

# PhiladelphiaStories

Cultivating a community of writers, artists, and readers across the Delaware Valley

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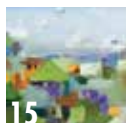
\* READ LOUISE BIERIG'S SHORT STORY "FIELD OF RYE AT TWILIGHT" ONLINE AT [PHILADELPHIASTORIES.ORG](http://PHILADELPHIASTORIES.ORG)

## ART



### Celestial Bodies I by Pamela Lee

Pamela Lee is a project-based artist, yoga instructor and writer living and working just outside Philadelphia since 2004. She earned a BFA in Fine Art from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 2001 and an MFA in Jewelry/Metals/CAD/CAM from Tyler School of Art in 2006. [pamelajlee.com](http://pamelajlee.com)



### Peace by Alice Chung

Alice K. Chung is a graduate of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She was born and raised in Seoul, Korea and earned BS and MS degrees from The Seoul National University. Chung claims that art is her life and finds inspiration to paint from her travels. Exhibiting in the Philadelphia area for decades, Chung has had 9 solo exhibitions, has received numerous awards for her artwork and is a member of many professional art organizations. [www.alicechungartist.com](http://www.alicechungartist.com)



### A Page From "The Book Of If" by Sharon Steinhof

Sharon Steinhof is a fine artist working in a variety of mediums. Her work has been juried into art exhibitions in Pennsylvania and New York City. She is the recipient of numerous awards and was selected for two public art commissions. Acrylic paint, photography and collage are Steinhof's mediums of choice. With a BFA from Arcadia University in Pennsylvania, the 'creative process' is her inspiration.



### Stormy Village by Daisy Cohen

With a degree from The Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, Daisy Cohen divides her time between her life in NYC and visits to the Valley Forge studio where she creates her mixed media work. Cohen's artwork combines painting and illustration in an exploration of imagination through a complex process of painting in layers. Cohen's work appears in NYC and with the Chester County Art Association from whom she's received the "Award of Excellence." [www.daisypainter.wixsite.com/paintings](http://www.daisypainter.wixsite.com/paintings)



### Lemonade by Constance Culpepper

Philadelphia artist Constance Culpepper's work is a study in domesticity and the commonalities of personal experience. She depicts heavily patterned interior scenes with vibrantly colored objects that she uses as a framework for conveying emotion. Culpepper studied psychology and studio art at Southern Methodist University and received an M.A. in Clinical Developmental Psychology from Bryn Mawr College. Her paintings have been featured in gallery and museum exhibitions throughout the United States. [constanceculpepper.com](http://constanceculpepper.com)



### Rodman's Hollow by Murray Brandon

The landscapes, seascapes, lighthouses, and historical structures featured in Murray Brandon's works are a reflection of the artist's long-standing interest in the outdoors. Known for his attention to detail, his watercolors and pencil drawings are a realist's portrayal of nature and history. A native of Havertown, Pennsylvania, he started drawing as a youth. Brandon attended Tyler School of Art. Over the past several decades, he has honed his artistic style through his travels within North America. [www.mvbrandonart.com](http://www.mvbrandonart.com)



### Pressure Changes Everything by Martha Bryans

Martha Bryans is a mixed media artist inspired by bricolage – an approach that improvises and uses whatever is at hand. Bryans relies on her interior life and imagination, a well-stocked studio, and the courage to venture beyond. Through her story quilts, wet-felted hand-embroidered compositions, and mixed media collages, Bryans seeks to create textual paintings inspired by the beauty and wonder of the natural world. Visit [www.darbycreekarts.com](http://www.darbycreekarts.com).



### Gwynedd Preserve I by Stefanie Silverman

Stefanie Silverman's love of nature is reflected in her colorful, impressionistic pastel and mixed media paintings of land, water, sky, and plants. Her artwork has been in numerous solo and group exhibitions, has won awards, and can be found in many businesses and homes. Please visit [www.stefaniesilverman.com](http://www.stefaniesilverman.com) for more information.

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# Letter from the [Poetry] Editor



Sandy Crimmins' served on the Philadelphia Stories board from 2005 to 2007 her voice and vision have fundamentally shaped Philadelphia Stories.

Perhaps we poets are too defensive about the role poetry plays in our lives. We often--/ often--shout and cry about the life-saving, world-healing power of poetry. And while I do believe that poetry and art can and do surprise us with their ability to help and heal, I agree that many of our hurts cannot be healed with poetry alone. Reading Rilke to a broken leg won't speed the process of recovery, but the right poem at the right time can give a person a needed dose of strength, quiet, or swagger. Some poems help us recognize our place in our communities, families, or our times.

I frequently teach Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," a poem that you may know even if you "don't know poetry." Hayden's poem reflects on "love's austere and lonely offices" and how, from the perspective of a child or young man, the work of love is hard to see. The subject of the poem, the unthanked, hard-working father, warms the spaces the speaker occupies, but he himself is at a remove. Students consistently respond to the poem with recognition.

Fathers are at the margins, centers, and in the shadows of many of the poems in this spring issue. The poems reflect a changing perspective on these figures of authority and how they help us, hurt us, or shape us in other ways. While we reflect individually on the paternal relationships in our own backyards, as a culture we are grappling with the excesses and dangers of unchecked masculine power. Many of the institutions we were taught to revere have let us down. A lot of the poetry we received for the contest touched on the connection between personal and political relationships. These poems reflect evolving perspectives.

Judge Dilruba Ahmed writes that Chelsea Whitton's "Spear Side (Patrilineality)" offers the reader:

*both tenderness and sense of tragic foresight, [as well as] an element of uncertainty...as the poem gestures meditatively toward the nature of grief, and the emotional and psychological exhaustion*

*it creates over time.... [It] depicts...the inheritance from the father's side: a gift of love across generations in the form of hard work and persistence. The poem...[acknowledges] in the final section that not all fathers are heroic or even good. Nevertheless, the poem reminds us that our familial heritage gives us our bearings, grounds us in a sense of history, and helps us navigate the present skies, however precariously the stars may have been arranged by those before us.*

Dilruba Ahmed had a nearly impossible task--to sift through some of the finest poems we've ever received for this contest. She writes about the process, saying:

*Choosing a winner, the runners up, and the honorable mentions was much harder than I could have anticipated, in large part due to the quality and depth of the submissions received. This year's pool of submissions included a wide range of topics that were--by turns--personal, public, allegorical, and universal. The content of the poems ranged from social media to mortality to bodily harm....Each poem had a distinct gift to give in terms of both craft and content, making my job of selecting just a few pieces a very challenging task.*

Each of the finalists contributed work that would have felt at home in Philadelphia Stories and I wish we had means to emblazon all of the poems on billboards, sides of buildings, and storefronts throughout the region. I am consistently humbled by the poetry we are able to publish, never more so than when we assemble our spring poetry issue. I thank Nicole Marie Mancuso for her unfailing help in this process. I thank Carla Spataro and Christine Weiser for *Philadelphia Stories* and the opportunities it has provided. I thank our judge, Dilruba Ahmed for her precise and careful reading of this work. Finally, I thank Joe Sullivan for remembering Sandy Crimmins through this prize that has become a powerful magnet drawing inspired and inspiring work from across the country.

