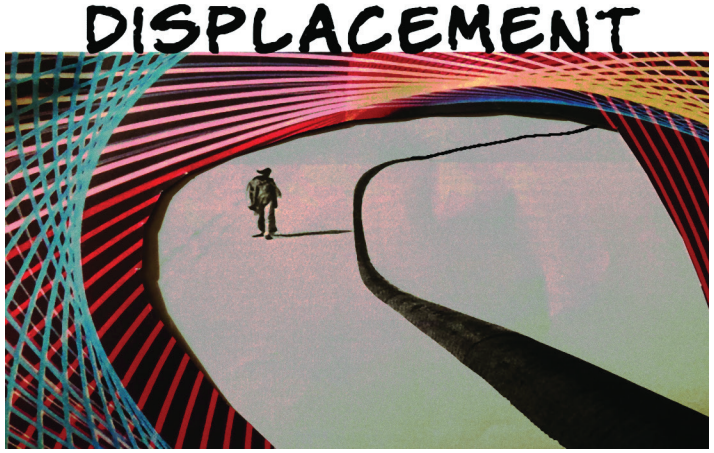

Wordrunner eChapbooks | April 2024

"I do have a sense of displacement as constant instability—the uninterrupted existence of everything that I love and care about is not guaranteed at all."

— Aleksandar Hegmon

DISPLACEMENT: Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Anthology
Prose Editors: Linda Saldana, Nick Valdez, Jo-Anne Rosen
Poetry Editor: Amanda Yskamp

Cover art by Amanda Yskamp

Wordrunner echapbooks

Contents

Contents *(continued)*

FICTION

Neighbors

William Cass

1

Henry and his father, Glen, sat eating dinner at the rickety picnic table their new landlord had left in the backyard. Light fell towards full evening. A screen door banged next door, and they watched their neighbor slowly descend her back steps, one hand on her cane, the other clutching a plastic sack.

Henry whispered, "How old is she?"

"Pretty old."

"Seventy? Seventy-five?"

"At least."

The old woman completed the halting journey to and from her garbage can, then hoisted herself back up the three steps. When the screen door clapped shut behind her, Glen and Henry both blinked. The short hedge of rosemary dividing their backyards gave off a faint, pungent scent.

2

The next afternoon, Henry was out back playing with his action figures. He'd built up two warring factions amidst clumps of dirt, rocks, and hunks of brush. He lay on his stomach on the worn grass rearranging formations and mumbling battle narrations with little bursts of explosions puffing his cheeks. He didn't hear the old woman open her screen door and emerge partway behind it onto her top step.

She regarded the boy for several moments before saying, "Where's your father?"

Henry went still. His eyes widened looking up at her. He shrugged, then said, "Working."

The old woman frowned. The prior month, between drawn curtains, she'd observed the two of them moving their few things

into the house that had long sat empty. She hadn't yet initiated any acquaintance.

"You big enough to be on your own?"

He shrugged again. "I'm ten."

The crease between her eyebrows deepened. She tapped the step with her cane.

"He'll be home soon, my dad. And he's trying to find after-school care."

"I see." She took a tissue from her cardigan pocket and blew her nose. "What's your name?"

"Henry." He struggled to prop himself up on his elbows. "What's yours?"

"Mrs. Baker."

"Where's Mr. Baker?"

"Dead."

"Oh." The boy dropped the action figure he was holding onto the grass and said, "Okay."

"Where's your mom?"

"Gone."

He stared straight at her. She saw no change in his scarred face except for his eyes.

"You scrape your cheek or something?"

"Called a malar rash. I just have it."

Mrs. Baker nodded slowly, but her frown intensified further. "All right, then," she finally said. A breeze rustled the colored leaves on her maple tree. "Best put on a warmer jacket before you catch cold."

He continued staring at her but made no movement. Somewhere nearby, a dog barked.

"All right, then," Mrs. Baker repeated. She tapped her cane once more as if in punctuation, then went back inside. Henry blinked again at the screen door's slap.

3

Later that week, Glen took Henry to an appointment with the boy's pediatric rheumatologist, Dr. Seinz. He'd made it with her after Henry experienced some heightened swelling in his feet and ankles, as well as slightly darkened urine. Dr. Seinz had ordered bloodwork and a urinalysis several days beforehand. She started the appointment by reviewing the results.

"Well, your white and red blood cell counts look okay," she said. "No worse than usual, anyway. But your kidney function is a little depressed, so I'm going to increase the dosage of one of your antimalarials. Let's me see those peds."

Henry had already removed his shoes and socks and rolled up his jeans. Dr. Seinz carefully inspected the joints in his lower extremities, pausing when he winced, then did a more cursory whole-body exam. She wrapped her stethoscope around her neck, pursed her lips, and said, "So, I'm going to up your naproxen a little, too, which should help with the swelling. Let me know if it doesn't or if you develop any oral ulcers. In combination, that could be sign your lupus is starting to flare up again."

Glen watched his son stiffen and said, "Will do."

Dr. Seinz gave Henry's knee a quick pat, then left the exam room while he rolled down his jeans. When Glen tried to help him with his shoes and socks, Henry brushed his hand away.

4

Mrs. Baker filled each new day much the same as the one before it. She rose a little before dawn, used the bathroom, dressed, and had tea and toast at the kitchen table while she read the newspaper. She labored once around the block listening to the birds and watching the sky lighten. Glancing at her morning TV talk shows, she rotated between crocheting and needlepoint projects. A couple of hours were spent after that reading, mostly memoirs she replaced often at the public library. Very occasionally, a little halfhearted organization was attempted of her husband's files and papers from

their fifty-four years together; Mrs. Baker mostly shuffled items from one pile to another in abject avoidance of throwing anything away. A sandwich with dill pickle chips comprised lunch. Her nap followed. She dabbled a bit afterwards with one of her word search magazines or the thousand-piece jigsaw puzzles she kept going on the dining room table. An hour or so playing the upright piano on which she used to give lessons came next. Weather permitting, a bit of attention would be paid to her backyard garden. Her few houseplants sometimes needed watering or pruning. Although no family or real friends remained with whom she corresponded, her email was checked late each afternoon. She ate dinner early: a bowl of soup with crackers on a tray table accompanied by the nightly news on television. DVDs of British detective series that she also checked out from the library concluded her evening. She was normally in bed by eight.

After her husband died, she considered getting a cat or dog for companionship, but decided she couldn't risk growing close to another beating heart that might also pass on.

5

On weekdays from 8 to 4, Glen worked as an occupational therapist at a rehab clinic across town not far from their old rental unit. His wife being gone meant leaving Henry alone for about an hour before and after school each day. The new district in which Henry was enrolled had no childcare program, and there was nothing private nearby with an opening available that Glen had been able to find since their move. He rued leaving his son at home alone and continued to look without success for alternative caretaking options.

His wife had moved out with no warning the previous year during Henry's most serious hospitalization. A two-sentence note from her was waiting on the kitchen counter for Glen when he got home from the hospital one night. She couldn't take it anymore, it said; she was done watching Henry suffer. Glen found her suitcase, a few clothes, and some toiletries missing, but nothing else.

She never returned for any of her other belongings and wouldn't respond to his cell phone messages, texts, or emails. He had no idea where she'd gone, nor did her mother or her few friends. She'd been between jobs at the time, so there was no employer with whom to check.

The hospital discharged Henry home a couple weeks later. Glen explained things to him in as brief, straightforward, and nonjudgmental a way as possible. He told Henry his mother loved him. Still, it took several months before he no longer heard his son crying himself to sleep.

6

Mrs. Baker continued to see Henry playing alone in his backyard almost every afternoon and noticed him walking to school each morning well after his father had left for work. She wondered about the butterfly scar on his cheek and the way he sometimes seemed to limp. The timing of her garden visits began to intentionally occur when she saw him in the backyard. Her raised beds bordered their shared hedge.

For more than a week out back together, they only exchanged curt nods in acknowledgement. A gray afternoon finally came when she caught him peeking her way and extended a couple of zucchinis across the hedge. She said, "Here."

"What?"

His action figures that day were scattered under the rosemary hedge. He straightened up onto his knees, squinted at her with one eye closed, and cocked his head.

"Take these," Mrs. Baker said. "Give them to your father. Cook them up with your supper."

The boy's expression remained impassive. He said, "That squash?"

"Something like. It's good."

He stood and took the vegetables from her. While he looked at them with suspicion, she said, "How about helping me with something in return?"

"What?"

"Rake those leaves." She pointed at the curling carpet of yellow and red under her maple tree. "Too much for me to manage anymore."

They stared at each other while she yanked her cardigan tighter. Henry could see her skull through her cap of white, cotton-candy hair. Her gray-blue eyes were hooded at the outside edges behind the rimless spectacles crooked on her small nose.

He said, "How?"

"Set those zucchinis on your picnic table and come through that gap in the hedge. She pointed back towards where their garages bordered the alley side by side. "Rake's just inside my garage door there."

He continued staring at her. Up close, the rash on his face looked angrier, creeping up the side of his nose. A sudden gust tossed his shock of brown curls. His hooded gray sweatshirt hung like an oversized drape on his waifish frame.

Mrs. Baker gestured with her chin. "Go on, get busy."

The boy did as he was told. She took the rake from him, demonstrated how to use it, then handed it back and watched him work. Several blocks away and off through the woods, the second-to-last train of the day passed: the commuter. She didn't say anything when some of the leaves escaped Henry's grasp as he carried his scooped bundles over and dumped them inside her trash can.

Mrs. Baker closed the lid when he finished, and he replaced the rake inside her garage's back door. They stood looking at each other again until she said, "Thanks."

He nodded.

"I should have let you crawl down inside the pile first," she said. "Covered you up. Didn't think of it."

"Never done that."

"Next time."

He gave a small sheepish grin, nodded again, and pushed through the hedge gap into his own backyard. The light had crept

towards gloaming. She watched him pick up the zucchinis on his way to his back door. Before going inside, he looked over at her and said, "Goodnight."

She took a turn nodding. His door clicked shut behind him. Her husband used to burn the leaves he raked up in an old oil drum. She had no idea what had happened to it, but the memory of that acrid smell pierced something inside her with renewed longing.

7

The next morning, with just the slightest wash of dawn blushing the eastern sky, Mrs. Baker and Glen emerged onto their front steps to retrieve their morning newspapers at the same time. Mrs. Baker watched him bend his tall, lanky frame and lift his paper from the mat. He watched her use her cane to do the same, then they stood looking at each other, separated by a half-dozen yards.

"Thanks for the squash," Glen said.

"You're welcome."

"It was good."

"I'm glad."

He nodded. "My son said he helped you."

"He did." She paused. "Indeed."

"Hope he does that again."

A pick-up truck passed slowly in the street, its headlights creamy in the murky half-light.

Mrs. Baker said, "He's a nice boy."

The corners of Glen's lips raised. He ran a hand over his thinning hair, used it to give a little mock salute, and they both returned inside their houses.

8

After his father left for work each morning, Henry slid the shoebox out from under his bed, sat on its edge, and looked through the few mementos of his mother he'd managed to accumulate. The box contained mostly photographs, but there was also a brush

that held a few strands of her hair, a snow globe she'd brought for him during one of his longer hospitalizations, and a small spray bottle of her perfume.

He parceled out whiffs of the perfume in order to save her scent for as long as possible. Occasionally, he studied the snow globe, turning it this way and that. Often, he ran his fingertip across the brush's bristles or particular photographs. Soon after their move, he chose one of the oldest snapshots of her holding him on her lap to keep in his daypack; he stole looks at it from time to time at his new school.

His bedroom faced Mrs. Baker's at the side of the house. Sometimes, when she returned from her morning walk and was changing from sneakers into moccasins, she could see him going through the box from the edge of her own bed through her muslin curtains. When she did, she only watched for a few moments before pressing her mouth into a tight line and leaving him to the privacy of his revery.

9

The med changes Dr. Seinz made seemed to help a bit. Henry's urine lightened some, and the swelling in his ankles diminished, although his feet remained tender. When he developed a small canker sore behind his lower lip, Henry kept it to himself and tried not to probe at it with his tongue when his father was around.

His new school was much bigger than his old one, and Henry was content to lose himself among its masses; he did well enough in class, spoke only when called upon, ate alone, and drew in a notebook during recess.

Glen had always been solitary by nature, grew more so with Henry's medical challenges, and retreated even further after his wife left and they moved. He had an older sister in an adjoining state with whom he stayed in semi-regular contact by text. When pressed by work colleagues, he joined one of their TGIFs, but departed quickly because he felt ashamed about leaving Henry alone even a little longer than usual; he never went again.

Mrs. Baker's social interactions had gradually diminished after the passing of her husband and others in their small social circle; the few remaining people she knew marginally well had all moved into retirement homes or closer to younger relatives. Almost no one in her neighborhood of small, clapboard houses had been a longtime owner like her, so she hardly recognized anyone there anymore.

10

Smiles and short, stiff waves became the accustomed greeting between the new neighbors. Mrs. Baker continued to pass on fall vegetables to Henry: beets, turnips, late corn, a small, mishappened pumpkin that he eventually carved for Halloween with his father's assistance. He started helping her in the garden from time to time. She waited until enough additional leaves had accumulated to have him rake them into a pile she could cover him with and heard him giggling down inside it when she did.

One evening, Glen watched her struggle dragging her garbage can to the alley for collection, so without asking, began bringing that back and forth for her. In silent exchange, she baked them a loaf of pumpkin bread, wrapped it in cellophane, and left it on their front step before Glen came out for his newspaper one morning.

For Halloween itself, Henry insisted on wearing the same dinosaur costume his mother had made for him two years earlier. Their first trick-or-treating stop was at Mrs. Baker's house. Glen stayed back at the dim edge of the front walk while Henry rang the bell. Mrs. Baker made a delighted fuss over him before offering him her black plastic cauldron of candy to choose from; after he took a couple pieces, she dropped another handful into his open pillowcase. Then she made him wait until she could get an old Polaroid camera and take his picture under her porchlight.

