him along over some of the places where he got stuck, struggled, at times gave up. I want to tell him it'll be all right — or maybe, in certain cases, warn him that it definitely *won't* be all right — but all I can do is watch. All I can do is try to make sense of it all, from the distance of however many years.

Honorable Mention, 2024 Prose Collections

Litwin's Fine Furniture

Melanie S. Smith

I have reached the age where I'm unashamed of the thrill I got watching naked and tattooed George Baines caress Ada McGrath's piano in his steamy shanty in the jungle of New Zealand. George was a half-Māori plantation overseer who fell in love with the mute and odd pianist, whose jealous husband chopped off her index finger to punish her adultery. An oddball, a bit broken. That he cleaned up for a woman was the measure of something like devotion.

Ten years before marriage, baby, and divorce, I worked in Washington, D.C., where Fred Litwin was a fixture on my walk to work and a fixture as well on the antiques scene, drawing moneyed clientele from The Hill. Mr. Litwin was a small wiry man with a few wisps of white hair, an intensely intelligent face, and one outfit: jeans, t-shirt, and a black bomber jacket. I was instantly intrigued by this octogenarian who commuted to and from Litwin's Fine Furniture on a motorcycle with a red milk crate zip-tied on back and was often visible schlepping back and forth from his brick storefront to trucks that loaded or unloaded aged finery. I love old things and more particularly, old wooden things, so one day I cautiously stepped out of the brilliant noon-day sunshine into the shop. It was dark and cool, redolent with the smell of tung oil and mahogany, oak, maple, and cherry, and dotted with porcelain and silver. An old radio sent out Rachmaninoff's *Tristan and Isolde*, more scratch than tune.

Heaven.

I had come armed with a conversation starter in case someone tried to sell me something I could not afford: Would stripping the finish from my antique mahogany desk lower its value? This was

the question I posed when Fred Litwin schlepped over to ask if he could help me. A gray suit from Congress studying an expensive armoire at the back of the store called to Mr. Litwin--"Fred," I would learn, was his preferred moniker--but the old man waved off the customer and sidestepped my question.

"I'm looking into the most beautiful brown eyes I've ever seen," he called back, fixing me with his gaze.

I knew this dance. My Sicilian grandfather was a little man with muscles hardened by carpentry and though he didn't wear a bomber jacket, he did let me, as a child, stand on his feet while he fox-trotted around the room to Frank Sinatra. Clinging to his legs, I took in an intoxicating elixir of tobacco smoke, sweat, and sawdust. "The apple of my eye," he called me. The language of flirtation.

"That's just my pheromones talking to your pheromones," I said to Mr. Litwin.

"Pheromones?"

"The chemicals in my sweat."

"I like what your chemicals are saying." He put an arm through mine and I got a whiff of his leather jacket, the diffuser of his own pungent chemicals. "Come, sit down."

He waved to an armchair with a cracked leather seat and took the worn ottoman across from me. In between was a rickety table patterned with circular coffee-cup rings and littered with donut papers.

"With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?" he asked, leaning in.

"Melanie," I said. "I work next door."

"Melanie. The dark one in Greek." He glanced at my chestnut hair. "Your parents chose well."

I posed my question about the mahogany desk and Mr. Litwin reached under the chair to fish out an open coffee can of tarry liquid. His proprietary polish, he said, made with tung oil and something else that I don't remember. He dipped a bit of rough cloth into the mix and rubbed the arm of my chair, which visibly

brightened. But what I noticed were his beautifully shaped fingers, tapered and neatly groomed despite the nails black-rimmed by furniture polish. He seemed less interested in proving the mix's effectiveness than in leaning close to me.

"I think you're just trying to sniff me," I said and winked.

"You're right." He winked back. "But don't worry. I'm happily married--fifty years and counting."

I was almost thirty years old, unpartnered and without prospects, and worried that I would miss out on motherhood. The idea was circulating that a single woman in her mid-thirties was more likely to be killed by a terrorist than become a mother. Propaganda that imbued dating with an air of desperation.

"What's your secret?" I asked.

He thought I meant to a happy marriage, not to finding someone to marry.

"We have slept in the same bed for fifty years," he said. "No twin beds. Same bed every night. That's the secret."