Courtney Bambrick  
Poetry Editor, *Philadelphia Stories*



# Spear Side (Patrilineality)

Poem by Chelsea Whitton

---

Your lopsided father stuck  
the loose stars to your sky

one summer. Even now  
they glow up there, as if,

like you, they are still dumbstruck  
by the memory of his hulking grace.

With one foot on the bed, one on  
the chest of drawers, his finger

pressed each phosphorescent  
shard into eternity, too high

for anyone to tear them down.  
It should have busted his ass

to do a thing like that. It did  
—that kind of thing—eventually.

>>>

“That kind of thing, eventually,  
will wear a man’s skin thin,” says mine.

His skin *is* thin, and mottled  
from five decades in the sun,

on a vast green field that only winks  
at abundance; does not, in fact,

yield anything up, save little flags  
from holes, the occasional sky-borne

alien egg. True enough, he’s burned  
his skin to paper for this game.

But he does not, this time, for once,  
mean golf. He means grief. *That* kind

of thing. He means leaving a child  
in the ground. All fathers suffer.

>>>

In the ground, all fathers suffer  
the fate of the warrior. In life,

it’s a sky of tin gods. Each one’s  
a private lodestar, lost to all but us.

Whatever they did for a living,  
our dads, however they hustled  
  
and failed, they spun silvery roses  
from gum foil, and blew Vaudeville  
  
tunes through grass kazoos. And when  
they told us how it was, we listened.  
  
We believed their tales were true.  
And so, however rent and upside-down  
  
and patched, we flew their flags  
until everything real blew away.

>>>

Until everything real blew away,  
your father's father's father raised  
  
a subsistence of cabbages above  
the fruited plain. Nothing much  
  
changed when the sky fell on us,  
it is said he is said to have said. Only  
  
the high folks got knocked down.  
Haha. What *could* bring a poor man  
  
low, apart from winter? Every soul  
piled in one bed with the newspaper  
  
stuffed to plug leaks in the windows.  
Still, to be survived by all six children!  
  
His salt-blind headstone seems to read:  
*God is fair to the faithful who toil!*

>>>

God is fair to the faithful who toil.  
Basically. Complicatedly. Squint  
  
and try to see a version of events  
in which good men are not heroic,  
  
only good. Unmask that good  
and you may find the face  
  
of a previous father, not so  
good. Meanwhile, and always,  
  
and always without knowing why,  
a procession of fathers stretches far  
  
as infinity. Each one is in line to carve  
his name over his father's name,  
  
into the stone. It is only a stone,  
but it shows them where to stand.



Chelsea Whitton is an internationally published poet and essayist. She is the author of *Bear Trap* (Dancing Girl Press, 2018) and is a PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati. Her poems have appeared in *Bateau*, *Cimarron Review*, *Forklift-Ohio*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Main Street Rag* and *Stand*, among others. Raised in North Carolina, she currently lives in Cincinnati with her husband, Matthew, and their cat, Puck.



# I Have a Father; I Have a Thousand Fathers

Poem by Lizabeth Yandel

---

They were telling jokes on T.V. late at night.  
They were driving the school bus, lifting  
me to drinking fountains I couldn't reach.  
They were talking too much, telling us  
to quiet down, they were fixing broken stairs,  
they danced when they were drunk, cried  
when no one was around. They sounded  
like smoking lungs, like too many hours  
worked. They were not the first to run  
in abandon. They killed in battle on desert  
sand, were shot in city streets, they told me  
I was weak, they let their weakness lead  
them. They enforced sentences, they served  
time. They held me while I cried, touched  
me when I didn't want it, didn't touch me  
when I needed. They hated themselves  
for it. They wrote poetry, they hated poetry.  
They scribed the game rules from books  
of their fathers, and yelled when I did not  
follow the rules. They were better than  
that. My fathers were of every color skin,  
accent, tongue. They praised and cursed  
and knew no God. They felt the weight  
of their predicament, yet could not see  
the time-honored bars of their own cage.  
Their words were wise and ignorant, soft  
and full of rage.



Lizabeth Yandel is a writer and musician based in San Diego, CA and originally from Chicago. She is currently completing a lyric novella about the city of New Orleans, and a chapbook, *Service*, which is inspired by her long, dysfunctional relationship with the service industry. Her work can be found in *Popshot Magazine*, *Rattle Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *Lumina Journal* and *1932 Quarterly Journal*.





## *Race Was Not a Factor;*

Poem by Carlos Andrés Gómez

---

they said. He said, *It*  
*looked like a demon. It*  
*charged [him], like [he] was five, It*  
*Hulk Hogan—*

two legacies  
ghost-stenciled into concrete, one shadow  
sifted into ash. He sleeps at night—No  
regrets. His family certain as the closed lid  
of a coffin  
they will be safe.

*It happened, he says, It was*  
*unfortunate. It is*  
*what It is.*

Which is the invisible  
legacy—  
eighteen years of a boy's  
stifled blush, choreography  
of a scowl with index and middle  
salute, sinew flung forward, barrel  
chest soft as unmixed concrete, whiskerless  
chin line. His crown was bursting  
forth and bowed, inverted king  
posing for a peon graced with steel, skull  
twice knighted by fire. The final blade  
of light cut endless through the high  
frequency shrill that fluttered  
from his mouth, dull thud from the brim  
of a broached squeal. Because child. Because  
scared. Because tired. The boy was tired  
of being shadow, dust film on boot  
lip, wanted to be luminous. Sometimes a life  
splinters to break. To scatter.  
To be.



\*

I see my nephew pressed to the edge  
of boyhood, though he looks a man  
in my imagination with his flinch  
and blush muted, he is still now  
carved raw from the giggle that over-  
takes his toddler body. Thomas  
the Tank Engine is this moment's alibi  
for letting go. As I watch him now  
I see him still in that faded cobalt,  
whale-imprinted bib he kept soaked  
through but, also, I see the son I have  
planned for, knowing there is no plan.

                    The nights                      accrue  
like gravestones in a tiny plot of land like light-  
less hallways that encircle the earth, an end-  
less tether that yokes the crisp dusk from each  
day as it is drained of light, what can never  
be seen cast against what can never be  
unseen. The promises made against  
that other unspoken promise, grief  
made invisible beneath the shadow  
of something too large to see, how all  
our children share the same erased  
name because of it, what leaves them  
riddled with everything they cannot see:  
piercing & rigid &                      always more  
weight than anyone predicts,                      & the child  
still in the street. It is two minutes and a few  
seconds past noon on Canfield Drive  
in Ferguson, Missouri and he is still  
right there, in the middle  
of the street, not my nephew. Not my  
son.



Carlos Andrés Gómez is a graduate of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Winner of the 2015 Lucille Clifton Poetry Prize and a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has appeared in the *North American Review*, *Rattle*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Muzzle*, *CHORUS: A Literary Mixtape* (MTV Books, 2012), and elsewhere. For more, please visit [www.CarlosLive.com](http://www.CarlosLive.com).



## Afters

Poem by Elizabeth Langemak

---

Two days later, the surgery is already a moon landing,  
and I'm its plowed landscape of proof.

In the bathroom mirror, my belly's all unwavering  
flags and stitched tracks on an aching,

windless set. The Betadine sticks – a mustard slick –  
for a week, and I don't know what to do

with the photos: *befores and afters*, they call them,  
six shots of cuts like new mouths to fix a flaw

I couldn't feel until I woke up, the doctor's light  
tread still impressed on my gut. I hide and dig them

out later, for days, those flimsy confirmations  
that what's real may as well not be, except that it is.