"This," she told him as it slid out of the slot at the bottom, "will go on my fridge."

When she held it up for Glen, he nodded and grinned, though it was too far away for him to see clearly.

11

Not long after Halloween, the weather turned too cold to be out in the backyard, so Mrs. Baker spent more time at her piano next to one of her living room's side windows. On an afternoon after she finished playing a jaunty march, she looked up to see Henry watching her from his own living room window a few feet away. He stood very still wearing a far-off expression before suddenly clapping.

Mrs. Baker raised her window and gestured for him to do the same. When he had, she said, "You like music?"

"We had a piano. My mom used to play." His shrug was slight. "She was going to teach me."

The rosemary hedge stood taller between their houses where a few branches nodded above their windowsills on the cold breeze. Mrs. Baker squeezed the handle of her cane, then said, "I could do that. Write your dad a note and come over." When Henry squinted and cocked his head, she added, "Go on now, get busy."

After he disappeared, she cracked open her front door, sat back down on the piano bench, and scooted over, leaving room for him.

Forty-five minutes later, Glen knocked on her open door, but Mrs. Baker and Henry didn't hear him over the music from the piano, so he stepped inside and listened to them. They were playing the Chopsticks duet, Henry using a single finger for the high part.

When they finished, Glen shifted his weight, and the two of them glanced over at him.

"Good…you found the note." Mrs. Baker looked from Glen to Henry and back, then said, "This one learns fast. Why doesn't he start coming over here after school so we can continue lessons?"

She hesitated for an extended beat. "No charge, and it won't be a bother. He can come over, too, when you leave for work in the morning."

Glen nodded. Seeing his son's quiet smile, a heat rose behind his eyes.

12

When Henry pushed through the front door in the mornings, Mrs. Baker had hot chocolate waiting for him on the dining room table where they worked on the jigsaw together until it was time for him to leave for school. In the afternoons, he first finished his homework in the same spot with a snack while she did word searches or worked more on the puzzle. They spent the rest of their time until Glen arrived at the piano together.

As she had with all her former students, she started him on scales, then rudimentary exercises, and by the first snowfall, he was playing very simple songs with both hands. Glen let himself in each afternoon and perched for a few minutes on the arm of the couch watching and listening to them. Henry had long, narrow fingers like his mother's, and he leaned over the keys just like she used to do.

When they finished playing, a few short pleasantries were exchanged. Mrs. Baker often sent them home with something she'd baked — cookies, scones, muffins. Every now and then, when Glen had stopped at the grocery store on the way home, he brought her a small bouquet of flowers from the tub at the checkout line. Gratitude was a mumbled utterance. Then the stillness of their own houses followed, along with the separate ticking of their furnaces, the groan of their floorboards, the wind rattling their windows when flurries came.

13

One afternoon, as Henry dumped his books from his daypack onto Mrs. Baker's dining room table, the photograph of his mother and him came with them. It slid face-up between his hot chocolate mug and the collection of puzzle pieces she was sorting through. Their eyes met. His remained impassive, but she could see them struggling.

"She's pretty," Mrs. Baker said softly. "Your mom."

He snatched the photograph, stuffed it back in his daypack, and opened a book.

She asked, "What's she like?"

He turned a few pages, shrugged without looking at her, then mumbled, "Nice."

He didn't see Mrs. Baker nod slowly. She went back to sorting puzzle pieces. He opened a notebook and copied a math problem into it.

14

Mrs. Baker didn't see Henry's mother parked at the curb across and up the street until a blustery afternoon in early December. The old woman noticed her through the front door she always cracked for Glen. The streetlights had begun coming on earlier with the gathering darkness and one above her car cast a yellowish tint on her windshield. His mother looked older than the woman in the photograph, her hair shorter under a knit cap, but there was no mistaking the expression on her face as she stared at Mrs. Baker's house; it matched the one that had been on Henry's that afternoon in his living room window after she finished playing the piano march.

Mrs. Baker lowered the palm she'd raised instinctively against her chest. Behind her, Henry fingered in repetition the opening of Für Elise. She waited for her breathing to slow before resuming her place next to him on the piano bench and leaning her cane against her thigh.

15

One morning shortly afterward, Henry took a sip of hot chocolate, studied Mrs. Baker as she fit together two puzzle pieces and asked, "Do you have any children?"

The old woman set down the pieces and looked at him. She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"We couldn't. My husband and I."

"Shucks."

"Yeah."

When he turned back to the puzzle, she did, too. They worked for another couple of minutes until Henry said, "You don't have any pictures of Mr. Baker around."

"No."

"How come?"

"Too hard for me to look at. They're all stored away."

"Tell me something about him."

"Oh." She tilted her head back and forth, considering, before saying, "He worked as a mechanic. He was solid, sturdy. I felt safe with him."

"Like my dad."

She nodded. "Yes, like that."

16

When a second canker sore developed in the back of Henry's mouth, he kept that to himself, too. He did the same with his increased joint pain and explained away his loss of appetite as being due to the extra snacks that Mrs. Baker had begun preparing for him. But he couldn't hide the fact that fatigue began luring him to bed earlier and earlier or the fever that spiked the week before Christmas. Glen gave him aspirin, and although the fever inched down afterwards, he spent the night in his son's bedroom slumped over in a folding chair.

During the wee hours, he awoke to a clipped cry from Henry, a sound he'd never heard before. He sprang to his feet to find his son jerking convulsively in bed with his eyes rolled back and a froth of foam at one corner of his mouth.

"Henry," he cried. "No!"

He'd received limited training after Henry's diagnosis should a seizure ever occur but could recall little of it. When his son's right arm shot out as rigid as a board, Glen turned him as gently as possible on his side in the other direction, fished his cell phone from his pocket, and called 911.

Mrs. Baker awoke to the scream of an approaching siren. She was standing in her robe under the porchlight on her front step

when the paramedics wheeled Henry to the ambulance at the curb. Glen hurried alongside holding his son's hand and followed the stretcher up inside its open back doors. Breaths came in short, frosty clouds, including the one from the stretcher. She held the fingertips of one hand over her trembling lips and clutched her robe to her chest with the other as the flashing lights and whine of the siren dissipated into the black, frigid night.

17

The next day, Mrs. Baker checked often for any activity at the house next door. She did her best not to regard her empty dining room chair or piano bench, but it proved difficult. She waited until late afternoon before going over and bringing back Glen's newspaper from the front step so their house wouldn't appear vacant. She dropped it in a cardboard box she set in her entryway. The following afternoon at about the same time, she did the same and retrieved the contents of their mailbox as well, moving carefully and deliberately with her cane in a dusting of new snow. On each trip, she glanced up the street where Henry's mother sat in her car at the curb under the streetlamp's yellow canopy.

Her kitchen wall phone rang as she was washing her dinner dishes that second evening. It was Glen.

"Oh, Good Lord," she said when she recognized his voice. "Please tell me he's okay."

"Well, I can't tell you that, but he is stable."

"What's wrong?"

"He has lupus." There was a pause. "Had it since birth. Very rare in children, especially boys, but there you go. Seizures can occur if it reaches certain stages, but he'd never had one before the other night." Another muffled pause followed. "Sorry," Glen resumed. "His nurse just told me they're trying a new anti-convulsive med tonight because he had another milder seizure earlier today."

Her palm had risen again to her chest. She said, "I'm so sorry."

She heard him exhale before saying, "They tell me he's out of

the woods, that he'll be okay. But we still have a ways to go. This is definitely new territory we're into here."

"Can I come visit?"

"Only family, I'm afraid."

"I'm bringing over your newspaper and mail. What else can I do?"

"Thanks, nothing."

Henry's Halloween photo stared back at her from the refrigerator. She said, "Please tell him I send my best. I'm thinking of him…of you both."

"Appreciate that." Another voice came from the room. "Listen, I have to go. I'll be in touch."

The line went dead. Very slowly, Mrs. Baker replaced the receiver on its coiled cord. The furnace kicked on. Beyond the woods, the last evening train clattered past.

18

Over the next few days, Mrs. Baker had no real appetite; she had to force herself to eat. She curtailed her morning walks and trips to the library so she wouldn't miss a call from Glen. None of her daily activities proved much of a distraction. She slept fitfully.

Her daily visits to retrieve Glen's newspaper and mail continued. On each, she glanced at the familiar car with its lone passenger parked up the street a couple houses away. On the fourth afternoon, she stopped at the end of her front walk under the wash of her own streetlamp and looked at Henry's mother. With half her face in shadow, the young woman stared back, completely still. Mrs. Baker slowly raised her cane, and after a moment, Henry's mother tentatively returned the gesture with several fingers, her shoulders slumped. Mrs. Baker nodded once, then made her way up the walk and back into her house.

Perhaps five minutes passed before Mrs. Baker heard her doorbell ring. She wasn't surprised and had been careful not to turn out the porchlight. She hadn't even taken off her coat; she'd dropped the items she held in the cardboard box but hadn't left

the entryway at all. She licked her lips, took a deep breath, and reopened the door. Henry's mother stood in her knit cap as perfectly still as she'd been behind the wheel of her parked car, and Mrs. Baker thought, he has your eyes.

For several, long moments, the two women regarded each other silently. Henry's mother appeared older than Mrs. Baker had imagined, more worn and wearier, but that could have been due to her forehead wrinkling and those troubled eyes brimming. No tears fell.

Finally, Mrs. Baker said, "He's in the hospital, but his father told me he's going to be all right. Henry."

His mother's shoulders sagged, and she looked away, whether from relief or concern or both, Mrs. Baker couldn't determine. The young woman nodded slowly, swallowed once hard, turned back and said, "Thank you."

Mrs. Baker reached out and clasped one of her hands in both of her own. It felt cold, bone-dry, almost brittle. They looked at each other while Henry's mother nodded a few more times, then withdrew her hand and went down the steps. Mrs. Baker watched her disappear up the sidewalk into the darkness and re-emerge under the streetlamp at her car. The old woman closed her front door, leaned back against it, and squeezed her eyes shut.

The car's engine started, then it crawled away in a whisper through the covering of new snow.

19

Henry's mother wasn't parked at the curb when Mrs. Baker made her visit next door the following afternoon. She wasn't surprised about that either. There was only one regional hospital nearby, and Mrs. Baker felt pretty sure her car was parked there now and probably had been since the prior evening. She wouldn't speculate as to whether Henry's mother had chosen to enter the hospital; she didn't allow her thoughts to go there.

When she got home, her answering machine's message light was blinking on the entryway table. She pushed the play button and listened to Glen tell her that Henry was about to be transferred to a larger, university-affiliated hospital up in the capital city several hours away where he could receive experimental treatments for the more serious challenges with his lupus that they were now dealing with. He said he was travelling in the ambulance with Henry and that his sister would come over to the house in a week or two and drive his car up. He said she'd probably pack up for movers then, too, because a relocation for them near the new hospital seemed a necessary next step. He said he'd call again to give her an update. He thanked her, told her they wouldn't forget her, and that they were truly in her debt.

With a clatter, Mrs. Baker dropped the things she held into the cardboard box, hung her overcoat on its peg, and cinched her cardigan close. She used her cane to make her slow way over the creaking floorboards to the piano where she lowered herself onto its bench. Even if Henry's mother wasn't yet with them, which to Mrs. Baker seemed likely, the old woman supposed she would find her way up there at some point. She hoped so, anyway, as much as she'd hoped for anything. She fingered a few notes of Für Elise and thought of the young woman's dry hand, her tortured eyes. Mrs. Baker's fingers halted on the keys, her heart aching. A gust of wind rattled the window, the furnace ticked on, the late train rumbled past beyond the dark, empty woods.

Satan on Your Best Day

Julian Ford

I woke up late that morning, as I did most third-grade mornings. My mother was there in the warm bedroom light, whispering, coaxing me awake.

Come on, honey, her voice soothed. *It's time for school. Come on, honey. Come on.*

I had hated school even then. My first two years had come and gone in a flurry of jump-roping and how-do-you-do-ing, but when I realized I was in for the long haul, I had become unenthused with the whole affair.

Come on honey. The field trip.

My eyes opened, warm light and the cream-yellow of my room. I had forgotten about the field trip — Mrs. McKenzie's whole class was going apple picking. I wiped my eyes and yawned, and my mother tossed my hair with hands I could barely see.

"Come on hon," she muttered, "don't be late again. Good day, good day!"

I nodded dutifully, and she glided away.

I dressed in speedy silence, legs stuffed into billowy denim, shirt and shoe and backpack all like air against my skin. No malingering today, I felt something bright and vivacious in the air, brazen excitement. In the kitchen my father sat and read the paper as I took my place opposite him, my mother's hands shuffling quickly and hectic a cereal bowl before me. Yes, yes. Good day. Good day.

The classroom smelled like ink spills and urine and bubblegum. Mrs. McKenzie had drawn a great big brown tree on the white board, flushed with ruby red circles hiding in the green. *Field trip today!* It read beneath the tree.

"Okay, my good little boys and girls," she chirruped, "let's line up for a headcount!"

The rushing of feet like the sound of wings fluttering, and the pushing and shoving of limbs. I ended up wedged in between Suzie Costilla and someone about whom I didn't care.

Standing next to Suzie, doing my best not to look at her, a warmth like summer came over me. Her hair was black, and when she turned her head to see her friends it brushed my shoulder. The smell of flowers hitherto uncategorized. I had to say something for reasons I couldn't surmise. I counted my breath, a trick my mother had taught me when I had to get my vaccine shots for school. Then I tapped Suzie's arm. Where my finger touched, a white print ghosted on her sandy skin for only a moment.

"Hey. Hey Suzie."

"Hey what."

"Did you know if you eat apple seeds you die?"

She turned and looked at me. A lascivious crawling feeling.

"Hm?"

"Apple seeds. If you eat them you die."

Her brown eyes performed an amazing cartwheeling dance over me, gliding up and down. She shook her head.

"Are you serious?"

I nodded, grim. "Completely serious." I'm sure my eyes were like dinner plates.

