

The English Department presents  
the 2021 Annual

## *Seven Gill Shark Review Anthology*

A collection of original composition by students, staff, faculty, and community members at College of the Redwoods. We are pleased to present these original compositions for your enjoyment.

All of this would have been impossible without the hard work and dedication of the following people:

### **Spring 2021 Student Editors**

Doranna Benker  
Kenneth Bozanich  
Ryan Cartwright  
Nazalin Dickerson

### **Faculty Advisor:**

David Holper, English Faculty

### **Graphic Artist:**

Erin Jones

## Spring 2021

Kenneth Bozanich	Chiquita Rose (Hobson Award Winner)
Ryan Cartwright	How Long? Mercy
Evy Couling	Reading Dickinson by Candlelight (Second Place Poetry)
Nazalin Dickerson	The Truth New Leather Shoes (First Place Poetry)
Doranna Benker Gilkey	Invisibilism (Second Place Fiction) Stages
Elijah Kineg	Danny's Dino
Heather Quarles	Passenger (Creative Nonfiction Award) An Offering
Riley Quarles	Spirit Rock
Stephen Sottong	The Map
Samantha Stone	The Visitors (First Place Fiction)
Laurene Mae Thorpe	My Mother Whistled
Lynne Wells	I Wore My Front Tooth for You
Jake Williams	After the Hunt
Glenda Wilson	Power

## **Honorable Mentions**

Michael Bickford	Making the Bed
Sarah Brooks	Homemaker
Mairead Dodd	My Zombie Mom
James Floss	Sanctuary: A Minimalist Novel
Kirsten Josang	Honey
Katherine Cech Latonio	Lunch
Delcie Moon	Surely, Forever
Joe Shermis	We Awake
Nick Vasquez	Nightfall

Creative Nonfiction Prize is generously sponsored by members of the local Northcoast  
Mensa

Poetry prize is generously sponsored by Northtown Books & College of the Redwoods  
Foundation

Prose prize is generously sponsored by Booklegger Books & College of the Redwoods  
Foundation

Hobson Prize is a combination of an anonymous donor and the College of the Redwoods  
Foundation

*Kenneth Bozanich*  
CHIQUITA ROSE

From every direction I could hear the sound of cleaver wielding butchers. Vegetable vendors stacked towering tables of gradients from light to dark. Aromas of sweet boiling *molé* from spice merchants filled the air. *Taco, tamale, and torta* tents rested shoulder-to-shoulder, and friendly competitors gawked at their neighbors' rush hour lines, waiting patiently for their next customer. Mexico City has always been famous for its numerous food markets, but this was the only one I had ever known.

“*La Merced* is the *only* market worth our time *mi dulce nieta,*” *Mi abuelo* always said. He knew all the secret alleyways and all the best vendors throughout this magical market paradise. I sneezed with discomfort from the spicy scent of chiles and onions simmering at the stall next to us. “*No pasilla?*” my grandfather exclaimed in disbelief.

“*¡Hoy no chiles pasilla mi amigo!*” *Pasilla* translates to “little raisin,” which I never understood because *pasillas* were not so little. These long, dark dried out peppers burst with sweet flavors of raisin and cocoa.

“We have plenty of delicious *poblano*’s, *señor,*” the vendor countered.

My grandfather grimaced and swatted his hand like he was trying to bat away an obnoxious fly. “Nahhh...*Vamos la chiquita,*” meaning, ‘Let’s go little one.’

*Mi abuelo* clutched my right hand, dragging me through the market in search of *pasillas*, his special ingredient for his homemade chicken *molé*. I was four-foot nothing and weighed about seventy pounds, and every time a vendor told my grandfather, “*No pasilla,*” my feet flew a good half-foot off the ground as he snatched my hand in a frenzy. *Mi abuelo* was a sweet man,

but at times when he couldn't get his way, his eyes began to flicker like flames. We had reached our final hope, the last vendor *mi abuelo* could trust.

“What do you mean *No Pasilla!*” my grandfather shouted for the last time.

“*Señor*, Miguel Francisco, our local supplier doubled his prices this week,” the vendor said. “Rumor has it that the *cabrón* found a wealthy buyer in Tlaxcala that wants to buy all his peppers.”

Finally, *mi abuelo* started to calm down. This bit of information was like a pail of water to his fiery eyes; it even put a smile on the old man's face.

“I'll take a quarter pound of your raisins, hulled pumpkin seeds, blanched almonds, and two cinnamon sticks, *mi amigo*,” my grandfather announced.

We were on our way. We had gathered all the supplies we needed for dinner that night, except for the *pasillas* of course. Every Saturday on our way out of the market I would beg him for my favorite treat, “*Abuelo, abuelo*, please can I have some *elote, por favor?*”

*Mi abuelo* was a frugal man. And every time he would say something like, “Next time, *Christina*, next time,” or “I can just make that for you when we get home,” which he never did.

But this time was different. I tugged on *mi abuelo's* pant leg and gave him my best doe-eyed Bugs Bunny impression. He looked down at me with his big crocodile smile and said, “Okay, *chiquita*.” Little did I know this *elote* was going to be used as a bartering chip a mile down the road. My grandfather let me order it myself.

“*Hola amiga*, one with everything?” asked the vendor.

“*Si señor!*” I exclaimed.

*Mi abuelo* and I watched the vendor as he lathered on the mayonnaise and melted butter. As the short man with the funny sideways ball cap began to sprinkle on the grated *cotija* (cheese), I could see *mi abuelo* licking his lips out of the corner of my eye. He then took two lime wedges and squeezed its juices over the corn. And finally, he drizzled a pinch of salt, chili powder, and cilantro for garnish. As *mi abuelo* handed him twenty pesos, the vendor placed the elote in *mi abuelo*’s hand.

“But it’s my *elote!*” I cried out, and the two men chuckled upon my reaction.

“My apologies, *amiga,*” said the vendor as he handed me my decadent corn on the cob.

We began our journey home, only a few miles down the road. *Mi abuelo* lived in a rural ranch style *casa* with *mi abuela*. They raised tons of chickens and made most of their earnings by selling chickens and their eggs. *Mi abuela*’s side hustle was homemade *tortillas*. Every morning except for Sunday, she would wake up, drink one cup of black coffee, and make around one hundred tortillas for all the neighbors in her area. Throughout the day strange people would knock on her door, and they would do an exchange, for everybody had to have *mi abuela*’s *tortillas*.

About halfway between the market and *mi abuelo*’s *casa*, we had made a turn down a random dirt road, but I was completely oblivious. I was so fixated on my *elote* that I wasn’t paying any attention to our whereabouts. *Mi abuelo* had stopped dead in his tracks as he squinted over a large chain link fence, still smiling. I was licking the *elote* residue off my fingers as I walked straight into his rear end.

“Watch where you're going, *mi dulce nieta*,” *mi abuelo* scolded jokingly. I had begun to tumble backwards, barely saving myself from falling flat on my butt.

“Where are we?” I asked somewhat loudly – enough to warrant a finger to the mouth. “Shhhh...” *mi abuelo* whispered. “This is where that crooked pepper farmer lives, Miguel Francisco. Look over there. Those are the *pasilla* plants.” I looked up at *mi abuelo*, and nodded my head as if I understood what was happening.

“*La chiquita*, I need you to do us a favor.” It was at this exact moment I realized the mischievous man that was my grandfather.

“Look here.” *Mi abuelo* pointed down at a spot where the fence had been dug out at the bottom. “Do you think you can fit underneath?”

A part of me was scared, but only a small part. The look on *mi abuelo*'s face was a look of excitement that I'd never seen before, and in turn it made me smile. I'd forever be a hero in *mi abuelo*'s eyes I thought to myself, and the old man *did* just buy me *elote*.

“I think I can fit under there,” I said cunningly, waiting to hear if there was an offer. He took a knee to meet me face to face, rested his hands on my shoulders, and said, “If you can do this for your *abuelo*, I promise I will buy you *elote* again next Saturday.”

I tried my luck at bargaining. “*Elote* for the next two Saturdays?”

*Mi abuelo* took his hands off my shoulder and put out his right hand to shake on it. He emptied out one of his produce bags into another and handed me an empty bag.

“Are you sure you want to do this, *la chiquita*?”

I nodded my head with much pride, “I've got this.”

“*Niña valiente!*” *Mi abuelo*’s crocodile mouth opened wide, exposing the gaps between his teeth, as he patted my shoulders.

I dropped my bone-dry *elote* to the ground and took the bag. Then, I got down on my tummy and began to shimmy my way under the fence. *Mi abuelo* was still kneeled over, so with one hand grasped onto the metal fence as I tip-toed over to the *pasilla* plant. In less than a minute, I picked about a dozen of the *pasillas* right off the vine and stashed them in my bag.

“*Abuelo*, how many should I get?” I shouted.

But my confidence got the best of me, because just as the words left my lips, the sound of dogs barking in the distance gave me goosebumps on the back of my neck, and that sound was getting closer.

“*Chiquita!* Run back!” I had never been more terrified in my entire life. I gripped onto the bag tightly and began to sprint back towards *mi abuelo*. I was about halfway to him when I noticed he picked up my filed down *elote*, hucking it over the fence, well over my head. The two bloodhounds were gaining on me. I cranked my head over my right shoulder and noticed that one of the dogs had taken the bait. My heartbeat was so loud it created an echo chamber that resonated throughout my entire body, like a large *tambor* drum. *Mi abuelo* was at the chain link fence, doing his best to prop open the bottom of it for me.

Mexico City wasn’t known for its baseball; *fútbol* was our sport of choice. But at this moment in time, I was a professional baseball player rounding third base. I screamed bloody murder all the way to fence. I dove headfirst sliding into home plate as *mi abuelo* pulled me in the last couple of feet before letting go of the fence, dropping it right on the snout of the snarling bloodhound. My tiny overalls were as dusty as that Pig Pen character from Charlie Brown. I had

safely made it out alive, *pasillas* in tow. My adrenaline was equal to that of a crazy person who jumps out of airplanes for fun. *Mi abuelo* immediately picked me up and threw me on his shoulders before I even had time to react or cry. He began to twirl around in circles and chanted the same four syllables, “*Chiquita Rose! Chiquita Rose! Chiquita Rose!*” It felt like we had just won the World Series. On our two-mile walk back home all we could do is revel in our glory. The triumphant *Chiquita Rose* and her *loco abuelo*. It was a warm autumn afternoon in 1980, and on our walk back *mi abuelo* taught me of the famous American baseball player, Pete Rose. World Series Champion and king of stolen bases, hence his new nickname for me.

Walking up to the ranch, we had to do our best to keep the smiles off our faces, for *mi abuela*'s adept gift of sniffing out secrets was second to none. Walking up to the porch, *mi abuelo* turned to me and said very quietly, “Let me do the talking, *Chiquita*. Remember, don't say a word; otherwise, she will be on to us.”

*Mi abuela* was about to ask us a million and one questions before we had time to answer any one of them. And there she was, ready to greet us as we entered through the front door. “What took you two so long? It's practically dark out. Did you get everything at the market for *molé*? *Chiquita*, why are your overalls so dirty? I'm going to have to wash those before your parents pick you up tomorrow.”

“Kids will be kids,” *mi abuelo* replied as he kissed *mi abuela* on the cheek.

“Well, go change into some clean clothes, so I can wash your overalls. *Cariño*, I plucked and prepared the *pollo* you butchered last night, I'll let you do the rest while I wash *chiquita*'s overalls.”

After cleaning myself up in the bathroom, I headed to the kitchen to watch *mi abuelo* as he prepared for us his famous *pollo molé*. Sweet smells wafted throughout the entire *casa* of *pasillas*, cinnamon, and Mexican chocolate. After I set the table of their finest dishes and cutlery, we sat down for dinner as *mi abuela* said a typical prayer in the name of the holy trinity.

“*Cariño*, this just might be your best *pollo molé* yet. Where did you get these *pasillas*?” *Mi abuela* proclaimed with radiant enthusiasm while rubbing her belly.

*Mi abuelo* caught my eye from across the dining table and gave me a wink and a smile.

*Ryan Cartwright*  
HOW LONG?

How long has it been?  
I can't tell anymore  
can no longer distinguish  
between the two  
in anything  
in any meaningful way  
a wound still sanguine,  
from festering longevity

Can you remember? How long  
stained pants  
wet sand and red wine  
crawling nearer and nearer  
into the geodesic cradle of shoreline

evading the breath of the tide  
on elbows  
in the sand,  
a pinkening sky.  
I wish you could have seen  
yourself  
I wish I could once again see you  
like then.

The tide chasing us further  
under lunar grandeur

How long?  
Forget how long,  
did it ever even happen?

A question of memory  
semiotic matrices:  
a flush of pink on your cheeks  
Musical minefields  
bedlams of laughter.  
Questions of liquor and literature,  
of memory and truth.

Ryan Cartwright

MERCY

Yes, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I killed him, and it was mercy, not murder, just like I been saying all along. But, before all that, let me backup a ways and tell you about a talk I had with myself when I first came all the way out here. When I first got all the way out here, I said to myself, I said, Richard, this here is yours now. Right here. Anything this side of the property line is yours and anything out there isn't. Simple as that. It isn't cruelty. It isn't politics. These are just the sort of talks we got to have with ourselves now, because it *is* coming. It *is* here. You know it, he knows it, we all know it. Doesn't matter if you're a religious man waiting on a rapture, a modern man waiting on the dollar to bust, or the country, or for ice sheets to go melting and drown us all in our beds at night. Whatever. The end is coming, and we all know it. It's the only thing left that we can know, the end. And me? Well, I am, and have always been, *a survivor*. Some will tell you it's already here, we're already seeing it, and I, for one, am inclined to agree with them. And so, how exactly, might I ask, am I supposed to *survive* if I go around letting everyone come wandering in, if I go around giving out gas cans and water bottles to each and every half-wit who comes wandering out here like the desert's something it's not?