Elizabeth Langemak lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she is an Associate Professor, and Director of Graduate Studies in English at La Salle University. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Day One*, *Shenandoah*, *Pleiades*, *The Colorado Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *Subtropics*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere.





# naps

Poem by Sakinah Hofler

at pathmark, you would sneak bottles of pantene pro v shampoo and conditioner into your momma's shopping cart and each time, at the register, your momma would notice and tell the cashier you can take that one off, and each time you would scream, *I wanna have hair like those women in the commercials!* and each time she would just stare at you.

later your 4th grade teacher brought your momma in for a talk, not about your grades or your behavior, but your hair; your hair bothered her – one ponytail obeying gravity; the other, sticking skyward. her name was ms. alifoofoo and you stared at her jheri curls which were more poppin than your uncle's while she said, *your daughter needs to look decent for school. maybe you should get her a perm.* you don't remember what your momma said back but it happened on a thursday and by that following monday, you were starting your first day at a new school.

you learned religion at this new school and how to pray five times a day and you figured that you were now five times more likely to get the lighter skin, the long straight hair, and the brown eyes with flecks of green that you'd been asking for, and each morning you woke up: disappointed.

one day, your momma came home with two boxes of "just like me" and you and your sister held your noses while your momma spread the rotten egg white cream on both of y'all's hair, shampooed, then conditioned. after she blow dried, you couldn't wait for your hair to cascade in layers, you couldn't wait to flip your hair over your shoulders like the girls you read about in books. yes, your hair was softer. yes, your hair was a little straighter. but, your hair didn't look just like that girl on the box so you cried. your sister's hair fell out.

your momma took you to a salon and a professional added the extra step, the beveler, hair pulled and pressed between the heat of two ceramic plates. now, you could flip your shoulder-length hair as you pleased. now, you could almost be in a commercial. this became your habit for the next fifteen years.

you grew up.

your hair never grew past your shoulders but you found new ways to be grateful. your classmate in college told you your last name was german, making you pleased your family's slave owners were at least german, pleased because it sounded better to certain ears than johnson or williams. your surprised coworker met you for the first time and told you, *you sounded white on the phone* and you used that info and that voice to book a reservation at that restaurant you had been afraid to call before. you shy away from the ghetto, avoid the eyes of saggars, you get degree after degree trying to be equal. some days, you try to convince yourself to come out of hiding, that you'll beat anyone down who dare thinks they have something to say, in fact, there's a proud photo of you in the first incarnation of the "black girls rock" t-shirt with your hand around your guyanese neighbor and that photo gets more likes on instagram than any subsequent photo. some days, you're like, *hell yeah, bitches, my black is beautiful.* most days though, you pull out a scarf and cover your hair.



Sakinah Hofler is a PhD student and a Yates Fellow at the University of Cincinnati. In 2017, she won the Manchester Fiction Prize; previously she had been shortlisted for the Manchester Poetry Prize. Her poetry has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Counterexample Poetics*. A former chemical and quality engineer, she now spends her time teaching and writing fiction, screenplays, and poetry.







# The Last Time I Hung With Baby D and Them

Poem by Sakinah Hofler

---

The twins—  
those grinning gangsters  
never seen without chains  
tethered around their necks  
and wrists, hold gold guns  
that glisten against the clever  
silver sky.

Do you  
want to hold one?  
I grip  
the grip and for a moment  
I get deer hunting—that transition  
from boy to man or even girl  
to woman, like Latonia B. who  
took the life of Mikey because she  
wanted to see what it was like.

In Newark, we don't bawl  
over felled fawns or ferry home  
trophies—we've figured out  
how to run without the chase  
or racetrack, how to turn off  
our eyes, zipper our mouths,  
and lose our memories. It is always  
open season and our stars  
are mere exhausted streetlights.

And here, Baby D's hand strokes  
my ass then settles for my lower  
back as he whispers,  
you got  
to get more skin on the grip  
to get rid of that sympathetic reflex  
in your hands. You've got to hold  
it tight to really see.  
I place my  
finger on the trigger  
and shut my eyes. I pull. And I see.  
How easy it is.



Sakinah Hofler is a PhD student and a Yates Fellow at the University of Cincinnati. In 2017, she won the Manchester Fiction Prize; previously she had been shortlisted for the Manchester Poetry Prize. Her poetry has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Counterexample Poetics*. A former chemical and quality engineer, she now spends her time teaching and writing fiction, screenplays, and poetry.







# Secrets

Poem by Lisa Grunberger

---

1.

When my Father was moving  
from being to being nothing  
I was about to go for a bike ride.

His right hand rose up  
from under the blue blanket  
as he patted the bed for me to sit.

I sat and stroked his face  
so thin and unshaven it appeared  
slender as the Flatiron building.

2.

In summer, we could sit in the yard for hours  
eating cherries, throwing the pits  
the dog would chase.  
We're planting cherry trees he'd say.

In winter, we raced through bowls of green pistachios  
seeing who could crack them faster.  
We'd set aside the sealed ones, the ones  
that stubbornly refused to be opened,  
the ones with no crack.

Daddy said they have secrets  
they can't bear to share with us yet.  
He poured the uncracked nuts  
into a ceramic bowl.

He never disturbed the bowl  
but sometimes he would lift it  
as though it were a seashell.  
He would nod his head.  
He was a quiet man.

3.

You will listen to your Father's slow breath,  
place ice chips on his cracked lips.  
You will listen to the final rattle  
and remember a baby's noisemaker, Daddy's keys.

4.

Any stillness I possess belongs  
in a yard  
where another family lives  
in the midst of cherry trees  
they cannot see.



Lisa Grunberger, is author of *Yiddish Yoga: Ruthie's Adventures in Love, Loss and the Lotus Position* and *Born Knowing*. Op-ed columnist Nicholas Kristof selected her poem "The Story of the Letter J" in his NYT column in 2017. Her play, *Almost Pregnant*, about infertility, adoption and motherhood, premiered in Philadelphia. She is Associate Professor in English at Temple University and Arts and Culture Editor at *The Philadelphia Jewish Voice*.







# Clerestory

Poem by Melissa Stein

---

*By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.*  
I survived that voltage and barbed wire.  
Now each day is clerestory,  
each night a palimpsest of scars.  
The militia pulls on its boots and waits.  
On the altars, doves peck each other bloody.

A spider traverses its unseen wire  
in the rarefied ether of the clerestory.  
He told me it wouldn't scar  
if I rubbed salt in it. Wait  
for the psalm to surface in the blood.  
Close behind is the conquering army.

A trapped dove crashes through the clerestory,  
a bewildered militia of scars.  
I strip the insulation and wait  
for ignition: for sweet oil to bloody  
the engine. Too late. He's left me  
behind, a shipwreck of transept and wire—

you will know me by the scars.  
By the crowned and pulsing weight  
of every lost and bloodied  
thing. Gilded and radiant is the enemy.  
His last message traveled the wire  
and vanished. God-blind is the clerestory.

