

Straylight

LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE

Editor

Dean Karpowicz

Managing Editor

Sara Guthman

Layout Designer

Aiden Baker

Fiction Editor

Sara Guthman

Poetry Editor

Ella Janis

Associate Fiction Editors

Alexandria Cooper

Aiden Hoaglund

Nina Pelli

Layla Springer

Associate Poetry Editors

Autumn Strand

Noah Dufek

Jerome Dunk

COVER ART

Red Line 3j2

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Digital Painting

Straylight

LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE

Straylight is a journal of creative and visual arts, published biannually by the University of Wisconsin–Parkside, supported by funding through the English Department and the College of Arts and Sciences.

Business and Editorial Address: Send all correspondence to Straylight, care of the English Department of the University of Wisconsin–Parkside, 900 Wood Road, Box 2000, Kenosha, WI 53141-2000.

Literary Submissions: Straylight publishes fiction and poetry. All submissions should be addressed to the appropriate genre editor. To submit online, visit the following address: straylightmag.com. Reporting time is about two months. Simultaneous submissions are not permitted.

Visual Art Submissions: Straylight accepts only electronic submissions. Send work in JPEG format at 300dpi. Find our submission link at straylightmag.com.

Submissions should include a brief bio and any information about previously published work. Work will remain online at least until the next issue is published. Submit up to six pieces of art in a single submission. Simultaneous submissions are not permitted. Reporting time is about two months. Work may need to be resized, but any alterations made will be sent for approval before publication.

Subscriptions: Subscriptions to Straylight are currently \$20/volume. Subscribers outside the U.S. must add \$7. Individual issues are available for \$12 each, and there are currently back issues available at a reduced price. Visit the online store for more details.

Web Access: Straylight is available online at straylightmag.com.

Copyrights: Straylight buys First North American Serial Rights. All rights revert back to the artist upon publication.

© STRAYLIGHT 2024

ISSN: 1946-3863

CONTENTS

FICTION

Quality Time *Bradley Bliss* 5

POETRY

New Worlds in Moments *PM Flynn* 13

A Minor Matter *Psycho Kanev* 14

Privacy *Peter Leight* 15

FICTION

Isiah *Philip Goldberg* 18

POETRY

Dissolution *Kelly Talbot* 30

Charade *Ann Christine Tabaka* 31

I Still Remember *David Dephy* 32

FICTION

Unfamiliar Faces *Stetson Bostic* 33

POETRY

Dazzle *Matthew J. Spireng* 48

Atlantic Prayer *Michał Zieliński* 49

Our Venus *David Sapp* 50

FICTION

The Rose Caddy *Terry Sanville* 52

POETRY

Harrowing *Kyle Heger* 67

Walking Home from the Tower Inn Pub *Brian Cronwall* 68

Argentina in September *Severin Allgood* 69

ART

Red Line 3j2 *Edward Michael Supranowicz* 70

Dining *Ayshia Müezzini* 71

I Love Tulips *Anna Reyes* 72

Lumière Descalier *JC Alfier* 73

Merrily Rolling Along *Edward Michael Supranowicz* 74

Galaxy Cocoon *Carella Keil* 75

CONTENTS

With All the Daylight Trapped in Your Hair	<i>Bill Wolak</i>	76
And So I Lived Outside of Your Arms	<i>Bill Wolak</i>	77
Stretching Like Dawn	<i>Bill Wolak</i>	78
Sky Swirl	<i>Tanya Fillbrook</i>	79
Sax Man	<i>Gloria Keeley</i>	80
Echo and Narcissus	<i>Carella Keil</i>	81
A Tired Matt Damon	<i>Jeff Hartnett</i>	82
Trouble on the Left Trouble on the Right 22	<i>Edward Michael Supranowicz</i>	83
FICTION		
Hiding from the Past	<i>Conrad Gurtatowski</i>	84
POETRY		
Plaid Shirt	<i>Brian Miller</i>	94
Where Are They?	<i>Andrew Eastwick</i>	96
Flicker	<i>Rosie D'Ercole</i>	98
INTERVIEW	<i>Scott Barrow</i>	99
CONTRIBUTORS		106

Bradley Bliss

Quality Time

His workweek had been crowded with a weary procession of trivial urgencies, but Friday had arrived, and he was home. The ledgers from the accounting firm, filled with efficient little numbers in perfect little rows, had been left in their rightful place at the office till Monday morning. Their airless pages paid the bills and kept the wolves from the door. To his credit, he never pretended they could do more.

Here now, surrounding him much as a circle of friends, were his books. They had been welcomed into his home years before, companions he had grown with and held dear throughout his lifetime. Their words rolled across the face of the pages in daysprings of imagination. They told stories of everyday people who pursued the freedom that ever stands beyond the gates of fear, of sunrises in lands far removed from his eighth-floor office window. They carried between their pages twilight castles with arching gables and secret chambers. Of peasant cottages surrounded by laburnum where frailty and courage lived together. There were poems about earthworms and planets, sonnets in praise of majestic horses, and chilling stories of things that walk with weary travelers by night. Each one invited him to open its pages and resume the conversation they'd had the week or decade before. The shepherd's pie he'd eaten for supper had warmed and settled him. His old chair welcomed him, and the weekend held no more responsibilities than some puttering around the house. He eagerly gathered up the book he promised himself he would read during the long workweek.

"Three chapters tonight," he told himself, "and all weekend to finish it off." He settled in to read, and his plan started well, but books were playful spirits who often carried their own

agendas. The words in this particular chapter were a little too weighty for a Friday evening and began to gently pull at his eyelids. Wisps of pipe smoke began to whorl above his head and twine with tendrils of his younger days, inviting his attention to wander.

“Just a little nap and I’ll get right back to it,” he promised. He reached up to pull the lamp chain and crossed the border of sleep.

Memory stirred herself, and childhood friends came up from the depths, inviting him to run free with them. The quieting that is simplicity gathered him in its wings. The ordered world of the accountant was about to be carried far away to a land of dreams.

“Daddy?”

The word came on bare feet, perhaps through a keyhole at the back door of his dream. In any case, it had come and laid its unique claim, calling out the best that was in him to wakefulness. His eyes saw a door crack open, and the silhouette of his daughter came into focus.

“Daddy?” said Emily. “Are you there?”

“Right here, Honey. Hop up.”

Pattering feet swiftly ran across the room, and with a leap, his daughter tumbled into her father’s lap to curl up in a tight little ball. His arms wrapped around his little wonder of creation as he began to rock her. The two sat there in the dark, enjoying the warmth, both supremely content. “Were you sleeping in the chair?”

“I think so. I remember walking alongside a river with a friend I had when I was your age.”

“Do you think your friend was sleeping too and you both were sharing the same dream?”

“I don’t know, but that could be true.”

“Why didn’t you ask him?”

“Because just when we were about to start a great adventure, a little girl woke me up.”

“Oh, who was that?” asked his daughter with a smile.

“You. And for that, you get a bug hug!”

He hugged her till she squealed. There was another little silence till presently he said, “Aren’t you supposed to be having your own dreams right about now?”

“I was worried about you.”

“And why were you worried for me?”

“Well, you promised me a story tonight, and if I’d gone to bed, you wouldn’t have been able to keep your promise, and I wouldn’t want you to feel bad.”

Her artful comment elicited a helpless snort from her father. She knew she had Daddy well in hand.

“So it’s a story you want. What should it be about?”

“I’m not sure, but something better than the best fairy tale ever told.”

“Well then, we’ll have to put two things together.”

“Goblins and princesses?”

“Those are good, but every really delicious fairy tale, every fairy tale that’s so unforgettable that you will remember it even when your face gets wrinkly and your teeth get wobbly, needs to have something seen.”

“And something hidden!” whispered Emily.

“Yes, something only children can see,” said her father. “It is very hard for an adult to make a good fairy tale without the help of children. They are always better at looking for hidden things. Adults get so used to making big, practical, faraway plans they forget to look under the bushes of a story or try to drink milk like their cat.

“Well, we must begin our tale by looking for the things that are half-hidden. In time, we’ll find the ingredients for a wonderful story.”

“People are like that too, aren’t they, Daddy?”

He looked at her. “Go on, Dear.”

“Some people hide what’s wonderful about them, and it takes time to find it, but then, when they see you keep looking

at them, they sort of widen up, and it comes out. Like the new boy across the street. I asked him if he wanted to know what his face looked like. He said he had a mirror at home, but I told him that was just his bathroom face, not his ‘I don’t understand the question’ or ‘I just saw a deer in the field’ face. I told him that he needed a friend to tell him what he really looked like.”

“What did he do then, Emily?”

“A smile broke over him that was beautiful, even for a boy.” She laughed. “And I coaxed it out of him! We’re friends now.”

“I see you have the ability to wriggle gems out of people,” said her father.

“Maybe, and now I’m going to wriggle a story out of you! How will we find the things for a story?”

“Well, there is something hidden in every real thing. Like your friend’s smile, a good story invites the hidden things to come out. It’s a soft night. Let’s go look for it together. Perhaps something is riding on the back of the wind.”

The two of them walked out onto the back porch that overlooked the garden. The air was heavy with mist, and the musk of the creek rose up to them, accompanied by the sound of the spring peepers. The reflection of the constellation Leo played in the water, shook his mane, then bent to take a drink. At the far end of the garden, a whip-poor-will performed her nightly concert.

“The garden looks so different at night when everything is sleeping,” said the child.

“Sleeping? No, not sleeping. We mustn’t think that a thing isn’t there simply because we can’t see it. Perhaps the whip-poor-will is calling out a tune for some rabbits dancing in the underbrush, or the stars in the pond are merely taking a bath.”

“And the peepers are really fairy babies crying for a story before they sleep.”

The night had laid its spell upon the two, and although the mote of dust they rode upon played no large part in the great matters of the universe, unmeasured were the wonders when imagination awoke.

“Listen, Child. What else do you hear?”

“I think I can hear music but only when the wind is right: the sound of a violin. Can you hear it too?” asked the child.

“Yes, when the wind is coming from the direction of the gazebo by the lake.”

“One day, I’ll learn to play the violin like Mommy.”

“It’s very kind of you to want to help notes go free, my dear,” said her father.

“I’m good at setting things free. I freed a bug from a spiderweb today. But, Daddy, aren’t notes free to fly away?”

“They aren’t strong enough to do it alone, Emily. Every new instrument is filled with all kinds of notes in it that are lined up and waiting to come out, but they need a musician’s help. The practicing and mistake notes come first; there are about ten thousand of them. Then come the getting better notes and the playing for grandma and grandpa notes. After these come the recital notes. Then the proud parent talk to neighbors and friends notes,” said her father.

“Daddy, you’re making all that up!”

“Oh no, not at all! And notes do all kinds of things once they’ve been freed. Have you heard the story of what happened when Mommy played note 75,341? She played it three summers ago when she was part of the Racine Symphony Orchestra. It happened during an outdoor concert on a Sunday night at the zoo.”

“What happened?” asked Emily.

“Your mother played the note exactly at the high point of the concert. It flew out of her violin and danced in and out of the ears of everyone there. But then the odd thing happened.”

“What odd thing?”

“Well, most notes like to fly up into the trees and wait for the birds to gather them up and use them again the next morning to wake the day. Some of the lower tones don’t like to fly so high. They tend to sink down into the grass with the dew and be used by the insects when they *cri, cri, cri* at night. Some

of them like to fly so much they keep going up, up, up among the stars and planets when they talk to each other.”

“Daddy, do the planets really talk to each other?”

“Of course they do. How else could they keep going around the sun year after year and not bump into each other? ‘Hello there, Saturn. Your rings are looking particularly lovely tonight.’ ‘Thank you, my old friend Jupiter. I see your spot is coming around into the sunlight. May I say I’ve never seen a more lovely shade of red.’ ‘Neptune, would you mind hurrying up? I declare, you’re getting more pokey each time we circle the sun!’”

“Daddy, what was the odd thing that happened to the note?”

“The note?”

“Note 75,341, Daddy. What happened to it?”

“Oh, note 75,341, yes. Later that night when we came home from the concert, we found it on our doorstep. I’m afraid we had been rather inconsiderate to send it free just before dark. It was only a baby note after all and was a little frightened of being set free under a sky that was already dark with clouds. It followed us home and was frightened until I told it about the work of the owls.”

“The owls?”

“Yes, the owls. You see, the owls protect all the sounds in the woods. Their yellow eyes stay open all night. After I explained this, the note flew up into the hickory tree in the backyard. I see it every now and then when I mow the lawn.”

“Bright eyes!”

“No, just eyes.”

“Bright eyes! They have to be bright because they’re on at night!”

Her father caught on to the rhyme and said, “With their cheery yellow light.”



Emily laughed. “And you’re my bright-eyed protector, aren’t you, Daddy. Do you know how I know that?”

“How?” he whispered.

And with a yawn, she answered, “because I feel safe enough to go to sleep.”

“Good night, Dear.”

“Good night, Daddy.” And the child closed her eyes and dreamt long dreams of the things her father had shared.

“Daddy. What an amazing, beautiful word,” he thought as he looked down upon his daughter.

“I love you, Child. I’m here. You’re safe.”

Then he, too, drifted off to his dreams with the half-guessed assurance that he had written another page in his own book. A book of memories that, when finished, would tell the story of a life well spent.



“We should have come yesterday.”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything, Em.”

“I think he’s coming around.”

“Thank God we made it in time.”

His eyes slowly opened to the muted colors of a hospital room. Soft, clinical light illuminated a half circle of kind faces.

“He’s awake!”

“Daddy?”

He looked up to see the face of a young woman whose eyes were rimmed with tears. Though confused, the others’ centeredness that had marked his life led him to her need.

“Dear girl, don’t cry,” he said. “May I help you?”

“Please stay, Daddy.”

“Daddy.” He said it aloud and remembered the first time his daughter called him that wonderful word. He smiled.

“He remembers you, Em,” said her husband. “He hasn’t forgotten.”

Her hands found their familiar place upon his.

“Close your bright eyes, Father. Rest a bit. I love you.”

“Daddy.” He looked down to see Emily in his arms.

“I love you, Child. I’m here. You’re safe.”

“Let’s have a dream together, Daddy.”

The tether of the world slipped away, and holding on to the hands he loved, a good man descended into that sleep, which on Earth knew no awakening.



PM Flynn

New Worlds in Moments

Broken tides move south today:

against winds slower than a sky crossing a beach, sands touching the bending toes of age. But I am ageless like clouds curving the horizon, touching the sea sometimes when it rains.

The sky's distance moves again as stars cross heaven. Stars, slower than eternity, count a billion years again and again, in light becoming time and place, curving waves that shake curling walls of predictability, draining the salted shoreline.

The salt feeds everything:

gnarly pines, browned grass, the treated wood of tomorrow's decay.

Now, I am a farmer, reaping every moment:

earth and sky, flesh and bone, the contention of pebbles migrating along the open cuts of shells on vacation. Salt heals everything.

Winds blow against tides at angles changing with sunlit sand never touching any waves. I daydream:

time weighs more than my spring seeds.

Every day is birth. What is not sound—stops, as the winds roll the salt air over morning. The sun spills on the ocean, and another day begins.

