

ENDINGS



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“Each end is always a beginning, because nothing
ever ends totally, nothing can ever end.”

— *Osho*

ENDINGS:
Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Anthology

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FICTION

Exiles

Ed Davis

Waking abruptly in pre-dawn darkness, I know it's time to go. It will take twelve hours to drive back to Ohio, and I want to get a chunk of that behind me before noon.

Dressing in the dark of my old friends' guestroom, I admit the real reason for leaving before they rise is that I don't want to face them after last night's confession. It hurts to recall Trudy's bright kindergarten-teacher smile when she welcomed me on Friday. I'll leave a note. She'll understand that I needed an early start—she accepts everything. I wish to hell I did.

I shoulder my gym bag, tiptoe past their room, make it outside, ease the door shut and merge with the new day still cloaked in black. In the glow of the west-hanging moon, I see the gate is closed. I'll have to open it, drive out and then re-close, making sure I get the balky thing completely shut the way Malcolm showed me. As he explained, without a fence, the deer decimate your garden. And he loves his tomatoes and peppers, Trudy, her flowers. I've loved *them* for over twenty years. The four of us met in college. Later, they took me in after Lynn divorced me, even let me live in their basement in Chapel Hill for three months, while I was unemployable.

I finally sobered up, left the basement and got a job inspecting houses in Columbus. First time my "family" drove north to visit, Mal clasped me in a bear hug and murmured near my ear, "You're solid as a rock." Untrue, but his claim gave me something to aspire to, while I put my life back together in a new place without Lynn.

I pull up and get out of the truck, mist swirling like smoke in my high beams. The air is alive with pine and leaf-rot. My hands are shaking. It's damn chilly, but that isn't it. It's that I *know*—and would give anything not to. Clumsily, I find the bolt, slide it back

and push. The gate creaks open; escape is imminent. Then I see them standing in the headlights' glow at the edge of the forest, at least a dozen: antlered, steaming, still as rock formations.

"Exiles!" Malcolm said yesterday, laughing. "After I built the fence, I'd catch the herd standing outside, staring longingly."

I realize I'm crying.

I get back in the truck, begin pulling slowly through the gate, and then I'm back in their midnight kitchen, facing Mal, with Trudy gone to bed. While he washes and I dry, we keep our voices low.

"I met a woman—Rochelle—at the university," he said.

"Colleague?"

"Grad student."

"It's serious?"

"We've been meeting for two years."

My throat had almost completely closed. He spoke again, breezily.

"I'm telling Trudy this week, to give her time to deal with what's coming before school starts again."

Deal with it? I still hadn't dealt with Lynn leaving me. After seven years, the wound was not yet a scar. Two flaps of skin have to meet and stay fully closed long enough for that to happen. I didn't say to Mal that I still love my former wife, that I respect her for doing what she had to do. How could I disrespect my best friend for doing the same? (Easy. Because he's married to the Perfect Woman.)

I put down the glass and embraced my old friend, recalling what he'd called me, *solid as a rock*. Maybe someday; not yet. All I said before we went to our separate rooms was, "I will continue to love you both, no matter what." I'd wished a little for some whiskey to knock me out, but those days are thankfully past. All night I imagined scenarios in which I played the hero, brought them back from the brink, after which we locked arms in a group hug. Then the voice that kept me company in the weeks after Lynn left, when I still harbored hope: *Get real. Not a damn thing you can do*. I eventually slept.

I've stopped halfway through the gate. The silent creatures beyond don't move, as if waiting to see what I'll do. Something in my abdomen twists, the calf above my foot on the gas cramps. Exiles.

I start backing up. A light has come on in the kitchen. I can smell the dark roast that Trudy will brew, can taste the French toast Mal will make. I'll relock the gate, go back inside, say the damn deer wouldn't let me out. They'll razz me unmercifully for trying to sneak off. I'll stay just until the rising sun floods the land with light. Then I'll go, give the truck its head, see if it can find home.

This Was Goodbye

Erin Dawkins

When we left Chicago five hours earlier, there were four of us. Now, there were only three.

"Such a beautiful campus," Mary Ann said. "I told him! I said to him, Natey, this is where you belong!"

She waved her pointer finger near the window to her right with surety. Mary Ann always said everything with surety.

Pat was driving. He lifted his finger to scratch his coarse, peppery sideburn. They ran down the sides of his face and joined to create one full and spectacular beard. He squeezed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and flicked his eye droplets onto the leather dash.

Mary Ann reached over and used her thumb to make circles on his shirt. "You okay, Patty? A hard day, I know."

He cleared his throat and nodded.

Nate's Michigan school was smaller than the design I built in my head, even after thumbing through all the brochures. The buildings looked like large, elegant homes. It was quaint, with its cobblestone pathways joining the buildings and monumental trees that probably wore a myriad of bright colors once fall hit.

When we arrived at Nate's dorm, his roommate was already there. The room smelled like chicken noodle soup. It reminded me of being home from school, sick on the couch watching *The Price is Right*, while the familiarity of school and friends and inside jokes continued on without me for the day.

The roommate walked over to us, bony and barefoot. "I'm Lance," he said.

"Nate." He extended his hand while balancing a box under his opposite arm.

"This is my mom and dad, Mr. and Mrs. Dempsey." Lance reached out and shook their hands.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

"And my girlfriend, Heather." Lance didn't reach out for a handshake when he introduced me. He only squinted his eyes, avowed an annoyance, as if to say *I hope you don't plan on visiting much*.

"I'll let you folks get situated." Lance slipped his feet into a pair of slides near his bed and left the room.

"Let's get some fresh air in here!" Mary Ann set her Diet Coke down on the window ledge and used her mom-strength to release the window from its painted seal at the edge.

Pat and Nate made trips back and forth from the car while Mary Ann and I assembled his half of the room. She made his bed and hugged the pillows, fluffing them like dough. I unpacked boxes near his desk. Bundles of tangled wires and power cords, shower shoes, a caddy with body soap and a lifetime supply of toothbrushes.

And while I sat at his desk attempting to untangle a coil of wires that would most likely never separate, I heard Mary Ann's lipstick-caked mouth open and close a number of times, as though her mouth was alive, lips fighting to suppress her words. Then, she finally spoke.

"Hopefully this will get you excited for college, Heather." I turned around and she swept her arm over the fitted sheet, flattening it. "Not *this* college of course, but *a* college."

She walked to the window and picked her Diet Coke up off the ledge, bending the raspberry-tinged straw tip between her lips.

I shrugged. "Maybe one day."

I could never get comfortable around her. She allowed me into her house, but never really invited me in. When Nate introduced us for the first time, she smiled as she sized me up. It wasn't until he told her where I lived, where I was from, that her face downturned with disapproval. My 900-square-foot house could have fit in their kitchen.

Her eyes entered me, reaching down inside, probing my intentions with her son. Suspicious. Speculating. Would it be an unplanned pregnancy? Or was I simply after the Dempsey's old money?

She never extended an invitation for Sunday dinners. While the older Dempsey brothers were seated next to their wives and girlfriends, Nate sat alone. At prom, Mary Ann didn't take photos of us as a couple, she merely asked Nate to stand in front of a flowering bush and took pictures of him in his tuxedo. Nate going to college meant the end of us, the end of me. Here, he would find a proper wife. One with a family of substance and a prestigious education.

And when the work in the dorm was done, and the room was set up, we stood awkwardly, as if hoping to freeze time, avoiding the inevitable goodbye that crowded the space more than the empty boxes.

We walked outside. Nate leaned in to hug his mother. And though he towered over her, she dominated the embrace, tucking her arms under his armpits as if to lift him. She kissed her finger and raised it to his cheek. He jerked back but stopped himself and allowed her to flatten her finger into his skin. Pat shook Nate's hand and pulled him in for a hug. I waited like a by-stander, hands crossed in front of me, waiting for my turn to say good-bye.

Earlier that year, while Nate was busy, Mary Ann approached me in their kitchen.

"I thought you'd like to be the first to congratulate him." She held it out, and I saw the school logo in the corner, the Mary Ann Dempsey invisible watermark that said *your time here is done* on the paper. I took it from her hand and read the letter. Words jumped out at me and implanted themselves into my dizzied brain. CONGRATULATIONS. DEPOSIT. HOUSING. He got in.

While I read, she watched me with an intense gape of satisfaction. A smile developed in the crook of her mouth. I could feel the skin of my neck ignite with warmth and ribbons of heat drew a deep reddened color in my face, tears in my eyes. I blinked wildly to attempt to hold them in. I couldn't allow myself to cry in her presence.

I looked up at her. "I'm so happy for him."

"Yes, we are too. I think he's ready to leave all this behind and start his life. Don't you agree?"

And my breath, my rage, my sadness, and yes, a tinge of happiness for him, swelled into a balloon and quickly released, deflating and releasing tears that fell heavy down my cheeks.

Mary Ann lifted her finger to my face and caught one on the tip of her finger. "Happy tears."

Later that night, while the older Dempseys slept, I turned up the volume on their television and straddled Nate on Mary Ann's green leather loveseat. After he finished, I moved to the cushion next to him and sat pantsless, allowing him to seep onto the fabric. I smiled as I imagined her, scratching at the stain with her French manicured tip, racking her brain about what could have spilled there as she removed it.

They watched from the car as I said goodbye to Nate. I didn't tell him to call me later. We didn't promise a visit on a weekend in the near future. He leaned in to kiss me, and I offered my cheek to him. He didn't try to stop me as I turned and walked to the car.

Once I buckled in the back seat, I rested my temple on the window. Mary Ann lowered the visor and poked at her eyes with her pinky nail, fixing her mascara that collected under her eyes.

"Mrs. Dempsey, I don't believe you ever told me where you went to college."

For the first time during the trip, Pat opened his mouth to speak.

"I actually went to school here. I graduated, let's see..." his eyes rolled up to meet his forehead. "Wow, it has to be over thirty years ago."

"Is this where you met?" I locked eyes with Mary Ann through the visor mirror. I didn't invite a smile on my face, it merely appeared.

Where were you, Mary Ann? And what did you do, thirty years ago, to catch a man who belonged to this place?

Mary Ann slammed the visor shut and pressed her temple against the window. Five hours to freedom, we thought.

Snow

Frank Diamond

On this overcast January Saturday afternoon, I open the shades in my wife's home office to encounter a slate gray sky. More snow on the way, but not that much, and I should be able to make it down the shore before the flakes appear.

One of the neighbor's inflatables lies spent upon a frosted lawn, a weary remnant of the recent holidays, a kitschy totem of a Santa that had waved at passersby now waiting to be dragged back into storage. I am inviting outside light into the room, but it keeps its distance, for the most part. Two lamps' bulbs popped when I'd turned the switches; what are the chances? But the other lights function, so I'll work among the shadows with what illumination I've got.

I step back.

On the bookshelf sits one of the many awards my wife's collected over the years. "To Barbara Bellini Clearwater for excellence..." And there's me framed, arms raised at the end of a marathon I'd run a good decade and a half ago. Fastened to the top, the homemade dedication from our daughters: "To Mack Clearwater, for finishing the race and being the best Dad ever!" I smile. That's new since the last time I'd been in here. I don't go into Barbara's home office; Barbara doesn't go into mine. Good boundaries make good marriages.

And just why am I here?

Because I answered the damn landline phone on Barbara's nightstand in our bedroom. We hardly ever pick that up. It's a spam magnet. We keep it in case we lose electricity in, for instance, a snowstorm and it's a way the kids can reach us in such an emergency.

I'd just gotten out of the shower after my morning rendezvous with treadmill torture and been toweling off.

Brrring! Brrring!

"Hello?" A girl's hesitant greeting.

"Yeah?" Already about to slam the receiver down on a sales pitch.

She clears her throat.

"I am looking for Barbara Clearwater? Barbara Bellini..."

"Yeah, yeah. How did you get this number? I'm her husband."

She gives her name — Andrea Lawson. She's one of the bookkeepers in the university's comptroller office.

Barbara's the director of auxiliary accounts. She oversees food services, on-campus catering, mail distribution, and the school store. They pay her well; she makes more than me — way more — and maybe once or twice in all these years one of the guys on a job ribbed me about it (they can count; two halves of what I make couldn't support our lifestyle) but that's OK. I know who I am.

To this Andrea Lawson, I now say: "oh" as an apology for my rudeness.

"Barbara's not answering her cell," Andrea hurries on. "And I looked through all her records and found this number."

"No worries, Andrea. Just give me the message that you were going to leave on the machine."

"It's that I can't find the recent invoice for Cactus Cuts. Barbara's usually very organized about invoices. She can just take a picture and text it to me."

Sounds like a deadline's been missed.

"I will give her the message," I say. "Also, I'll look for it, and I'll text you the pix."

Cactus Cuts, eh?

I think of when our kids were little and running barefoot in our backyard with their squirt of a dog yipping and chasing about.

Barbara and I each brought daughters into our marriage: one with me, two with her. Tweens when we took vows, and we bought them that dog, a little Australian terrier named Cactus, that they swore they'd be responsible for but ... well, you know how that goes.

Now, Barbara and I are in our mid-50s and find ourselves at a point where we can cherish the challenges of work without being

slaves to jobs. Though we savor the fruits of capitalism we don't much like capitalists and absolutely loathe the soulless corporations and other organizations that run things. I don't know what you'd call us: perhaps sellouts, perhaps survivalists, perhaps all too normal.

Me myself, you can call lucky, because Barbara still turns heads. She could pass for 35. Her curves demand attention, asserting themselves even in loose clothes or business attire, and her legs could be those of a runway model. Her auburn red hair cascades over her shoulders onto her back. She sometimes floats the idea of getting a more "sensible" cut, to which I'll offer a noncommittal, "OK."

"Hmm," Barbara responds, meaning that that decision's been put on hold yet again.

But it's not just her looks. She moves through the world like answered prayer. Her smile warms rooms. Her laughter dispels darkness. Her...

Hold on. The above litany might suggest that we're not very much anchored to the practicalities of a relationship. Not so. It's a marriage, man. We disagree, sometimes bicker as every couple does. But all things considered, not bad. Not bad at all.

Still, Cactus. A bit of a mystery.

What are the chances that Barbara deals with a vendor whose name is the answer to security questions for all the websites that our daughters need to access?

What was the name of your favorite childhood pet?

I'm a construction manager so I can imagine a situation where I see a name like, say, Cactus Industrial Lift Equipment. I'd at least have to check it out.

The invoice lies on the floor right under where Barbara packed her briefcase. That's the last thing that she takes care of before she flies off. She loads her clothes and toiletries with care. But the business papers she stuffs inside like afterthoughts. When she returns home, she'll sometimes mention that she misplaced some work item, and first thing goes to her office to conduct a search.

I've occasionally asked: "Need help?"

"You wouldn't know what to look for."

Not this time. Every company's invoices look a little different, I suppose, if for no other reason than there's a unique heading and address. But basically, an invoice is an invoice is an invoice.

Now, standing in her office as the sky outside grows heavier, I make sure it's the right one. Yep: \$3,462.34 for ground beef from Cactus Cuts. Direct deposit. Well, mystery solved. I lay it on her desk, take the pix. However, before I text it to Andrea Lawson I notice the address.

It's in Ocean City, New Jersey. That's where we have our shore house, right on the beach. We're at 1786 Boardwalk. Barbara's bonuses paid for the lot and the building material, of course, but I oversaw the construction and also put up a couple of the main rooms myself.

The address for Cactus Cuts is 1788 Boardwalk. Nothing there but sand and dune grass.

Must be a typo.

I text Andrea Lawson: "This is Mack, Andrea. Still looking for that invoice."

Immediate response: "Thank you so much, Mr. Clearwater!"

In the next hour or so I sleuth. I inspect the Cactus Cuts website. Just a logo and not much else. Under "contact us" is the same phone number that's on the invoice. I call three times, always getting kicked to an answering machine. I don't leave a message. I need to be careful. I'm messing with Barbara's job here. And I am violating her privacy.

Still: 1788 Boardwalk, Ocean City, NJ, 08226.

It just doesn't exist.

My cell vibrates. A text from Barbara.

"Leave, yet?"

I start to text back, but my impatience kicks in and I call.

"Did you, babe?" she asks again, above the airport cacophony.