I didn't ask him, that day, about how to find someone I loved enough to share the same bed for the rest of my life, because I was on my lunch break and he had customers. But his simple certainty about seemingly complicated questions, delivered with sparkle, would come to serve as a daily crumb of consolation. It instigated a habit that lasted several years: lunch with Mr. Litwin, me in the chair with a cracked leather seat and him, sunk down in his frayed armchair. I would wander in with a loaf of French bread and some butter or a container of cold eggplant and he would sweep off the small table then lay out our nosh as if it were fine dining. Good paper napkins appeared along with something he brought from home: a jar of honey to go with bread and butter or a tin of olives that he bit with his incisors to chew out the pit. Because the same font of wisdom was a messy eater who put the polish-stained finger in his mouth or talked while chewing, sending bits of food flying out of a mouth with a full set of intact coffee-stained teeth. He effervesced with opinions on everything, aware of every customer's whereabouts while his eyes never left my

face. I cannot remember the substance of our conversations. Only that, as we talked, he absently reached for the ankle of my crossed leg--I wore short skirts and pumps back then--and circled the bone with his finger as he opined. Not pruriently, not dirty-old-man.

George Banes, stroking Ada McGrath's piano.

As a child I spent hours at my grandparents' house. Nonno was a scrappy smoker and former pugilist, all hands and nose, while my demure grandmother--Nanna--was a fair-haired beauty with refined features and the quiet way of an impoverished princess who retained her noble ways. They fought each other constantly but both adored me, though I was partial to the mischief-prone grandfather who entertained me with cigarette tricks and houses built of cards from a tobacco-stained deck. One sweltering night, he scooped me up and laid me in one of the twin beds in his air-conditioned bedroom. The rest of the house was acrid from smoldering cigarette ash, but his room was cool and the bedsheets, light and dry. The next morning, he reported to Nanna, "She didn't move an inch. She woke up just the way she fell asleep," like a salesman's I-told-you-so about a mattress guarantee. But Nanna objected to my sleeping in his room and by the time I was eight or nine, she won out. From then on, I slept in her double bed wearing one of her white smocked nightgowns, pinned up at the hem so I wouldn't trip. I loved the princess attire but I preferred the cool comfort of Nonno's room. My refined grandmother snored like a sailor…and I longed for my grandfather.

Nonno was the first to elicit such magnetism. I remember the day I followed him out of the house with my piggybank: He was buying a new station wagon to hold his carpentry tools, and I wanted to contribute. He returned a day later in a brand-new emerald-green Ford; inside was a small green foot-pedaled car for me. I was his queen, and I knew it. At any family gathering, a pat on his knee beckoned me to ascend the throne. His boney legs under my bottom were a delicious sensation as were the warm fingers that stroked the back of my neck as gently as if I were porcelain.

I was not touched this way by my mother, who likely suffered from a personality disorder, or my father, the dispenser of corporal punishment intended to placate her--I was the child conceived before marriage who deprived her of a college dream and ousted her as object of paternal love. My childhood was filled with her nearly incessant screaming. Nonno was my haven. The fists he raised toward Nanna stood in stark contrast to his gentility with me. I hated when he hit her but I never turned on him. There was no other place to get what he offered.

After five years next to Litwin's Fine Furniture, our office moved six city blocks across town. Lunch with Mr. Litwin became impossible, particularly on humid July days when stepping outside was a collision with a wall of heat. Besides, I was busy. With men.

Six years earlier, on a flight between Boston and D.C., I had dozed off one seat away from a tall tweedy man my age. When the pilot announced our descent, I woke up and the man and I chatted briefly. He was a New York City-based script writer; I was an aspiring writer. Geoff scribbled his name on a page of the airline magazine and ripped it out. I accepted the offer, shy at the kind of male attention that never came my way. Jeers and catcalls, yes; but a handsome well-dressed man giving me his telephone number? I kept the magazine page, a talisman of want. It lay under the mess in my desk drawer, until one day while straightening up, I took it out. "You probably don't remember me," I announced after boldly placing the call, "but we met on a plane five years ago." Yes, he did remember me, and vividly. "You fell asleep," he said. "I thought you were beautiful." Our two-hour conversation ended with a plan for him to travel, the next weekend, from New York City to the apartment I shared with two women in a D.C. suburb.