And she was one of them, alright. I woke up that day with a bad feeling. A bad feeling, I tell you. And I'm not one to read tea leaves or sift through chicken shit trying to find out what tomorrow's gonna be. Don't believe in any of that. Don't need to see the future or be a man of God to know the end is coming, that it's already here. But I felt it that day. Someone's coming. Something bad's gonna happen. And sure enough, she did. First, I saw her little trail of dust come up over the ridgeline. And soon enough Marshall, yessir, my shepherd in that photo there,

he takes off running and howling. So, I hollered at him to can it and went outside to see what she had to say.

My fiancé, she babbled, all teary eyed, he's back over the ridge there trapped. They were out climbing around doing God-knows-what and a boulder came and rolled onto him and now he's trapped. You can use my phone, I said, if you need one. She said, no, on account, I assume, of whatever drugs she was on, whatever it was making her all beetle eyed and touchy like that. There's no time, she kept saying, but I could tell from the minute I saw her what kind of girl *she* was. No doubt about it. You have to go out there and help him, she said. With all due respect, miss, I told her, the hell I do. And then I told her, more-or-less, what I told you all just now. That the end is here already. Here and now. And I can't go helping every half-wit who comes begging for help, anyone but me, Marshall, and the chickens. She didn't say anything a while until finally, without the balls to say it loud, or to look me in the eye while saying it, she said, you're a murderer then, and you might as well have killed him yourself doing nothing. Well, I spit right down into the sand to let her know how I felt about that. But she kept on begging and pleading and finally I got so sick of it I told her to shut up and lead me over the ridgeline to where he was.

Not long, maybe twenty minutes and she found him, pinned, sure enough, bleeding out over everything. He didn't have any time left. That much I promise you. He hardly moved when we prodded him. Just bubbled some little tears up, and to tell you the truth it made me sick just looking at him.

Young man, I said, you hear me? His eyes were open, looking at me all dull. By then, sun was coming down and everything up in the sky all turning pink. I figure, everybody gotta die, might as well die out here in the desert with the sky all aflame. He nodded, half looking at me,

half not, looking up at the sky. Are you a religious man? I ask him. A tear fell down the side of his cheek, clearing a little path in the dust all over his face. No, he said, not anymore.

I knelt down real close, so she couldn't hear and whispered to him, you're a lucky man, you know that? He had another sob coming on, but over that a laugh snuck through. Teary, hopeful, totally confused. You think you can get me out, he said, looking right at me this time, finally. You're a lucky man, I said back to him. Lucky you don't have to see the end. I'll get you out right now.

Help him, help him, she kept screaming. There's only one way to help him now, I told her, and it ain't pretty. He coughed a little, blood coming out all over the sand, smiling at me and her and the pink cloud-streaked sky. Mister, he said, who are you, mister? I'm here to help, I told him. I'm here to help you, young man. Anything, she said. So I took out my .45, aimed, and with a single shot to the head put him out of his misery. If it was me out there, I'd hope any of you'd have done the same. Simple as that.

Evy Couling  
READING DICKINSON BY CANDLELIGHT

The posts, grimly fixed  
Great blows against clay

The howl and lurch  
Of epiphany  
A glut of feathers  
Startled in the snow

The fence line  
Bends like a daisy

One side  
Propped up by stones  
The other  
By metre

A hawk,  
Religious  
Strikes some small incident apart

Levers  
A punctuative curl

All that sits between us is the table and the bowls of chicken soup. And the tension in the air. And the truth. I sit pensively at the table, anxiously running a million simulations of how the conversation may go in my mind. My anxious eyes dart around the room until they fall on my father who is shooting a glare of disapproval at the headphones in my ears from his seat at the head of the board.

“Get the pitcher from the kitchen,” he says, his voice devoid of emotion.

I regard him briefly as I rise, anxiously fixing my eyes on his cellphone, my mind preoccupied by the impending doom of an inevitable “ding.” He sits in ignorant silence, his hands folded in his lap. He is a stately man with broad shoulders, sporting a well-ironed black polo and sitting adjacent to me the head of a cedar table crafted by my maternal grandfather. It is a stark reminder of my mother’s absence, and I curse her in my mind. She sits under the shade of a San Diego palm with my brother, while I walk eggshells to avoid my father’s alcoholic rage.

I drag my feet as I walk back to face the meal, dreading the perverted version of my favorite chicken and dumplings my father has prepared. The broth is bland and tastes nothing like hers. The meat is dry, its texture like sandpaper against my tongue. At least the roughness balances the slimy film around the dumplings, which are floury and lose their constitution as I try to skewer them with my fork. Sheryl sits at the table, too, my father’s aggravatingly bubbly girlfriend who asks me to call her “Mom” and tries to convince me to do hot yoga. When she turns and smiles at me across the way, the sweetness in her expression makes bile rise in my throat.

“This is one of my favorite things about your dad,” she tells me. “I love Southern hospitality!”

I, on the other hand, am convinced that Southern hospitality must be a myth. In my childhood visits, I found nothing inviting in the swampy air, which percolated to my skin and glued clothes to my weathered, reddened body. It’s hard to look fondly upon weeks spent with scaly skin that burned at night when I would writhe between rough sheets in a windowless room on the second floor on an ancient farmhouse. As the least favorite of the grandchildren, it was only natural to confine me to the worst chamber available. I endured many sleepless summer nights in that space, sandwiched between yellowing wallpaper that danced in the dark. In the low light, retro flowers would twist into malevolent visages, and the piercing eyes of Jesus in a framed painting would seem to bore into me, peering at my soul.

“I know your secret,” he seemed to tell me. “Soon they will too.”

I wondered if one of the faces in the wallpaper was my great-uncle Thomas. He blew his brains out with a rifle in that room when I was five. On one visit years later, my older cousin Dustin, a scrappy, pudgy boy with crooked teeth, told me that they had hung the Sallman Head to cover the blood spatter. The image was often burned into the backs of my eyelids when I lay down to rest.

With so much tragedy on the property, I’ve always had a hard time understanding why it hasn’t been long since sold. The sun beats unfavorably upon my family’s land, a barren plot in Greene County, Mississippi, that my ancestors have resided on since the surrounding territory was Spanish Florida. Several old, wooden structures stand dilapidated across the expanse of wasteland, dwarfed by the still unimpressive family farmhouse at the end of a gravel driveway. The soil is spent and nothing grows, save for several dying trees and fields of jaundiced grass. In

my first foggy memories of visiting the home of my clan, I see my father grasping my shoulder as we looked out at the fields, promising that our land was something to be proud of.

I have never felt pride for the wasted orchards. Canopied with climbing kudzu vines from the sharecropping era, the towering elms and river birches dotting the plot are suffocated and diseased. There's a certain acidity to the air that's hard to describe, like the scent of spoiled milk that's been baked in the sun. I've never found comfort in unusable fields watered by the blood of slaves owned by my forebears.

As I gaze into the inedible soup in my bowl, I recall the last time I stood on that desecrated land, just under a year ago on my 14th half-birthday, hours after my grandfather's wake. My right hand felt heavy, as if sleeted with permafrost from reaching out to touch one of his cold, lifeless palms. His skin had felt plump and full, like a water balloon. Disturbed, I imagined what it would be like to pop it.

The hot tears down my cheeks came soon after, and I wondered if I might see my father cry that day. Instead, he remained as stoic and unwavering as ever. When we returned to the house, he stood in the field for hours, lopping softballs for me to whack with a child's aluminum bat we had found on the property. His expression remained flat and absent.

Once the sun fell and lit the sky up with orange, we entered the house for dinner. My cousin Casey, a 20-something in Wrangler jeans and a Trump for President t-shirt, which I felt wasn't exactly mourner's attire, approached us as we came in.

"Ya know," he quipped to my father. "She's pretty good, but I'd watch out. I ain't never see a softball girl not turn into a dyke."

My father chuckled, a show of emotion I found strange and out of place for the occasion. "Not on my watch," he returned.

My legs shake violently beneath the tabletop as I dwell on the memory, the slur my cousin spoke leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. I try to calm myself, but I feel the panic rising. A month ago between the sterile white walls of the psychologist's office, a woman with a tight ponytail and well-creased forehead, I was advised to hold an ice cube when the anxiety got this bad.

"Sir," I prompt my father. "May I get up for a moment?"

"No," he says coldly.

I glance over at Sheryl, who begins to shovel soup into her mouth, avoiding being pulled into the conversation between my father and me. I remain silent. By now, I know better than to talk back. The anxiety is easier to endure than a cherry red lick to the face, or the sound of a cracking belt making impact. Still, I feel devoured by the unsaid words threatening to spill from my lips. I have the urge to claw at my throat or cave in my sternum, if only to stop the fluttering butterflies from beating against my organs and clouding my mind.

The tension still hangs thick between us, the truth suspended within it. I can't face him now. I don't know why I ever thought I could. I feel relieved when he clears his throat and breaks the silence, so I don't have to.

"I know," he says flatly.

"What?" I return, my voice edgy in accusation.

"I know," he repeats.

My father has always had a way of telling me everything without saying much at all. His voice is jagged like broken glass, and his blue eyes regard me with stiffness and disdain.

"No, wait—" I begin, ready to fire off one of the cover stories I've spent years developing for just this dreaded moment. He stops me.

“Ms. Rachel already called me.”

The blood drains from my face at the mention of my girlfriend’s mother, who had read the thread of messages between us the night before. I was ignorant to think she would wait to tell my father until I had the chance to myself.

“You’re gay.”

It’s not a question. He states it plainly, how one would read a line of a textbook, and the pain somehow stings worse. There is no denial to spew, nor excuse to make; my mouth hangs agape as I struggle to produce a response, but I know it’s over now. The image of my father combing through messages littered with I-love-yous fills me with a sense of dread more profound than any I’ve ever felt, and it takes everything in me to meet his stare. With a start, I realize that, for the first time in my life, I see tears prick at his eyes. There are no more words to utter; they’re translated by his gaze.

*I am so disappointed in you.*

I’m surprised to find that his disapproval cuts deeper than his anger ever has. The tension dissolves, the truth is plain and visible to him, and I feel uncomfortably exposed. All that sits between us now is the table, and the bowls of chicken soup.

*Nazalin Dickerson*

NEW LEATHER SHOES: A PANTUOM

Late nights scuffed my new leather shoes  
I found you here: underneath a full moon  
Stumbling down tear-stained streets  
Feet catching on the weeds between the sidewalk

I found you here: underneath a full moon  
Lamenting childhood like mourning a daughter  
Feet catching on the weeds between the sidewalk  
Tripping off how the past is colored

Lamenting childhood is like mourning a daughter  
And trusting a conscience that sounds like your father  
Tripping off how the past is colored  
Never stopping to wonder why you're running

Trusting a conscience that sounds like your father  
In all of your years you never learned better?  
Never stopping to wonder why you're running  
Tumbling through time to escape the inevitable

In all of your years you never learned better?  
Than stumbling down tear-stained streets  
Tumbling through time to escape the inevitable  
Late nights scuffed my new leather shoes

*Doranna Benker Gilkey*  
INVISIBILISM

She wasn't sure when exactly her invisibility started. She thought maybe the first signs showed up when her youngest child became a teenager. It's hard to keep track, but that seemed to be when her husband saw her a little less each day, until on her forty-fifth birthday he didn't see her at all. That's the day he packed the big suitcase, threw it in the Prius, and left. She had never really stood out, per se, but she was fairly certain she used to be \*seen\*. She made the best of it after her husband left. She cheered herself up by going to summer festivals and Ted Talks with her friends. The invisibility hadn't become chronic quite yet. But slowly, steadily, her friends saw her less and less, since they had grandbabies to see instead. She wondered if she had grandbabies too, but her children had stopped seeing her shortly after her husband had. So of course, she couldn't see them, and she didn't think she could bear it if her grandbabies couldn't see her either.

She was somewhere near fifty when she realized her invisibility was affecting strangers as well as friends and family. She had gone by herself to a bar for a poetry slam. She never did get the bartender's attention. Person after person stepped in front of her, completely unaffected by her. Then she couldn't get a seat; even the bad seats were taken by purses and coats, their owners never noticing her. There was a particularly colorful scarf draped elegantly over a chair behind a column, mocking her. Nobody would answer her inquiry, "Is this seat taken?" The scarf itself provided the answer — yes, obviously the seat was taken. Frustrated with being less visible than a scarf behind a column, she took it and left.

Nobody noticed.

She started to experiment with her now-complete invisibility. At the local Co-op, she would simply pick up pretty little items she fancied and walk out the store. Nobody would offer to help her when she came in, and nobody took note of her helping herself on the way out. She went to the opera, plays, and concerts. She could waltz right in, no ticket needed, to watch from the best vantage points – there was usually at least one empty seat. She became bolder and indulged in all the adventures she passed up on in her youth – train rides, cruise boats, even flying to foreign countries. She sometimes dyed her white hair on a whim, pink or turquoise, changing with her moods. She wore bright, fluttery clothes, a far cry from her dull, matronly outfits from before, when people might have noticed, though they wouldn't. She strode wherever she went, head held high, sparkling silver shoes clack-clacking boldly, though nobody noticed.

It had been years since anybody spoke a word to her directly, which is why in Greece, as she gazed upon the Acropolis, she ignored the woman who complimented her colorful scarf. She glanced around to see who was being addressed – people tended to bump into her. That's when she noticed the taller woman, crowned with a halo of white hair, looking right at her.