A Minor Matter

At the shore—

splashing waves ...

It's like receiving endless telegrams from eternity

with hands stuck in the dark water—

Sometimes, the sky

stretches beyond reason

and gives you the love that you can't find anywhere else,

not even inside the ink of your blood

to write the last letter of your life.

Peter Leight

Privacy

When no one is looking,
I open the door
in order to get up
and close it.
I'm keeping my tongue
away from my lips
and my lips away
from my teeth,
not letting my teeth
touch each other,
like a split level,
I don't even have a taste in my mouth.
When I reach for something
that's out of reach it's uncomfortable,
I change my position so I can reach it
more comfortably.

When I say
hush nobody
disagrees,
not even moving my lips:
I like to imagine
I'm more industrious
than I imagine.
Nobody's telling me
to *stop it*.
Not even looking for a way out,
that's not what I mean,
as far as my private
property is concerned honestly,
it's none of your business.

Right now my hands
are leaving me
and coming back to me,
as if they're passing secret information.
I mean people talk about *guilt by association*,
but it doesn't have anything to do
with me: when I think about
space I'm thinking about unmanned
flights, using a pencil with an eraser
because they cancel each other,
what I like about
self-storage is you don't need anyone
to get something out
for you or give it back to you.

Not holding
on to anything
that doesn't belong to me,
when I open
my mouth it's shiny
inside, like a glassed-in island.
Touching the tips of one
hand to the tips
of the other hand
as if they're transmitting:
I don't want to be a person
I can't depend on.



When no one is looking,
I close the door
without even opening it,
holding up my hands in case there's something
I need to hold on to.
Not telling anyone
to *leave me alone*,
that's not what I mean.
I think I'll take a picture
of myself to see what
I look like *right now*,
at this minute.
It's embarrassing when
the door is open
and you don't even
bother to close it.

Isiah

The heavenly aroma of roasting coffee beans wafted into my nostrils as I stood in The Beanery, an uptown coffee shop. What a pleasant place to be on such a cold, dreary day. Guess everyone agreed as all the tables appeared taken. Where to sit?

At a nearby, larger table, three young women were engaging in a spirited conversation filled with laughter and the occasional loud voice better suited for a bar. Their happiness made me jittery. Tragedy does that. Silent suffering too. It sweeps one up like the cold wind outside.

Not wanting this uneasiness to retake control, I focused on an empty seat at a small table up front. Holding a mug of latte, appropriately spumy, I approached the table; wearing a red and black checkered scarf, a tall, thin, Black man with a naked head and gaunt face sat in the other chair.

“Mind if I sit here?” My voice sounded as tentative as I felt.

He looked up at me with deep-set eyes; their surprising cordiality soothed my lingering anxiety. “By all means, do.” His velvet voice was gracious, and before I settled in the chair, he announced his name: “Isiah.”

I placed my mug on the tabletop. “George.” We shook hands, his grip strong for such a frail-looking man.

Isiah proceeded to tell me he was twenty-five, born in this city, and had resided here on and off. “Tried Atlanta, Miami, New York but always came back here. Guess where you’re born is a strong magnet. At least for me, it was.” He sipped some of whatever was in his cup. “Packed a lot in a quarter of a century.”

“Sounds like it.” Fourteen years younger than me, he looked fourteen years older.

Usually, I gave a stranger their space across the table to avoid intruding. After all, in this case, he’d been here first. And

I was a private person — especially since that day — not big on revealing my cards to anyone. But Isiah wanted to talk, seemed to relish the company, and deep inside, so did I.

He asked where I was born.

“New York.”

“Big city. Too big for me.” He blew into his cup and drank some of what was in it. Placing his cup down, he continued to tell me about himself: his jobs, mainly in the service industry. But then he focused on his mother. His eyes softened as he spoke. “To me, she was a saint. We . . . were very close . . . until she passed at the young age of forty-four.” He toyed with his cup. “Cancer.”

Whenever anyone told me of death, I grew empty of words. My brain scrambled to find the right thing to say only to come up with the obvious. “Sorry.” What else could I say? Forty-four was so young; he’d feel robbed of her. I understood something about that. But I closed my mind on what I knew and returned my attention to him. “At least you have your father.” How presumptuous of me.

The papery skin on his face tightened, making his skull’s contours visible. “My father . . . hmmm . . .” He proceeded to reveal how he had despised his father for years. Only recently had they made peace. What the rift was about and what caused the reconciliation, he didn’t say.

I didn’t push him on any of it. People meant well by inquiring. But at least to me, those questions just registered as prying. Isiah appeared content that they’d healed the wound. With his mother gone, he might need his father more than before.

“Look,” he said, “I shouldn’t dwell on him, especially with everything going on in this crazy world today.” He raised his cup and drank some more out of it.

Our conversation continued. Isiah’s warm demeanor cracked open my shell. Like a newborn chick, I started to chirp about how I’d moved down here for a job. “Two jobs, kids, and

a divorce later, I'm still here." Of course, I wasn't telling the whole story. That would be too painful.

He appeared to be studying me. "You a religious man, George?"

Had he seen something on my face? A trace of melancholy? A flash of pain? Had my secret slipped through my pores wordlessly? "No . . . not really."

"I am," he said. "Faith was why my colon cancer was caught early."

More cancer. How much could a person endure? Still, he seemed to be in decent spirits, more than I believed possible. Maybe faith had actually helped somebody—certainly not me. "Well, I'm glad to hear that." I raised my mug. "To continued good health."

He bumped cups with me, a ceramic clink, a soft sound in a noisy space.

Not long after that, I craved another latte and asked if he wanted a refill.

"No, thank you."

I went and ordered another cup. When I returned to the table, Isiah was gone.

Puzzled, I sat.

He hadn't seemed like someone who'd leave without saying goodbye. He must've had a reason. Anyway, Isiah had made what would've been a lonely cup of coffee more pleasant than expected.

And I sipped my hot drink alone.



Back in my car, I wondered about Isiah. Did he often sit at The Beanery hoping for companionship? Was his life brightened by conversations with strangers? Indeed, there were worse habits. He seemed like an honest and caring person. And sitting across from him had shone some sunshine on me this chilled, cloudy afternoon. As I turned a street corner, I pulled my life away from Isiah and wondered what my plans would be

when my kids spent the following weekend with me. It would be good seeing them. They helped drive away my loneliness, a constant since that day, a severe pain I dealt with through gritted teeth. Come Friday, I would pick up my son and daughter and do my best to make the weekend memorable.

Three days later, I was in the neighborhood where I worked, far from The Beanery. Realizing I needed something for dinner, I dropped into a nearby supermarket, wheeling the shopping cart up and down the aisles in search of fixings for my meal.

“George.”

The voice was familiar, as was the face—Isiah. He was standing several feet away, the same scarf wrapped around his neck, holding something wrapped in brown paper, perhaps meat or fish. A friendly smile spread across his face.

What were the chances of running into him days after our first meeting? Hadn't he told me that he lived around the corner from The Beanery? This supermarket was miles from there. A few supermarkets existed between this one and that coffee shop. But my puzzlement soon melted, replaced by happiness at seeing him again. Something pulled me toward him, and I couldn't say what, so I pushed my cart over to him and gave him a hearty handshake; his grip equaled mine.

“Fancy meeting you here, George.”

I agreed and told him I'd popped into this market by chance. “My office is only a few blocks away.”

“My father lives nearby, so I stopped to pick up something for dinner. Providence, isn't it?”

There was a twinkle in his eyes, which caught me off guard. I gathered myself in a hurry.

“Guess so.”

A woman pushed her cart around us, looking disgruntled. An older man cleared his throat before avoiding us. Not a good place to talk.

Isiah seemed to not notice. “Sorry about leaving so abruptly the other day. Had an important errand . . .”

“Don’t we all.” I warmed the moment with a smile.

“Glad we crossed paths again. I’ve been thinking a lot about you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. About what you said, about your divorce and lack of faith.”

Faith was not what I was looking for right now. Was Isiah some proselytizer, ready to bring belief to the souls he perceived as lost or strayed? I wouldn’t go there, so in my most polite voice, I excused myself and started to walk away.

“Hope to see you at The Beanery again,” he said to my retreating back.

“Hope so.” I turned down an aisle, heading toward the cash registers.

Despite my trepidations about being drawn back into the world of the faithful, I wrestled with going back to The Beanery again to see Isiah. He appeared to be a nice man, something in short supply in my lonely life and society in general. But my mental steps of heading to that cafe balked at being preached to, no matter how subtly the sermons came. I decided to steer clear of the place.

And that might’ve been the end of it.

But the following afternoon, a man who resembled Isiah, wearing the same checkered scarf, was exiting a downtown medical arts building. I called out his name, but the street was noisy with car traffic; my voice was drowned out. He turned right at the upcoming intersection. When I arrived there, he had vanished down a street of shadows. Perplexed, I shrugged and continued to the garage and my car.

Friday afternoon was drizzly and chilly as I drove from downtown to my ex-wife’s place to pick up the kids. As I passed the large stone church on the corner, a tall, thin figure emerged through its wide front doors. The scarf. Isiah? But I was driving too fast to be sure. I tried to see him in my rearview mirror, but a row of parked cars and vans blocked my view.



Nothing like this had ever happened before in my life. Two people whose paths had never crossed before were now seemingly zigzagging in the paths of one another. Would I now see him in the park, at the movies, or in a restaurant? I gripped the steering wheel tighter. A strange possibility was emerging. Did my doubts about faith have anything to do with Isiah's appearance?

I'd never been a truly religious man. By that, I meant I'd never been much of a churchgoer. An occasional Christmas Mass was the extent of my attendance. Still, I always believed the world was more than what spun around on it, including me. At one time, faith had streamed through my blood. But that was then. Like the years marked before and after Christ's birth, mine were defined and separated by one day, one afternoon, and one moment.

Had it been already five years since ...



Five years ago, a car horn outside my house emitted one long, frantic beep followed by children's screams. My youngest had been outside riding his bike. I ran to the living room window. Some neighbors were gathered in the gutter. What the hell? A car stopped on the pavement; its driver's side door opened; an agitated woman leaned against the car, her hands tugging her hair. Distraught faces turned my way. My next-door neighbor headed with purpose in his steps toward my front door. Then came the desperate ring of a doorbell. His words, "Jamie, it's Jamie ... oh, God ... he's been hit." Without remembering how I got there, I stared at my son's prone eight-year-old body, limbs sprawled on the asphalt in a way they shouldn't.



I'd sat beside my comatose son for a week, praying for a miracle. A week passed, and no miracle came. With his death, I grew distant, unreachable. The bond of my marriage began

to dissolve. Friends no longer knew how to approach me or what to say, and in time, those relationships collapsed. Not long after, I slammed Heaven's gate on God.



And now, five years later with my marriage over, friendships dissolved, it was “my weekend” with my two remaining kids. My oldest son, daughter, and I had spent a Saturday afternoon at an indoor rock-climbing space, then we'd gone to a pizza joint my kids liked.

“My weekend.” All mine, but really all theirs. The truth was I only started to climb those plastic rocks because Jake, my oldest at fifteen, was into it. Gilli, just thirteen, was a bit of a tomboy, so it fit the bill for her too. She was quicker than her brother and consistently rang the bell at the top of the fake mountainside faster than he did.

I couldn't help myself. Over a pie that was one-third cheese, one-third pepperoni, and the final third pineapple, I burst out with, “providence or serendipity?” They eyed me like I had just evoked a magical chant that opened some mysterious cave filled with the newest video games. So I decided to tell them about Isiah.

At the end of my tale, abridged for younger audiences, Gilli munched on a piece of grilled pineapple and looked up at me with the wide-eyed gaze of a teenage daughter who believed her father had taken a “crazy dad” pill. Not a word came from her mouth, just a slushy chewing sound.

Josh held his drooping slice. “Happenstance.” Then he chomped a big bite of his pepperoni pizza.

I regretted telling them as I sat there picking at my slice of cheese pizza. Why had I said it? Perhaps because I didn't have anyone else to tell, certainly not my co-workers in the break room or Jessie, the garage guy who parks my car on workdays. My angry, distant behavior after Jamie's death had torn apart my marriage, ripped away so many friends, and buried my faith.



I returned to my son's reaction. Were providence and serendipity synonymous in some way that was open for interpretation? Josh saw it as neither and called it happenstance. His mother's yoga instructor would call it karma. A man of God, like Isiah, viewed it as providence.

Or maybe it was just like I believed, serendipity. In the end, everyone recognized that unexplainable things could happen. But could serendipity or happenstance or providence or whatever you call it actually change things?

I placed my partially eaten slice back on its plate.

After my weekend with the kids ended and they'd been dropped off safely at my ex-wife's house, something made me return to The Beanery. Call it an urge, a force. Call it a desire to have a delicious latte. By the time I arrived, it was already late afternoon, and few folks were there. But at that small front table was Isiah.

He appeared delighted to see me, his steaming cup before him.

I sat across from him, eager to get to the point, and brought up the recent occasion where I thought I'd seen him on foot.

He drank some of his brew, put down the cup, and smiled. "Not unusual. I love to walk all over, and I do get around. Should've said hello."

"I tried ... but you didn't hear me or see me."

"Too bad. I would've loved to have chatted. Like I told you the last time we met, I've been thinking about you."

Having no cup to grip, I placed my hands flat on the table. My tone came out wrong, harsh. "What does that mean?"

"Oh ... just thoughts ... about what you've been through. Your loss."

I never told him about Jamie. "My son's death?"

His face appeared perplexed, or did it? "My God, no ... that's terrible. I was talking about your divorce and being separated from your children." He took another sip. "I do know what it's like to be separated from a parent." He ran his

finger along the lip of his cup. “Oh my, nothing worse than the loss of a child, not even the loss of a youngish mother. Care to tell what happened?”

I didn’t want to, but the urge to seek relief by talking about my son’s death compelled the words to fly from my mouth. When I finished, he appeared misty-eyed. And I felt some tears rolling down my face. Quickly, I wiped them away.

“Now I understand your lack of faith.” He sounded sincere.

But he didn’t understand. It wasn’t a lack, as he called it, but a total shutdown.

We sat quietly until he said, “If you need a shoulder . . . I couldn’t have gotten through the chemo without the ears of friends—and my faith, of course.”

That word again. I wanted to say something but believed it wise to keep those sharp words inside. But then I let them out. “Where was your faith during your mother’s illness?”

He flinched, but a genteel smile soon replaced that initial reaction. He appeared to be gathering his words. “My faith . . . why, I always had it, even then. Don’t get me wrong, George. My mother’s death was a rough time. Sure, I felt pain. Plenty of it.” His eyes seemed to retreat farther into those deep sockets of his. “But I also felt . . . acceptance. God had chosen my mother to join Him. I never questioned His decision. And that helped get me through the worst.”

How generous of Isiah. In light of what had happened to Jamie, I wasn’t that giving. But I wouldn’t openly doubt his belief, a powerful one. So I changed the subject—a significant change, and I hoped it would work. “What kind of movies do you like?”