All that's left is to hide and wait  
for the report of jackboots in a forest of blood.  
To some, it is a symphony.  
We collect feathers and bind them with wire  
and twine. These wings are our clerestory.  
The engine stalled, that metal body scarred

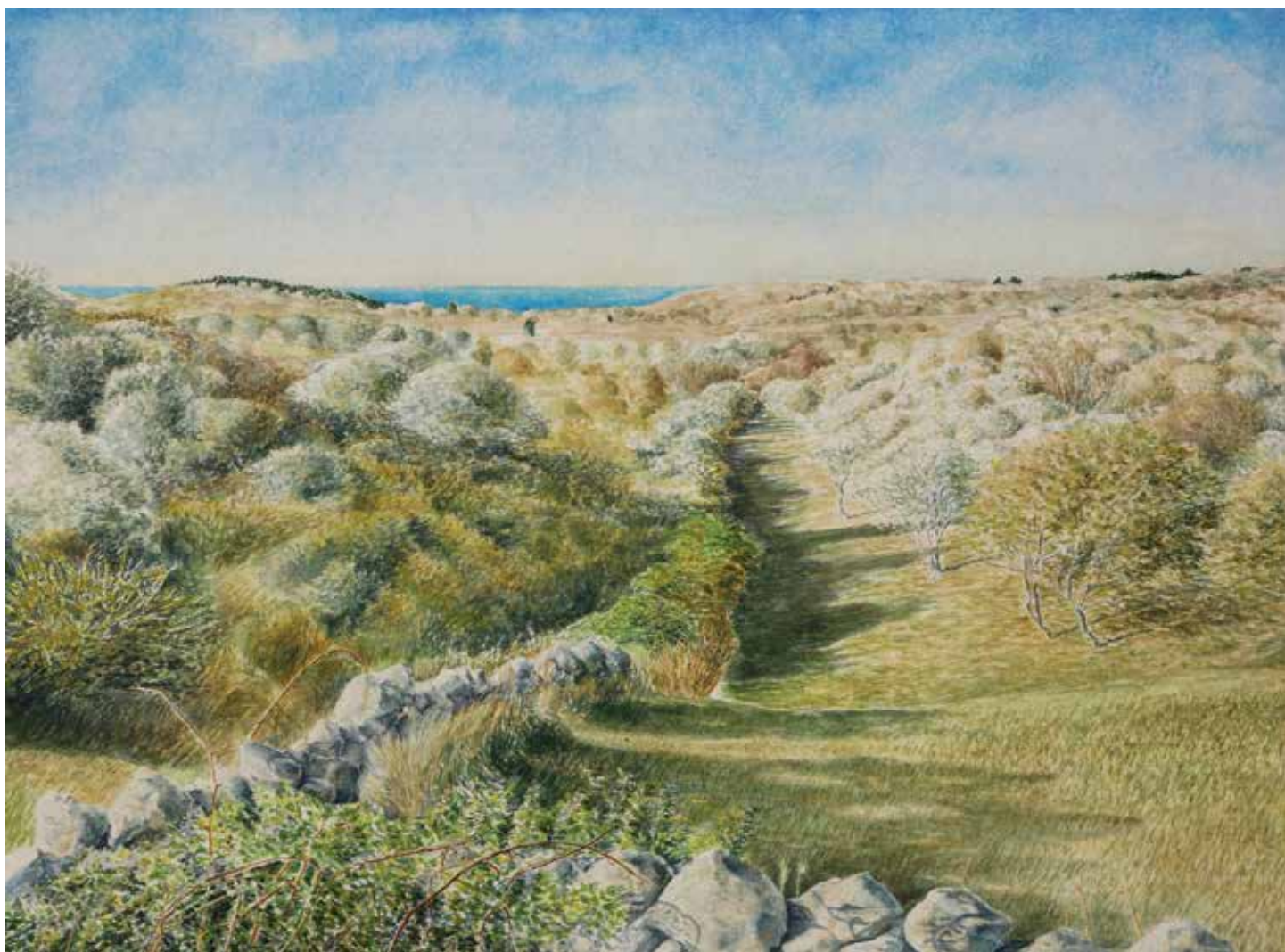
the rails, and in its wake, the blood  
bearing its testimony.  
The bodies dragged. The shallow graves, the fire.  
Who stabbed out the windows of the clerestory?  
What will annihilate these scars?  
The immaculate landmines wait.

We are bound by blood to our enemy  
while God feeds stars to his clerestory.  
Why aren't they detonated? The whole world waits.



Melissa Stein is the author of the poetry collections *Terrible Blooms* (Copper Canyon Press, 2018) and *Rough Honey*, winner of the APR/Honickman First Book Prize. Her work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *Harvard Review*, *New England Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Best New Poets*, and others, and she's received fellowships from the NEA, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Yaddo, and the MacDowell Colony, among others. She is a freelance editor in San Francisco.







# Ode to a Flamingo Bag

Beverly Jean Harris

It's a comfort to know someone who's as neurotic as I am. My friend and coworker Jane gives me that particular solace. Jane, like me, tends to get too attached to inanimate objects.

I am, however, trying to change.

My husband, Walt, and I married three years ago—a first marriage late in life for both of us. I often wonder if he regrets the mess, literally, that he married into. Soon after our wedding, we moved in with my mother, who had grown frail since my dad's death a decade earlier and could no longer easily live alone. My mom and her memories were blithely ensconced in the old family homestead, a stuffed-to-the-eaves house on the Jersey shore.

Living in my childhood home is oddly illusory. Sometimes through an open window on a summer night, I imagine I've caught the scent of the honeysuckle that no longer grows on the front yard fence. Sometimes when I dust the porcelain horses on the shelf above my desk, I recognize in my heart the hope I'd had, at ten, of having a real palomino. And sometimes when I glance at the pull-the-string Casper that stands on my pink-decaled dresser, I feel again the pangs of first love—for a cartoon character.

And then the present pulls my string: I'm surrounded by stuff—overrun by the many objects that had belonged not only to me, but also to my mother, my father, my sister, my brother, my grandmothers, my grandfathers, my fussy Great-Aunt Flossy, my demented Great-Aunt Batty (as we fondly called her), my pack-rat Great-Aunt Esther, and my long-suffering Uncle Bo, Esther's second husband, who had lived with all the old great-aunts in Virginia until the last of that generation died, bequeathing the detritus by default to my parents in the north. Among the jetsam were an abundance of antique candy dishes, a profusion of Flintstones jelly jars, a Ping-Pong table, five Flexible Flyers, every issue of *Consumer Reports* since 1936, a 1963 Montgomery Ward Sea King boat motor, twenty-two ties on a twelve-tie tie rack, an autographed eight-by-ten glossy of Art Linkletter, an inflatable Sinclair dinosaur, a Pinocchio marionette without a nose, and a seven-foot-tall papier-mâché rabbit.

Still, Walt and I threw none of these "treasures" onto the pile of things we gathered for our small town's annual bulk-pickup day, which took place on the second Wednesday in September. Instead, on the eve of the pickup, we gathered true junk that we could never sell or give away—treadless tires, rusty pogo sticks, bent gutter drains. And, at the end of a long evening of purging,

just before I carried that last armful of junk to the street, I tossed, on impulse, one more object onto the heap: my canvas lunch tote. The design of its fabric was still appealing—tiny pink flamingos and green palm trees against a black background—but the small knapsack was falling apart.

On Wednesday morning, I felt a sense of accomplishment as I drove down the driveway and glanced at the mound of street-side rubbish, the tattered tote atop the pile. For a split second, I wondered if I should reclaim the little bag from its fate, but I was pressed for time to make my train to New York and didn't stop.