She blinked at me. I blinked at her. My eyes and hers, dancing together. Then she smiled, like the sun pouring from out of smoky dim horizons, like light beams touching unwarmed dawn.

"Oh, shut up."

She turned around. My face was like a furnace when Mrs. McKenzie came by and patted my head. *Eleven*, she said, ignorant of the world below her. I grinned stupidly at nothing in particular.

The gasoline-leather smell of the bus made me think of concrete blacktop and dusty parking lots. Boarding, I watched Suzie fall away from me. I did everything in my power to look as uninterested and disaffected as possible, hoping maybe Suzie could see how cool I was. I kept it up until the gym teacher Mr. Zelinski sat down next to me, and then the charade was over. He

had little business sitting next to me that day, but when there weren't enough chaperones, he got to leave his dark, bleachy closet office and step into the light as tag-along. I kept my eyes to the window, watching the town unspool out and hoping it would be enough to keep him at bay. It was not.

"Y'alright with me sitting here, Charlie?"

Charlie wasn't my name but I nodded just the same. Mr. Zelinski grunted and nodded.

"What are we doing today, Charlie."

"Apple picking, Mr. Zelinski." I could see him in the corner of my vision — his white beard, yellowed years of tobacco, the black tar lines that ran along the parapet-teeth in his lower jaw, his viny nostril hairs spooling out.

"Excited?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess."

When I nodded back, a little dog-snort escaped his nostrils. I could see he wanted to say more but didn't. My chest felt heavy and I turned away. Outside, the landscape shifted and transmuted, old church steeples and shopping malls to wheat fields and reddening trees, all haloed by white birds ever overhead. It was very good, even with Mr. Zelinski breathing at my side.

The orchard appeared just moments after we bumped over the Maryland-Pennsylvania state line. Trees for miles, from the road out across the gentle crests of the hillsides, towering obelisks. The road ran up an old dusty hill to a barn, an antique that shone red as the apples. Along the barn doors, beaming fruits adorned a lazy banner. *Ed's Apple Orchard*, it read. I wondered who Ed was. Maybe a tall, spruce face, old as the earth, a great white beard far cleaner than Mr. Zelinski's, a lake-like voice. Beyond the barn, the hills ran for what seemed to be the rest of comprehensible earth. I wanted to imagine what it looked like in the woods, but before I could, Mr. Zelenski rose and broke the reveries of my classmates.

"OKAY-BOYS-AND-GIRLS-GET-UP-AND-GET-MOVING-BECAUSE-ITS-JUST-ME-AND-MRS-MCKENZIE-AND-YOU-DONT-WANT-TO-MAKE-IT-ANY-HARDER-FOR-US-THAN-IT-NEEDS-TO-BE!!!!!"

The voice shook the bus. Children stood in great pools of chatter, giggling and scuffing sneakers, spooked by Mr. Zelinski. In the back, Mrs. McKenzie made an admirable attempt to cohere the pandemonium. "Come on, boys and girls," she sang, "we have to go meet farmer Ed!" Even as a child, I felt a spark of pity for her.

We erupted from the bus like a torrent, pluming into a gravel lot. There were adults waiting outside, sweet guiding figures in gingham and wool. Kind and smiling, a farmer fellow (Ed?) stepped forward to address us.

"Hello boys and girls!" He announced. His face shone red and speckled in the sun. No beard, younger than I had imagined. "Are we happy today! Who's ready for a farm tour!"

Moans and murmurs. I already saw how it would go.

The tour was long and arduous, weary children marching through too-windy corn shoots and too-bright fields. The Mennonite-actors did their best to keep us all together, telling jokes and stories, but they were understaffed and over-tasked. All morning long, the air was filled with the well-meaning shrieks of "*little boy get back here!*" and "*little girl you shouldn't be touching that!*" In spite of the heat, though, I enjoyed the newness of it. We marched through apple thickets and I touched the dim rubied skin of the fruits. I hopped horse droppings and giggled. I leaned against old fence posts to watch the cars go by on the far-off road. Instead of listening to the woman leading the tour I watched for Suzie, imagining her black hair in the thronging children. I never quite saw her.

The tour ended back in the barn. The tour woman, Sarah, brought us before a wooden barrel with a huge handle sticking out of the top. We encircled her. In the center, Sarah addressed us.

"Children, look here, look here. This is how people used to make butter in the old days! A long time ago, you had to do everything by hand, not like now." A small *wooooaaaoowwww* went through the circle of children. Somewhere in the group, a hand shot up.

"Did you have to make everything by hand?"

The woman nodded, her eyes excited.

"Yes, children, everything. Even our clothes!"

Another, louder *woooaaaoowwww,* rising and falling like a sea tide. She seemed to have a power over us that the other workers had lacked, a charisma I couldn't place. I turned around and saw Mrs. McKenzie stood just behind us. I cocked my chin at her. *Is that true,* my eyes asked her, *is that really true?* In psychic understanding, she nodded. A third *woooaaaoowwww* unfurled in my mind.

In the center of the circle, Sarah pumped the great wooden instrument, the muscles under her arms flexing and working with agrarian strength, the wood of the old dinosaur creaking and uttering beneath her. The process went on for some time, and the class watched her dumb and mute. Her forehead beaded with sweat, and a single black hair curled out from under her headdress. In my stomach I felt a comfortable strange warmth, running down from my sternum to mid-thigh. My breath started to quicken. For some reason, I wondered where Suzie was. The woman heaved and worked and grunted, looking up and catching my eyes.

"And boys and girls," she said. "Eventually, if you do that for long enough, you get…"

A pause, a ruffling and shuffling of her gingham blouse. Then from somewhere I couldn't see, she unearthed a pure-white hunk of ivory.

"…This!"

The whole room was quiet for the space of what felt like an hour, as ones who had witnessed a great and world-shaping event. Her eyes were still on me it seemed, shining deep white light behind their pupils. I wanted to speak but could not. My words were dry and ineffectual in my throat. From the crowd, another child's voice came.

"So, all that work just for that little thing?"

Sarah laughed, and the spell was broken; noise came back into the world.

"Well," she said, "nothing comes easy under God's skies."

Then the tour was over, and we were free to escape and apple-pick in the wilds of the orchard.

Suzie was standing alone when I found her on the edge of the trees, far from the rest of the class. Her eyes were caught in the canopy above, one foot crossed in front of the other, like a sculptor considering a half-made shape. What way forward, what way ahead, how shall this process continue. She was a popular girl, usually encumbered by a gaggle of others, but now she stood alone. For a moment, I considered turning around and letting her be — playing tag, or stick-dueling with one of the other boys — but in my heart feathers ruffled, and my feet stayed. I hesitated. Then I called out.

"Is it an apple?" I asked.

She turned around and looked at me. Brown eyes that ran the length of the earth. She blinked and blinked again.

"Is it true?" She asked. "Is it true what you said?"

I blinked back. "Uh. What?"

"About apple seeds!" She exclaimed. "*Duh.* Would we die if we ate one?"

I said nothing for a moment, pacing forward to join her. "What. Oh. Right. Uh, I dunno. I mean, I think so."

"That doesn't make any sense. You don't make any kind of sense. Why would teachers even let us eat it if it killed us."

I shrugged. "I don't know, Suzie. It's just something I heard."

"Where did you hear it from?"

"Oh, you know," I said. "Like, around."

She shook her head and giggled. "You're so dumb," she said, hitting me in the shoulder. "Here, look, you need to do something for me." She shot a finger up into the canopy. "See it?"

I looked. At first I saw only the gadding leaves, the slithering branches. The trees grew taller on the edge of the orchard. Then, I saw it, protuberant and fire-red.

"Oh boy. That's really up there."

"Doesn't it look so good?" She said, more a demand of agreement than anything. "It's so high up, but I want it so bad."

"Try climbing it?"

"I tried, but I'm not strong enough. Plus the bark hurt my hands. You think you could help me?"

I hesitated. "Should we get a teacher?"

"Oh, you're no fun." She scoffed. "We could do it ourselves, I bet. I don't like Mr. Zelinski a whole lot." To this we shared a nod of agreement.

I looked at the tree, then Suzie, then back to the tree. Reaching out and running my hand along the coarse bark. There were no branches at arm level, not even any low enough to reach if you jumped. My eyes crawled along the height of the tree, from root to top. I gripped at the bark and licked my lips.

"What if," I began without looking back, "what if I held you up and you grabbed it?"

"Huh?"

"Like, on my shoulders."

"Is that allowed?"

I hesitated for a moment. We both knew it wasn't.

"I don't think so," I muttered. "Is that alright?" I looked away from the tree bark and saw the rascal-grin etched along her face. I knew her answer before she said it.

She was light, but not as light as I'd hoped. Her thighs were unbalanced on my shoulders, and after only a few seconds I was swaying. I could hear her huffing through her nostrils above me, annoyed.

"Keep me still! I can't grab it with you moving around!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying," I huffed. "Can you reach it?"

Instead of answering, Suzie swiped at the air with her arms, rocking us like a boat in a storm. I did what I could to assist, standing on my tip-toes, but it was for nothing. She was undeterred. I felt her thigh muscles squeeze around my shoulder.

"If you jumped for it, I could."

"What?"

"Come on!" She pleaded, kicking her feet. "I almost have it!"

I huffed, peering up to the fruit. It hung placid, wafting in the fall breeze, perfectly unreachable. Behind me, where I couldn't see, I could hear the shouts and laughs of my classmates. Nobody was close, I was certain, no teachers or adults. I looked at the fruit above and grit my teeth, molar grinding against molar. I wanted it very badly. My hands moved from her ankles to her thighs and I gripped tight.

"Get ready, Suzie."

I hefted my feet off the ground and we went careening. I felt her swipe, but no luck. I jumped again, harder, the sinews in my denim pants stretching. Suzie pressed me on, telling me to get higher, and I obeyed, grunting and sweating, and her swiping and swiping. I jumped higher and higher, working like a locomotive.

"More," she said, "I almost have it, more, more, more—"

At my foot, something grasped tight. A wandering root, a muscle spasm, maybe a snake. A noise came from my throat, a guttural cough.

"*Ho my God*—"

A *thunk* against the earth and a *boom* and a *crack*. The fall was swift and crashing.Suzie fell behind me and I went careening forward, my forehead slamming into something hard and jagged. My vision erupted, white kernels popping and bouncing off the other. A flapping and fluttering of wings in the dark, as birds in departure. Everything was dark for a moment. Then everything was blue, then green. I floated in the colors and thought no thoughts.

Sensation returned slowly. The warmth of the sun on my skin, the tickling of grass tongues along my ears, the sound of faraway children. I sat up and wiped my eyes, remembering who I was. I turned. At my side, Suzie clutched her forehead and moaned. I blinked and blinked again. The colors of it all seemed wrong, I thought. There was a strange redness in her fingers, the color of sunset spilling out along her brown cheeks. Optical illusion from a concussion, perhaps. Then I realized what the red was.

"Oh," I said. "Oh god, um, Suzie. Suzie. Oh God. Uh, listen, I can go get a band-aid, I can go get Mrs. McKenzie, Suzie, oh my god, uh, I can um uh—"

In her eyes, furious water brimmed. She leaned her head back and cry-screamed, the skies splitting open. I leaned in and tried to hug her, the way my parents did when I hurt myself. Then through the trees, I saw him, his white beard storming down the green, his feet crushing down the vines and the ivy.

"—Oh *shit*."

Mr. Zelinski came roaring curses, separating me from the crying Suzie in an instant, his arms steely and forceful.

"WHAT-IN-THE-NAME-OF-SON-OF-A-BITCH…"

In the trees I could see that children had followed him, circling the scene in the trees all around us. Perhaps they had seen us even before the fall. Mrs. McKenzie was there too, standing in the circle of children, her face downcast and disappointed. Mr. Zelinski knelt down, consoling the crying girl, inspecting her for bruises, for marks, for wounds, and wiping the blood from her forehead. I stood in silence for a moment, and then something moved me to speak.

"I, uh, well, I don't really", I stammered, "I don't really know how that happened, we were just trying to get that apple up there and I—"

Mr. Zelinski turned, his face red underneath the white of his hair. "Goddamn it, Charlie, get your nose out of it," he demanded. "You're like Satan on your best day! Go see Mrs. McKenzie!"

I tripped back. No words left. Around me I could hear voices, classmates giggling, Mrs. McKenzie shushing, the inquiring tones of the farm keepers. I was stumbling without looking, Mrs. McKenzie caught me in the trees, and I smelled her hypnosis perfume, the lavender and the myrrh and the chamomile. She took my arm, a firm and gentle hand around my bicep, and led me away from Suzie. Following Ms. McKenzie, I looked into Suzie's brown eyes and she looked into mine. No words to be spoken. My face was hot and wet.

There was a scolding in the trees afterwards, Mr. Zelinski and Ms. McKenzie both. Assurance of parent phone calls and punishments. I answered exactly how I was supposed to and never once

told a lie, looking at my feet the whole time. It didn't matter. When the scolding was finished and Mr. Zelinski had taken care of Suzie's injuries, I sat alone in the trees until the field trip was over. When we returned to the bus, I watched for Suzie's black hair, hoping to apologize. I never saw her.

On the ride back, there were no seagulls in the sky. I didn't notice when we bumped over the Pennsylvania-Maryland state line. Mr. Zelinski sat next to me and said nothing, and it made me happy that he didn't. We were back in the classroom soon enough, then back getting a headcount, and then at the ring of the bell, back outside. Some boys I knew found me at the bus loop and told me to come over.

"We're all gonna ride the same bus back today, and we can shoot Nerf guns at each other after."

"I'm okay guys," I said. "I'm actually going to walk home today."

They shrugged, then went off, running and arguing.

