

PhiladelphiaStories

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

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POETRY ISSUE! / **ROOMMATES** CHRISTINE C. HEUNER / **SYLVIA** LOUISE BIERIG / **SEAMING** KARA PETROVIC

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WEB EXTRA AT PHILADELPHIASTORIES.ORG, "IN THE WOODS" BY CURTIS SMITH

ART



Crossing Over by Catherine Kuzma

Born in Philadelphia and residing in New Jersey, Catherine Kuzma earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Rutgers University. Kuzma's oil paintings have been shown in the Philadelphia area, New Jersey and NYC in solo, group and juried exhibitions and publication of her work includes the cover of the July 2018 Tishman Review. Sparking the rich, meditative process of painting, nature and landscape serve as the initial inspiration for Kuzma's paintings. More of her award-winning work can be viewed at www.catherinekuzma.com.



Spring Lilies by Catherine Kuzma



Torrent by Dganit Zauberman

A native of Israel, Dganit Zauberman grew up in a Kibbutz. She moved to the US in 1992. Zauberman earned her BFA with honors from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia in 2008. In 2011 she graduated from the MFA program at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She now devotes her time to making art in her studio. Visit www.dganitzauberman.com.



Vaad The Banyan Tree by Rinal Parikh

A biochemist by education and artist by passion, Parikh's art reflects the heritage and vibrant culture of her native India. A self-taught artist, she draws on a childhood fascination with color and composition, portraying spontaneity and energy with saturated color in various medium. Parikh is involved with many Philadelphia area arts organizations and looks forward to a major solo show of her work this spring at The Duke Gallery at Community Arts Center in Wallingford, PA. Visit www.rinalparikh.com.



Magical Landscape by Pamela Tudor

Pamela Tudor is a painter and creator of three-dimensional shadow boxes. She works in acrylics and mixed media. Her expressive paintings focus on our beautiful planet and her concerns about climate change. Tudor studied with the Art Students League and the New York Studio School. Her work has been on exhibit in the Philadelphia area and beyond in gallery and museum shows and is found in private collections across the United States. She is a member of Inliquid and The DaVinci Art Alliance. Website: www.pamelatudor.com.



I See You by Pamela Tudor



Barn Study by Jeff Thomsen

Jeff Thomsen grew up in Glenside, PA, and attended Abington High School, the College of William and Mary, and Temple University Law School. In 1991, Thomsen enrolled in the certificate program at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Thomsen lives in Havertown, PA, where he maintains his studio when not painting and drawing out of doors. www.jeffthomsenart.com.



The Road Home by Susan Klinger

Susan Klinger began her art career painting in watercolor, but now works mainly in pastel. Realism is her primary focus, but she has been exploring abstraction to express a different side of her artist personality. Her work has been exhibited throughout the eastern U.S. and has garnered awards nationally. She exhibits regularly at Off the Wall Gallery in Skippack, PA and is a signature member of several national art societies. www.susanklinger.com.

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Letter from the [Poetry] Editor

This year's Sandy Crimmins National Prize poems explore deep grief and remind us of the system we operate within—a system that will kill difference or defiance. Danger and comfort are braided throughout the poems in this issue; they twist around the poems creating space to both grieve and grow. Some poems tear back the bandage painfully, but do so in order to apply balm. Often in one poem, we find a voice crying out in rage, then finding clarity and direction. These poems feel necessary: we frequently look to poetry for comfort, but that comfort can be untenable in an atmosphere so saturated with violence as ours is.

This year's contest was judged by M. Nzadi Keita, author of the poetry collection *Brief Evidence of Heaven* which elegantly considers the life of Anna Murray Douglass, first wife of Frederick Douglass. The winning poem "Elegy for Breath" by Carlos Andrés Gómez is, according to Keita, "unrelenting" in its presentation of trauma. She continues:

This poem haunts our very own breathing with a question, both mournful and matter-of-fact: how much, in the U.S.A., does breathing inside a human black body redefine, from birth to death? Focused on the long tradition of American citizens murdered by police, each stanza in this poetic montage answers in a different way.

Many of the poems selected as finalists reckon with the realities of racial, sexual, and religious violence. Of her selection of poems, judge M. Nzadi Keita says, "The stunning compassion, honesty, and force of witness in the [selected poems] reinforces and affirms....how poets solidify our human bonds." We need one another. These poets deftly, through a variety of styles and tactics, present humanity as broken, but—staggeringly, stubbornly—capable of healing.

Philadelphia Stories thanks Joe Sullivan for his robust and continued support of this contest. We also thank Nicole Mancuso, contest coordinator and assistant poetry editor, and Yalonda Rice, managing editor, who exert gentle-but-considerable authority and keep us moving forward. Mostly, we thank the poets who generously share their work with us and we encourage local writers to continue to do so.

We will celebrate our winners at the LitLife Poetry Festival presented by Philadelphia Stories along with the Montgomery County Poet Laureate Program at Rosemont College, April 6. Attendees will enjoy master classes with Crimmins judge M. Nzadi Keita and poet Dilruba Ahmed, judge of this year's Montgomery County Poet Laureate competition. A series of panels will discuss and reflect on a variety of ideas related to the place of poetry in our lives and the world. We will celebrate the winning poets of the Crimmins contest and the new poet laureate of Montgomery County in an afternoon reception which will be free and open to the public. For more information please visit philadelphiastories.org/litlife-poetry-festival.

Courtney Bambrick
Poetry Editor, *Philadelphia Stories*

WINNER OF THE 2019 SANDY CRIMMINS NATIONAL PRIZE IN POETRY

"Elegy for Breath," Carlos Andrés Gómez (Forest Hills, NY)

RUNNERS UP

"All Objects," Brittanie Sterner (Philadelphia, PA)
"Nine-Year-Old Suicide in Reverse," Chad Frame (Lansdale, PA)
"How to Read Whitewater in the Mid-Atlantic Region,"
Kimberly Andrews (Chestertown, MD)

HONORABLE MENTIONS

"Post Rehab," Claire Rubin (Oakland, CA)
"Phantom Limb," Fran Baird (Flourtown, PA)
"Bruce," Chad Frame (Lansdale, PA)

EDITORS' CHOICES

"Imagine Sisyphus Happy," R.G. Evans (Elmer, NJ)
"Tapestry Room," Rebecca Levi (New York, NY)
"Neighborhood Report," Julia Lattimer (Boston, MA)

FINALISTS

"Chugach," David Hopes
"The Silence of Emma Gonzáles Teaches Us about Language,"
Matt Hohner
"I wonder why they never taught us about Sylvia Mendez,"
Mercedes Lucero
"Sestina as Kabbalah/Kabbalah as Sestina," Leonard Kress
"Oceanic Moments Outside a Discount Superstore," Hayden Saunier
"If none are strangers," Brittanie Sterner
"H.O. Andrews & Sons," Kimberly Andrews
"Poem about Death Ending with Reincarnation," Carlos Andrés Gómez
"Edge of the Dance Floor," Carlos Andrés Gómez



Elegy For Breath

Poem by Carlos Andrés Gómez

Picture the adolescent: mimicking
what makes him worthy. Pick his
most potent snapshot for click-

bait: fresh-faced but mean-
mugging; same mask I'd pull
clean across my jaw for any