His face lit up. “Oh, the old ones, especially the epics like *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur*.” He raised his eyebrows as if to certify his picks. “What do you watch with a bucket of popcorn?”

“Guess Marvel movies, *Star Wars*, and *Indiana Jones*. When it comes to movies, I’m a big kid at heart.”

We chatted some more until I realized it was time to go.

Isiah's eyes seemed to brighten. "George . . . my offer stands." His voice sounded louder in the quiet of the place.

"Which is?"

"I'm available whenever you need it."

"Thanks." I stood and then walked out into the dimming daylight.

On the street, a question popped into my head. Was Isiah a figment of my imagination created to combat my loneliness? It stopped me cold. I looked around at the people shuffling past. No, I wasn't that desperate, and I continued on my way.



Now Isiah was in my head a lot, morning, noon, and night, day after day, week after week. He graced my meals. Entered my dreams. Who was this man? Why had he come into my life? Happenstance? Divine intervention? Both seemed "out there," as the kids say.

One afternoon as I sat at my office desk, these thoughts came to a peak, and a need for fresh air overcame me. I hoped a brisk walk would clear my head and do me good.

But on the street, my mind was gripped by that gaunt man with those harrowing eyes. Completely lost in myself, my fog was broken by honking and screeching tires. The moving car was almost upon me, and a terrifying image thrust before me: Jamie's crumpled body.

Suddenly, somebody pushed me out of the car's way, and I fell to the pavement.

Concerned voices rang out above me.

"You okay?"

"Need an ambulance?"

"Call 911."

I barely registered what was said, only wondering who had pushed me to safety. A tall, Black man in a checkered scarf stood in the crowd: Isiah? But his face was turned away.

I blinked, and he was gone. Had he really been there?

Confused, I caught sight of the same man, or so I believed, scurrying across the street, never looking back.

I was able to right myself. After a brief discussion with a cop about being alert when crossing streets, I was free to go. And there was only one place that beckoned me.

It was quite a hike, during which I called the office and told them what had happened and that I'd be out for the rest of the day. Sore as I was, I made it to The Beanery. At Isiah's table, there now sat two teenage girls on their phones. I ordered a latte, took a seat nearest that table, and waited long after the teens and their phones had departed. Only when the barista tapped me on the shoulder and said that the store was closing did I leave.

If I had been consumed by thoughts of Isiah before, my need to know now reached blind obsession. I returned many times to the place where we'd first met. Each time, someone else was occupying his seat. When we'd first talked, he said he came here often. I grew puzzled. Maybe his cancer had returned? I'd heard of people whose cancer came back with a vengeance and were dead within days.



The day was rainy, bleak. I walked with a purpose to The Beanery, its roasting-bean aroma pumping out the vents. Through the raindrop-streaked front glass, I saw Isiah at his table. My heart pumped faster, and I raced inside. But the man seated there wasn't him. Deflated, I caught sight of a barista wiping down a table in the cafe's corner and went up to her. "Excuse me."

She looked up from her chore and offered me a one-hundred-percent customer service smile.

"Do you recall the tall, lanky man with a gaunt face who usually sits at that table? He wears a red and black checkered scarf."

She scrunched her face as if she was flipping through some massive mental photo album of customers she'd seen. Rain

continued to patter against the plate glass windows, dishes continued to clatter in the sink, customers continued to chatter at their small tables. Finally, she shrugged. “No, can’t say I do.”

Back on the street, huddled against the elements, I noticed a tall, lanky man walking ahead of me. I picked up my pace and caught up to him. It wasn’t Isiah. I apologized for the intrusion, and the stranger walked away. The rain fell harder; puddles formed on the sidewalk. People were scurrying to drier places. I stood there, facing the sky, letting the raindrops cleanse me. Had Isiah been real? Had he saved my life? Or had I been handed a chance to believe in something?

Belief or disbelief? I pulled my jacket tighter and headed home, saying a brief prayer for Isiah under my breath.

Dissolution

You're shoving fear and rage
into circular steel holes
as you mutter prayers
to the demons you carry.
The impaled sun is dying
on the edge of the city skyline,
a hundred towering tombstones
backlit by the flames of hell,
as all that was once blue
smolders to black.

Bullets are cast in last chances,
melted in a crucible of chaos,
poured in molten desperation
into a mold of resignation,
and cooled to a cold, hard shell
that broods in a chamber,
waiting to shatter the silence
in eruptions of blood and screams.

You cannot hear my words,
and I will not bear your weight.
I leave you to your searing psyche.
In the street, a robed wraith
passes me by, clutching
gleaming metallic destiny.
I flee into the dark distance
as each wishless star fades,
and all that remains
is the blinding truth
of a youless tomorrow.



Ann Christine Tabaka

Charade

I've lost my way—among the brambles of life,
pricked by thorns of indecision. I am the *unsung*,
the *unloved*, the *forgotten* . . . to each penny, a
thought is paid. Stray desires pursue an illusion.
The moon hides its face & stars refuse to shine.
Autumn calls to me. I have learned to cry
in silence, to hold back the flood of despair.
Sadness crushes the night, leaving shards of
dreams in its path. Long-winded words join
short-sighted actions to complete the charade.
I must pick up the pieces of my broken past &
learn to live without you. I can only pretend.

I Still Remember

I still remember there was an ocean,
right behind that constellation over there,
named as an Ocean of Breath,
we all lived out there when we were young,

and the breath and thoughts strayed transparent,
and there was a tree ragged by the prayers,
shadowy followed in our wishes,
shaking with hope before the end,

when those seconds—
always starving lodgers of times,
took our wishes away,
leaving the myriad small sparks,

trying to shine a light in our hearts,
as the precious stone in dirt,
cannot be consumed by slow decay,
not even dragged by force of doubt.

Stetson Bostic

Unfamiliar Faces

A clump of sprinkles held together by icing—a remnant from Isabella’s ninety-second birthday—caught Ethan’s eye. He’d seen it before, nestled in the corner next to the kitchen threshold. It had been there for almost four months, and this was the third time he’d spotted it. Each time, Ethan had moseyed into the kitchen, where he had already been going, and forgotten about the clump as he continued whatever task had brought him there.

Isabella sat in the breakfast nook, turned away from the kitchen toward the window, admiring a picture of their daughter. She ran her finger over the cheeks, leaving smudged fingerprints. “So pretty, look at that chestnut brown hair and those big hazel eyes.”

“I’m cleaning it this time,” Ethan said. “It’s driving me crazy now. I need a paper—”

Three hollow knocks came in an even pattern from the front door. The mail slot opened, and an inch of envelopes crept through, clinging impossibly together as they thudded to the floor. Isabella shuffled out from the nook, then hurried across the kitchen and into the living room with a careful jog no faster than her walk. She reached the front door and pulled it open, ignoring the mail that was sent sliding.

“Thank you!” she called, waving to the mail carrier.

The woman, halfway to the next house along the stone footpath, stopped and looked at Isabella. She waved back and brought her face to a grin. Isabella felt a twinge of unplaceable fear. Though her arm remained up from waving, it held completely still. If the carrier noticed the odd look on Isabella’s face, she did not show it. The carrier held her grin—almost a painting of a smile—a moment longer before turning and continuing to the neighboring house.

Isabella remained in the doorframe for another few seconds before easing back into their home. She squeaked the door shut, then cautiously bent over to retrieve the stack of mail. Returning to the kitchen, she passed by the clump of sprinkles and found Ethan starting a pot of coffee. “The mail carrier,” she began with uncertainty, “I guess she must be new.”

Ethan stared at the coffee pot as though daring it not to start, then nodded as it let out the first crackles. “Well, I wouldn’t know, just you would. I never say hi.”

“It’s a woman,” Isabella said, looking blankly through Ethan’s back. “But not the same woman, I’m sure of it. And there was something strange about her.”

“I just assumed it was a man,” Ethan said, reaching for the mugs in the cupboard above the coffee machine. “Because of the way you always run to the door.”

Isabella broke from her trance. “Oh, enough now, still jealous after who knows how many years. I like to be friendly with everyone in town. You know that, silly man.”

Ethan set the mugs next to the machine. “The man at the bank is quite handsome and years younger than me!”

Isabella moved close to Ethan and took his arm. “I haven’t so much as held another man’s hand all these years, and you know that, silly man.”

Ethan turned, showing her his teasing smile, and took her hands. “Though many have reached for it, not that I can blame them.” He raised her one hand with his own, placed his other on her back, and pulled her gently into a slow dance. “Who wouldn’t reach for beauty?”

The wrinkles around her eyes deepened, and she leaned her head into his chest. They moved slowly about the kitchen, pacing in rhythm to the drips of coffee.



An hour later, their mugs were empty. Ethan worked on a crossword while Isabella added length to a scarf now long

enough for three necks. Quietly, as though she was only speaking to herself, Isabella said, “I suppose we should think about dinner; we haven’t much food here.”

Ethan grunted, but his squint never broke from the line of squares six across that began with an *M*. “An electronic holding place,” he mumbled as he read.

“Will you go with me to the store?” Isabella asked, looking up from her knitting. “I’d feel better if we did. I don’t like running so low.”

Ethan let out a frustrated huff. “I just had it. I don’t want to go. My back isn’t feeling up to the walk.”

Isabella set down the scarf and needles. “I’ll just order them, I suppose. That will be all right.”

Ethan set down his pencil. “No, we can go. I’m sorry I didn’t consider it longer. It will be nice to walk.”

Isabella shook her head. “If your back isn’t up for the walk, you won’t be able to carry the bags either. And I don’t want you to. I’ll order, and we’ll go for a shorter walk after they arrive. Down to the pond and back.”

Ethan nodded. “Okay. I’m sorry, beautiful. I really do think my back can take it.”

Isabella stood and kissed his forehead. “Those puzzles cause you more frustration than joy. I don’t know why you do them.”

“I enjoy being frustrated,” Ethan said with an eager smile. “That’s why I married you.”

Isabella wrinkled her nose at him and rubbed the kiss from his forehead with playful urgency. “Silly man. Silly, funny man.”

For the next hour, Ethan listened to a book as Isabella took stock of their food and made her list. Three times she checked it, scurrying back and forth between the table and the refrigerator, the pantry, the cupboards. Every now and then, having been distracted by her antics, Ethan would rewind his

book a few sentences. Finally satisfied, she turned on their tablet and began to order.



Ethan fell asleep. Isabella paused his book and tucked a decorative pillow between his head and the windowsill. She tidied until three more knocks came at the door. Ethan pulled awake and watched as Isabella worked her way across the living room. Careful to stand slowly, he got up to join her, not wanting her to carry in the bags.

Isabella opened the door and immediately took a few steps back—her left hand still squeezing the knob. Two paper grocery bags sat on the porch, and a man stood behind them. As Ethan got closer, he could hear the conversation.

“I asked if I could bring them in for you?” the man said.

“Please,” Ethan called, leaning against the couch in the center of the room. “That would be nice. Please set them on the kitchen chairs.”

The man nodded, then bent at the knees and pulled up the bags. Isabella took another step back toward the door to their bedroom. The man eased through the front door, turning slightly to fit both himself and the bags.

Isabella watched the man pass her, and Ethan saw the fear on her face. It spread to his own, and he tensed as the man passed by, carrying the bags—smiling but not making eye contact. They watched and listened as the man scooted out the kitchen chairs, set the bags to rest on them, and adjusted one of the bags to make sure it wouldn't tip. He came back through the threshold—walking with purpose toward the front door—and gave a nervous nod to Ethan.

“Have a nice day,” the man said as he exited.

“You as well,” Ethan replied, anxious to not be rude. He walked to Isabella and took her hand, pushing the door closed with his shoulder as he did. “What's the matter, beautiful? I hate to see such a look on your face.”

Isabella pointed to the door. “I am certain that the grocery boy is a young man, school age, working weekends. And is



today not Saturday? That man was far too old. I don't think I've ever seen him."

Ethan tried to think but couldn't remember any young man of school age. "I don't know these things. I never answer the door unless I have to." He thought another moment, feeling Isabella's hands shaking in his. "Do you know the young man's name? Now that you've mentioned him, it does sound familiar. Working to save some money for college. We could call and ask if he is working. Maybe he took the day off."

Isabella seemed calmed by this and nodded. "The young man's name is Jordan. I will call the store now."

Ethan helped her walk to the kitchen, knowing she was shaken. She wasted no time and soon had someone on the phone.

"Yes, hello, I was wondering if Jordan was delivering today, I..." Her face scrunched; her head tilted. "I like to tip him when he delivers, to save for college, and I forgot to last time, so I wanted to make sure I did this week."

Ethan smiled at her cleverness and held her hand as the person on the other end of the call asked for a moment. The pause was long, and Isabella tilted the phone, her eyebrows raised, so that Ethan could hear the muffled conversation sneaking through from the other end.

The conversation stopped; a silence followed, and then the person replied, "Yes, Jordan is working—"

"*They've ordered already today,*" a faint voice said, low as though from behind the one they were speaking to. Another silence.

"—however, he is stocking shelves today, not delivering. He should be delivering again next week."

Isabella stared at Ethan with eyes so round she looked a decade younger. After a moment, Ethan nodded toward the phone, encouraging her to finish the call.

"Thank you," she said at last. "I will... have to give it to him next time. Have a nice day."

"You as well," the person replied.

Isabella ended the call and set her phone on the counter. Ethan encouraged her to take a seat, and she allowed him to guide her. They sat in the two empty chairs, both next to a grocery bag, holding hands.

“Jordan doesn’t work during the week. And why would he stock shelves for just one day? Did you hear the talking? The other voice?”

Ethan rubbed her hand, then kissed it. “I did. Something is strange, but I’m sure there is an explanation. Let’s think of what to do.” He took a gradual breath, pulling as deep as he could, held it, then let it out slowly.

Isabella watched him repeat the pattern twice, then joined him and found herself calmed after the first cycle of breaths. “I should finish the groceries,” she said, her eyes now closed. “Then will you walk with me next door? To talk to Liam and James?”

“Of course. And let me help you with the groceries, beautiful.”

Together they unloaded the bags. Ethan passed cans to Isabella, placing the milk and yogurt into the refrigerator while she organized in the pantry, setting the apples and bananas into the fruit bowl. With only the meats left, he passed them to her one at a time, and she placed them along the bottom shelf of the refrigerator in the order she planned for them to eat: the steaks, the chicken breasts, sweet sausages, a hunk of chuck for pot roast, and ground turkey.

Ethan folded the bags and tucked them behind the trash can to be used for recycling when the current bag was full. Without speaking, they moved to the entry table next to the front door. Isabella took her purse, and Ethan took his wallet. They both took their house keys.

The air was warm but pleasant, and the sun glowed through the thin clouds. Their road—lined on either side with similar houses—was quiet. The sidewalks were empty except for a few walking silhouettes in the distance. Together they walked

the footpath—large flat stones set close together through the tidy but sparse flower bed that lined the house—toward their neighbor’s house.

Isabella knocked. They stood arm in arm, waiting for the reply. An elderly man of similar years popped into the window next to the door. His face was tired and suspicious.

The man cracked the door open. “What is it?”

“Hello,” Isabella said. “We’re here to see Liam and James. We have a question for them.”