Instead of walking straight home, I walked through the neighborhoods, mostly alone. As the day grew dark, the windows of the houses glowed soft and fire colored. Pretty soon, the sun was setting. On Marco Street, I picked up a stick and tapped it against my thigh for a while. From an oak tree, a squirrel skipped down and sat in front of me, its tail thrusting and swishing in the air. I looked at the stick in my hand and wanted very, very badly to throw it at the squirrel. Then I saw the squirrel's watery eyes, and I saw what it wanted, and I thought *I don't know what I want.*

At home, when dinner was ready, I ate quietly. My mother asked me how my day was, and I answered in rote practice.

"It was good."

"Yeah, honey? How was the orchard? Was it fun?"

"Yeah. Really fun."

"Learn anything new?" My father asked from the other side of the table.

"Mhm. About butter. Yeah. Yeah."

In the corners of my darkening vision, my mother leaned in.

"Baby, is everything okay?" She asked me. I nodded.

"Mhm. It was super fun."

In the other room, the phone rang. My father waved it off.

"After dinner. They can call back."

We kept eating. Then, a strange sensation emanated down from my head into my nostrils, my toes, my fingers, my back. I put my fork down for a second, feeling my back shake and shiver. Then my mother had her arms around me, and my father was holding my hands, and all the lights looked bleary, and the snot was running down my face.

"I didn't even want it, Mommy," I sobbed, "I didn't even want it, Daddy, I didn't even want it."

Honorable Mention, 2023 Fiction Collections

Drift

Jaryd Porter

The air smelled of dead skin and phlegm. The snow parted for a pair of beaten-up Converse. Santo didn't bother to lift his feet, anymore. It was a waste of energy. He believed that this was a form of karmic punishment for everything he'd stolen, but Santo couldn't bring himself to believe that anyone deserved such misfortune. He peeled back broken, bloody lips to exhale a cloud of hot breath ahead of him. The wind whipped that warm cloud around his face and dragged it off into the distance. His feet began to drag through the snow, packing it between his laces and under the tongue of his shoes. He gasped, shivering and pulling in the stale breath which was being pulled away from him bit by bit.

"I…could…kill…for…a…coffee," he whispered, needing to hear his own voice. He only heard it in his right ear. His mouth tasted like blood. Iron, rust, pennies…Santo's lips dripped, deeply red.

"I…could…*kill*…for…a…*hot*…coffee," Santo said.

His lips cut themselves with the bladed, serrated dead skin as he trembled and mashed them together. Part of it had to be conscious, because Santo was relieved that he responded to himself. His throat built up the reply like an upheaval of soil or a grave being exhumed. "You…couldn't…*kill*…if…you…tried."

The snow was compacted against his ankles. If he had taken flight, his ankles may have shattered like icicles on first impact. He was tired, but he heard this voice. It came from all around him. His bloody upper lip lifted and revealed shiny, white teeth: glossy, tinted, tainted. The drippings from his nose were frozen streams, dammed the moment they met his thin mustache, for they lacked the fortitude to survive this inane obstacle. Damned the moment he hit that invisible patch of ice on the road and his car spun into

the snow drift, drifting off of the road and into the pale mound, which could not recall the last instance in which it had the power to give life, rather than take it. Santo was damned from the start.

Santo reasoned that he was talking into the wind and it made a reply. He reached into his pocket and pulled an American Spirit from his ratty jeans, sheering wind cutting through the metastasized patchwork on his knees. He held the bent cigarette in a closed fist. It had snagged a small carpet of pocket lint. Santo's fingers were too cold and uncoordinated to dislocate the acquired lint or to seize the rogue cigarette with efficacy. He winced against the cutting nature of the wind. He had made himself an adversary to it when he exited his vehicle and went wandering through the blizzard.

He braced his arms tight around his torso. His skeleton shrank and tightened, skin turning to fire. Frostbite had a burn like nothing Santo ever felt before. His legs would hardly bend to let him pick up his feet. He got the feeling that it might be easier to list to the left, then to the right, and let gravity pull him into the trench along the highway. For the Laws of Physics to let him slip through its fingers and sink into the whiteout seemed like a mercy.

In his mind, he heard the ticking of the metronome. The burning at his fingertips was the sting of blisters forming as his older brother chewed on a toothpick and watched Santo slap the bass guitar for hours and hours. Juan tapped his foot in accordance with the tick and tock, while César bobbed his head. César who was the studious little brother. His body had been stunted and become so frail. Brittle bones meant expensive hospital bills. Scholarships or a full ride would still mean a family in debt and the kid was too smart not to notice how his parents and brothers scraped and scrounged for every bit of cheddar. It was all for César, because without the extra crash, even with scholarships or a full ride, every broken bone, bruise, and fracture put the family in financial peril.

Santo opened his eyes. The frost from his tears almost welded them shut. The car would likely be found and, if abandoned, it would be searched. Santo couldn't risk his car being searched and

impounded. He was thinking of the risks, now. At this point, he was willing to resign himself to the good will of the elements, but he could see César sitting in his motorized wheelchair, waiting for his older brother to come home. If Santo died in the cold, Juan would go through his personal possessions and find a few packs of American Spirits buried underneath a dozen pairs of folded boxers. Santo feared that he would be caught with cigarettes more than Juan digging underneath the folded pairs of socks and finding lifted jewelry and wallets. Hot property to be fenced off. Santo was afraid that Juan would find these things and start to see Santo instead of innocent Martín. César would find out that his brother was a myth.

It was a difficult reality to accept that he wouldn't make it. Not in this blizzard. He couldn't see more than five feet ahead of himself. Every inch behind the wall of frozen white yielded a deep, unending black. Vanta black could disappear into a void like that, rendered finite and further devoid. Santo glared at his obstacle, starting to recognize its infinity. If he walked on, he would be lost to this starved expanse as it devoured all of Santo and all of Martín, like they were one man. As much as Santo wanted Martín to be a bass player with a flashy sports car and as much as Martín wanted Santo to bring home money to provide for the family, they were both being subjected to the same torment and the same tear. Santo shuffled, turning his back to the wind and pulling a KC Chiefs lighter from his jean pocket. Red with the white arrowhead, but most of the fine detail had been scratched away. Santo had lifted this lighter and kept it. No one was looking for their Chiefs Bic lighter.

"Okay…okay…we're okay, Martín," Santo said, placing the cigarette between his lips. He tasted the blood, then the paper, finally the stale tobacco. Santo bit down on it as his lips were unreliable in this persisting sub-zero climate. The last bank that Santo drove by had read "-15 C." Santo was unsure of how many degrees Fahrenheit that would translate to, but the saw teeth of the passing wind informed him that it was likely sub-zero in Fahrenheit,

as well. Santo felt a pained, tingling smile emerge. César could've translated Celsius to Fahrenheit in a second.

"We're not okay. You should've killed that guy. He took your gun from you and he saw your face. You should've killed him," he said to himself.

Santo produced a small flame with a careful flick of the BIC. The flame was brief. The flame lasted less than a second. Twenty-two years for a flame. The fire was old enough to support his family and grow and work for stingy white men who called him "hambre" like it was his name. *Pronounced "Hombre."* Santo gave life to sparks, considered creating a new flame. This one appeared more brief than the first. A way of deflecting the blame for the brevity of the first flame.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Martín asked.

"You didn't see him the way I saw him," Santo replied.

"You shouldn't be seeing him at all. He saw your face. It's not about what you wanna do, Santo. It's about what you gotta do. This is about our family. Juan, César, Mom, and Dad are gonna have a dead kid to bury, you idiot," Martín hissed, talking with his teeth, blending together "d"s and "t"s and "p"s and "b"s. Most of the vowels survived the numbness of his lips, though "a" and "e" sounds were hardly recognizable. Santo had his head shaved. There was nothing to grab if he got in a fight. It had already come in handy once.

"I'd rather be dead…than be a murderer," Santo said.

"That…!" Martín tried to snap his frozen fingers, but the dry skin created a chilled, glossy friction between these anonymous digits. "That makes one of us…*guey*."

Santo recognized that the lighter didn't stand a chance against the wind. It never had a real opportunity to thrive and grow. There was a possibility that there wasn't enough fluid to even produce a sustainable flame.

He slowly sheathed the lighter in his pocket before burying his hands in his jacket pockets. He started to walk, carrying himself back toward the car. The car was a shelter from the wind and that was his only chance. It wouldn't start, but it was an interior and offered opportunity.

"He even saw you leave," Martín said.

"I hit him square in the nose, Martín. I could'a killed him, man."

"You. Should. Have. Killed. Him."

Santo glared at the Mustang buried in the snow. He sighed, stepping down into the ditch and digging with his bare hands, shoveling piles of snow aside. If he couldn't get inside, he was done for. He shoveled and dug, ignoring any resulting agony, ignoring his breaking and bleeding fingernails, his burning palms, his ripping cuticles, and his lips moved. Possessed.

Santo watched his hands bleed into the snow. The snow was light enough on top, but it had already begun to compact around the wheels of the car. If the Mustang hadn't been totaled when it spun out, drifting into the ditch was the nail in the coffin. Thinking of coffins, Santo almost wanted to pray for safety, but he didn't want to be found frozen in his car with his hands clasped in prayer–transformed from flesh and blood to a monument. Santo prayed to his lighter, instead. He thought of that arrowhead:

"We won the Superbowl last year…I know you guys are capable of miracles. Gimme one. Just one. I only need one."

"Who are you talking to?" Martín snickered, stricken with disbelief.

"Look who's talking?" Santo replied, fumbling his keys in his hands. His fingers were turning blue and purple and going black at the fingertips. The skin was splitting and bleeding, now. The doors clicked and unlocked. Santo climbed inside the coffin, slamming the door shut as he landed in his leather driver's seat behind his steering wheel.

"Who's talking, Santo? A thug I invented so we can provide for our family so I wouldn't feel like a criminal?"

Santo tumbled the cigarette between his teeth and presented the KC lighter, flicking it twice as his thumbnail oozed and bent back like it was ready to fall off. A small, stable flame was produced.

Santo watched it dance gently, flashing warmly in different directions like a puppy ready for adoption. Looking for love. A pair of headlights shone through the driver side window, a pickup truck parking on the opposite side of the highway. Someone was present.

"Maybe…I wanna be part of that family, too. I want to meet my mom and dad. I want to play bass with my brothers. I just wanna be real, Martín. Together, I think we can be that. If we wanna be real. If we wanna live."

Tyranny of the Here and Now

Terry Sanville

On his way from his apartment to the restaurant on Santa Barbara's State Street where he always eats Sunday brunch, Jimmy stops rolling his walker, sets the brakes, and sits on its bench seat. Reaching down he adjusts the newly-issued braces on his lower legs. Fifty-five years from that explosive day in Vietnam and he still can't feel anything below the knees. But once in a blue moon, he wakes at night to violent itching in his left ankle. He scratches it until the skin is raw, relishing the pain. But it never lasts.

"The doctors say it's just old nerves firing off," he tells Omar, the restaurant's bartender. "All this time later and they still can't do jack."

"I'm sorry. That must drive you nuts," Omar says. "But they're findin' something new every day."

"Yeah, yeah. I've already lived longer than most."

Omar grins. "That's because I pour you the finest California Chardonnay and make the best Bloody Mary."

Jimmy chuckles. "I'm sure that's it."

But Jimmy sometimes feels like he's just another bearded old guy at a bar, biding his time. What the hell does biding mean anyway? Some archaic word with no ties to his dead sister, the war, his rose-colored Cadillac, joy, Camilla, family, crawling under old houses to fix broken pipes, the used-to-be. His life is like flashes from a black-and-white rock video – people staring at him lurching down the street behind his walker. At 77, that's what he's all about in the here and now, the terrible here and now.

Jimmy maneuvers his walker away from the bar and sits at his favorite table. He can watch people come and go and check out games on the big screen TV. Brianna, her dyed red hair flaming, smiles and moves toward him. It's an honest smile. She's more than a tick past fifty but looks great. He knows everybody in this joint, from the kids bussing tables to the head chef in the kitchen and

all the managers. He used to work on the restaurant's plumbing before he retired and sold the business.

"So how you doing today, Jimmy?" Brianna asks. "Have you already ordered drinks?"

"Oh yeah. You got anything special on the menu?"

"Same ole stuff. But the quiche looks good."

"I'll have that."

He watches her walk toward the kitchen, her hips swaying, showing off just for him he's sure, well . . . maybe, a Sunday treat anyway. The restaurant fills with the after-church crowd mixing with the recovering Saturday-night-blowout folks. Jimmy laughs to himself, thinking he's the only sane one there.

Brianna brings him his first glass of Chardonnay, "good to cleanse the palate," she says. He gulps it down. The cold numbs his throat and in a while it will help numb his mind.

He watches football, not giving a rat's ass who's playing or who's winning, just enjoying the catches, the tackles, the swiveling hips of the running backs, just the running. Jimmy remembers his high school years, on the track team, a dork, running mile after mile to get in shape for the next meet. He recalls the exhaustion after each two-mile run, not wanting to take one more step, grabbing his shaking knees in the cold winter wind, drool dribbling from his mouth onto the crushed-brick track. He'd do anything to feel that sweet agony again.

Brianna walks toward him with his first Bloody Mary on the tiny tray, weaving her way between tables, never spilling a drop. A sharp pain stabs at his lower gut, forcing a low groan that surprises him. He pushes himself up, turns and shoves the walker away from the table.

"I'll . . . I'll be back . . . in a minute," he gasps.

"Sure, hon, sure. You okay?"

Another spasm and he bends over but keeps moving down the hall toward the alcove and the side-by-side unisex restrooms. The one on the right is locked and occupied. He hustles to the left side door. It pops open and a young woman emerges. He brushes

past her, his walker's wheels clacking over the tiles. Twisting, he locks the door, shoves the walker away and staggers toward the toilet. The room is sheathed in gleaming white tiles and smells of Pine-sol mixed with air freshener.

He struggles with his belt but can't get it undone. Finally, he yanks it tighter and it releases. He drops his boxer briefs. It's too late. In a final spasm he empties his bowels onto the floor and the commode, the stench overpowering.

Jimmy leans against a wall and gasps, his heart thundering. The sight of his accident reminds him of bad days as a plumber. Wiping himself off he scans the room, looking for cleaning equipment. He tries a shoulder-high cabinet but it's locked. He washes his hands and slowly opens the door. Nobody is there.

