

# PhiladelphiaStories

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

FALL / 2019 / FREE



FEATURING THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION WINNING STORIES  
MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE ROGER HART / CLAY PATRICIA SAMMON / CAMP VAMPIRE KIDS JOE DORNICH

# CONTENTS

THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION IS A NATIONAL SHORT FICTION CONTEST MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE MCGLINN AND HANSMA FAMILIES. CONGRATULATIONS TO THIS YEAR'S WINNERS!

## MARGUERITE MCGLINN WINNING STORIES

- 4** MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE (first place) .....ROGER HART  
**14** CLAY (second place).....PATRICIA SAMMON  
**21** CAMP VAMPIRE KIDS (third place) .....JOE DORNICH

## FEATURES

- 27** LOOK AWAY (non fiction) .....SUSETTE BROOKS

## POETRY

- 12** OUR ROOF IS THE NOSE OF A ROCKET .....CHRISTA PAGLIEI  
**12** GREASED LIGHTNING.....LORI WIDMER  
**13** PATERNOSTER LAKES.....RYAN HALLIGAN  
**20** BREAKING 200.....SYDNEY DOYLE

## ART



### Fire by Maggie Hobson-Baker

Maggie Hobson-Baker, an artist, designer and Associate Professor of Studio Art and Design lives and works in the Philadelphia Area. Interested in the dialogue between traditional and digital platforms in the creation of art and visual images, Hobson-Baker works with her iPad and Bamboo Tablet as well as traditional materials. Her work reflects her love of shape, color, nature and design. A breast cancer survivor, "Fire" is a self-portrait of her journey through treatment.



### Amber Daydream by Nancy Bea Miller

Known for her still-life and figurative work in watercolor and oil, representational painter Nancy Bea Miller earned a BA in English from the University of Pennsylvania and an MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She lives in Philadelphia. Her work has been exhibited widely and is represented by several galleries. Miller is the creator of the Genre of Inclusion Project and is the past founder of Plein Air for Camphill. Visit [www.nancybeamiller.com](http://www.nancybeamiller.com).



### Homeward by Lee Muslin

Lee Muslin has participated in well over 250 exhibitions throughout the United States, including 21 solo shows. Many New York and Philadelphia gallerists and museum curators have selected her art for juried shows. Muslin has been privileged to receive 35 awards. She attended the University of Delaware as a fine art major and subsequently received a degree from Parsons School of Design in New York City. Visit [www.leemuslin.com](http://www.leemuslin.com).



### South Jazz Club by Catherine Peluso

Catherine Peluso resides in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. A participant in the Rittenhouse Square Fine Art Show for many years, she is a Signature Member of the Philadelphia Water Color Society and holds memberships with Delaware Valley Art League, Flying Colors Art Group and Artists Circle Art Group. Acrylic and watercolor are her main mediums while her subject matter is usually urban scenes, animals and flowers with portraits of interesting looking people sprinkled in. Visit [www.catherinepelusoart.com](http://www.catherinepelusoart.com).



### Rittenhouse Glow by Michele Byrne

Michele Byrne is recognized for her figurative plein air work and her dynamic palette knife paintings. She lives in Reading, Pennsylvania and travels extensively to paint in various locations throughout the United States and Europe. She is a signature member of the American Impressionist Society and has received numerous awards for her plein air and studio work including a 2018 President's Choice Award from the American Impressionist Society. [www.michelebyrne.com](http://www.michelebyrne.com).



### Teapots and Eggs by Nancy Bea Miller



### Camac Street by Robert Reinhardt

A Philadelphia artist/educator, Robert Reinhardt actively explores his love of nature verses man-made structures through photography and painting. With degrees from Tyler School of Art and University of the Arts, Reinhardt teaches at Germantown Friends and Fleisher Art Memorial. His work has been exhibited in national and local galleries and juried exhibitions, as well as public, corporate and private collections including the Philadelphia Museum of Art. View Reinhardt's photography at [restinpixels.us](http://restinpixels.us).



### Countdown by Peter Murphy

Peter E. Murphy was born in Wales, grew up in New York City and currently resides in New Jersey. The founder of Murphy Writing of Stockton University, he is the author of eleven books, chapbooks and a selection of published essays and poems. From his "Beautiful Decay" series, "Countdown" presents a contemporary image of the SS United States currently docked in Philadelphia. The ship brought Murphy and his family to the US when he was a child. Visit [www.petermurphy.com](http://www.petermurphy.com).

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# New Editor on the Block

Trish Rodriguez – Fiction Editor, Philadelphia Stories

I attended Philly schools. I bleed Eagles-green, and still live, read, and write in the Philadelphia area. I am a Philly girl, and I am excited to be a part of the Philadelphia Stories team as the new fiction editor. I have a high bar to clear, taking over for the wonderful job performed by the former editor, Mitchell Sommers. This summer, I dove in by screening entries for the Marguerite McGlinn Prize for Fiction.

In reading over 60 entries, I tried to be objective, but is that really possible? Quite a few stories were too similar to others that I'd read before. Some had characters that didn't resonate with me. There were some good stories that just didn't make the cut. And, there's always the batch that just didn't follow guidelines.

A few stories blew me away and made me feel honored to be a writer. I maniacally shouted, "This is why I write. This is why I love short stories." These stories opened a doorway to a character, a world, or a way of thinking for me. I write in hopes to achieve that connection with other readers. As the fiction editor for Philadelphia Stories, I will strive to bring such stories to you.

Ultimately, the winners were chosen by our judge, Susan Muaddi Darraj. I have to admit that I was excited when a few of the stories that made a huge impression on me made the final cut. Here's what our judge, Susan Muaddi Darraj, had to say about our winning stories:

**1st: "Mysteries of the Universe":** An utterly compelling story of the faltering relationship between two people who seem incompatible on the surface. Skillfully weaving in scientific research, the author depicts both the respect but the growing strain between a university researcher and a member of the campus' maintenance crew, a man who is gifted by random flashes of insight. The language is moving in its specificity, the dialogue is riveting, and the comparisons between logic and gut instinct are often startling.

**2nd: "Clay":** "Clay" captures the imagination completely as it promptly drops the reader into the horrors of World War One. The plot follows the grim task of Allied tunnel diggers who are attempting to reach German lines. The writer brilliantly captures the fear and claustrophobia of working underground, tunneling for an hour to gain an inch, while Germans operate just a few feet above -ground. A psychologically intense and suspenseful story.

**3rd: "Camp Vampire Kids":** A brilliantly imagined story about a camp of children who suffer from a rare sun allergy; these young people live and play by moonlight, sleeping away the hot days of summer to protect their lives. The protagonist is resilient and determined, secure in the comradeship of his fellow campers, until he learns that the girl he adores is undergoing successful treatment of the condition. The angst of teenage love, magnified by an unusual affliction, is portrayed powerfully here.

## 2019 Finalists:

"Sargasso Sea"

by Carol Dines (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

"Alice Bickerstaff vs. Helen Keller"

by Sarah Ulicny (Ferndale, Michigan)

"The Fair"

by Will Hearn (Gulf Shores, Alabama)

"King Solomon's Sword"

by Alice Hatcher (Tucson, Arizona)

"Soiling the Tree of Knowledge"

by Aaron Tillman (West Roxbury, Massachusetts)

"Litter Entries"

by Dog Cavanaugh (Philadelphia, PA)

"Incidentaloma"

by Jared Hanson (New York, New York)



The Rosemont Writer's Studio offers MFA graduates, from any program, and other members of the larger Philadelphia writing community an opportunity to take focused writing and publishing workshops at a reasonable cost. Fall 2 registration is now open. **Classes begin October 28, 2019. [www.rosemont.edu/studio](http://www.rosemont.edu/studio)**





# Mysteries of the Universe

Roger Hart – First Place Contest Winner

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The premonition hits as I walk down Park Street to the university. One foot up in the air and bamm! Knocks me back like a punch in the gut or a mysterious pain in the chest. A premo that sends a chill down my spine despite the warm spring morning. I try to shake it off. I have things to do.

Crows squawk in the maples and oaks, a holy racket. In the distance the university band rehearses for the halftime show of the first home football game four months away, another holy racket. The smell of fresh baked bread and donuts drifts from Sweet Melissa's Bakery on Lake Avenue.

I try to wash the ugly inkling, the déjà before the vu, out of my mind by concentrating on the cottonwood fluff floating in the air, the noisy crows scolding me, the fat dandelion blossoms blanketing the lawn. A large limb from a sycamore tree has fallen across the sidewalk in front of the physics lab. The dew-covered grass in the shade of the red bricks and ivy of Rodman Hall needs mowed. Cleaning up downed limbs, mowing, trimming, mulching flowerbeds, seeding the muddy areas around the greenhouse. Maintenance stuff. My job. Need to get everything looking tiptop for graduation.

The premonition gnaws at the sunny day. It's a dark thundercloud threat just over the horizon, lightning flashing, thunder booming. I hope it's a false warning, a fake forecast.

I've had a few, both good and bad, fake and not. Take the one when Sloane and I were camping in the Boundary Waters, our first date, although we didn't think of it as a date. We'd known each other three weeks. Morning fog blanketed the campsite so thick we couldn't see the water a few feet beyond our beached canoe. Dew dripped from the needles of the pine trees, landed on the rocks with little plops. I closed up the camp stove, and we took our cups of coffee inside the tent, sat on our sleeping bags with Yogi hunkered down bear-like between us. "A moose," I mumbled a few minutes later, just as the coffee was beginning to cool.

"What?" Sloane asked.

"Outside the tent," I said. I hadn't heard a thing, no hooves crunching on pinecones or sloshing through water, no chomping of aspen, no snorting. Pure premonition.