The door stayed where it was, open only an inch. “What are you saying?” the man asked.

Ethan took a step back and checked that they had walked the right direction, knowing the neighbors on the other side kept to themselves. “Liam and James,” he said. “The owners. Kind young men. You must be the father of one of them. Maybe a grandfather? Very proud, I’m sure, both doctors.” For a moment, he felt confused—like there was something else he would normally add after making such a statement.

The man peered back out the window, holding the door firm. “I’m here alone, and leave me alone.” He shut the door but continued staring at them through the glass.

“Sir,” Isabella said, hoping he could still hear her. “Please do not play a game with us. I am having a bad day as it is.”

The man shook his head, then disappeared.

“Come, beautiful,” Ethan said, feeling uncertain. “Let’s just go home and rest. It is certainly a strange day, but maybe we are just tired. My back hurts, and I know I did not sleep well last night, and I probably kept you up with my turning.”

Isabella shook her head. “Something is wrong. We’ve had dinner here with Liam and James.” She knocked again, so hard Ethan took her hand and checked her knuckles. Through the window, she could see the kitchen light flick off. “I want to go to town,” she said. “To the grocery to see if that boy . . . Jordan . . . is working. Will you come with me?”

Ethan did not hesitate. “Yes, my love, if it will make you feel better. What is important to you is important to me.”

Though his back ached as they walked the first block, Ethan made sure to hide it, not wanting to upset Isabella or give her cause to turn back from their mission. They walked slowly, the houses flowing by—disorienting in their sameness—and Ethan was pleased to feel his back loosen after a few blocks.

They reached a large circle that was also lined with a sidewalk. A single car drove around it before exiting in the direction of town.

“I don’t think I liked this at first,” Isabella said. “But it is pretty how they have the flowers in the center and lining the sidewalk all around.”

Ethan agreed and rubbed her hand with his thumb. To their left and straight ahead, the roads branched out. They turned right and walked the gentle bend, following the car, which was now a speck halfway down Main Street. At the far end of the street—only three blocks of buildings—was the trolley station, and they could see that the trolley was parked, waiting for the next scheduled trip.

“That, I liked,” Isabella said. “The trolley when we stopped driving; it was nice to know I could still get around if I wanted to.”

“But we never want to,” Ethan said.

Isabella shook her head. They were nearing the first building, the bank, which sat next to a small park with two benches in the center, which was across from a small parking lot. “Could you imagine going into the city now? All those people? We have everything in town. It’s just nice to know we can, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Ethan said. He looked at a couple sitting on one of the benches. They were cuddled together, smiling. Ethan slowed Isabella to a stop, bent down, and kissed her on the cheek, then on the lips when she turned to look at him.

“Silly boy,” she said, giving him another kiss. “You’ll embarrass us in public.”



They passed the bank window, and this time it was Isabella who paused. “That teller, it is not the usual one.”

The woman inside the bank noticed them and waved. Her face glowed with a smile that looked artificial.

Isabella pulled Ethan’s arm. “Come, let’s be discreet.”

They passed their favorite restaurant, then the movie theater. The coffee shop, then the clothing store. In each one, Isabella noticed an unfamiliar face, and each time, she tugged at Ethan’s sleeve to let him know.

Ethan assessed their situation, feeling that his wife was on to something. In each of the buildings, buildings he knew, were shoppers and patrons. They browsed or stood at counters. He tried to think of when he had last seen a face he knew and could not. “Something is happening to this town,” he said, realizing there was fear in his voice. “Thank you for being so aware. I wouldn’t have seen it. Something is wrong.”

Isabella lifted her hand and rubbed his back. “Stay calm, my love. I have been thinking of a plan. Look at the clock.”

There were three lampposts on each block, all currently turned off. Halfway up the pole of the center post was a small clock. Ethan’s eyes drifted up to it. “Ten until four.”

“The trolley leaves on the hour.” Isabella looked around to see if anyone was close enough to hear them. “We will check the grocery store, confirm something strange is happening, then hop on the trolley and take it somewhere we can ask for help.”

Ethan leaned down closer to her. His eyes settled on the grocery store, which sat in the center of the last block, then on the trolley, only half a block farther. “It is a good plan, but where will we stay?”

“We have money, so we will find a hotel. But we can’t figure any of this out until we escape. If the mail carrier has been replaced and the grocery boy and our neighbors and—”

“I understand, beautiful,” Ethan said. “We will be replaced too.”

They crossed the final alleyway and walked the last half block until they reached the grocery store. The sign hanging out front read *The Grocery*—a row of vegetables underlined the words. Ethan and Isabella looked at each other and shared knowing looks. The sign, like so many people in town, had been changed.

They entered the grocery store with tentative steps, allowing the automatic doors to open wide before continuing into the artificial air. They heard squeaky wheels and beeps coming from checkout. Ethan almost took a cart out of habit, but Isabella hurried him along, moving as directly as possible to Customer Service. A man in his thirties looked at them sympathetically as they approached. “How may I help you?”

“We’re here to talk to our delivery boy, Jordan,” Isabella said, looking the man with the false grin directly in the eyes. “We always give him a tip but forgot to last time, and I will not feel right until we do. Will you please call him to the front? We were told he is stocking shelves.”

Ethan saw the man was hesitant and sent him a glare, hoping anger would mask his fear. The man took a short breath, agreed, then walked into the small room behind him. A moment later, he returned. Too quickly, Ethan thought.

“He’s on his way,” the man said.

“Thank you.” Isabella looked up at Ethan.

He gave her a quick hug, then began pacing, browsing the shelves, always aware of who was near and how they were behaving. A woman of middle age seemed to be watching them from the registers. Two younger men, both clean-shaven and tall, seemed to be watching them as they stacked apples at the end of the produce section.

The end of the nearest aisle was stocked with boxes of Cheesy William’s Mac ’n’ Cheese. Ethan picked up a box and examined it absently, trying to hide his increasing anxiety. Isabella stood at the counter, reading the back of a pack of batteries, ignoring the occasional glances from the strange man

behind the counter.

Ethan heard footsteps coming down the aisle. He went to return the box to the shelf while leaning to peek at the incomer and accidentally toppled the row of boxes. Like staggered dominos, the boxes knocked at the other rows, and as Ethan flailed his arms to stop them, the boxes flowed from the shelf to the floor.

As he knelt down to pick them up, he heard the voice of the approaching person.

“Let me help you with that.”

As he looked up, his hand settled around a box, and as he lifted it, his mind registered that the box was lighter than it should be. Empty. His eyes met those of the young man walking toward him, then fell to the printed name tag that claimed the man’s name was Jordan. He felt Isabella’s hand on his shoulder and realized he had knelt quickly in a panic and struggled to his feet as the man neared. The pain returned to his back, a few twinges popped in his knees, and the man arrived. Ethan looked down and saw empty boxes crushed beneath real ones.

“That’s not Jordan,” Isabella whispered in his ear.

The man may have heard her but gave no indication. “It’s so nice to see you both. You really didn’t have to do this. I won’t accept any money, but thank you!”

Ethan took Isabella’s hand and felt that it was shaking. “This is so embarrassing,” he said, his voice wavering. “We keep our cash in the entryway table, and in our hurry to get here, we completely forgot to take any.” He lifted his free hand to his forehead and rubbed. “We are so sorry. We really wanted to . . . but please tell us, will you be working next Saturday?”

The man smiled. Ethan and Isabella squeezed their hands together. It was the same false smile they had seen so many times that day.

“Yes, I am!” the man said. “Don’t be embarrassed at all. I’m actually done with work for the day. May I walk you home? I

don't want you to think I'd be doing so for the tip; it's just a long walk, and I saw you struggling just now to stand."

"What time is it?" Isabella asked.

"Almost four," the man said. "Two minutes 'til."

Their hands tightened again. "We'll walk ourselves. Have a nice day," Ethan said, knowing he sounded panicked. "Come, Isabella."

But Isabella was already moving, and it was she who pulled him to start their walk. They moved quickly for the door and heard the man walking behind them.

"Please, I insist," the man said, keeping pace.

They reached the door. Just before it glided open, Ethan saw in the reflection the man pretending to be Jordan and the man from behind the counter and the two clean-shaven boys who had been stacking apples—all closing in.

"Keep away from us!" Ethan yelled, turning slightly, allowing Isabella to exit first.

"Did you make the call?" the man from the counter asked Jordan's imposter.

Isabella moved faster than she had in years, and Ethan kept with her, the pain in his back fading behind adrenaline. The trolley sat at the end of the rail line—ready to move. Their footsteps blurred together with those of their pursuers who intermittently shouted for them to stop. A few others peered out from the windows of nearby buildings, pressing their faces against glass to witness the excitement.

Ethan overtook Isabella just before they reached the trolley, and with strength that surprised him, he pushed open the accordion door at the rear of the vehicle. Holding it open as the hinges resisted, Ethan helped Isabella enter—both breathing heavily—then allowed the door to snap shut behind them.

The people from the store reached the trolley, but instead of trying to enter right away, they began to surround it. A few went to the center door on the left side; others stayed by the door Ethan and Isabella had entered through; the man from

the counter walked to the main door at the front right. Isabella noticed that more had joined and pointed this out to Ethan who then pulled her into his arms.

“Start the trolley, we beg you!” Isabella yelled to the front.

There was no reply. The people paced in front of the doors. Ethan glanced out the back window and saw a white car speeding toward them from the circle. He turned to Isabella and pointed to the car. Isabella looked, then turned his face to hers and kissed him.

“Whatever happens, silly boy, you always have my love.”

“Whatever happens, beautiful, you always have mine.”

The car stopped behind the trolley, and from the driver’s side door emerged a slender woman, middle-aged, with chestnut brown hair. She hurried to the trolley and moved directly to the door they stood inside. She looked at them through the glass, smiling, and both Isabella and Ethan thought this smile was sincere. It held a kindness that filled them with an uncertain peace.

“She has beautiful eyes,” Isabella said, feeling on the verge of tears. “Beautiful hazel eyes.” She began to weep and was not certain why she felt such a strange blend of joy and sorrow.

The woman pushed open the door as easily as Ethan had. They moved back, sitting instinctually on the seats behind them. The woman moved closer, then took a seat that put them to her left and the rear window at her back.

“Everything is okay,” the woman said.

Ethan noticed her white coat—the kind doctors wore—doctors like Liam and James.

“You’re the woman from my picture,” Isabella said. “I won’t believe someone so pretty with such kindness in her eyes will hurt us. Please help us leave this town. There is something happening here that is wrong.”

The woman reached out a hand and placed it on Isabella’s knee. “I am Maria. I like that picture. I’m smiling in it because my dad is making me laugh while my mom takes it.”

Ethan leaned forward—assessing Maria’s face—and placed his hand on hers, which was still on Isabella’s knee. As fast as a blink, his nose scrunched and tears flowed, and he let out a staggered sob. “Hello, beautiful daughter,” he said, now squeezing her hand. “My daughter the doctor, I’m so proud of you, hello.”

Isabella turned and looked at Ethan, then turned to see the face she now recognized. “Oh my, silly girl, what are you doing here?”

“I work nearby, Mom,” Maria said. “At the hospital. They called and said you two were having a rough day.”

“With Liam and James?” Ethan asked, his cry calmed to a gentle stream.

“No, they work somewhere else. They haven’t been your neighbors for a long time.”

Both Ethan and Isabella nodded, and together they squeezed Maria’s hands, rubbed her cheeks with their knuckles, and smiled upon her the way only parents can.

“Why doesn’t Jordan work at the store anymore?” Isabella asked. “I don’t understand.”

“He worked at a different store near our old house. You don’t live there anymore,” Maria said. “You live here now, and these people help take care of you.” Outside, the people that had given chase seemed to be dispersing, though the man from the counter stayed. “Jordan worked at the store back home, but that was a long time ago.”

“We still owe him a tip,” Isabella said.

Ethan felt that this wasn’t true, but instead of correcting her, he rested his head on her shoulder and kissed her cheek.

“I’d like to get you both home now,” Maria said.

Ethan groaned as he straightened his back. “Yes, let’s do that.”

Maria guided them down the stairs back outside. She spoke to the man from the counter for a moment, then returned to



them. “Could we walk together? We could also take my car.”

They both wanted to walk. As they made their way back down the street, the faces they saw through the windows looked less menacing and more helpful, their smiles less artificial and more concerned. Isabella asked if they’d had a circle back home and mentioned that she liked the flowers. Maria answered their questions, telling them where she’d gone to school and how long they’d been here.



When they arrived home, Isabella offered to make tea. The three of them went inside, put down their things, and walked to the kitchen. Ethan felt a thought tug at him and allowed it to turn his eyes, and he spotted the clump of sprinkles in the corner. He asked Maria to get it for him, to take a paper towel and scoop it up. As he and Isabella nestled into the nook, Maria tossed the birthday remnant into the trash can.

They sat and talked. Maria showed them pictures of their son-in-law and their grandchildren and shared how they were doing—all well. It was not long before Ethan and Isabella became tired. They said their goodbyes, and Maria promised to come visit soon and told them she came once a month by herself and once a month with the family. They stood at the door and watched her go, telling her to be careful walking.

They settled into bed and held hands as they eased toward sleep. Their minds replayed the exciting day, though as dreams came nearer, the causes of the excitement became hazy. Before slipping to slumber, they both held a final thought in their minds and a final image—love and a familiar face.

Dazzle

It was points of light against the chill November night:
stars, yes, and stadium lights and reflections off brass instruments
and helmets and the goal posts, and eyes, oh, so many eyes,

and eyeglasses in the stands and an occasional flash
from a camera and the sparkle of ice crystals. This was long ago,
and it was as if we were newborn, suddenly presented

with countless points of light out of which objects
would form one after the other until it was
no longer a dazzle but the world around.



Michał Zieliński

Atlantic Prayer

Little star, guide our galleons.
We've come to wreck
civilizations. I have guts,
I have spears, I have fury,
all waiting to be unleashed.

Saint Paul of Tarsus,
Uber Pool me away
with blind men & deaf women,
from the packed away toys
& peaceful blasphemies.

My heroes up there,
on corners of every two streets,
advertise to me running shoes
with doctored images
of your teeth.

Prophets, dance your light,
where Mary goes round,
tidying after Jesus
in his own room with her
young, worn-down hands.

My patrons, trivialize me,
narrow me down, down
the birthing canal, mute & sticky,
a red blob of amniotic fluid.
Lend me your shine forever.

Our Venus

They were devoted
Relished the ritual
Mom and Dad
Sat sucking down
Winstons for hours
After supper in their
Matching red chairs
(What a pair)
In view of our naked
Venus de Milo
Armless goddess of love
That Dad oddly brought
Home to Mom to stick
In our living room planter
To accomplish some kind
Of instant sophistication
I suppose — who knows?
Between them a weighty
Green-cut glass ashtray
Round with steep walls
Like a backyard pool
Overflowed with butts
Spent brass artillery
Shells in their battle
When the TV winked
Out in 1969



No more riots Vietnam
Cartoons or assassinations
I'd draw our Venus
Her unwavering perfection
Again and again
While Mom's and Dad's
Cheeks grew hollow
Skin grew sallow—
Age and emphysema
Years later I'd admire
Our Venus in the Louvre
Her flawless contrapposto
Her steadfast contours

The Rose Caddy

I hadn't been that excited since Becky Gutierrez kissed me on the mouth in seventh grade. I read an ad in the classified section of the *Santa Barbara News-Press*:

1958 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz Convertible, one owner, needs some work, cash only, \$850 as is. Call Woodland 6-3027. No dealers.