He hustles back to his seat, smiles at Brianna, and takes a big gulp from his Bloody Mary. A soft cry comes from down the hall. Brianna and Omar turn and hurry off. Hushed conversations. A bus boy drags a mop bucket, its metal wheels rattling over the wooden floorboards. Sherry, the sous-chef, emerges from the alcove, pale, shaking. She walks through the restaurant and out the front door to the street, lights a cigarette and puffs.

Omar approaches. "Was that you, Jimmy?" he asks, his voice loud and shaking.

The room quiets.

"What are you talking about?"

"Did you crap all over the restroom?"

Jimmy hesitates. "No, it wasn't me."

"Yeah, it was. You were the last one in there. The bus boys saw you."

"Hey, Omar. It . . . it wasn't me. How can you insult me like this?"

"How come you can't wear adult diapers? You know what's goin' on. Be . . . be responsible."

Jimmy's face burns. Brianna looks away. Omar shakes his head and returns to the bar. The room remains quiet. People stare, new flashes added to his rock video.

Jimmy can't possibly stay. He pushes himself up and takes a huge gulp of his Bloody Mary. He struggles to remove his wallet and drops some bills onto the table. Omar and Brianna watch him go, unsmiling.

Back on State Street, he takes a deep breath and shudders. Just one more thing to lose – first his older sister, then his legs, then parents and the business, and then Camilla, ah Jesus, Camilla. His kids are so far away and Skype just doesn't cut it. How is he going to live if he loses control like that? Is this one step closer to the rest home, to the ultimate indignity?

The look of disgust on Omar and Brianna's faces burns into his brain. He hustles back to his apartment, his hips aching from the effort, and struggles to peel the cover off his rose-colored '58 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz. He's kept it in perfect condition; *it* doesn't leak anything. Someday he'll give it to his son, if Carl even wants it. The kid likes Jeeps and Land Rovers. Jimmy works the Caddy's hand controls and swings out of the parking lot. In no time he's blasting along Highway 101 with the top down, heading north toward Goleta and the airport. In a lot near the old terminal he parks and watches planes take off and land.

After his kids left home, he and Camilla used to hang out there and talk about what it would be like to travel abroad, to Morocco, Buenos Aires, Athens, Shanghai. As a teacher, she loved geography and each time at the airport she would tell him stories about some far off place, the people, the countryside. Jimmy would close his eyes and almost see it. This day, he tries to recapture his visions of Paris, Stockholm, of Alaska with its pure white snow. But his mind returns to the soiled white tiles of the restaurant's restroom.

He starts the car and heads home to his TV, computer, and two adopted cats that cuddle with him at night, probably because he keeps his electric blanket on and the two fur balls are heat-seeking scoundrels.

Two weeks pass. Jimmy hasn't left the apartment, afraid of another accident. Finally, he drives to a drugstore he's never shopped at and enters. After searching the entire store, too embarrassed to ask for help, he finds the aisle with the adult incontinence products right next to the one with baby diapers. He studies the packages, different brands, different designs for men and women, different sizes. Old women customers do the same thing. Nobody looks at each other, avoiding eye contact.

At home he dons his first pair of male briefs. They don't show under his trousers, but rustle when he walks and make a soft crackling sound when he sits. In the days ahead he notices other old people making the same sounds, a select club of the aged that no one wanted to join. But as time passes, the briefs provide enough comfort and security to let Jimmy venture out of his apartment with some level of confidence.

On Sundays he returns to State Street, hurries past his old haunt to a new restaurant a couple blocks farther down. It has a full bar that serves lots of specialty cocktails along with the old standards. The waitresses are kind, the food good, the atmosphere congenial. It's Jimmy's new here and now, but not as good as he remembers the old. He misses Brianna and their make-believe flirting, and Omar's stories about his family's history in Syria.

The weeks pass. Autumn rains wet the sidewalks lit by nearby neon. But Jimmy is determined and the storms can't keep him away. One Sunday, he approaches his old haunt. Omar and Brianna push through its front door and stand on the sidewalk, waiting. He sucks in a deep breath and moves forward, then stops. They stare at each other. Jimmy pulls at his white beard.

"Look, guys . . . I'm sorry . . . sorry for the mess . . ." He stands swaying in back of his walker, as if using it to protect himself from attack.

Brianna nudges Omar who clears his throat. "Yeah, about that. I'm sorry . . . we're sorry for embarrassing you in front of all those people. You probably couldn't help it."

Jimmy nods. "Yeah . . . it was the ultimate embarrassment. But the mess was worse."

Omar grins. "We know, we know. Sherry wouldn't go in there for weeks."

Brianna elbows Omar. "I miss you," she says. "Not the staring at my ass so much but . . . but just having you there."

Jimmy nods. The rain increases. Brianna stares at the sky and crosses her arms.

"Well . . . it's Sunday and I haven't eaten. Can . . . can I come in?"

"That all Depends," Omar says and winks.

"Don't worry. I'm safely wrapped. Got more stashed in my walker."

Brianna moves to open the restaurant's door. "We have your table ready."

"Thanks for having me back."

She hesitates, then places a hand on his shaking shoulder. "You are welcome."

Jimmy lurches inside to a warm room with the TV flashing a football game, the here and now just a bit more kind on this rainy Sunday morning.

The Location Prompt

(A Short History of the Home City)

Jay Shearer

In the earth-toned lamplit office of Dr. Abraham Smallovitz, Rick handed over his response to the assigned prompt, and watched as his therapist's left brow, just the one, rose in clinical concern.

"This seems, well, a little glib for the exercise, don't you think?" said Smallovitz. He did the eye flutter thing he couldn't seem to control.

"Maybe," said Rick. "It's what you asked for. A short history, emphasis on short."

Dr. Smallovitz stared down at Rick's response to what they'd called "The Location Prompt": *Write a short history of your home city, or rather, your time there. Include any and all salient events.* Rick had taken half a minute to think it through, then wrote, in chronological order from his move here in '92, the quickest, shortest history he could muster, sophomorically reliant on sports and politics. He wrote:

Bulls win / Sox win / Obama wins / Hawks win / Rahm wins / Cubs win / Trump wins

The last event of course wasn't Chicago-exclusive but had landed here like a neutron bomb of existential dread. Rick thought Trump's victory ought to be included since it was wed so firmly and forever to the Cubs'. Two things they said could never happen, happening back to back in a matter of days, like the twin towers in reverse, cursed entities we'd assumed would collapse, rising instead from the preemptive ashes. But Smallovitz wasn't having it.

He read Rick's short history aloud, with question marks: *Bulls win? / Sox win? / Obama wins?*—then stopped and gently shrugged. "I mean, it's all wins, Rick," he said. "No losses. Who's *that* undefeated in their home town?"

"I didn't say I was undefeated."

The mild-mannered Smallovitz clucked his tongue and sighed. "You've lived here nearly a quarter century, Rick. And now you're about to move. That's *huge*. I can't see how …" He shook his head. "I mean, what about the birth of your son?"

"Oh that's …" Rick leaned up and took the list. "Just after the Sox win."

"And your divorce?"

Rick cleared his throat. "Start of Obama's second term. But …"—and he thought he'd inject a little humor—"no bailout for me! This guy's not too big to fail."

"Ha. I see," said the doggedly humorless Smallovitz. "And when uh … when was the, uh, restraining order?"

Rick stared back at him, stunned pale. "It wasn't a *restraining* order. Jesus, Abe. You know that. *Restraining* order? It was … an arrangement she asked of me informally. Just some time off. But that's over. Totally done!" He looked down at the list. "Um … sometime before Rahm beats Garcia in the runoff. Like, just after the Laquan McDonald tapes are released."

Smallovitz winced, clearly trying not to. "You see your life in newspaper headlines?"

Rick shrugged. "Not really. Sometimes I don't see my life at all."

Smallovitz nodded, not giving in. "How about … well, when did your wife cheat on you?"

Rick's head shot back as if he'd been tazed. "Anna didn't *cheat* on me!" His eyes fluttered in amazement. "She just … after we split, she got together with a close friend of mine. A once close friend. Very. Hell, he sees my kid maybe more than I do. But … well, you know all this, Abe. What the fuck?" Rick leaned up for effect. "Are you *high?*" Smallovitz stared back in suspicious silence. His eyes seemed watery and insecure. Rick winced. "*Are* you?"

Smallovitz sighed. "I'm a bit sleep-deprived. Sorry. And I forgot to take my Omega 3."

A hot ready anger pulsed through Rick. "Shit, Abe!" he said and stood at his seat. "This isn't working. I … I don't know what

any of this has to do with my *location*. Or with… the city that's about to spit me out!" He turned on his heel for the door. "*Fuck* this city! This city is an overpriced *rapist!* Go ahead and bill me for the hour!"

He shot out past the empty front desk, took the elevator that was open and waiting, as if it knew he was coming, and landed eventually on the street, where he bolted east in a huff toward his car. Fuck this city. Forget this city. Hammond, Indiana, here I come. He would close on a modest little house there next week. Here, he couldn't afford one. Not somewhere he wouldn't be scared to live anyway. But forget that. Forget it. Forget. Forget.

Rick heard a crowd chanting, loud, then louder. When he reached the corner, he stood rock still as a mass—hundreds, thousands—passed. What march was this? There'd been so many lately it was hard to keep track. Then he saw a few signs and remembered. Oh right: the science rally. The mass pep rally simply for the principles of *science*. Seemed a touch peculiar on its face, but here felt perfect. In fact, a godsend. A healing! Not some single individual with their little problems, but a mass of citizens facing the large ones. The voice of the damn people!

Rick stepped right in and marched along, though he wasn't normally one for crowds. He often felt dissolved in the mass, lonelier than ever, but here—*here*—he was empowered. A rush of expansive feeling. Yes—science! Science and reason will save us! God bless rational thought!

As the pulsating oneness moved toward Michigan Avenue, Rick was brimming with emotion, part euphoria, part desperation. He high-fived strangers and chanted along, in love with it, forgetting himself, when, off to the side, near the Art Institute, he saw her, or thought he saw her—just a flash—and stopped dead in his tracks. Oh god, is that Anna? With Jackson in his little Sox cap? Her hippy chick blondeness was hard to miss, plus that Aztec-patterned shawl she wore? It was exactly the sort of thing she'd go

to. As would her fiancée, his old friend Eric. Was this city so small he couldn't escape them? Even in a massive crowd? Shared custody didn't mean they shared plans, though moving to Hammond was about to fuck all that up. Marchers swept past, grazing his shoulders. He waited, fighting the impulse to turn and flee.

But then he thought: no. This was *his* town. Rick's town. He owned it too. Why do they get to keep it? He wouldn't run away. He'd run *toward.* He shot through the crowd, shouting "Anna! Jackson!" He slalomed through the bodies, too swiftly, clumsily, a desperate sort of plunge. "Anna! Eric!" But he still didn't see them. He put his head down—a kind of fullback— and picked up speed, then whacked hard—*wham*—into a body, which fell back to the curb.

Rick stared down at what he'd done: he'd knocked over a cop, a short stout white woman, hair threaded in a bun, who in turn had crashed into—and startled—three or four demonstrators behind her. Shock white, Rick said sorry, *so* sorry, but when he reached over to help, a firm hand gripped his bicep. "What the hell was *that?*" A heftier cop, fleshy male with a Ditka mustache. "Was that on purpose? Were you *aiming* for her?" Rick protested. No, no. As if he was some sort of anarchist, a cop-seeking kamikaze, hailing violence on the rational mass.

Rick shot for deferential as the woman cop stood and brushed herself off. A small crowd encircled them. Rick apologized repeatedly, but the hefty cop didn't care. You're out of control, he said. Let's go talk about this.

Rick stared back, stunned.

"I said I was sorry!" he said and then shouted at the onlookers. "I'm sorry, guys! Come *on*. I'm not … some anarchist in black with a fucking *bomb*." The hefty cop's mouth hung open. The cop he'd capsized openly grimaced. Rick couldn't seem to help himself. "What? You gonna interrogate me in a dark room? Why don't you to take me to the 'black site' in Homan Square and *beat* it out of me?"

Both cops stared, part amazed, part amused, then reached for the cuffs on their belts.

Handcuffed in the back of the cruiser, left there alone for nearly an hour, Rick eventually had to smile. Two plus decades and he'd never seen the inside of a jail cell. Or even a cop car. Then the memory rushed in and he recalled that he had: he'd sat in a cop car briefly, ages ago, as they questioned him after his car was stolen, a car they would recover the same day, the thief inside it, idling next to a second car his friends were stealing. Rick had to show up in court downtown, not far from here, a tight little room with tin-pot grandeur, and confirm he neither knew the accused nor had he given him permission to drive his car. A skinny tall black kid, only fourteen, with an angular cast to the bones in his face, looked as sheepish and inward as any adolescent caught red-handed in the wrong. An innocence still there. A purity. Rick surprised himself and on a whim, probably a stupid or naïve one, decided not to press charges.

He felt virtuous about it, but not for long. That very evening, as if to answer this act, Anna miscarried late in a pregnancy for the second time in as many years. Just crushing. If Jackson's pregnancy hadn't taken, they'd probably have given up trying. But the car theft and that kid in court were wed forever to this horrible loss, as indelibly entwined as the Cubs to Trump. A rich, seething moment in his life. In *their* life. And they'd survived it. Though who knew about that kid in court. Let's hope he's pulled through. That might be the real miscarriage.

He should put all *that* in his short history. How could he forget that one? There were so many more. So many. He should write it all out before he moved, he was thinking. Smallovitz was right. Smallovitz was right.

NONFICTION

EDITORS' CHOICE

In Strange Company

J.D. Mathes

My time started in Clark County when I'd been arrested at my armory for helping cover up the theft of a machine gun and helping a guy get rid of it. Up until then I'd been a top-of-the-class, honor-graduate, top-gunner-in-the-National-Guard type of guy who may have underage drank with my hippie wife, but nothing so fucked up as this. Crazy, only five months ago I'd voted for Reagan's second term to be tough on crime.