I have a daily routine. As soon as I settle into a window seat on the train's sunny side, I tug the hood of my jacket over my eyes and doze off. I crave that extra hour of rest after rising early enough to make the 6:42. Today, though, near Rahway, I woke with a start, remembering what my friend Sarah had said when she ran into me on the boardwalk this past summer and noticed that my flamingo tote kept flopping open because its Velcro fasteners were clogged with fuzz: "Why don't you take it to a tailor to get it fixed?"

I retrieved my cell phone from my purse and called my husband.

"Walt, do me a favor—could you check to see if the trash guys have come to pick up our stuff? And if they haven't—"

"Okay," he said. "Let me look."

I hoped that the junk hadn't been collected yet. I wanted to save that flamingo bag.

I heard Walt lift the phone again.

"Yep!" he said. "They took everything! Isn't that great?"

My heart sank. "Everything?"

He exhaled. "Oh, no, Natalie—you're not having second thoughts about something you threw out, are you?"

"No," I lied. This had happened before. Last time it had been a plastic Mr. Potato Head. Since then, I'd accepted the toss because most of its pieces were missing.

I said goodbye to my husband and began, as with Mr. Potato Head, to rationalize the little knapsack's disposal. The bag's foam insulation had disintegrated. To try to mend it, I had stapled the cracked plastic lining to the canvas, but it had come loose.

Maybe I could buy a new lunch bag just like the old one! I grabbed my cell phone again and began to search online for "flamingo lunch tote," "flamingo and palm tree lunch tote," "flamingo knapsack," and "flamingo insulated bag." I found only



one picture of it. A red-lettered message hovered over the image: "no longer available."

Then I remembered I had bought it seven years ago at the Happy Crab Gift Shop in South Florida, on my last trip to the Gulf with my friend Harry, for whom I'd always felt a fierce and steadfast love, and who had died several months later from a simple surgery gone wrong.

Finding a new identical flamingo bag suddenly seemed vital. When I googled the shop's website, I was cautiously hopeful. The store opened at nine. I told myself I would call when I arrived at work. There was nothing more to be done, so I shut my eyes to try to nap.

I couldn't nap. I called the Happy Crab Gift Shop, even though it was before nine. After the beep, I left a long and detailed voice message, describing every aspect of the flamingo tote. The woman who sat next to me in the middle of the three-seater sighed loudly. My cheeks burned red when I remembered I was in the Quiet Car.

I returned to my frantic search of the Web. In the tunnel under the Hudson, I finally wore myself out and fell asleep. Two minutes later, I woke with a start when the PA blared that we were at the last stop, Penn Station.

Exhausted, I arrived at work and said to Jane, my confidante and the managing editor of *Tort Times* at Scotch Legal Publishing (where, according to Jane, any day was a reason to drink), "Do you remember that nice little flamingo lunch tote of mine?"

"How could I not?" answered Jane. "It's like Mary Poppins's magic carpet bag, but instead of tugging hat stands out of it, you're pulling out snack bars and bananas all day."

"It was falling apart, so I threw it away. Now I'm regretting it."

Jane's eyes squinted as if she could feel my pain. "Oh, no. The old attachment-to-an-inanimate-object problem."

I knew Jane would understand.

Two weeks earlier, Jane had spent some time overseas with a French friend in Paris. "Did you have fun in France?" I asked her when she returned from her vacation.

She answered, without a smile, "Yes, but I'm really upset about a lumbar pillow I took to Europe with me and left in the rental car at the Paris airport. I've had that pillow for years."

"Well, at least it wasn't a stuffed animal."

"It was pretty close to being a stuffed animal," she replied. Jane's lovely face was contorted with misery. "It was stuffed."

I winced at having said the wrong thing. "I'm sorry, Jane."

"It's somewhere out there in the world without me. I abandoned it."

"Did you call the car-rental place?"

"Yes, as soon as the wheels touched the runway at JFK. No answer. I left a message. I called my friend in France. When she finally picked up the phone, I didn't thank her for the wonderful time—I immediately started telling her I'd lost my lumbar pillow. She probably didn't know what I was talking about. For one thing, I don't think she was familiar with the word 'lumbar.' But I don't think she even recognized my voice. And then I realized it was the middle of the night in France."

"Did you call her back? During the daytime—her daytime?"

"Yes, but she didn't pick up."

"Maybe she was out distributing flyers about your missing lumbar pillow."

I laughed. Jane didn't. The person who's obsessing usually

doesn't laugh at jokes about the object of obsession.

Now it was my turn to be obsessed. Jane had left her office and was leaning against my cubicle, letting me lament my loss. Anybody else would have told me to just get over it. Not Jane.

I asked her again if she remembered how cute it was.

"Yes, it was charming." Jane shook her head, mirroring my sadness. "I'm so sorry, Natalie."

"Did I tell you it was made of really nice cotton?"

"Several times. But you said it was falling apart, right?" She sounded tentative, as if I might argue with her.

"Yes, it was in terrible shape. But I probably could have asked a tailor to repair it," I said, echoing my friend Sarah's words.

"You know, I'm not sure if tailors fix plastic and Velcro . . ."

She drummed her fingers on the Plexiglas side of my cubicle.

"Where did you get the bag?"

"In Florida. On my last trip with Harry."

Jane raised her eyebrows.

"I know. I'm sure that's why I'm so fervent about it." Of course, the little knapsack reminded me of Harry, but it seemed as if there were something deeper gnawing at me, something that made the pain more acute.

Jane must have felt this way two weeks before. "Did your brother give you that lumbar pillow?" I asked. Jane's only brother had died when they were both in their twenties. She still seemed bruised from the bereavement, though whenever she spoke of him, she mostly talked about what a "wiseass" he'd been.

"No," Jane said. She looked pensive. "But when he was three, he lost a little green crib pillow that he'd carry with him everywhere. He had a total meltdown." She shook her head as if



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to shake free her thoughts. "I don't know, Natalie. Whatever it is, you and I both seem to be suffering from the same thing." She patted the top of my cubicle wall. "We'd better get to work. But come in if you need to talk again." She walked into her office.

I rolled my chair toward my computer and thought back to that last trip to Florida with Harry. At the end of a long day by the Gulf, we had sat side by side on our towels, facing the ocean. Harry's arms were linked around his knees, his skinny tanned legs crossed at his ankles. His black hair stuck out, spiky and wet from the sea. The warm air smelled of salt as it stirred around us. "I think you love the beach more than you love me," he said. I just laughed at him, knowing it wasn't true. We stayed quiet a long time, watching the waves break into glistening foam. A flock of flamingos landed on a strip of bright wet sand. "Look at them, Nattie." He tilted his head. "No matter how many times I see them, they still take my breath away. Pink birds. Don't that just beat all!"

I called the Happy Crab Gift Shop. The salesgirl told me they no longer carried lunch totes. So, once again, I began trolling the Internet for flamingo bags, hoping that somehow the larger computer screen at work would yield better results than had the smaller screen of my cell phone. The search findings were no different. As I looked down in despair, I glanced at my hand. My amethyst ring wasn't on my finger. Where was it? I always wore it.

Distraught, I rushed to the doorway of Jane's office. "I lost my ring!"