Polaroid of me & my best friend
in eighth grade. Let's be clear: joke
stance—now used to justify

killing make just the just-
snuffed, just clumsy youth branded
bold-fonted & blood thirst. Peace

sign transmogrified to gang sign—
since the expert talking head
confirmed it. The expert talks &

confirms inside a rectangular frame
that renders most of him invisible.
Talks & confirms two bullet-

points from the bleached-
teeth interviewer. But nowhere
is the testimony of breath

stifled, the practiced hands that
remained watched whenever they
ascended, whether in prayer or

surrender, holding a bag of groceries,
a cell phone, or a son. Nowhere
is that last sigh freed from his tired

lungs as the sixth shot struck
the base of his skull sprinting
with back turned. The neighbor describes

that final sound I did not hear & yet
cannot unhear. It is suddenly the last
sound I hear from too many people

I love: my brother-in-law, my four
nephews, my high school best friend,
my infant son. (Every police officer

is out in the world defending
himself. Every one of them describes
the nightmares in which they see

a dark object against the darkness
that turns into fire & populates a rigid
void with lead. Every police officer

is a human being. He makes mistakes
sometimes. He got nervous. He thought
about his two kids & his pregnant wife,

it was fourteen days before retirement.
He's never missed a Sunday at church.
Believe me, it's true. I've seen him pass

the donation plate. Sometimes
he takes a naked, crumpled bill in his
calloused hands, wipes the sweat

& residue on his crotch.) I saw Jesus
on Easter Sunday still resting
on the wall, a hooded sweatshirt

draped across his torso from the college
he was to attend just to make it all a bit
more decent. Everything you stare into

becomes a fist, a loaded weapon aimed
at your face. I wake up in a country
based on a single document made

to protect every human being equally
who is a wealthy, white man. The woman
I meet after my show in Myrtle Beach,

South Carolina has no response when
I ask her why the killing of three dogs
made her protest, made her write letters,

made her boycott, while the murder
of a defenseless Black child inspired
not a single word from her lips?

Loud music; blocking the middle of an empty
residential street; a wallet in a trembling,
outstretched palm; a back sprinting away

in fear; a woman after a car accident
knocking on a door for help; a toy
rifle in a Walmart in Ohio; a boy

in Money, Mississippi, walking, lost
in thought, a stutter from Polio, a whistle
he learned to cope with his stammer,

when the implication of Blackness
is always absolution from murder.

My son's first breath was with-
held: the cord that had nourished him
for nine months now choked three

times around his throat, as he fought
for life. Like his sister at birth. Like
the father on a sidewalk in Staten

selling cigarettes to support his six kids
to survive born fighting stayed fighting
to breathe. When my son gasped

finally & then slumbered into dream,
his blooming tenderness unguarded as
a single orchid, I said a silent prayer

for the imagined crimes his world was busy
inventing, to condemn him for being born
Black & having the courage to breathe.



Carlos Andrés Gómez is a Colombian American poet and the author of *Hijito*, selected by Eduardo C. Corral as the winner of the 2018 Broken River Prize. Winner of the 2018 *Atlanta Review* International Poetry Prize, 2018 *Sequestrum* Editor's Reprint Award in Poetry, 2015 Lucille Clifton Poetry Prize, and a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *North American Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Yale Review*, *BuzzFeed Reader*, *Rattle*, *CHORUS: A Literary Mixtape* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), and elsewhere. For more, please visit: CarlosLive.com





All Objects

Poem by Brittanie Sterner

Here are feet on the floor of a plane over Omaha:
Here are swatches of ground turning into ground
Here is voice mail from an unknown number
Here is every computer-generated test
Here is waiting with glass
Here is middle-night
Here are foreheads touching here are hands in space
Here is rope
Here is the braid that makes the rope
Here is a death one day
Here is another death
Here is another death
Here is perched investment
Here are plot equations from above
Here are characters for land and love
Here is unstoppable weather
Here is a bowl of ocean
Here is food digesting
Here is top of the bottom
Here is morning, again
Here is wake with a ship on the tongue
Here is a mouth of fog
Here are rotaries of birds
Here beads traffic in rosaries
Here graves imitate trees in rows
Here is orchard
Here is fruit clung and hatched
Here is a basket
Here are hands applied over Omaha, braiding highways
Here lawns cropped in rectangles
Here tillers in bunches transit
Here an accident that didn't make news
Here clipped migration
Here is lamp on a timer
Here letters spell electricity
Here is the room after leaving
Here is the light going off.



Brittanie Sterner has been writing poems since childhood. She holds a BFA in poetry from Emerson College and an MS in arts administration from Drexel University, and her storytelling research has been published in the Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society. She currently serves as the director of programming for One Book, One Philadelphia, a project of the Free Library of Philadelphia.





Nine-Year-Old Suicide in Reverse

For Jamel Myles

Poem by Chad Frame

A candle unsnuffs, its smoke drawn back in,
its guttering, finger width flame relit.
The bright blue JanSport rises from the floor
and hooks its straps around your slight shoulders.

You dart backwards down the carpeted stairs.
The door unslams. The yellow bus backs up
around the cul-de-sac. Your eyes unclench.
The children suck words back away from you.

High-fledged F, its bulbless semiquaver.
Lofty A, its slopes unassailable.
Selfsame, cliquish GG, backs turned to shun.
Surprised O, rolling, caught up in all this.
And T, the final, burning cross of it.

That morning, unknowing, your mother smiles,
untousles your hair like wind smoothing grass,
and sits. Inky clouds of coffee billow
past her pursed lips like possessing spirits.



Chad Frame was the 2017 Poet Laureate of Montgomery County and is a founding member of the No River Twice poetry improv troupe. He is also the poetry editor of *Ovunque Siamo: New Italian-American Writing* and co-founder of the Caesura Poetry Festival. Chad has been published in various journals, including *decomp*, *Barrelhouse*, *Rust+Moth*, and *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*, as well as featured on the radio program *The Poet and the Poem* hosted by Grace Cavalieri in association with the Library of Congress.





How to Read Whitewater in the Mid-Atlantic Region

Poem by Kimberly Quiogue Andrews

Here's the gift, the undetermined, toothy space in which it bubbles
up crazily, thrashing around and telling you incessantly about

the nature of possibility: these terrible courtships, in other words,
you've had with rivers, their greenish syntax letting all the silk

slip to the floor. Susquehanna, Lehigh, Youghigheny, their stolen
clauses, the low trees trailing their fingers as if to say *there now*

river, there now. And in the little canoe, you sound out each line
in turn. This is the side of you that is full of eagles. The story

unfolds in several keenly observed parts: eddies in their indecision.
Standing waves like stacks of letters, each signed *fondly*.

Undercut rocks against which the water boils low and smooth,
dangerous in the same way that simplicity is dangerous—

You read for answers because the painted ceiling above you
demands a key to its own reflection. You read for the sluice

because you are normal: you ask for directions, you are
standard in that finally, you favor the tongue harbored between

the wide-set molars, the sunlight bouncing off of a body
shaped like allowance, like the valleys you dare to call your home.



Kimberly Quiogue Andrews is a poet and literary critic. She is also the author of *A Brief History of Fruit*, winner of the 2018 Akron Prize for Poetry and forthcoming from the University of Akron Press, and *BETWEEN*, winner of the 2017 New Women's Voices Prize from Finishing Line Press. She lives in Maryland and teaches at Washington College, and you can find her on Twitter at @kqandrews.