Seven days of no appetite and dreamy fantasies followed despite a forecast of late-week snow that evolved into a blizzard warning. Should I cancel? Should he cancel? Or should we simply go for it? Movie scripts were written about this sort of happenstance--we

were living Nora Ephron's next big hit.

We agreed: He would come. The trains would continue to operate even if the streets weren't plowed.

Friday morning brought the smell of snow; noon delivered a whisper of fine soft flakes; but by late afternoon, we were swallowed by a humming storm. The neighbor's house was invisible, a mere patch of fuzzy light across the street. Then the power went out and as my eyes adjusted, what had been dark became visible. Blowing snow had turned the landscape into a frosted white cake. The appointed hour of Geoff's arrival came and went with no call, no text--this was pre-cell phones--and no way to know where he was stuck.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when a loud thump came from below, at the door to our parking lot. I heard my roommate's surprise, then the deeper tones of a man's voice. Geoff had indeed been stuck, but not on a train; rather, in the D.C. train station. He had left New York early to beat the storm. As soon as plows came out, he hailed a brave cabby. And now, here was the very tweedy, very tall man I had met five years earlier, with thick black hair and a boyishly handsome face. He had come bearing a paper bag with jars of olives and anchovies, a bottle of wine, and a loaf of sourdough. I could almost smell the New York City air.

I spirited him away from my roommates and we sat in the kitchen feasting and drinking by candlelight, eventually heading to my bedroom where he lay on his side, staring at me with a child's adoring gaze. He wanted to hold and be held; he wanted to kiss. But George Baines he was not. I wore a white smocked princess nightgown that remained at ankle-length all night, and the next morning, I slipped out from the tangle of sheets and caught myself in the mirror, a desirable but untouched beauty. How had he resisted? I told myself he had braved a blizzard; how could our meeting be anything other than propitious?

The promise of more sustained my relationship with Geoff for nine or ten months. We dined out and spent hours walking and talking and lying in bed. He loved me, but he could not

allow himself to want me. He gazed at me until he was sleepy, then rolled away into thrashing nightmares. I was in a tug-of-war with an invisible opponent. The increasingly fancy dinners and theater dates were a measure of his fear. I thought wryly that Fred Litwin was too old to be a lover but not too old to want it while the handsome man I desired had no sap. Sleeping in the same bed would deliver neither desire nor enduring love.

I broke up with Geoff shortly after I met a man at a dance who pressed me against a wall for a hard, thrilling kiss and observed, "Your tongue is the perfect taste and temperature." That relationship would end too. He was ten years older than me and done with marriage and children. He wanted to have "fun."

For years I had a recurring dream that I found a secret door to a hidden room on the non-existent third floor of my childhood house. I alone knew the room existed and had to climb various ladders from my attic bedroom to gain entry. The room had high windows that let in light and brick-red kilim rugs underfoot. Two sideboards groaned with China and silver, but it was the old oak table that I loved best. The dream had a sense of urgency about it; I had to save the forgotten wooden things before the house burned down or was locked up and sold, which is what eventually happened in reality but not before, as a teenager, I had crawled around in the eaves and found an ancient copy of Emerson's collected poems and a few old glass apothecary bottles. I was fourteen the first time I climbed out the attic window, onto the roof with a book in my hand, to crouch beside the chimney and read out loud:

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.

My father shouted that I was damaging the asphalt shingles, but that didn't deter me. Perched on the roof, I whispered the words of T.S. Eliot, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and W.H. Auden

and there, as well, I took up the habit of memorizing lines, carrying poetry like a thief with contraband stitched into the seams of her coat. During my lonely later years, I often woke with multiple books of poetry splayed among the tangled sheets and caressed them before jumping out of bed. I gave myself to words and they gave themselves to me, the tomes becoming cracked, worn, and dog-eared in the process.

Lovers all, broken open by love.