"Passengers for flight yada, yada, yada, please board at gate yada."

Greetings. Farewells. Laughter. Children being told to behave.

Hurry ups. Slowdowns. Luggage being bumped about. Tidbits of detail that break the surface for a second and then get pulled back down into the nondescript.

"You know about the snow, right?" Barbara asks.

"I'll be sitting by the fire watching the ocean when it comes."

"Lucky dog."

Two things Barbara loves: snow and the ocean. Snow on the ocean makes her want sex.

"Yep, babe," I say. "Gonna kick my feet up, quaff a few, turn on the fireplace, maybe order me some Chinese. And tomorrow I'll be watching the Eagles."

"Text me a picture of the ocean? At sunrise?"

"If I'm up."

"Enjoy it while it lasts."

She means the sunrise, but probably also the time off I've got because of a lull in the construction business for which I am currently collecting unemployment.

Overcome by a need to feel useful, it's at this moment that I am tempted to tell Barbara about the call from the university and the Cactus Cuts invoice with the wrong address. But I don't, because the explanation might be so obvious that I'll look dumb.

"All well there?" I ask.

Long pause.

I say: "You still there?"

"I love you very much, Mack Clearwater."

This is different. Her tone embraces and pushes off at the same time.

"Honey? Barbara?"

"I am here."

No, she's not.

"What?" I ask.

"I'm just nervous. Just nervous about my presentation tomorrow."

I hear a tremor. She is nervous.

I say: "You're presenting?"

"Oh, the dork who was going to bailed on them, and they asked me to fill in."

"You're allowed to say 'no.'"

Especially to a professional organization that you owe nothing to — really — but Barbara hardly ever says "no" to any request for help. In her mind that's weakness. I long ago stopped trying to convince her that it's not.

I say: "You'll knock 'em dead like always."

"Hope so."

Passengers on flight...

Barbara says: "That's me. Gotta go. Love you."

"Me too. Make more money!"

"Ha, ha."

I grew up poor in the West Oak Lane section of Philadelphia and dismiss people who don't have to worry about money, but who preach that money isn't everything. It's a false god. OK. I don't worship it. But I want it and I'm not one bit ashamed to say that I enjoy spending my wife's money because we do everything together and I love her.

Barbara grew up even poorer than me. She alludes to it rarely, but I've pieced the outline together from what in-laws have let slip at gatherings. The old man was an abusive drunk who eventually deserted the family, and then the old lady went crazy, and then Barbara — all of 18 — had to take legal custody of her two younger siblings and raise them.

Barbara vowed: Never again would she go hungry. Barbara vowed: Never again would she be chased by creditors. She would always earn a lot of money. And she certainly does. I knew she made a good living, and then they started giving her bonuses, which hadn't originally been built into the compensation package for her position. I call it the Barbara Bellini Clearwater Annual Overachievement Award.

So, yes, some of the exorbitant college tuitions for which people must take loans get funneled to professionals like my wife who keep the administrative gears of higher education grinding. And she's worth every damn penny.

"I wish I got bonuses like that," I say sometimes.

"Do you want the bullshit that comes with it?"

No, thanks.

We don't rent the house in the summer like most owners down the Jersey Shore do, but it's an option for when we retire. A place like ours? On the beach? Five bedrooms, three bathrooms, and jacuzzis on all four levels? Grand and unobstructed view of the ocean? An elevator? We could charge \$15,000 a week in season. But the girls use it now and then year-round including the summer; and we sometimes join them; get to see the grandkids, the two sons-in-law and what appears to be a third son-in-law in the making. (I'm not so thrilled about this one, but the daughter will never know that.)

Before I exit Barbara's home office, I close the shades and see that the sky continues to darken.

Time to go.

I pack light; I've got clothes at the shore house. I've about an hour and a half ride in store. As I head out to my car, I can taste the threat of snow. I start the engine while buckling my seatbelt, back out of the driveway and roll on off. I turn on the Beatles station, but the disc jockey insists on playing rarities that never made it onto any of their albums and with good reason: They suck. I turn it off, ride in silence.

I cross the Walt Whitman Bridge with the skyline of Philadelphia in my rearview and as the day's shadowy grip continues tightening, muting the outlines of the cityscape.

My mind wanders because that's what minds do.

I'm humming "Maxwell's Silver Hammer," a ditty on Abbey Road about a guy who bashes in heads. So much for "All You Need Is Love."

I think about the real Maxwells out there: sociopaths, psychopaths, narcissists.

And evil people.

I went to Catholic school. "The evil one will sneak up on you and steal your soul!" my first-grade nun warned with such intensity that one kid fainted and had to be sent to the nurse's office.

But that didn't stop the lesson. Judas, she told us, starts out

small, stealing a little bit of money here but then more and more until finally he takes the 30 pieces of silver.

And a real Maxwell wouldn't have bashed in heads as a kid. He would have probably started out smashing windows and throwing stones at stray animals.

Yeah, it starts out small.

Think about those governmental officials or company accountants who wind up in jail for embezzlement. What began as a minor snow job — they often start out by "borrowing" and then reimbursing, until they skip a payment or two — becomes an avalanche of millions of stolen dollars, crushing their reputations and destroying their lives.

Speaking of snow....

I'm a bit surprised by the first flakes, which seem to dart out of my way as if playing a game of chicken. The snow's come a good six hours before they said it would. But then I hadn't been looking for updates.

Bare branches of trees along the Atlantic City Expressway stretch toward the sky like converts at a revival meeting. As the snowfall quickens, the brake lights ahead and the headlights behind glimmer weakly, and I fight off a loneliness that urges me to call somebody. Maybe one of the kids. Maybe an old friend. Not Barbara. She'd say she's prepping. I shake it off. I need to concentrate on driving, a decision I know Barbara would approve of.

The snow not only comes earlier than expected but also harder. It's now officially a storm and they're saying seven inches in Philly, and about three down the shore. The car begins to miss a beat of traction, like a song on a flawed CD that skips maybe once or twice, but that's enough to drive you crazy. I catch up to the sprinklings of the salt trucks and follow the treated lanes until the exit ramp that spills me out onto the Garden State Parkway. In about 15 minutes I turn off the superhighway onto a generic throughway with red lights and traffic circles, merging into a cautious flow of vehicles heading toward the sea.

I'm almost home.

The wind adds potency to the salt air. I can taste it even more than usual as I cross the Ninth Street Bridge into Ocean City. I ride to the top of the arc and despite the conditions I glance to either side down at the brownish wharfs jutting out, the brighter piers holding back. Boats covered for winter bounce in place and the pastels of the houses and buildings quiver in and out of view.

Years ago, Barbara and I would drive into town, park on Palen Avenue, and then jog the two and a half miles over the bridge to Somers Point, turn and jog the two and a half miles back. We ride bikes now, or power walk. The girls and their mates run the bridge: “We don’t jog,” they pronounce.

The water in Great Egg Harbor Bay heaves and slaps about as it plays with some of the small boats making their way back to slips and wharfs. I spot two seagulls bouncing about the sky fighting to get to wherever seagulls hide when it snows.

And still the mind wanders.

Barbara and I met at a wedding. She, an acquaintance of the groom. Me, an acquaintance of the bride. At the reception, we’d both been seated at a table of singletons; random cousins, school chums, an older friend of the bride’s parents.

Barbara and I sat opposite each other but as the drinks came and people got up to dance or mingle, we moved unoccupied seat by unoccupied seat closer until we were next to each other and chatting. And not because either of us was on the make. In fact, the opposite.

We’d both just gotten out of bad marriages and had young children to raise. Both had decided to keep things simple until the kids went off to college in about a decade. Maybe a date here or there, though we shared a mutual dread of the dating scene.

At one point, I raised my beer and tapped her vodka martini. “To being single!” I said.

She laughed. “Hear! Hear!”

A year and six days later we married.

The transition presented challenges. For the most part, we didn’t live under the same roof for the first two years. Her girls

didn’t want to move out of Barbara’s house, my daughter didn’t want to move out of mine.

When the girls started middle school, Barbara and I acted quickly, selling our houses, pooling resources and buying a much bigger home that included several bedrooms with adjoining bathrooms (in other words, each teenage girl with her own bathroom — they loved that) and a pool in the backyard. Everybody had their space.

This unorthodox start to married life meant that in the beginning Barbara and I, out of necessity, kept our finances separate and over the years — for one reason or another, but mostly to avoid the hassle of marital incorporation and any complications about inheritance (her daughters would get Barbara’s worldly goods, mine would get mine) — we never bothered to change that arrangement.

Separate banking accounts, separate credit cards and credit ratings, separate ownership of cars, separate tax filings overseen by separate creative accountants who ensured that we didn’t pay more because of those separate filings.

Now, driving into Ocean City, I turn too abruptly onto Palen Avenue. The backend swerves a bit, threatening a tailspin, but I steady it, saying quietly “Whoa!” like a movie cowboy calms a movie horse. I motor at a crawl the rest of the way to the shore house. I turn down the alleyway, skid again, open the garage, and head into shelter.

When I get upstairs, I immediately jack up the heat. I throw my backpack on the bed and start inspecting, going from room to room testing lights; turning spigots on and off; flushing toilets; eyeballing the washer, dryer, heater, and air conditioner; riding the elevator. I run the vacuum. Then I pull the shades aside on the sliding doors and stand for a second just taking in the scene. The snow. The ocean.

I turn on the fireplace, grab a beer, pull one of the kitchen chairs around to face the view and watch winter unfold. And hear it unfold, as well, for the waves crash like drums keeping bad time, and the wind whistles tunelessly. The whitecaps roll upon each other, too impatient to wait their turn. And the snow falls faster.

So beautiful.

The house whispers my name. At least that's what I think I hear just before I doze for a few minutes, but in those moments something happens. Dread jolts me like electricity and I yell in terror, waking myself. This — whatever this is — confronts me like an intruder, it feels that real and malignant. I am gasping. I hold my face in my hands, fighting an urge to sob. And I remember that kid who fainted back in first grade when the nun talked about Judas the Betrayer.

Just a horrible dream.

But it wasn't a dream. Or at least not one that I remember. A feeling had assaulted me, an explosion of fear that still bubbles through my veins. Extinction showed itself, as if I'd become an animal in line in a slaughterhouse who glimpses what's in store, discovers the source of the sacrificial bleatings.

I think I know what's going on.

A wandering mind doesn't mean purposeless thinking. Somewhere during this day's journey my subconscious rolled right up to the gates of ugly probability. Nodding off as I did allowed what lurked beyond the barrier to come crashing through, sweeping away denial that I hadn't even realized I'd been clinging to.

But now I know. I must have known since my conversation with Andrea Lawson. Maybe I've known for a long time but had buried that knowledge.

I look at my phone. I'd missed a call. I listen to the message.

"Hello, Mr. Clearwater? This is Andrea? I still can't get a hold of your wife? Did you find the invoice? There seems to be... Could you just tell Mrs. Clearwater to call? I tried to reach her at the conference?"

Of course you did.

She continues haltingly: "Um. And she isn't... Um. Well, if you could just do that, Mr. Clearwater? Tell her to call me?"

Andrea doesn't want me to worry, but too late. I know what she's not saying. Barbara isn't at the conference. There's no record of her signing in.

My breathing labors, my joints ache, and if I didn't know better, I'd think that I've come down with the flu. But I do know better. I know my body and know that it's a panic attack. I've had them before, just never this intense.

I look out at the ocean and the snowstorm, the elements shifting and tumbling and rushing first here, then there, and striking against each other like mobs. I see something on the water, a light etching a straight line between mystery Points A and B. Is it real?

Time to confront my future.

I text Barbara. "What now?"

In about an hour and some amount of beer later, my cell buzzes. It's a number I don't recognize, one I wouldn't ordinarily answer. I stand, go over to the sliding doors as if trying to avoid being overheard in this big echoey house. It's still snowing in the gathering dusk.

"I really do love you, Mack Clearwater."

"Barbara, please. Come home."

"I haven't decided, yet."

"Where are you?"

She could be anywhere.

"I haven't decided yet."

But she has. And knowing Barbara, the cops will never find her.

"Come home. We can get through this. I know about a guy...."

A guy who'd embezzled about \$6 million over two decades and he got just four years in federal prison. Of course, he'd given about \$4 million back and turned state evidence. Still, she could get a relatively light sentence. I'd visit. The girls would visit.

"They're going to take everything, Mack," Barbara warns. "I am so sorry. The shore house. All the stocks and annuities. Possibly even the other house. They'll freeze my assets, at least the ones they can get their hands on."

"They can't stop me from working. The girls are launched. They're OK."

Are they? I think about how we helped them buy their houses. How Barbara helped them buy their houses. Where did that money come from?

“So, I start over,” I continue. “I can do it.” I tick off names of family members who’d probably let me live with them for a while.

“Barbara?”

“My darling, I am so sorry.”

“Come home. Please.”

“Andrea Lawson. I can’t believe it. Done in by that little twit.”

“She called me.”

“She called me. So did my boss. And the provost. And campus security. I’m sure by now the FBI and other people I don’t want to talk to have called. They might find my phone, even though I destroyed the SIM card and the memory card. But nothing ever really dies, does it? They’ll find what they need to find. Build an even stronger case against me.”

“Come. Home.”

“I don’t want to go to prison.”

“So, you choose that I’ll never see you again? That the girls will never see you again? Our grandkids?”

“No, not really.”

“Sounds very convincing.”

“I will figure a way to keep in contact.”

“Lie.”

“Don’t be like that, sweetie.”

“Like what? Betrayed?”

Then, as if she’s talking to herself, she says, “It’s like I died. And I did in a way.”

“Where are you?” I ask.

“Somewhere. Nowhere.”

An airport? A train station? I can hear announcements.

“Where are you?”

“The less you know, the better, darling.”

“How? Why?”

She chuckles, and even after all these years of being married, the sound emitted surprises me. I’d never heard her make a noise quite like that. It’s not evil. It’s not good. But it’s not Barbara, either. Who is this person?

She says: “You never asked ‘how’ and ‘why’ before, sweetie. You never asked how we could afford the things we bought, Mack. The trips we took. The way we lived. Did you really think I made that much money? Can you tell me that you never had an inkling about just what was going on?”

I don’t respond.

“The less you know the better,” she says. “They’ll want to arrest somebody. Tell them all about this conversation. Tell them how you never suspected. How you were blindsided. About how you tried to talk me into giving myself up.”

I flop into the chair, suddenly so exhausted that I can’t hold the cell phone against my ear anymore. I press “speaker,” place the gadget on my lap.

“You would love this view, Barbara,” I say. “The waves. The snow. The wildness. The way light reflects off the breakers. And the sounds. Sounds I never heard before. Of course I’ve got the fireplace going. And, yeah. Almost forgot about the...”

And I continue in this manner for I don’t know how long until finally I look down, see the darkened screen, and realize that she’s gone.

Rubble to Water

Molly Gleeson

It was always summer now. The old people, the ones who were left, spoke of the cold before. How it came down from the sky sometimes, like white tufts of milkweed, covering the ground until all was still and silent. That was long before I was born. Even Ma doesn't remember. It was Nee-Nee, my grandmother, who told me. It was Nee-Nee who told me the broken house where we live with seven other families used to belong to her and her alone. It was hard for me to understand this. I had always known and lived with the Browns, and Pridemores, and Cavars, and all the others, and their children, who, like me, roamed the rubble around us barefoot and shirtless. We were wild things, like the storms that hit every afternoon, one more violent than the next. The upstairs rooms leaked, so the families who lived there would file down the slippery stairs and huddle with the rest of us until the storms passed. Then they would tell us to help them mop up the mess that was left. The upstairs families — the Kirleins, the Brenners, the Bryants — didn't have any problem bossing us around.

"They are the strong ones, Nell," Ma said to me, and although this explanation always seemed unfair, I knew these families belonged to the Sessions. We didn't argue with members of the Sessions. They made all the rules for Plainsmede.

I couldn't, but Nee-Nee remembered the beginning of the Sessions.

"By force and by fear," she said knowingly.

"Don't talk to Nell like that," Ma said.

"It's the truth," Nee-Nee said, spitting out each word.

"It doesn't help anything," Ma said in exasperation.