I immediately went to the public library and searched my favorite magazines for photos of that car. I found full color glossies that took my breath away—dual headlights, wraparound windshield, and small sculpted fins in back. The two-door looked smaller, more balanced than other Cadillac land yachts. The one in the magazine had pearl white paint with red leather interior. A monster V-8 with a golden air filter filled its engine bay.

Four months before, I'd passed the multiple-guess test at the DMV and had gotten my learner's permit. Every weekend, Pop braved the twisting roads of Hope Ranch with me behind the wheel of his Studebaker, trying to work the three-on-the-tree shifter without grinding the gears or burning up the clutch. He could take about an hour of my punishment before we'd pull into the Modoc Club's parking lot and he'd disappear inside to down a couple of quick ones.

When I told Pop I wanted to buy a five-year-old Cadillac, the neighbors could probably hear him laughing halfway down Calle Poniente.

"What the hell, Jimmy? That boat will barely fit in our driveway, and you'll burn a gallon of gas just drivin' to school."

"I thought you'd be pleased," I answered. "That Caddy is solid and can take a direct hit from a tank without anybody getting hurt."

“That’s true, that’s true. A good thing.”

Mom and Pop had felt super protective ever since my older sister, Carolyn, tried to walk across the 101 on a green light and was killed by a delivery van. After that, Mom wouldn’t go near highways and insisted that I take the bus home every day.

But once in high school, I had to have a car. Every boy trying desperately to be a man needed a driver’s license and a car. And the bigger its engine, the more macho we appeared, except maybe Bobby Burnhart, who drove a Chrysler 300 but looked like a dweeby grammar school kid behind the wheel.

“And it’s a convertible,” I continued.

“Yes, that’s pretty neat,” Pop said, grinning. “I remember drivin’ a friend’s ’36 Olds during the war. We had the top down on a back road outside of Philly. I was home on leave after Marine Corps boot camp before shipping out, and we decided to tie one on. Afterward, my friend was too drunk to drive, so I took the wheel. I could hit a hundred in that Olds, no problem.”

“Gee, Pop, that’s a swell lesson—go out drinking, and drive fast.”

“Don’t get smart. We were on our way to fight the Germans like gladiators before entering the arena. Besides, it was years before I married your mother and she straightened me out.”

“So what do you think of this Caddy?” I wanted to get Pop focused on the car. If he got sidetracked on wartime stories and his bachelor days, we’d never get anywhere.

Pop stared at the ad that I’d clipped from the News-Press. “Something must be wrong with it. I’ve seen this model goin’ for two or three grand, easy. They’re kinda rare.”

“Yeah, I know. Only 815 were made. But I’m taking auto shop at school, and I’m pretty sure we could fix whatever’s wrong.”

“What do you mean, *we*?” Pop smiled and bit down on his cigar. “*We* don’t have tools to do squat. And that thing won’t fit in our garage.”

“Sure it will, Pop, if you park your Studebaker in the back lot and—”

“Just hold on, son. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“So will you call this number for me? You’re so much better on the phone and know how to haggle.”

Pop grinned. “Sure, kid. But if I help you with this, you gotta let me drive her. Having a Caddy in our driveway, even an old one, will class up the place.”

“Sure, Pop, sure. Anytime you want to take her out.”

But I knew if I bought that Caddy with money I’d saved from working as a box boy at the A&P, he’d have to fight me for the keys. I had visions of cruising Santa Barbara’s State Street, top down with my bodacious girlfriend (to be named later) snuggled up next to me, her hair wrapped in a scarf as the wind off the Pacific enveloped us. Or roaring down some highway at 120, the car filled with my geeky buddies on our way to some place where they played hot rock ’n’ roll and wouldn’t card us before serving whatever drinks we wanted.

Pop agreed to make the call. “Is this the party that’s sellin’ the ’58 Eldorado? Uh huh, uh huh. Where can I see the car, take her out for a test drive? Uh huh. That’s an automatic, right? Look, my son and I will be right over to check it out. You have the pink slip, right? Uh huh. And you are? All right then, Carl, be there in a few minutes.”

It turned out that the seller lived down the block from where my sister used to take piano lessons in the San Roque neighborhood. Pop seemed as excited as I was as we climbed into his Studebaker.

“We’d better go to the bank and get your money. If we like the car, I want to close the deal this afternoon.”

“Sure, Pop.” I wasn’t about to delay buying my first wheels.

Carl, the guy selling the Caddy, looked like he should have a yacht tied up at the marina, a real stuffed shirt. When Pop asked him what was wrong with the Caddy, he mumbled something about it needing new gaskets and that it dripped

a bit of oil but “nothing serious.” He handed over the keys to Pop. We climbed in and cruised State Street with the top down, the car’s big engine barely murmuring. She had a pale rose-colored paint job and a white and rose interior, both in good shape.

I opened the glove box and found a pint of booze and some snacks.

“Hey, Pop, she comes with her own bar.”

He grinned. “Close that up. We don’t want to get stopped.”

We drove around town for half an hour, took her onto the highway, and ran her up to one hundred. She drove smoothly, no major rattles. When it was my turn to drive, I thought I’d have to throw Pop out of the car to get behind the wheel. The Caddy felt so much easier to drive than his clunky Studebaker, what with the automatic transmission and power everything. I could spin the wheel with one hand. The radio worked, as did the electric windows. I was sold. So was Pop. He didn’t even haggle with Carl over price. I handed over the money, my not-so-long life’s savings, and Carl signed the pink slip. The car was mine.

It took Pop ten minutes to back the Caddy up our narrow driveway and into the garage, the roll-up door barely clearing her chromed front end.

Over the next few weeks, I discovered all the things wrong that I should have noticed when buying the beast. The power seats didn’t work, the air conditioning didn’t blow air, the brakes were squishy, and the convertible’s top had major rips and tears. She continued to drip oil but not enough to lose any sleep over.

Going for driving lessons with Pop was a snap. No more recovery stops at the Modoc Club. And instead of our isolated training grounds in Hope Ranch, we cruised State Street, the radio blaring, Pop’s arm planted on the door top, his face wearing a Cheshire cat grin. I think his thoughts floated somewhere back before the war, before family, kids, mortgages,

his struggle to establish his own plumbing business, when his future looked as rosy as the Caddy's paint.

When school started in the fall and I had my license, I rolled into the parking lot, pulled next to Eddie Marsango's lowly Chevy, and clicked off the radio. I chose that spot because it was easy to maneuver into without damaging the Caddy's mirrors or scraping a fender. I climbed out, pocketed the keys, and sauntered off to class. George Slack and all the cool guys stood on the walkway and stared, mouths open. I had given the car two coats of Turtle Wax. Every piece of chrome, and the Caddy had plenty, gleamed in the sunlight.

After school, a bunch of the guys hung around as I popped the hood and showed them the monster engine with its three Rochester carburetors.

"She makes 335 horsepower," I bragged.

"Yeah, but it's gotta weigh three ton," George Slack countered. "This thing rides like a rolling sofa."

"So what? I'm not askin' you out on dates. And I can still beat your ugly ass, Edsel."

"In your dreams."

The carburetor love talk continued as I showed them the car and all of its details, including the trunk big enough to hold two or three bodies. But to my chagrin, the girls continued to ignore me, and word got around that they thought the Caddy looked too flashy or like a car their fathers might drive. To prove their point, Pop frequently borrowed the keys to run the simplest of errands and would be gone twice as long as necessary. And he never paid for gas; it cost me over five dollars to fill her.

But for the first time since my sister's death, he wanted to go fishing with me. We'd drive up the coast to El Capitán Beach and surf fish, our backs against the white cliffs, a cooler of soda and beer planted in the sand along with our rods and reels resting in their sand spikes. He'd stare at the ocean and tell stories about his early life fishing off Montauk, long before WWII.

From hours of listening, I noticed that Pop's life so far had been divided into two eras: years before the war and years after. The pre-war stories were the best, and he talked with me as I envisioned he'd talk with his Marine buddies. Whenever we were together, I let him drive the Caddy.



The trouble started in mid-November, right before Thanksgiving. The car started running hot and leaking enough oil to turn our garage floor black. Power was down. Pop followed me in the Studebaker to Dave's Westside Auto.

Dave stared into the Caddy's engine bay. "Well, she looks like she needs a head gasket on the left side, maybe a new thermostat. You should replace those old hoses before one of 'em blows and leaves you stranded. And I should check the brakes."

"How much will all that cost?" Pop asked.

"Don't know until I dig into her. I'm a little worried about that left-side head. You run these big cars hard, and the heat can crack her. Need to magnaflux both heads to be sure."

"When will we know how much it's gonna run?" I asked.

"I'm pretty busy this week. Maybe next week or the week after. But it's gonna cost you just to find out what's wrong."

I sighed. Pop didn't look happy either. He'd have to drive me to school in the morning before work, and I'd have to bum a ride to the A&P from a classmate and explain to everybody what happened to my cool wheels.

When Dave called, it wasn't good news. We both went to his shop after school. I had already run up a fifty dollar charge just for the testing, and nothing had been fixed.

"The overheating cracked the left-side head, and it has to be replaced," Dave said. "The cost of replacing all the gaskets and hoses ... and the brakes really should also be done ... will run the bill up to about \$525."

Pop and I stood in silence and stared at the quiet motor under the Caddy's mile-long hood.

“What do you think, Pop?”

“How much money do you have?”

“About two hundred.”

“I can spare a hundred.”

“What if we didn’t do the brakes now?” I asked Dave.

“That’ll save you some.”

“Look, Pop. I’m working full time at the A&P, taking home fifty a week. What if we leave the car for a month, then have it fixed?”

Pop nodded. But I could tell he didn’t like my solution.

“I got a spot in the back lot to park her,” Dave added. “I won’t charge ya anything. But you’ll have to help me push her.”

For the next half hour, we grunted and groaned as we pushed the five thousand pound beast into a shaded space and pulled a plastic tarp over her shredded convertible top.

In a month, I collected all the money I had, and Pop and I drove to Dave’s. The Caddy looked beautiful, polished, the interior vacuumed and wiped clean. When I turned the key, the engine started right up and ran smoothly. But the brakes felt different.

“What’s with the brakes? They feel real touchy.”

Pop grinned. “Well, I talked it over with your mother. She agreed that the brakes should be done now. It’s a safety thing.”

“I’ll pay ya back, Pop. I’m still working almost full time. Shouldn’t take long.”

“Don’t worry about that. Just enjoy the car. I know I’ve missed our fishing trips.”

“So have I.”

“Maybe we could drive up to Cachuma Lake and try some freshwater fishin’.”

“Sounds great.”



Gradually, throughout the rest of my junior and senior years in high school, I gained confidence, didn’t try so hard to be cool, and developed enough courage to ask girls out.

Making out and the potential for love and affection shoved my gearhead mentality into the trunk. The car became a vehicle to take me somewhere else, to shake loose from the petty schoolyard rivalries and the machismo of my classmates.

After graduating in '64, I went to work for Pop. I figured in two to four years of apprenticing, I could take the test and become a licensed plumber. Pop had three journeymen working for him. The company made good money with me digging trenches, crawling under houses to check on leaky pipes, or busting my knuckles on corroded faucets while Pop puffed on his cigar outside and bragged about his youthful bass fishing adventures in New York's Finger Lakes region.

When I started working for Pop, Vietnam and the war involved something called "advisors," and there wasn't much on the news about it. Then in 1965, the US started sending Marines, and Pop and I paid attention. Young men my age started disappearing from our street, and one week, Mom came home from her coffee klatch in tears with bad news from the Braddocks. More and more men got drafted. I held my breath.

"What do you think, Pop?" I asked one night after watching the evening news with Walter Cronkite.

"Don't like it. Fighting in that jungle isn't anything like the Ardennes. The Viet Cong could be anywhere, and you'd never see 'em."

"I've been lucky so far."

"Yeah, you have. But if this thing keeps goin', the draft will get you."

"I'll probably end up fixing latrines at some army base."

"Maybe. But I don' like the looks of what's goin' on."

As our black-and-white Zenith flickered, Mom got up from the sofa, her eyes red and dripping, and hurried from the room.

Pop lowered his voice. "We better not talk about this kinda stuff in front of your mother. Gets her upset."

"But it's all over the news."

"Yeah. They got cameras everywhere."

“What do you think I should do, Pop?”

He puffed on his cigar for a few minutes before answering. “I don’t know. Maybe wait to get drafted, do well on their tests, and hope for the best training.”

“I could go back to school.”

He scowled. “You can’t run away from your duty to serve. Besides, it’s only a two-year hitch.”



As it turned out, I didn’t quite make it two years. I got drafted in early 1968 at a time when the military needed everyone they could get for the infantry. I did well on my tests, but apparently that didn’t matter. They needed bodies to go hunt down the VC, to fill the Hueys for search-and-destroy missions, to fill the nightly news back in the world with how many Commies had been killed. We were winning by the numbers.

On one such mission, just north and east of Saigon, I moved as point through the jungle, leading my platoon through the snarl of growth so thick that I had to push away vines and creepers with every step. I didn’t see the trip wire nor feel the explosion. I awoke in a Huey heading for the evacuation hospital on Long Binh Army Base. A medic bent over me holding an IV bag. Looking down, I could see my lower legs slashed and bleeding. My back hurt but not my legs.

I spent two days at the evac hospital before flying to Japan where they removed the shrapnel. I couldn’t feel my legs from the knees down. When I lifted them at the hips, they just hung limply like sodden wash on a clothesline. The doctors said the nerve damage couldn’t be repaired.

Three months later, I was home in Santa Barbara in a wheelchair, wearing dress khakis and carrying my Purple Heart in its case. In preparation, Pop had built a ramp up the back steps off the driveway. Inside, he’d installed a lift that took me to my room on the second floor. I looked out the window at the garage, its door rolled up, exposing the Caddy to brilliant sunshine.



“So, Pop, you’ve been driving the Caddy?”

“Yeah, son, to keep the battery charged, ya know?”

I grinned. “Sure, Pop, sure.”

“Wanna go for a ride after lunch? I think you’ll like what I’ve done with her.”

“Done?”

“You’ll see, you’ll see.”

After eating, I rolled out the back door and down the ramp to the driveway where Pop parked the Caddy. I opened the door and slid onto the passenger seat. Then, as I had practiced during rehab, I folded my wheelchair and hefted it into the back seat.

“That’s damn impressive,” Pop said. “I’ll get a canvas tarp to put over the upholstery, so ya won’t damage it.”

“Thanks, Pop.”

He started the car, then backed it down the driveway and drove to Hope Ranch, our old driving lessons haunt. At a wide spot in the road, he pulled over.

“Now watch what I do,” he said.