In jail, I learned, someone was always measuring you for what it profited them. Convicts will rope you into a card game to pass the time and voila you owe a carton of cigarettes to some asshole. It didn't sound like much, but people will beat the crap out of you for cigarettes. I talked with others so as not to be a dick but remained guarded. But I wasn't guarded enough, trying to play it cool like I wasn't worried. The judge had just refused me bail even though my parents offered up their house as collateral. What was next? I was dialing the phone trying to get a hold of my dad. A guy who'd been glaring at me for a couple of days hit me in the temple from behind. I bounced off the wall as the receiver clacked against the cement. I kept my feet and turned toward him. He shadowboxed like Sugar Ray Leonard as he danced backwards toward the deputies storming the pod. Blood ran down my face. It hurt like a motherfucker, but even a guy like me, who'd never been in jail, knew not to care how much it hurt and not to show weakness. I knew, too, how lucky I'd been. If he'd kept pummeling me, it would've been a struggle to fight back.

"Man," an old stringy haired addict said. "You need to learn how to look over your shoulder without looking like you're looking over your shoulder."

What rattled me the most was how fast it happened. I'd been training in martial arts with friends from my unit, but we trained squared up to each other, and if we did practice for attacks from behind, it was for someone grabbing you. I never wanted to be caught off guard again. I fell back on my military training to appear bullet proof, to keep men at a distance, and to hide the shame I'd caused my family.

After the judge gaveled me to two years, I was transferred to a federal prison in Arizona. The addict told me it'd be better there. The population was stable. "No joke," he said, "You'll learn who to avoid."

"Welcome to AZ," the Japanese trustee with a clipboard says as the marshals unshackle us. He looks at the six newly arrived prisoners from Vegas. "Good, no Korean dogs," he says as we line up for photographs, fingerprints, and questionnaires about scars and tattoos to identify us if we escape or our corpse turns up cold on the yard. The office people compare files from other inductions to make sure everything matches and note any new tattoos or scars since our last intake record. I write down the new scar on my temple.

I find it funny guards go through this same process when they start work. A guard's photo, called a hostage photo, is so the public relations officer can show the press who is captured if inmates seize control or to identify their bodies when the authorities retake the institution. A record of who they were before cigarettes burn dime-shaped scars into their faces or before fellow officers riddle them with bullets by accident.

The guards lead me across the yard toward a cellblock. After County, the prison feels freer. The desert smells like early monsoons had flooded the land and left hints of water pooled in natural cisterns. The buildings are spaced around a quad like a community college. Through the cyclone fence and concertina wire the desert is unbroken for miles, the stark sky overhead. Two workout areas have mesh shade tarps strung over them, and a running track is to the south of the buildings.

We walk into a building and through the smell of industrial strength cleaners, polish, and cigarettes. Just beyond the door the guards stop at a security post that looks over the common room with tables and chairs. Two tiers of cells surround the common area like motel rooms around a courtyard. Each has a wooden door with rectangular slits of safety glass so the guards can look in on you. The guards check me in, then lead me through the tables and up two flights of stairs.

The cell has a stainless-steel toilet, a bunk bed, and a small place to stow my stuff, which are Colgate toothpaste, toothbrush, pocket comb, a plastic soap case with a bar of Irish Spring in it, deodorant, two disposable razors, a notebook with a pen, a transistor radio with an earpiece, and a piece of cardboard from a legal pad with the Yin and Yang drawn in black ink on one side. I've written dates on it, starting in the upper left-hand corner since being locked up. I drew little asterisks next to some dates, meaning my wife Lynne had come to visit.

My cellmate resembles one of my dad's brothers. He combs his reddish hair Johnny Cash style. He says everyone calls him Bristol, like the city. He sounds as if he could be from my old man's roots, but instead of driving trucks or working in a mine, he ended up riding with the Hell's Angels in Vegas after Vietnam, trafficking narcotics. Fading tattoos cover Bristol's arms: a pin-up girl, a Navy ship, a heart, and a motorcycle tire with wings and a date with the name of a brother killed in a motorcycle accident.

"He was shot off it, but it was an accident all the same," Bristol says. He wants to take me by the Vegas table to meet some guys. "Look, man, Gold is from an old school mob fam. I'm not saying you got to suck his dick, but just be cool. Dig?"

The long drive chained in the van to a bunch of strangers hoping we wouldn't die in a fiery crash left me beat, but I figure I need to go along with him. The last thing I want to do is slight a mobster. We walk to a common area where inmates sit around tables, talking or playing cards or dominoes. That isn't too different from County. Inmates play the hell out of games.

"This is the new guy." Bristol introduces me to the middle-aged mobster. Gold shuffles a deck of cards and looks like he thinks a lot about odds. His black hair is trimmed, without a hair out of place.

Bristol takes a seat and looks at me until I catch on and sit. "We caught your fifteen minutes of fame on the news," Gold says.

"Me too," I say. I'd watched my arrest on a television in County's holding cell less than an hour after it happened. The images of me being marched out of the National Guard Armory, between two plainclothes agents, hands cuffed behind my back, past camera crews and reporters shouting questions, and into a waiting unmarked car made me feel like my spirit was trapped in Hell's waiting room, the last moments of my life before they cut to the weather.

Gold riffles the cards, cuts with a butterfly cut, and sets them on the table. "Cut them."

I pick up half the deck and set it aside. He takes the bottom stack and sets it on top of the other. He deals five hands of poker with the cards face up. The first card in front of him is the Ten of Hearts. His second card is the Jack of Hearts, then the Queen of Hearts, and the King of hearts. He pauses before turning over the last card. All the other hands look good enough to keep somebody betting. "Are you a gambling man, New Guy?"

"No, but I bet the Ace of Hearts is next."

A fat man with a pale complexion shuffles over. "This is why we never let him deal," he says. He's accompanied by a man with a disfigured nose who stands about five-five. "You're the new guy," the fat man says as he shakes my hand. He eases his weight into the chair with a long sigh. His salt and pepper hair is also perfectly cut. I wonder if they have a private barber. "They call me Shy, and this scarred-up fireplug is Rub." He thumbs to the disfigured man.

"Welcome, New Guy," Rub says. "We heard about the fucking you got from the Feds with no bail, and that rat-fuck who gave you up. The Feds couldn't catch a cold without a snitch."

"My best pal too."

Rub shakes his head.

Gold flips over the Ace of Hearts.

"We playing cards or you just going to keep wowing us with sleight of hand?" Shy says.

Gold grins. "You in, New Guy?"

I smile at the offer. "I need to stretch my legs."

Rub says, "Me too. I'm not losing weight sitting around letting Gold swindle me out of cigarettes and ice cream. Come on, New Guy, I'll show you the yard."

Once outside, Rub pulls off his shirt. Several smudged gunshot scars and three long slashes paler than his Mediterranean skin mark his body. When he sees me looking, he says, "I've led a charmed life."

The warmth of the sun and the breeze off the desert feel refreshing. Beyond the wire, mountain ranges called sky islands tower 10,000 feet above the desert floor. I'd grown up in these deserts. As a kid, I felt so free. If I wanted, with some good boots and a pack, nothing could stop me from walking in any direction to the lip of the world to see what was on the other side. Those weeks confined in County, with forced air and artificial lights, made my mind twitch as sound echoed off the concrete horizon. I felt an edginess like someone looked at me with malice all the time.

Rub leads me along a sidewalk circling the yard between buildings and past one of the weight piles where men lift away their time. Three men with swastika and SS tattoos talk shit to a couple of black guys in do-rags. They look about to fight when the guards arrive. There's a lot of pointing and threats of later. We walk out onto the track and where it passes close to the fence, I stop. I squint through the wire. Heat waves rise through the mesquite, blurring the saguaro cacti. They appear to be swaying in a revival with thick gray-green arms stretching up to the bright sky. Beyond that thorned congregation, miles of open country.

Knots of men pace their way around the track. Some guys run. There's a lot of Mexicans. I figure it's because we're close to the border. A Black guy rolls up. "Hey, Rub. This the new guy from Vegas?"

"Sure is, Mookie."

"My cousin Playboy says I needs to look out for you."

I laugh. Playboy and I had gone to basic training and armor school at Fort Knox together where we learned to be good tankers. We were in the same platoon at home before I fucked it all up. I guess technically we are still in the same unit. I don't face court martial until after my release in about two years. Playboy will be a sergeant by then. I'd just turned twenty-one in the county jail. When I think about getting out, I realize I'll have been in prison as long as I've been out of high school. What the hell am I going to do? I don't know and thinking about it makes me want to run through the razor wire. I stare through the fence at all the desert.

The first night passes like no night in County. No clocks tick in this Arizona darkness. No muted traffic and hum of lights and the city beyond, no howling of inmates or the buzzing of alarms or click clacking of remotely locking cell and pod doors with the clattering of keys and nonslip soles on polished floors — only the silence and the ringing in my ears from a history of gunfire and rock concerts like any other mining town kid. Most of my first night in County I'd slumped in the holding tank too terrified to sleep. The place reeked of shit and piss and unwashed men. Sometimes people made a lot of noise, like a drunk Mexican in frayed jeans who yelled, "Time waits for no man!" as he pissed into the overflowed toilet with toilet paper streaming down its sides like a holiday float. A guy missing two front teeth asked, "You want that?" He pointed to a chewed-up baloney sandwich sitting in the lap of a guy passed out and drooling.

Here in AZ, I lie on the thin mattress not very different than the one I had in basic training. They must've gotten their mattresses from the same supplier. Even locked alone in the county cell, I'd not fall asleep for hours and then wake at anything outside the normal white noise of the jail. Once the fritz of a light bulb burning out brought me up swinging in the darkness. I began trying to meditate like my martial arts instructor, Dean, had taught me. He said it'd help me focus and clear my mind. He told me to breathe in for a count of five to ten, and out for the same. Concentrate only on the breath and let my mind join in the stream of it. It helped some, but there was always something on the edge of it, like a wild animal just beyond the ring of firelight.

Bristol snores on the bottom bunk. I wonder what Lynne is up to. It's hard to believe I'd seen her only two days ago. We'd been separated a couple of weeks before my arrest, but she came to visit me several times in County. It seemed like we'd never had a problem or argument when we looked at each other through the security glass, talking over phone receivers, but we knew in that unspoken way of ex-lovers, we were beyond reconciliation. A guard shines a light in, snapping me out of my recent past, and moves on.

About a week later, a skinny old man shows up from Vegas. He'd been a boxing trainer but fucked up with some coke and a gambling debt and landed his ass in the penitentiary. All the Vegas guys know him from the city. He'd worked with some legit boxers who'd taken shots at titles. They call him Cutter, because he's a great cut man to have in the corner and had thrown a fight for money when he'd used a razor to thin the skin over one of his boxer's eyebrows, so it'd gush blood when hit.

I've fallen into lifting weights with Mookie and walking the track with Rub, Shy, and Cutter. The staff reassigned me to a cell in the same block as the other Vegas guys when Bristol got transferred. The guards showed up and took him out one morning. I don't have a cellmate, so if I feel like walking around in tiny circles at three in the morning, I can, which is preferable to staring at the dim ceiling for hours. I read a lot, and I'm working my way through *The Ten Thousand Day War: Vietnam 1945-1975*. Some evenings I watch the guys play cards, laugh and joke, but never join in the game. I steer clear of the television area after some convict lost his shit about the others watching "Motherfucking *Miami Vice*." The guards came and cooled him out. I hate being close to the guards.

I won't even speak to them like some inmates do, as if they'd just bumped into each other at the park.

As we walk the track, Cutter says, "I can train you and Mookie to box. It'd help me keep my skills alive."

"That'd be cool," I say, trying not to sound too excited.

The next afternoon, the first thing Cutter says to us is, "We're going to steer clear of the bags until you learn footwork and how to throw a punch from the ground up."

Cutter points to three Mexican guys learning to box from an older Mexican. One of the Mexicans is big and has a Virgin Mary tattoo covering his back. He's strutting around, talking shit to others. "That's Yucca training those guys. He gets them right on the bags. It's amateur. See how they have shit follow through?"

Cutter gets us to stand with our left foot forward, angle our shoulders, hold our hands, and tuck our chin. "Alright push forward with your rear foot while taking the weight off your left. Don't bob your head. That'll give you away and your opponent will counterpunch. You're launching an attack, not walking in the park. To move back, push backwards with your left foot." We start moving in slow motion. "If you can move fluidly, you can suck a guy in, then lunge in with a jab."

It isn't until the next day that we begin working on punch mechanics, learning to step and torque our bodies and to use our muscles and skeletal structure. Then we put them together in combinations. Jab, right cross, uppercut. Jab, left hook, right hook to the body. Jab, jab, uppercut. To create muscle memory. To learn, as Cutter says, to "act before the thought."

After a week, we line up at the heavy bag. "The sweet science isn't about slap fighting like a couple of bitches," Cutter says. "Your punch must extend past the target six to eight inches." Cutter smacks the heavy bag with his arm fully extended at the end of the punch, making only a slapping sound. It barely moves. "Now watch," he says as his fists go up, and he steps in and slugs the bag so hard it jumps back and up a foot or more.

Some guy waiting his turn says, "That old dude packs."

My first punch wrenches my wrist over. I gasp and shake it out.

Cutter smiles, "Rookie. Keep your fist and elbow in line while keeping the wrist rigid."

The big Mexican with the Virgin Mary tattoo says something. The Mexicans laugh.

I ignore him and square up again.

I feel self-conscious about working the heavy and speed bags with all the cons on the yard. Some of them work the bags as if they'd grown up doing it. All the violent eyes size me up, each of them thinking they could knock the shit out of me.

Over the next few days, I build up confidence. I begin slugging as hard as I can. I delight in making the heavy bag jump with a well-connected punch. I've lost my awkwardness at the bag, especially with Mookie and Cutter there. I care less and less what other people think.