HONORABLE
MENTION

Post Rehab

Poem by Claire Scott

they taught us to pray mother to our lord
jesus for strength to refuse

the call of meth of vodka of vicodin
to call our sponsor eat three

meals a day fresh berries mother
& broccoli run a mile each morning

they say keep a gratitude journal
pages filled with purple ink
 mother mine is empty

midnight visitors to keep money
coming to keep me in needles
 mother & crystal meth

mother I can't wait any
speed no longer
 rehab has ruined

I pour another glass, fill a syringe
drinking darkness as jesus
 dances on the cross



Claire Scott is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

HONORABLE
MENTION

Phantom Limb

Poem by Fran Baird

I trash the bird feeder,
scatter the seeds away from the house.
As the exterminator predicted,
the scratching in the crawl space goes away.
The birds return for days,
stare up into the air, fly around
the empty space like lost migrants,
then disappear and don't return.
My son calls from his chaos.
I am drawn once again
to hover around his sadness,
as if I still could care.
This time, when I return home,
something in me is missing.



Fran Baird was born in North Philly, the youngest of 12 children. He has studied in workshop with poets David Ignatow, Cathy Smith Bowers, John Drury, Jamey Dunham; and currently with Leonard Gontarek. His poem "Neshaminy" published in the *Schuylkill Valley Journal* in 2009 was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His first chapbook, *Painting With My Father*, has been published by Finishing Line Press in 2019. Dr. Baird conducts a poetry workshop with long term incarcerated men at Phoenix Prison (formerly Graterford) as part of the Prison Literacy Project of Pennsylvania. Ten poems from five poets from this workshop were published in the Fall 2017 *Schuylkill Valley Journal* (V45).

HONORABLE
MENTION

Bruce

Poem by Chad Frame

Outside, it's scarcely my sixteenth
winter, pacing the drive, unsure
what's led here—hours of typing,
the heyday of dialup chatrooms,

a torso photo, a phone call
to calm my jangling nerves—me out
the door, you on your way to pick
me up. Only the sparse, dead trees,

thinning hair on the hilltop's scalp,
are watching when your car rattles
to a stop, your cracked face an old
catcher's mitt slowly catching fire

within, spewing cigarette smoke.
Terrified, more of backing out
than anything, I creak the door
open and climb inside. We go.

Later that night, I am retching
in the bathroom when my mother
comes home from work. I do not tell
anyone there are parts of me

that will never shake free, never
be grown out of or eased into,
will never be the same again,
because they do not come from me.

This day I have learned to swallow
more than you, more than pride or Coke
straight from the two-liter bottle
to cleanse the taste—the hardest thing

to swallow is the idea
that there will be no second chance
at a first time. Persephone,
trapped in winter, aching for spring,

must realize because she swallows
her captor's seed she can never
feel the sun, her mother's plain face
bearing the promise of flowers.



Chad Frame was the 2017 Poet Laureate of Montgomery County and is a founding member of the No River Twice poetry improv troupe. He is also the poetry editor of *Ovunque Siamo: New Italian-American Writing* and co-founder of the Caesura Poetry Festival. Chad has been published in various journals, including *decomp*, *Barrelhouse*, *Rust+Moth*, and *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*, as well as featured on the radio program *The Poet and the Poem* hosted by Grace Cavalieri in association with the Library of Congress.





Roommates

Christine C. Heuner

John used to say that we were millionaires, but now we might lose the house. Tommy, our oldest, and his wife, Ashleigh, plan to buy us out. We told Tommy that he, Ashleigh, Emily, and Troy could just sell their house, pay off our balloon loan (whatever that is), and live with us while we pay him back, but Tommy wants to own it free and clear and have his say-so. He said, "Dad, you haven't fixed a f---ing thing in this house in over forty years." Well, that's true. John denied it up and down, but it is true. Raccoons and squirrels ate into the house through the roof. We had to call West Pest.

Our first plan was to move into Tommy and Ashleigh's house, but we're eighty, and there's no way John and I could climb all those stairs. Truthfully, Tommy and Ashleigh have something to gain from the move, too. Their taxes are almost twelve thousand. (John says ours are eight). And if we moved in with them, they'd have to renovate and that meant even higher taxes. That's how they explained it to me. It made sense, sort of. I don't understand why making your house better costs more in taxes.

Also, we live in a good school district. Ashleigh told Tommy that if they buy our house they can take the kids out of private school. More money for vacations, she said.

Sometimes, I get upset. All my friends have a nest egg with eggs still in the nest. Well, soon our nest will belong to Tommy and Ashleigh. I thought we could sell the house before we lost it and move to an apartment or one of those elder places, but John would have none of it. He said, "I've lived here almost all my life; I might as well die here."

Before Tommy decided to sell, John would call him every night after The Wheel, pushing him about the house, asking Tommy what to do next like Tommy was God Almighty. It got so bad John said, "I took care of you. It's your turn to take care of me."

I wanted to say, "It's not right." Tommy has been there for us, mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, having us over for dinner. It's more than Maryann and Paul have ever done for us.

Tommy owes us nothing.

Just after Tommy and Ashleigh sell their house, we have to clean out ours. I find pocketbooks and clothes with the tags still on them--Dotty and I used to go shopping every day--and I offer them to Ashleigh and Emily, but they don't want them. The clothes wouldn't fit them anyway. I am not a small woman.

So John has to get rid of his stuff, too. He saved and saved

and saved things, thinking they'd be worth something someday. We find an antique dealer who wants to penny-pinch. John moves stuff to the "keep" pile when he doesn't get the price he expects. Ashleigh says to him, "We've all made sacrifices," and what can we do? What's hardest for John, I think, is just knowing that no one wants his stuff. And some of that stuff like the records and cameras got damaged when the basement flooded; time yellowed his classic comics and all those *National Geographic* and *Playboy* magazines. I don't want to know why he keeps the *Playboys*; he says they're worth money, especially the Trump issue. The antique dealer says they're a dime a dozen. He also says that about the Norman Rockwell plates, which Bradford Exchange said would be worth a mint someday, but Ashleigh checks the internet and says they're worth forty bucks for a whole set. Well, John, who paid thirty-five a plate, won't believe it. How is it he always bets on the wrong horse? And here I am, holding the ticket.

John wants to keep games with the pieces missing, the broken bowl he said was his mother's, and the wreath with the bells. He and Ashleigh have a real fight over that one. I have to call her into the middle room and tell her that he isn't acting like normal. "He's not sleeping or eating as much," I say.

She lets him keep the bells.

Ashleigh goes through the place like we aren't still living here. About the hutch, she says, "There's too much sh-t in here" and asks if we need the salt-and-pepper shakers Dotty gave me from her trip to Alaska.

She holds the big glass of sand from our trip to Hawaii for our twentieth, makes a face and asks, "What's this for?"

I let her get rid of the china they gave us at the Trump Taj, and she lets us keep the Lennox from our wedding. She says it's special and I like that.