When they fought like this, I would run outside and find the others, who were climbing hills of rock or salvaging anything that might burn and provide light. We got extra rations sometimes from the Sessions if we brought in a good load. The smattering of

houses in Plainsmede held a hundred or more families, but these houses with their blown-out windows dark from the inside seemed to watch us even when no one was around.

At night the darkness was complete. Without a moon, we'd stumble over each other before saying goodnight. Only the Sessions had a fire, out in a distant field, where they would sit and make decisions for Plainsmede.

It was Garrett Kirlein, a big kid from upstairs, who pointed it out to me one day.

"You don't see many white-haired ones anymore, do you?"

"Ma says they get older and older until they die," I said, trying not to think about Nee-Nee. My lower lip trembled just a little.

Garrett shook his head.

"No," he said a bit too loudly.

We were in a field behind our house, throwing rocks at a puddle and enjoying the splashing. It had rained hard a few hours ago, but there was no relief from the heat. A mosquito buzzed around my head. I swatted at it, annoyed at both it and Garrett.

"What do you mean, no? That's what happens," I said.

"If you're so smart, Nell, then where do they die? Why don't you see those dead bodies?"

"They bury them."

"When? Do you ever see it happening?" Garrett persisted.

"We're just kids. They do it when we're asleep, so we don't cry."

I felt like crying now.

"They do a lot of things when we're asleep," Garrett said knowingly. "I know all about it. You don't know anything."

With that, he shoved me towards the puddle, but I caught myself before I stumbled into it. I had never liked Garrett. I didn't like how his dark hair stuck straight out from his head, how he liked to push around the little kids. I was 10 and so was he. Everything seemed unfair to me. And I didn't like what he said about the old people. He knew something, and I wanted to know, too. Just last week Nancy's grandmother, always swaddled in blankets on the floor of our house, was suddenly not in the room next to

ours anymore. That's when I asked Ma, and she said that Nancy's grandmother had died. This worried me a lot because I knew her grandmother wasn't as old as Nee-Nee. It didn't make sense to me, but a lot of things adults said and did didn't make any sense to me.

But Nee-Nee never told me I was stupid. I liked spending time with her best. I liked her stories of when she was a girl. She had lights in her house all night long if she wanted. She always had enough to eat, she said. Not like me, she said, as she poked at the ribs that stuck out from my slight frame. Nee-Nee would tell me about the things she ate and drank.

"I miss beans," she said. "Beans with pork fat and greens. Too bad we don't have some of that now."

We were in a distant stand of trees and shrubs, looking for greens to cook and herbs to help the sick. People were always sick in Plainsmede.

"Tell me again about coffee," I said.

"Oh, coffee!" Nee-Nee said, her eyes lighting up. "So bitter, but I always added plenty of sugar and cream. It made me happy, coffee did."

She looked wistful.

I couldn't imagine a bitter drink the color of tar, made sweet and creamy with other things I had never tasted. But I liked her stories. I think it made Nee-Nee happy remembering them. Maybe not as happy as her strange coffee concoction had made her, but happy enough for Plainsmede.

Thinking about happiness and unhappiness made me remember Garrett's story about the old people.

"Nee-Nee," I said, serious now. "What is happening to the old people?"

She looked at me sharply.

"What do you mean, Nell?"

"Garrett Kirlein says they're not just dying. He says they're going away on purpose, or something."

For the second time that day I felt like crying again.

I went on.

"Nancy's grandmother didn't die, did she, Nee-Nee?"

"I'm not sure. . ." Her voice trailed off and she looked towards the rubble and tattered houses of Plainsmede.

"You're not going to leave me, are you Nee-Nee?"

Finally, my tears started in earnest. Hot and sticky just like the air around us, they slid down my face and splashed on my bare flat chest.

Nee-Nee squatted before me and took hold of my limp arms.

"Listen, my precious one," she said, "I may not always be here in the flesh, but my spirit will live on. It will live on in you. You must believe me, no matter how much it hurts."

She hugged me then, tears and snot and all.

It was the only time I could remember that Nee-Nee left me feeling more bereft and confused than when I had started.

One moonless night, I was shaken awake. I was scared at first, but then I saw familiar hair sticking out from his head, and I realized it was Garrett. Dazed from sleep, I looked up at him from my pallet.

"Get up," he whispered. "And be quiet. I want to show you something."

This time, I thought I might get some answers from him, so sleepy as I was, I carefully picked my way over sleeping bodies and followed him out into the night.

It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the dark. I traipsed after Garrett, who was moving fast over the weeds and rocks in front of the house. He only turned to speak to me once. He said, "When we get there, you can't make any noise. It's really important. You can't cry or anything."

I nodded, but a deep terror began to grip my insides. We walked for 20 minutes or more, past ghostly houses and empty lots, and I was going to complain to Garrett, but then I saw a wavering, luminous light some ways ahead of us. The bonfire. The Sessions bonfire.

Garrett turned to me and put a finger to his lips. He bent double, so I did, too, and we began carefully to pick our way closer to the fire. Gradually, the fire came into focus — odd pieces of wood

scavenged by some of us, no doubt, burned like the sun at midday.

A lone old man stood behind the bonfire. What was he doing? I wondered. I almost said something aloud to Garrett, but he must have sensed this and pinched my bare arm. We were behind some low scrub. We couldn't feel the heat of the bonfire, but we could hear it crackle. Then we heard a booming voice, some distance to the left of the old man. I realized there was a half-circle of younger men facing the man with the voice, the fire, and the old man. This leader was pointing at the old man.

He said, "We fault you for knowing. We fault you for your silence, your complicity, your inaction. What say you?"

"Please. . ." the old man said weakly, barely heard over the pop of the fire.

"Please. . ." he said again.

The leader spoke. "We name you guilty."

Then the group of men in the half-circle stood and yelled at the old man, "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!"

That's when the first rock flew out from the group, sailed over the fire, and hit the old man in the head. His head jerked back, and his body slumped to the ground. More rocks showered down on him, and I wondered why I couldn't hear him cry out. Instead, the night was filled with the cries of the other men.

"Guilty!" they chanted again and again.

Then, they came at the old man with rocks in hand. The old man lay still on the ground, but first one from the group used a rock to smash his skull, and then with a yell the whole group began smashing his body with the rocks they held in their hands.

I realized I was crying, the tears soaking the skin on my face and chest. Something was stuck in my throat. I had to get away. I had to get away and get this thing out of my throat.

Half blinded by tears, I got up clumsily, not caring who saw me. Garrett tugged on my shorts, but I ignored him and began to run back the way we had come.

I ran and ran, almost with no breath. Desperate, low scrub and sharp grasses nicked my bare legs. I tripped over rocks that

cut my feet. I kept running, not knowing if Garrett was behind me, not knowing what was blocking my breath. Raw and broken, I began to feel my own blood dripping down my legs. Finally, my old house with the blown-out windows loomed out of the night.

I paused. The thing in my throat was still there. I tried to breathe evenly, but my breath came out like a cough. I thought of Nee-Nee, asleep on her pallet downstairs. She didn't know. I decided right then she couldn't know. I would protect her.

The next morning, Ma said, "My god, Nell, what happened to you? You're all bloody."

I looked down at my legs. The cuts and bruises were still there from last night's journey, and blood had dried in thick, crusty rivulets down my calves.

As she took a damp rag to clean me, Ma said, "Were you out early this morning? Did some of the boys chase you over those hills of rubble you're always playing around?"

When I didn't answer, she looked up at me curiously.

"What's wrong, Nell? Cat got your tongue?"

Us kids never understood why the adults said this phrase about cats. We knew the feral cats that lurked and hunted around Plainsmede, and we thought the idea of a cat having our tongue wasn't funny, as the adults seemed to.

But I still couldn't speak. That thing still gripped my throat, whatever it was. Nee-Nee came into the room then, her long ratty white hair carefully combed back from her face.

"Can you get this girl to talk today, Mama? I can't seem to."

Ma stood up. My legs were clean and wet.

"Look at those eyes," she said. "Stubborn stubbornness."

I turned to look at Nee-Nee. She took my face in her hands and looked into my eyes.

She said, "That's not stubbornness. That's terror."

That was the beginning of my silence.

Of course, I couldn't explain to Ma or Nee-Nee or anyone about the thing stuck in my throat. At first, I pointed to it frantically in front of Nee-Nee, but she just said, "Don't worry, my precious one."

You'll talk when you're ready. Right now, there's too much to say, and it's blocking your gullet. Don't worry. In time all will be well."

It was the closest explanation to what I understood to be the truth. I was almost grateful. But I couldn't believe her when she said all would be well. I couldn't warn her now, but I would save her when the time came.

In the fields and rubble piles with the other children, Garrett would just glare at me. Then he ignored me altogether. He still talked, though.

Gradually, the moon began to grow again, and when it was entirely full, I woke up to see two men standing above our pallets. I hoped they didn't notice that my eyes were open. I kept very still, like a feral cat ready to pounce. I recognized one as Mr. Kirlein, Garrett's father from upstairs. The other was the leader from that awful night. Then I knew. I knew they had come for Nee-Nee.

As the leader leaned over Nee-Nee's pallet and began to slip his hands under her shoulders, ready to lift her, something happened in my throat. The heavy thing that prevented me from speaking was suddenly dislodged. I sat up and I began to scream. Bodies around me moved. I screamed. The leader gripped Nee-Nee under her shoulders, and I could see she was awake now. I was screaming as Ma and the others woke up. I kept screaming.

"Shut her up," the leader said over my own noise.

Mr. Kirlein turned to me, but I heard Nee-Nee say before anyone could stop her:

"That's right my precious one. Keep screaming. Scream all you want. Scream for what is right. Scream for all of us."

That was all I heard because then Mr. Kirlein came towards me, his face a contorted mask in the moonlight that shined through the broken window. He raised his arm.

We are by a stream. It runs clear and bright. We splash in the shallows. Nee-Nee is there, too, and she is laughing — the many lines on her face creased in joy.

Editors' Choice

Inshallah

Lita Kurth

This is the day he says goodbye. His uniform is faded. His boots, the same ones from the last war, are worn. He's thirty-nine years old, but they are calling up men as old as fifty. He's still handsome, his wife says. When his children say, "goodbye Daddy" and kiss him, they believe they'll see him again.

And so he goes to muster with the troops in their motley uniforms. His beard is flecked with gray, his eyes unduped. His shoulder remembers the rifle sling. While orders are given, a few lines of Hafiz float in his head. "Carry your heart through the world like a life-giving sun," but how will he do that with a rifle?

He moves out with the young, fidgety on dreams, eager to use their guns. Women stand on the sidewalks, watch and wave. He doesn't look.

Oh, this crowd of excited boys. The sky will burn them. They'll live in the smell of sweat and shit. There will be lice and diarrhea. If they're lucky. And can he be lucky twice? Come home with only shrapnel? No. There's no exit from this path. The enemy capital holds a hundred streets; one will be, for him, the last.

As he marches, his footsteps say, his pants legs say: *what is, what is, what is*. Almost a poem. The order was given. His soles hit the dusty street over and over and over. Things cannot be different.

Some young men don't march with him. Their parents set them on a plane and now they fly, sipping coffee and looking out the window. Their feet will alight on golf-course grass, deep carpet, sparkling tile. Beirut, Paris, Dubai. Wouldn't he do that too if he had money? But he will remain on the ground. He has never risen into the sky, heard propellers roar. In this war like the last one, he will travel by truck and battered ship.

He has never ascended those stairs that lead to clouds; he never will. Unless it's true what some have said, what happens after the choking gas, the burning and writhing, the shaking ground, deafening roars, thirst, exhaustion, blood, and screams. Is there a place of peace, above, beyond? It might be so. But what's ahead he knows for sure. Fate gave the signal. He walks toward it, in his pocket, a pencil and smudged notebook; in his head, poems. Where do the unwritten verses go?

Fallen Flowers

Mark Schafron

It is the waning hours of the noctis shift, the time just before dawn shimmers gold through the bay fog. Over the public address, a female voice practiced in just-the-facts: "Code blue, ICU six-two-seven, code blue, ICU six-two-seven."

Awakened patients in semi-dark rooms groan, adjust themselves, try to get back to sleep. One patient bumps the IV in the back of his hand, curses, then closes his eyes.

Four pairs of feet pound down gleaming tiles to room 627—sensible nurse shoes and candy-colored clogs squeaking when taking the corner. Now comes the urgent rattling of a crash cart.

In 627, a nurse is pumping a bag valve mask clamped on a woman's face. The nurse has raised the woman's bed into a reclining position; the patient is limp with her jaw slack.

The nurse, still pumping, says, "I came in on rounds and found her unconscious and not breathing. I hit the alarm and started bagging her."

A white-coated doctor with red hair sticking up, jarred from a nap on his office sofa: "How long in arrest?"

"I don't know. Maybe since the end of the last round."

"Pull the bag. Let's suction her throat."

The in-wall suction unit makes a *shook-shook-shook* sound.

"Clear," the doctor says. "Continue bagging. Crank the O2 to one hundred percent. You stay as airway manager." The doctor snaps a glance at the beeping patient monitor. "Hypoxemia and tachycardia. Get the ventilator online."

Wordlessly, two nurses shove visitor chairs into corners, while a third yanks the privacy curtain fully out of the way, then powers on the ventilator sitting on its cart.

The bagging nurse, still pumping, says, "I see cyanosis on her lips."

"Her lungs were roasted to begin with. Let's intubate."

The doctor leans into the woman's left ear. He notices her unlined, creamy skin. Hair grown back powderpuff-fluffy between chemo rounds. "Angela?" he says loudly—emergency responder voice. "It's Dr. Reilly. We're going to put you on a machine to help you breathe. I'll be sliding a tube into your mouth and down into your trachea, but first I'm going to give you something, so you won't feel it."

The doctor glances at the monitor again, watches the ventilator screen as it boots up.

"Point one five of etomidate into her IV, please. Not that it matters," he says more quietly. "She's comatose. But, just in case."

I can hear you.

The tube hurts. I wouldn't feel it, you said.

Roasted?

Next day, midday visiting hours. A new shift on duty. A man arrives on the ICU floor. His blue eyes are bloodshot, making them look aflame. He has grocery store flowers wrapped in pink paper. He turns into 627.

A veteran nurse seated at the central station looks up, sees him go in. She wears a white smock patterned with smiling yellow suns. "Sir? Sir!" To her younger colleague: "Shit! I wanted to catch him and warn him, damn it." She quicksteps around the counter, enters the room.

The man is standing with his mouth open. The flowers are on the floor where they slipped from his hand.

"Mr. Armistead?" He doesn't answer. He stares. His wife reclines, semi-elevated, eyes closed, an accordion hose running from the ventilator to her open mouth, sealed with white tape. IVs trail from both bruised arms. A third hangs from her neck, unused, residual from last night's emergency.

The ventilator goes *hiss, thump, thump . . . hiss, thump, thump*

. . . its internal conductor keeping slow, infallible time. Her body jerks just a little with each machine breath.

"Mr. Armistead?" She grazes his forearm with her fingertips. His head snaps toward her, his face like one startled from sleep: "The hell happened here?"

"We tried to call you last night, but your cell kept disconnecting."

"I forgot to charge it. My head is mush. I don't sleep."

"Well, anyway, we saw she was having a little trouble breathing, so we put her on this ventilator to breathe for her. Let me get Dr. Ross. She can fill you in."

The ventilator screeches an alarm. He jumps, looks back and forth from his wife to the machine. The nurse steps over, taps a few buttons and the conductor inside the machine again takes up his baton: *hiss, thump, thump . . .*

"It's fine," the nurse says.

No, it's not. Unbind me. My heart flutters like a leaf.

They stand at the end of the bed, Dr. Ross and the husband. He is a tall man and towers over her.

"What got her moved to us in the ICU from oncology was pneumonitis, which is a general inflammation of the lungs that makes breathing difficult. What we have now is ARDS—acute respiratory distress syndrome—where the inflammation is causing her body's immune system to respond dramatically and escalate the inflammation exponentially. Essentially, her lung tissue is being destroyed. Steroids can help—we have her on a course of them—but at this stage of severity, really all we can do is use the vent to keep her breathing."

"Is that from the chemo and radiation?"

"That's a question for the oncologists. I'm a pulmonologist."