He put the car in drive and worked a hand control, and the Caddy pulled away, moving at normal speed. A stop sign appeared, and Pop worked another hand control, and the Caddy rolled smoothly to a stop.

“Pretty neat, huh?”

“Yeah, way cool.”

“When we heard what happened, I talked to Dave at West Side. He designed and built the controls. They take a bit of gettin’ used to, but I’m sure you can do it.”

“Yeah, Pop.”

I wasn’t sure at all. Fortunately, I could one-hand the steering wheel with a Brodie knob while working the hand controls for the gas and brakes. I practiced all that winter on back roads away from traffic. The Caddy’s ashtray filled with remnants of Pop’s Dutch Masters cigars. I still had a driver’s license and could go by myself. But Pop insisted on tagging

along. One time, we talked about Vietnam, what life was like in the field: torrential rain, the heat, clouds of mosquitoes, the villages, mama-sans, skinny boy soldiers, coolie-hatted women tending rice paddies, and the B-52 bombing runs that shook the earth. Pop finally asked me how I'd been wounded. After I told him, he sat chewing on his cigar. We motored up Highway 154 and over San Marcos Pass in the early morning light on our way to fish Cachuma Lake.

"You might not have made it in my war," Pop said. "It took 'em too long to get the wounded to field hospitals. A lot of 'em bled out before they could patch 'em up."

"Yeah, Pop. In Nam, the dustoffs saved lots of folks."

That's all we ever said about my injury. I could tell his thoughts had drifted back to the snow-covered Ardennes. He never talked about the fighting itself. He had his secrets. I knew not to pry. Besides, I had my own secrets.



The VA gave me some cool polio crutches and braces for my lower legs. I could lurch around my parents' house and managed to maneuver pretty well in stores and offices. I always had pretty good upper-body strength. After my injury, I lifted weights at the Y and got stronger.

Pop's business grew as the Santa Barbara area became more packed with people. I thought I couldn't work anymore as a plumber. Pop wouldn't let me quit. At first, he'd send me out on small jobs in the Caddy or larger jobs in the trucks with one of the other crew. Over time, I could crawl around under houses and snake sewers as well as the rest of them; it just took me a bit longer. The customers didn't complain. But it took me a while to get used to their reactions to my disability. Doubtful housewives looked at me with sympathy, hovered over me, offered to hand me tools, or gave me iced tea or lemonade on hot days. As time passed, I'd get requests for my services from repeat customers.

One summer Saturday, Mom told me a parade was happening on State Street, and it might be fun if I checked it



out. As a kid, I really liked the parades on Veterans Day or the Fourth of July. Pop would put on his dress blue Marine Corps uniform with all the ribbons. We'd stand at attention as the color guards and military bands passed before us. I remembered how Pop's legs would tire, and we'd have to find a bench to rest. I figured it was my turn.

Locals and early summer tourists crowded the downtown. I had to park five blocks off State Street and use my wheelchair to reach the parade route. Unlike other parades, this one started in mid-afternoon. People made space for me at the curb in front of the art museum. Looking down the closed-off street, I strained to hear the first notes of the military marching bands, the rattle of snare drums, the blare of brass horns. Instead came the sound of bongos, congas, guitars, screeching trumpets, and saxophones, all to a calypso beat. The sound of hard sandals slapping in time against the asphalt mixed with whistle blasts, shouts, and the rumble of singing.

A huge mob moved up State Street. Young, tanned men stripped to the waist with long hair and braless women wearing beads, feathers, and flowing dresses danced before a float that held a makeshift band. More musical groups followed, all playing the same freewheeling rhythms, trailed by children and their parents dressed in sunflower costumes or tie-dyed T-shirts and jeans. The whole gang reminded me of the hippies in San Francisco during the Summer of Love.

The parade passed quickly, and the crowd of onlookers emptied the sidewalks and followed the music up State Street.

"You wanna follow 'em?" the guy standing next to me asked.

"What is this parade?"

"It's the Summer Solstice celebration."

"Huh. Never heard."

"Come on, you'll like it."

The guy and a couple others, their faces painted with yellow swirls, lifted me in my chair into the street and pushed

me forward, following the last calypso band and crazy floats.

We turned onto Micheltorena Street and passed in front of my Catholic elementary school. I wondered what Sister Mary would think. We ended up at Alameda Park. I thanked my pushers, rolled along a walkway, and pulled up next to the central gazebo. The crowd swirled around me. The strong scent of marijuana filled the air. I had smoked enough in Nam to recognize its fragrance, and in no time, I was grinning along with the rest of them.

Families had spread blankets on the grass. Everyone shared food. Children ran crazily through the throng. The music continued its steady beat like the sound track of that art film *Black Orpheus*. I closed my eyes and felt the warmth of the afternoon sun flow through me. I felt naked but unashamed, even with my damaged legs. The music pulsed, and I dozed.

Someone gently shook my shoulder. "Would you like some help?"

"I'm ... I'm all right. Just a bit tired."

"That's okay. But the party is winding down, and you'll have to leave."

The woman smiled at me, her brown face covered in bright paint with glitter. But she wore a modest summer dress and looked a bit older than the others.

"That was one crazy parade," I said. "I was expecting marching bands and color guards."

"Yes, it's the city's first Summer Solstice parade. I think they wanted to do something totally different, something nonmilitary."

I chuckled. "Yeah, well, they succeeded."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes ... yes. It was nice to see so many people, you know, happy."

"How about you? Are you happy?"

"Now that I've met you I am. My name's Jim."

"I'm Camilla."



“That’s pretty.” In the soft light, her brown body glowed. She looked beautiful.

“Thanks. So you have someone picking you up?”

“No. My car is over on Olive Street.”

“You have a car?” Camilla’s eyes widened.

“What, you think a cripple can’t drive?”

“I’m . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I can get around just fine.” I felt angry but forced it down.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” she said, an eyebrow raised.

“It’s getting dark. Do you have a ride?”

“I’m supposed to go home with my housemate. But I can’t find her. She’s probably at the beach partying. I’ll just take a cab.”

I sucked in a deep breath. “I can take you, if you want.”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey, I’m a good guy. Besides, you can outrun me.”

She grinned. “I guess it’s all right. But I live in Carpinteria.”

“All right, let’s go.”

“Do you . . . do you want a push?” she murmured.

“No, I got it. I’m not tired anymore.”

On our slow roll back to the Caddy, we talked. Camilla worked as a teller at Crocker Bank with goals of becoming a loan officer for the high-roller customers. I told her everything except the details of Vietnam. Disclosing those secrets would have to wait. But she was persistent.

“So did you get hurt in . . . in Vietnam?” she asked.

“Yeah. I can’t control anything from the knees down.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It could be worse.”

“Yes, I know Hispanic families who’ve lost sons.”

“Yeah.”

We moved slowly down Olive Street, my wheelchair bumping over the uneven sidewalk until coming to the Caddy. I stopped, leaned forward, and opened the passenger door for her.

“This is yours?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Yeah, she’s big and rides smooth.”

“Can... can we cruise State Street before you take me home?”

“Sure can.”

“I’ve never ridden in a flashy convertible.”

I started the car. Camilla smiled at me. She took a scarf from her purse and tied it around her flowing red-brown hair. We cruised State for over an hour from the harbor all the way out to Petersen’s Drive-in and back. We waved to people on the sidewalks. I leaned on the horn, never tiring of the Rose Caddy’s elegant call.

Camilla slid across the seat and snuggled next to me, her body warm against mine, the wind off the Pacific enveloping us. I wanted that feeling of joy to never stop. So far, it hasn’t.



Kyle Heger

Harrowing

My nightmares really worked
me over with a harrow last night,
cutting deep and long, breaking
through clumps of cohesiveness
and resistance, flaying me into a
receptivity for their seeds. What
kind of crop will I find springing
up today from such carefully
cultivated ground?

Walking Home from the Tower Inn Pub

Near midnight, the mist over Bronze Age burial urns
rests close to the ground. The lanes are shadows.

Walking past the church graveyard, the ale in me says,
“Aha, graveyards and ghosts, the dead walking in the chains
of their dust, dried stems of abandoned flowers blooming
in ways unimaginable in the full light of commerce;
Saxon and Roman, English and errant French and American,
peopling the night in somber spectral, in tribute to memory
of conflict, lingering when forgetting would be more comforting,
wonder in formless stone steps.” The mist rests on dark lanes.

And as I pass the Haunted Tunnel, the mystic in me says,
“Drip, drip, drip. In this darkness, no one knows the steps
until the foot touches; beware the breathing, too heavy,
of echoes, like cusps of tides scalloped on the sand;
vertigal vision, altered night, My God, the tunnel leads
to someone’s house!”

And the man in me salutes the moon, nods to the headstones,
smiles at the tunnel, and stumbles up the lane, singing
the pub folksinger’s refrain, “Drill, ye terriers, drill,
well, you work all day for sugar in your tea,
down behind the railway, and drill, ye terriers, drill.”
The moon, mist-softened, merely mutters,
“Time, gentlemen, Time,” into the old, old shadows.



Severin Allgood

Argentina in September

are you a winter
 forest? what would you
 like to know about the sun and burning sky,
 clouds of smoke and choking ether?
 high above the alps
 and the andes, nowhere near
 the milky way, but miles from the moon

in the atmosphere the ozone
 says goodbye

plummet back to earth and kiss the
 stones that fall
 pebbles maybe gravel
 break upon descent
 the plunge is quick and cold
 a junket in itself
 you break records
 you stoke fears
 never one to
 let slide
 the other wary bloc
 you have
 the echo wound

rise and breathe and collude
 embers of the cortex
 lapsed in borrowed time
 like your toque but not your crown

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Red Line 3j2

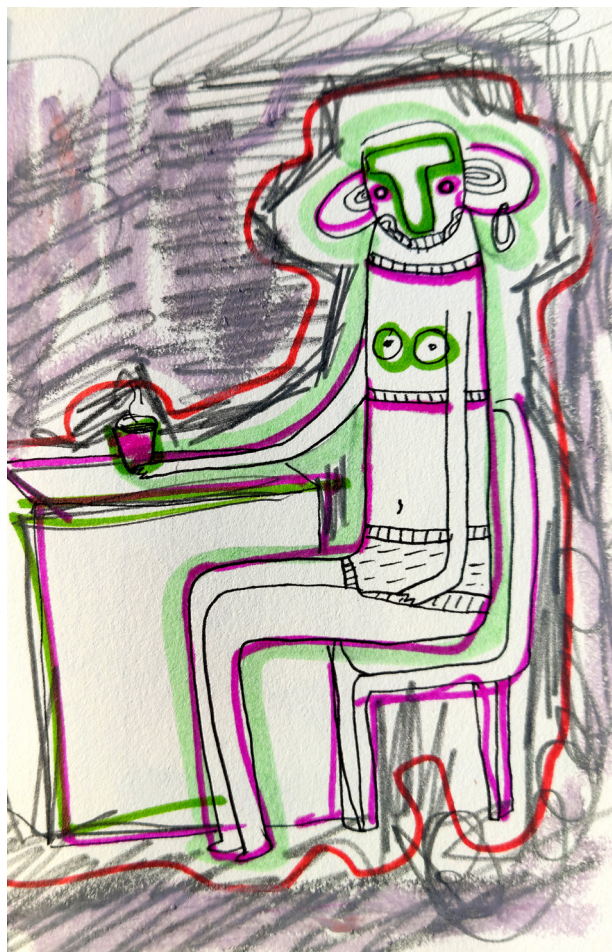


Digital Painting



Ayshia Müezzín

Dining



Mixed Media

Anna Reyes

I Love Tulips



Watercolor



JC Alfier

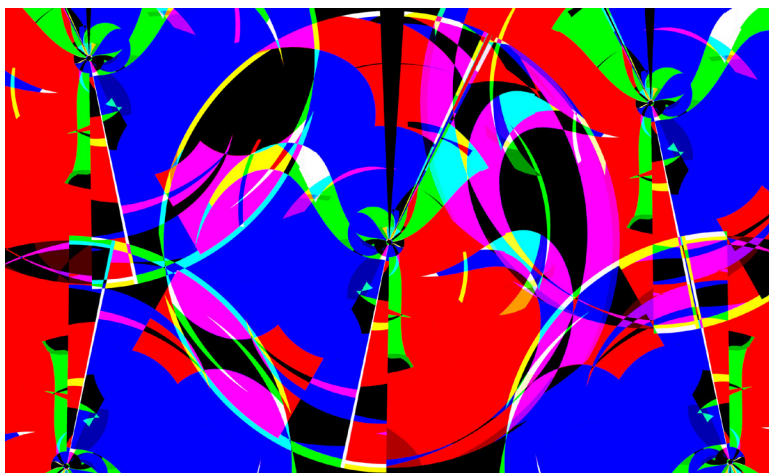
Lumière Descalier



Collage

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Merrily Rolling Along



Digital Painting



Carella Keil

Galaxy Cocoon



Digital Photography

Bill Wolak

With All the Daylight Trapped in Your Hair



Digital Photography



Bill Wolak

And So I Lived Outside of Your Arms



Digital Photography

Bill Wolak

Stretching Like Dawn



Digital Photography



Tanya Fillbrook

Sky Swirl



Mixed Media

Gloria Keeley

Sax Man



Mixed Media

Carella Keil

Echo and Narcissus



Digital Photography

Jeff Hartnett

A Tired Matt Damon



Collage

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Trouble on the Left Trouble on the Right 22



Digital Painting

Hiding from the Past

When his cell phone started chirping at a half hour before midnight, Justin Wasik knew it had to be something other than good news. He was right.

He lifted his head off the pillow and reached over to snatch his phone from the nightstand. The number displayed did not look familiar. That's because the call was from Saint Margaret Hospital informing him that his uncle, Nathan Wasik, had just passed away from a heart attack.

"Your uncle named you as his contact," a formal sounding female voice informed him. "We are holding personal items for you to pick up. Mr. Wasik left articles of clothing, a wallet with twenty-seven dollars, and a set of keys. Also, when you pick those items up, the hospital will need instructions regarding your uncle's remains."

"I need to make a few phone calls. Can I come by in the morning?"

"By all means, Mr. Wasik. And our condolences on the loss of your uncle."

As he anticipated, Justin tossed and turned through the night. He rolled out of bed at 6 a.m., showered, shaved, threw on a pair of Levi's and a Cubs T-shirt, and called the Schererville, Indiana, post office where he worked as a clerk to tell them he wouldn't be in that day. Then he jumped into his Honda Civic for the twenty-minute jaunt to the hospital.

At the first stoplight, he checked himself out in the rearview mirror. He ran the fingers of his right hand through his thinning, brown hair and cursed the Wasik gene pool. His father went bald, Uncle Nathan was bald, and at forty-four, his hairline was making a steady exit. What he also feared was an early demise. His father had passed away two years earlier



of brain cancer at sixty-four. Now Uncle Nathan bought it at sixty-four. A year after his father passed, his mother died of a stroke at sixty-three.

Upon arriving at Saint Margaret Hospital, he was taken to see his uncle's remains. The man looked no different dead than he did alive. Hollow cheeks, sallow complexion, unshaven. The visage of a man consumed by alcohol.