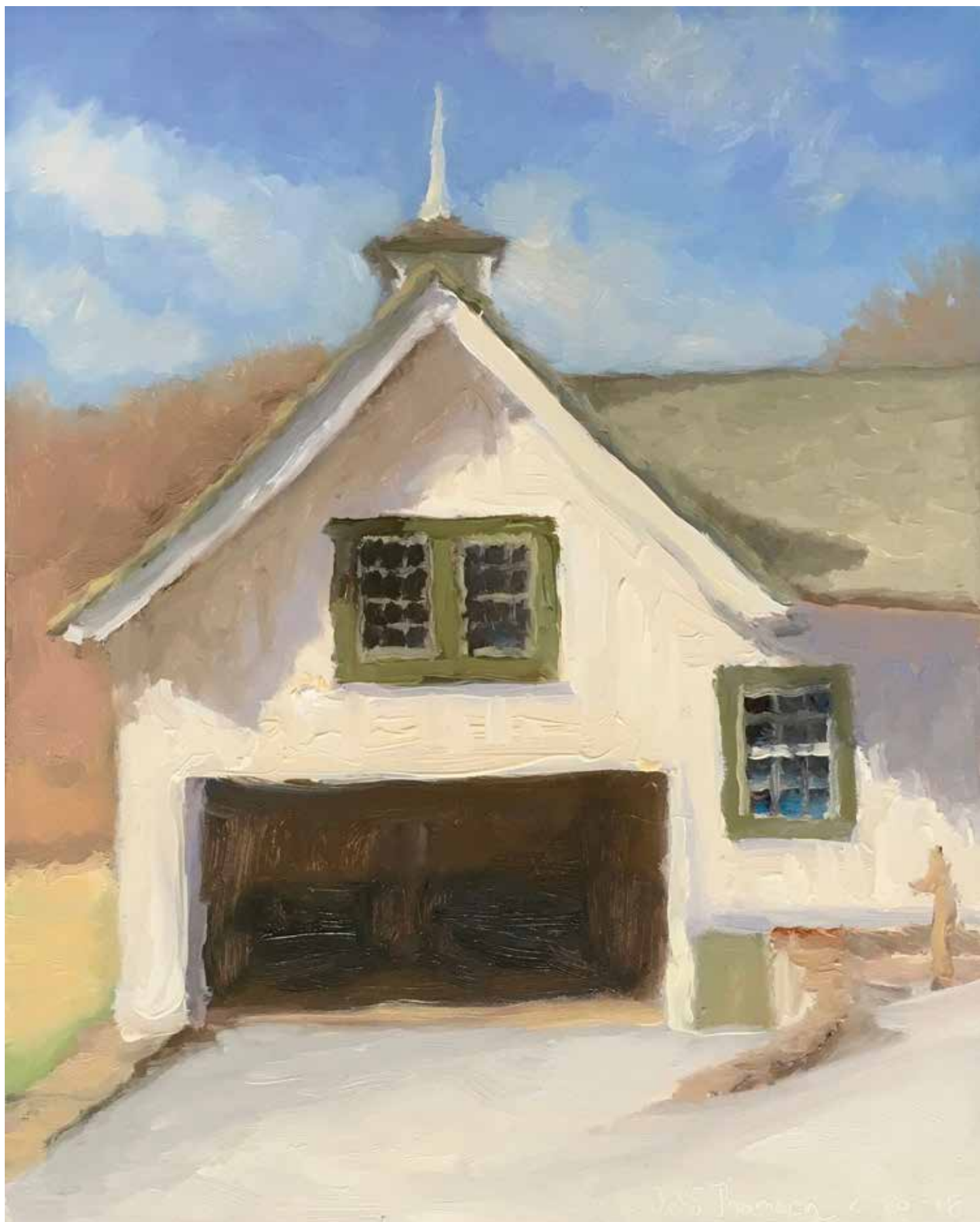
She takes down all of the fake flowers, saying they're full of dust; she brushes off a little puff as proof.

"I like the flowers," John says in the same voice he uses to praise the ratty green carpet, broken nutcracker, and cracked slushie maker.

Ashleigh moves onto the bathroom and cleans out the drawers. She throws out one of John's medications that expired in '08 (almost ten years ago); he tells her to give it back. She asks, "Why not just call the doctor for a refill?"

He says, "The doctor's dead."

She laughs the kind of laugh that seems like she is crying, and



then she goes back to her own house to finish packing.

While cleaning out the basement, Tommy finds a clacker thingie. He brings it upstairs.

"Dad used to hit me with this piece of sh-t," he says, whacking it loud.

Well, I really, truly don't remember that at all. "He never hit you or Maryann or Paul."

"He didn't touch Maryann or Paul. He went after me."

"He never--"

"Wake up, Ma! You know why he stopped hitting me? We were outside doing yardwork and the mower went over a f---ing tree root and stopped. He came at me with a stick and you know what I said? I said, 'You can come at me now, but I'm getting bigger than you and one day I'm going to hit you back. I'll knock your f---ing lights out.'"

God's honest truth: John is a good man and always has been. He was a well-decorated engineer. I don't know what all he did each day except that it involved circuits; he earned more patents than anyone else in the company. On the dining room wall, we have a huge plaque dedicated to his service. I am surprised that Ashleigh, as she takes everything off the walls, says, "This is an amazing accomplishment. We'll put it back up after we paint."

Ashleigh, a lawyer, is quite accomplished herself.

I get rid of huge garbage bags of stuff, but it's the small treasures that are the hardest to lose. Ashleigh takes off the magnets and grandkids' art projects from the fridge. She even removes the St. Jude prayer card. He's the patron saint of lost causes; we need him now more than ever I tell her, and she says, "But it's water damaged. I'll get you a new one."

As soon as our house becomes theirs in early March, Tommy and Ashleigh rip it apart, even all six of the old trees and bushes that are just about ready to bloom yellow. I think John will burst. He almost loses it when they knock down the kitchen walls and pull up the tile. They find asbestos beneath it, and someone special has to come remove it. Tommy gets angry as if John put the asbestos there himself.

When the walls are stripped to their wooden bones, the work guy finds an old hornet's nest and one dead squirrel. He lifts it up to show us. It looks like it was flying mid-air, all its charred limbs spread out. The guy points out two thin slivers jutting from its mouth. "It was probably electrocuted," he says.

The next time John tries to step in and offer some advice, Tommy says, "You *begged* me to buy this f---ing house for you. *Begged*. And now I'm here. You don't see Maryann and Paul helping, do you? They took the money and ran. I'm here now. Stay out of my way."

Tommy used to be such a good boy. When John's father died, Tommy was about fifteen; he put money in his grandpa's suit pocket so he wouldn't be bankrupt in heaven.

Tommy thinks we lost all our money because we were "high rollers" at the Taj and we bailed out Maryann and Paul. Well, I'm not sure where all the money went, but we gave Tommy money for his first house. He paid us back, but the point here is that he took from the pot when it was full.

God's honest truth: I used to love going to the Taj. The purple carpet and glittering chandelier above the escalator welcomed us like royalty. The jingling slot machines sounded like a party,

and I'd sit there for hours just watching them roll and roll and roll, spinning colors and promises. We won ten thousand once, the money pouring in my cup like gold from a rainbow. We got to eat at the private dining room on the fiftieth floor where they made the special omelets and served steak and shrimp for dinner. And they gave us gifts too: sweatshirts and coats and wine and liquor and small kitchen appliances and comforter sets and the china Ashleigh took to Goodwill. I got a Michael Kors pocketbook that I found while cleaning out and gave to Ashleigh who was glad to have it. I'm glad I can give her something.