Sloane gave me her Ph.D. in theoretical physics look. I couldn't even recite the title of her doctoral thesis, which had something to do, she explained, with cosmic rays called Oh-My-God particles. I had no clue what Oh-My-God particles were despite her attempts to explain, but I took comfort in her admitting

no one else knew much about them either. Sloane says space-time is curved by gravity and that virtual particles pop in and out of existence, but she doesn't buy into premonitions, prophesies, omens, or signs.

Holding onto my cup, I crawled to the tent flap and flipped it aside. Ten feet away and staring at our red canoe was a giant moose although, I guess, all adult moose are giants. I touched my finger to my lips and pointed. Yogi, curious but cautious, watched, sniffed the air. No growl or bark. The moose grazed around our campsite then stepped into the lake and urinated, which sounded like a bucket of water being dumped or a waterfall dropping from a respectable height. "Premonition," I said a bit smugly.

Sloane shook her head.

I tried throwing a little of her theoretical physics stuff at her. "Didn't you tell me yesterday as we were paddling across the inlet that quantum things in the future can influence the present? Maybe the future moose in front of our tent signaled it would be there."

Sloane smirked. "Future events influencing the present is only true in the quantum world," she said.

Sloane is driven in an indoors/office/journal reading sort of way. Although she had traveled to conferences in several countries and a dozen major cities, this was her first camping trip. I wanted to ask how one thing could be true in her quantum world and not ours, but the moose had moved on, and she was packing up, preparing to move out.

Later that day, the moose day, two young women wearing nothing but hats paddled by us, which has nothing to do with this story.

"Morning," I said, doing my best not to focus on their as yet un-tanned breasts.

"Morning," they answered.

After they'd rounded a bend behind us, Sloane, sitting in the bow, turned, cocked her eyebrow. "Well? No comment?" She spoke softly as sounds carry over water, and she didn't want the topless paddlers to hear.

"I'd worry about mosquitoes and sunburn," I said, "but it's a free world."

Sloane puzzled over my answer for a second. "In the spirit of sisterhood," she said, and then facing forward, pulled off her sweatshirt and bra.

I stared at her back, the way it narrowed near her waist, the



smooth skin, the soft bumps of her spine. "Oh, look," I said, pointing at an island behind us, tricking her into turning around. "Thought I saw a bear."

She squinted at the island, and then at me. "Yeah, right," she said, daring me to stare.

A bare-breasted theoretical physicist sitting in the bow of my canoe. Who could have imagined?

Sloane says we met by mistake, but I say we have a cosmic connection. When the science department has a lecture I attend. I like seeing slides of galaxies, nebulae, the colorful clouds of Jupiter. When I was in high school we had careers day, and I signed up for cosmetology, which I had mistakenly assumed was cosmology. The instructor, a woman with fluorescent blond hair and bright red lipstick, asked each of us to describe our interest in cosmetology. "Wrong class," I muttered.

Sloane, applying for a position in the physics department, gave a lecture on dark energy and mistook me for another prof. Instead of wearing my maintenance clothes, boots and a blue shirt with *Russ*, my name, stitched in red above the pocket, I wore a sport coat and tie, having come from my niece's recital. (Lucy's only ten and plays the violin.) After the lecture I complimented her, and she asked about my research focus. "Oh, I go in circles," I said, referring to mowing the lawn, but she thought I was talking code for work with the Hadron Collider. We went to dinner where her mistake became obvious as I had no clue what she was talking about: Hilbert space, vacuum energy, the fine tuning problem. She laughed when she discovered I mowed the lawn, and when we returned from our Boundary Waters canoe trip she moved in with me, saying I was a mystery and she liked mysteries. We've been together nine months, something my mother calls a pregnant amount of time.

Her look: white blouses and not a wrinkle in them. Black skirts that show off her long legs. She's thin and has reddish-blond hair, which she wears in a no-nonsense, professional above-the-collar cut, a style the instructor in the cosmetology class might have liked. Her lips stretch across perfect teeth and her hazel eyes sparkle when she smiles. She doesn't wear glasses, which is surprising her being a theoretical physicist who is always buried in a book.

Anyway, all this has little, maybe nothing, to do with my premonition, but, as Sloane says when describing her quantum particles, we really have no idea what is real and what isn't, so I've included it here in an effort to be as honest as possible even though honesty is a seldom admired characteristic today despite lip service by politicians, religious folk, the FBI, and the Boy Scouts.

The spring semester is almost over, and dandelions cover the campus commons. Arnold Dickey, the head of maintenance, ordered ten gallons of Roundup and told me to spray last spring and fall. I don't trust Roundup despite assertions by DuPont that it's safe. I got rid of it, burned it in the incinerator, then sprayed the lawn with water. I don't understand Arnold's love of Roundup. He was in Vietnam, got sprayed with Agent Orange, which has been linked to his Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and was made by Dow Chemical, which is now part of DuPont, so you'd think he'd be suspicious of chemical sprays and chemical company claims.

Arnold catches me as I approach the maintenance shed. Before he went through chemo Arnold looked like Willie Nelson what with his beard, western hat, and long, white pigtails, but

his hair and beard are gone, replaced by bald, although he still wears the black western hat. I think he's going to warn me about the dandelions, which isn't really a premonition as much as a hunch. There's a difference.

Arnold owns a hangdog expression and gets right to the point. "Sloane," he says. "How do you feel about her getting the trip?"

*Trip?* I squint. "What trip?"

He waves his hand in the air, trying to remember the name. "The Antarctica thing."

I don't know about any Antarctica thing. Sloane going to the South Pole is something I can't imagine. Our canoe trip to the Boundary Waters was her equivalent of going to the moon.

"Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. Maybe she's going to surprise you."

"When?" I ask.

"Maybe over dinner. I don't know."

This is the way Arnold talks, expecting you to fill in between the lines. Arnold also has spells, gets confused, maybe the chemo, maybe something else. Arnold calls me Wes sometimes when I'm Russ, maybe a beginning dementia thing, maybe exposure to Roundup. "No," I say, "I mean when is the South Pole thing?"

He looks up in the trees, maybe trying to remember, maybe watching a squirrel. With Arnold, everything is *maybe*. "This summer, I think. Going to be there six months." He pauses, points at the dandelions and shakes his head. "That Roundup ain't doing shit," he says. And then remembering, "Maybe she said something and you forgot."

Sloane works late, sleeps late. Much of her work is done at her office desk. Most of it is math without numbers, just letters and squiggly lines, sometimes a graph. I've seen it. Why would she want to do that in Antarctica? "Must be a mistake," I say. "She's a theoretical physicist. They go to conferences in big cities, sit indoors. They don't go to the South Pole. We're going camping this summer."

"Can't be in two places at once," he says.

But you can, or at least those quantum things Sloane talks about can. Here and there at the same time. Unbelievable. It's like a habit with them.

I haven't talked with Sloane since lunch yesterday. She nudged me with an elbow to the ribs when the alarm went off this morning, but she went back to sleep before I rolled out of bed, so we haven't had time to talk about the South Pole or her being in two places at once.

Arnold, like me, has not had much luck in his love life, and he tends to be cynical about relationships. That's why he worries about Sloane. He thinks she's stringing me along, which has nothing to do with the string theory of the universe she often mentions.

I dismiss Arnold's off-hand warning the way I dismissed ten gallons of Roundup and this morning's premonition. I toss Antarctica in my mental incinerator. Melted. Gone.

I'll stop by Sloane's office later, after I take care of the sycamore limb blocking the sidewalk next to the physics building, after I pretend to kill the dandelions. We'll have lunch together, and she can tell me something new, maybe explain how gravity curves space or how those quantum things can be in two places at once. I'll ask about the Antarctica thing, which goes to show my mental incinerator is not working.

When Sloane goes for a walk to ponder, she takes Yogi. What a sight! Yogi weighs 140, twenty pounds more than Sloane. When we went to the Boundary Waters, Yogi and I swam despite the water being so cold my fingers, toes, and personal body parts went numb. He stayed by my side, kept an eye on me. That's the Newfoundland way. His chin is white and his eyes are milky. He is slow to get up, and he sits gingerly, but he loves to swim.

Students greet me as they head to their classes. "Hi, Russ, "Morning, Russ," they say. My name is stitched in red letters above the pocket of my blue shirt, which I have already mentioned, so they know me and that I can unlock their dorm room doors when they forget their keys. They watch, a few do, as I cut up the sycamore limb and haul it away. Sycamores love water and the physics building is on high dry ground, so I have no idea what the tree is doing here. I sometimes wonder what I'm doing here, too.

Anyway, by the time I finish taking care of the limb and pretend to Roundup the dandelions, it's lunchtime, and I enter Rodman Hall, the physics building. Sloane's office is on the third floor, the floor with the view of the football stadium and the river. I knock on her door and it swings open. "Oh," she says. "Is it that time?"

In the beginning we ate lunch together a couple times a week at one of the tables in the faculty lounge off the cafeteria, days when she didn't have meetings or a class, but we stopped doing that for reasons I don't know. It happened. A mystery. When the weather warmed up and everything began to green, we sometimes walked home and had lunch there, sat on the back steps and watched Yogi sniff around the yard, cock his arthritic hip on the bushes.

Today, however, the day of the bad premonition, I order delivery from Busy Day Café before heading to Sloane's office. I don't have to specify what we want. It's always the same. "Lunch for Russ and Sloane," I say. I'm in Sloane's office five minutes when Jerry whose-last name-I-don't-know shows up with the white bag holding our sandwiches, a vegetarian wrap for Sloane, a steak sandwich for me. Sloane drinks Coke despite my warnings about it being a lot like Roundup. I drink water.

We make small talk. She's amused by my granting amnesia to the dandelions but otherwise she's preoccupied. Sloane is desperate to understand the universe. "Is it those Oh-My-God particles?" I ask, nodding at the papers on her desk.

She goes, "What? No. Just thinking. We need to talk." She looks at the office door the same way Arnold went blank staring off at the squirrels and for a second I think something is going around, a distraction bug or virus.