I stare at the ceiling from my bunk, trying to map out the connections between blemishes on the paint, to make patterns and shapes that make sense. I have the sensation my body is gone and only my mind rests on the pillow as I concentrate on finding meaning in the ceiling. It's almost like being super wasted without the room spinning. I try to meditate, but my attention keeps wandering across the ceiling. Dean told me meditation could increase my awareness of the world around me. I could develop a sixth sense to detect when danger was approaching. I don't think it's true, but I hope so.

"Hey, New Guy. What gives?" Mookie asks.

"Not much, man." I sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bunk.

"We working out?"

I'm glad Playboy told Mookie to look for me. Playboy works hard and sticks by the rules even though he talks shit about being a gangster in his neighborhood. Gangsters don't worry about making corporal. He's one of those dudes who never screws up or looks

stupid, but he never excels either. He sure as shit doesn't cover up for a friend who steals a weapon. Hell, he didn't even take some of the stuff most others did after field training. On my first gunnery exercise, I saw guys stuffing belts of machine-gun ammo, boxes of pistol cartridges, smoke grenades, batteries, and rations into duffle bags they'd brought for that purpose. One sergeant said, "It's all reported as expended, so technically not stealing." It reminded me of the bonus program some miners lived by. The company didn't pay dick and tried to fuck guys out of overtime, so tools and supplies disappeared into garages across the mining town.

I follow Mookie to the yard.

"Everything okay?" Mookie asks.

"Yeah."

"Alright, man. Just keep it tight. Don't let those fuckers get into your head." He motions to the Mexicans at the boxing area. "That big guy just trying to look hard for the Mexican mafia and got nothing to lose. He's getting deported no matter what."

I start working combinations and moving around the heavy bag. The smack echoes, and the chain it hangs on rattles in rapid succession like a percussion section in an avant-garde band. I move away to let Mookie have a go. The speed bag is harder because of the hand-eye coordination needed and how fast the bag moves. I manage to make the bag beat a staccato, but my fist slips under, and it flops to a stop. I get the rhythmic thump-thump-thump going again. I feel like I'm accomplishing something of purpose. I'd read Bruce Lee's philosophy about coordinating the mind and the body and becoming an overall fighter. In County, I felt my martial arts training had failed me, so now I hope to absorb all Cutter could teach me. At night after lights-out, I start thinking I can save my military career. If I go into the court martial and tell them how hard I worked at being a warrior, they'll give me a chance to redeem myself. I need to show them I can endure, improve myself, and stay out of trouble here so they'll see I'm not a criminal.

The soreness and shock on the bones and muscles under the desert sun make me lose my sense of being. In basic training, drill sergeants used to yell as we struggled in the front leaning rest position, our arms and shoulders aching from relentless gravity. The dark sweat of Kentucky humidity soaked us. Our faces contorted in a new pain none of us had to confront before. We wannabe soldiers were struggling not to collapse to the earth while the drill sergeants yelled, "Gravity is a weak force in the universe! Suck it up, dicks!" We lost our old selves and transformed into some harder, other beings. Here in AZ, I push the exertion and pain past what I endured in basic training because it makes me lose who I am now. It forces out my dark mood of being a worthless piece of shit, of not belonging here, and not belonging out there anymore. It makes me forget the disgrace I've caused my family, especially my mother, even if only for a little while. I hope, like basic training, it transforms who I am.

We finish working out and head to clean up before dinner. The big Mexican had tried to cut in line a couple of times. Cutter pulled Yucca aside, and they had words out of earshot. Yucca said something to his guy, and he backed off.

Before I get back to the cellblock, Cutter stops me. "Listen, I can arrange for you to go pro. You got the speed and skill and incredible focus."

I feel a flush of pride being asked, but I say, "I love training and all, but it's not for me."

"Listen, when you get out, I'll set you up with a trainer in Vegas. We'll get you a place to stay and take care of your expenses. We'll have a legit contract." He looks like a hungry man.

I think about this guy who promises to help me but who also might be the corner man who'll cut my face for a side bet. "I don't want to fuck up my brain, man. Nothing personal."

"Think of your future. The money and the glory. I can get you into a title fight. You'll get unbelievable pussy."

I say I'll think about it to get him to shut up.

Later, Shy tells me Cutter's been bugging him to talk with me about boxing pro. "Cutter's worried when he gets out, he'll be an

unemployed felon looking at turning sixty with zero prospects. That's no reason to turn your brain into pudding."

One afternoon, Cutter asks if I can get a towel. I start off but turn back when Mookie yells, "What the hell!"

The big Mexican with his T-shirt wrapped around his head had cut the line in front of Mookie. He's hitting the heavy bag. His back tattoo of the Virgin Mary is covered with sweat, and it looks like she's having a seizure as he punches.

"Step back and wait your turn, motherfucker," Mookie says. The guy keeps punching.

Guys start watching and drifting closer. Mookie clenches and unclenches his fists. I look around for guards, but I don't see any.

Some of the other Mexicans shout in Spanish.

"Fuck this shit," Mookie says. Everyone expects him to start swinging. The crowd surges towards them.

I watch for an ambush, but everyone looks like spectators.

The guards have noticed and are moving in. Exasperated, Mookie shakes his head. "You want it that bad, it's yours." The Mexican stops hitting the bag, puzzled. Mookie throws off his gloves as he walks toward his cellblock.

Cutter loses interest in training us. Then they transport Mookie. I use the bag on my own, mixing in kicks and elbow strikes. One afternoon, I'm working on the speedbag when Gold drifts over from his spot against the cellblock wall where he hangs out in the shade. I see Rub watching, along with Shy and a Cali Hell's Angel who arrived last week. Gold says to me in a voice like he's asking for a smoke, "It's time you stopped." He looks around as if he can see through walls. "You just need to give it a rest."

The bag still swings. The chain creaks. No one else waits to use the equipment. I look around, not seeing what he sees. Yucca and the big Mexican and his compadres were transported. One day they were just gone. Some random dudes and some cliques

mill around with a couple guards watching. Slow dread creeps through me about the casual crowd.

I nod. "Okay." What else to say when a mob guy gives me fair warning? He doesn't wait for me to say anything else. He continues up the walkway toward the track as if that's where he was headed all along. I take off my gloves and leave them with the bag. I head back to my cell to read.

That evening, playing cards, Gold tells me, "Look, New Guy, I was born into this. You weren't. Get out and don't come back." He lays his cards down. "Gin."

After lights-out, I meditate. It reminds me of being a kid when I tried to hold as still as possible in the desert so I wouldn't spook any wildlife. I'd read how soldiers in Vietnam would lay next to trails motionless to surprise the enemy in an ambush. So still that lizards crawled over them, or birds landed on the barrels of rifles as if alighting on a fence. In my concentration, I felt absorbed into the earth, as if I were a stone, and the animals came. Tonight, I feel I am sinking into the earth. My mind has become blank, and I am dead in the coffin that is this bunk. My breath isn't mine but a vibration in tune with nature. I feel it as sure as the hum of a bass note. I sink into darkness. In the void, I hear my mother crying until it's interrupted by a distant scream. It's me as I awake to the sudden flash of the guard's flashlight across my face as he counts me.

The next week, the guards rouse me out of my bunk before dawn. One tells me to gather my things. I walk out ahead of them. Their keys clack and echo in the empty cellblock as they shuffle, mumbling to each other behind me. My abs tighten. Every hair on my body rises as my balls draw up. I hadn't yet learned to look over my shoulder without looking over my shoulder. I wonder if Gold was warning me off about the guards, the one group where he couldn't bring his menace to bear. They march me through the yard's anodized light to the admin office where the Japanese trustee waits with his clipboard. His skin looks pasty like life has been sucked out of him. He makes a checklist of my possessions,

including a letter from my wife saying I can expect divorce papers soon. I sign the trustee's form.

A couple of days before, Rub told me I'd probably be sent to Lompoc on the California coast. "Watch your back," he said. "That place is no joke."

With a rattling of keys and chains, the marshals cuff and shackle me. A marshal takes my box, and they load me on a bus, the lone passenger. I look out the window but can't see anything. It's dark, and the anodized lights obliterate the sky

Places

Hugh Findlay

Lexington, KY, 1964-71

As a boy in the first grade at St. Peter's school, I thought the black water fountain in the school yard was for boys and the white one was for girls until a second grader ran me off, shouting that it belonged to him and the other Black boys, and that he'd report me right quick if I didn't stay off his daggone property. I henceforth obliged.

A couple years later at the downtown Woolworth's, my mother refused to wait for a table or a stool at the counter, and so we waltzed right into the Black section and parked our immigrant butts down for service. Then the Kentucky purebred waitress whispered we'd need to move just as soon as we could, while all the other diners scowled and shook their heads, and sure enough, a White man saw our faux pas and gave us his table. I had root beer and a grilled cheese sandwich, while mother had iced tea and smoked Virginia Slims. She told the waitress she didn't care where we sat, that her feet were hurting, and it was so much hotter here than in Toronto. The waitress just grinned and asked, *You ain't from around here, ain't you honey?*

When I was about 10, my parents let my older brother and I go to the kids' matinee on Saturday afternoons. We always wanted to sit in the Strand theater's balcony, up high with a big view of the screen and everyone below, which must've been a real sight, but the *Colored Only* sign stopped us dead. Still, the kids up there always seemed to have a grand time, chuckling and cackling all through the Three Stooges movie previews. But they knew to quiet down when the feature presentation began, or the usher would threaten to kick them out.

Then, at intermission, because the balcony was at the back of the theater and the stairs emptied into the lobby, they always got to the concession stand first. So, we took our time and went to the *Whites Only* bathroom, mingling there a bit until everybody finished their business. Then, unspoken, we ventured out more-or-less as a group into the lobby. It was just how it was done, and everyone understood the separate timing of it all. That way we all got equal time at the counter before the intermission was over. But sometimes they ran out of *Raisinets,* my favorite, which distressed me mightily. It was those times when I thought the system was flawed and could use some work. Though I also knew there wasn't a darn thing I could do about it. That's just the way it was. Anyway, I'd forget all about it once the movie restarted.

While I was riding the Liberty Heights city bus home from school one day, a Black lady with little white tufts of hair sprinkled into her scalp like snowflakes told the driver, *Yes suh my transfer is still good*, until he shoved it in her face and demanded that she read it. But she just sat there and looked at her feet and glanced out the window while he hollered for her to get off his damn bus. Then he asked her in frustration, *Lady, do you even know how to read?* I was stunned. What a silly question. Then, as her silence slowly revealed the awful answer, I felt pity. So, I got up, and because I could read at an eighth-grade level (which I was proud of), I asked her if she wanted me to read it to her. Well, I guess that embarrassed her real bad because she instantly turned on me, mad as a wet hen. *NO!* she said through clenched teeth, which caused a kind of snort to come out of her nose. That was it, the bus driver had had it, so he fetched her up by the arm and tossed her down the exit doorsteps.

All the grownups around me said it was the right thing to do, and they nodded their heads in agreement as we drove off. The Black riders in the back of the bus just tightened their jaws and sat real stiff waiting for their stops.

When I was 14, my father took me along on a church "charity call" for the St. Vincent de Paul Society to a needy family of poor folks. Earlier that day, I had bought new sneakers with my own lawn-mowing money and, when I was at the store, I decided to lace them up with double laces —half-lengths each—so I had not one, but two, fancy-looking bow ties on each shoe. The laces were purple. Fancy.

My father brought his A&P grocery store vouchers and we drove downtown to 3rd Street. When we parked, all the Black faces stared at us, but Pop just walked around like he "owned the place," which was how you were supposed to do it, so that way you got respect and were somehow protected. I guess also because he was doing God's work, and I was learning a by-God lesson—only then would I truly appreciate what my parents had given me in life.

So. we climbed these dark rickety apartment stairs up to a single room where we met a young Black woman half my mother's age, with five kids all excited to see us but still standoffish and untrusting. My father sat down at a dimly lit table and talked in low tones with her, while all those kids, younger than me, stared with big eyes, not moving, just looking, and I was most uncomfortable, but I reckoned I was OK because my father was there.

Anyhow, I'm sitting there waiting for it all to be over, because I felt I'd had enough exposure to seeing how poor folks lived when I notice the oldest boy, almost my age, is not looking at me but instead is staring down at my shoes. I'd flat forgotten about them! I glanced down at those stupid laces and then back up at him, and he had this look on his face that didn't need much translation. It went something like this:

Dang, white boy, them are some fine shoes! Who the heck are you to walk in here like that? I wish I could get me some fine shoes too, but I can't. No, all I can do is want them real bad. And when you gone, I'll keep on wanting them. Because wanting is all I got. Nobody takes that away. Not from here, white boy. Not this place. This place is mine.

Burn-out

Colleen Wells

(Names and identifying characteristics have been changed.)

When I told my therapist I was planning to work an entry-level job in mental health and I didn't know if it was a good idea because it's just a behavioral health tech job, she immediately applied what she calls "the magic *and*."

"You're working an entry-level job in mental health, *and* it's an important job not a lot of people can do," she said.

Two-and-a-half years later, I'm still at it, coaching clients at the transitional living home on life skills. Our clients come from homelessness, state hospitals and incarceration. I coach them on how to clean toilets and their rooms. I smell urine, and dirty, sweaty socks, and unbathed musk. I clean up their vomit and feces when they've not been well.

I coach them on cooking skills. I wait patiently for Vinnie to come back to help finish making the lasagna while he takes a smoke break, which he needs from the stress of the prep.

Billy heaps leftover mashed potatoes and gravy six inches high over two plates and calls it lunch. I focus on nutritional skills, specifically portion control. He dives in anyway.

I guide clients not to smoke cigarette butts they find on the ground and not to drink a monstrous amount of Monster drinks. I model reflective listening and eye contact, social skills for clients living with schizophrenia.

We take clients to the YMCA and practice wellness skills. If John does a lap around the track, it's a victory because normally he just wants to hit the vending machine or smoke in the wooded area adjacent to the parking lot.