Now we go to the Sands in Bethlehem every Thursday because it's closer and, of course, the Taj is no more. Sands is not the Taj, but it will do. Ashleigh gets annoyed that we stay up all night playing and come home in the early morning.

"Didn't you learn your lesson?" she asks. "Plus, you could get in an accident."

I tell her we go just for fun. There's no traffic at that hour except for the trucks. They give us the play money on Thursday and we don't have the money to spend now anyway.

"But we took over almost all your bills," she says.

I tell her we have the car insurance, the burial plots, just stuff like that. I can tell that John wants to tell her to mind her own business, but he won't do it. His courage is as brittle as his knees, which the doctor says are bone-on-bone. Plus, he knows what I know: they can throw us out anytime they want.

Ashleigh is what you call a tricky wicket. Before she moved in, she used to have us over for dinner every Sunday and buy us food from Costcos, but now it's different. Maybe it's all too much for her. Maybe she is worn out, but, even so, she is strong. She can lift almost anything even though she's tiny. She comes home from Costcos with big boxes and holds them on her hip. On her shoulders, she carries bags, big and heavy like saddlebags. I say, "I don't know how you do it."

Ashleigh says, "I don't either" or "Someone has to."

John thinks she hides food in the basement. They made a kitchenette down there. I haven't seen it because I can't get downstairs (the sciatica), but I hear it's nice. John says, "I heard Ashleigh tell Emily they have oranges and bananas. Why won't she share?"

He likes an orange and banana every morning. He mostly eats very healthy.

"It's not our food, John. We didn't buy it." Honestly, it's like he's a third grader.

"But she used to share it, Peggy."

"Maybe she's sick of sharing."

He's quiet for awhile and then asks, "Why would that be?"

"Why what?" I'm doing my word-find and don't want to be bothered.

"Why won't she share? I like a banana in my cereal."

"John, for God's sake, it's like I said. She's sick of it. It doesn't make sense to me. A few oranges, bananas--how much could that cost? But you wouldn't want your roommate eating your food, would you?"

He considers this. Then he says, "But we're not roommates. We're family."

I tell him I know. I go back to my word-find until The Wheel comes on. I used to have ice cream while I watched The Wheel, but Ashleigh said that ice cream is not good for me. I said I heard that milk can help you lose weight. She laughed, not a mean kind

**"Ashleigh is what you call a tricky wicket.
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of laugh, but, at the same time, not a good-humor type of laugh. I get the sense that Ashleigh is amused by the expanse of all I do not know.

I don't tell Ashleigh that Dotty was dieting on her deathbed with not even a hair on her head, so what's the point? I'll take my cookies and ice cream, just not when Ashleigh is awake.

I know Ashleigh takes pills. I don't know what all for. Maybe for a general kind of illness people get when the business of life gets heavy. She still goes to her Wednesday night meeting where people help each other. She's been going for years and years. I used to watch the kids for her; she was a nervous wreck in those days, running from here to there, dropping them off at the front door after Emily's dance class, speeding away, calling us before her return to have the kids ready to go. She's a bit softer now.

Three times, she went to a place Tommy said was like a hospital, but he didn't want to talk about it. I went over the house and helped with the laundry, took care of Emily and Troy for a few days until she came home again. God's honest truth: I liked those days when I could help with something.

I still wonder where Ashleigh went, but I've learned it's best not to ask. People get offended so easy. And, I don't know, it just seems like everyone has something they want to keep close inside, a self they don't want anyone else to see. They get scared of someone taking what's theirs.

In May, my younger sister Adele's husband Charles dies; he's been sick for awhile now. Tommy tells me not to cry. For the first time, I yell. "I am sad, Tommy. Can't you understand that? I know you don't want me to cry. I know you don't want us living here. You wish we were gone." And when I say it I believe it. I know John and I have more years behind than ahead of us.

He walks away; Ashleigh comes up to me, puts her arm around me and says, "We do want you here." She whispers it like she doesn't want Tommy to hear or is scared to say it.

My sister Adele has been calling me every day since Charles died, punishing me with evidence of how awful life can be and is. She even tells me about her neighbor's dog who can't defecate. She says, "They have to send him to the vet, which may cost thousands. It's just awful."

And always someone at her church is dying. John, who sometimes listens in on speakerphone, says, "Well, we all have to die

at some point."

She ignores this excellent logic to talk about funeral services; she has nothing to wear but the basic black dress with the bottom seam ripped because she's worn it so many times.

I tell Ashleigh about Adele's doom-and-gloom. She asks how I stand it.

"Well, I do my word-finds while she's talking."

"Can't you tell her to talk about something positive?"

"I did once. She said then she'd have nothing to talk about."

Ashleigh shakes her head. "I don't know how you do it. You're too nice."

"I should be tougher, like you," I say.

She smiles and shakes her head. "No way. You wouldn't want that."

But maybe I do want that.

Tommy comes inside, sweaty from yardwork. He says to Ashleigh, "You could come out and offer me a drink, you know."

"You could've asked," Ashleigh says. "I can't read your mind."

"You're such a help. I guess I have to get it myself." He takes a big glass, opens the freezer, and grabs a handful of ice.

Ashleigh looks at me. I shrug and give her a smile. Troy comes into the kitchen and says, "What's going on, guys?" He's so sensitive he can smell conflict. He's the best of all of us, altar-serves every week and prays before every meal: "We fold our hands, we bow our heads, we thank our God for our daily bread. Amen."

I taught the prayer to my friends at the Women's Club, and we say it every time we go out to eat. I'm so proud of Troy, but worried, too. You can't help worrying.

"Nothing's going on," Tommy says. "I need help pulling

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“Afterwards, we go to the Golden Corner and have coffee and pancakes and bacon and hashbrowns. Ashleigh gets her egg-white omelet with fruit. People must think that we’re a perfect family, and when my friends and people I barely know come up to us and say how wonderful it is that Troy serves every week and ask how John and I are doing, I can almost believe it myself.”

weeds. Get your shoes on.”

Tommy goes downstairs in a huff to wake up Emily. She stays in her room all the time these days. Whenever she comes upstairs, her eyes look heavy, her hair a little dirty. If she smiles, it’s a weak one. Maybe she needs some kind of pills, too.

Last week, I asked Ashleigh if Emily was okay and she said, “We’re taking care of it.”

All I can do is say my prayers for everyone’s good health. I pray all the time, for all of us.

Church is the only time we’re really together as a family. Like I said, Troy altar-serves. Before the move, Emily used to be in the choir. Ashleigh is a Eucharistic minister so she holds the gold plate or the metal cup with fake jewels and says either “the body of Christ” or “the blood of Christ.” She gives everyone a smile,

like she’s offering them a meal at her house that she’s been preparing all day.

Afterwards, we go to the Golden Corner and have coffee and pancakes and bacon and hashbrowns. Ashleigh gets her egg-white omelet with fruit. People must think that we’re a perfect family, and when my friends and people I barely know come up to us and say how wonderful it is that Troy serves every week and ask how John and I are doing, I can almost believe it myself.

They smile at Ashleigh and tell her she did a good job, which she later tells me she doesn’t understand. “I’m not really *doing* anything up there,” she says.

I tell her it’s important to serve, and that’s what she’s doing. “Someone has to, right?”

She smiles and says that yes, she guesses that’s true.