“Do you speak English?” the taller woman asked in a clipped British accent.

“Were you speaking to me?”

“Yes. I like your scarf. It makes the brown of your eyes quite rich.”

“Oh! Thank you. It's been so long since anybody's...”

“Noticed you? I understand. The same happened to me. But I see you, and clearly you see me.”

The woman was spare as well as tall, giving her an ephemeral look. She wore a flowing light-blue dress that matched her light-blue eyes.

“Yes, I see you, clearly.”

The taller woman proffered an elbow, which the shorter accepted gracefully. They walked away from the Acropolis arm-in-arm, which nobody noticed.

*Doranna Benker Gilkey*

STAGES

Like some celebrity clown or dancer,  
I laugh and wear a red nose at cancer.

Aunty writes her blogs, shares memes  
and whispers platitudes at cancer.

Lips pulled back like a scared, scarred alley cat,  
Sister sharply hisses at cancer.

With his big voice, like an old timey preacher,  
Dad stood on a box and railed at cancer.

Grandpa submitted to the doctor, who  
turned a microscope and scalpel to cancer.

Like a most pious petitioner,  
Grandma brought God's attention to cancer.

Head back, mouth wide like the most bereaved mourner,  
Mama rent her clothes and wailed at cancer.

Like a battle-worn soldier, the last standing,  
I ponder; when will it be me against cancer?

*Elijah Kineg*  
DANNY'S DINO

Drive-thru processions would begin around 6AM, and every car would ping a tinny jingle to your headset. At the end of my shift, the computer said I'd rung up 78 customers for an average of 82 per shift. Later, alone in my one-bedroom apartment, that tri-tone screech still rung in my head. I'd hear it while basking on the screenlit sofa, while standing under the shower water, and long after I tried closing my eyes. Images of hot food lowered down to stranger's cars reeled in my lids and stayed there like cinema of the blind.

Employment at "Danny Dino's Pizza Party Palace" was a classic example of a temporary life-choice becoming something closer to long term. Like, seven months long term. The scaffolding had become the building.

I felt a bit like a guest on *Family Feud*, only upon my arrival I'd been coupled with absolutely nobody of familial relation. While my father *had* been the store's manager, the GM deemed him as "furloughed indefinitely," while citing "Ball Pit Transgressions" as the reason for his being fired. All that occurred the same day I came to help out.

Apparently, a child customer had blown chunks in the ball pit which should have triggered CC (cleaning code) #299 in Danny Dino's Posterity Pocketbook, where-in it states that each ball must be replaced with brand new SKU's and the pit should be closed indefinitely. Dad thought this was silly and a waste of money. On my first day, he had me clean each individual ball with bleach spray after drenching in citric acid the entirety of the pit itself. Unfortunately, someone spilled the beans, and my efforts had him fired uncontestably.

I dream continuously of the Ashram and the yoga retreat. Cruising down the 1 highway, the passenger's side window framing the Pacific in an ever-changing, animated portrait.

Stopping by the ocean to enjoy a helping of something homemade, sans gluten.

Around lunch, the customers corral themselves through the maze of red ribbons leading to the front register. The skin on their skulls is loose and weary while they superimpose franchise backdrops of pastoral-colored Dinosaurs smiling with human teeth. Your eyes seldom meet theirs when they order their food.

“Yeah, can I get a, uh...”

They always look so ponderous this way. Fingers tripod below an upturned chin while reading the suspended menu board behind me. I think they're about to impart some revelatory knowledge of life, some deep inhalation from the tube of the universe.

“Let me get a large Chicken Blast BBQ Burger and a Coke.”

“Do you want that ‘surprise style?’” I ask, automated.

“What's that come with?”

“It's a surprise.”

“I don't want to be surprised.”

Eastern philosophy and general suggestion of stoicism says you should observe thoughts and feelings, but you should not judge them. Let them move like geese over pondwater, leave the pool unbroken and pellucid. Such maxim become absolutely unmemorable in a place like this.

“Welcome to Danny Dino's Pizza Party Palace, where you chow down with your favorite prehistoric pals. My name is Lauren.” I speak the words like an apostate citing scripture. The guy on the phone tells me he wants a large Raspberry Raptor Riptide, and how much that would cost.

“Do you want the Friendship bundle?”

He doesn't, but I give him a price he doesn't like, and he starts yelling at me. In yoga training, you get exceptionally good at sensing people's pain from immediate contact, and after a while, you get good at sensing it no matter the proximity. I try apologizing, but he doesn't like our naming system and thinks it's horseshit. I think so, too. The ridiculous taxonomy of fast-food items causes most people to overlook the fact that Danny Dino's serves breakfast, too. Danny Dino has a menu so vast you'll wish a fiery ball of rock would come and reset the world a second time.

“Petey Pterodactyl is such a dumb name,” Jerry tells me on break. “The P is silent.”

I sit in the same bench that I always do and watch stoplights command the human flow. You're offered a timer for break, but the ten-minute allowance is practically circadian at this point. Jerry tells me his IBS has been acting up, so I show him a yogi trick where you take a thumb and forefinger and pinch the muscle opposite the elbow at 30-second intervals. “It should loosen you up a bit.” I help him pinch his arm, and the brief, albeit *real* contact is nice after a shift where personality is expressed primarily into a microphone.

Jerry says thanks and slings the purple jersey over his shoulder. He walks out, his shift is done. There's so much heat from the pavement in July, his body warps and refracts like a bad signal off a cathode-tube television. The desire to chase his mirage gets stronger the farther out he goes. A desire if not for oblivion, then to at least escape work a few hours early. I can remember meditation, when I had any space for it, would melt the hours down to liquid. It's not like that here. Here, the hours go like cubes of ice. It's time all the same, but I got to hold it inside my throat for a while before it melts through me. I tell myself that I'll get better at this. I

stand by the door for a minute, thinking of something unrelated, then button my jersey and go back inside.

*Heather Quarles*  
PASSENGER

My grandpa never locked the doors to his house. If a burglar was going to come and steal his things, then he'd be damned if the front door would get broken down too.

The house had already endured one redwood smashing its way through the roof and had also weathered a clan of crafty racoons who'd been known to sneak into the basement and steal bait from the have-a-heart trap, but those thrills were the closest "breaking and entering" events that the house had experienced since my grandparents built it in the early '60s.

My grandpa and grandma designed their mid-century modern A-frame ten years after they had their only daughter, and raised her, their three dogs, and a lifetime of holiday laughter under its roof until they both died in it, five months apart. And aside from the single year in the early '50s when my grandpa worked for Louisiana Fish and Game trapping catfish and eating beignets (while my grandma stayed behind to finish her bachelor's—a progressive move for that era, and even more progressive that *her* mother had insisted upon it), those five months, separated by a breath-thin veil from January to July, were the longest my grandpa and grandma had ever been apart.

They partied hard in their house during the decades when men wore suits and ties to each other's homes and women wore dresses they had sewn themselves. They clinked their translucent cocktails together in the kitchen as they watched their nightly programs and fed the dogs ice cream for dessert. They were with each other every day for thirty years of teaching in public schools, esophageal cancer, and three knee replacements. They were always together, always a team.

So, they were definitely with each other the day my grandpa inched their new white Subaru—with all of its newfangled buttons and gizmos—into its usual parking spot in front of their (unlocked) front door. I can picture my grandpa’s focused face during this critical juncture because I’d been along for the ride—and the park job—countless times before. I knew his grey eyes would be alert and wide as he took in every detail; his white hairs dusting the headrest as he sat erect and leaned forward to manage this task just right. He would have tilted his head up, nosing his way forward until the cornered window of the passenger side lined up exactly with the house’s door frame, a trick devised over thousands of parkings. This maneuver allowed my grandma the best exit and still left him plenty of room to navigate—with two canes at this point in his life—between the front of the car and the azalea bush.

Inching the car forward like this was his tried-and-true method, and it had worked every time before. He had perfected the window-door lineup so specifically that when I had, many times in the past, opened my door prematurely in my impatience to get out before the car stopped crawling forward, my grandpa barked, “Get back in!” in the swift effective growl strangers might attribute to an aggressive throat clearing.

In fact, his “Get back in,” sounded a lot like his, “Goddamn robbers,” and, “Not locking the door” phrases. They weren’t so much mumbled because you could clearly understand every word (and *understand* them, you did), but they were coughed out with a kind of scornful efficiency.

Maybe it was the years of smoking that dropped his voice into its gravely grumble, or it was maybe the decades of commanding a classroom in the mid-1900s that growled its way out of him well into the years after he’d quit smoking and retired from teaching, but I suppose this is what made me fearful of him when I was a child.

I didn't understand then what I'm so glad I learned later: how funny he was, how caring. How his repertoire of jokes would grow with every decade, not because he learned more of them, but because he embellished his favorites, mastering them with such delicacy that my family and I would be halfway through a story he'd made up and before realizing we were smack in the middle of the old "Coldwater" punchline. He'd gotten us again.

During the five months without my grandma when I joined him for dinners and learned what it meant to care for another human, I'd realize just how beloved he had been to the junior high students who'd knifed his nickname and their affinity for him into the edges of their desks: "Hoss is boss," and also, just how beloved he was to me. As a child though, I was used to the melodic dotting tones of my grandma, which came singing to me as we drew and played cards, or when she asked me to think about what I might like for a snack.

It is amazing to me looking back on it, that his voice never left the low, gravelly baritone, even when his only grandchild announced she planned to move 3000 miles away to study English, not something practical like science or law. Nor did it shift registers in his excitement when she returned to teach it and follow his own career path and lifelong love of education; nor even in his ultimate sorrow when he limped down the hallway, and she held him as he cried his only public tears after her grandma passed away in their bedroom.

That low rumble was a constant.

So unlike mine, which squeaks immediately at excitement, doubt, or silliness. My grandpa's steadiness was something we could always rely on.

So, when it came time for my family and me to approach the rocky process of appealing to his senses (and not his pride) about the danger he was to himself and others while driving, we

cleared our throats and finally found words to open the conversation in octaves that surely sounded a bit pitchy against his own deep protests.

It wasn't that his mind was going, as my grandma's was, but it was his legs that betrayed him, and in fact, they had been for decades. The last time I really saw him dance was poolside in Kauai after the five-course dinner he and my grandma (and the rest of us) indulged in for their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. For two kids raised in the Depression, this was a postcard of paradise. The stories of their dance clubs from the '40s were things of legend, and his legs were memories of moves I only heard hints of when he tapped his cane on Sundays, sitting in his regular pew (furthest from the pulpit), in the brief moments when traditional hymns swayed into sounds particularly jazzy for Lutherans.

I never heard him complain about aging with arthritis, nor the triple-botched knee replacements, but every limp and "oof-da" rising out of chairs fused his fury with an aching body into a scornful silence even I could understand.

I think it was a relief for him, but certainly something he would never admit, to relinquish the car keys every Tuesday, so he and my dad could run to Costco (though it took at least a year for him to allow another of us –my mom or me—to drive him anywhere). He was especially stubborn after he passed both his written and in-person driving exams at the age of 85, a feat we all feared and found inspiring, glancing skyward every time it came up, because surely it had been an act of God. My grandpa never did hit anyone though, and he died on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday with a valid California driver's license, five years left until its renewal.

There were a couple of moments, however, that stunned my family and me into silence when one of us recounted the "story of the day" to each other and marveled about the luck my grandpa seemed to keep having behind the wheel.

One evening, I invited my grandparents to a musical rehearsal of mine, which took place about a mile from their house. With my grandparents' dancing history and their lifelong love of music, I thought they would enjoy an hour or so of my Calypso steel drums.

My mother agreed to drive them (or rather, my grandpa agreed to the arrangement), and when they arrived, she sat inside next to my grandma who happily smiled along and winked at me every time I looked over. My grandpa had ridden shotgun and elected to stay in the car, since even the distance to the door was too far to walk, so he listened through the studio's open door and tapped his fingers along the rolled-down window.

I was pleased I could give them an evening out without too much fuss or fanfare. It had been ages since we could exhale together and enjoy a moment of music, of memory. I looked to my grandma again, who happily smiled back, giving me a little wave through a haze of dementia. It was such a joyful moment for the three generations of us music-loving women. But when I glanced out the door to get the same affirmation from my grandpa, he was gone.

We never had to worry about him wandering off like we did my grandma—who had, actually, walked nearly three-quarters of a mile to our local gym once before someone from her church recognized her and invited her to lunch. For one, my grandpa's mind didn't stray like my grandma's, and for two, his legs would never have been able to take him far. We know that's one reason he held so firmly to his keys—they were his legs, his freedom, his way to see the world and to bring others he enjoyed along for the ride.

So when I glimpsed his empty seat, it wasn't so much fear but confusion that consumed me, before I spotted the top of his head (and then the rest of him) methodically plodding around the back of the car, walking towards the driver's seat.

Uh-oh.

Time to go.

I eyed my mom in the middle of my song and motioned frantically towards the car. In a moment, she was easing my grandma up and out, and as my mom guided my grandma into the backseat, I pocketed my sticks and ran to say goodbye. My grandpa had already started the car.

“Thanks so much for coming!” I squeaked, as my grandma rolled down her window to squeeze my hand goodbye. Mom buckled resignedly into the front.

“Yeah,” my grandpa huffed, “let’s go.” He backed out quickly with my mom and grandma waving.

When I checked my phone during a down-moment at drums, I saw I had several texts from my mom, and even before I opened them, I could see the “red-alert” emojis bursting through what I would understand to be six lines of flashing sirens and stop signs once I opened the text:

*Gee ran a red light on the way home.*

More siren emojis.