"Can she get better?"

The doctor pinches her chin, studies her patient. "It's not likely, and with her blood oxygen as low as it is, considerable brain damage is inevitable, and likely already in motion."

He looks at his wife, the face of a decade together. His lips tremble as her body does its little jerk in time with the ventilator.

He clears his throat. Swallows. "Can she hear us?"

"Possibly."

He glares down at the doctor. "Then maybe we should speak privately?" He bobs his head toward the door. She follows him into the corridor. He stoops to hear her better.

"Honestly, in my examination this morning, between vent breaths, I saw Cheyne-Stokes respirations, which we see when someone is near death. I administered a paralytic, which will keep her from doing something called bucking the vent, so the machine can do all the work for her. I have her heavily sedated, just in case, but as things stand, she's not going to wake up." Dr. Ross glances at the tablet she carries. "I see that you are her healthcare proxy?"

"Are you telling me I might have a decision to make?"

"Will other relatives visit soon?"

"They're trying, but they all live back East and that blizzard . . ."

"If they can come, I think it would be a good idea if they did. What you're seeing in there is life support."

The doctor walks away and leaves him standing, staring after her, while medical personnel bustle by. A food service worker rolls past, pushing a cart loaded with cups of green Jell-O. Other visitors creep along the corridor as if trying not to make noise, peering into rooms, feeling their way, faces creased with worry.

The nurse in smiling yellow suns watches him, knows the look of bad, very bad news. "Goddamn Ross," she mutters to her desk mate. "She has the bedside manner of a robot."

The husband makes eye contact with her. She busies herself at the desk. He drops into a stray wheelchair and raps his shin on the footrest without noticing. His insides tumble, then settle. He gets up and goes into the room, rummages through a plastic drawstring bag marked *Patient's Belongings*, finds his wife's glasses,

cleans them with his shirttail. He puts them on her face. She is hopelessly nearsighted without them. This way, when she wakes up, she won't see the world as if through a waterfall.

He pulls a chair upholstered in cheap aqua vinyl next to her bed and takes her hand. It's soft, like always, but cold, like never.

"Angela," he says. "Squeeze my hand if you can hear me."

Nothing. He has forgotten about the paralytic.

The flowers stay where they have fallen.

Roasted, roasted. I am so roasted. Ah, Bill. I'm so sorry. You've been a good man. This is going to be rough on you and Mom.

Now I am a blind woman going deaf, straining to hear. I have been cheated of time. It isn't fair; all this suffering just to become a ghost.

The husband takes the grungy parking garage elevator to his car to make a call. He sits in the gloom holding his now-charged phone, massages his temple with two fingertips, sighs, taps in his mother-in-law's number.

"Barbara. It's Bill."

"What's going on out there?"

He closes his eyes, recites what he knows. Omits Angela's slate-blue lips and fingertips. Omits the empty urinary drainage bag, which Dr. Ross said is a sign of her kidneys shutting down. Omits the lead-white face like a medieval portrait.

"I have to get out there," Barbara says. She is sobbing. "I don't care what they say. Or you. I'll step in!"

"Barbara, with the snow and the airport situation back there . . . I hate to be blunt, but I don't think you'd make it in time."

"Damn you! Why did you have to move her way the hell out there?"

"We went where there was work," he says quietly. "You know that."

"God damn you!" She is sobbing louder. "That's my daughter!"

"That's my wife," he whispers.

"She could have done so much better!"

"I'll keep you posted, Barbara. If anything changes, I'll call. Or call me whenever you want."

In a high-pitched yowl, like a cat in pain: "You son of a bitch!"

He taps the disconnect button and puts the phone in his shirt pocket. He sits for a moment, staring ahead blankly, then drives his fist into the dashboard with such force that it smashes the radio. His knuckles bleed. He does not notice.

Pain and fear have been mine for months upon months, like walking through a bitter headwind. I am exhausted from the trek. The wind has stopped, yet my heart beats as if it would leave my chest.

I was ambitious, but I see now nothing will happen except this. I should be angry. Or scared. I am neither. I would just like to sleep in my own bed.

The husband sits in the chair watching his wife. Hears the machine breathing for her, watches the little jerk of her body. He holds a paperback book, folded over his index finger.

The noctis shift is coming on; he hears the exchange of information at the desk just outside. An announcement over the public address system: visiting hours end in ten minutes.

He sits up and leans forward, grips the armrests, unsure if he can stand. He gets to his feet, gathers his jacket. Feels the pocket for his keys. Nurse sunshine enters with her relief. They confer at the ventilator, jot down some notes.

The night nurse turns toward him: "You don't have to leave," she says in a voice rich with the Caribbean. Sunshine nods in agreement.

"No?"

"No. You can stay the night if you'd like. That chair over there is a recliner."

Sunshine leaves, returns with a blanket, pillow, and a small plastic bag of hospital-issue toiletries. He takes them, thanks her. Dr. Reilly pops his head in, beckons to the nurses, and they file out. The husband drags the recliner out, fluffs the pillow, and lies down. The night nurse returns, dims the lights.

"Were you going to watch TV?"

"No, no thank you."

She switches on the television to the "Comfort Channel"—a scenic slideshow backed by soft, classical music. She puts the TV controller with its small speaker on the pillow next to Angela's head.

"In case she can hear, this is calming—better than hearing hospital sounds. Have you been talking to her?"

"Yes. I was reading to her, actually."

"Good. But try to rest as best you can."

He looks at Angela. "My wife is dying," he says. His voice sounds spectral, as if it came from a far corner of the room.

"She has some very sick lungs," the night nurse says. She leans over to look at the empty urine collection bag, frowns, starts to say something, checks herself.

"Try to rest," she says. "I'll look in on her a little later."

He goes into the patient restroom, dry heaves, rinses his mouth with bleachy-tasting water, returns to his chair. She is still there, the monitor softly beating with her heart.

He can't sleep but pretends to when the nurse comes on rounds, fusses with this or that, and goes. He avoids the comfort slide show, watches the patient monitor instead. The numbers mean nothing to him, except the rising heart rate. Periodically, he reaches over to squeeze his wife's chilly hand and stroke her face, tells her he is there.

I am shedding my shape, myself, slowly, moving in a slow river flowing to I know not where, but I know I am approaching the cusp of something ancient. I hear voices I haven't heard since childhood, asking the gods to show me what lies beyond the rudiments of time.

Morning, three days later. Nurse sunshine comes on duty, conducts her relief, enters Room 627. The husband sits close to the bed, holding his wife's hand. He looks like he has been up for days. The ventilator screeches; sunshine quiets it. He doesn't look up. The machine has sounded alarms all night, every night.

Dr. Ross comes in, checks the vent, examines the patient, studies the vitals on the monitor. The husband looks up at Ross, raises his eyebrows.

"Sir," she says. "See the heart rate?" She taps the monitor with her pen, as if instructing a class. "One hundred fifty-five. Her brain stem is commanding her heart to pump what little oxygenated blood she has to her organs, to try to keep them alive. Her heart has been racing like this for eighteen hours. The next thing that will happen is she's going to have a heart attack. Then we'll have to resuscitate her, if we can, which isn't likely."

"Can't you do a . . . what do you call it . . . a tracheotomy for the vent, while I arrange for a long-term facility?"

Ross squats down before him, rests her hands on her thighs. "We could, but you have to think of quality of life. Her lungs will not heal. They're too far gone. Her brain has been oxygen-starved for days. Her kidneys have shut down, and toxins are flooding her system. I've conferred with my colleagues and we all agree. Even if something miraculous happens and she keeps going, you're looking at a vegetative state." She glances down at the floor, thinking, looks up, moves the hair from her eyes. "I'm very sorry, but you need to think of end of life."

Ross stands, leaves.

He looks at his wife, leans in. "Did you hear all that?" he says. "Angie. What do I do?"

I lie curled in a hollow in a patch of warm morning sunshine, resting in a field of thousands of wildflowers: red, yellow, blue, white. Black

butterflies flutter and whirl in my heart. I rise and walk to a wood where the buzz-saw sound of a million unseen cicadas announces me to the trees.

I traverse a broad gully, sure-footed, guided somehow up and over a ridge of aspen and scrub oak. Distant things shimmer in a forenoon now glimmering with heat, and the sound is of summer insects. I feel pinkish warm as I move through sweet, waist-high ferns to a dry swale, cross, climb to a plateau. There a sweat-stained old man plows a field with twin mules, like a sepia image of my Yankee great-grandfather. I strain to see his face. He whoas the mules, raises his battered fedora in greeting, then uses it to point. My eyes follow and there, just below, is a calm sea.

Ross and sunshine come in, stand quietly. He looks from one to the other. "Okay," he says.

"I'm going to give her more morphine," Ross says. "She will feel no pain."

His mind flashes back to when they had to put down their ancient, sick dog. "She will feel no pain," the veterinarian said. He cradles his throbbing head in his hands.

Sunshine taps on the patient monitor. The vital signs disappear. The word *comfort* floats across the screen. Two other nurses appear, carrying a basin of water and washcloths, shift Angela here and there as they bathe her, then comb her hair.

"God forgive me, I hope I'm doing the right thing," he says, quietly, not to them.

"You are," all four say in chorus.

"Why don't you step out for just a sec," Sunshine says, gently. "I'll come get you in a minute."

Sunshine brings him back in and the ventilator, IV lines, and other life support paraphernalia are gone. He kneels next to his wife. Sunshine pulls the privacy curtain closed and leaves.

I come to the shore of this flat blue sea. A ship awaits and somehow, I know it's for me. I board and step forward to the bow, where there is a brass binnacle and compass, its needle pointing dead ahead. I hear the footsteps of others boarding behind me, but I cannot turn my head to see them. Forward in the distance is a brilliant green shore, a continent, and I know that is where we will go.

As the boat begins to move, swiftly, the breaking rush of the bow wake makes a sound that swaddles us in comfort. We begin to sing, in a perfect otherworldly harmony.

Dr. Ross enters, wearing a stethoscope. She lays the diaphragm against her patient's carotid arteries, listens, then does the same at the chest and ankles. She does it twice, then checks her watch: "4:27 pm," she says.

The husband looks at her, bewildered. "Why would I want to remember that?" he asks.

"I'll give you some time with her," she says, and leaves.

The husband struggles to his feet, yanks open the window curtains, tearing one, filling the room with golden California sunshine. A while later, he comes out of the room, closes the door. The day shift is at the central station, Ross, and sunshine included, all tapping into computers.

"Thank you," he says, flatly. He is glassy-eyed. "All of you. I know you did your best." He walks away toward the elevator, staggering a bit. His wife's glasses dangle from his fingertips.

Nurse sunshine follows him, catches up.

"I'm so sorry for this," she says. "You've been very brave."

"Me?" he says, incredulous.

"Yes, you. I've been doing this a long time, and you don't know how many times I've seen people come once, and then never again because they can't handle it."

"Who would do such a thing?" he says. He presses the button, steps into the elevator and disappears.

Sunshine starts her car in the tomblike parking garage. She lights and deep drags a cigarette. "Leave it at work," she whispers thrice, like a mantra, blue smoke tumbling from her mouth as she forms the words.

A nurse from pediatrics walking past sees her, playfully wags a finger—no smoking on campus. Sunshine bobs her head and shrugs. "Three years until retirement," she says. She flicks the cigarette out the window. It sparks on the concrete for all to see. She puts the car in gear, rolls to the exit.

From his car, the husband calls a funeral home, tells them where to find her. Then he taps out his mother-in-law's phone number, stops, puts the phone away. He pulls out of the garage, squints in the sudden light, drives in a trance. When he stops, he finds himself in the parking lot near the summit of Mount Diablo, a place he's never visited. He jogs the trail to the summit, setting off miniature rockslides of sharp-edged Franciscan chert the color of dried blood.

Sweating and breathless, he looks west over honey-colored hills of wild oat grass dotted with green oak. The breeze smells of baked sage and vanilla. In the distance is the shimmering bay, with the Golden Gate Bridge outlined as if made of matchsticks and black string. Beyond the bridge, the Farallon Islands float on the horizon. The sun blinds him as it sinks into the Pacific. Here, at the end of the world, he begs it not to go.

In her office, Dr. Ross puts her head down on her desk. Her hair fans out over her forearms like a veil. Silently, she weeps.

Burn

Sarah Senft

Salt and pepper on his muesli. Stale bread soaked in milk overnight until it has softened enough to be spread across the lawn the next morning to feed the pigeons. A prized record player on a black stand complete with records, some still in the original cellophane, wrapped in black garbage bags, anticipating sticky fingers. Hospital bed corners. Three sons, one daughter and a wife. A small dog named Jack. The six o'clock news. A Jameson neat and whorls of cigar smoke. A portrait of an ordinary man.

The air was heavy with chatter as she remembered.

She absentmindedly pondered the idea that if she remained wedged between the two aunts any longer, she might become part of the linoleum. Maybe a chair would be set upon her head. The wooden legs, securing her placement as a permanent fixture at the dinner table. Maybe the broom would tickle her nose as it went about its perfunctory task. Maybe the shod feet that crossed her threshold would wear her down and she would eventually acquire a beautiful patina on her surface.

Maybe. Maybe...

She woke with a jolt from her reverie when a drop of scalding hot tea landed on her bare arm. Nerve endings tingling. She yelped. Had anybody heard her? How could they? Each voice in the kitchen trying to outdo one another, getting louder and louder, a cacophony of crows muscling for supremacy. She elbowed her way out through the crowd trying to get above the surface of the din. Gasping for solitude. Until finally she broke free.

She found herself alone with him. He was smaller now. Shrunk. With a pallor not seen outside of a vampire movie. Waxy. With a morbid fascination she sidled even closer. The tiniest of threads peeked out of the corner of his mouth where his lips had been sewn shut. An unmistakable musty scent swamped her nostrils. She wrinkled her nose. She was hot and sticky, beads

of sweat forming on her upper lip, tasting salt with her tongue. With an impatient sigh she brushed wisps of hair off her clammy forehead.

She could hear the merriment drifting down the hallway towards her. Her time alone with him coming to an end. Her heart, roaring in her chest. She moved closer. To an outsider it looked like one final moment with a loved one. To say goodbye. She caressed his face one last time. And then brought her lips as close as possible, stubble grazing her cheek, and whispered her final message to him.

Burn.

He could feel her presence from within the confines of his resting place. They had thought of everything and spared no expense. Custom oak to fit his dimensions. The interior lined with white ruffled satin perfectly framing his dark wool suit. The suit which at that moment was irritating his bare skin, causing his flesh to goosebump and turn red. Him unable to adjust to ease the discomfort. This awareness of his new state of being was jarring. He felt her breath. The hairs on both arms stood on end. A wave of warmth battling the frigid cold he was currently experiencing, despite the wool suit amid the dog days of summer. He strained to hear her words. She spoke so softly. He could not respond. Even if he had wanted to. He was experiencing exquisite tenderness in his mouth from the sutures that were inserted through his jaw and up into his nasal cavity. That tiny thread she had noticed, the only evidence of his macabre manipulation. His eyelids shuttered. The glue they used irritating his sensitive cornea. His hands knotted across his chest, rosary beads intertwined between his fingers. A Hail Mary or two unlikely to make any difference to his current predicament. The noxious smell of death in his nasal passages. The holy water being applied to his forehead in the shape of a cross puddling and settling just behind his left ear, leaving a damp spot on the satin lining.

He fought to forget.

Forget what, you ask?

He found himself in his body again. He could hear the bed springs groaning and creaking under their weight. The slap of the headboard against the wall breaking his focus. His gaze momentarily switched to what was happening above the bed. The cross, lifting off the wall, perilously close to coming off completely. A symbol of hope. And of death before rebirth.

The piercing, high pitched sound of the drill interrupted his thoughts. Light was replaced by the darkest dark, cocooning him permanently.

He began to feel warm again. His spirits lifted. Luxuriating in the possibility of a resurrection. His terror and fear from before abating. The heat was unlike anything he had ever experienced. Almost unbearable. But tolerable if this was his rebirth.

The sizzle of his flesh in his ears. The smell. Impugning his nostrils. An echo of her last words to him. Burn.