One day after church and breakfast on the first hot day of the season, Ashleigh does dishes with her purple gloves on, hunched over the sink. I ask her about something not at all important. She looks at me and I know she has not heard. “You look pale,” I say. “I think the stress is getting to you.” (They were back and forth from the storage locker all week).

She starts crying, wipes her nose with the purple glove, and says it’s more than that. She sits at the table beside me. “Tommy wouldn’t want me to tell you, but I’ll just say it. I had a miscarriage.”

“Oh, wow,” I say. “Dear God.”

I want to give her a tissue, but there’s nothing on the table, not even a napkin. I never have what I need when I need it.

I stand up as best as I can, hold onto the table, and put my free arm around her. She pulls away and rubs her eyes, the gloves still on her hands. They are big gloves and make her look like she’s ready to handle something hazardous.

“He blames me,” she says, curling up her legs on the chair.

That’s Tommy for you. He always blamed us for how he turned out; he said we held him back by convincing him not to join the Marines like my brother. Once I asked him, “How long are you going to blame us, Tommy?” He didn’t have an answer to that. There are always more questions than answers.

I sit back down next to Ashleigh and tell her about both of my misses. The doctor said it might be because of the Factor Five and that I should tell my kids about it because it might be part of them, too, and that’s the scariest thought: something in me I didn’t even know was there striking out to curse them. But my kids didn’t want to hear it.

“Did Dad blame you for them?” Ashleigh asks. She’s probably in her late thirties by now, but she looks like a child, her brown eyes deep and sad, her nose a little wet from where she wiped it with the glove.

“Thank God, no.” What else can I say?

She cries again and it doesn’t seem she’ll be able to stop.

Then there’s Tommy at the kitchen entrance. He’s taller than John, which makes him 6’5.” He fills the space around him. Now that he has so little hair, his eyes seem big and, when he isn’t smiling, almost mean. He isn’t smiling now, but he doesn’t look angry either.

He comes up to us, puts his arm on my shoulder. “Hey, Ma,” he says and then turns to Ashleigh. He puts his arm around her.

She shrugs him off and calls him an “a--hole.” She says, “You know what I gave up to come here? I *loved* that house. Our bedroom overlooked that magnolia. We had room to spare. Now, I



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live in a f---ing shoebox."

"That tree was a mess, Ash. You know it. All those blooms turned brown like turds and you'd freak out whenever we tracked them in the house. Don't shine it up--"

"And now this." She puts her hands over her stomach. "You have the nerve to blame me."

She swipes at the table. The plastic napkin holder stuffed with napkins and the salt shaker take flight across the room. The salt shaker cracks open like an egg.

She gets up and heads for the door, but Tommy blocks her. He puts his arms around her, bends down and kisses her hair.

"I'm sorry, Ash," he says. "We can try again."

She pushes him. "I don't want to try again. I need a nap."

Tommy lets her go. He and I look at each other for a moment. I want to ask him how it got this way. I thought Ashleigh wanted to be here, wanted the good schools and lower taxes. She told me she buried St. Joseph upside down in her front yard to help them sell the house.

Tommy leaves and I have to clean up the salt shaker myself. I throw some over my left shoulder, for good luck.

Ashleigh says luck runs out, and she's right. Just before August, John gets sick, first just a cold, then bronchitis, then pneumonia. He wouldn't let me or Tommy take him to the hospital, but then he got so sick he couldn't stand up straight and Tommy said he was through with him being "f---ing stubborn" and drove him himself.

It's hard to see John with all the tubes attached to his hand and the bruises on his arms from the blood thinners. For the first time maybe, I understand that I might have to live life without him. With the exception of Margie, all my friends' and sisters' husbands are dead.

The night before they release John from the hospital, I rest in the chair beside his bed and watch him sleep with this mouth open, snoring slightly, his hair in a messy froth against the mattress. I remember something: after my first miss, not long after I had Maryann, he told me I should've rested more. He brought home all kinds of fruits, mostly oranges, and said I needed more vitamins. "You're not healthy enough," he said. Well, I couldn't stop crying. I cried for days and couldn't really tell him why.

And I can hear that clacker. Tommy crying.

Not long after we arrive home, we're sitting at the kitchen table and Ashleigh keeps asking John if he needs anything. He finally asks for an orange. She goes downstairs and comes up with one. She stands at the sink, peeling it.

I get sick, too, not as bad, but enough to need the antibiotics. We can't get out to church. After mass, Ashleigh brings communion to our room, which is so cluttered with stuff she can barely get inside. (Tommy says our room smells; he sprays it every day with Lysol and says we need to get rid of more "sh-t.")

John tries to sit up in bed, but cannot manage it. Ashleigh holds out her hand, but he won't take it. I know what he's thinking: how does it look, this little pint pulling him up?

"I'm embarrassed," he says.

"Don't be," she says. "We all need help. I love you."

"I love you, too," he says with phlegm in his throat.

She pulls him to half-sitting, takes a wafer out of the little brass box, and places it on his tongue.

She comes to my side of the bed and holds up the wafer like

it's everything I could want in the world and sets it in my palm. "The body of Christ," she says.

I cross myself, say "Amen," take the wafer and put it on my tongue. As it becomes a sticky clump on the roof of my mouth, I think about bodies melting away through sickness and sadness. The priests say: the body dies, the spirit remains. Ashleigh once told me I have a strong spirit, stronger than she'd ever have. Well, I'm not sure I believe her, but it was nice to hear from this tough little lady.

My older sister Helen says to count your blessings and also that you never can tell where the blessings will come from. Ages ago, her little Tessy, not yet two years-old, took a seizure and passed on. Yet Helen never stopped believing in God, so I believe through her. If Ashleigh says my spirit is strong, well, maybe she can believe in God through me.

Ashleigh asks if we need anything. John asks her to turn on the TV. She clicks it on and the hazy light makes the room seem even smaller with all the boxes stacked in every corner; they block the closet and dresser. We are old, so old, and this stuff will live longer than we will. Maybe the room is a fire hazard like Tommy says, but God's honest truth, there's no sense in worrying about it.

The next morning, I make it out to the kitchen to get my coffee and see a St. Jude prayer card on one of the table's place-mats, trapped in shiny plastic, protected from harm.

Well, that's Ashleigh for you.

Christine Heuner has been teaching high school English for over 18 years. She lives with her family of six in New Jersey. Other than reading and writing, she enjoys spending time with family and exercising before dawn. Her work has been published in *Flash Fiction Magazine* and is forthcoming in *Scribble*. She self-published *Confessions*, a book of short stories.

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Sylvia

Louise Bierig

I moved to Oil City to get away from Sylvia.

But apparently, she found my address, because on December 28, 1928, she sent me a New Year's card on her exquisite Japanese style stationery. The front of the card showed a sketch of a boat, which reminded me of a Japanese character. This type of art was all the rage in the salons Sylvia attended.

Inside I expected to find a haiku she had written, but instead she wrote a brief note saying how excited she was to have obtained my address. She encouraged me to write her back and promised more unsolicited letters soon.

I lay the card down on my rented table and let my breath out slowly.

No, Sylvia, no. Please leave me alone in Oil City where I can start my life over.