*All okay.*

Prayer hands.

*Gee non-plussed—“We made it, didn’t we?”*

Eyes bulging emoji.

I’m sure that when they got home, my grandpa eased the car perfectly into its designated spot in the driveway before anyone was allowed out. I’m sure that my mom sat—a child again at 60—tight lipped until he turned off the ignition and gave the, “All right, then.”

He had always been a careful driver. He was cautious, alert, and never in a hurry. He was so *not* in a hurry that when he would drive me to basketball practice (before I got my own license and zoomed to the gym), he would hit the high school's speedbumps and roll backwards. I'd be in the backseat glancing anxiously at the clock knowing I'd have to run extra if I was late, but every time I would choose laps over a critique of his speed.

With all of this in mind, I'm not sure what happened the day my grandpa, instead of inching his way forward so that the passenger window triangulated with the front door, pumped the gas and launched what was undoubtedly one of the most thrilling and downright frightening moments in my grandparents' last decade.

In what was certainly a speeding white blur of Subaru and siding for them will only ever be a scourge of speculation for the rest of us. Maybe his foot slipped. Maybe his knees buckled. Maybe he just got it wrong. I can only drive through the scenario so many times (and come to terms with the fact that no one told me about it until I asked about the new panel in the wall), before I park all the possibilities and admit that my grandpa heaved his foot onto the gas by mistake and steered his brand-new Subaru right into the side of the house.

I imagine that he sat there for a moment, dumbstruck, cursing at the goddamn car before breathlessly taking my grandma's hand to make sure she was alright.

Not long after that, maybe just a few exhalations, I'm willing to bet that my grandmother sighed and chirped, "Well," making to open her door before my grandpa clipped, "Get back in," and threw the car in reverse.

When I asked my dad about this event recently, he said he found out about it when he stopped by the next day to check in on things. Dad had been visiting pretty much every other day

at that point and was the only person in our family who could really speak with my grandpa Man to Man.

“There’s a hole in your house,” Dad had begun once he was inside, after walking around the smashed car and shingles marring the yard.

“Yeah, that damn car drove through it,” my grandpa had scoffed.

My dad raised his eyebrows, the only indicator of his incredulity when he retold this part of the tale, and I’m sure it’s what he did when he heard my grandpa’s telling of it too before he blinked them back down and maneuvered the conversation into how they wanted to fix things.

But before my dad knew about the wreck, before he fixed the house with my grandpa’s blessing, before my grandpa admitted to himself both the house and the car were smashed, I’d wager any windshield that my grandpa revved the car out of the siding that day and backed it into its designated spot, then hobbled around its totaled front fender and opened the door to his own house, without any damn key.

*Heather Quarles*  
AN OFFERING

I stand amidst the smoke  
outside on the deck, having just hunted  
the last pear  
from the tree my grandpa planted decades ago.  
All summer I'd been waiting for the fruit to ripen.  
All summer  
the deer and the grey squirrel were acrobats  
stretching for the supple fruits—  
standing on hind legs and winding  
harrowing routes through branches  
to sink their wild teeth into grainy sweetness.  
All summer they got there first.  
If only  
they knew how good it would be  
if they waited.

It's been a week  
since the fire's shadow flung itself  
rust worn and singed  
into our coastal basin—  
the grey sorrow of cremation  
closing in, the air dry,  
heaving dusty remains  
of coyote, bear, and owl;  
a forest traveling through the sky.  
Mortal migration.

Now another summer passed.  
We have not scattered my grandparents  
beneath the giant redwoods  
as they'd asked. They're shelved  
in a corner of my mom's house  
too precious  
and too terrible to let go.

Slowly, on the deck,  
I suck my pear down.  
I inhale  
what's left of a life.  
The twins, who are just about to outgrow their spots,  
vacuum the grass below the Bartletts.

They nose around,  
swift breaths of pleasure  
warming the grass before every bite.  
I call out my deer song  
fling the knobby core  
towards one of them. I feel like  
I've just offered it everything.

He would stand here  
tracing the deck with fingers sticky from pear juice  
chuckling at the soft brown hides poking around under his trees,  
naming every doe. His legacy,  
a wild bodied whisper  
bounding into fruition.  
Today, Mildred's great-great-grand-fawns  
watch me blinking back  
the fire's flakey memories floating out of trees.  
They rip another fig leaf down,  
their obsidian muzzles  
pulping an afternoon snack  
sixty years in the making.

Riley Quarles  
SPIRIT ROCK

first light departure from our coastal home  
mile high wilderness visitation  
fresh mountain air a tall glass of thin november nip  
anemic low southern sun offering more light than warmth

hoarfrost underfoot      four sets of boots crunch potato chip rhythms  
raven and vulture our trail guides  
we follow their slowly spiraling sky-dance back and forth along the ridgelines  
some kind of magic conjures condor memories of the future

frigid eyes watery      drippy noses red  
hairless faces scarfed against chill      hairy-face exhales transform from  
warm-breath into mustachioed icicles

beyond forest open high-country vistas appear      from our highest viewpoint we see  
no map boundaries      no buildings      no roads      no cars      no people

it's quiet up here                      we sit                      conversation ends without notice

sauntering ridge-walk resumes      wide-open track progressively narrows to  
a knife's-edge no-net tightrope with mortal drops to the east and west  
eyes widen      pace slows      every footstep deliberate      heartbeat aroused      senses electrified  
sacred rock appears before us              relentless winds appear from nowhere

we find stone refuge in wind-shadow just below the ridgeline      packs off      check-in discussion  
maybe we *are* unintentional holy-land interlopers              we are guests at best

flatlanders in high country with honest intentions      seek direct experience with the mystery  
no inner-medicine ritualistic training      locals' no-climb advice rings in a not too-distant echo  
stone grotto talk reaches consensus agreement      let's linger but not climb  
let's lay-back and bask in this rich global-center of biodiversity

it's quiet up here                      we sit                      awestruck by the sacred whole

huge-rock towers before us      itself thrust skyward by unseen forces millennia before  
as flawed souls with pure hearts we shrink into its craggy embrace  
arms outstretched in prayer we voice solemn gratitude to the seven directions

to this sacred rock before us to these ancient trees on our left to the swift river on our right  
to the great sea behind us to the solid granite and molten core below to the open sky above  
to the spirit flowing inside and around us and all things

heart floodgates burst open decades of apologies overflow  
remorseful tears stream for generations of irreparable damage  
acknowledge individual and collective rivers of arrogance and greed

and without reasonable expectation we seek forgiveness sitting quietly we await reply  
a penetratingly silent spirit-answer is carried in on the wind

it's quiet up here

*Stephen Sottong*  
THE MAP

She closed the book, placed it on the table, and finally, decided to walk through the door. She held a hand-drawn map found in the book of animal fables grandmother had read to her when she was a little girl.

Grandmother – dear, lovable, impractical grandmother. She'd taught her only granddaughter the names of the birds and to love the giant redwood trees that surrounded the cottage where she'd lived since grandfather died. Dear grandmother who, when mother insisted she move to town, walked into those woods never to be seen again. Grandmother must have known that she'd retrieve this book while cleaning the cottage.

The first part of the map was familiar to her – from the cottage, up the path away from the river to the ancient redwood stump surrounded by a fairy ring of daughter trees, now each a hundred feet tall. She circled the stump and found the burl where she'd sat with her grandmother listening to tales from her Hupa neighbors. The map showed a trillium, and there the three-petaled flower was. In her mind it seemed coincidence, the flowers grew everywhere in this forest. Still, she circled the tree by the flower and found the trailhead the map showed.

Her mother, she was sure, would chide her for taking the risk of walking alone in the forest. There were bears and mountain lions. Little doubt, that was what became of grandmother. Still, she walked a bit farther.

The trail opened to a meadow. Some intrepid settler had planted two rows of apple trees forming a shaded cloister path. The map said: Sun shower. As she walked beneath the boughs, a breeze rustled the leaves. Sunlight filtered through the intermittent gaps, falling like droplets on

the path. At the other end, she looked back to find the breeze calmed and the path uniform shadow.

The way led into the forest. A short walk farther, the path split. She consulted the map to no avail. Wadding it up, she tossed it down in disgust. She'd turn around and end this silliness. There were boxes to be packed for the estate sale. Time was being wasted.

A varied thrush landed in front of her, its breast ocher red, yellow stripes above its eyes. The usually shy bird fluttered its wings and issued its rusty-hinge call. Hopping to the map, it pushed it toward her with its beak and flew down the left hand path. She stared, astonished, after it. It flew back, called and again flew down the left hand path. Picking up the map, she walked after it.

The path wound and narrowed. Berry vines tore at her skirt. At a large boulder, the path ended. Checking the map, she saw the boulder and a note: Wait for a guide. She sat on the boulder. Dusk approached. She huddled against the night chill. It was too late to retrace her steps back to the cottage. This had been a fool's errand, and she'd be lucky to survive the night.

A seeming impenetrable wall of vines parted, and an elk approached her, coat velvet sable, eyes liquid black, crowned with many-pronged antlers. It stopped feet from her, sniffing, pawing the ground and taking the measure of her with those great eyes. She shivered under that gaze. The elk bowed, its antlers surrounding her as if in blessing. It turned, moving back into the forest. From somewhere beyond it, she heard the sound of a dulcimer. She followed.

She wrote that he should wait for her on the corner of Thanon Nakhon Chai Road and Sukhantharam, so there he stood, a pillar among chaos, anticipating her arrival.

*I'll be wearing denim shorts and a bright orange tank*, she had written.

*I'll be in slacks and a blue Paul Simon shirt*, he wrote back. Though he knew this information was merely trivial, since she'd have no difficulty spotting him among a sea of Thai patrons and zipping tuktuks. Now, he was also certain that he should've worn shorts. The Bangkok heat was thick and unforgiving, curling up under his pant legs and sticking there.

"Brian?" A woman was approaching him in an orange tank top, stopping briefly to let a man in a shower cap wheel a fish cart between them before extending her hand in greeting.

"Hey, you must be Malea!" Brian said, clasping her hand with a swiftly manufactured enthusiasm that contradicted the sweat now beading above his brow. She was effortlessly beautiful, with a round face and light chestnut skin. She seemed to fit right in too, save for her American accent.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "You must be boiling out here...the place is just down this road. Shall we?"

"Please, I'm starving...so you've been to this restaurant before?"

"I have. I go once a week, actually. It's my absolute favorite in the city. The Tom Kha Gai is to die for. First time in Thailand?"

“Yeah.”

He followed her down the center of the bustling street, feeling especially clunky and overgrown compared to the impressive grace with which she slipped through the crowd. This was the first blind date Brian had had since his separation with Lilly two years ago, and he was relieved that the clangor of the market would squash any potentially awkward silences between them. They wove through a large family sampling grilled meats, a couple walking and laughing with kabobs, and a group of children momentarily halting their soccer game to squeal excitedly at the four foot flame suddenly sprouting from a vendors' steel barrel.

Aromas of stir frying chillies, garlic and basil stole the air around them.

“Why Bangkok, then?” Brian’s voice was competing with a nearby chef calling orders out in Thai.

“Oh, many reasons. For starters, my dad was Thai. He introduced me to the food, some of the language, and what Thai culture hadn’t been squeezed out of him by American assimilation. We could never afford to travel here as a family, until...well, you know.” She made a swiping gesture with her hand to the scenery around them. “Oh, look! Here we are!”

Brian registered the modest red building she was referring to. Gold kaleidoscope paper fringed a single awning that jutted out over the door. His eyes scanned the elegant tangles of Thai lettering that seemed to vibrate on the stucco. Malea flashed him an excited smile, and he felt as though he’d suddenly swallowed those swirling letters.

The hostess led them to a table by the window. There were no chairs in the room, so they sat cross legged on bamboo floor mats instead. Brian glanced down at the menu and saw only more foreign swirls.

“Um, would you mind ordering for me?”

“Of course. It’s actually custom that women order for men anyway.” She winked at him, and Brian decided he liked being taken care of. “Thai food is all about the balance of sweet, sour, spicy, and salty,” she explained. “I’m going to get you the Tom Kha Gai. I swear, you’ll never want to leave this place.”

Brian remembered that earlier Malea had mentioned her father in past tense. He wanted to ask her more about him, but thought he’d better keep the conversation light. The truth was, he wanted to learn everything about this woman. He would happily sit here on the floor all afternoon, filling the shelves of his internal library with her stories.

The server arrived at their table, and she and Malea exchanged several words in Thai. Something Malea said had this woman genuinely laughing, and Brian found himself smiling with the contagiousness of it.

“What did you say?” Brian asked after their server turned and sauntered back toward the kitchen.

“Oh, I just asked whether I should set up camp in here and start paying rent because the food is *that* good....I come here so often that I’ve gotten to know her sense of humor. I can usually make her laugh, and then she brings over an iced coffee on the house. You’ll see.”

“But she never actually remembers you...”

“No, how could she?”

“Isn’t it bizarre though? She must treat you exactly the same way every time you come. When I enter simulations, I don’t tend to visit the same places or speak to the same people. It reminds me that it’s all fake.”

“I used to be that way too,” Malea sighed, “then I guess one day I’d seen enough. Everyone’s so A.D.D now...all this switching in and out of realities. You work here, but you live there, and you date and leisure in some place entirely different. Is anyone even satisfied with anything anymore? I just want to be one thing. I’d love to just be here, forever.”

“Wouldn’t *that* be nice,” Brian said. “But no one can afford to stay in simulation forever.”

At this, Malea cocked her head rather peculiarly, and the left corner of her mouth twitched. “Some can.”