I wait for the talk we need to have but none comes. I avoid the Antarctica thing because I don't believe it's true and because I'm afraid if I ask it will be, sort of like those quantum things that come into existence when you observe them. There's a connection here I can't explain. "Hey," I say, trying to drum up a little enthusiasm. "I'm looking forward to the lecture tonight."

She sips the Coke, leaving a smudge of lipstick on the straw. "Oh, Russ, are you sure you want to go?"

I take a bite of my steak sandwich. It's huge. Her veggie wrap is green and small. Maybe that's how Sloane stays so thin. I'm confused as to why she thinks I might not want to go. I go to all the physics lectures. I like hearing about the unknown, and I've not made a fool of myself by asking a question, stupid or otherwise. I just listen. "Sure," I say. "I'm going."

"Going where?" a voice behind me asks.

Rocky, the grad student she's supervising. I want to say, *Oh my god, it's Rocky*, but what I actually say is, "Hey, Rock. The lecture tonight."

Rocky's eyes never look straight at you but off to the side, like you're really six inches to your left. He's thin and pale and cultivating the Einstein look with his wild hair. He wears dark-rimmed glasses and needs to change his name or switch his major to geology.

"Excuse me," he says to Sloane, stepping behind me and my steak sandwich. "Do you have time this afternoon to look at my calculations . . ." and then his voice trails off as he mumbles things like Planck's constant, dimensions, and vacuum energy.

Sloane gives me a look that says she needs to take care of this and it would be a good time for me to run home and let Yogi out for a few minutes. She can say all that with one look, a twitch of an eyebrow, pursed lips.

I grab my sandwich and thermos of water—no plastic bottles for me—and nod to Rocky, who flinches despite my not touching him. I save the last two bites of the steak sandwich for Yogi, who will give me a look that says thanks.

Later, after sitting on the back deck with Yogi and him giving me the look that says thanks, I walk back to the university where right off I'm confronted by two students, a young man wearing flip-flops and a tie-dyed shirt and a tiny, wide-eyed, granola-type girl, who may or may not be his girlfriend. Both are holding cell phones, like this might be the way they talk to each other. "Russ," she says. The tone of her voice suggests she's locked herself out of her room. Again, this is not a premonition but a hunch based on voice, body language, and her blocking my path.

"What can I do for you?" I ask, and she points at the grass, at the tiny pink flags warning that the dandelions have been sprayed with an herbicide and they should stay off the lawn for twenty-four hours.

"You're poisoning the environment," she says. Her tie-dyed friend nods.

"It's not poison," I whisper. "I put flags there so everyone would think I sprayed the dandelions." I hope this doesn't get back to Arnold who would be sorely disappointed in me.

The girl, wearing a Greenpeace badge on her jean blouse and half a dozen silver rings dangling from her ears, takes a defiant stance. "Herbicides are poisonous," she says. She snaps a picture of the pink flags with her cell phone. "You're killing microorganisms in the soil. Animals will track this back to their homes. Birds will eat poisoned worms."

I bend down and snap off a dandelion. She jumps back like I'm going to attack her with it. I bite the dandelion. She gasps. The guy stares at me. "Cool," he says.

For a second I think the dandelion has a sickening sweet smell, a bitter taste. I worry that Arnold came out with more Roundup, real Roundup and not water, and dowsed the dandelions. I pick another, a fat, bright yellow one with moisture still clinging to the bloom. I sniff. There's no sweet smell and the blossom tastes like salad without the dressing.

The girl is confused. Maybe I'll die in front of her and maybe I'm telling the truth. She tugs at the sleeve of her boyfriend's tie-dyed shirt, and they slip away, careful to not step on the grass.

Another thing I learned from Sloane was that things, quantum things, exist only when they interact with other things. If they

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The first speaker, a physicist responsible for experiments with photons, explains that when two quantum particles are close to each other they become entangled. They can then be sent their separate ways and still, somehow, maintain a mysterious connection when thousands, even millions, of miles apart.

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don't interact, they don't exist. I asked Sloane to explain. She started, took a deep breath, stopped. "Electrons, photons, all the tiny bundles of energy that make up atoms, don't exist unless they interact with something."

"Yeah," I said. "But how is that possible?"

"It's hard to explain," she said.

Although she assured me I had nothing to worry about, I welcome these interactions with students. We exist!

A lot of the things I learned from Sloane came during our canoe trip to the Boundary Waters. "What came before the Big Bang?" I asked as we paddled across a smooth stretch of water. Yogi's ears perked up like he wanted to hear the answer too.

"There was no before," she said. And then she asked, "What's wrong with those trees?"

"They're aspen. Probably the Aspen Blotch Miner. It's an insect."

"Will it kill them?"

"Probably not. And how can there be no before?"

"There was no time."

We paddled close to shore. The wind had shifted and we were alert for any sudden change in the weather while I tried to grasp how there could be no time. A few seconds later—see, there's time—I touched my finger to my lips and pointed at the bird swimming ahead of us.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"A loon."

We went back and forth all afternoon, me asking questions about the universe, how an electron could be in two different places at the same time, what is dark matter, and Sloane asking questions about the Boundary Waters, what were the smooth rocks where we beached the canoe, why was the area so rich in iron ore, what was the story of the Native Americans who had lived here, and where had they gone.

I've heard dozens of science lectures, and I've read a few books, but I'd never had a chance to ask questions of an expert. My job during those science lectures is to be quiet. Talking with Sloane I felt the way a music lover taking a canoe trip with Adele or Prince might feel, like a football fan talking with Jimmy Brown, the greatest running back of all time.

We fell into something special on that trip, if not love, something moving in that direction. Sloane had a wicked sense of humor and several times we laughed so hard we almost tipped the canoe. At night, after the mosquitoes quieted down, we'd stretch out on the smooth slab of rock along the shore, hold

hands and stare at the stars while Yogi snored beside me. I tried to imagine a universe that went forever and then tried to imagine one that didn't. Was there intelligent life somewhere out there staring back at us? How did this universe get started and why were we here? Sloane was looking for the answers. Loons called back and forth, their songs both beautiful and haunting.

Sloane talked all winter about the two of us going on a return trip to the Boundary Waters. "I want to see a bear," she'd say. I have the permit and a couple weeks off in August. That's why I don't think Antarctica is a real thing.

I get ready to mow despite the mower's roar annoying the professors who are trying to teach electricity and magnetism, particles and waves. A few professors have become so outraged by the mower's roar that they fight back. We have battles. The physics professors have threatened to shoot me with lasers and turn on powerful magnets that would suck the fillings out of my teeth. I let the tractor backfire and make an extra sweep past their windows when these things happen. I hate cutting the dandelions, but a job is a job, so I make sure the mower deck is secure, fire up the tractor, and begin making loops around the green. Mowing is a good time to think.

Do premonitions have an expiration date? How can you tell the fake from the real? These are things Rozzi and I argued about when we were on patrol outside Kandahar. Rozzi claimed if you never told anyone your premonition it wouldn't come true. He hoped it might keep at bay the nightmare scenarios we all foresaw. He also said premonitions had no expiration date. I argued everything died sooner or later, even premonitions.

I can't shake this morning's premonition, which is like a bad dream, a disturbing movie playing on a screen behind my eyes. Made me feel hollow. If this premonition were a movie there'd be sad music playing, maybe a cello or bagpipes, maybe the theme from the movie *Starman* at the moment Jeff Bridges is about to leave and never come back. I would describe it except for hoping Rozzi was right. If I keep it under wraps it won't happen.

I go around and around, the circle of mowed grass growing smaller with each loop. I take comfort in knowing the dandelions will be back. The sun is fat and bright, the first really hot day this spring, and my neck is burning.

After work I walk home, I call Sloane's office as I put a pizza in the oven.

"Russ," she says. "Sorry. I'm going to dinner with Dr. Franz and Dr. Ahman before their presentation tonight. We're on our way now."

I hear other voices and laughter in the background. "Okay," I say. "I love you."

"Okay," she says. "Got to go."

I eat half the pizza. Yogi's bones are tired, and he ignores my offerings of the crust.

As I walk toward the lecture hall the whistling of the spring peepers and the smell of fresh cut grass cheer me although they do not wipe out the ghost of this morning's premonition. When I arrive the room is half full of grad students and their friends. I don't spot Rocky's wild hair. The two giving the lecture and the physics faculty have not yet shown up, still hobnobbing, I suppose, at the Other World Tavern across town.

I take a seat near the front and save the seat next to me for Sloane although she will probably sit in the first row with the other physics professors. This does not bother me. I understand







how she might want to lean over and whisper a quantum question or comment to one of her peers who will whisper theoretical things to her.

Five minutes before seven they show up and take their seats in the first row. Sloane turns in her seat, spots me and nods. I wink back and let out my breath, which I didn't realize I'd been holding. After long introductions the lecture begins.

The first speaker, a physicist responsible for experiments with photons, explains that when two quantum particles are close to each other they become entangled. They can then be sent their separate ways and still, somehow, maintain a mysterious connection when thousands, even millions, of miles apart.

I like the idea two particles can remain connected when far apart. I think Yogi and I have that. I hope Sloane and I do, too.

Next up, is an older woman who repeatedly swings her head to the side to get her long, going-to-gray hair out of her eyes. Her theory is that the universe is a hologram, nothing more than a projection stored in a two dimensional membrane surrounding the universe. "Which is real?" she asks. "The three dimensions we think we know or are we and our world like the images in a mirror, mere projections?"

I can't sit still any longer. Maybe it's the weight of the bad premonition. The thought that we are nothing more than images is too much. I raise my hand.

The woman smiles, leans forward and nods.

"But we're more than images," I say, hoping I haven't missed the entire point, hoping, too, I'm not embarrassing Sloane. I tap my chest, the spot over my heart. "I'm solid."