His next stop was the office where he received a plastic bag filled with Uncle Nathan's personal items. Next, he filled out some paperwork. The stout lady behind the desk asked him about funeral arrangements. When he said he didn't have a clue, she gave him a list of funeral homes in the area. Justin thanked her and said he would be in touch by the end of the day.

Once he was back home, it dawned on Justin that he had forgotten one task. The two deceased brothers had a younger sister living in Seattle. Aunt Estelle had moved away from the family sometime in the '80s, and as near as he could recall, it had been at least ten years since she came back to Indiana to visit her family.

Justin looked up her number in a family directory he kept in a dresser drawer. Not surprisingly, a recorded message informed him the number was no longer in use.

"Now what the hell do I do?" he grumbled to himself.

He ambled into the kitchen of his modest bi-level to fire up his Keurig. Then he picked up the black plastic bag containing his uncle's personal belongings and began to investigate. There wasn't much of value: a grease-stained pair of jeans, worn-out sneakers, a black T-shirt with a Sig Sauer logo on the front, and a faded blue hoodie. At the very bottom of the bag was a wallet and a key ring with four keys on it.

As he fingered the keys, Justin knew what his next task would be and dreaded the thought. It consisted of driving fifteen miles to Calumet City, Illinois, where his uncle's mobile home was located. Since he had no desire to check the place

on his own, he decided to wait until his girlfriend, Carey, got off work at 3 p.m. to bring her along. Carey was a cashier at a nearby Jewel supermarket. He texted her to inform her of his uncle's passing and to see if she would accompany him to the trailer. She readily agreed.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your uncle," Carey said as she settled into the shotgun seat. "I don't think I ever heard you mention him."

"Probably didn't. Not much to tell." Justin kicked on the air conditioner to fight off the oppressive July heat. Cargo shorts and a T-shirt didn't help much. "He was kind of the black sheep of the family."

"Did he have any kids?" Carey asked. Her chestnut hair pulled back from her face, along with a sleeveless blouse and khaki shorts, was in a concession to the eighty degree plus temperature.

"No kids. Never married. The guy was a bit of a loner."

Not that never having married was a crime. Justin hadn't married either. In fact, Carey was the first woman he could honestly say he had fallen in love with, this after only a three-month relationship. The other unusual aspect was that they were the same age, making her the first woman he ever dated who wasn't at least three years younger. He had dated women with nicer figures and cooler fashion senses, but Carey possessed a depth and warmth he hadn't found in anyone else. Add to that a sharp sense of humor, and he was hooked.

"So when was the last time you were in your uncle's place?"

Justin thought for a second. "Had to be last January during the cold snap. He couldn't get his old truck started, so he called me to lend a hand. Before that was a couple of days before Christmas. I stopped by to give him a Christmas card with a gift card from Home Depot. He was always fixing stuff."

"How thoughtful of you."

"Well, no one else was going to give him so much as a Christmas card, much less a gift. I gave him a Home Depot gift card every Christmas."

“You are so sweet,” Carey said, giving Justin a slight nudge with her shoulder. “Did he get you anything?”

“He didn’t have the proverbial pot to piss in. Injured his back working construction when he was about my age. Been collecting disability ever since. I told him not to worry about getting me a Christmas present, but every year, he would wrap a big red bow around a twelve pack and give it to me.”

“Which of course you shared with him.”

“Of course.”

“What about your brother, Richard? Did he have any kind of relationship with your uncle?”

Justin reached in his center console for a pair of sunglasses to block the late afternoon sun sitting low in the western sky. To slow the ride even more, traffic on Lincoln Highway started to build. “Not hardly. Richard, being a rare college graduate in our family, tended to look down his nose at Uncle Nathan. Since he got a promotion and moved to Indianapolis three years ago, he seldom comes back home to visit.”

Carey shook her head. “I think it’s sad the way your family made your uncle persona non grata.”

“I love it when you speak Latin,” Justin chuckled.

“Too bad because that’s the extent of my Latin vocabulary. So why is your family so down on your uncle?”

“As I understand it, back in his younger days, he was all about sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll. Alcohol became his drug of choice in his senior years. He didn’t exactly endear himself to the straightlaced Wasik clan.”

When the *Harvest Estates Senior Community* sign came into view, Justin felt a slight twinge shimmy through his gut. He followed the main road, Caroline Avenue, past neat rows of single-wide and double-wide trailers, a total of 170 throughout the park. Caroline Avenue looped around and connected at the far end to Meadow Lane where his uncle’s single wide trailer was parked. It had yellow siding with green trim and a strip of lawn that had more dandelions than grass. A pair of evergreens

framed the front of the trailer. At the back of the lot stood a brown metal shed.

Justin pulled his car onto an asphalt apron at the front of the trailer.

“This is a really well-maintained trailer park,” Carey said, a note of surprise in her voice. “Most of these places look like meth labs on wheels.”

“You have to be at least fifty-five to live here. Most meth heads are dead by then.”

They exited the Honda and negotiated the narrow four step porch at the side of the trailer. Justin pulled out the keys, resisting a sudden impulse to turn around and go back home. When he opened the door, they were greeted by a blast of hot air.

“Holy crap!” he gasped. He turned to his right where a thermostat read eighty-nine degrees. It took him a mere second to switch on the central air.

“You could bake a ham in here,” Carey said.

“Don’t forget. We are in a giant metal box.”

The interior of the trailer consisted of a small kitchen at the center, a living room in the front, and a short hallway that led to the bathroom and two tight bedrooms in the rear.

Aside from the stifling heat, the next thing that overwhelmed the two visitors was the smell of garbage. Justin stepped into the kitchen to turn on an overhead fluorescent light that revealed the source of the stench: an overflowing garbage can that sat between the kitchen table and the refrigerator. The wobbly table was piled with junk mail, old newspapers, used paper plates, fast-food containers, and a Tupperware bowl filled with a yellowish semi-liquid substance, the origins of which Justin pushed from his thoughts. Across the way, the sink held a pyramid of dirty dishes, glassware, and discarded beer cans.

“I take it Uncle Nathan didn’t use a maid service,” Carey muttered, wrinkling up her nose.

“Couldn’t really call him a hoarder,” Justin shrugged. “More

like a lazy slob.”

The idea that his uncle lived in such squalor saddened Justin. “I talked to him about cleaning up the place. Even offered to help. He kept promising he’d do it, but as you can see, it was low on his list of priorities.”

The living room proved to be just as bad. Clothes were stacked on the couch like an afterthought. Cardboard boxes filled with *whatever* were lined up along two of the walls. The carpeting was threadbare and stained.

Justin found it difficult to breathe. He wasn’t sure if it was the oppressive heat and odors or his growing sense of remorse. Shaking his head, he moved past the kitchen and into his uncle’s bedroom. A blue tarp covered the window, making it hard to see. He flicked a wall switch, and what he saw almost made him turn the light off. The bed sheets were dingy and torn. Clothes were scattered in every direction, as if a gale had ripped through the room. A ripped leather recliner sat in one corner. Beside it were stacks of *Sports Illustrated* and *Time* magazines. Next to the bed was a table that held a CPAP machine. From the looks of it, Justin surmised it was rarely used or cleaned.

“Who’s going to own this stuff?” Carey asked. “Did your uncle have a will?”

“Damn if I know. Who would want any of this?”

Justin moved to a dresser and began to check the drawers. A thick layer of dust blanketed the top. On the wall above the dresser hung a Chicago Cubs poster celebrating their 2016 World Series championship.

Two of the five drawers were empty. The other three contained bunched up underwear, socks, T-shirts, check registers, old utility bills, and odd pieces of mail. Beneath the pile of underwear, Justin uncovered a Charter Arms .38 Special five-shot revolver.

“Oh my God!” Carey exclaimed. “Put that thing away before it goes off and shoots one of us.”

“Relax.” Justin smiled. “I bet this hasn’t been fired in years.”

He gingerly returned the gun to its hiding place and shut the drawer.

“Is there something in particular you’re looking for?” Carey asked, eyeing the gun drawer.

“There is. A few years ago, Uncle Nathan mentioned to me that he had important papers stashed away somewhere. At least, he said they were important to him.”

“I hate to be a pain,” Carey said, wiping her brow with her right forearm, “but can I help speed up the search? This place is like a sauna.”

“Sorry.” Justin glanced around the room, then pointed to the closet. “Let’s see what’s behind door number one.”

He opened the sliding door. Scrunched together in the tiny closet was a silver parka, a few faded sport shirts, and a couple of grizzled cardigans. His curiosity was piqued by a long cardboard box sitting on the floor behind a pair of battered brown work boots. He leaned over to pick up the box and carried it over to the bed for further investigation. Inside the box was a congeries of loose papers and envelopes that included receipts for tools and old medical bills. Toward the bottom of the stack was a life insurance policy.

“Believe it or not,” Justin said, “it looks like Uncle Nathan has five grand for funeral expenses. Assuming he kept up with the premiums.”

“That’s a mighty big ‘if,’” Carey cracked.

“How sad,” Justin replied softly. “Everything in this trailer amounts to his whole life. And all that amounts to is a lot of junk. The man had nothing and nobody.”

Justin caught a glimpse of a business-size envelope peeking out from under a truck repair bill. Inside the envelope was a folded sheet of notebook paper containing a handwritten letter. He unfolded it and began to read.

Dear Justin,

I am writing this letter out of guilt and pride. Guilt because I got your mother pregnant while she was married to your dad (my



brother) and pride because I fathered a child as smart and good looking as you, although I had very little to do with either.

Your mother and I thought it best for all concerned if we kept who fathered you a secret. She loves your dad and doesn't want to destroy their marriage. I totally agree. As much as I love you, I could never be the father to you that he could. You're better off with him as your dad.

You probably wonder what happened between me and your mom.

Your dad enlisted in the army, and when he left for basic training, your mom and I hooked up. It is something we never should have done. But she was lonely, and I was attracted to her. When you're young, you sometimes do stupid things. When your dad went away, she stopped taking her birth control pills. We only had sex once, but that's all it takes. She didn't want an abortion, so when your dad came home on leave, she made up a story about how she forgot to take her pill the last time they made love the night before he flew to Fort Polk for basic. He had no reason not to believe her.

So here we are. I'm writing this when you are ten years old. I don't know when I will show you this letter. If ever. But I do want you to know this. Just because I never claimed you as my son doesn't mean I love you any less. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Love,

Your dad

Justin stared at the page, his body frozen in disbelief. He read the letter again, as if a second reading would change the results.

Carey watched her boyfriend's body stiffen. Despite the heat in the trailer, his complexion suddenly grew pale. "What is it?" she asked. "What does it say?"

Justin felt like a funnel cloud was forming in his gut. Turning his head away, he handed the paper to Carey.

"My God," she whispered after reading the letter. "You didn't know any of this?"

Justin wanted to scream. To break something. To drop to the floor and cry. A whirlwind of thoughts shredded his brain. “How the hell could my mother keep something like this from me?” he croaked, his throat tightening. “So who the hell am I? What am I?”

The letter in Carey’s hand began to tremble. She wanted to console Justin, but her words felt inadequate; nonetheless, she knew he needed support. “This doesn’t change anything. You’re still the same Justin you were a minute ago. A day ago. A year ago. The same character with the same principles.”

Justin rubbed away perspiration from his brow. “I feel like I’ve been living a lie.”

“You’re not the liar.” Carey placed her hand on Justin’s right forearm. “Pardon me for saying this, but your mother and uncle are the ones who lived a lie. You are just an innocent victim in all this.”

Justin drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “I guess that explains why Uncle Nathan—or should I call him Dad—sent me a birthday card every year. I was the only one in the family who ever got one. Everybody just thought that for some reason I was his favorite. Some reason.” He took the letter from Carey, folded it, and put it in the back pocket of his shorts.

Carey fought back tears as she saw the look of confusion on Justin’s face. “He obviously loved you.”

The clutter in every room of the trailer suddenly took on new importance for Justin. Trash became memento. He walked back to the living room, his eyes taking in every object as if they were rare discoveries. Lying flat on the coffee table, partially obscured by a plastic cup and a Burger King bag, was a 5 x 7 metal picture frame. Inside the frame was a photo of a five-year-old Justin in between his real dad and the man he grew up believing was his dad. Each of them held a fishing rod. Behind them, a pure blue lake stretched to the horizon. Everyone wore a huge smile.



“I vaguely remember this,” Justin remarked. “Near as I can recall, this is the only photograph of the three of us together. Probably one of the last times we were all together. Period.”

“In a way, you were lucky,” Carey said, looking over Justin’s shoulder. “You had two dads who loved you.”

Justin stared at the picture for a brief moment before replying. “I suppose that’s one way to look at it.”

He put down the frame and strode toward the door. After locking the trailer, he pulled the letter from his back pocket, tore it into several pieces, and tossed them into the air like celebratory confetti.

Carey watched in bewilderment. “Why did you do that?”

“What’s done is done,” Justin declared. “The three main actors in this play are all gone. They’re dead. The past exists only in our head. I refuse to live there.” He grasped Carey’s right hand. “I may not be exactly who I thought I was, but I still love you the same way. Let’s see where my new life takes us.”

Plaid Shirt

After our fifth date
at the coffee shop,
we stood at her front porch.
I glanced at my plaid shirt
and stared at her lips.
A first kiss is like a plaid shirt
that gets worn for the first time,
feeling passion in colorful patterns.
My heartbeat thumped through the pocket
as I fiddled with the top button.
The front porch squeaked
from my sway to catch this moment.

I bought her an apple at a festival—
her favorite fruit.
She teased me about trying funnel cake—
not a good texture for me.
Her hands wrinkled the fabric of plaid
from a tight hold during a hayride.
When we stumbled through a corn maze,
I thought about how we blended
with an orange and black tone
like my shirt's checkered pattern.

Later at a concert,
she told me my plaid shirt
brings out my eyes
during the piano solo.
We took pictures of us
during intermission



and knew every song.
She said, "I see you
in my future." That phrase
became my shirt's tag
in extra large,
and I felt proud.

Though, for a month after,
her silence haunted me
until I ran into her
at our coffee shop.
We stared at each other,
but she walked past me.
I felt like a rag,
an old plaid shirt
she threw away.

Where Are They?

They are here,
In the cheap peeling paint
And powdered plaster,
In creaky floorboards
And carpets worn smooth.
In windowsills filmed with dust,
Stain-mottled glass
And rust-flaked frames.

But where are they, we ask,
They whose notions still shape us?

In chandeliered ballrooms,
Mahogany studies. Parquet
Floors and plush brilliant rugs.
Marble staircases, balustrades,
Balconies, and bay windows.
Gables, eaves, porticos.

And yet we ask, where are they—
They who impressed our malleable minds
And molded our tender souls?

In cabinets and fixtures,
Plumbing and wiring.
Cellars, attics, crawlspaces.
Ceilings, floors.
In the walls and between the walls.

Still, we ask, where are they?

In the bricks and mortar,
Cedar siding and cinderblocks.
Frames, foundations.
Every part of the edifice.
They are the edifice.
Everything, inside and out.

Still, still here.