I was fifty-two when I set eyes on John, and I knew that day that I loved him. And knew that I wanted him almost as quickly. On our second date, spotting him first, I was startled by a powerful rising heat. What some call love at first sight was more like second sight, a limbic prescience. Want had to overpower the parts of my brain given to linguistic expression and over-analysis. Perhaps that's why I trusted it. The first night we slept together, he knelt to unbutton me as delicately as if he were peeling a fig and leaned back, his face lit with joy.

"You're beautiful!"

He was long and strong and hot, and he held my face in his hands for a long time, studying it before he kissed me. I remember the buttery smell of his neck, the way he cupped my chin as if he were sipping me, the delicious weight of him, a sinking into darkness and poignant hunger for the shelter of his body. Afterwards I slept soundly in the cave under his arm and for a few hours, there was no more ache.

Two years later, I was his bride and his widow, robbed by a galloping cancer. Among his belongings, I found a slim volume of *The Wasteland,* Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and a collection of Neruda's loves sonnets. Early on, John had confessed to being baffled by poetry. Then one night, he rolled over to face me and said, "I memorized a poem for you."

I gave a little squeak of excitement.

"I'm nervous," he said, "so if you don't mind, I'd like to shut the light."

He started, then fumbled, then started again. In the dark his voice was spare, like a bucket rising up out of a clear cold well.

I love your feet
only because they walked
upon the earth and upon
the wind and upon the waters,
until they found me.

"Neruda," I had wept and reached for him.

Mere months later I would lie in the dark, weeping and frightened, attentive to his breath, his heat, and his silhouette under the covers, memorizing their poetry for the looming day he would be too soon gone.

The dream of a secret room had long ceased by the time John died. Mr. Litwin had also died decades before though I had managed to squeeze in a last visit before leaving Washington, D.C. to become a writer, or so I thought. Marriage, motherhood, divorce, remarriage, and widowhood lay between me and my first published work. I was still single, though my long hair was now short, my short skirts gone, and in their place, blue jeans and an anorak. I hurried into Litwin's Fine Furniture and scanned the dim shop until my gaze landed on Mr. Litwin, older and a bit more bent. He schlepped over, overjoyed to see me, and pulled me into a welcome embrace that delivered the familiar whiff of his bomber jacket. The photograph that someone snapped shows a bald man reverently kissing the forehead of a pretty young woman whose eyes are closed to receive the benediction. In actuality, I was crying. That moment was a farewell and a bequest. Mr. Litwin loved me, and I loved him.

Forever, and from the beginning.

I write at the table from my old dream. I knew it wanted me from the moment I spotted it in the shop of a carpenter who made fine furniture from reclaimed wood. The tabletop was once the

floor of an eighteenth-century farmhouse, worn to a satiny patina by generations of footfall. Its legs from a century-old sheep barn still exude the fatty residue of the woolly flanks that jostled against them. Each time I pass, I draw my fingertips over the surface, tracing the grain and absently circling the worn spots that need rubbing with walnut oil.

Fingertips like hungry mouths, savoring the taste of devotion.

POETRY

Knowing

GTimothy Gordon

Even as a child, my mother never talked down to me, neither babytalk
nor prattle, reader of more than fairytale or slick B'rer Rabbit trickery
before knowing better, and one spring late afternoon we stood on the
one white stoop slab looking across the broad swath at 2nd & American
intersection at what she called the taproom where a young man already
past his prime who'd been there before stood just outside its open door
and began a sweet, plaintive, lyric stardust memory, that matched
the chastened, enveloping spring dusk and said without looking at me,
You know, Gerald, he's singing for his supper, and I did, even then,
before First Holy Communion, without yet knowing her words
but knowing what she meant wasn't exactly supper he was singing for,
that every softness came with a price, and when finished, was escorted,
by an aproned insider who dabbed both eyes with a flowery kerchief, in.
My mother wore her floral or print dress the only ones I ever remember
her wearing, even into adulthood, never having owned a dressy dress,
which is what I thought then, still do, a real mother wore. She never looked

at me or had “a moment” with me, or me at her, or said anything
of note
after he left his voice behind outside as an even softer April
evening stole
upon us, or wondered if she were wistful, or lost in reverie, or
inside a feeling,
when we went inside where we lived unsettled upstairs city lives
that people
often led that side of town that soft spring dusk when even at four
or five
nothing dreamy ever touched our lives back then I somehow
knew I was
already beginning becoming a man.

from A Week on the Concord & Merrimack Rivers

Poems inspired by H. D. Thoreau’s account of a boat trip with his brother, published in 1849

Peter Greico

XI.