“I suppose some can, yes...the rare few who aren’t on government stipends. Old money. But, I mean...would you really want that *forever*? Think how monotonous – ” but Brian was interrupted by the two steaming bowls of soup placed in front of them, and the smell robbed his attention. An impossibly rich fusion of coconut, ginger, lemongrass and galangal now electrified his senses.

Malea smirked. “What were you saying about monotony?”

Brian laughed and swallowed his first spoon full of the soup. “Yeah, food just isn’t the same out there, in the material. But I was talking about the relationships in simulation. These aren’t technically real people...just a grid pattern of pre-set personalities. This isn’t even real Thai culture.”

“The culture is programmed into them,” Malea retorted, defensively.

“You can’t really *program* culture though...real culture is ever-shifting. This place will be static forever.”

“Well, maybe I want to be static, too. I’ve seen the way people have changed with virtual tech. It isn’t a positive change, Brian. I don’t want to require constant entertainment like most people do these days.”

Brian stared silently into his Tom Kha Gai. The last thing he wanted was for this date to turn into an argument. The server came back over and placed two iced coffees on the table, precisely as Malea had predicted.

“I’m staying,” she said.

“How?”

Malea shifted her posture and looked seriously at Brian. Her pupils were deep umber pools, and Brian was treading water. “When my father died...it was because of a terrible accident on behalf of the corporation he worked for,” she said solemnly. “It turned into a big lawsuit, and my mom and I won a lot of money...” she trailed off.

Brian could tell where this was going, and he felt an incredible disappointment strike like granite behind his ribs. Why would she be bothering to date if she had already made the decision to leave the material forever?

“Won’t you be terribly lonely though?” he blurted out. “These aren’t real people you can have real relationships with.”

“I’ve accounted for that.”

“For what?”

“Loneliness.” She held his eyes for a long moment. “You’re going to stay here with me.”

Brian fell silent. He was suddenly hollow. “What?” It came out in a whisper.

“Do you honestly have any *real* relationships out there, Brian?”

“Of course, I do!”

“Are they deep?”

Brian thought of his cat. Then he considered his coworkers at the firm. “Yes...” he said, but with less certainty now.

“What is the ‘ever-shifting culture’ you find so compelling out there in the material?” Her words didn’t sound bitter; just genuinely curious, as if she’d been mulling over the question for years and had drawn only blanks.

“Wait, how did you find me?” Brian retorted, embarrassingly aware that he had no examples of ‘compelling’ culture in his own life, apart from visiting simulations as an outsider. An imposter, looking in. “I thought it was Jenny who set us up...”

Malea looked down and prodded a mushroom before answering. “I did some research,” she said, her voice lower now. “Our profiles shared almost identical interests, and I had a professional run some stats. You and I were more compatible than any of the other 2,000 or so men we scanned in the region.”

Brian gulped.

“It’s done, Brian. If you want this with me, the paperwork is already signed. We can stay here forever, and I’m certain you’ll learn to love me, if you don’t already.”

A four foot steel barrel flame rose and fell inside him. The beads of sweat were returning. His compass had been broken for years, so why would he deny this new magnetic pull across the table? Perhaps she could be his north star. Something original, in a world of reruns. Something resembling real belonging.

Then the check came. They didn't bother leaving any money; they just walked out together into the Bangkok heat.

"I'm going to need some shorts," Brian said.

*Laurene Mae Thorpe*

**MY MOTHER WHISTLED**

She whistled in the morning sun.  
She whistled when her work was done.  
She whistled a sweet lullaby  
To wipe the tear from my sad eye.  
She whistled a happy song.  
She whistled when the night was long.  
She whistled till the very last  
As she took leave of all things past.  
She whistled so I would always hear  
Her music whistling in my ear.

*Dedicated to Josephine Marie Schwartz, nee Verneti  
1914 – 2008*

*Lynne Wells*

I WORE MY FRONT TOOTH FOR YOU

Knowing you were arriving early today,  
to paint the back wall of the house;  
the expanse left bare and bruised  
after I had the climbing hydrangea  
busted out, chopped down,  
ripped off the siding,  
I inserted my front tooth.  
I hate that flipping thing,  
but after months of dental digging,  
bone implants, gouges, blood,  
it does present a pristine smile.

The morning was misty,  
decks and siding damp,  
so you texted me you would begin the job later.  
My mouth ached  
while my tongue worked  
on the back of that plastic retainer,  
much like the actor did who played  
Freddy Mercury in "Bohemian Rhapsody."  
Shall I take out the front tooth  
and rest my oral cavity?  
No, I wanted to greet you at my best.

Finally, you arrived with your  
painter's overalls and strong brown arms,  
in your once white pickup truck.  
Then a brown four-door Chevy  
ambled in, parked beside you,  
and an older, rounder man emerged  
in faded white canvas pants.  
You proudly introduced me  
to your father, whose hand I shook,  
and as he smiled, he sported  
a nice wide front tooth gap.

*Jake Williams*  
AFTER THE HUNT

My father and I hunted.  
in prayer-like silence  
to not scare the prey.

After a hunt, we cleaned  
our rifles in a precise ritual  
like giving Holy Communion.

We lay our guns  
on a white bed sheet  
as if adorning an altar.

My father reverently screwed  
together the sections  
of the metal cleaning rod

with its blonde wood handle  
and anointed a white pad  
with a drop of Hoppe's gun oil.

He pushed the staff  
slowly down the barrel  
to avoid gouging it inside.

He repeated the ritual  
with a clean white pad,  
a penitent saying Hail Marys.

When all dirt was exorcised,  
he wiped the barrel  
and dark brown walnut stock

with a red flannel rag  
as a priest wipes clean  
the communion chalice.

By my fourteenth year,  
I religiously imitated  
his rifle cleaning rite.

I never scratched  
or left the barrel dirty,  
or forgot to wipe the stock.

At eighteen I left home  
and never hunted again.

*Glenda Wilson*  
POWER

Who has the power? Certainly not me. My Dr. tells me what drugs I can take, what exercises I can do, and what I can eat. He almost had a heart attack when he found out I was using artificial creamer, saying it was the worst thing in the world for cholesterol, and no wonder mine was high.

My son controls what I can save in the attic and closets. Years ago, after my small strokes, he went through everything and threw out most of what was in my attic so fast it was just a blur. He would say things, such as “Mom, there is no earthly use for these old surveyors tools your dad used 70 years ago and none of us will want them when you are gone.” As fast as he was throwing things in the garbage can, I was pulling them out and running into the house with them, but who knows how many I missed? I was raised in an orange grove, and I have saved my Dad’s orange sack that opened at the bottom to let the oranges roll out into a box. Well, that went along with my uncle’s shoeshine kit in its homemade wooden box. My son is a good guy, but he has no sentiment in him whatsoever.

My oldest daughter controls what clothes I buy and how I decorate my house. She has a great eye and always looks like million dollars. In fact, she just went to a New Years’ Eve party at a big hotel in San Francisco with her 23-year-old daughter, and all the men were asking her to dance instead of the daughter. My granddaughter finally said, “That’s my mother!” and the man of the moment replied, “That is your mother? Well, she is hot!” Anyway, I trust her judgment and wait until she is around to make decorating decisions. She is not pushy, just talented.

And then we come to my youngest daughter who lives in Chicago and has appointed herself to handle everything else. She is sure I am going to fall while shopping and bought me a rolling walker that she is convinced I should use all the time. I try to use it any time there is the slightest chance I might fall. If I complain about any physical problem, she nags me about going to the doctor until I do just to satisfy her. I try to sound upbeat when she calls for, she is very perceptive, and if I sound depressed, she has all kinds of things I should do, none of which I want to do. She is relentless with her advice, and I guess she had to be that way to get through 10 years of college. She ordered a lifeline for me and got the most sensitive type that reacts if I fall without my pressing it. Recently it went off, and I had let my cell phone run down, and I was at exercise class, and they could not reach me, so they called this daughter, and she called everyone I know. I asked my daughter if she could not order a less sensitive type, and she said, "We will talk about it," which means no. It is very hard for her to take care of me long distance, but she is doing her level best. She has looked at several retirement homes in Chicago and thinks I should move back there. I tell her I know my name, and I usually know where I am, and if I do not, my address is on my walker. If I get lost, I am sure I could call her, and she would direct me home. I guess it is OK if she has the power, for she holds it in her hands with love.



## HONORABLE MENTIONS

*Michael Bickford*  
MAKING THE BED

I come into the room as usual  
in the middle of a moonless night.  
A skunk has been foraging  
just outside the window  
and I can hear the rain-birds in the pasture  
chit—chit—chit—the summer scent  
of clover covering the skunkiness,  
a floral counterpane. I know the bed

is as I left it yesterday, this morning.  
She is gone. A few days with her sisters  
in the sun. I am alone but I must  
make the bed before I sleep. Even though  
I can't see, I close my eyes to better  
feel. I know this space—surfaces, textures  
weights, the rumpled interstitial spaces  
of the bedclothes, corners edges folds,  
the rough-smooth weft and warp of crisp percale,  
the topographic stitching of the quilt.  
I reach for where our heads have lain  
to pull the pillows off and toss them lightly  
on the chair I know is there.  
The sigh of fabric whispers yes. I reach  
and stretch, tuck and smooth, her fragrance rising,  
my unseen hands caress cold emptiness.

Were she here, I would feel her warm nearness  
before I ever heard her deepened breath.

Only the chit—chit—chit resounds  
from wall to ear tonight. Renewing  
these ritual motions something hits me,  
overcomes me from the gut like grief.  
I shudder and throw myself down into  
this darkened nest of ours in tears,  
inhale the absent presence of her side  
and wet the wrinkled hem of sheet  
that rested on her face.

*Sarah Brooks*  
HOMEMAKER

As I awaken to muted light  
refracting frost across my window,  
I sink into the weight of heavy blankets  
and the cottony, soft comfort of my bed.

I am thinking of doorways,  
and sidewalks,  
park benches with cold metal slats,  
angled, not flat.

I am breathing  
but I cannot see my breath,  
my fingers are not numb,  
and my socks are not wet.

I am hoping you have found a place  
safe from the kind of men  
who have beat you and treated you  
as if you were disposable.

I am wishing I could bring you  
something warm to eat  
as you amble across the street  
in search of the antidote that keeps you well.

I am imagining you seeking  
a way to fix your pain,  
to stop the voices in your head,  
while smoking cigarettes in the rain.

Sometimes I drive at night  
searching for your slight body  
believing I see you, an apparition  
disappearing through the fog,

remembering when we were neighbors,  
how we would take the kids to the river,  
and have dance parties  
in your living room.

Now I wonder if you are  
bathing in that river water,  
or if you've spoken to your daughter  
or finally found a place to lay your head?

I wonder how one makes  
a home of concrete,  
and your frayed ends meet,  
when you are condemned to living  
the desperate dance of survival.

*Mairead Dodd*  
MY ZOMBIE MOM

I am five years old.

My mom is a zombie.

Kennedy is President of the United States.

Hop Along Cassidy is riding into the sunset on our black and white television set.

Geepers, I'm just a kid. How was I supposed to know? I was not equipped to be a zombie wrangler. On Erick Erikson's psychosocial development scale, I was sitting on Square One. Trust vs. Mistrust. My brain was not fully capable of handling anything beyond making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Grownups have this tendency to place unrealistic expectations on little children. They tell us to grow up without any explanation why. They look us straight in the eyes delivering a blah, blah, blah sermon about life not being fair. As if a whole lot of talk is an antidote for my adolescent angst. I have the attention span of a gnat.

There is something wrong with my mommy. It is frightening me, and no one will give me an answer to my question why. I tug on shirts. I ask the question over and over and over again. Yet, no one will tell me. Why is my mommy a zombie, and am I endangered of becoming one too?

It's quite obvious my mother is weird. Just look at her! Greasy hair tightly pulled back, soft pasty skin frames the dark half-moon circles under her eyes; two glazed over orbs dim and expressionless. Her daily attire is a frumpy and faded terry cloth bath robe ancient from wear. It is accessorized by a pair of fluffy pink slippers. Her big toe is peaking out of the one on her right foot saying hello.

Winters in upstate New York were often brutal and confining. The osteopathic old house we lived in had a residential chill to it. The large farmhouse felt like an empty barren castle surrounded by a moat. We were held prisoner in the house during those months. My mother though was rarely sighted. Yet, she was there. Somewhere. Invisible. Hiding from reality. Quiet as a church mouse on anti-depressants.

Today, she has managed to shuffle into the kitchen. She lives on cocoa and toast. I am watching her from the crack of the pantry door where I am hiding. I like to eat dog biscuits in there. You know, the ones that are different shapes and colors? I'm going let you in on something and this is top secret. (They all taste the same). She sprinkles cinnamon and sugar on the oleo laden bread. Two heaping teaspoons of Nestle's Quik powder plops into a pottery mug of hot milk. A few stirs later and just like that she disappears, shuffling back into her cave of oblivion.

My Zombie Mom doesn't drive. She doesn't know how. Maybe that's a good thing. On one of our rare outings, she is standing in the checkout line at K-mart. I am embarrassed. I keep my distance and wander back to aisle three. Her badly painted bright red lips need touching up. They are pursing, pulsating, and vibrating as if she were a fish out of water. Her hands clasped, arms locked, elbows directionally pointed to the left and right clutching her black patent leather handbag. She says nothing, robotically retrieving what she owes handing it to the uncomfortable woman at the cash register. I look up at her. I feel sorry for myself. I feel sorry for her. I am insecure, and this sense of embarrassment has just stomped on the love I have for my mother.