Mr. Duggan's Legs

John Sergio

Mr. Richard Duggan died last week. There was no funeral, Danny said. The City hearse just came real early in the morning and took the body away before it could smell. Mr. Duggan had no family, and he lived alone over the Millinis in one room on the top floor. He was old and he didn't smile or talk to anybody, and he didn't go out, hardly ever, and we almost never saw him except for once or twice a year when he limped real slow up the block to Jamaica Avenue to take the el.

Danny Millini was still sore at me because they put his dog to sleep after he bit me bad. I got like over thirty stitches but that was the summer before. Prince had tore me up like I was made out of cray paper. I had been on the sidewalk in front of the Millinis' long driveway when I heard the cry PRINCE IS LOOSE. I froze, and just stood there. My dad had always told me the safest thing to do if a dog charges is NOT to run. But I guess that's for normal dogs. Prince was crazy. My mom sometimes looks at my dad funny-like and she says that you can still see the scars on my face and arms and they're still red but it doesn't bother me. They don't hurt anymore and the nightmares have stopped so who cares. I just can't be around dogs anymore. Not even little tiny ones. I was the second person Prince bit and enough is enough, my dad said, that dog is a danger but neighbors don't sue each other as long as the doctor bills get paid which I guess they did but then my dad said the Millinis didn't have a lot of money and we were lucky cause we had a major medical since dad's a machine-shop teacher and in the union at Brooklyn Tech, so who knows? My friend Charles lives next to the Millinis and he got bit first—like six months before me—and he got a hundred dollars when Prince got him, and he said my dad was stupid and a sucker not to sue but I just said back to him YOUR MOTHER! just like Al, my older brother, taught me to say to rank out somebody as he called

it, but I didn't say WHAT about his mother even though Al had said that was enough and that's all you need to say. Anyhow, Charles didn't want to fight and said he was just glad that he got his hundred dollars put in the bank for him for when he was older and he didn't even need stitches. He said maybe I could of gotten even TWO hundred. Man!

A few days after Mr. Duggan died, the Millinis emptied his room and carried out so much garbage to the curb. I spoke it over with Hans and Charles and we waited for our chance. When the Millinis all left in their old station wagon for Mass on Saturday night, which my dad told me the Church now said counted for Sunday (even though WE still went on Sunday morning), we attacked that stuff at the curb. It was me and my brother Paul, and Hans and Charles, and Pepo who mostly spoke just Spanish and just moved in and went to PS 54, not Cenacle like the four of us. Call us garbage pickers—I don't care. We got some really neat stuff.

I got a box of pencils and old fountain pens but I got ink all over myself and when I went home, all sweaty from running, my mom yelled at me and I had to wash up like it was Sunday night before school. There were all sorts of pencils in the box in bunches tied up with rubber bands that had dried and shriveled up and looked like dead worms wound around the pencils that mostly were worn down and had no tips and the erasers were all hard rubber and couldn't erase nothing and would just tear your homework up because they were so old and now like a rock. There was a broken radio Pepo took to open and fiddle with and an old flashlight but the battery had busted and was all leaky. That got on me and burned a little but I wiped it off good on my shirt. There were a few tools which I took: a few screwdrivers and a pair of pliers and Paul got an old saw that was rusty and my dad later made him throw it out cause he could of cut himself and then he would need a needle or his jaw would lock up and not close, ever, my dad said.

There were so many heavy boxes of old papers. Pepo found hidden in there a bunch of dirty pictures and some had words in a different language on them too. He shoved them in his pocket,

and we couldn't see but it's a sin for us because we go to Catholic school, but he says HE could look cause he went to public school which was better than Catholic school with mean nuns hitting you with a paddle. We said that was dumb and he could go to hell. There were magazines and books but all of this was for old people. Nothing about baseball or race cars or bull fighting or other fun stuff. There were like a thousand gazillion pages of boring paper with numbers on it like math in school. Records of some kind. Over and over we threw up handfuls of these papers and yelled Happy New Year! and watched it rain over all of us and settle in a big mess in the street.

There were lots of clothes but to us these were just rags so we didn't bother with this until Pepo found a dollar in one of the pockets, and then we emptied all the bags of clothes like a rummage sale my mother would sometimes drag me to, and we felt in every pocket but we didn't find any more money. We told Pepo that when the Mellinis got back from church we'd tell Danny that he found a dollar in the clothes and he would have to give it back because it was from Danny's house but he said in bad English and with some Spanish words thrown in that we couldn't understand that then we'd all have to give everything back that we found, and also Mr. Duggan was dead and didn't need it, and anyhow, finders keepers. That was all really smart of him to say so we shut up about it after that.

Hans found an old duffle bag that had Mr. Duggan's army clothes in there. It was motheaten and smelled and Mr. Duggan was no general, that's for sure. The army shirts had just a few stripes on the sleeves so what comes after buck private? We looked for guns and knives and ammunition and grenades but there was none of that neat stuff.

There was a whole bag of old pills and medicine and bandages rolled up and ointments in tubes that we stepped on to watch them squirt, and there were all these old, small, dark brown and green, thick glass bottles. We smashed them hard on the black street with all the cracks and we threw some of them straight up really high

and watched them crash and explode, and they almost hit us on our heads but we dodged them cause we were too fast.

Paul found a book of all the green stamps that my mom kept but I took that from him because he didn't know they were like money and when you saved enough you could get like a free car or who knows, maybe even a house. He tried to grab it away but I was bigger and so he jumped back into the garbage pile to see what else he might find.

Charles found a suitcase that was locked but we took a rock to it and busted it open thinking there could be stacks of thousand-dollar bills or jewels inside but it was just more papers, including old photographs from when Mr. Duggan was just a little boy with his mom and dad, but the writing on the back of the pictures in pencil was smudged and you couldn't read it. His high school diploma was in there too from some school from a faraway state like New Jersey or California or somewhere. It was dated in the 1930s like before they had electricity.

There was a package of letters that fell out of the box. Hans took one look at the girly red ribbon wrapped around these letters and jumped back into the pile, leaving me to look myself. The letters were in their envelopes from so many years before. They had funny stamps and there was army writing on most of them and some of the words and sentences in the letters were blocked out good so nobody could read them. Plus it was hard to read anyhow, since it was all in script and Mr. Duggan had written them all because they all had his name on the bottom so I don't see how he got them back from the girl Dear Ash, or Dear Ashley or My Dearest Lady Ashley that he wrote them to and they were all so mushy about love and real boring so I searched around trying to find any exciting war talk and there was some but so much was blocked out and he sure liked to say Jap and Dirty Jap a lot, and he also used a lot of bad words too but it's a sin to say those bad words and I won't. The letter on the bottom was different from the rest. The envelope had been sent to some army hospital to the attention of Mr. Richard Duggan which is how we learned his full

name. It was in a girl's handwriting and the paper was fancy and on top it said *My Dearest Dick which made me giggle but I continued and it read I'm so, so sorry about what happened to you and I do love you but I can't and have to write this letter.* It was going to be more mushy stuff like what would make my mother sad and cry so I dropped it into the mess at me feet and jumped back into the pile.

And then I found this. Buried all the way at the bottom of the heap I saw and grabbed a leg from a dummy they have in the store window like when you go at the beginning of the year to get your new school clothes. I grabbed it and threw it over my shoulder like it was a gun the soldiers carry while marching. Charles tried to take it from me but first I swung it like a sword and then jabbed at him like it was a bayonet and he couldn't get it from me. I put it back over my left shoulder with my right hand holding it in place from the upper leg-end and the foot part out past by shoulder as I marched around, feeling victorious: hup, two, three, four, hup, two, three, four...

Hans, who had run into his house because he had to go to the bathroom, bad, came running back out like he was missing all of the fun and he wasn't even off his stoop when he saw me and yelled loud for me to drop it. *John!* He shouted. *EEEEewwwww! That's Mr. Duggan's wooden leg! When he got all blown up and his leg shot off by the Japs in the war.*

Instantly, I dropped that leg like it had come alive and would bite, and I began to run as fast as I could, in circles first, like a dog, and wiping on my shirt my right hand where I had held the end with my open palm just where the fake leg would have met the stump. I remembered back to a few nights earlier when my mom and dad had thought I had fallen asleep on the couch. They were talking about the war and someone wounded in Oak-in-ow-ahh. Dad had looked at my mom funny like and had said the leg maybe he could live with but that this other thing was worse than death even. What could ever be that bad I had thought. Then, scared that the leg was contagious and like I was infected, I tore for home, as fast as I could, my lungs pounding. Past the length of six houses I

ran. It was like it was last summer and Prince was loose and kids were screaming and running and jumping on cars to escape this mad dog instead of just standing there, helpless, but this time I ran and ran so fast and if there was a dog I knew it couldn't catch or bite me. I was young and could live for so long, really almost forever, and it was stupid to worry about dying. I had my legs still and they worked just as they were supposed to and they could carry me for many, many years till I got old like forty or fifty even, through a life that had every possibility open to it, maybe even for me to fall in love, and marry, and have children and maybe even become a general one day in a war and awarded all those stripes and medals. Yeah, me a war hero when I was all grown up.

NONFICTION

Last Call at Video Droid

Eve Goldberg

It's a scorching summer afternoon in 2018. The air is still. A red vinyl banner droops down the side of a squat stucco building, its white block letters shouting: **GOING OUT OF BUSINESS SALE**. Video Droid—our neighborhood video store—is closing after 34 years. I've been coming here for 18 of them.

The parking lot is jammed. Cars spill into the pizza parlor's spaces next door and line the surrounding streets. I luck into a parking spot, then hop out and hurry toward the building, a low-grade panic setting in. *Am I too late? Is everything worth having already gone?* My flip-flops stick slightly to the heat-softened asphalt as I cross the lot.

Inside, Video Droid is packed—more crowded than I've ever seen it, even on a Saturday night in its heyday. People clog the narrow aisles, shouldering past one another in front of shelves that once held thousands of DVDs. A small monitor dangling from a wooden ceiling beam plays *Blazing Saddles*. A woman with stringy blond hair and blue tattoos winding down both arms pulls *8 Mile* from the rack and drops it into a cloth bag, then adds *Boyz n the Hood*. Nearby, a man in shorts and a Giants cap beams at his young son. "You'll love *E. T.*," he says, plucking a multi-disc set from the shelf. "It's great."

I make a beeline for the Criterion Collection at the back of the store. Alas—but not surprisingly—the shelves are nearly bare. No *The Third Man*. No *Rashomon*. No *Weekend*. What remains are a few obscure French films by directors I've never heard of. I feel a real pang of disappointment, sharper than I expected. Why didn't I come earlier? The sale was front-page news in the local paper. I should've known better.

Video Droid is closing. An era is ending. And there's no mystery as to why. Netflix and streaming did it. In 2000, there were roughly 28,000 video stores in the United States. By 2017, there

were about 2,000. Then COVID slammed the door shut. Today, only a couple of hundred remain.

Not that long ago, video rental stores were woven into the fabric of everyday life. And indie shops like Video Droid were heaven for film fanatics like me. We liked to scoff at big-box places like Blockbuster—though, in moments of desperation, we went there too.

My first video paradise was Vidiots in Santa Monica. Vidiots was where I could walk up to the film nerd with a mohawk behind the counter, hold up a VHS copy of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and tap the back of the box.

“It says here Pierre Boulle wrote the screenplay,” I explain, “but the actual screenwriters were Michael Wilson and Carl Foreman. They were blacklisted during the anti-communist witch hunts of the ’50s, so Boulle—who wrote the novel BUT DIDN’T EVEN SPEAK ENGLISH—got the credit and the Oscar.”

And, because I am young, and passionate about the subject—and prone to over-explaining at any age—I don’t leave it at that. “Eventually, both the Writers Guild and the Motion Picture Academy corrected this travesty, and Wilson and Foreman’s names were added to later prints.”

“Wow,” says Mohawk Girl. “I didn’t know that. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

The next time I’m at Vidiots, I pull *Bridge on the River Kwai* from the shelf and find a handwritten note taped to the back which details the writing history of the movie. It was that kind of place.

Vidiots closed in 2017. Now Video Droid is closing too.

Of course, it isn’t just video stores. Brick-and-mortar retail of all kinds—neighborhood shops and corporate giants alike—is vanishing. Sears. K-Mart. Bed Bath & Beyond. RadioShack. Toys “R” Us. Shopping malls are becoming ghost towns, vast indoor ruins of escalators and food courts.

I turn away from the stripped-down Criterion shelves and head to Film Noir. I scan the spines, searching for old favorites. *Double Indemnity*—gone. *Sunset Boulevard*—gone. *Touch of Evil*—gone.

My expectations drop to nearly zero as I weave through the crowd to Classics.

Why do I even want these DVDs? I can stream most of these movies anytime I choose. Maybe it’s smarter not to spend money on plastic relics. But still... there’s something about the physical object. Is it nostalgia? A desire for ownership? For permanence? What happens if streaming services jack up prices, or quietly remove titles, or the internet goes down entirely? Does a tangible object offer a kind of reassurance in a world where so much feels provisional?

The Classics section is still half full, though the cases are out of order now, leaning drunkenly into empty spaces. With little hope of finding anything I care about, I lazily run my finger along the spines. And then—there it is: *The Hustler*. And wait—There’s *Night of the Iguana*... And *Marnie*... And *Blade Runner*!

And then, tucked away in the jumbled Staff Picks section, my favorite film of all time: *Chinatown*! I can’t believe no one has grabbed them already. But somehow, miraculously, they’re mine.

Treasures in hand, I stand in the long line snaking through the aisles toward the register, content—maybe even a little smug. The woman behind me cranes her neck, trying to peek at my stack. I turn and show her.

“Great haul,” she says.

“What did you get?” I ask.

She opens her Sonoma County Library book bag. “Mostly for my grandkids. But this one’s for me.” She pulls out *The Breakfast Club*. “My favorite.”

“Fantastic,” I say, secretly happy that not everyone shares my taste.

We exchange knowing smiles.

A few minutes later, I pay, step outside, and carry my stack of movies into the bright afternoon. I don’t look back. There’s nothing left to see—just a banner, some fading letters, and the quiet certainty that something familiar has slipped, finally and permanently, into history.

Honorable Mention, 2025 Prose Collections

Braided Lives

Eileen McGorry

I feel the tension of the psychiatric emergency room as soon as I enter. The chairs in the waiting area are full, and patients or family members are pacing in the spaces between the chairs and the registration desk. Some of those pacing stare at the staff room visible through the glass behind the desk. Others walk with downcast eyes as if memorizing the patterns on the floor. I slip by them and hang my coat on a hook in the back hallway and turn to the charge nurse who is walking toward me with a chart.

"This woman was brought in by the police. She tried to jump out of a three-story window. Her son and husband pulled her back in. Cantonese speaking, but I already called for an interpreter. Her son speaks English, so you can get started. Just get her admitted."

Dramatic as it sounds, it's an easier assignment than most. Usually, we're handed a chart about a patient in crisis and no plan. The hard part of the job is sifting through the mess inherent in a crisis and formulating a plan. We are the city's public hospital. Across the hall from our locked clinic is the city's primary trauma center and medical emergency room. The entire hospital is a teaching facility for the medical school at the university across town.

I see the son right away. He is a tall and slender man-child. He looks as if his height is new, as if he is uncomfortable hovering over people. He has none of the usual swagger of teenage guys. He stands next to his mother, a short thick woman, who is sitting in one of the chairs weeping. The father, not as tall as his son but just as slender, is mumbling and pacing.

Two uniformed police officers, both of whom look to be in their thirties, are at the front desk. One is filling out a 5150, the form used to place the weeping woman on a seventy-two-hour hold. The other police officer is talking with the clerk. Margaret,

a smart formidable African American woman, has worked in the clinic for ages. She does all the data entry and helps in managing the waiting area. She never gets rattled. She and the cop are smiling, not at all bothered by the activity that surrounds them.

I approach the mother and son and immediately the father is there. He's yelling in Cantonese, not at me but at his wife. She cringes as if his words are pummeling her.

"Let's go to a room," I say to the boy. He leans down and talks softly to his mother as he takes her arm. The father follows, no longer yelling, but no less agitated. Along an interior wall we have four interview rooms. With the number of patients currently in the clinic, I am relieved that one is free. On a different hallway, there are also three seclusion rooms.