Our course now curved gracefully to the north.
Here, on the sloping banks, carpenters worked
at mending a scow, as busily as hornets
& mud wasps, with tools gleaming in the sun.
After passing Moore’s Falls by means of locks,
we pumped our oars, driving sand-pipers
from rock to rock before us, chasing shoals
of pickerel just below the transparent stream.
We rowed near enough cottages to see
sun-flowers leaning in their yards. At Bedford,
where stone masons were repairing the locks,
we spoke with one who raised his eyes
& looked upriver & seemed envious.

Ahead, on a rod of clear sand
amid the alders stood a solitary bittern.
One wonders, by its patient study
of rocks & sandy capes, has it not yet
wrested from Nature her whole secret?
Standing on one leg, it looks out
from its dull eye long upon sunshine
long upon rain, upon the moon & stars,
& on silent pools & dank fogs. “Farewell, heroes,”
it sighs, “henceforth, my lyre sings only of loves.”

As we settled to shore, the neighboring
woods stirred alive with pigeons. We could hear
the wiry murmur of their wings
as they changed roosts, & their gentle cooing.
As one loitered too close, we caught it
to be plucked & broiled, though it did not
seem quite right to do so.

XII.

The highway down from Homer & Hesiod
to Horace & Juvenal is more pleasing
than the Appian Way to us river sailors
for whom the sun never rises out of ocean waves.
Instead, it comes up out of green coppices
or peeks around the sides of dark mountains.
At Amoskeag the river divides between rocks
into separate torrents & trickling rills
its volume much reduced by diversion
into the canals. Stones trapped in the current
revolving on a pivot have formed potholes
stones scouring themselves to sand, their revolutions
complete before thought began to revolve
in minds of men & women—sinking deeper
& deeper into the rock, doing Sisyphus-like
penance for stony sins. The finest workers
in stone are not blows of copper or steel
but the gentle touches of air & water
flitting at their leisure. From here is visible
Uncanoonuc, the mountain Mohawks called
"The Two Breasts," comprised of two eminences
with a soft cleft between. Sixty years ago
a woman went to gather pennyroyal there
& tripped on a small brass kettle hidden
on the grassy slope, supposed to have belonged

to an Indian hunter ambushed on the trail.
Above Amoskeag the river spreads out
to form a lake reaching two miles without
a bend, where canal boats have gathered
bound for Hooksett, going up empty
behind a sluggish & fitful breeze.

XIII.

We are sometimes made aware, after years
of vain familiarity, our hearts forever
inexperienced—of the kindness—of the
kindredness—implicit in the ways of our friends:
how they treat us, not as what we are,
but as we aspire to be. Remembering this is like
remembering the heat lightning of past summers.

Yet in this, we continually act parts
more interesting than in any drama written
by any Racine or Goldoni. One goes forth to say,
"Sweet Friends!" & the salutation returns,
"Damn your eyes!" But never mind;
faint heart never won true Friend. The tragedy
begins when silence is mistaken, not when
there is misunderstanding about words.

"I never ask your permission to let me
love you; rather, it is my right! For I love you
not as something private & personal, which
is your domain, but as something in you
worthy of love, which I have found."

It takes two to tell the truth—
one to speak it & one to hear.

We will cherish each other's hopes & be kind
to each other's dreams, & never stand
on ceremony: don't wait till I invite you,
but see me glad when you come at last.
Let our dealings be above ourselves & draw us
up to them. The only danger in Friendship
is when it ends. At parting, have we any last words?
Alas, we have not found first words, yet.

Myth

Ted Morrissey

from *Mary W. Shelley: A Biography in Sonnets*

They waited impatiently, mainly for you to fail:
Who were you to compete with the poets,
who would no doubt find writing a ghost
story simple child's play? Embarrassed,
mortified (traumatized by the loss of your
baby), you must acknowledge each morning
you had thought of no story, one imagines
much to their smug and preening satisfaction.
Then came the nightmare of *the pale student*
of unhallowed arts lying beside the thing. You,
a terrorized girl, had witnessed with closed eyes
the birth of a myth, more potent than Prometheus.
Something new to haunt you, this *hideous phantom.*
Beyond the shutters, the Alps shivered in moonlight.