It's time for noon medications. I coach on medication compliance, but Mary refuses her meds.

I call 911 more times than I can count. God help us, someone got into the Lysol, the acetaminophen, glass.

Of course, there are glimmers of goodness, but they are fewer and farther between. Steve and I jamming out to "Electric Avenue" by Eddie Grant while cleaning bathroom three. Christina high-fiving me after she breaks two miles on the stationary bike at the YMCA. Shayne actually smiling as he pets a Tabby cat at the animal shelter. Making vision boards while listening to the Beatles because that's the one thing Jason likes is the Beatles.

In fact, some days it's like I've walked into a portal of hell. There is a heaviness in the air. Communal despair. You should see the place on a full moon.

The toilet in bathroom one is clogged again. A client is upset, thinking it was done on purpose. It does look suspect. There's a pile of feces with toilet paper on top, then more poop, then more paper, like a shit sandwich. I should be the one upset; I get to plunge it. And I plunge further into despair.

Sue, who likes to shop and once gifted me with a denim Hello Kitty clutch bag, spends her check in two days, but she's back at least, angry, penniless, and hunting for cigarettes. She's in no shape to be coached on budgeting skills.

Shayne's relapsing. Meth. His meanness is our first clue.

Burn-out feels like I've done all I can do for these clients. I could teach myself the same mindfulness skills I teach them. Breathe, Colleen, breathe. In. Hold. Exhale.

I take time off work, but it doesn't work. Lather, rinse, repeat. What's the use? There's no point. Stick a fork in me, I'm done. But I don't quit. Because the dishwasher is broken again, and the clients are broken, and I'm broken, and if I quit, I've let them down somehow, let myself down too. Plus, I'll be broke.

I work an entry-level job in mental health, *and* it's one that matters.

POETRY

Nature Hater

Kathleen Bryson

I don't like the term coronavirus art.
Californian blackworms crawl towards me, only me, I'm targeted,
they're genetically modified like in films like *Uranus*
Attacks 1960s films with buxom Zsa Zsas
You get the picture. You're a nature lover.
You don't know what art is, but you know it when you see it.
You don't know what permafrost is, but you know it when it melts.
You're a social animal in a double split experiment
and this is a social identity theory.
Perhaps taking place in the city of Split, Croatia on our side of the
parallel universe. We're stuckhere, my friends.
Our Split Airbnb had an eccentric deposed noble
as host who now in 2017 worked for the
Croatian city tourist industry and mined our
respectively dull minds' shallows for
English advertising slogan suggestions.
Lickety-split. Time to Split. We weren't helpful.

Melting glaciers have thinned down bergs
to surreal sculptures of the same monster worms
revealed by the melt, like a drained lake once prematurely
dammed. There is the blackworm again, it's a bullying thing.
Lumbriculus variegatus. I try to avoid its eyes but
the fucker has no eyes. It is practicing
macroaggressions against me, anyway,
it is ignoring me because it is in a zoom meeting.
This particular worm has made it so
I am no longer a nature lover.
I'm all about the misobiotic.
I am all for Climate Change now. Fuck the worm.
The glaciers keep melting. There's me in 2017.

A head and shoulder bust of freeze.
It was from five quantum years ago, back when
I used to smile. Hashtag saveourfuckingplanet.
A friend is distracting herself in the midst of the pandemic
by growing a monster worm in a jar on the window sill.
That was when I first saw it clearly, through
whittled glaciers, the iced glass of a pickle jar.

Trouble in the Academy

Kathleen Bryson

Yesterday I opened a brochure for
the Museum of Unnatural History and
immediately saw the annotated illustration
of a bearded precognitive *Opabinia* chimera
depicted as having left the sea for a bit to
go hug up on a tree and put ear to bark to listen
perhaps fruitlessly for oracle advice as per the
future of the planet as concerns supernovae.
This creature was not our ancestor.

There is a lie in the museum and I can prove it.
I'm not just talking about human-*Opabinia*
facial-haired chimeras with ESP. At the time
Opabinia regalis lived, ca. 509-497 million years ago,
sentient predictive trees had not yet developed on land.
Secondly, despite being very connected to nature and
new-agey and-all, this animal's psychic skills need fine-tuning,
because the Earth's fate is not to perish in a supernova.
Our sun is too small for that. Nope, in 7.6 billion years,
our planet likely will be simply swallowed up

by the expanding red giant that is our displacer sun,
and eventually our star will fade to a white dwarf,
as it is not sufficiently massive to go supernova.
I hope you feel better now.
The paltering curators got one thing right in that
Opabinia is dead as a dodo,
the dodo being a crowd-favourite exhibition at evil rival
the Museum of Natural History as an anti-matter of fact.
Enjoy your best life while you can (a tacit half-truth
implication of evolutionarily competing multiverses

with divergent laws of physics and ecology);
I'm sure the now-extinct psychically hirsute entirely real *Opabinia regalis* did.

The Crow War

Kathleen Bryson

Last London night I was asking people if
they knew the recipe for snow ice cream
Outside a sky navy blue and
horizon lavender against the old sunset,
I scooped the big orange bowl
full of fresh snow; my Proustian mom added
the evaporated milk, the vanilla flavouring
and the cocoa powder from the steely Hershey's
tin substantial in my compressing palms,
material reality like a coin or belt buckle
At home in Alaska there was always the orange bowl
but at elementary school continued silent treatment
by a girl I longed to be friends with
she was not an extraordinary girl
but I felt she was special, unique, friend-desirable
via her disregard for me.
I was not an extraordinary girl
in her eyes or in those of
many classmates
Money can't buy you love but
when I was eleven I exchanged my
library-dues refund of ten dollars
into countless but technically countable
small change and nickel-and-diming it
I threw silver never cheap tan coins
across the slick playground
to see my bullies and bullies-adjacent dive for change
There were nickels ice cubed up for weeks
chilled mosquitoes amber no coinage base greed ice
A dime fell heads or tails I won that day.

Last night I was asking people.
It has recently become a trend for bijou
delis to offer vegan ice cream dishes for dogs.
Everything's so hot these days.
Last night I was asking people about
you far away on another continental bookshelf
then pretended I wasn't.
Speaking of libraries a glut in the market
so now I live in a world where every
Little Library has no books save covertly deposited
paperbacks of Previous Harry's *Spare*
so now I live in a world where charity shops
refuse this century's Bartholomew's 500 bejewelled hats
the cheaply hired mourner Mickey Mouse sweeping and weeping
as once the noble charity shops did for fertile,
spawning copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey.*
I was at a funeral ten years ago, a sad one, as they most often are.
Due to the deceased's chequered career many
of those grieving were arthouse pornographers by trade
and at the wake the eroticists all bitched about
the financial success of in their mass informed opinions
the poorly written,
unerotic,
Fifty Shades of Grey. Cold hard cash.
We live in a cold world.

Me, now I live in a hot world.
I live in a world full of Little Library bookshelves
stuffed with unopened copies of *Spare.*
Would it kill ya to throw a little fifty shades this way.
Filthy lucre, piece of eight,
like a piece of hell, like a piece of shiny L
Very Marie Antoinette despite being technically
on the dole for two months before the
new job kicked in before Rhodes burned I
bought a London loaf of artisan sourdough
when they didn't have the oily focaccia I wanted
and then felt I didn't want that many carbs
to walk off so I sat cross legged barefoot in the heat park
throwing all first the soft glutinous intestines then
the expensive upper crust to pigeons then
crows then a squirrel I was alarmed to see
I was the prime mover for inter-corvid violence
and indeed caused a crow war

Florida, 1960

Chris Bullard

We lived on a narrow barrier island
that we knew was there to hold things back.
We didn't talk about what was expected,
confident that any disturbing waves
would be blocked out, eroding tides kept
at respectable levels, storms tamped down.
When the hurricane hit we had to consider
whether the ground might shift from under us.
Ours was the last car to cross the causeway
before it closed. Dad wouldn't chance
leaving what he knew was ours. Swaying
in the maddening wind, I heard my mom
raise her voice for the first time to him,
shouting, "You're going to get us killed."

Survival

Chris Bullard

Some preferred places without light
for escape: the bed fort, perhaps,
the back of a bedroom closet,
to wait out the parental storms.
For me the single oak towering
over the short-cropped grass
of our suburban quarter acre
was where I felt most protected.
Leaning back into the crotch
where three strong branches met,
I was turned upward. Birds
and the abstract edges of clouds
wandered across the illuminated
disc of heaven like the tiny
creatures I'd seen wiggle
through a microscope lens.
Everything leafy was in motion.
Warmed by the sun, I might nap,
cradled by that maternal sway,
except I feared to fall to earth.
In that cache of sky, hidden
and watchful, I meant to stay
high up and apart from others.

Invaders

Hoyt Rogers

Time out of time; then invaders come.
Caribs, from the Other Great Earth.
For untold suns, we keep to ourselves.
We plant the cassava, hunt the iguana.
We fish for the white-fleshed carite.
Our wars subside into rites of peace.
Now our cousins maraud like nightmares.
Friends by day, red-mawed ogres by night.
Forgotten twins, steeled and magnified.
Corded with sinews from slaying panthers.
From clubbing sharks, from plowing the sea.
Their swift canoes surprise us at dusk.
Their black hair dangles, slick with fat.
Anointed with smears of our blood.

About the Authors

Alaskan-born **Kathleen Bryson** received her Ph.D. in Evolutionary Anthropology from University College London. She studies prejudice/empathy in humans and other great apes and is currently a postdoctoral researcher with SHARESPACE, the European research project on mixed reality and virtual reality. She also is a published author of over 100 fiction pieces, including 3 novels. Her most recent novel is the experimental The Stagtress, published by Fugue State Press (2019), and her nonfiction book *Why We Struggle With Ambiguity: The Quiddity Question* will be published in late 2024. Her poems have been printed or broadcast in *Magma, Ranger, Ghost City Review, Bombay Literary Magazine, Jalmurra, Erbacce*, among many other magazines. *www.kathleenbryson.com*

Chris Bullard is a retired judge who lives in Philadelphia, PA. In 2022, Main Street Rag published his poetry chapbook, Florida Man, and Moonstone Press published his poetry chapbook, The Rainclouds of y. His poetry has appeared recently in Jersey Devil, Stonecrop, Wrath-Bearing Tree, Waccamaw and other publications. He was nominated this year for the Pushcart Prize.

William Cass has had over 300 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as *december, Briar Cliff Review,* and *Zone 3.* He won writing contests at Terrain.org and *The Examined Life Journal.* A nominee for both Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net anthologies, he has also received six Pushcart Prize nominations. His first short story collection, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories,* was published by Wising Up Press in 2020, and a second collection, *Uncommon & Other Stories,* was recently released by the same press. He lives in San Diego, California.

Hugh Findlay's writing and photography have been published worldwide. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2020 for poetry and the *Best Microfiction Anthology 2024,* he is in the third trimester of life and hopes y'all like his stuff. Instagram: @hughmanfindlay. Portfolio: *https://hughmanfindlay.wixsite.com/hughfindlay*

"Satan on Your Best Day" is **Julian Ford's** first publication in a literary journal. He is an incoming graduate student in the University of Maryland's School of Journalism who plans to pursue writing as a career. In between shifts at a coffee house job, he is working on a draft of his first novel. He lives in College Park, Maryland and has done some freelance journalism in the DC and Baltimore areas, mostly on theater and music. Samples of his writing may be found here: *https://linktr.ee/julianford*

J.D. Mathes grew up a feral child in the deserts of the American Southwest who loved to read library books and take photographs. In 2019 he was awarded a PEN America Writing for Justice Fellowship. He has worked as a screenwriter with Rehabilitation Through the Arts, is a three-time awardee of the Norman Levan Grant, a Jack Kent Cooke Scholar alumnus, an award-winning author of four books, photographer, screenwriter, and librettist. Although Mathes still struggles with subject-verb agreement and where to put commas, he is currently working on a book length project, Ill Served: Veterans and Mass Incarceration, which will tell the stories of justice involved veterans and their experiences with mass incarceration. He loves his two daughters very much. *jdmathes.com*

Jaryd Porter is a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Wichita State University where he is enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program with a focus on Creative Writing Fiction. His story "Obama Black"was published by Fleas on the Dog online literary magazine (Issue 13) in February 2023. He is a Managing Editor on the WSU student literary journal *Mikrokosmos* in 2023-2024.

Hoyt Rogers is a poet, translator, and novelist. He has published many books and contributed poetry, fiction, essays, and translations to a wide variety of periodicals. His latest collection of poems is *Thresholds* (MadHat 2023); his latest translation is Yves Bonnefoy's T*he Wandering Life* (Seagull 2023), and his latest novel is *Sailing to Noon* (Spuyten Duyvil 2023, volume one of *The Caribbean Trilogy*). Born in North America to an ethnically diverse family, he has spent most of his life in Latin America and Western Europe. Please visit his website, *hoytrogers.com*

Terry Sanville ives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His short stories have been accepted more than 500 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including T*he American Writers Review, The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated four times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in *Best of the Net* anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist.

Jay Shearer's writing has appeared, among other places, in *Chicago Quarterly Review, Other Voices, Tikkun*, and *Mayday* magazine. He is the author of a novel (*Five Hundred Sirens,* Cairn Press), a chapbook novelette (T*he Pulpit vs. the Hole*, Gold Line Press) as well as two full-length plays (*The Full Treatment* ran at Broom Street Theater in Madison, WI, where *The Song Fight* is now under consideration). He teaches at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the city where he lives with his wife and two sons.

Colleen Wells writes poetry and creative nonfiction. She believes writing is a healing force and aspires to help others feel more empowered to share their stories. She is the author of *Dinner with Doppelgangers—A True Story of Madness & Recovery*, and Animal Magnetism, a poetry chapbook. Her work has appeared

in *Gyroscope Review, NUVO, Ravensperch, Rockvale Review*, and *The Potomac Review*. Themes reflected in her work include mental illness, adoption, empty nest, the elderly and the environment.