The room is eight by eight with white walls. The paint is not that old, but the walls are scraped and scuffed. Just like everything in this hospital. There is a large window that has lost its seal, so it looks perpetually dirty. Eventually it will come up on a maintenance list, and workers will appear and replace it. Along one wall is a cushioned bench that is the width of a single bed. It also serves as a couch. It is functional but uninviting. On the side wall is an old wood desk and a chair with wheels. Fluorescent lights burn overhead. The lights are more suitable for a medical emergency room than a place where calming patients is just as important as their medical status. The son and mother sit on the couch. The father, leaning against the wall, is scowling, but is no longer yelling. I sit at the desk and turn my chair to face the family. The interpreter arrives, introduces herself and takes a seat next to the mother on the couch.

I tell the son we plan to admit his mother to the hospital. He turns and speaks to his father. The father barks back at him and is gone from the room and from the clinic. I ask the interpreter to ask the patient if she wants her son to remain in the room. She is still sobbing but she puts her hand on his arm as she nods.

My questions are standard. I already know this woman is seriously depressed. Although she will not understand my words,

I keep my voice calm and soft. It helps that we have treated her in the past and I can consult her old chart. Through the interpreter I tell the woman we are admitting her to the hospital, and she nods. Trying to reassure her, I say the unit where she will go has many Cantonese speaking staff. She nods again.

I focus on getting her history and current medical status. Although, on its face, it is likely she is presenting with an acute psychiatric crisis, I must be careful not to miss any medical problems that might have precipitated the crisis.

Once finished, I leave her in the room with her son, and I ask the doctor to write admission orders. I call the admitting unit and give the receiving nurse a report. Then we wait for an escort to take her upstairs. All this time the son has said nothing to me. Sitting next to his mother, he looks like he is all alone. My gut starts to ache for him.

Eventually transportation staff arrive and help the woman into a wheelchair. The son leans down and speaks to her. Then she is gone. The son stands to leave. I know where that ache in my gut is coming from now. Crossing every language and cultural barrier, this young man reminds me of my younger brother. At sixteen he was still living at home when my father declared bankruptcy. His need to help my parents was both visceral and resentful. Out of the house and immersed in my own life, I never showed up to do anything to help him.

"Sit for a minute?" I ask him. He starts talking before I say another word. "He is always yelling at her. At me too, but it's her that worries me. I'm out of high school next year, but if I leave, I'm sure she'll kill herself. I hate him, but I don't know what to do." I ask him a few more questions, are there other siblings, yes, but both are older, and they are not coming back. Do you plan to go to college? Yes, but I cannot leave her.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. I search for words, "It's good that you want to take care of your mother." And after a pause, I add, "You also have a right to a life of your own."

Finally, I give him a slip of paper with the number for a clinic in the Chinese part of the city. "Maybe talking to someone will

help." He takes the paper and nods, then stands and slips it into his pocket. At the door he pauses, then turns to look at me and says, "Thank you."

Months before I moved to this west coast city to go to graduate school. Having left a relationship that spanned ten years, I was single and thought a new start in a sophisticated city would energize me. Initially it felt like an adventure, but eventually I just felt alone and lonely. Arriving to a tight housing market, I stayed in a motel until I eventually found a studio apartment in a three-story art deco building. The neighborhood wasn't pretty, but the studio was inexpensive, and the building's locked front entrance and stony construction felt like a fortress.

Excited to have found a place, I hardly noticed the marginal nature of the streets around me. More industrial than residential, the streets bustled with commerce and lower working-class people scurrying to buses or walking their kids to school. But at night it became shaded, not from the darkness but from the consistent presence of guys in hooded sweatshirts moving along the sidewalks. Occasionally I would lie awake and hear scuffling and shouts, sometimes followed by a siren. Arriving home from school during the day then work at night, I had my keys out before I left my car. I checked my surroundings then walked with a steely presence to the front door. Checking behind me, I unlocked the door and quickly shut it behind me. My behavior never changed but over the years I spent there, I grew to feel safe. I was never approached on the streets, nor were any of my neighbors.

From the start my schedule was busy and I guess that's why it was a few months before I saw the women on the corner. It was dark but they were gathered near a streetlight. One quite tall, the other two of average height. Despite the cold mist that covered the city, they were each in tiny shorts and skimpy tops, tops that pushed the flesh of their breasts over the minimal material that covered them. And heels. It was the heels that got me. I knew the sidewalk was full of holes and cracks. How did they not stumble?

One of the women was cupping her hand around a lighter while the other two watched any car that slowed. Which mine did as it was where I needed to turn. But they only glanced at me before turning back to watch approaching cars.

While it heightened the edginess of the neighborhood, the ladies intrigued me. My apartment had large windows, and I often arrived home late and stood at the window and watched them watching the slowing cars. As a car stopped the passenger side window would lower, and one of the women would approach the car and the open window. Within a minute she would open the door and slip into the car.

Years before and in a different city, I worked with heroin addicts in a drug treatment clinic. There I met women who had been sex workers for years. Initially intimidated, I soon learned they were resilient women in unforgiving circumstances. They had survived things that would have killed me. I admired them for that.

Once I noticed the women, it seemed like I saw them everywhere. One day on the bus, one of them sat across from me. Her buttocks were tucked into the curved seat, her make up liberally applied. She was young, maybe not even eighteen, and her make-up made her look childlike. She boarded the bus like any other worker.

Then one day I saw the childlike woman again. I was at the laundromat behind my apartment building, and I was waiting for my clothes to dry. I wandered outside into bright yellow sunshine and paced the parking lot. I noticed a white pick-up truck in one of the end spaces, a large white man sitting in the driver's seat staring out at me. Then that childlike face popped up from his waist and down again, and up and down. That man never took his eyes from mine.

In my second year in the city, because of the prospect of double overtime, I stayed in town for the Christmas and New Year holidays. On Christmas Eve the clinic was unusually quiet. An hour into my shift, I was already restless. When the police arrived with a street kid who threatened to stab himself, I grabbed the case. The police said he stood in the middle of a street, screaming, holding a

large knife to his chest. "This was after the girlfriend said she was leaving him," the cop added.

The police liked us. Mostly because they didn't have to wait around when they brought someone in. They filled out a single piece of paper to put the person on a psychiatric hold, told us the story as they knew it and were back out on the streets. We were not legally bound to hold anyone for those seventy-two hours. But we were responsible for evaluating them for safety and the need for inpatient treatment. We usually sent more than half the patients placed on holds to outpatient care, rather than hospitalization.

I liked the job because the nurses had a lot of responsibility. And a good bit of respect. We always had a doctor, but we did most all the initial assessments. Which we then reviewed with the physician before we made a final plan. The challenge was in doing the assessment well. If you didn't get the right information, if your report to the doctor was full of holes, and if this happened consistently, you would find yourself in a supervision session with the head nurse or the clinic director.

The young man is nineteen and the girlfriend is about the same age. His clothes are dirty, and he looks like his last shower was months ago. The girlfriend is better dressed. If she is living on the streets, she hasn't been out there long. The clinic is so quiet, I talk with them for over an hour. The girlfriend is now being supportive. He wants to be released, and she is saying she will stay with him to keep him safe. I believe her promise to keep him safe is sincere, but I know, once back on the streets, the situation might change. Later I will regret not taking her aside and talking to her alone. From the beginning I know the safest thing is to send the girlfriend out and keep the young man at least until the morning. Had we been very busy, had the patients been piling up, I would have done exactly that. And no one would have questioned the decision.

Instead, I leave the kid with his girlfriend in a room. Meanwhile I see another patient who I know from the initial report I get will not take long. Then I return to them. He will be safe; she will stay

with him. But I still am not sure. I have them sit longer. After he has been with us for a few hours and after multiple conversations with him and his girlfriend, I finally talk to the doctor about letting him go with a follow-up appointment the next day.

Christmas morning the quiet atmosphere is gone, and the place is full. The nurse holds a chart out to me. “By the way,” she says, “that kid you saw yesterday, he is in the OR, his girlfriend left him around midnight, and he stabbed himself in the chest. It was touch and go. But he’s going to live.” She’s still holding the chart she wants me to take. She pushes it toward me and says, “This woman came in on her own, brought a whole bag of meds with her, says she was afraid she was going to take them all.” When I still don’t take the chart, she starts waving it up and down.

Eventually the loneliness I felt when I arrived in this city begins to fade. It helps that I am busy with graduate school and my job. And I now go to occasional parties or hikes with friends, or even on a few dates. When the man I left behind in the old city calls me asking if he can visit, I say yes. Even as I know our relationship is unalterably fractured by his consistent infidelities.

When he arrives, we walk the bustling streets of the city, stopping in museums and exotic coffee shops. My biggest joy in this new city is the unending bulging bookstores; many of them small store fronts that tunnel into the back where I lose time among the tightly packed shelves. He is less obsessed with books than me and I am surprised when he follows me into these places without complaint.

This man broke my heart over the years I lived with him. For years he promised to change. And he would. For a while. Then the hang-up phone calls or unexplained absences would resume. We would break up. Then he would call, and I would go back. Moving stopped all that.

On his visit, neither of us talks about these things. Instead, we talk about art and history and the rewards of reading great literature. We explore the pretty parts of the city. The museums, the grand hotels, and the waterfront. I tell him about my new life

here, using vignettes and interjecting color and in that telling, I discover a new story. A different narrative that is not fiction yet not fully true. It sounds more like the adventure I expected. My place of work and the stories I tell sound intriguing. I describe the schoolwork, which I find tedious, as if it is energizing.

I don’t tell him that I have struggled to find friends here. Or that I am still over eager for letters from old friends. When his departure approaches, he tells me he wants me to return to him when I have finished school. I tell him only that I enjoyed his visit. I don’t tell him that I wonder if the warm feelings I once had for him will ever return.

When he leaves, I return to my work/school schedule. One evening I talk with a woman who reports she is suicidal. She, like me, is single and in her late thirties. But her life is in ruins from serious past traumas. They haunt her. It is still the age of paper charts and hers is stuffed with emergency room visits and hospitalizations. None of the interventions have helped the deep depression she carries. I sit in a room with her, the thick folder of her troubles on my lap. She is so small. Her short brown hair circles her head like a halo. She pulls her body tight to the center of her being and only speaks if I ask her a question.

She had taken more than one overdose in the past few years and has also, on occasion, cut into her veins hoping to hit an artery. When I asked her why she has come in, she tells me she wants to walk into the mountains outside the city with no provisions or equipment. “They’ll find me in the morning, frozen to death,” she says.

Quietly prodding her I get mostly shrugs. As we talk, I realize her plan has minimal definition. She wants to wait a few months when the weather will be colder. But I remember the boy I let go into the night when he convinced me his crisis was not imminent. I tell the woman she should stay overnight in the emergency room, even though I know she will be released to outpatient care in the morning.

Six months later, I learn that she has killed herself. Not that time and not before coming in to see us several more times. Nor

did she walk into the woods. Instead, alone in her apartment, she took another overdose.

Soon I begin thinking about moving from my neighborhood. I check out a place in a vibrant neighborhood in the city. It's the downstairs of a house. Another studio but one with access to a small grassy backyard. It's a block off a boulevard busy with quirky stores, coffee shops, bookstores, and neighborhood restaurants. No hooded figures, no women strolling the streets in small tight shorts and high heels.

I am considering renting it until, as I leave, I study the limited street parking. I think about arriving home at midnight and circling the blocks looking for a parking space. As I drive home, I wonder how I would fit the move into a schedule that has no room. It's dark when I get home. I pour a glass of wine and stand at the window and watch the women. A car pulls in right below me and I watch one of the women briskly walk up, speak to the driver through the open passenger window, then swing the door open and get in. I want to stay at the window to make sure she returns safely. But I am too tired.

Each evening, I listen to patients whisper of childhood abuse and neglect and tell life stories fragmented by mental illness and drugs and alcohol. I watch the nurses who feel the sadness of those they try to help. And other nurses who grow cynical and speak briskly to clients who stop their meds or become unstable because of drug use. I worry about myself and compassion fatigue. Sometimes coming into work, I see only the litter beneath the benches outside the emergency room or the thick dirt that lines the curbs around the hospital. Inside I watch the housekeeping staff swish their mops across those old floors wondering if their hard work only serves to move the dirt around.

The hospital is in a poor neighborhood, but it doesn't lack vibrance. It is full of bodegas and cafes, and dark daytime bars and ethnic restaurants. On the sidewalks women hurry along with kids, all of them carrying plastic grocery sacks. They quickly pass the alleys and ignore those who exchange money for small packets of powder.

The graduate school, part of the large university, several miles away, is a mass of tall white buildings scrubbed clean by the sun. In the nearby neighborhoods the apartment houses and small but expensive homes are inviting but pricey. Inside the school I sit for hours in softly lit classrooms and listen to theoretical lectures on the practice of nursing. There is no dirt and no talk of hooded characters or messy lives or prostitutes.

One evening I am assigned to evaluate an angry man in restraints. He is thin and wiry and yelling in Spanish. We have seen him many times. His wife waits outside the seclusion room. She speaks enough English to tell me that her husband came after her with a carving knife. She ran to the bedroom, locked the door and called the police. Last time it was a machete. The machete is no longer in the house; her son has removed it. "Off medications," she says to me. Alcohol or drugs, I ask. She shakes her head. New medical problems? Once again, she shakes her head.

He is vigorously fighting the restraints and will exhaust himself if we don't get him calmed down. I put my hand on his arm to check if his temperature is significantly elevated. Then I use a stethoscope to count his heart rate. Even with all his fighting, first with the police and then with us, his heart rate is not bad. I ask the orderly to stay with the patient. The orderly is younger than me. He is round and often morose.

I call the patient's outpatient clinic and confirm what his wife had told me. I talk to our doctor and then draw medication into a syringe. The orderly did not stay with the patient as I had asked. He is outside the room near the main desk. He is trying to keep one eye on the patient and one on the television set mounted on the waiting room wall. When he sees me, he goes back into the room. I keep the syringe with medicine down by my side and out of sight. In my other hand I have a paper cup with the same medicine.

"Mr. R, we want you to take some medication, will you take these pills?" The doctor has come into the room with me. He tells the patient we want to help him calm down. The patient responds with shouts and grunts and thrashing limbs. Then he tries to kick

the orderly, but the restraints do their work, and he is unable to reach his target. He aims his leg at the doctor but again he misses. The doctor and the orderly turn the patient on his side, and I quickly insert the needle pushing in the calming medication. When they lower the patient back to the thin mattress, he looks right at the orderly and once again thrusts his foot toward him clearly trying to kick him in the groin. Again, he misses.

“Mr. R.,” I say. “We are going to admit you upstairs.” I turn to leave but not before the orderly places his hand on the foot that tried to kick him. Looking first at the patient and then at me, he twists the patient’s foot. Then he walks out of the room.

I should report him. Or minimally, I should talk to him. Instead, I give into the hopelessness of doing this job well. I have been here too long. And I am always tired.

I go home that night and stare out my window. There are two women on the corner. One of them is the woman I saw get into a car months ago. The one I thought I should watch for a safe return. I know, with only six weeks left in this job, I am not going to report the orderly for twisting that patient’s foot. Knowing this disturbs me. I will be finished with school in a month. A colleague has offered me a job in the state where I used to live. My plan is to quietly leave this place.

I am surprised when my resignation garners much attention. There are several small gatherings and an official going away party. The clinic director asks to meet with me, and we talk about my years in the clinic. “It’s a challenging and demanding place,” I tell him. I think about telling him about the orderly, but it’s too late. What can he do with my report if I am out the door? And I know he knows anyway. We all know what happens. The good, even sometimes great work, we do and the rest of it too. I brought up the kid I released who left and stabbed himself. “If the clinic had been very busy that night, it would have never happened. I would have made the quickest and safest decision. But I had so much time with him. I really thought I could trust the two of them.” He nods.

The man I left behind calls and offers to help me move. I accept his offer. But I have no illusions about him. I pack up my apartment on my own. When he arrives, we drive to the U-Haul place. They attach my car to the tow piece. I’m glad I don’t have to drive an oversized truck on my own. I carry down the less heavy items, but my man friend does most of the work.