After 71 Years of Marriage: What My Mother Said

Pamela Wynn

first I knew of your dad he lived in that hobbled together
house on the main road
when we still lived in the back woods but your Aunt Tillie
being my best friend and
your dad being one of her 6 brothers I was bound to catch
a glimpse of him now
& then but truth be told in Sunday School when we were
only 5 or 6 years old
I hardly paid him any mind

then when we were 10 or so the fact that he spoke to Ada
May (my very own sister)
but ignored me impressed itself upon my mind & I began
to see what she saw in
him but he never spoke to me only Ada May & I got it in
my head the reason he
liked her was that tam she wore to church plaid wool &
hand-knitted tilted to one
side on her head (course now I wonder where did she get
the money for such a thing?)
then one day it came to me all of sudden-like that he might
speak to me if I wore
that tam but I knew Ada May would tell on me to daddy if
I took it so for a while
I just let things be but

by the time I was 13 I knew me and your dad were meant to be
together forever &
we started dating which sounds young nowadays but keep in
mind my mama married
age 14 and had her first child a year later and of course as you
know my daddy was
against us marrying and if it'd been down to him we'd never
married since he
& your dad's pa had a long-standing feud so when me and your
dad turned 16 we
drove across the state line where it was legal for us to marry &
we been together right
up till now & I don't know what to do next him cold in a grave

About the Authors

Jim Beane's stories and essays have been published in numerous print and online literary journals and magazines, including *The McGuffin, The Baltimore Review, Worker's Write,* and the anthology *DC Noir.* His short story collection *By the Sea, by the Sea...* was published in 2018 by Wordrunner eChapbooks. *The Deadening,* his debut novel, was published in 2024. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee, a Virginia Center for the Creative Arts fellow, a mentor for the Veterans Writing Project, and an instructor for The Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland. He lives west of Baltimore with his wife and extended family. www.jimbeane.com

Jane Laube Boch's fiction and short-form memoir have appeared in the anthology *What Dwells Between the Lines,* on Silver Birch Press, and in the Wordrunner e-chapbook *Love.* You are likely to catch her re-reading Jane Austen or binge-watching Star Trek and Marvel movies. Find her online at www.janelaubeboch.com and on Instagram.

Ann Calandro is a writer, artist, and classical piano student. Her writing has appeared in *Lit Camp, The Fabulist, The Plentitudes,* and other literary journals. Serving House Books published her short story collection, *Lost in Words,* in February 2025. Her artwork has appeared in literary journals, been included in the 2023 New Jersey Arts Annual, and exhibited at Phillips Mill, the Monmouth Museum, the Biggs Museum of American Art, and galleries. Shanti Arts Press published three children's books she wrote and illustrated. Calandro received a master's degree in English from Washington University in St Louis. See artwork at: ann-calandro.pixels.com

Ed Davis' prose has appeared in many anthologies and literary journals such as *Sky Island, The Plenitudes, Wordrunner eChapbooks, Write Launch* and *Slippery Elm.* His latest novel, *The Psalms of Israel Jones* (West Virginia University Press 2014), won the Hackney Award for an unpublished novel in 2010.

Frank Diamond's poem, "Labor Day," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize Award. His short stories have appeared in many publications (including Wordrunner eChapbook's *Up-Ending*). He has had poetry published in *Philadelphia Stories, Fox Chase Review, Deltona Howl, Artifact Nouveau, Black Bottom Review,* and *Feile-Festa.* He lives in Langhorne, Pennsylvania.

GTimothy Gordon: *Dream Wind* was published in 2020 (Spirit-of-the-Ram Press), *Ground of This Blue Earth* (Mellen Press), while *Everything Speaking Chinese* was awarded the Riverstone Poetry Prize (AZ). Work appears in *AGNI, American Literary R, Cincinnati PR, Mississippi R, New York Q, RHINO, Sonora R, Texas Observer;* several nominated for Pushcarts and Best of the Net. *Empty* was published 2024, *Blue Business* in 2025 (Cyberwit Press). *Knowing* is in progress. Gordon divides lives between New Mexico/Texas borderland Chihuahuan Desert Southwest Organ Mountains and Asia.