My dad used to tell me my "mouth went like a whippoorwill's ass" whatever that meant. It did leave a lot to the imagination being five years old and all. I had a very vivid one, colorful and prolifically creative. It turned out to be my salvation. It was an insulating shield, a useful

device in my psychological toolbox. The parallel world of play self-regulated the loneliness and emotional trauma living in me, my mother, and our house.

There were two individuals I must give credit to for their outstanding service with preserving the early days of my childhood. Holographic bodyguards, assigned as my guardian angels. Make believe heroes living in a land where I made all the rules. They taught me bravery, resiliency and birthed a passionate creative force within me which continued to sustain me beyond my childhood wonder.

The mouse who lived in the soap dish four stories up from the bathtub was the first to appear. He was jovial, empathetic, and silly. I never took him for the jealous kind. Oh boy, was I wrong! One day I brought home Fuzzy Wuzzy. “Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear,” but he was also a bar of soap. The marketing team who created him amazed television viewers with his ability to grow hair. Every kid on the block wanted one, including me! Let’s just say, Fuzzy Wuzzy was a big disappointment. He grew nothing except smaller after each bath time disintegrating into the oblivious afterlife of the tub’s drain. His legacy lost in the eternal hell of the city’s sewage system.

Tiger lived in the front parlor of the antiquated upstate New York farmhouse. He could have been the poster boy for a well-known cereal if that feline fellow Tony hadn’t shown up. Behind French doors, tightly shut, Tiger eloquently hosted tea parties. He was never harsh, always delightful, outrageously funny. The mouse from the soap dish would often attend. We talk about everything while sipping pretend tea from our teeny tiny china cups where grownups were not allowed.

My zombie mom did not like to talk much. But I did! That's because my mouth went like a whippoorwill's ass. My mom communicated in gestures. It was a menagerie of head bobbles, grunts, and eyes not blinking, staring into her own version of outer space.

Candy jars of anti-depressants lived on the upper shelf of the medicine cabinet. Names like lithium and thorazine were framed by crossbones warning to BEWARE! I instinctively knew not to touch them. They sounded like something you would keep in the garden shed out of reach of children.

When she walked through the door after visiting the Holiday Inn of Horrors, I was perplexed. Shock treatments transformed her into a confused and transient ghost. She walked by me as if I were not there. I couldn't understand. Why wasn't she happy to see me after being gone so long? Why was my mom a Zombie?

When you are five years old, grownups represent the all-powerful beings who have the answers to everything. Wrong. I continued to ask those dumb grownups about my Zombie Mom. Telling me the old song and dance, "Children should be seen and not heard" is a total copout. In case you haven't noticed, I am much wiser than my years give me credit for. I have the eyes of innocence living in these sockets: a superhero power giving me the ability to see things grownups would rather deny.

Imaginary friends are the best listeners. They let you say anything you want to them. You need an answer? They let you come up with one all on your own. The Mouse and Tiger warned me about grownups and their propensity to sweep things under the rug. They said grownups don't mean any harm. The incapacity to share the harsh realities of life is their way of telling you they love you. They are afraid too.

I am an old woman now. The stigma of my mother's mental illness still follows me to this day. My mother's shadow has led people to quickly diagnose me. Days of feeling sadness equates a problem. "You know, depression runs in the family."

Yes, I do know. I lived with a Zombie Mom.

What they don't know is I am an eternal optimist. Thanks to two therapeutic figments from my childhood, I learned I have the power within me to create my own happiness, despite the world outside. I will not be made a victim based on my heredity. Depression can be a useful emotion. It stops us in our tracks and forces us to still ourselves. In that stillness there is an opportunity to go within. We often find the answers we need to make changes. Re-evaluating what is working and what is not in our lives provides an opportunity for self-renewal. This reflecting acts as a psychological reboot steering us into a better direction.

However, when depression becomes a chronic condition and takes precedent over your life, it is unhealthy. Just like it became for my Zombie Mom. It requires support, guidance, and help from an array of professionals. My mother was living in an era where treatments for mental illness were not only archaic but also harmful, a time when destructive practices created a façade. It was a method of white washing over the problem with very little focus on what was lying underneath.

My mother was a woman who struggled every day of her adult life held captive in a living body with a dying soul. She was drugged, shocked, and bound by the chains of her past, a prisoner of her own thoughts, unable to find the key that could set her free.

My lithium lip-smacking mother is dead. Her catatonic stare is a memory. I never stopped loving her nor grew roots of bitterness, despite her lack of nurture for me as a child

growing up. I owe a world of thanks to my imagination. It served as a surrogate in a world within a world called Make Believe.

I miss my Zombie Mom. My childhood fears about her have been replaced with an adult's understanding. I was never in any danger of becoming a Zombie. My mother was a restless spirit lost in her own wilderness.

Some say each star in the night sky is the soul of those who have departed. I look up into the expanse of the infinite universe, a magnitude of glittering beings overhead. And I always embrace the brightest one believing it's her, shining brightly, a glorious ethereal being in a world of happy.

## 1. BURRO

She refused the next step, my curses unheard as the rest of them continued up. I dug in my heels swift and hard. The sound she bellowed echoed as she dropped her hindquarters and let me know that that was the wrong move; I almost fell off. Come on, Bertha, just over that next ridge! She didn't care.

Velia and Stem kept moving forward on their own steeds. Mark padded quietly beside. Tex and Buck were somewhere. We were close. One more ridge, and we would be safe for a few more days.

Bertha squinched, and I tumbled off. I found myself among young thistles. Bertha! I cried, thistles! I don't know if she heard me but soon she was munching. A few moments later I was astride, and we moved again upward toward tomorrow.

## 2. JOKE

You better watch it, Tex said, and he meant it. We were five days from Sanctuary, and the rabbit stew wasn't great.

I'm sorry; I didn't mean it that way. I didn't.

I can be such a jackass. I was just trying to be funny. Anyway, I didn't sleep well that night. In the morning, my attempt at cornbread seemed a hit. Thank goodness for acorn flour.

We saddled up and set out again for Sanctuary. Velia took lead on her thoroughbred; Mark padded beside her, followed by Tex on Buck, his pony. Bertha and I were in the rear. The horse flies circled. Dust kicked up with every step. I think I smelled honeysuckle or jasmine. I actually fell asleep on Bertha as she clipped-clopped along, feeling for the first time in a while that everything might be OK.

### 3. VILIFIED

I never could sleep past daybreak. The sun was coming up just one mountain range and river crossing away from Sanctuary. I pushed my coverings aside and rolled out of my so-called tent. Everything was wet and that was OK. Bertha was happily eating grass with Buck, both flicking flies with their tails and ears. Fortunately, it was early, there weren't many, yet.

The last few days had been difficult treks over mountains skirting the steep-down omnipresent river.

I yawned and stretched and went to Bertha. She kept munching. I put my arms around her neck and came in close and deeply sniffled her familiar smell. I scratched her mane and her snorfling acknowledged my attention. She masticated loudly with a lip ballet. Hang in there, baby; a few more days and things will get better.

A hawk screeched, a shot rang out, Velia's horse reared, and Bertha broke her rope. I hung on for dear life as my sturdy burro escaped me to safety.

They had found us.

#### 4. ATTACK

Pa-twang!

Rock dust rained down as I pulled Bertha's bridle toward me and huddled her behind an outcropping. It was a near miss. She had just saved me, and now I needed to save her.

Velia's horse, Chauncey, whinnied as another shot rang out. I had no idea where Stemley or tracker Mark was. Tex and Buck were somewhere. All I knew was that we were under attack close to Sanctuary.

Bertha did not like being bridled. Another shot. She shriek-hawed loudly, and my hands burned as the rope raged through them and she bolted.

An exchange of gunshots, at least four more rounds. My ears hurt. The gun powder smelled bitter. Where did they get that ammo?

A hand gripped my vest and shucked me up. Are you alright? It was Tex. Come on; get on your burro; we have to go, now! I ran towards Bertha.

#### 5. NIGHT

Later, we felt safe enough to build a fire. The canyon was secure. The fire snapped and crackled as sparkly fireflies pirouetted up.

Where are you from, Tex? Stemly queried.

Austin. He pushed the remnants of old beans and rancid rabbit into his mouth. He used the last of my cornbread to scrape his plate clean. An owl whooled as we finished our meager meal.

Why did you help us? Velia asked.

Dunno.

Mark snerffed for the first time in days.

Thank you, I said. And Bertha thanks you. Silence followed. As crickets chirped and forks scraped tin, the Milky Way blazed above.

## 6. AMBUSH

In the morning we mounted. Bertha seemed calm. I watched Velia flang herself onto Chauncey, a magnificent thoroughbred at, what? 16 hands? Chestnut brown, his blaze face was striking.

Velia was Nordic. A gazelle mystery: her sword work was—unearthly. Why she joined us, I still don't know. Anyway, we slowly trundled toward Sanctuary together.

Stem snuffled the air. Tex seemed sullen. I was just tired, but Bertha soldiered on.

Sanctuary. We hoped for the best. When we still had radio, it seemed the only option. Suddenly, Chauncey niffked. Mark stiffened, and his hand went up. Velia quivered an arrow in the blink of an eye as Tex shouldered his shotgun.

Me? I hunkered down on Bertha.

## 7. STEMLEY

Stemley had special gifts. S/he was from Yugoslavia and smelled smells none of us could. S/he anticipated the gun-smoke and then the thunderstorm. We did not anticipate the thunderstorm.

Gunfire surrounded and sequestered us behind the rock face. Marcus commanded us down and behind as illegal bullets flew. Stay alive. So close to Sanctuary! It was hard, but I kept Bertha quiet. Stemley snuffled again and pointed left.

We crawled carefully away; difficult to do with a pony, a horse and a burro.

Bertha nearly lost it as a white dagger of electricity shattered the night. Her bucking hooves missed my forehead by inches

We crossed into Shasta County — me, Marcus, Velia and Tex. A black curtain of rain showered down.

## 8. 2ND AMENDMENT

Ok, Tex had a shotgun, even though Tex was not his name and the gun *was* illegal. Before the decline, Vice President Obama did come for our guns and ammo like they said he

would, and with the help of President Pritchard had the second amendment renounced. Who needed a militia when it became every man for him or herself?

It was different up here. Sling shots and arrows weren't enough when you needed to bag that rabbit, raccoon, or vole to stay alive.

Bertha didn't care. She was happily munching lupines, just miles away from Sanctuary. It was finally quiet; the "Blam, blam, blam!" episode was over. How much illegal ammo did Tex have? Anyway, he bought us time as we plodded, tired and disheveled toward Redding and sanctuary.

## 9. RABBITS

We passed what had been a place for big waters. Marcus Thunderbolt knew of a time before that it wasn't. (Tosh's allies did, too.)

We camped that night just outside of Whiskeytown. I really missed whiskey.

Velia was crackerjack not only with her swords and arrows but also her slingshots and rabbit was what for dinner. Tex ate with gusto, cracking every little bone and sucking the marrow. In the light of our little campfire, he waxed nostalgic over rabbits. Due to the terrible rabbit hemorrhagic decimation in Texas of 2020, he hadn't had rabbit since KOVID-23 reappeared.

I missed Guinea pigs. I blame Ecuador for that.

Chauncey semi-squatted and let loose a majestic streaming, steaming pee.

We were settling in for the night when Bertha cahouled and disturbed us all. At that very instant, two brilliant falling stars streaked the sky.

Mark leapt, Stem unsheathed s/her knife, Valia was gone, and Tex and I were frozen with fright as *she* entered the circle of our firelight.

#### 10. TOSHUA

She was six foot two, armed from toe to crown, literally. Every toe had a shiv; she had shin splades, knee shrap, criss-crossed bandoliers with highly illegal ammo; she wore teat cheats and was crowned with laser-emitting diodes. At least that's all I could see in the fire light.

Bertha, Chauncey, and Buck made horsey noises as they tried to retreat into shadow as she stepped into our light.

Hungry?

Rabbit?

Shem nodded and held up a plate.

Truce? s/he asked.

Tosh (we soon learned was her name) accepted and sat around our fire. We wanted to know why they were hunting us. Timidly, I asked.

Sanctuary, she said as she crunched the rabbit's head.

Then Velia's knife was at her neck.

## 11. INTERROGATION

What's your name?

Tosh.

How many?

Four.

Why!?

Sanctuary. We need you. We won't get in without you.

Call them off.

Done.

Why shoot at us?

To get your attention; to slow you down.

Velia lowered her knife, and we all relaxed. I farted. Bertha lowed in the background.

Chauncey whinnied, and Buck's nostrils flared.

Ok, Tosh. Prove your worth at Sanctuary.

## 12. SHASTA

We came into Shasta. Imagined tumbleweeds blew down main street, but there was only a mamma skunk, peacock proud, strolling the white line with her three little kits, tails up, skittering behind.

Mark signaled for us to stop. He dismounted and investigated. He knew what for; his DNA was from around here.

A rusted sign squeaked and squealched in the weak wind. A squintle of light glinted off a shop window startling me. The flies were bothering Bertha, and she stamped repeatedly.

Tosh proved valuable as we cautioned through town.

Stem snuffled nothing.

We decided to camp just outside the far side. I was falling asleep; in that moment between here and there, a twig snapped. Hail, hail, the gang's all here.

## 13. PROSPECT

We clumbled along through another day of rain and stumbled toward Sanctuary across the Sundial bridge wet, tired, and hungry. It was dark as we approached downtown, wearily.

Kentucky Fried Chicken, Starbucks, Raley's; all shuttered, all quiet.

A rat slinkered by.

After several blocks, we saw the wall.

It was heavily fortified. A streetlight just outside the gate flashed an eternal yellow, "Caution! Caution! Caution!"