"Oh, no!" she cried, sympathetic for the second time that morning. "This isn't your day, is it?"

It wasn't Jane's day either. She'd just spent half an hour helping me through my first crisis, and right on its heels came the next one.

"Maybe you took it off and it's at home. Did you call Walt?" She left her desk to join me.

"I'll try," I said, without hope.

I called home. When Walt didn't answer, I left a message saying I couldn't find my amethyst ring.

Norris, one of the company IT guys, must have overheard our conversation. He walked over to Jane and me. "Is it your wedding ring?"

"No," I replied. "It's the ring my dad gave me when I was sixteen. I've been wearing it since then."

"That's a long time," Jane said. "I mean, that's a *really* long time."

"Did it slip off when you were washing with soap and water?" Norris asked.

"No, she never uses soap." Jane laughed. "Sorry." She looked at me and sucked in her cheeks. "Not a time for laughter."

On the other side of our shared Plexiglas wall, Keith, the marketing coordinator, pulled out his earbuds. "Did you say you lost your ring? Did you take it off to wash your hands?"

"She never washes her hands," said Jane. "Sorry, did it again."

"I never take it off," I said, ignoring Jane. "I even wear it in the ocean."

"Do you wash your hands in the ocean?" Jane asked. She shook her head. "Wow, I really do apologize. I don't know what's wrong with me."

I knew. Two weeks earlier, I, too, had felt compelled to quip about Jane's lost lumbar pillow. Even the most empathetic peo-

ple have their limits and eventually need some comic relief.

Jane, Norris, and Keith began searching the floor. I went to my coworker Elaine's office. I often go on and on about things to Elaine, so I had purposefully avoided her all day because I knew I'd go on and on about the flamingo knapsack. When I went to see her now, I went on and on about my amethyst ring.

When faced with a crisis, whether it's realizing that the cross-references in an 800-page treatise must be renumbered before a five o'clock deadline or whether a friend has misplaced a beloved ring, Elaine is levelheaded and charges into action. She gathered her straight brown hair into a ponytail. "You should send an email to the office and ask if anyone has found a ring."

"Good idea."

"I'll look around." She set off.

At my desk, as Elaine suggested, I emailed my coworkers, asking them to tell me if they came across an amethyst ring. In my haste, I addressed the message to "Everyone," so my email was sent not only to my own local New York office but also to the branches in San Diego, Berlin, and Shanghai. One of my colleagues in Germany responded, "We haven't seen it here!" with an implied "ha, ha."

Five minutes later, Elaine appeared behind my chair. She reported that she'd combed the ladies' room but hadn't encountered my ring. "I'll ask the security guards downstairs to call us if anyone turns it in." She strode toward the lobby.

I wondered if the ring might have fallen off my hand into the bulk-pickup pile. I called Walt again to ask him to look for it in the driveway or on the road.

Walt answered the phone this time. "Did you get my message? I found your ring—it was sitting on top of your jewelry box."

And then I remembered. Last night I'd decided to try on a new turquoise ring that I'd recently bought as a future consolation in case I ever lost my amethyst ring. I must have forgotten to put the old ring on again. How ironic. It was as if the old ring were teaching me a lesson, as if it were saying to me, "I told you so. You like me lots better than that new ring anyway." But, of course, that was crazy—the ring was an inanimate object.

I peered through the Plexiglas wall of my cubicle into Jane's office, but she wasn't at her desk. I told Norris and Keith that my husband had found my ring at home. I located Elaine (who, back from downstairs, was shining a flashlight under the copier) and told her, too.

I returned to my chair and sat down. Jane was walking toward me, carrying a cup of coffee.

"I found my ring!" I said, smiling.

"I'm so glad!" She walked to the opening of my cubicle. "Now you can start obsessing about the flamingo bag again."

In fanning the flames of my fixation, Jane was not merely craving comic relief to abate her exasperation at having listened to me moan for hours on end. Whether it was a conscious act or not, she was doing what Harry used to call "going for the jugular." Whenever anxiety had gripped me, Harry would keep mentioning the angst-inducing object of my obsession until he was talking about it even more than I was. "Oh, Nattie," he'd say, "if only you had stayed three more minutes at the stage door! You would have met the whole cast of *The Music Man*, and it probably would have changed your life!" Or: "I can't believe you left that empty conch shell on the beach! You'll never see it again! I'll bet that shell is calling for you right now—'Nattie! Nat-

tie! Why did you leave me?" At first, the hyperbole would make me more perturbed, but then later I'd glimpse the ludicrousness of my preoccupation, and, finally, I would laugh. Like Jane and me, Harry was prone to "ruminating" (his euphemism). "It takes one to tease one," he would say.

After Jane's reminder of my monomania, I once again began trying to convince myself that I'd done the right thing to toss the tote. I swiveled my chair to face her. "The lining was really a mess," I said, seeking reassurance.

Jane set her cup of coffee on my desk and put her hands on my shoulders. "Natalie." She fixed her eyes on mine. "You need to *let it go*."

Yes. Jane was right.

That afternoon, while formatting footnotes, I mulled over how I cling to the past until it crowds out the present. I thought about the many things that I *hadn't* put in the trash collection—things like my childhood crush, Casper. Harry had sometimes called me "Casper," a loving taunt about my paleness. Now that memory made it even more difficult to exorcise the Friendly Ghost.

At five o'clock, Jane stopped by my cubicle to say good night. "Feeling better?"

"A little." I wasn't.

She smiled at me. "One day you're going to laugh about this."

"It's as if I keep searching for something that's already gone. It's just an inanimate object. Why do I care?"

"It stings less," Jane said, as she zipped up her coat, "to mourn the loss of a bit of fluff or fabric."

Maybe the small losses absorb us to keep the bigger losses

out of mind. Maybe our obsessions distract us from the terrors of love. And maybe we dwell on something silly so we won't be haunted by our more momentous decisions—like my choice to go to the beach the day before Harry's surgery instead of traveling to the city and spending the day with him.

On my way home on the train, I slept. I woke to see a stretch of salt marsh outside the window, the still water reflecting the evening sky. Near a patch of tall grass, three wading egrets blazed pink in the glow of the setting sun.

I could almost hear Harry's voice beside me. "See, Nattie? If you open your eyes to what's in front of you, you can find flamingos anywhere."

Flamingos everywhere, Harry. Don't that just beat all.

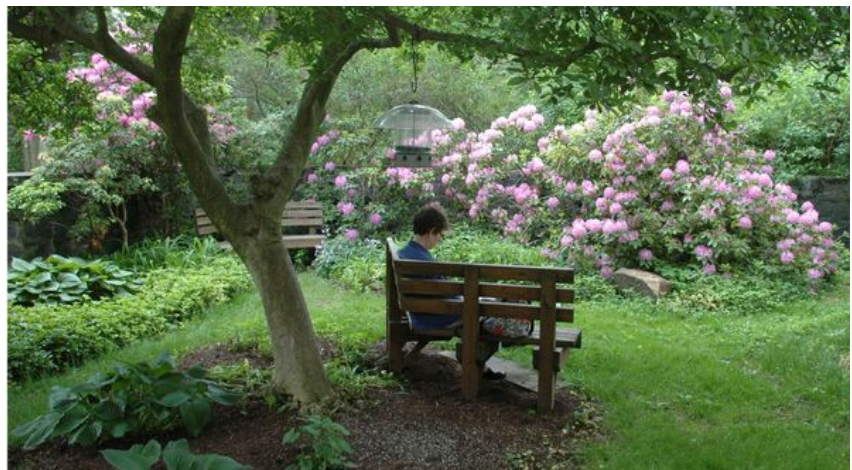
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Beverly Jean Harris is the author of the prize-winning story "Driving the Dodge Over Fifty," published in Volume V of *Short Story America*. Another of her stories will appear in Volume VI. Beverly studied fiction writing at the University of New Hampshire and New York's New School. Having worked every kind of job from making cotton candy to proofreading paperclip invoices, Beverly is now an editor in New York City. She believes that the stories we tell are the stuff of life, along with music, creatures, and the beach. She lives in New Jersey near the ocean.