But Sylvia would not leave me alone. Ostensibly, I went to Oil City to take an electrical course. When the lakes froze in winter, the freighters stopped running, so it was a good time to study and learn some new skills. I wanted to advance from an oiler to an engineer, and an electrical license would help with that.

But Sylvia did not care about my career advancement. She wanted to domesticate me, keep me inside all winter, locked in her embrace. She wanted to feed me salt-glazed soft pretzels, and apricot tarts with thick crusts, and German butter cookies, until I gained weight. For despite her fascination with Japanese art, Sylvia was second generation German, a curvy woman, who loved nothing more than baking with flour and butter. At the very least, she wanted me to take my electrical course in Erie.

"That I cannot do," I told her. "I must go south."

I did not elaborate on how far south I needed to go. Let her think I went to Louisiana, or maybe, to Antarctica.

But now Sylvia had found me. And she would know I had gone sixty miles south to Pennsylvania's oil capital. Surely, my sister had provided Sylvia with my address. And now she would be writing me all winter, trying to get me back to her apartment where she wanted to teach me how to put the toilet lid down without slamming and wash the dishes without banging.

"This is a house, Nathan," Sylvia would admonish. "It is not an industrial environment. It is not the *William Mather*."

Now when I worked on the *SS William Mather*—from late April through November—we would get a weekend's leave in Erie once a fortnight, and I wouldn't mind seeing Sylvia then. On a weekend, in spring, summer, or fall, with the windows open

and the breeze flowing through, Sylvia was quite tolerable. Enjoyable even.

But not in the winter. I learned that lesson last year and decamped in January to my sister's, but that was no good because Sylvia would come to visit me there and whine and pester and cajole to get me back over to her apartment.

So Oil City it was. The electrical course was all right. I've had plenty of time to explore the city where oil was first discovered, trek around the ghost town of Pithole, and make the rounds of the five bars. Many of these watering holes were popular with the other fellows from my course, so I often bumped into familiar faces.

Last night when I returned home from a tour of The Moose and Bob's Oil Gauge, I took out Sylvia's New Year's card again. Her stationery was very elegant, some kind of Japanese influence, as I've said before. The cover, I now realized, was an origami sailboat. Inside, she expressed her delight at finding my address and her intention to write more soon.

It was now a day into the New Year.

When I woke up, it was morning, pale light coming in through the white curtains. I was lying on the davenport, Sylvia's card on the floor. I picked it up and placed it on the buffet. My course wasn't back in session until after the holidays, so I walked down the flight of stairs to the mailbox. From it, I pulled a letter from Sylvia.

Dearest Nathan,

I don't know how to begin this letter. I am so glad to have found you, while simultaneously completely confused by you. At times I think you are a bad man. Sometimes I even say to myself, he is a bad, little, stiff man. I think of that night and how you kept shouting. But other times I remember all the good in you. I remember the sweetness in your voice, the deep look in your eyes when—

Sorry, Nate, I will try this letter again another day when my thoughts are clearer.

*With love,
Sylvia*



By the time I finished reading the letter, my hands were shaking. This was another thing that infuriated me about Sylvia. She had studied Jungian analysis in Paris and everything that happened had to be analyzed and reanalyzed and then triple analyzed. I never knew what she meant.

A bad, little, stiff man? I had never seen myself that way. And if I was that awful, why was she writing to me?

I did recall shouting at her, particularly last winter, when we were trapped in her rooms, two hundred inches of snow having fallen over the course of the winter. I knew that shouting made me a bad man. But at least I was honest with her. I didn't keep my aggravation bottled up the way my father did, only to snap at my mother or my brothers or me with some sideways comment that no one understood. People always knew where they stood with me, and when I was angry, I made no bones about pretending otherwise.

Then I was struck with terror that Sylvia would find a way, between snowstorms, to come visit me. I could imagine returning home from my electrical course and finding my landlady had let my "wife" into my apartment. Sylvia would smile and say, "You didn't come to me, so I came to you." Then she would berate me for leaving her alone for Christmas and failing to celebrate the holiday with my sister.

Or worse, what if she staked out one of the bars, and I ran into her at The Sinkhole?

I had never forgotten that awful weekend when she'd turned up in Cleveland because I'd missed our rendez-vous in Erie the weekend before. There had been trouble with the prop, or something, but Sylvia had taken it personally. She'd shown up at the ship, pretending to be my wife. I didn't have the heart to tell her that wives didn't show up at ships and follow sailors around

to bars. Wives waited at home. Instead, I'd booked her a hotel room with a view of Lake Erie and took her out for a sirloin steak.

Alone in my room in Oil City, I dropped to the floor for one hundred push-ups, followed by one hundred sit-ups. I felt better when I continued my William Mather routine as much as possible ashore. In Sylvia's apartment, I had hung buckets filled with weights from a hook I installed in the ceiling, and lifted them all winter to keep up my strength.

Once I finished my exercise routine, I felt better. I crumpled Sylvia's letter up into a ball and aimed it towards the waste basket. I missed. Then I regretted having crumpled the bizarre post and decided it would have been better as a paper airplane. I walked across the room to the waste bin and grabbed the ball and began smoothing the paper out. I lay it under the bulk of my electrical guide, hoping the heavy tome would smooth out some of the wrinkles. If that didn't work, I would iron it. I had once dropped a school paper in a bucket of water, and my mother had helped me air dry the paper and taught me to iron it without scorching the paper.

Once Sylvia's letter was creaseless, it would make a perfect paper airplane, and I would sail it right out the window of my apartment and let it fly over the snow blanketing Oil City.

Next winter I would have to go further south.

Louise Bierig grew up in the Northwestern corner of Pennsylvania and now lives in the Southeastern corner. In both corners, she has enjoyed writing, sailing, and growing native fruits and vegetables. Currently, she leads the Lansdowne Writers' Workshop, grows a small garden, and, along with her husband, raises two sons. She has published her work in *Philadelphia Stories*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Swarthmorean*, *Soul Source* newsletter, and wrote a newsletter column titled *The View from Lupine Valley* for the Lansdowne Farmer's Market newsletter. Currently, she is at work on a novella set in a Californian mining town.



Seaming

Kara Petrovic

My mother holds me down, her hands locked around my wrists as I am screaming, writhing in pain. It is midnight, or sometime after. The fluorescent lights of my room feel too bright, they burn against my skin, cursed with hypersensitivity. I can hear my mother cooing at me, gently whispering it is time to stop. Covered in cold sweat, my skin is slick, and my hair sticks to my forehead. This is a snapshot of my life at its lowest, which happens more often than I care to admit. It is a panic attack, or something similar, some days I cannot tell the difference. Yet, with unyielding patience, my mother hears my screams and we go into our usual song and dance: where my hands are scratching at my skin as if I were digging for gold, and her hands are petting my head, snaking their way around my body to make me still.

My mother never really understood mental illness, not when it first crept into my bed and made itself a home. She thought I was attention-seeking, the youngest child tired of raising their voice just to be heard, that this was the newest of my attempts to gain her affection. My mother thought she could shake it out of me, that if she grabbed me by my shoulders enough times or slapped me across the face hard enough I would snap out of it and be the child she had envisioned.

I am 22 years old now, and I have a cornucopia of diagnoses, all of which seem to be trying to outdo the other. In my youth, I was a lost soul — to put it kindly. A fire raged in my chest while a demon followed my every footstep: I was enamored with death.