The woman nods a few more times to acknowledge my question. "But you aren't solid. You are mostly empty space. And that very tiny bit of you made up of protons and neutrons and electrons? Well, they're not solid either. They're bundles of energy that pop in and out of existence. It's a great mystery, isn't it?" And then there are more questions, eager grad students wanting to impress their professors and each other. I stop listening. When

the lecture is over, when the speakers have been thanked and everyone heads for the door, there's a tap on my elbow.

"Russ?" she says. "You okay?" She sits, one vacant chair between us.

"Are we entangled?" I ask.

"That happens only in the quantum world," she says.

"Are you going to the South Pole?"

She doesn't appear surprised by my question. "Yes. I don't like the cold and it's outside my realm of experience. But I'm looking forward to it." She glances at her group as they wait for her by the door. "We can talk later."

I say I understand although I don't. I want to ask about our trip to the Boundary Waters and if she plans on living with me when she comes back from the South Pole, but I already know the answers. Sloane pats my knee and says she has to run.

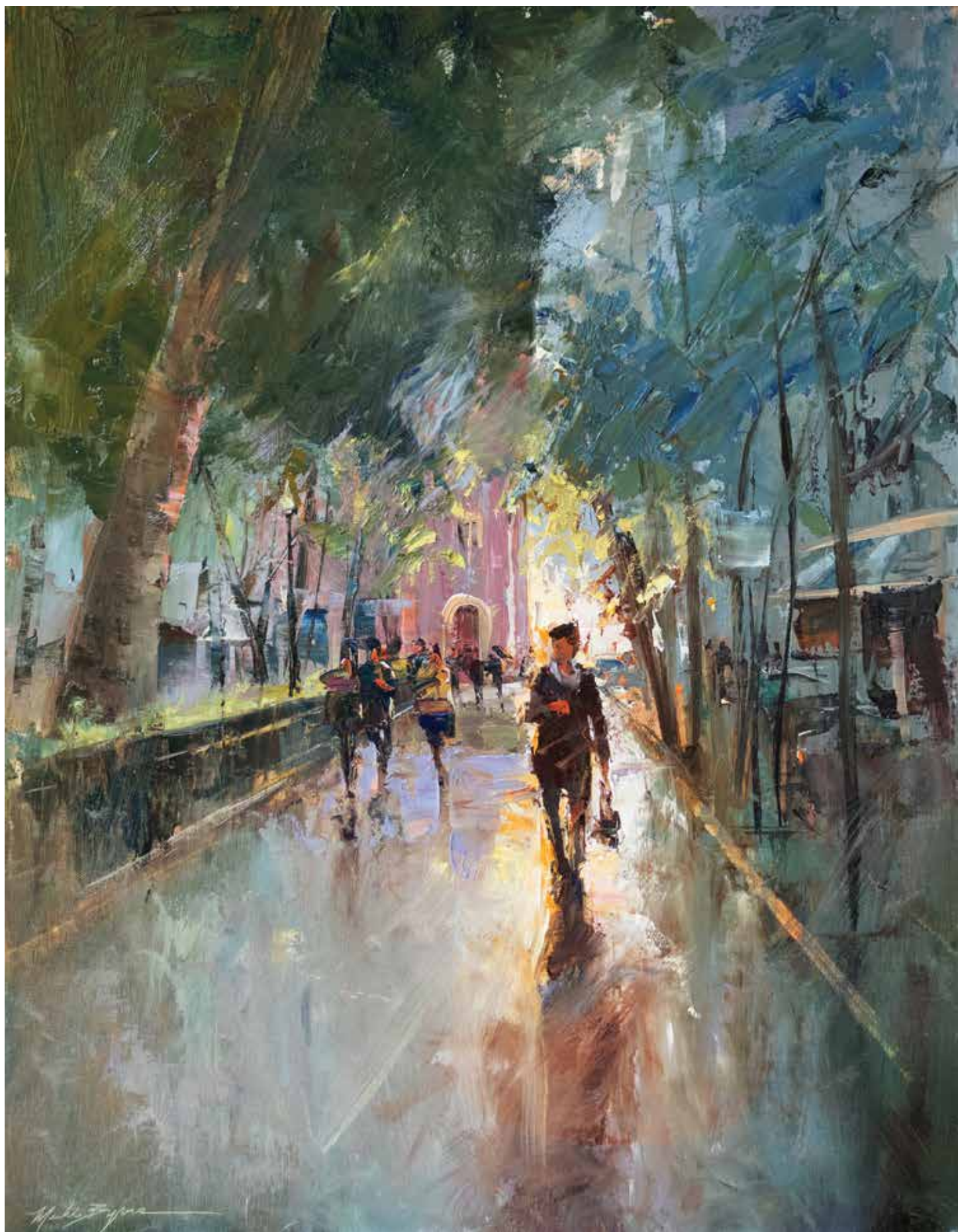
The auditorium is mostly empty when I leave. On my way out the door I bump my elbow. Solid.

As I walk across campus my mind races from one thought to another. Yogi is having trouble getting up and down and this may be his last trip to the Boundary Waters. A couple sitting by the lake laugh and lean into each other. The spring peepers sing. Usually I take comfort in seeing the night sky full of stars, but tonight is an exception. I feel alone. Temporary. My premonition haunts me. I feel like I'm no more than a character in someone's story, and I might, my entire world might, at any moment, blink out of existence.

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Roger's stories and essays have been published in *Natural Bridge*, *The Tampa Review*, *Passages North*, *Runner's World*, and other magazines and journals. His short story collection, *Erratics*, won the George Garrett Contest and was published by the Texas Review Press. "Fireflies" was awarded first place in the *Third Coast* fiction contest. "Numbers" was awarded first place in *The Ohio Writer* fiction contest, and his short story "My Suff" was featured in a dramatic reading at the Cleveland Playhouse. As a former science teacher he's still fascinated by the mysteries of the universe and the human heart. He now lives in Iowa with his wife, Gwen, and two giant dogs.





# Our Roof is the Nose of a Rocket

Poem by Christa Pagliei

Our entire building hums,  
as a beetle does before it takes to the air.  
We break bread and give thanks and make things  
with such frequency and repetition  
that our awareness of time passing  
is telescoping inward.  
We'll demand innocence,  
but we know the hum,  
this static-white-noise  
in the field of our mind  
is to remind us that  
the ratio of life lived  
to life left to live  
has shifted  
the first of many times.  
Climb six flights of pre-war stairs  
open the hatch to the roof so we  
can drink green wine from flea market crystal.  
It takes so little work to unhinge  
there is little doubt that we are living doors.  
We can calculate how concrete makes  
geometric shapes between cities.  
There is a cold front,  
and coats are thin so we  
cast a gaze across the skyline,  
a play's curtain.  
Audacious, we cut holes  
through and peek at the actors.  
From the roof of that building  
with it's wild hum  
like buzzing wings  
we dopplar out  
convinced that, tomorrow  
we will lift avenues  
and blocks and all  
with only our will.

# Greased Lightning

Poem by Lori Widmer

It's like old times  
the way we are laughing in  
this dive bar, the smell of  
stale fry oil soaked into  
the wooden tables our  
elbows stick to.

My friend is telling us about  
the day the upper-class boy  
popped her cherry—

only the details now are hilarious  
and not heart-racing like  
it was then, but the  
way we are laughing, it's

as though the decades hadn't gone  
anywhere and we were  
those nubile, smooth-limbed does  
burning simultaneously with  
embarrassment and promise

when the world was at our  
feet and we were too unsure of  
how to tread—

The papers that year marveled at  
balloon angioplasty and test tube  
babies and the first successful  
transatlantic balloon flight


and Jim Jones would change the way  
we look at Kool-Aid forever—

but we were inventing our own vocabulary,  
racy admissions whispered behind  
hands, our heartbeats and the  
ache between our legs matched the


hard rock thrums vibrating from the  
muscle cars driven by boys with wild  
hair and no inhibitions—

they'd drive by slowly, trying  
out their best Kenickie come-ons,  
we'd respond with Rizzo taunts  
then turn away and lock arms, laughing

just as we are now, drunk on  
the reflection we see  
every time we close our eyes.



Christa Pagliei is a writer and media producer from Wyckoff, NJ living in Brooklyn, New York. A published poet and fiction writer, she co-created the podcast *Lost Signal Society*- a series horror/fantasy/sci-fi plays. Additionally, she's a Film and TV professional working on shows like *Succession*, *Sneaky Pete*, *Mr.Robot* and many more.



Lori Widmer is a full-time freelance writer and editor who writes for businesses and trade publications. She was nominated for the 2016 Pushcart Prize. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Philadelphia Stories*.



# Paternoster Lakes

looking down on the Grinnell Valley, Glacier National Park, Montana

Poem by Ryan Halligan

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Five blue pools of water in the mountains  
sewn together by strings of icy streams—  
half-decade of the rosary, or full  
if each bead counts twice.  
Dammed by moraines dropped by moving masses

of ice, each could be its own mystery.  
Above the green and red strips of sediment  
lies a lonely frozen tarn that showers  
the four beads below.  
Snow drifts block its path from unsure footfalls.

But glacier lilies finish the prayer,  
trail receding ice, lift the spring up slopes  
with their golden crowns, delicate heads bowed  
until dormancy,  
when they'll store the spark in bulbs.



Ryan is a writer living and working in the Philadelphia area. He holds an MA in Writing Studies from Saint Joseph's University and writes poetry and creative non-fiction.



# Clay

Patricia Sammon – Second Place Contest Winner

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Sam asks, "What are we doing here?" and you don't know if he means here, in Flanders, or more generally, here on God's green earth, which here, in Flanders is not green but mud-covered and cratered and incapable of sending up any other crop but barbed wire. Or if he means still here, at the edge of this pit—because the horse that was drowning in the mire is now still.