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# The Receipt

George Fenton

Like I usually do at the end of every day, before making the climb up my apartment building's steps, I reach into the breast pocket of my denim jacket to find my apartment key. Sifting through loose change and tangled headphones, my hand wades through my pocket until the cool brass surface of the key meets my fingertips. I make a grab for the key only to end up grazing past a crumpled receipt beneath it. The paper crunches under the key. My legs halt their campaign up the staircase. I unconsciously slip past my keys. My hand flirts with the waxy parchment for a moment. I know what the paper is. I can picture the words printed on it. Slowly I bring the receipt out into the open and uncrumple the document until each line of text is present. Through various stains of dirt and coffee the faded ink reads,

"BLOCKBUSTER VIDEO RENTAL

Good Will Hunting

Run Time: 126 Minutes

Rental Date.: 12/05/2007

Return Date: 12/15/2007

Total: \$5.35"

The key no longer matters. My apartment stairwell melts away in surrender to a dream. The memory has begun again—I can't do anything to stop that now. Without consent the receipt has made me eleven years old again. I am home in my living room. Three sides of paisley wallpaper have appeared. Dad sits parallel to me on our olive corduroy couch, manning his usual position next to our cat, Patches. His feet resting on the ottoman. I'm sitting on the hearth of our fireplace, my back to the flames. The Saturday night ritual begins. Tonight's communion: *Good Will Hunting*. A light smoke rolls out of the fireplace and engulfs the room in the smell of burnt cherry tree. Mom materializes from the darkness of the kitchen, three cups of tea in hand. Robin Williams is on the on TV telling Matt Damon how he ditched the 1975 World Series because he met his future wife. Mom shoos Patches off the couch and sinks into the sofa under Dad's arm. A light layer of sweat forms on my back from the heat of the fire. The wind howls outside, but tonight we are sheltered together, kept warm by the familiar comforts of our Saturday night rite. Matt Damon goes in to kiss Minnie Driver. Mom nudges a few inches closer to Dad. Elliott Smith's "Say Yes" plays from the TV. I sip my tea from my freckled mug. I sip it again, and again, and again

as I always will every time I revisit this flip book memory, or grab for loose change or reach for my headphones, or just want to experience a time when reality felt concrete. But isn't that what we all want? To live in the past again, even if it's only through a two way mirror.

My living room slowly dissipates. The paisley wallpaper, the warmth of the hearth, my parents sitting together on the couch all vanish in the smoke. I am in front of my apartment door now. The receipt is still in my hand. My phone vibrates in my pocket, with a text from Mom.

"Do you know if you'll be spending Easter with me or your Dad this year?" I crumple up the receipt and go inside.

George Fenton is currently a senior at Saint Joseph's University studying English and marketing. Born originally in Zug, Switzerland, he immigrated to the United States in 1996 and spent his formative years in Bucks County. He now resides in the Overbrook neighborhood of Philadelphia. George's work has also appeared in the literary magazine *Crimson and Gray*. Along with writing, George also puts most of his creative energy into his band Parius.

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# The Lucky Ones

Kara Daddario Bown

On my last day of radiation, I sat eagerly awaiting my release from six months of treatment. In anticipation, my eyes scanned the fluorescently lit, crowded waiting room of Abramson Cancer Center. As I waited for my name to be called for the last time, I thought about the young girl—about five years old—who I noticed in the waiting room the prior week. Her head was bald, and a yellow mask protected her small face. She sat in a wheel chair, which was too big to accommodate her tiny frame despite being made for children. The ill-fitted device called even more attention to what I was thinking: *She shouldn't be here*. None of us should be in this waiting room but especially not her.

I thought about how lucky I was when I was six. The humid Philadelphia summer evenings of my childhood had been spent eating cherry popsicles in my parents' backyard and running

through the sprinkler, feeling wet, squishy grass beneath my feet. When dusk settled into darkness, I would walk around a white flowered dogwood tree and catch lightning bugs.

I hoped the little girl I saw spent more days playing in her backyard than confined to a waiting room filled with yearning. All of us were waiting for the day we didn't have to feel scared and uncomfortable anymore. We were waiting for life to resume. She didn't appear to be burdened by this same longing, I realized, as her eyes connected with mine. She sat serenely in her chair while I impatiently tapped my leg, wishing I could be anywhere else. I knew I couldn't have handled a cancer diagnosis at her age with as much grace.

I remembered the girl's mother had wheeled her towards the exit of the waiting room. *Please let her ring the bell. Please!* I held my breath as she passed near the silver bell that hung from a wooden pedestal. Ringing the bell was a rite of passage for any patient who completed their treatment. The girl's mother stopped at the bell, and I saw a small arm reach up and forward to grab the wooden clapper that was attached to a string. *Thank God.* Sound permeated the room, and everyone applauded. The girl's eyes hinted at a smile under her mask and her body sat a bit taller in her chair, projecting the same pride as if she were the winner of a spelling-bee contest.

My name was finally called, breaking my train of thought, and I walked back to the changing area. Once I was gowned, I stepped out into the patient waiting room and stood in the doorway, peering out into the hallway periodically to ensure I wasn't missed for treatment.

In the emptiness of the room, I wished for the company of a woman with breast cancer who had become a familiar face and a comforting maternal presence. When we spoke, deep lines hugged the corners of her mouth, suggesting she laughed often. We met on my first day of treatment, and I recalled our conversation when she glanced at me as I sat in a chair facing her.

"What are you here for?" I asked.

"Breast cancer," she replied, "full mastectomy."

I winced. "You look good," I told her. This was one of the only compliments many of us paid to one another. If you looked good, your treatment was going easier than most.

"What are you here for?" she asked.

"Lymphoma. Non-Hodgkin's," I replied.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"I'm thirty-one."



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She shook her head vigorously then stopped and fixed her eyes on me again.

"My daughters are in their thirties. I'm so glad it's me here and not them," she moved back further into her chair.

I realize now that the look I saw in her eyes on that first day of treatment is the same look I must have given the little girl weeks later. She was relieved she wasn't me. She was relieved her daughters were not me. How lucky, she must have thought, that she was healthy as a young woman.

The definition of luck evolves after a cancer diagnosis. What used to be a simple dichotomy – lucky or unlucky – stretches into a continuum that is flanked by the number of blissful moments before cancer and the number of moments to be lived after cancer. Luck used to be finding a quarter on the ground or free parking in the city or winning anything more than a dollar on a scratch-off lottery ticket. Now, luck was a good day feeling like you used to or that moment when you first wake up and, for a few unburdened seconds, forget what has happened to you. It is lucky to see a sunset or feel the embrace of someone you love. And, it is still very lucky to catch a lightning bug.