If death was a man, with sickly grey skin and bones for fingers, he followed me throughout my adolescence, before I even knew how to correctly spell suicide. At 12 years old, I would write notes to my mother and leave them on the threshold of her bedroom, apologizing for being the way that I was, stating I knew she would be better off if I were dead.

I would watch her read these notes, hidden behind the pillars in the house. With the scoff of a laugh accompanied by a quick roll of her eyes, her staple response to my behavior, she would crumple the paper up. To her, this was a cry for attention, and I suppose in some way it was. It was also a cry for help, one she would make me wait several years to receive.

Meanwhile, I played surgeon with myself. I seemed to believe that if I cut deep enough I could find the source of my sickness and remove it from my skin. Since I had to eradicate this on my own, I had to navigate without a sense of direction. I would lock myself in my room and map out the corners of my brain, go

hunting in the depths of my subconscious to try and locate the cause of my misery. At the dollar store, I would buy razors, take them home and break apart the safety barriers. I would mark up my arms, my legs, my stomach. I experimented at first, marking Xs all over my skin, but it quickly became methodical lines and, each new session, I challenged myself to dig even deeper.

A therapist once told me that the pain I carry is liquid gold, and it fills up the cracks inside of me and creates a new work of art each time— I stare at my pain and try to see the beauty in it, in its curves and twists, the knots in my forearms and the scars on my body. All I see are cracks. White lines that look nothing like gold. I trace my fingertips along the hypertrophic scars and, suddenly, I am engulfed in loneliness and vulnerability. Though I want nothing more than to hold on with an iron fist, I let go of the abyss and tell myself the wounds have healed. Yet they burn each time I see someone trying not to stare.

My mother believes pain can be expunged, as if my pain and I should separate. My mother says happiness is a choice. I promise I am trying to choose happiness every day, but maybe the words stick in my throat, maybe I'm so used to excelling as her disappointment that I can no longer tell the difference.

I am fifteen years old and I have been living with an unnamed illness for three years. It's November, 2011, and my sister and I are setting up the Christmas tree. My parents are still together, out for the evening at a concert, desperately hoping this date night will save their marriage. At some point in the evening, my lungs and heart plummet in my chest and my mind repeats one track. I sneak into my parents' bedroom and find my father's sleeping pills I had stumbled upon several weeks prior. I read the label with care, noting all the warnings. "Do not operate machinery. Take with food. Do not consume with alcohol."

Do not consume with alcohol.

Before I know it, I'm standing in front of the liquor cabinet, 26 pills in hand. I look through my options, and settle on the one with the highest alcohol content: tequila. I down the pills, chase them with the tequila, in seconds. The alcohol burns my throat, my body contorts in protest and I shiver as it enters my stomach. For a moment, nothing happens.

I walk upstairs into my bedroom. I pick out the outfit I would like to be found in: I change my shirt. I put one leg into my favorite pair of jeans.

When I wake up, I'm in the hospital. My mouth is black, covered in charcoal, and there are light burn marks on my chest. My mother sits across the room from me. Her thumbnail is in her mouth. She has been crying but when she realizes I am awake, her face hardens. I can hardly hear anything; the world is muted. She draws near and kneels by my bed. Her brown eyes I inherited are cold. "Listen," she says, "there will be a psychiatrist who comes to see you. You must listen to me. You must lie. You must not tell the truth. If you do, you will be hospitalized and this will ruin your life."

Ruin my life.

She coaches me, over and over, on the things I have to say. I stand up groggily and stumble towards the bathroom. She follows me, stands behind me, watching as I wash my face. She follows me back into the room, saying, "This was a mistake, an accident, you didn't know what you were doing."

"This wasn't an accident," I say, wincing as the words make their way from my throat.

"Don't be stupid. You must tell the psychiatrist, 'no, I don't have a history of this type of behavior.'"

When the psychiatrist visits me the following day, I say, "I made a mistake. It was an accident. I didn't know what I was doing."

I answer, "No, I don't have a history of this type of behavior."

When my 24 hours are up, I am released, and the next day I go to school as if I hadn't just died two days prior.

This becomes a standard play for us. The following year I make the same attempt. I steal painkillers, head to the liquor cabinet, swallow tequila. Again, I wake up in the hospital and follow the same script. When it happens again, and again, and again, we eventually manage to avoid going to the hospital, and it is my mother's turn to play doctor. As she wraps gauze around my wrists when I am 17 years old, her lips in a hard line though the rest of her face has softened over the years, I note her expertise: it had always been second-nature to her, healing my physical wounds in ways she could not mend the disorders in my mind.

Somewhere along the way, without much notice or declaration, everything changes. I have moved out and am living an hour's drive away. We see each other on weekends. Some weekends I skip. I ignore my mother's messages, her phone calls, and the more I do, the more they increase in frequency. No longer does she look at me with disdain. On this visit, I am 19 years old, sitting on the porch and smoking a cigarette with my mother. Even when we are the same, both smokers, we are different. She smokes thin sticks, I smoke 100s.

She asks, "How are you doing?"

I say, "Better than I have in years."

I look toward the setting sun as she flinches. I flick my cigarette away. The conversation is strained, painful, and I'm checking my phone at five-minute intervals; waiting for when I can take my train to a home that is no longer with her. She sends me care packages, tells me not to worry so much, kisses my forehead, and I realize this is the most attention I have gotten from her in years. Except now, I think, I no longer need it. I am independent, grown, away from her. I am eating healthy, sleeping well, saving money. For all intents and purposes, I am well and stable.

But I am not cured.

The illness returns.

I find myself coming home more and more. My mother welcomes this. We have a family dinner every Sunday, just the two of us, and I can see the happiness etched into her face. I feel her warmth for the first time in years, and I suddenly begin to loathe when it is time for me to return to my house.

At the end of the year, I move back home and nestle myself into her. She calls me baby, and reminds me that the world is not my enemy, and neither is my mind. I realize, then, that finally: neither is she.

My mother never understood mental illness, no, but she grew to accept me. We had lived in parallel, traveling in the same direction, never once touching. In the years that followed my first splitting of skin, I learned to come to terms with my mind. My darker inclinations left shadowy traces on me that I have filled with gold. My body is a work of art I cherish, each mark a reminder not of my lowest, but of what I have survived. I fell out of love with my own melancholy. In ways unclear to me, my mother did the same.

My mother holds me down. After a few minutes, my breathing evens out and my tears dry themselves on my face.

That night, we sleep together, cocooned around each other and still.

Kara Petrovic is 23 years old and is currently living in Toronto, Ontario. They are a survivor of trauma three times over and are living with a variety of mental health disorders. They have been writing poetry since they were 8 years old. In 2017, they self-published a collection titled *beyond rock bottom*. Their poetry has been previously published by CONKER magazine. In 2018, they were selected to read for Toronto's Emerging Writers Series. They are also currently writing a book of fiction with a co-author who lives in Belleville, New Jersey. Philadelphia holds a special place in their heart, as their father and youngest sister live there. They identify as genderfluid and pansexual.



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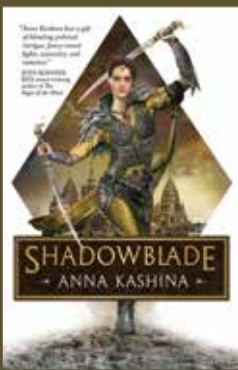


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