Peter J. Grieco is former professor of English and retired school bus driver. His poems are widely published in small magazines on line and in print. His blog "At the Musarium and Other Writings" [pjgrieco.wordpress.com] archives much of this work. His collection of ekphrastic verse, *The Bind Man's Meal,* is available from Finishing Line Press.

David Hadbawnik is a poet, translator, and medieval scholar. Recent books include a translation of the *Aeneid* (Shearsman, 2023); an edited volume, *Postmodern Poetry and Queer Medievalisms* (Medieval Institute Publications, 2022); and a book of poetry, *Holy Sonnets to Orpheus and Other Poems* (Delete Press, 2018). He currently lives in the Minneapolis area with his wife and family.

Stan Kempton's writing is defined by his having lived many years in the mystical world in New Orleans and having experienced brushes with death and prolonged exposure to love. His work has been shortlisted at *Glimmer Train*, and his novella *Breeding in Stockholm* was second runner up at Faulkner Word and Music Festival. Other pieces have appeared in *New Author's Journal* (For Poetry), *Double Dealer, Valiant Scribe,* as well as 2023 "Best Of" for *Valiant Scribe, The Wisconsin Review, Seems, Tribes* and *Metal Scratches.*

Joseph Kierland is a graduate of UConn, Hunter College (post grad in English Literature) and the Yale Drama School. He has been writer-in-residence at New York's Lincoln Center, The Lab Theater, Brandeis University and The Los Angeles Actors Theater. He is presently working on a novel.

Ted Morrissey has published several novels, including *Mrs Saville,* a sequel to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and a winner of the Manhattan Book Award, as well as the collection *First Kings and Other Stories,* a 2020 Wordrunner e-chapbook. He co-hosts the monthly podcast A Lesson before Writing.

Melanie S. Smith is a 2019 graduate of the Grub Street Memoir Incubator; her work has appeared in *Ruminate, The Common* and *Cagibi*, as well as the yearly anthology, *Ms. Aligned*. She has enjoyed residencies at Vermont Studio Center, Craigardan, and the Elizabeth Bishop House in Nova Scotia. She teaches writing and counter story at Boston University. In May 2025 she will travel to her grandfather's birthplace in Sicily to finish *The Shape of a Good Ancestor,* a memoir about the impact of his unspoken trauma as "enemy alien" during World War II on the lives of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Don J Taylor lives in Central Scotland, with fiction and poetry published in print and online in the UK, US, and Germany. His work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2018 and featured in

New Writing Scotland (2012 and 2020), *AbstractMagazineTV ezine, Bath Flash Fiction* Vol 4, *Litro Magazine* (2021 and 2024), and *Pushing the Boat Out* (2023). He won the Federation of Writers Scotland's Autumn Equinox short story competition 2022. He had a short story, and a poem placed in the 2024 Neil Gunn Writing Competition. Recently his work has been published in *The Tangled Web Magazine, Poetry Scotland, Dodging the Rain, Dreiich*, and *Short Stories from Scotland,* Vol 2.

Pamela Wynn is a poet and retired professor of poetry, writing, and theology. She is author of *Diamonds on the Back of a Snake: Poems* (St. Paul: Laurel Poetry Collective, 2004), *A Good Soul: Poems* (Minneapolis: Rocking Chair Press, chapbook, 2000), and co-editor of the anthology *Body of Evidence: Poems* (Laurel Poetry Collective, 2012). Her poems have appeared in numerous journals including *Blue Mountain Review, Comstock Review, Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality, Passager Literary Journal, Water~Stone Review, Askew Poetry Journal, The Writer, Kaleidoscope — International Magazine of Literature, Fine Arts, Disability*, and *NewVerseNews.com*. She has received support for her work from the Dayton Hudson, Jerome, and General Mills Foundations, Minnesota State Arts Board, Anderson Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, and New York Mills Arts & Cultural Center.