A woman in her mid-forties entered the waiting room, returning from her treatment. She had thick hair that fell to her chest and was pinned haphazardly in the front with a small clip. I looked with envy at her as she passed through the room. *How lucky is she to be done for the day. How lucky is she to still have her beautiful hair.* Although I lost my hair months before radiation, feelings of discomfort would rise every time I caught my hairless reflection in the mirror or a car window. I would have given anything in that moment to experience the sensation of placing my hair behind my ears or threading it together carefully into a braid.

My name was called again, and I was ushered back to the treatment room to receive radiation. Technicians secured me to the hard, cold table with my radiation mask and placed a breath hold tube in my mouth. The breath hold apparatus mimicked a snorkel with goggles, a mouth piece and a nose clip. Every day during treatment, I pictured myself diving into clear blue water searching for fish to ease the claustrophobic panic that set in when my entire upper body was restrained. As my treatment began, I thought about how luck's definition becomes even more complicated when examining its relativity.

Cancer is generally classified as an unlucky disease yet even that is relative. Some people find luck in having a particular type of cancer or early disease staging. It can be lucky to have fewer side effects from treatment or have the support of loved ones on good days and bad days. Luck can also be measured by quality of the time before and after cancer. Luck can be remission and luck can be acceptance. Relativity shatters the dichotomy - it seems you can be both very unlucky and very lucky at the same time.

To prove my own theory of luck's relativity, I turned towards another recent memory. Midway through my chemotherapy treatment I lost my dad who had been a steady beacon of light in this world. Extended family and friends approached me at his funeral with teary faces and said, "How unfair this is. How unlucky you must feel dealing with your

treatment and your father passing." What they didn't know is that I am the luckiest person in the world. My cancer was caught accidentally and early, and because of this, my treatment plan was shorter than most people diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I would also rather embrace every moment of grief I experienced from the loss of my dad than spend one day not being his daughter. I had a wonderful dad for thirty years. When I was six, it was my dad handing me a popsicle in the backyard on a warm summer evening and my dad holding me close when a game of hide and seek became too scary. Our memories together play like a montage through my mind and soul every day. How many children in this world never know that kind of love? How many children, like the girl in the waiting room, experience a childhood with undeserved hardship? I am a lucky person.

My treatment ended unceremoniously with the technicians freeing me from the radiation mask. I thanked them and walked down the cold, white hallway back to the changing rooms. As I dressed, I rationalized that luck is always with us, we just have to want to find it. Even in the darkest night, if we search the horizon until our eyes are strained, we might find a small beam of light in the distance to guide us forward.

After I changed out of my gown, I walked slowly into the general waiting room and made my way towards the bell. I paused to take in the room exactly as it was that day. I wanted to remember what it was like to be there in that capacity, in that moment. I reached for the bell clapper and pulled it towards the mouth. The quiet room erupted in applause as the first sound of the bell pierced the air. I stood facing the bell, listening to its echoing sound, and felt both relieved and guilty. The bell only rings for the lucky ones.

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Kara Daddario Bown is a writer who lives outside of Philadelphia. Her writing focuses on her experiences with illness as well as being a Philadelphia native. She has performed at The Moth and is a StorySLAM winner. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Belladonna*, *The Pennsylvania Gazette* and *The Penn Review*. She holds a Bachelors in English and Creative Writing from the University of Pennsylvania.



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Photo by Sue Burrough



# George Saunders: My Imaginary Boyfriend

Aimee LaBrie

George Saunders, author of *Lincoln in the Bardo* and several excellent short story collections, visited Rutgers the other day to do a reading. I went to his master class, which was an informal-ish discussion and Q&A for students and rabid Saunders fans like me. He showed up, this ordinary man in jeans and a button up shirt, carrying a water bottle and looking a little shy. He has written some of the funniest, saddest, most memorable stories I've read (see: "Victory Lap." See "Puppy"). I couldn't believe we were in the same room, and I couldn't believe how he just acted like this regular person you might see on the subway. I always imagine successful fiction writers as somehow having an other-worldly, untouchable glow. George (may I call him "George?") appeared very approachable and modest; he's a teacher too, after all, at Syracuse University, but, I mean his writing has been published in *The New Yorker*. I am certain that if I ever have a story published in *The New Yorker*, I will forever forward shun ordinary folk. As the conversation progressed, he was funny, self-deprecating, smart, and generous with his advice. I took notes because my memory is never reliable (and also because if he happened to look up at me, I wanted him to see someone who was really paying attention).


These are a few of the pieces of advice he offered for beginning fiction writers.

1. He related a story about how his mentor, writer Tobias Wolff, said Saunders was allotted only three dream sequences for his entire writing career and cautioned that he should "use them wisely." For beginning writers, this suggestion seems particularly important—dream sequences in fiction are about as interesting as dream explanations by our co-workers. Unless we're in them, who cares? (This is my interpretation, not George's).
2. When a student asked what to do about her work being criticized for being too "raw," he asked a few more questions, trying to get closer to what she meant. The woman said that her nonfiction was confessional and difficult for others to read. He nodded, and suggested she go back to the page and see if there is a deeper level to the truth she was uncovering. He suggested she turn toward the criticism from peers, not away from it. He said that most people know what works for them or doesn't. The writing is for the imagined audience, so we must always be seeking to engage them, and to charm them, line by line. If we can bear to look more closely at our own work, we might uncover something even more beautiful and truer.
3. Even if you are a young person who hasn't not necessarily experienced great disaster, you are still allowed to write about trauma. He quoted Chekhov. I wasn't able to write it all down fast enough so I looked it up just now: "There ought to be a man with a hammer behind the door of every happy man, to remind him by his constant knocks that there are unhappy people, and that happy as he himself may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws..." We have all experienced some degree of misery and pain, and so it's okay to try to imagine it in other contexts. On a related note, his breakthrough moment as a writer was when he realized that he was allowed to explore this human suffering and also allowed to make it entertaining.
4. Most dialogue is really a monologue. In other words, in real life and in fiction, we are often speaking not directly to one another, but rather continuing whatever we're thinking, regardless of what the other person is saying. I find this to be depressing and true. I am working on in my personal life, but in fiction, it's a useful bit of wisdom. Our characters have their own internal thoughts and egos, and so may actually respond to those things more than what's being said by another character. We often talk past one another.
5. Fiction requires empathy training. We have to understand and care about our villains as much as our heroes. Give the bad guy a limp, a vulnerability, something that the reader can identify with so that he is more alive and complicated.
6. Consider putting down the phone and/or getting off-line. Take a break from social media and go read some James Joyce. As artists, part of our job is to keep reading. Rework your life so that you are both reading and writing more. Twitter will wait for you.
7. Be more Buddhist. He did not suggest this—but I am. He did mention that he is Buddhist, and I think that approaching our characters with more humility, attention, and empathy can only help to make them (and the story) more engaging for the reader.
8. And lastly, make life easier by allowing yourself to throw some words on a page without worrying them to death. Put something in place conditionally, even if you think you will probably get rid of it later. It's too much pressure to agonize in the beginning, so give yourself a break. Later, you will go back and find the places where the text is boring or the dialogue sounds mechanical. For now, just write it.



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