Flicker

My body floats in this room
As the candles glow
Your face hidden in the shadows

I feel held
Body sinking into the pillows
Your face next to mine
Your body on the floor
Leaving safe space

Everything is soft
But still I freeze
Too close
Body stiffens and breathing breaks

But you are there
Asking what I need
And somehow
It's safe
To shake
To release

And when your lips tentatively touch mine
Soft as velvet
I let go
Melt
Into a new world
With you

Your hands steadying
The beat of my heart



Straylight Interview**Scott Barrow**

Scott Barrow has been working with Tectonic Theatre Project for almost twenty years as an actor, deviser, writer, and senior teacher with the Moment Work Institute. He collaborated on the creation of *33 Variations* from Georgetown to Broadway, on *Uncommon Sense*, *The Laramie Project Epilogue*; *Ten Years Later*, *Treatment and Data*, and *Here There Are Blueberries* opening at the New York Theater Workshop this spring; working as a deviser on each piece and performing in the productions. His plays *Full of Grace* and *The Outcasts of Penikese Island* received productions, and his adaptation of Geraldine Brooks' *March* is in development with the author. Scott is also the artistic director of Stages on the Sound, a not-for-profit pairing working theatre artists with schools in the tristate area. He earned his MFA from Brandeis University.

Jenny Olson: How would you describe your role in the show to our readers?

Scott Barrow: In the University of Wisconsin–Parkside's production of *The Laramie Project*, it was fantastic to facilitate the talkback and help frame some of the questions and responses about our process and methodology. I can be an expert on what Tectonic uses to create productions. I've been with the company for twenty years, and I've seen five or six productions from hunch to opening night.

Jenny Olson: Can you tell me what you mean by the hunch?

Scott Barrow: When Moisés Kaufman, Andy Paris, Leigh Fondakowski, or I have an idea, we call it the hunch. That

is, something has happened, and there's a story to be told. We do a lot of work with source material that's not written as dramatic text. That's newspaper articles, interviews, or expert opinions—source material that you would find in the encyclopedia or Google. But after the hunch has been clarified a little bit by this initial research, we begin to form a central question that we call the organizing principle. Anything that happens in the play needs to relate to that concept. For *The Laramie Project*, the central question is, how does a community respond to this vicious anti-gay hate crime? There's a familiarity to the story that we can all take home with us.

Jenny Olson: Are there any other lessons to be taken away from *The Laramie Project*?

Scott Barrow: As theater makers, it's hard to walk in someone else's shoes, but it's also vital because the currency of an actor and a theater maker is empathy. If we go in having already answered the central question or having figured out what we want to put on stage, then we're removing dialogue that is important to the community conversation.

Every time that I see the production, I'm moved by characters like Jed and Rob DeBree or some of the clergy who have a journey from a very homophobic, exclusionary, or xenophobic place—one of ignorance and lack of sympathy—to a place where their lives and their hearts have changed.

It's a beautiful part of the story and also a teaching moment for me. How do you reach people who struggle with ignorance or lack of exposure to cultural differences? That's one of the things that really came through in this production for me: those voices were played in a way that didn't set them up as villains or parody them. They're played with graciousness and sincerity, which was a real strength of the production.



The stagecraft is remarkable. It's not *Wicked* that's coming through town. It's not *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* or any of that stuff. It's not conventional. It's more than that. That kind of staging is good to keep in mind on a thematic level.

Jenny Olson: What is it like to produce a play that invites intense controversy and opposition from groups as vocal as Westboro Baptist Church?

Scott Barrow: Extremists seem to have a response to everything. No matter what the subject is, there are people who are going to object to it. Westboro Baptist Church is the most obvious extreme. I do have difficulty putting their words on stage because I'd love to not hear them or for them to not be uttered. They are poison.

Yet I don't feel like we're giving that hate speech a platform.

We are using it as a tool. As Rulon Stacey says in the play, "I didn't understand the magnitude [to] which some people hate." We're not giving it a platform but exposing its ugliness. It's important. It should hurt the audience to hear these things. We at least have some common ground that this is wrong.

Jenny Olson: What is the play's impact upon the queer community? Has it inspired action?

Scott Barrow: Well, presenting and producing a play is the first step toward advocacy. This play has reached thousands of communities internationally. It's going to affect change not only in those who watch the play but in any of the performers or designers or directors that have to sit with this material for four, six, eight, ten weeks.

We can see the success of that advocacy in many ways: from direct confrontation to crowdsourcing funding for events to

public protest. It's inspiring because it acts as a roadmap for how to support queer culture and how to take a stand for anything that you feel is essential and, at your core, needs a voice.

Jenny Olson: The play takes place in Laramie, which at the time had a population 30% of the size of Kenosha. How has the response of smaller communities differed from larger ones?

Scott Barrow: Generally, a bigger, more urban environment is more of a nexus for different people, ideas, and cultures. Living in urban spaces exposes people to different lifestyles, religions, and practices. This constant exposure becomes an acceptance that this is the world. Without that exposure to cultural differences, who's going to teach us about the reality of those cultural differences? Who's going to be the one to remove some of that ignorance?

Producing or acting in a play in New York or any urban environment is different than producing or acting for a small community. It's not like producing it in Brooklyn where you're telling people what they already know. I have great empathy for this play going into those small communities because it challenges their ideas. That's where theater can be actionable, and that's where theater can do what it does better than other mediums, which is to create community and create a conversation around ideas that can, at times, be extremely difficult.

Jenny Olson: Would you say that the fact there's more internal conflict in the audience makes for a fiery performance?

Scott Barrow: As a performer, I can feel the difference between an audience that is really with me but dead cold, silent, and an audience that is laughing along with me and gets all the inside jokes. In the first one, the audience's attention is palpable. It feels like the hair going up on the back of my neck because I can keep four hundred people on the edge of their seats listening



intently. That's the work. In the second instance, I don't want to say it's less successful, but it might be less important.

On the same afternoon I had the opportunity to do the original national tour of *The Laramie Project*, I was offered the role of Hamlet. This was fifteen or twenty years ago. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. Then a friend of mine said, "Well, listen, you can go off, and you can do the best Hamlet that that community has ever seen, or you can tour the country with *The Laramie Project* and literally save lives."

Some people who see this play can see themselves represented on stage in a way that maybe they've never seen before. Others may hear conversations from their dinner tables presented on stage and have a different response or different answer. Again, that's the work, that type of engagement.

Jenny Olson: Over the past twenty-five years through advancements in queer rights, various administrations, and changes in public opinion, how has the reception of the play changed?

Scott Barrow: I think, in some ways, it is a household name. In some ways, the extremism and the homophobia that was a lot more of a standard twenty years ago, in my experience, is much less accepted. I was in Laramie last week, and there were pride flags everywhere, so the reception is different. The play is still needed to this day, but the message has shifted a little bit. For places like Laramie, the play is much more about trans rights and transphobia than it is about homophobia. Those are radical shifts from twenty-five years ago.

Jenny Olson: Has this production helped heal any of the damage done by the tragic loss of Matthew Shepard? How have things changed for the Shepard family?

Scott Barrow: Over the years, I've had wonderful conversations with the Shepards. Dennis and Judy have had to adjust after

being thrust into the public eye. After more than twenty years, they've gotten incredibly good at it. They've also found meaning in the tragic loss of Matthew. That's an opportunity that not a lot of parents have.

The loss of a child is unnatural. That they can continue to love and embrace Matthew and work with Matthew in absentia every day is a wonderful gift to him. As Bill Clinton wrote in a personal letter to them, and I'm paraphrasing here, just the awareness and change that both their son's loss and the creation of the Matthew Shepard Foundation brought on a national and international level is enormous. They are helping to ensure that this type of thing doesn't happen to somebody else's baby.

Jenny Olson: What makes this production of *The Laramie Project* unique?

Scott Barrow: On a structural level, the sound design as well as the periodic interruptions of the play with that beautiful choreographed movement where the stage picture changes constantly brought it into the present. The echo of that made it a modern story. My identification was with the Pulse nightclub shooting only a few years ago.

It reminds us that this is happening now, this is happening yesterday, it's happening tomorrow. It is important because theater can be alienating in the sense that it's set in the past, so the audience doesn't always relate to it.

In terms of the cast members and their ages, it was wonderful to watch their terrific performances, the way they identified with the material, and the way it resonated with them. There's something really moving about watching young people develop both their aesthetics and the way they see and filter the world.

Jenny Olson: I thought what you said about Pulse was interesting because while I was watching the play, I connected



with that feeling of clinical depression in a crowded nightclub. So many of us struggle with mental health or with our circumstances, so to celebrate life and feel pride, it's a queer feeling.

Scott Barrow: The fact that it's staged in an alley where you get to watch the audience on the other half of the stage is really important. We're not wondering what other people are thinking about these characters or about Dennis Shepard or about homophobia. We're watching the community respond to it. That doesn't happen in a lot of theater. We hear the laughter and responses. It's a useful theatrical device. A lot of directors will put audience members on stage for that very reason.

Jenny Olson: You're a part of this whole, and when you cry, everyone knows.

Scott Barrow: Or don't cry or be unmoved or bored. That says something too. If somebody is not engaging with the material, it says something about them and the community.

Jenny Olson: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers, performers, and crew members?

Scott Barrow: The people that you're performing with, the people that you're in school with, are the people that you will be making art with going forward. Right now, they're not the ones that are offering you work or jobs, but those people do become your community, especially in the theater because of how often casts change and work environments change. Hold fast to the people who you're with now.

CONTRIBUTORS

JC Alfier's most recent book of poetry was *The Shadow Field*. Journal credits include *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, and *Vassar Review*.

Severin Allgood's fiction and poetry have appeared in the *Riprap Literary Journal*, *Coachella Review*, *Glint Literary Journal*, *Rubbertop Review*, *Crow Hollow 19*, and the *University of Memphis Magazine*. He has taught writing and literature at the University of Memphis and Christian Brothers University. He is a firefighter who lives in Germantown, Tennessee, with his wife and two daughters.

Bradley Bliss is a retired Wisconsin school teacher who enjoys writing and working on oil lamps in his free time.

Stetson Bostic writes speculative and literary fiction. He lives near Philadelphia with his wife and daughter. Read more of his work at stetsonbostic.com.

Brian Cronwall is a retired English faculty member from Kaua'i Community College in Hawai'i. His poems have been published in numerous journals and anthologies in Hawai'i, Guam, the continental United States, Australia, Japan, France, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, including recent publications in *Bamboo Ridge*, *Chiron Review*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *The Santa Fe Literary Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly Review*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Exit 13*, *Talking River Review*, *Albatross*, and others.

Rosie D’Ercole is currently editing her first anthology *The Pink Room*, and her work has more recently been featured in *Curio Cabinet* and *Partially Shy Magazine*. Find her on Instagram: @rosie_isabella_jean_

David Dephy is an American award-winning poet and novelist. His poetry work is going to the moon in 2024 with NASA and *Brick Street Poetry*.

Andrew Eastwick’s writing has appeared in *Barely South Review*, *In Parentheses*, and *Into Chaos* (Sans.PRESS). He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and daughter.

Tanya Fillbrook is a published author and illustrator both in print and online. She is currently working on her poetry and art combinations.

PM Flynn is published in *Helen Literary Magazine*, *Main Street Rag*, *Grassroots Women’s Project*, *The Mirror/Slush*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *CactiFur*, *Agape Review*, etc. *Resource Publications* published his first book of poetry, *Shadows on Moss*, in January.

Philip Goldberg’s work has appeared in many publications, including *trampset*, *Dillydown Review*, *Straylight Literary Arts Magazine*, *Raven’s Perch*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Evening Street Review*. His microfictions have appeared in *Blink Ink*, *50 Give or Take*, and *Riding Light Review*. His stories have also been included in best-of collections, earned the honor of being a finalist for the 2021 James Hurst Award, and received a Pushcart Prize nomination. He has finished a novel.

Conrad Gurtatowski grew up on the blue collar, working-class south side of Chicago, which has inspired his short stories and poetry.

Jeff Hartnett is a retired professor of architecture from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. He has an art-and-photography website: jeffhartnett.weebly.com. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

Kyle Heger, former managing editor of *Communication World* magazine, lives in Albany, California, with his wife and son. His writing has appeared in seventy-three publications.

Peycho Kanev is the author of twelve poetry collections and three chapbooks published in the USA and Europe. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines. His new book of poetry titled *A Fake Memoir* was published in 2022 by Cyberwit press.

Gloria Keeley is retired after teaching for thirty-five years at the City College of San Francisco. When the pandemic hit, she decided to earn her Creative Writing Certificate of Achievement. It took her a year and a half and eighteen required units. During the pandemic, she also took up photography.

Carella Keil Carella is a writer and digital artist who creates surreal, dreamy images that explore nature, fantasy realms, portraiture, melancholia and inner dimensions. She has been published in numerous literary journals including *Columbia Journal*, *Chestnut Review* and *Crannóg*. Her writing was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and she is a 2023 Door is a Jar Writing Award Winner. Her art has appeared on the covers of *Glassworks Magazine*, *Nightingale and Sparrow*, *Colors: The Magazine*, *Frost Meadow Review* and *Straylight Literary Arts Magazine*.

Peter Leight lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has previously published poems in *Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *Antioch Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *New World*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Matter*, and other magazines.



Brian Miller is a Penn State Altoona graduate with a degree in English. He took three poetry workshops during that time. His poetry has appeared in several magazines and journals, including *Straylight Literary Arts Magazine*, *Old Red Kimono*, and *The Connecticut River Review*. He also has two chapbooks published by Finishing Line Press.

Ayshia Müezzín is a multimedia artist merging high and lo-tech methods to create physical and digital pieces. She is obsessed with futurism, MENA-region archaeology, Alashayan mythology/history/culture, and deconstructing ancient things with the use of contemporary technology to create the artifacts of the future.

Anna Reyes is a human services degree (B.A.) graduate and has experience in peer counseling. Anna has published three poems, one hard copy.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two cats (his in-house critics). Since 2005, Terry's short stories and creative non-fiction works have appeared in more than four hundred journals, anthologies, and magazines. He is also an accomplished blues and jazz guitarist and a professional urban planner.

David Sapp, writer, artist, and professor, lives along the southern shore of Lake Erie in North America. A Pushcart nominee, he was awarded Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Grants for poetry and the visual arts. His poetry and prose appear widely in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. His publications include articles in the *Journal of Creative Behavior*; chapbooks, *Close to Home* and *Two Buddha*; a novel, *Flying Over Erie*; and a book of poems and drawings titled *Drawing Nirvana*.

Matthew J. Spireng's 2019 Sinclair Poetry Prize-winning book *Good Work* was published by Evening Street Press. He is the author of two other full-length poetry books.

Edward Michael Supranowicz grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. His poems and artwork have appeared in the USA and other countries.

Ann Christine Tabaka was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize in poetry and nominated for the 2023 Dwarf Stars Award of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association.

Kelly Talbot has been a professional editor for Wiley, Macmillan, Oxford, and other publishers. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies.

Bill Wolak's collages have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

Michał Zieliński lives in Poland's Lower Silesia. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Metaworker*, *Wayward & Upward* anthology, and *Where The Meadows Reside*.