Chauncey clumpled his front right hoof thrice on the cracked pavement. Bertha snorted. Buck's nose snuffled up. A flock of cedar waxwings (or maybe they were bats?) coruscated from below to above and out into the night. A strong, strong light sliced the night; we flinched and claudched our eyes.

This time, it was Bertha that farted.

#### 14. SANCTUARY

More than a week of going up the 299 from Humboldt, through Trinity to Shasta with a burro as my best friend along with a dysmorphic super-smeller, an honest-to-goodness fearless Amazon on her big, big horse Chauncey, a sullen Texan who reminisced about rabbits while riding a ridiculous pony, a local tracker with uncanny knowledge of our whereabouts and now Tosh and her associates: Bruno, Laila, and Chetco, two of whom also from north coast tribes.

We have been hungry, sunburned, flash-flooded, hot then cold, dusty then wet, road-weary and saddle-sore.

And here we were, blinded by floodlights at Sanctuary, finally. Eight or nine city blocks fortified by a high thick wall, barbed wire and glass shards. The rest of Redding lay in ruins, the streets desolate and dark. The blinking yellow stoplight turned green; a siren sounded. With a wrenching sound, the gates began to open.

Bertha snuffled near my ear, then sneezed.

## 15. OPENING

The sound of the gates opening and sirens wailing was deafening, and we were all blinded by the light, revved up like a deuce 'nother runners in the night. (I once won a \$50 bet that I really knew those lyrics.)

The gates clanged to a stop, and the siren was cut. We were anxious.

After wiping Bertha's phlegm off my face, I glanced around: Valia stanced like a samurai warrior (where the hell did she get that Japanese sword?!); Tex still on his pony, hand on his rifle in its saddle holster; Toshua, Bruno, Laila, and Chetco huddled right, whispering. Markus lifted his right arm, palm up. We froze. Someone was coming. Chauncey whinnied a low warning. Luckily, Bertha had no bodily issues.

A small form entered the circle of light. Tosh flicked on her Corona lasers, and Tex snapped up his rifle. A small girl, no more than eight, in tattered clothes, coughed politely and timidly said,

Hello...?

## 16. CLOSURE

Soon she was joined by a raggle-taggle group of about 23 kids aged from maybe 5 to 15 or so. They looked emaciated.

Have you come from Haven? the leader asked.

What? I parried.

Haven. All the dults went to Haven after the rupture.

Everyone?

No. Nanna and Uncle Dick were left to project us. But Nanna fell into a well, and we found Uncle Dick dead after drinking smelly stuff from a white bottle. We buried him behind the school.

How have you survived?

With the rupture, we had no water. We learned to catch some from the sky and then from wet mornings.

What did you eat?

Well, what was left and then what we could find. First the chickens.

Stupid! one muttered as he squiggled.

Yes, Cluck; Jeez! I know that now!

Another plucky girl chimed in with: But I'm good with rats; Chesslie over there finds snakes and Fatso here (he giggled) is an expert on worms, bugs and frogs.

We were astonished.

Are you coming in?

Absolutely!

Chesslie came up to Bertha and scritchd her forelock.

You're cute! What's her name?

Bertha.

Come on, Bertha. You can come, too, mister.

She bridled us through the gates as the mechanism slowly wrankled them shut.

## 17. BEGINNINGS

Finally, we were in.

It looked bad. Entropy started its work years ago; few buildings were still intact. Velia motioned our group aside.

Where do we begin?

Tex said, I'll take watch and scaffolded up the wall with his rifle. Markus began walking the perimeter to assess its integrity. Velia hopped on Chauncey and galumphed off in search of weaponry. Stemley said s/he would snuffle around for food and set out. That left me, Bertha and the outlaws.

And—you guys?

I have something to say, Tosh admitted. I killed someone here two years ago; it was a love thing. They ran me out, and I needed to make amends. I knew I would never be let back in if I hadn't gained another's trust. We...uh...have been working on a special project for some time. Chetco guffawed and patted his large leather satchel strapped to his side.

What's that?

Laila grinned, her ebony face radiant. That? That's tomorrow!

Seeds! Bruno gushed. Domestic, wild; you name it. Fruits, nuts and veggies from all over Humboldt, Trinity, and Curry counties.

Collecting them wasn't always easy, Chetco muttered with some sadness.

Come on! said Tosh, we have gardens to build! They broke right.

And then there was just me and B, now inside, when it dawned on me. My smile was a mile; I loved my mom dearly, but I liked winning better. All those chidings for spending hours and hours playing Minecraft and other civ-build-apps.

Incidentally, I do have a Master's from HSU in Sociology. So: We haven't just *made it* to Sanctuary, we were going to *make* sanctuary!

*Kirsten Josang*  
HONEY

Lida Mae took off her gingham apron, hanging it on the hook in her pantry. She grabbed her oven mitts and pulled the steaming dish of cornbread from the oven. Walking into the dining room, she set it on the table amongst the other dishes she'd spent the day preparing. The main course was a beef stew whose name she struggled pronouncing, and her other sides included cucumber stuffed cherry tomatoes, an exquisite shrimp cocktail platter, and Caesar salad. For dessert she'd made gelatin fruit salad that had been set in an overpriced bundt pan, as well as a chocolate fondue. *Presentation's everything*, she thought, as she double-checked to make sure everything was still perfectly placed. Satisfied that her standards were met, Lida Mae entered into the wood-paneled living room where her husband was entertaining guests.

“Well y'all, I do believe dinner is ready to be served!” While it stood out in the Bay Area, Lida Mae's soft Southern drawl held just the right amount of charm to cause endearing smiles to appear on her guest's faces.

“Oh, Mrs. Botwell, you must have been slaving away in there, making this meal. You really should have let me help with something!” The words of the wife of the couple they were having over seemed to ooze out in a sticky, sweet way. Her pale eyeshadow was a bit too heavy, and it clashed with her deep pink lipstick. Lida Mae didn't mind the obvious false sincerity because as the group rose from the couches and started making their way towards the dining room her response was just as canned.

“Don't you worry one bit, Mrs. Daley. This is just a little something I whipped up.”

*If only*, Lida Mae thought to herself as she led the group to the room next store.

As the four took their places around the table, blue Russel Wright dishes welcoming them, there was finally a break in the conversation between Mr. Botwell and Mr. Daley. The two were work colleagues at a high-end architecture firm and were incredibly engrossed in a discussion about their latest project involving a structural aluminum manufacturer. Their attention quickly turned back to their wives as they sat down and tucked the corner of their freshly pressed napkins into their collars.

“This looks delicious, Mrs. Botwell,” Mr. Daley complimented the hostess as he passed a platter of beef bourguignon to his right.

“He’s right you, know,” his wife chimed in. “It looks almost too pretty to eat!”

Lida Mae smiled demurely at the compliment as she served food onto her own plate. A little bit of the main course, a small serving of Caesar salad, three tomatoes, two shrimp, and one slice of cornbread was all she served for herself. Lida Mae knew her perfect silhouette wouldn’t sustain itself if she ate until she was actually full. She watched enviously as her husband and Mr. Daley heaped large portions into their plates.

After a few minutes of amicable silence due to eating, Mr. Daley turned to address Lida Mae. “Mrs. Botwell, I do believe we have a problem.”

Her heart dropping, Lida Mae swallowed the bite that seemed to have turned to stone in her mouth. She had worked hard on the meal, and her husband had approved of the menu. Delicately dabbing her mouth with the napkin placed in her lap, she said, “What seems to be the issue, Mr. Daley? Is the food not warm enough?”

“No that’s not it. The problem is that this cornbread is just too delicious!”

“Oh my-- oh well thank you, sir--”

“You’ll have to give the recipe to my wife, so she can make it at home!”

Mrs. Daley laughed good heartedly. “Where did you get the recipe, anyway, Mrs. Botwell?”

“It’s actually an old family recipe. Authentic Southern--”

Lida Mae was interrupted again, as Mrs. Daley laughed and said, “You mean you didn’t see this on *Woman’s World*?”

Conversation continued amongst the others as Lida Mae put on just the right amount of nonchalance for the people at the table not to notice her irritation. Her cornbread recipe had been her mother’s, and it was one of the few things she had from her and her time in Alabama. Her family had been dirt poor growing up, and marrying Danny Botwell had been her ticket out of that life. Of course, you wouldn’t be able to tell that now by her auburn coiffure, architecture husband, and her social status in her neighborhood woman’s society. Nobody, besides her husband, really knew about that part of her past. This was how Lida Mae wanted it to be and why she worked so hard to keep up appearances.

Despite the threat of possible shame and losing her status of “perfect housewife,” Lida Mae, from time to time, became absolutely fed up with hoops she jumped through daily. Now, at her dinner party that had entailed hours of effort, was one of the moments where Lida Mae was simply done. Unfortunately, now was not one of the moments when she could do anything in particular about it.

Taking a deep inhalation, Lida Mae looked up from her plate and got her bearings again in the conversation going on around her, stomach grumbling as she pushed her partially full plate back.

Aside from Lida Mae's momentary internal meltdown, the dinner party had gone off exactly according to plan. The highlight of the evening had been when she brought out the fondue pot, with chocolate and fruit keeping the Daley's entertained. Mr. Botwell had reaffirmed Lida Mae over all the hard work she had put in with a kiss on the cheek, before heading into the family room to watch a program on their state-of-the-art television set, leaving his wife to clean up.

According to the alarm clock on her nightstand, it was now 1:30 in the morning, and Lida Mae still was unable to fall asleep. Her husband slept soundly beside her and did not stir as she quietly rose, grabbed her robe from a hook on the back of the bedroom door, and slipped out of the room.

Padding softly downstairs, Lida Mae entered the kitchen. Her freshly cleaned glasses gleamed in the cupboard as a stray beam of moonlight shone through the window, reflecting off of a cut-crystal design. Lida filled her glass with cool tap water, took a sip, and turned to put it in the sink when something caught the corner of her eye. A pale green, square Tupperware, sat on the counter in the corner of the kitchen. It was the leftover cornbread from the dinner party.

A small amount of resentment trickled into Lida Mae's awareness as she remembered the interaction during the meal that had, as her father used to say, "ruffled her feathers." Lida Mae recognized that she was the one who self-imposed her high expectations. She was the one who paid close attention to trends, thinking that they would cover up her poor, farm girl origins. It was as if she thought that if her makeup wasn't just right, an enemy would get an arrow into the crack of her armor. Lida Mae knew full well what she was about. It just so happened to be that on occasion, she wished she could still be an ignorant child, walking barefoot through a cotton field in the hot, southern sun.

Looking at the Tupperware once more, Lida Mae felt something else seep into her awareness. It was pity. It was as if a small, careless Lida Mae was telling her future self to give herself some grace.

Lida Mae walked over to the green container and opened it. The salty-sweet and bready smell reached her nose in an instant. Her mouth began to water. Grabbing one of the few pieces left and placing it on a small plate, Lida Mae proceeded to slather it with butter, letting out a sigh and relaxing her shoulders as it melted ever so slightly. Adding just a dribble of honey, like her mother used to do, Lida Mae allowed herself a small smile. Turning and sliding her back down the pale yellow cabinets until she sat on the floor, Lida Mae took a bite and closed her eyes. With a deeper sigh as she slowly chewed, feeling the granules roll around her mouth, she relished her solitude.

September, 1970. The first day of school at a junior high in a suburb in Southern California. It's the beginning of first lunch, and Elaine walks from class onto the quad where kids are in small clusters on and around concrete planters and picnic tables. Elaine searches for her cousin—the only person she knows—but sees only a mass of unfamiliar kids, all talking and laughing and seeming to belong. We can't know, but probably her heart pounds, and her knees shake.

She clutches her brown paper bag lunch and searches for someplace to sit, someone to sit with. We can imagine that she doesn't want her aloneness and strangeness to be so obvious. We can see—and no doubt she has seen this too—that no one wears ankle socks like hers, and many girls are wearing pants, certainly not the handmade kind of dress that her mother stayed up late finishing for her first day of 7<sup>th</sup> grade in her new town.

And then she sees a girl she noticed in her Language Arts class which met right before lunch, sitting alone, eating from her own brown paper bag lunch. The girl isn't wearing ankle socks, but she is wearing a dress that doesn't look brand-new or stylish. The girl is singularly focused on the eating of her sandwich, so we can infer that she too feels alone and awkward. Elaine approaches and points to the place next to the girl, asking if she can sit there. The girl looks up from her sandwich and nods with a bit of a shrug.

And so begins a halting conversation of small talk and shy questions and answers. Elaine finds out that the girl's name is Barbra and she's from a small town near an Air Force base somewhere in Georgia. Barbra discovers that Elaine is from a somewhat larger town near a lake

in Wisconsin. Both are new to this dry, dusty bedroom community east of Los Angeles, and they talk about the reasons that brought them there, though Elaine most likely doesn't want to share the embarrassing fact that her parents have recently gotten divorced.

They do discover that Barbra has a big brother in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and so does Elaine. Their brothers have second lunch, but the girls agree the boys wouldn't want to be seen with their sisters anyway, so they have had to fend for themselves on this first day of junior high school. How strange to eat lunch outside, they exclaim! Both girls had attended much older, multi-story school buildings with hallways, cafeteria, and gym all inside the school. This school is nearly new, only one story, with classrooms that all exit into pods laid out around the center quad. And such a funny name for a school: Frisbee Jr. High!