So you tell Sam that "What are we doing here?" is a rich man's question. Then you step back inside the billet and tell Charley that if the three of you set off right away for the trenches there'll be time for a quick swim before you have to report for duty. Charley can understand what people say to him just fine. It's answering with any sense that's impossible for him. Charley picks up his helmet and canteen and says, "Hymn 34, all rise." The three of you set off across the three mile distance from the billets to the trenches as easily as if you were still sewer workers living in Manchester and setting off down Portland Street for another day of tunneling beneath the city. A Red Cross wagon swerves in front of you. Charley chimes, "Lord High Mayor likes butter on his toast" and at once such a happiness seeps into your raspy mood—not unlike butter into toast—because the two best people to have in a tunnel with you are Charley and Sam. Down in that deep dark, inside that scraping silence, you want to be with men you've known all your life. The time the sewer main caved in, and the heavy hand of earthworks was pinning the three of you in place, infiltrating nostrils, eyes, lips, Charley whistled a tune – and you knew it was his wordless way of saying what he had no words for: *Be absolutely still. Panic uses up the little air we've got. Rescuers will be here presently.*

Yesterday an officer with an important look about him pulled you aside and said, "You sewer moles are easy to spot— you're all too small and too old to be soldiers. A German spy with perfect English could overhear that simpleton in your crew and strike up a friendly conversation, asking how the tunneling is going. Your fellow will chat away about how the tunnel is now all the way across No Man's Land. How, in fact it's almost directly under enemy front lines. How we're just a day or two from setting our mine and blowing a few thousand Germans to Kingdom Come. That daft fellow of yours is a danger to our mission."

In response, you stepped up onto a crate of canned meat and you faced the officer, very close: eyes, nose and mouth. You didn't say, "The one thing Charley can't do is join in a chat." Instead you said, in words as solid as a landlord's fist to a door, "Charley is Charley. Nerves-of-steel." To which the military man

said, "If you were a proper soldier, I'd have you court martialed for..." But just then the klaxon sounded and everyone, even the officer, had to put on a gas mask, and that was that.

Walking along with Charley and Sam toward the front lines you concentrate on keeping clear of the motor lorries rushing officers to and fro, and the mule teams laboring to bring rations and water bags to the trenches, and the general supply wagons hauling armament so that the low thud of shelling and the high clatter of machine gun fire need never cease. Sam points to a German aeroplane lifting into the blue. When the three of you reach the canal you see that there will be no swim. A thousand concussed fish, floating on their sides, are staring up at you as you stare down. You look back at the scene behind the billets. An immense observation balloon is being winched down. The man in the balloon's basket is still aiming his long lens at the German lines. Not for the first time the basket puts you in mind of the one that's said to be positioned at a chopping block to catch the head of an executed man after the axe falls. You are grateful never to have seen such a sight. Sam has told you that here in Flanders, someone guilty of desertion or cowardice is killed by firing squad, and you're glad never to have seen that sight either. The shadow of the oblong balloon washes over the three of you, conferring some kind of luck, or perhaps not.

When you enter the reserve trench, you hunker along, careful to keep below the lip of the sandbags while also being careful not to lose your footing on the slick boards. Twenty yards along, you take a left, up a communication trench and you nod to a group of soldiers swallowing scoops of mud colored bully-beef. One of the soldiers says, *Hey, sewer moles, how's the peace and quiet down there?*—and you laugh because, fair enough—these Tommies have only to raise a helmet on a stick to find out how many snipers are dedicated to goal of killing them. You continue along another support trench and eventually approach the sentry who is guarding the mouth of the tunnel. Today's password is *Lord Nelson*. The three of you wait for a length of time that is equal to a quick dip in the canal and then, sure enough the night tunnelers appear. As they climb up the ladder of the shaft, they are blinking. They give you their report: *seven and a half feet dug. Good progress. Candle went out twice but probably not monoxide because the mouse in the cage didn't swoon. No sounds of Fritz digging. All in all, a quiet shift.* Then the off-duty tunnelers unwrap the pads from their boots and hand you the cotton batting and then they set off on their three mile walk to



claim the cots at the billet. You don't tell them about the fish in the canal. They'll know soon enough.

The sentry pours each of you a measure of rum which, when gulped, briefly and warmly acquaints you with the entire reach of your throat and the hollow of your stomach. You wrap your boots and descend the shaft and begin to make your muffled way along the tunnel. There is a sequence by which the sounds of the surface world fade: the first to be lost are the small sounds such as the moans of wounded men. Then, a hundred feet along, it's as if machine guns were never invented. Another hundred feet of trundling, and the shrieks of mortar fire are no more. You continue your crouched journey, your helmet skimming the dirt ceiling, your shoulders almost fully claiming the breadth of the passage. You have to mind your footing as you step along the tracks for the wagon trolleys while you also try not to step on the air hose. At regular intervals you have to step past a single wagon trolley. You've traveled almost the full half-mile length of the tunnel, aware of the warm smell of earth and the cold smell of stones, all the while thinking of home and you're worried that thinking about home could be a bad omen. You think of the cellar room in the alley off Portland Street. Your wife, sitting at the wooden bench, taking up her knitting. Her cousins, Nellie and Mary, home from their shifts at the cotton mills, both as stooped as you are as you continue jogging the distance. In the dark of your head you persist in contemplating the whole lamp-lit scene of the room, all the while wishing you could stop because maybe the oblong shadow meant today there will be an invisible pocket of monoxide. Or maybe today you will accidentally breach the wall of a German tunnel—and then what you would come upon is not your wife, setting down her knitting needles but the whole lamp-lit surprise of three Germans setting down their shovels and reaching for their revolvers.

You reach the utmost end of the tunnel. The night crew has left the lamp to dig by. The candle and the caged mouse are both trembling though the air seems satisfactory. You place your hand to the working face of the tunnel, a little ritual you perform at the beginning of every shift, for no particular reason. Then you lean back on the diagonal of the wooden board. You take up the grating tool between your legs so that your feet are on the cross bar, and your hands are on the handles. No one had to tell you Flanders clay is just like Manchester clay: same sweet slip of almost oily earth. You press the grafting tool to the wall of earth and kick out the first brick of the day which Sam grabs and drops into a burlap sack and which Charley gathers as the first sandbag of the day and sets in the trolley. Within moments the three of you—kicker, bagger and trammer, have the rhythm. You are deep inside the elation of knowing you are good at your work and that you'll never have to stop because the war will never end.

Behind you a sapper quietly guides the full trolley back up the track a ways so he can unload into the waiting trolley and return. Another sapper is carefully setting down a few wooden boards to have at the ready. As you press and twist and tug, you indulge a lovely thought: wouldn't it be fine if you and Charley and Sam were the very crew that completes this particular tunnel. After so many months of rotating shifts and a half mile of digging, you'd have the great excitement of having the sappers rushing along to you, unspooling the detonating wire, packing the explosives into the earth, tamping them well in place. Then all of you would be making a waddling sprint for the shaft ladder and up on the surface you'd be finding a hiding place so you could look across No Man's Land and see thousands of tons of earth lift high into the air and hang there, heavily aloft, for several additional seconds, before relenting and returning to the surface

in the form of dead men and armament and wood and steel. And what had once been a hillside would be dirt that belonged to nothing.

Press of feet, twist of hands, you kick out another slab and another—like a succession of stillborn babes being dropped into sacking and consigned to eternal rest. You’ve never seen a baby being born, stillborn or alive, but you’ve seen three young children, each wrapped in a winding cloth and lowered into a pauper’s grave with all the other typhus victims. Yes, you’ve seen that. To shiver off the thought you almost say aloud that it would be fine indeed to be the crew that completes the tunnel, but of course you say nothing. There’s no talking down here. The work must be conducted silently. The boots must be padded. The burlap bags must be placed, not dropped into the trolley, because, as close as your tunnel is to the German front lines, there must surely be Hun tunnels setting off in the opposite direction, perhaps no more than a few feet above or below, and the enemy diggers must not learn of your existence.

The sob comes on you of a sudden and almost in time, you manage to muffle it in the crook of your elbow. It was just the choked thought of that beautiful horse that lost her footing and slipped into the muddy crater. Just the sight of her clambering uselessly in the slime. You knelt down on both knees at the edge of the crump hole, and looked into her great, searching eyes. They were the color of rich earth. Her whole body was the color of rich earth. There was no way to tell her that rescue was impossible. That she could not be hauled up out the sins of mankind. That her thrashing was only hurrying her drowning. So, yes you took out your revolver. It was a merciful thing to do in a wrongful world.

Sam signals *Wait, Stop*. You know he’s mistaken your sob for a burst of monoxide that is theoretically possible because you deviate from time to time out of the clay and into jumbles of shale and gravel. You oblige and hold up the little mouse that seems untroubled by any monoxide, or by the fact that he is in

a cage, in the companionship of men under No Man’s Land. You reach into your pocket and crumble a little iron cake into the cage—just for the pleasure of seeing the mouse’s pleasure—the quick tongue, the twitch of whiskers. You crumble another bit of rations. A few weeks ago Sam pointed to the fields behind the infirmary and said that one day farmers would have to crumble lime onto the ground because so much chlorine gas had rolled across this place. The thought startled you—that the ground itself would need to heal.

Charley has the steady nerves and Sam has the keen hearing. Sam’s pointing upwards, wide eyed. You can hear nothing except the feeble issuance of the air hose but you continue to look up at the blank of the overhead clay. Sam nods, excited, alarmed. Charley hands you the long stick that’s stored near the trolley. You slide the stick into the ceiling of the tunnel and then you bite the protruding end, clenching your jaw. Instantly you can feel an intermittent trembling. Minute vibrations are buzzing through your lips, jaw, sinuses. Sam is right. There are Germans digging very nearby—above and off to the right.