Many times, I have regretted coming to this city. But I have learned things here. Four years working with patients in crises have sharpened my clinical skills. More importantly, I have learned that intense work settings can erode the compassion that is just as important as nursing skills. While I have made friends who will stay in my life, I now realize that fresh starts are at times, an excuse for running away. I wonder about all the decisions we make in our lives. How one stacks up against the next.

When we finally pull away, I have an impulse to say goodbye to the women on the corner. And I do, silently, as we pass by them. A few minutes later we are on the freeway.

Quantum Entanglements

Kimberly Peterson

Two particles interconnect such that the state of one instantly influences the other, even over enormous distances. We meet in high school: sweaty linebacker and geek in Harry Potter glasses. Our voltage accelerates my protons until I glow neon, vibrate from hair tips to toenails. Drool Pavlovian when the bell rings to end classes, hoping your car waits for me.

Despite attending college in different cities, we entangle. You graduate. I leave early. Squeak floorboards, rocking colicky newborn. Your pay sets our relational equation.

You \$ > Me 0 therefore You > me

The state of one entangled particle predicts that of the other with absolute certainty. ↑ Amber fizz of beer, earthy stench of pot, your weekly reward. ↓ Cherry balm for my cracked lips, a luxury we can't afford. Your purse strings chafe my neck.

If no external force is applied, objects continue to move in the same direction.

Subsidized daycare + education grants = Registered Nurse +
part-time employment

You \$ = Me \$ but not You = me

If you can only see two objects and nothing else, it's impossible to tell which one moves and which stands still. I keep the house clean and prepare meals. We save money. For a house, I thought. But you have a new priority.

Leather aroma + grinding gears + car seats = New Camaro +
standard transmission

Toddler says, "Mommy, I don't like it when you make the car go eek, eek." I learn to ease out the clutch with six months of Baby

2 between me and a sweaty steering wheel. But can't adjust to leaving those babies on birthdays, holidays. Sob as I drive to work.

Twelve-hour night shifts nauseate me. Storm clouds gather around my eyebrows.

My full-time work = ↑ headaches + ↑ salary

You \$ < Me \$\$ but still You > me

If the first particle rotates clockwise, the second rotates counterclockwise. I need a bachelor's degree to secure a day job. Take evening classes part-time. Earn promotions.

You \$ < Me \$\$\$

Quantum interference is the ability of one particle's wavelike action to amplify or diminish the other. Like the wake of two boats meeting, both are enhanced, or one cancels the other.

I'm the first part-time student to graduate top of my class. You deem the purchase of a graduation picture a waste. Local campus pays; features me on the cover of their magazine. Mails one to every home. Two particles repel each other when proximity costs too much energy.



Coffee grinds and apple cores. I brush them off to retrieve the magazine from the kitchen garbage. You're sick of this focus on me. *No one acknowledges the sacrifices I made. I worked my butt off all day but still had to babysit the kids twice a week. You couldn't have attended those classes without me. Where's my prize?* Then you complain about the dust particles I've allowed to collect in the living room.

Gravity pulls everything down.

The Death of a Teacher

Sherry Sallows

I retired at the end of June — nine years as a school librarian and eleven years as a teacher. The first week of July some relatives came to visit.

“How did you celebrate your retirement?” asked my brother-in-law.

“I’ve just been drinking champagne by myself this week,” I replied as I glanced over at my husband and daughter.

“She had a retirement supper with her staff the last week,” said my husband, defensively.

And I did. The staff Community Fund group gave me a lovely yellow garden globe and paid for my meal, a cheesesteak and fries and one alcoholic beverage. The principal said a couple sentences about my time as the librarian — very nice, very positive. Then she moved on to the next five staff members who were leaving. It was done and forgotten in about an hour and a half. Through the rest of the week a few staff members came and chatted and wished me well. It was all very pleasant and tearless. Some students gave me hugs and told me they would miss me; I received a card from one class and a card from two other students saying goodbye. From a co-worker I got a plant and another gave me a handmade goodbye gift. I was grateful for these things. But why, at the end of my last day, why did it feel so underwhelming? What did I expect?

A couple of weeks earlier, in a conversation with my family, I suggested that perhaps we could have a party in mid-July. I thought we could celebrate a few milestone events all at once — my retirement, my daughter’s university graduation, my husband’s 60th birthday, and our wedding anniversary. The response was an oppressive quietness.

My daughter broke the silence first, “Umm, who would you be inviting?” she asked.

“You and your dad’s work friends, some other friends, and my co-workers might come.” I noted.

She shook her head, “I don’t think many would come and do you really think your school friends would come? They’ve already said their goodbyes.”

Now I was the silent one. The two of them had so many friends, why wouldn’t some of them come? But she was probably right about my co-workers.

Then my husband chimed in. He was weirdly adamant, “I DO NOT want to have any celebration for my birthday.”

He would **only** agree to a family celebration for our daughter’s graduation. I redirected my gaze to my computer screen, which wasn’t even on, but I had to look away from them because I suddenly felt weepy. I said nothing but thought, *What about me? Can’t we celebrate me?* It felt selfish but I let myself wallow in the emotion. I don’t think either of them realized what I was going through. Did I even know what I was experiencing?

Even though my family was not considering any kind of retirement celebration I admit that I secretly hoped that they would plan some little thing, a little gathering of friends or something. I was being ridiculous though because no party has happened or will be happening. There was nothing from my family to celebrate **me**. My husband’s first comments on the day of my retirement were about finances and the retirement payout from the School Division. He also made a side note that I may need to go back to work someday if necessary (I guess a writing career doesn’t count as work). My daughter was busy with her life, but she did make me a pie.

My first days of retirement consisted of a week-long visit with the in-laws which included eight children (under the age of nine) on the beach. The bottle of champagne that I bought for myself provided a refreshing nightcap after each day of beach fun. As I sat and stared at the last glass of champagne from the bottle, I swirled the liquid around. This particular bottle came with real gold leaf sparkles — I watched the gold turn and dip and shine. I raised the glass as a toast to myself. “Here’s to future golden opportunities,” and I downed the last sip, gold and all.

The day after the in-laws left, I visited a friend — a teacher who retired last year from a different school in the same Division. She baked me a chocolate cake as a retirement treat.

“So, how is retirement going so far?” she asked.

“To be honest it’s been disappointing. There have been lovely well-wishes and gifts, but it just feels underwhelming. I don’t know what I was expecting.”

She placed a coffee and a piece of cake in front of me. “I know exactly how you feel. When I retired last year, after 25 years, it felt just like any other June. Nothing special, no celebrations, just congratulations and good luck wishes.”

“No kidding. I drank a bottle of champagne all by myself this week. The only thing celebratory about it was the gold leaf pieces glittering in the bubbles.”

She laughed, got up from the table and opened the fridge. She pulled out her own bottle of champagne, unopened. She spun it around — shimmery pink waves moved like a lava lamp inside the bottle. “A friend gave me this for my retirement.” She twirled it again. “You and I should plan a celebration of our own one night and empty this one.”

I laughed, “It’s a date.”

Later in the evening, I posted the few retirement pics (that I took myself) on Facebook, to acknowledge to myself that this has actually happened. The well-wishes poured in, of course — *Congratulations! You will love it! Enjoy!* What else are they supposed to say? I appreciated their comments. They recognized this was a big moment. But, for such a huge milestone . . . why did it still feel so meh?

The next day, as I responded to the congratulation posts, clicking the “like” button to each comment, a thought suddenly occurred to me. These posts, they spoke about future hopes and dreams; no one mentioned the death. No one acknowledged the death of my education career, the end of the person that was a teacher and a librarian, no one talked about that life. There was no recognition of that part of me that was consumed by my career,

the contribution that I gave to that life — the devotion, the dedication. The loss of that life needed to be mentioned, celebrated, remembered, mourned. It needed closure. I decided that a funeral must take place.

A few days later, my retiree friend and I stuffed a bag with the bottle of shimmery champagne, two red solo cups, a lighter, a small pie tin, and our official Letters of Retirement and we drove over to my school yard. The air was grey with wildfire smoke when we pulled alongside the school — eerily perfect for a funeral. Two ravens sat atop the spruce trees nearby and waited. It was as if they were invited to the ceremony. Their silence was unnerving. We settled down at a wooden table by the edge of the playground.

“I really do understand what you’ve been feeling,” my friend said.

I looked at her with appreciation, “It’s upsetting that we both felt like this at retirement, isn’t it? Thanks for going along with this crazy idea of mine. I do believe it’ll be helpful to have this little funeral to just let it all go.”

I pulled my letter out of the bag and clicked the lighter. “Goodbye teaching life.” I set my letter afire above the pie tin and watched it burn. I handed my friend the foil plate and the lighter. She lit her paper and dropped it into the tin. The final bit of paper that burned was the School Division logo at the top left corner of the letter. We laughed. The ashes were left to cool as I read my tribute to our teaching careers.

“We are gathered here today to celebrate, remember and mourn our careers in education. Today we acknowledge all that we have experienced and endured as educators for the last twenty plus years. We will embrace the joy and happiness that we felt when our students succeeded. We will keep in our hearts their smiles, their laughter and their dreams. We will release the frustration, anger and despair we felt when our students struggled, and when the School Division offered little help. We will let go of the horrible, unmentionable things that we saw and heard — those things that left us feeling helpless and heartbroken.” My voice began to

crack, and it became difficult to continue speaking. I wiped away the tears welling in my eyes.

After a pause I gathered myself and continued. “We acknowledge all the mistakes we made and we will forgive ourselves. We will remember, with fondness, our school family and those co-workers that supported us during the difficult parts of our teaching careers. We are ready to release these lives and let them rest in peace. We will leave with our memories, a full heart, and no regrets.”

For a few minutes we sat quietly. A slight wind made the ashes in the tin dance around and then all at once a heavy gust picked them up and scattered them around us. We watched as the end of those lives settled onto the ground.

My friend then reached into the bag and pulled out the plastic cups and the bottle. The metal cage came off with ease, but she struggled with the cork — she pushed and twisted and pulled, but it wouldn’t release.

“It figures,” I said, “a struggle right until the end.”

Perhaps it was also symbolic of the moment; our wish to break free from our education careers — and how difficult it was to leave. With a few more tugs, the cork began to loosen and move. She held the bottle outward to let the cork pop toward the trees. When the cork finally released there was no big pop nor was there the ethereal vision of champagne mist floating out like a spirit. Instead, the air flowed out like a silent fart. We burst out laughing! She poured the shimmering wine into our cups. I let out a deep breath, “Well, here’s to us.” We knocked the cups together in a toast. The champagne splashed up and dotted my cheeks, moistening my dried tears.

No more regrets, I told myself.

We Will Sing

Julie Stielstra

Dad’s life spanned many chapters: athlete, football coach, high school teacher, father, reader, house painter, musician/singer/songwriter, playwright, hunter, fisherman, carpenter, traveler; lover of dogs, cats, and all things wild, and the lakes and woods of Michigan. Even the final chapter wasn’t too terrible: yes, he needed hearing aids. He fell a couple of times, brushing it off with his usual harrumph and dismissal, but at last reluctantly accepted a stout Ukrainian-carved walking stick with the polished brass head of a Labrador Retriever for the handle. His wife took over the household cooking and maintenance and the driving. And the “bossing” (as he called it) about taking his pills and doing his physical therapy. He kept making music, settled at a tavern table with half a glass of red wine among friends, but mostly let them sing his songs. A year before, he stood in the balconies of Michigan theatres to accept the cheers and ovations of audiences applauding the revival tour of his musical play, *North Country Opera* — with my now-middle-aged brother in the cast.

The mechanism was starting to wear and grind. A more serious fall and hospitalization. Some cardiac irregularities. A probable mini-stroke. Sudden painful flares from an inflamed gallbladder; a blocked bile duct. You don’t want to do surgery on a ninety-year-old guy, no matter how stoic or tough he is...or has been... unless you have to.

They had to. And damned if he didn’t come right on through it: “Heart, lungs, blood pressure, vital signs all stable throughout,” said the surgeon. I drove a thousand miles to Michigan for the aftermath, feeling sick and frightened. My grandparents died when I was just a kid; my mother is an ornery nonagenarian living a thousand miles in the other direction. I didn’t know how to do this.

Dad was pale, frail, weak. He needed help to get in or out of a chair or bed. He disliked the walker, but needed it now, as one

of us clutched the gait belt under his armpits. It's amazing how quickly you can come to take a urinary catheter bag in stride, and start saying, "Here, wait, let me move The Accessory over here." He said he had no pain. He sat at the kitchen table and ate dinner; he grinned and waved at his new baby great-grandson on a video call. He read the newspaper by the woodstove and stroked the lynx-eared tabby cat curled up beside him. He napped often. He was cheerful.

Then, a fall getting into bed. We got him up. The next day the physical therapy exercises were not doable. That night, the paramedics were called. He lay in his bed, yellow-pale, unconsciously gripping the bedsheet, breath rasping through a slack and gaping mouth. At that moment, at four in the morning, I thought I was going to watch my father die before my eyes. But he didn't. Not then.

They stabilized him. His heart was a wreck. He was in diapers. His speech was a thick, slurred croak we could barely understand. I was there for the hospice conversation. I had been wondering if the time was coming for that, though his wife had not. But we agreed: he's 90. His heart cannot repair itself. He hated the hospital; he wanted to go home. So, he did. And so did I.

Where I live, the sandhill cranes start arriving on their northward migration in late February. We get flashes of spring: blue skies, south winds, balmy afternoons when you drag out the lawn chairs and sit with your sleeves rolled up and your face turned up to the sun. And the cranes come. In the last week of the month, there was a day where they soared and sailed and called from early morning till nightfall. They're often so high you can't see them unless they tilt just right and their wings shine silver, but you can hear them. The great purring trumpets cried down to us, hour after hour. A friend said she stopped counting at ten thousand that day. I spoke to Dad and told him about them; I told him about the two bobcats who were chasing rabbits in the pasture, and about the visitation of seventy wild turkeys in our front yard. ("Do you have a shotgun?" he asked, and I could hear the smile.) Afterward, I leaned back in

my chair and watched and listened as the cranes streamed north. And I wondered if they were carrying parts of him, if their lofty passage was delivering a message about another passage looming.

He died on March 1, at 5:30 in the evening. Quietly, peacefully, with his devoted, indomitable wife stretched next to him on the cot alongside his hospital bed in the living room.

Dad was not a man of faith. He did not believe in an immortal soul. He has siblings who believe in their hearts that their brother – their tough, kind, thoughtful, creative oldest brother – is scorching in eternal hellfires. He said he didn't care what we did with his body; it wasn't going to matter to him. His wrapped ashes are sitting in his favorite old leather and wicker fishing creel for now. Perhaps there is a *mortal* soul: whatever life essence we have, that unique and nebulous skein of energy and memory and love and pain and history, just has to have this husk to live in, and when the husk turns to dust, it simply disperses.

I was driving through Cheyenne Bottoms not long after. I had occasionally hoped that maybe one day Dad could make a trip down here to Kansas, so I could show him this glorious expanse of prairie and sky, peopled with its birds, animals, shimmering grasses, and wildflowers. So different from the deep, chilly forests of Michigan, but still teeming with life and light. It didn't happen. But as he loved Michigan, I love Kansas, and we understood what that meant to each other. A flight of pintail ducks lifted from the dyke's edge and winged alongside my car. The sun broke out of a cloud-piled sky and their white necks glowed. And I suffered the ache that Dad was gone, nowhere, simply vanished from the earth. That he could no longer fish the cold brown rivers, watch the sun pour golden on the trees, hear the cranes call, watch a hummingbird, hear a great song be sung, call his dog, embrace his wife: could no longer cherish anything beautiful in this world. The radio station began to play a sonorous, mournful piece of choral music: slow, deep in sound and color. A requiem mass. As the pintails veered away over the water, I thought no! He is *not* nowhere. Dad is *everywhere* now. He's in the ducks, he's in

the water, the sky, the wind, he's in the coyotes' cries, he's in the music. Of course, he's in our memories (feeble and time-limited as they are). His molecules are scattered, absorbed, strewn across the world with everything that lives in it.