They compare their lunches. Elaine has peanut butter and jam on white bread, potato chips, and a banana. Barbra has a bologna sandwich with a cut up apple and a side of black-eyed pea salad from supper the night before. The girls talk about other foods they like. Barbra tells Elaine about how back-home they made ice cream in a coffee can, rolling it up and down a hill and then pouring maple syrup on top of it. "It's so good!" she says smiling, stretching out "good" in her soft, southern accent. Elaine smiles back. "I've never made ice cream, but it sounds really fun!" she replies with her harsher Midwestern vowels.

They talk about the weather. Their pets. Favorite songs on the radio. Sometimes they're quiet as they search for something else to talk about and silently stare down at their feet kicking rhythmically against the planter they're sitting on.

And then the bell rings. "I have math now. What do you have?" Elaine asks. "P.E." Barbra says, "I wonder if we have to dress out today. I didn't get my gym suit yet. Did you?" Elaine nods. "But I didn't bring it today. I don't know when we get our lockers." And then it's

goodbyes as they head off to their classes. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow in Language Arts,” Elaine says crumpling her bag filled with her lunch trash. Barbra scoops up her stack of books and turns toward the locker rooms across the quad, “Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

Elaine and Barbra never have lunch again. They speak from time to time in that shared Language Arts class, but the school has a way of separating kids into different tracks of classes, and the students themselves do the same with greater efficiency all on their own. The next day, Elaine finds her cousin and begins eating lunch with her cousin’s circle of friends until it is obvious that Elaine doesn’t quite fit in with that group and slowly finds a few other shy girls who become her friends.

Elaine probably didn’t notice what became of Barbra after that first lunch together because she was so preoccupied with what she was wearing and whether any boy might like her and if anyone noticed her pimple or thought she looked dumb lugging a violin and sack lunch to school.

Weeks later Elaine did see Barbra hanging around with a group of girls who congregated near the multi-purpose room steps at lunchtime. Barbra wasn’t wearing dresses anymore but looked at home in flairs and lace-up sweaters like the other girls she was with. Elaine and Barbra may have glanced at each other or even said hi, but maybe not. Elaine may have felt a tiny sense of relief that Barbra found her own friends, and Elaine didn’t need to feel guilty about never having looked for Barbra at lunch again.

In fairness, Barbra never really looked for Elaine either after the third day of school when she was invited to join a girl she met in P.E. And later there surely was an awkwardness, some kind of constraint about entering the others’ current circles. What might they have said to each

other? How could they have shared what they were feeling about that one lunch and then the absence of any other?

What could these girls really know about the other? It's guaranteed that Elaine didn't know anything about the Jim Crow laws that weren't fully eliminated in the South until 1968 or the fact that the schools in Barbra's town were struggling to integrate during the last few years she lived there. It's very likely that at the supper table Barbra's brothers talked about being accosted in the school parking lot by groups of white boys with razor blades, and Barbra would have had to walk by the ugly scrawls at the school entrance and drinking fountain telling the Black kids (in a very impolite way) to go back to their own school. Sitting on that concrete planter, talking about their schools "back home," Elaine couldn't possibly have imagined any of this.

But, of course, Barbra wouldn't know that there were no Black people in Elaine's Midwestern school, and her knowledge of Black people would have had to come from reading about Harriet Tubman and the injustices portrayed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and perhaps seeing Martin Luther King, Jr. on TV if her parents chose to watch him on the news. Like so many other little white girls, Elaine probably was outraged that white people could be so cruel to other human beings, but if she had tried to talk to her parents or teachers, they would naturally have told her that she would have done what everyone else was doing at the time—people didn't think it was wrong. Elaine might have felt indignant at such a thought—never noticing that "people" meant "white people"—but would have naively thought that everything was put right by the Civil Rights movement.

Coming from the Deep South, Barbra was probably confused by Elaine's friendliness on the first day of school. But she most likely came to believe that Elaine wasn't much different

than the white girls back home based on what she observed of her later. She would have seen how Elaine had white friends to eat with the next day and how Elaine didn't seem to notice her at all as she sat kicking her feet against the concrete planter studying her sandwich. Her momma probably had told her things were different here than in the South but warned her to be careful anyway. Barbra couldn't have helped but notice that in the quad there were groups of kids mostly clustered together by skin color—black groups, tan groups, white groups—and by the kinds of clothes they wore. In the groups of “popular” kids, there were one or two Black kids and several Chicanos, but they usually wore more expensive clothes than what Barbra's family probably could afford. The poorer Blacks hung out together just as the poorer Chicanos and poorer white kids did. It wasn't really all that different from her hometown and everywhere else in the South that Barbra had lived. And though there weren't signs for different restrooms or drinking fountains, areas were claimed by different groups, just the same.

As junior high went by, Barbra may have noticed Elaine looking her way occasionally at lunch or when passing each other in the hallway. Most likely it was easier to just pretend she didn't see her. Some of her friends liked to make fun of girls like Elaine—so skinny, white and freckly, so nervous, so easy to teas—and make them blush. Barbra didn't exactly take part, but she didn't try to stop them either. Perhaps it felt a little good to see Elaine squirming.

And Elaine? She undoubtedly did wish—if she thought about such things—that Barbra could know that she wasn't staying away from her or her group of friends because they were Black. She would be staying away because she thought *they thought* she didn't like Black girls . . . and she wouldn't know how to explain herself to them without looking stupid and blushing.

Like a movie based on real events, we'd like to tell you what happened to the two girls “afterwards.” We'd like to report that both women graduated from high school and went on to

college, married, and had children. That Barbra's daughter followed her grandfather into military service, and Elaine's son came through a difficult adolescence to make something of himself. That they retired after long and successful careers in an office or hospital or school and are now happy grandmothers, despite a bout with breast cancer or an ugly divorce. We'd love to tell you that through the years of Rodney King and Tyisha Miller, Eric Garner and George Floyd, it became easier to talk about what Elaine thought or Barbra felt, sometimes even with people who didn't share their skin color. And maybe that they both took part in a Black Lives Matter march in 2020, and despite being masked up, made eye contact and nodded to one another. But we really can't know.

*Delcie Moon*  
SURELY, FOREVER

The long, wooden table sat empty. Matching chairs lined its perimeter, and a clear, plastic cover protected the deep red tablecloth underneath. The curtains cascaded over the dining room windows, shutting out the little early morning light that had made it through the sea of grey clouds.

Outside, a Song Sparrow perched upon the slender branch of a rose bush and quickly scanned the front yard. He reported his initial findings with a long, high whistle followed by several shorter notes. He scanned again and sang out more details to the neighborhood. This went on for a minute or so before he fluttered off in a flash, leaving the rose bush vacant once more.

A light came on inside the old red house, followed by the steady sounds of a familiar routine: the bathroom faucet running; the whisper of soft fabrics falling off the body; then the firmer whisper of starched fabrics and the clink of suspenders being locked into place; the thumping of thick blankets dropping onto a mattress and being tightly secured underneath.

A door opened, and more light devoured the darkness. Pots and pans clanked and clattered. The front door opened and closed, rested for a few seconds, then opened and closed once more.

Aurel held the newspaper in his hand and made his way to the dining room. He pulled out the chair at the head of the table and took his place there. He removed the rubber band from the periodical and unrolled it, scanning the front page briefly before turning the page and lingering over the editorials, unfazed by the activity in the kitchen. After a few more minutes of

casual engagement with the news of the day, he neatly folded the paper into its original state and set it aside.

"Will they come?" he wondered to himself, gazing out the freshly disrobed windows into the front yard. The cedar tree kept the property cool and shady, but it had grown alongside the family, and it was strong and healthy, so he saw no reason to remove it. Besides, the neighborhood birds found shelter there, and he enjoyed watching them. He had tied a feeder full of seeds to one of the branches, and it was usually a hotspot of activity.

"Anything interesting?" Mae asked as she turned a mug over and filled it with hot coffee before sitting down in the chair adjacent to the head.

"No, not yet," he replied. "Must be too cloudy still. Even the birds want to stay in bed."

"I saw a mamma cat prowling around the other day. Looked like she was nursing. She's probably real hungry."

"Too many cats these days. People just let 'em multiply. No concern for the consequences."

"They make it so expensive to spay 'em, hardly anyone can afford to keep pets anymore. I guess kids just have to go without nowadays."

"Kids have plenty nowadays," Aurel retorted, and Mae grew quiet. She got up gently, sliding her chair back into place before returning to the kitchen. She pulled down a couple of plates and some utensils, then expertly slid the spatula under the fried eggs and transferred them from the hot cast iron pan onto the dishware. She shoveled country potatoes onto the plates as well, followed by buttered toast. She carried the meal to the table and set one breakfast down in front of her husband, the other in front of her own chair. She sat down softly and placed a napkin on her lap, then looked out the window in the direction Aurel was gazing.

"Blue Jays aren't afraid of any mamma cat," he smirked, then turned his attention to his food. He grabbed the ketchup in front of him and spread it over his potatoes before scooping them onto his fork and into his mouth. His wife then began eating her own meal.

"I forgot the orange juice," she said as she made to get up.

"It can wait," Aurel replied. Mae hesitated, then resumed her breakfast. When they had finished eating, Mae cleared the table and began washing the dishes while Aurel continued to peer outside.

The Song Sparrow had returned, and others had followed his courageous example. The plump Fox Sparrows pushed the Dark-eyed Juncos out of the way and picked through the feeder, seeking out the richest of seeds and hurriedly tossing these around in their beaks in an effort to break the tough outer hull. Aurel smiled slightly as the brave little Song Sparrow dove into the fray and startled the Fox Sparrows, who instinctively flew away. The delicate bird had the breakfast table all to himself, for a few moments anyway.

"Good for you," Aurel laughed to himself. "You still getting that orange juice?" he asked Mae.

"Yes, I'm just finishing up these last dishes."

"I'll do that in a minute. Come on over and sit down now."

She grabbed the carton of orange juice and walked back to the table, filling up two glasses with the sweet liquid.

"Would you pass me the newspaper, please?" she asked. Aurel handed her the paper and went back to bird watching. Mae drank deeply from her glass before starting on the news. She read in careful silence as her husband watched the birds.

"Will they come?" he wondered to himself. When his wife was finished reading, he rose and made his way to the kitchen.

"I'll do that, Pop. You go sit down. I'll join you shortly."

Perhaps it would be a busy day. He walked to the front room and pulled out a bag of pellets from against the wall. He sliced through the plastic with his pocketknife and opened up the hopper. He grunted as he picked up the bag of fuel, and Mae came rushing in.

"Let me help you with that...." she began, hurrying to Aurel's side.

"I've got it," he insisted. Once he had set the bag back down, Mae returned to the kitchen and resumed her chores. Aurel flipped on the stove and paused for a moment, studying the fireplace. He grimaced as he took a step toward his chair, but the jolt of pain in his back passed, and he finished the last few steps. He sat down slowly and breathed a measured sigh of relief before picking up his *Guns and Ammo* magazine on the shelf next to him. He put on his glasses and read for awhile, his body relaxing into the steady rhythm of the grandfather clock stationed against the back wall.

Mae's voice broke into his thoughts, and he set down the magazine. She was on the phone. As he listened, Aurel stared ahead at the photos on the wall. He frowned, taking off his glasses and staring intently.

The photo of his boyhood self had been on the wall for decades. Decades that had gone by in a flash. It made him dizzy to think about it. He still remembered the starched military uniform and the snug hat he had worn the day the photo was taken. He had been so proud.

"You look just like your father," his mother had told him.

His father had been gone for years, fighting in the Second World War. But the day the photo was taken, he was there, with his family, dressed in his military uniform. They were together, for a time.

"Will they come?" he wondered to himself again, snapping out of his reverie. He heard Mae saying her goodbyes and hanging up the phone. She went into the bathroom, and he sat waiting in the softly lit room, the warmth and jingling of the pellet stove keeping him company.

Finally, she emerged from the restroom and walked into the front room, sitting down in the chair to the right of Aurel's place. He looked at her.

"Kids should be here in a few minutes. School's out this week, and there's no one at the house," she said, answering the question that lingered between them.

Aurel looked again at the photo of his younger self, smiling and confident. His mother and father together still, together at last.

He grabbed the remote control that was at his side and switched on the TV, going through the channels until the excited noise of children's cartoons was released into the house, chasing away the last of the bird song that still danced in his ears.

"Make sure they wash up when they get here. They're sure to be hungry, and they shouldn't eat with dirty hands."

"I'll make sure, Pop," Mae replied. Then, to herself, "I always make sure."

*Joe Shermis*  
WE AWAKE

We twist what can't be broken,  
we break what we can feel,  
we feel what can't be spoken  
and speak what might be real;  
it's a twisting, breaking feeling  
that we speak of when we can,  
opening to what we catch  
with what it is we've ran...

We run what we can garner  
as we walk it into light,  
pushing from the middle  
as the outsides get too tight;  
it loosens up the chakras  
as the mind and spirit flows  
down from light we're given  
when the sun shows what it shows...

We open up a window  
when we have to get some air,  
breathe what will be offered  
with the morning that is there;  
if we open up the mind set  
we will see what dawn will break  
when we live within this very day  
with what the day will take...

*Nick Vasquez*  
NIGHTFALL

The tide drummed against the shore  
her rhythmic chanting soothing ancient wounds.  
Slowly the moon rose over the redwood canopies  
in chase, Venus followed her lover.

I recalled my texts on gravity  
the stronger force attracts the weaker one  
and it seems even in nature the strong prey on the weak  
for ensnared by the moon's pull was Venus.

Until she broke away from the moon's waning strength  
and across the sky she rode alone  
westward towards the sun's descent,  
leaving the moon forgotten to rise alone.

I craned my neck to watch the moon  
whisper of love of sorrow of regret  
to any who would listen.

His voice quavered and he gasped  
before descending below the canopy  
welcoming midnight geists.