If it were not the case that your tunnel now reaches almost to the German front lines—if the tunnel were perhaps only halfway across or even three quarter’s across, then you’d dig in a fury towards these enemy diggers and you’d attack them the way a lamprey strikes through the dark waters and latches onto the side of an idling trout. But with the tunnel so close to being able to deliver a mine that will blow up a thousand Germans in their trenches, you do not attack the diggers. You do not reveal yourselves. But your mind, thinking of them, is like an unexploded shell in their midst.

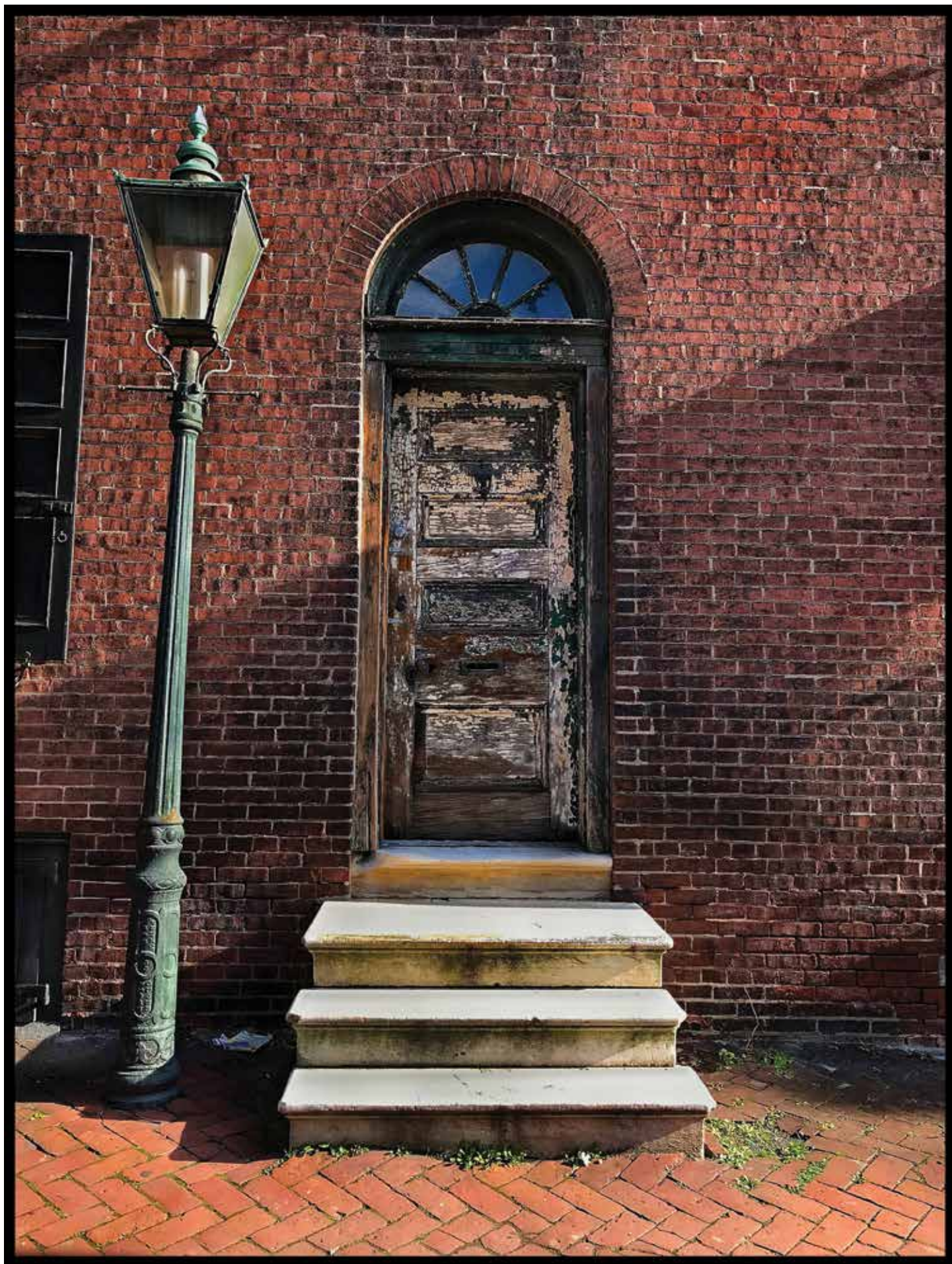
Sam gives the signal to keep digging. Making not a sound, you slide the grating tool into the yielding clay. Sam guides the brick into the burlap bag, passing it to Charley. In an hour you have achieved almost a foot of distance. You set a plank on either side to support the newly won distance.

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But then, loud—a sneeze. You look at Sam and Charley. You know. It's the German diggers. They have also been making progress. They are now directly overhead. And they are not taking care to be quiet. Perhaps they feel safe because they're still so close to their own front line. One of the men is dragging a shovel or spade. He's tired. One of them, perhaps the one who sneezed, has a runny nose. There is repeated sniffing. You and Sam and Charley take out your revolvers and make ready for the possibility that the Germans will tumble through. For some un-clocked amount of time you remain halted, motionless, while they proceed overhead.

Eventually the sounds of their digging become barely discernable, faint as the smell of coal smoke in the socks that arrive in a package from home. But Sam is Sam. He delays giving the start gesture so you spend the time wondering if the reason you keep thinking of home today is because the next letter from home will bring bad news, or because your wife is about to receive bad news about you. When the mouse squeaks for no reason, you flinch such that you almost tumble from the board. The tempting notion that it would be your crew, today, that would complete the tunnel was fanciful; and now the time lost to motionless waiting has ensured this will not be the case. Nonetheless, when Sam gives the start gesture you slam your feet onto the tool and you twist it fast. Clay to bag, bag to trolley and another board up. The only sound is the slide and suck of clay as it is being claimed from its quiet and sent up to the surface as stacked sandbags.

If talking were allowed, and if you were a talkative type, you might try to find words for a mysterious quality possessed by the clays of Manchester and Flanders. When stared at directly they have a brownish-gray color, but as you look away, they gain a momentary bluish cast. The gliding blue is not an ordinary

color—it is the departure of a color. The day you were departing Manchester, you and your wife stood in the crowded square. You told her goodbye and she said she'd send you wool socks. Then she said something else but the sense of the words was submerged to the general noise because you were already turning away, attending to the orders of the sergeant calling for the tunnelers to file in. You'd like to tell Sam and Charley that the flash of blue in the clay puts you in mind of how your wife said one more blue thing to you and how it was beautiful because it didn't have to become ordinary words such as "Mind, be careful, Luv" or "They say you'll be home in a month." The blur of sound remained everything she would have said if she had words sufficient to the pride and fear and anxiety she felt. Continuing to dig, you decide you will not speak to Sam and Charley this evening, as you are strolling back to the billet, about a shade of blue that cannot be directly considered. The words to speak of it glide out ahead of you.

As you work the grating tool you wonder if perhaps the clay of Manchester and the clay of Flanders are not merely similar. Perhaps they are one in the same. Perhaps the layer of clay you used to dig through to construct the sewers continues southward beneath places you've never seen—Birmingham and London, then beneath the English Channel that the ship crossed as it carried you and Sam and Charley to the war, such that the layer of clay reached into the depths of Flanders. You have just learned that such a distance is not so very great. In the most recent letter from home, written in the hand of the minister's wife, your wife told you that recent explosions in Flanders were said to have shaken the windows of London and startled Prime Minister Lloyd George and wasn't that a remarkable fact. But perhaps your wife had not dictated that sentence. Perhaps the minister's wife had read an article in the Manchester Times and suggested to Annie that her husband might like to know such a remarkable fact and Annie, puzzled—even frightened at the thought of rattled panes of glass, had agreed to the sentence being written and then she'd folded the letter and placed it into the parcel with some tins of condensed milk, some tobacco, some thick wool socks. But now that you think of it as you press your feet to the cross bar of the grating tool and grip the handle, maybe it wasn't your wife who'd sent the several pairs of woolen socks. Maybe it was Charley's wife or Sam's. The three of you always share whatever arrives in a parcel—not just the socks and tobacco but also the news about people who are nothing more than names to you.

Sam relieves you at the board. He'll do the clay-kicking for a while and you will load and bundle the burlap sacks. If the war never ends that would mean the parcels would never cease coming and this is as pleasant a thought as the one about being the team who completes this tunnel.

The ground all around you shudders violently, causing the three of you to jounce about. Never before have you experienced such a cataclysm. Sam is grinning. He gestures that some gargantuan shell must have landed just above. And he smirks as he points to himself and then moves his hands apart. Yes—it was probably a British shell that almost killed you, falling just short of German lines.

Coming to, the first thing you realize is that you were knocked out. You reach for the grating tool, the plank beside you, the mouse in its cage, the nearness of Sam and Charley but by the flats of your hands, your feet, your forehead you know you are

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trapped in a man-sized gap of air. *Sam, Charley* you call out and the immediate dirt keeps the names for itself. *Cave in* you inform yourself. You wonder if you are on your belly, facing the entire thickness of the world that includes China, or if you on your back looking up through a mere forty feet of dirt. Without strength or space in which to kick, you manage to arch your back. You turn your face so you can take a deep breath. Dirt falls into your ear. *Entombed*. It was the word you had meant not to think but now it is the word that is keeping you company as you consider the casket of your predicament.

A small part of you—perhaps the quivering mouse that is your heart, is desperate to tell you, before you lose the ability to think, that perhaps you are thinning to oblivion because carbon monoxide, which is the true enemy, is already moving through the passageways of your bloodstream. At this thought you send up a great foisting of panic that does not enlarge the gap whatsoever. You whistle some notes over and over. They are not part of any tune but they don't need to be. When you have stilled yourself, you conduct the interview that Sam would conduct when checking for gas poisoning: headache, confusion?