Next week we will gather with every friend and relative who wants to come to celebrate his life. There will be laughter ("Note: in honor of Jay, formal dress is discouraged."), reminiscence, and hugs. There will be a lot of great music. Dad used to joke about attending his own wake. "Prop me up at a table with a beer in my hand, everyone can come and sit and have a drink with me." After ninety years, many of Dad's old friends have gone on before him. I like to imagine them sitting around a big round table with pitchers and glasses to hand, listening in.

I've heard it said that grief is love with nowhere to go. Next week, a high school auditorium will throw its doors open for it. The love will pour through every person there, and others who are not. There will be tears – in the right place, for the right reasons. And we will sing.

POETRY

The Commute

Sam Floyd

And really when I think about it all, the mornings on the interstate at dawn, the colors of the farm
land in the fall, the winters when the fields were mostly gone to
frost and snow and stalks and
mud and crows, the miles to work I traveled so I'd be the kind
of husband everybody knows
a wife would want, not necessarily the only thing she wanted,
nonetheless, a part of what she
wanted.

As for me, I wanted even more than happiness to just belong.

And far as I can see, her dying was for me like when it snows on
winter fields, all wind and mud
and crows.

Come Back

Sam Floyd

In my running days, when I'd start in the fall to
hit my winter comeback trail, leading to a race I loved
to run in the spring, I began to notice, in my sixties,
that each winter I'd make it a little less far back
up the old comeback trail, that there were heights

of it I'd probably never reach again.
And that was okay, I'd think to myself. Everyone gets older,
and running-wise, I'd known for some years I was
slowing down, even if it didn't feel like it most of the time,
and even though I wasn't a math and numbers person

who always watched the clock.
Now, in my late seventies, with a knee the meniscus
is wearing out in, keeping me from running much at all,
I feel each winter that I'm moving less far back
into each new spring, like the springs are pulling away

from me like a group of younger, faster runners,
like my spring will probably get here but I'll somehow
belong less in it, that I'll arrive in it less sweaty and
exuberant, that I'll mostly just be able to walk in it,
and then maybe only sit and watch it.

All this is just a *feeling*, of course, just one of those things
runs everything even though I'm conditioned to think
my thinking mostly does, which it doesn't.
It's those feelings, the modern tip ends of our animal
intuitions, that are what actually run things, the clicking

body stopwatch I resist, even though the numbers don't lie,
because I think somehow they maybe just might, because
we humans invented them, the numbers, and because we've
assigned them to every damn thing, like pain levels and
fat grams, and because we can calculate any distance we've

traveled, and manipulate the standings in our polls. The
point is, the comeback trail will only come back so far, and
then one day—like a diminishing echo—it won't come back
at all, and by then, maybe I won't have time to feel too sad
about what's coming back and what's never going to.

A Heartfelt Goodbye

Tonia Kalouria

O
My Beloved,
I loved you to the
depth, breadth, and volume
of my ace-inhibited, beta-blocked,
arrhythmic, enlarged,
pace-maker-
charged,
murmuring,
valves-replaced, stenotic,
catheterized, quad-bypassed,
multi-stented, functionally-stunted,
congestively-failing,
anginal heart.
YOU
were my
Ni...
tr
o
.

But Before You Go

Gregory O'Neill

The world's just a place. So, I have one
mother and one father. But those will get
replaced by trees and pricey bottles of
Shiraz and Chardonnay. By laughter and
coins. Then those things are replaced. And
replaced again. The way friends fade in and
out of your life. How jobs come and go along
with complete confidence in our futures. The
world remains just a place that spins. I've been
replaced many times as you, living in the middle
of the hourglass where nothing stays for long,
living over the continents that slip under our
feet. The world's just a place where all things
crashed together, and now, dazed, unravel.
People who collided in the mall and are now
well on to other things. Unbecoming is becoming.
A building in Cleveland. A mind in shock about
how far back childhood swirls. The world's just
a place until you change. We are islands, we're
ashtrays, we're untimely understudies. Tonight
won't be tonight much longer. You not you, nor I
me. Perhaps we'll sleep with the bedroom door
wide open. So much going. So little leaving.
The world's just a place. And remains to be seen.

Perhaps the Worst Is Over

Gregory O'Neill

In the quiet of afternoon, naked
sunlight warming a slant of hardwood
in the kitchen, a cat, gray and idling
with heat. A tumbler's water dances
on the table with the slight whip
from a ceiling fan.

What regrets but these, the silence,
the weight per breath sinking into the
deep cavern of the chest, the famished
loneliness, not born but nourished,
the inevitable sound of determined
feet leaving over the clicking floors,
the pause before the shutting door.

Light from the window misses a still life
with ripe pear and knife hanging on
the wall. Something should be said,
at least, of absence. Had I remained,
I might have mentioned it myself.

The Gumball Ideation

Gregory O'Neill

Yes, I'm going, but since you're so kind and the cosmos remains
unlisted,
things swooshing as they must, I'll remind you we all suffer each
other
like background radiation. Dime stores are now at least a dollar. Do
I hear
five. Soon enough. I told you I'm going. And I can't get a good
shake, or
is that an even break, what even is an even break, whatever it is I am
completely broken up over it, to bits. Little bits of this and that that
accumulate into dumps and landfills, of course they don't fill them
with
land, which would be better, the bits are garbage, and in what sense
is it
all garbage. Shopping certainly is perfunctory garbage. Like
sneezing
could be perfunctory death. The way you feel sometimes alien to
this
planet that, far as you know anyway, has indeed always been your
own.
Peachy. But please, before I'm out of here, please no more meta-
phors made
of plush toys. And cancel my lavender lunch reading with repeat
offender
marshmallows and the Pastel Teacup Xylophone Society. Neeners.
Sorry,
that should've had a trigger warning. Sugar stench. Parting shot.
Apply a
fluffy pink bandaid. Right between the lemons and the off-brand
Dramamine

I realized there's no such thing as an uninteresting number, except
for 366,
because I couldn't take one more day of a gooey year like this one.
And that
makes me dizzy, hence the generics. Ugh. So, goodbye. But I do
admit I
find it singularly satisfying somebody's happy knowing there's
already
enough of everyone else to go around. There's nothing here one
could
mistake for clear moments of morning, and the afternoon is dead
on arrival,
even the specious perfection of twilight presents only vulgar stubble.
So, alright,
goodbye. At least the knowing is useful, useful and useless at the
same time.

The House Poems

Christine C. Rivero-Guisinga

i. Kitchen

A kettle sits on the stove, fire unlit.
Was that supposed to be my answer?

Going through the motions halfway,
I called you back. You did not answer.

This silence in our story —
after the beginning, before the end, a mislaid answer.

“When one day we find our house is burning, one of us
will walk back inside.” No answer.

You will not say my name. I say instead, “You are my last
safe harbor.” The door stays half-closed. Still, no answer.

ii. Garden

I am piecing you together, you will not stay.
 A spider lily slits its gut, frees style and twisted anther.
 Leaves we gather in our hands; they curl and fall away.

We go through motions, through all of them halfway.
 Another lily splits its bud, parting sepals in surrender.
 I am piecing you together, you will not stay.

I thought our silence might yet heal us where we lay.
 One more lily cleaves apart, leaking fragrance from the fracture.
 Gathered leaves wither; from our hands they fall away.

Spider lilies riot, stigmata stamen-stained give way.
 I say your name, the sound you hear but do not answer.
 I am piecing you together, you will not stay.

Spider lilies blast the air, linalool, orange decay.
 I breathe pollen and I whisper, you are my last safe harbor.
 The leaves we gather die; they all die the same way.

You cupped a firefly in your palms, once, a heady New Year's Day.
 Our house now burns, you walk inside, I stand and follow after.
 I am piecing you together, you will not stay.
 The spider lilies droop. From our hands, the leaves, they fall away

iii. Bedroom

You are my last
 safe harbor.
 This sudden silence,
 our house burning.
 One of us
 walks back inside.

Inside,
 where breath becomes the last
 theft between us.
 Our hands makeshift harbor,
 touch alight, surface burning.
 Our tongues tasting ash, tasting silence.

Lip to wrist, to teeth, to silence.
 Doorways collapse. Inside,
 knees raw, navel burning,
 spit, steam, skin igniting last.
 The ruined harbor
 holds, shelters us.

What remains of us,
 lying blistered in silence.
 Exposed clavicle, a once frequent harbor.
 Embers eating of the meat inside,
 limbs remain, limb and rib bones blacken last.
 Our hands rest a space apart, bared knuckles burning —

burning
us
our last
silence
inside
this shattered harbor

No sirens in the empty harbor.
Beneath wet ash, bodies have stopped burning.
Settling from inside,
dirt and dearth of us
staining soil, silence.
This home, our last.

One of us walked back inside, the house, the burning.
The silence, safe. Our last harbor, the hollow of our hands.

About the Authors

Ed Davis' poetry collection, *The Time of the Light*, was released by Main Street Rag Press in 2013. His novel *The Psalms of Israel Jones* (West Virginia University Press 2014) won the Hackney Award for an unpublished novel in 2010. Recently, he's been publishing flash fiction at venues such as *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Every Day Fiction* and *Literally Stories*. His collection of linked stories, *Here Where We Stand: The Shawnee Springs Stories*, was released by Main Street Rag Press in April 2026. Two of his stories were published by *Wordrunner eChapbooks*, Issues 42 and 54.

Erin Dawkins was born and raised on the south side of Chicago. She received her BA in Journalism from Columbia College Chicago and her MA in English with a specialty in Creative Writing from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Her fiction has been published in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Five Minute Lit*, *Half and One*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Still Here Magazine*, *Blood+Honey Lit Magazine*, *Mouthful of Salt*, *WestWord*, and others. In 2025, she received an Author's Fellowship from the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing.

Frank Diamond's short stories have appeared in *RavensPerch*, *the Examined Life Journal*, *Lost Lake Folk Opera*, *Dulcet*, *Thriller Magazine*, *the Fredericksburg Literary & Art Review*, *Stepping Stones Literary Journal* and *Wordrunner eChapbooks* (Issues 45 and 54), among many other publications. His poetry is also widely published. The poem "Labor Day" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives in Langhorne, Pennsylvania.

Sam Floyd is a Graduate of Bellarmine University and The Brandeis School of Law. He has a master's degree in English from the University of Louisville, as well as an MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University's Bluegrass Writers Studio. His

work has appeared in *Little Somethings Press*, *Heartland Review*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Libre*, and other publications. He currently resides in the Crescent Hill neighborhood of Louisville, Kentucky.

Molly Gleeson's essay "Two Sides of the Same Coin" was published in *Post Road Magazine* in December of 2025. She received a Pushcart nomination for her short story "Meishi, Furo, Neru" in *The Midnight Oil's* magazine, which also won best short story in their 2020 contest. Molly's essays and stories have been published elsewhere as well. She lives in Bloomington, Indiana.

Eve Goldberg is a writer and filmmaker based in Sonoma County. Her essays have appeared in *American Popular Culture*, *Hippocampus*, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *All About Jazz*, *Cinema Retro*, *The Rumpus*, *Eclectica*, and *The Reading Room*. She is the author of the mystery novel *Hollywood Hang Ten*.

Tonia Kalouria is a retired Ohio teacher and soap actress. She has poems in several anthologies: *A Glass of Wine With Edgar*, *Quoth the Raven*, *Evermore*, *Poems From the Lockdown*, *Nothing Ever Happens in Fox Hollow*, Vol 2; *Thriving*, *Yonkers*, *Classical Poets*, Vol. X, *Purr and Yowl*, *Love-Lifespan*, Series Vol. 4, *A Cosy Romance*, *Red*, *Tales from the Bedside*, and five eBooks of *The 5-2 Crime Poetry*.

Lita Kurth, MFA-Rainier Writers Workshop (PLU), is the author of *One Creative Writing Prompt a Day...* (Callisto Press) and the forthcoming *Writing Memoir in Flashes* (Thinking Ink Press). She has received multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations for fiction and creative nonfiction and has taught creative writing at De Anza College, CreatorSchoolCA.com, and elsewhere to students aged 8 to 80, from jail residents to professionals, and has been an invited reader at many events from Cinequest's Poets n' Writers to Poetry Center San Jose's Well-Read series. *Wordrunner eChapbooks* published her story "Peasant Child" in Issue 48.

Eileen McGorry practiced as a Registered Nurse for forty years. Her essays have been published in the *Examined Life Journal*, *Wordrunner eChapbooks* (Issue 30), the *Write on the Sound* 2025 anthology and the online edition of the *American Journal of Nursing*. She lives in Olympia, Washinton with her husband Ron.

Gregory O'Neill writes from Seattle. His poetry and prose have appeared widely, in publications that include *The Laurel Review*, *Mantis Literary Journal*, *Jackdaw Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *Route 7 Review*, *Relief Quarterly*, *Four Tulips*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Litbop*, *Eunoia Review*, *Paraselene*, *Cathexis NW Press*, *Words Faire*, *Zoetic Press*, *Last Leaves*, *Gabby & Min's*, and numerous others.

Kimberly Peterson began her nursing career caring for elderly people, rich soil for a budding author. After several unfortunate promotions, she spent time writing dry policies. Once rescued by retirement, she applied her quest for precise language to creative endeavors. Her favorite website remains Merriam-Webster. Her work has appeared in *Room*, *Entropy*, *Prairie Fire*, *EVENT*, *Querty*, *Pinhole Poetry*, *The Prose Poem* and in *Wordrunner eChapbooks'* Microprose 3. She received honorable mention in the following poetry contests: *The Banister* (2016), *Memoir Magazine* (2018), *Passager* (2019), and *TNQ Nick Blatchford Occasional Verse* (2024).

Christine C. Rivero-Guisinga works for a humanitarian organization. A SEA Lit Circle member, her poems have appeared in the *After Happy Hour Review*, *The Ex-Puritan*, *The Itemz/ Review*, and most recently in *Only Poems Daily*. She shares travel photos and short poems inspired by the haiku form on Instagram @storyseamstress.

Sherry Sallows is a recently retired teacher-librarian with a B.Ed. from Brandon University, Brandon, MB. Her interest in writing began with children's literature but she is currently exploring speculative fiction and creative nonfiction. She has had two stories

published in short story collections and a number of pieces printed in her local newspaper. In her capacity as a librarian, she has provided two recent book endorsements for award-winning children's author Anne Renaud. Her children's story "Mommies Always Come Back" was short-listed in the 2024 Children's/Young Adult Fiction category of the 93rd Annual *Writer's Digest* Writing Competition.

Mark Schafron's stories have appeared in *The Paradox Literary Magazine*, *Glass Mountain*, *Literally Stories*, *Quabbin Quills*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Atom Mind*, *American Epitaph*, and *Bad Haircut*, among others. His nonfiction and journalism have appeared internationally in periodicals and technical journals. He **lives in Massachusetts.**

Sarah Senft is a writer from Cork, Ireland, now living in Vancouver, British Columbia. Her work has appeared in *The Closed Eye Open*, *50-Word Stories*, *Bending Genres*, *Ivo Review*, *The Piker Press*, *Wingless Dreamer* and *Prosetrics* with forthcoming work in *Halfway down the Stairs*, *Fish Girl Collective* and *Excision*.

John Sergio is the COO Emeritus and was a founding partner of a mid-sized investment bank; he was the COO for over 20 years until his recent retirement. He has enjoyed a long and rewarding career in the securities industry, and he has written for national, literary, and financial industry publications. His essays and fiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Oh Reader*, *Candlelight Magazine*, *The Grand Life*, *Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight*, *West Trade Review*, *The Good Men Project*, *Nature Insights*, *Sneaker Wave Magazine*. Forthcoming work will appear shortly in *Kinsman Quarterly* and *Amazing Stories*.

Julie Stielstra lives in a 100-year-old farmhouse in central Kansas. She is the author of almost three dozen published short stories and essays. Minerva Rising Press named her historical novella *Pilgrim* the winner of their 2016 novella contest. Her 2020 novel *Opulence*,

Kansas received gold medal awards for young adult fiction from the Midwest Independent Publishers Association and the High Plains Books Awards, and the 2022 J. Donald and Bertha Coffin Memorial Award for Fiction from the Kansas Authors Club. *Wordrunner eChapbooks* published her story collection *Protected Contact* in 2017. She blogs on books, writing, reading, animals and whatever else takes her fancy at juliestielstra.com.