If Sam were here he could hold a lamp and check you for a bluing of the lips. You don't think you are suffering poisoning. The slump of your limbs is due to the cave-in, not gas. You feel yourself to be alert. In fact that is all you are. You are a buried alertness. You are something that the earth is thinking about—with fixed concentration.

The warmth of your body joins itself to the warmth of the dirt in a general numbness. You are no longer awake but you are not asleep. You are gliding in place. By means of shoulder blades and kneecaps, ankles, wrists you are traveling the pebbled layers, the gravels and the boulders, the totalities. Stuttering along, you come upon all the dead men—those buried in an instant by a land mine or a mortar shell, or buried with care in the infirm cemetery. You know them to be young men from Dorset and Bavaria, Brittany and forests of the Ardennes. In a juddering embrace you hold them all. You are the slants of water tables. The secrets of seeds. You are widespread. You are too vast to be rescued. What stretcher could hold you? What stretcher bearers could bear the weight of you? You are all of Flanders. You are a trembling that is matched to no shell or exploding mine. You are the tremendousness of the ground itself.

Quick as the scraping sound that startles you, you shrink back into the smallness of a man: two arms and two legs, hungry lungs, eyes meant for sky. Someone is approaching by means of a shovel. You fill the inch of air above your mouth with shouting. Even if it is a German tunneler about to come upon you, well—better to be found and then shot and become the color of rich earth and no longer foundering, than to live for some forgotten time before ceasing to.

Some sort of rod strikes your belly. You gasp and dirt falls into your mouth. There is an odd snort of expelled dirt that is different from your own snorting and spitting. The rod is a tube. Someone is blowing through it to clear the end of dirt and now he is speaking to you. Could it be the very officer who was in a flap about Charley; has he come all the way to the end of the tunnel to supervise the rescue. In your wild relief you can make no judgment about a high born accent.

He is giving you an instruction. "Wait for me to move the tube from my mouth to my ear and then give me a shout."

How long ought you to wait, you wonder? What is the distance, measured in time, between lips to ear as he turns his face?

"Here!" you shout. "Here!"

You listen to his response. "Conserve your air, chap. We'll very soon have you on velvet."

Already you are forgetting you were once someone fully alive in the living ground, joined to its mineral quickness, its trickling and seeping. Already you are forgetting what it was to be held by the dead earth, to be joined to all the stones and bones within it. Already you are becoming someone who, if told the blue in the clay was like the earth thinking of the sky or like the earth thinking of the water, would have no idea what that meant.


Already you have shrunk into yourself. And who else should you be but one of the diggers of the 170<sup>th</sup> tunneling company and proud to be so.

Already there is lamp light. Arms reaching. And then a voice making the report. "We've got the third one. We've got Ed."

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Patricia Sammon was born and raised in Canada. She graduated from Cornell University and then returned to Canada to complete graduate studies at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She now lives with her family in the United States. Her stories have appeared in *December*, *Narrative* and *MidAmerican Review*. Among her awards she has won a Nelson Algren (back when they had several winners a year), a Cecil Hackney and an Asheville Writers' Workshop. One of her stories is being anthologized in this year's Best Non-Required Reading.

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# Breaking 200

Poem by Sydney Doyle

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*"There is no time to think or savor the thrill of speed. And as you go down that strip, you don't see anything. It is a no-man's land." – Don Garlits*

Did it? Did it? Didn't it? It did! By God, it did. Don Daddy did it. Big Daddy broke hot rodding's barrier with a bam and a bale of smoke, barreling down the straight-away. Cheers from the bleachers. The rocket speed shock of the year we'd all been waiting for.

Did The Greek do it earlier in Illinois? All's I can say is today the Chrondek clocks called it. In Great Meadows, at the Island Dragway, Big Daddy Don Garlits did it.

But it happened so fast—couldn't see a damned thing. A shroud of fumes. Let's pause. Take it back. Slowly now, back up the quarter-mile belt of tarmac. The Swamp Rat back across the starting line. The amber bulbs blaring again.

Now our rare hour—clear the area!—Daredevil Don, engine revving, raring to tear track. Slower, now, watch how the slick-wedge car's back tires stir a whirl of smoke, burning rubber. How, like an arrow, this 2000 horsepower nightmare dragster blasts down the blacktop, shatters the barrier, buries its challenger in vapor and exhaust.

Watch the parachute burst from the back. Watch the car break to a halt. Watch Don Garlits turn the wheel, drive back, rattling down the strip, his parachute dangling limply behind, his white glove waving from the glittering mist, already clearing it.



Sydney Doyle grew up in the Great Meadows mucklands near the Delaware Water Gap. She received her MFA from Johns Hopkins University and is currently a Doctoral Fellow in English/Creative Writing at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. Her poems appear in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Canary*, *Waccamaw*, and elsewhere.





# Camp Vampire Kids

Joe Dornich – Third Place Contest Winner

Mom and I are driving to camp and playing the game where we think of jobs I could one day have that won't *compromise my condition*. That's how she phrases it. Mom and I spend a lot of time avoiding things that might compromise my condition.

"What about a blackjack dealer in Vegas?" I say.

Mom groans in that way that makes her nostrils flare.

"What's wrong with that? There are no windows, plus casinos are busier at night."

"So are emergency rooms. You could be a doctor."

"You always say that," I say, then turn and stare out the window. We pass a field and some white cows that look purple through the protective tint. "I could be a bouncer."

"Yeah?"

"At a strip club."

Mom takes her eyes off of the road just long enough to look me over all elbows and knees and reedy angles. "Who are you going to bounce?"

"Hey!"

She smiles and blows me a kiss.

The game continues. Mom and I go back and forth, suggesting jobs that are noble and practical (hers) or silly and adventurous (mine). What we don't say, what we never talk about, is that I'll be lucky if I live long enough to do any of them.

Mom pulls the car onto an off-ramp. "We need gas. You coming inside?"

I nod.

"Then get your gear on."

"I don't need it. I'll just run from the car to the store. I won't get burned."

Mom hits me with the full wattage of her pleading gaze. "Can we please not do this? Not again?"

"Fine."

Mom and I also stopped at a gas station the first year we went to camp. We were lost and went inside for directions. I had my gear on then too—the gloves, the jumpsuit, the face shield. I remember the man behind the counter, the way he stared at me even when Mom started speaking to him.

"Craryville?" he finally said, dragging his eyes from me to Mom. "What do you want to go there for?"

"We're headed to Camp Fun Without the Sun," Mom said, and when the man asked what that was, she told him about the camp and the kinds of kids that go there.

"Yeah?" he said, a smirk stretching across his face. "Like little monsters? Little vampires?" He turned to me, brought his fists to his mouth, and made fangs with his index fingers. Then he

hissed.

Mom lost her mind. Truly. There was a moment of micro-insanity where she just screamed questions at the cashier—*What the hell is your problem? What kind of person are you? Can't you see he's just a little boy?*—things like that.

The man didn't know any of the answers.

Mom put a hand on my shoulder, steered me towards the door. Then she stopped, turned around, and kicked over a display of Cool Ranch Doritos.

She was still fuming as we bounced along the camp's gravel driveway and entered the clearing in the Craryville forest. The other mothers took us inside, sat Mom down, poured her a jelly jar of white wine. They told her how they'd all been there before, how they'd all heard some version of judgment and cruelty spit at their kids. How people follow them through stores, snapping not-so-surreptitious pictures with their phones.

"Some jackass asks if my son is a vampire at least once a week," one of the mothers confessed. "Which is just so stupid. So ridiculous."

And it is. When I met Cameron a little later, he was, with his chubby cheeks and ginger crew cut, the least vampire-looking kid I have ever seen.

We've also been called Midnight's Children, Children of the Moon, Children of the Night, Shadow Kids, Nightwalkers, and Night Dwellers. Other people simply point or stare, exchanging whispers and laughter in a classless language all its own. But the most common attempt at creativity, the pejorative we hear again and again, is Vampire Kids.

I wish it were accurate. Imagine a vampire. Now take away the strength and the speed and the immortality, and what are you left with? A pale guy with a terminal reaction to the sun. That's who I am.

That's who we all are.

We're all born this way, but our genetic disorder lays dormant for a while. Depending on the particular variant, we'll get anywhere from four to six years of day living before it kicks on. Four to six years of pool parties and playgrounds. Of normalcy. Of friends.

I was lucky. I was eight when my immune system could no longer protect my body from the sun. Cameron jokes I was a late wilter. Then, I was young enough that Mom could coax me into my gear by playing to my imagination and sense of make-believe. She'd remind me that my UV-protectant jumpsuit was the kind astronauts wore. She called it my "special costume," and, for a while, it did make me feel special. Unique. Now it makes me feel like a freak everywhere I go. Everywhere but here.

Mom and I are one of the last families to arrive. We park beside the camp's main building: a long, single-story structure with dorm rooms on each side, and a kitchen and dining hall in the center. Us kids bunk up on one side of the building so we can stay up all night, watch movies, and play video games. The moms stay on the other side so they can talk, and drink wine, and sometimes cry and hug each other when they think we're not watching.

It's always pretty dark in here. Shadowy patches are intermittently interrupted by the faint glow of a few Edison bulbs. The building has plenty of windows, which are covered with a UV-protectant film, but they're also draped in a coal-black fabric with the heft and thickness of Victorian theater curtains. Dan and Karen don't like to take any chances. Mom and I have the same tint on our windows back home, but she, too, takes the curtain precaution. Our house doesn't get a lot of light either. All of our plants are plastic.

I shed my gear, and when my eyes adjust, I race down the hallway to my room and find Cameron. He's sitting cross-legged on his bunk amid piles of clothes and DVDs and video games. Cameron and I have been roommates at camp for the past four years, and since then, his method of "unpacking" has been to just dump everything on his bed, retrieving items as needed.

"Check it out," he says, holding up his copy of *Time Fighters II*. "You will soon succumb to the awesome power of my Mayan warrior."

"Yeah? Not if my knight's broadsword has anything to say about it."

"You two are a couple of dorks."

I look over and see Hannah lying on my bunk, her black hair fanned out on my white pillowcase like inverted starlight.

I met Hannah last year, her first at camp. A bunch of us were in the game room, flopped on beanbags, watching a movie. She came in and sat on the small square of available carpet beside me. I noticed the faint band of cinnamon-colored dots that run under each of Hannah's eye and over the bridge of her nose. "I like your freckles," I said, which, admittedly, is not the smoothest line ever uttered in the history of mankind (it's probably not even the smoothest line in the history of that game room), but even so, Hannah smiled, brought a self-conscious hand to her face.

"Thanks," she said. "The result of my moonbathing I guess."

I know she was joking, but I still couldn't help myself from picturing Hannah in her backyard, in a bikini, supine in a band of silver light. I almost fell off my beanbag.

And now here she is again. After the grim limbo of home-schooled loneliness, she's back in my room, on my bunk, grinning that she's caught me in a moment of unguarded nerderdy. It's fine. Hannah can criticize our video game obsession all she wants, but we all know that she's logged more hours in the *Time Fighters* arena than Cam and I put together.

When the rest of the kids and moms have settled in, Dan and Karen gather everyone in the dining hall.

"Helloooo campers," Dan resounds with his usual showman flare, smiling through his beard that's gone grayer since last summer.

The lighting from the Edison bulbs lends a theatrical glow to the dining room. It's an affect Dan embraces. It's a behavior Karen tolerates.

"Karen and I happy to see a lot of familiar faces and to welcome some new families."

I look around and spot some new kids, maybe five or six years old, most likely recently diagnosed. I envy them. They sit beside their mothers, giddy at the prospect of a week filled with games

and playmates, and no such thing as a bedtime. They don't yet know how camp also offers a break from the outright judgment or veiled pity of strangers. They haven't yet come to depend on it.

Dan continues his speech. He runs through the schedule of field trips and nocturnal activities, the ways in which all of us will spend the week "embracing the night." Then Dan introduces Katie, his and Karen's daughter, and the reason they started this camp.

Katie is the oldest person with our condition. Not just here at camp, or in the country, but in the world. When I first came here, I didn't think much about that, or maybe I thought it was cool. But now I sometimes lie awake and think about how difficult and lonely that fact must be. Katie is the living embodiment of all of our hopes and, at the same time, all of our fears.

She'll be twenty-five in August.

Katie is in charge of the junior counselors, and now that we're thirteen, Cameron, Hannah and I are old enough to qualify. She welcomes each of us back, reminds us of our various duties and responsibilities. She tells us the Assignment Board will be finished after dinner. Then, while the rest of the campers finish unpacking, the moms head to the kitchen to prepare a feast.

It's mainly moms that accompany us kids to camp. Some of the dads who live close enough and can get away for the weekend drive up for the last two days. Those days are always hard for Mom.

Dad didn't take my diagnosis well. He always enjoyed a beer or two after work, but the day we came back from the doctor's, I watched him pull a bottle of bourbon from the top of the fridge and drink from it straight. He started going out more and more, staying out later and later. One night, he climbed into the back of a police car and demanded to be taken to an establishment called "The Tit Mouse." When the officer informed Dad that was he not a cab driver, and his cruiser was not a taxi, it was then that Dad became what would later be described as "insolent."

So, some Thursday night/Friday morning, this cop knocked on our door only to find the sleep-smeared face of an eight-year-old on the other side. Mom was working nights then.

"You here all alone?" he said.

"My dad is supposed to be watching me."

The cop spent the next few seconds looking at me, and then over at his cruiser where Dad was slumped against the window, asleep in the backseat. The cop had this look on his face, as if the effort of turning from me to his car was causing him a deep and mysterious pain. Eventually, he let Dad go, saying that he wasn't going to arrest him because Dad had no priors. Which I didn't understand. At the time, I thought "priors" was police slang for priorities. It turns out that cop and I were both right.

Mom tried to defend Dad, telling me that he was just scared and confused. She said that, given time, he would be back to his old self. But less than a year after that night, Dad left us and moved to Phoenix, a place that averages 351 days of sunshine a year. So enough about Dad.

As I'm finishing my second helping of Karen's lasagna, I see that Katie has somehow intuited my most secret of desires, or it's just a stroke of amazing fortune, but either way, I'm overjoyed when I check the Assignment Board. Hannah and I have been assigned Lifeguard Duty for Midnight Swim.

Dan and Karen buy glow-in-the-dark items in bulk. I sit on the dock, watching a lake teeming with phosphorescent beach balls,

Frisbees, and pool noodles. Neon green inner tubes glowing like giant radioactive doughnuts. Campers splash around, and luminescent blues and greens and yellows reflect and ripple in the dark water, the colors pulsing and undulating like some submerged aurora borealis. Hannah sits beside me, our legs dangling off the edge of the dock, our feet in the water. Our knees nowhere close to touching.

I think about mentioning my aurora borealis comparison to Hannah. Things haven't been going as well as I'd hoped. I've spent the majority of our shift trying not to stare at Hannah, then smiling awkwardly and quickly looking away when she catches me. Instead, I tell her about the *Ipomoea Alba*, how it's a night-blooming morning glory. I don't tell Hannah I know this because it was the topic of my botany paper. Mrs. Sedota, my online science teacher, let me choose it. When I admitted I selected that flower because I thought Hannah would like it, that it would give us something to talk about, Mrs. Sedota said I had "admirable foresight."

But now as I hear the words spill from my head, I realize that only someone who doesn't really interact with other people would think their science paper a suitable source of flirty banter.

"It's commonly called the moonflower," I say, "because when its alabaster petals unfold, they resemble a full moon."

"That's . . . cool," Hannah says. Then she raises her eyebrows, offers a slack-tightrope smile.

Even in the dark, I can tell it's a look of forced interest. I wish one of the campers would start drowning and save me.

"Yeah," I continue, like an idiot. "Even though many people consider the moonflower beautiful during the day, it's at night when they really come alive. Kind of like—"

You. *Like you*. Like you. Just say it. Why can't I say it?

"Kind of like."

"Mushrooms," Cameron yells as he rumbles past us, leaps from the end of the dock, and cannonballs into the lake.

Later that night, Cam and I are in the game room, slumped on beanbags, awash in the kaleidoscopic glow of *Time Fighters II*. The *Time Fighters* franchise allows players to choose warriors from various epochs and then battle to the death. Mom doesn't care for the violence, but it's not like she can tell me to go outside and play either. Currently, my medieval knight is getting his gallant ass handed to him by Cameron's Mayan warrior.

"You should just tell her how you feel," he says. "Let her know how infatuated you are."

"Who?"

Cam is good enough at *Time Fighters* to turn away from the screen, to stare at me and through my bullshit while still fending off attacks from my knight. If there is a perk to a life spent indoors and with little social interaction, it is that we are all excellent at video games.

"Yeah, fine, I like Hannah. But I wouldn't say I'm infatuated with her."

"You spent all of last summer writing her that poem. Comparing her skin to . . . what was it . . . midnight snow?"

It was moonlit snow, and I only spent half the summer working on it. Not like it matters. Not like I gave Hannah the poem, or even finished writing it.

Cameron nails my knight twice with his Jaguar Claw Strike before I can parry with my broadsword.

"Either way, you better get moving," he says. "Her mom told my mom they might not be coming back next year."

"What? Like not coming back to camp? Why not?"

Cameron shrugs his shoulders. Then his character catches mine upside the head with his obsidian war club. There are car-

toonish bursts of bright red gore, and I'm a goner.

The next afternoon, I roll over from a nap to find Hannah standing over my bed. She's backlit by this soft, ethereal white light. She looks like an angel, and I must be dreaming.

"You have a lot of drool on your pillow," she says. "Like, more than seems normal."

"What?" I sit up. "What's happening?"

"Check it out," Hannah says, and then steps aside to reveal the window, its curtains drawn, and beyond them a sky choked with clouds the color of dirty cotton.

I can't decide which is more beautiful—the view from the window or the smile on Hannah's face. These shadowless gray days have, over the years, come to represent one indelible thing: freedom. The freedom to be outside during the day, to feel, however briefly, like ordinary kids. By the time we scramble to the door, Mom is already there, measuring the UV index with her solar meter. It's a 0.8, the lower end of the potential threat spectrum. Still, Mom groans.

"I'll wear a hat."

"And long sleeves," she says.

"Fine."

I change clothes, and Mom warns me not to smile at the sky so my braces don't get struck by lightning. Then she laughs. Because yes, as if having an extremely rare and deadly allergy to the sun wasn't enough of a genetic kick in the dick, I also have crooked teeth.

I return to the clearing just as Cameron and Katie have almost finished picking teams for kickball. Cameron has snagged Hannah. It's between me and Jacob, one of the new five-year-olds, who is running around chasing a grasshopper. It's Katie's pick. We lock eyes. I try to project a neutrality, to suppress all emotion, but my face must not be cooperating because Katie shoots me a sly, knowing grin. Then she picks Jacob.

Cameron places Hannah in centerfield because she possesses an athletic grace, a seemingly effortless speed. Cameron sticks me in far leftfield because I do not. Just as we're about to run to our positions, Hannah removes her hoodie. She's wearing a white tank top underneath. Even with the cloud cover, this is a careless and dangerous degree of exposure. I think about saying something. Then I notice how Hannah's tank top allows some of her black bra strap to wink through, and I keep my mouth shut.

Instead, I think about what Cam said.

"Dan told me they might put in a zip line next year," I shout across the outfield. "That'll be pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah. Maybe," she shouts back.

"Maybe. Why maybe?"

Hannah points toward home. Mom is up. She does a little shimmy at the plate, rubs her toes in the dirt like a bull about to charge. Then she smiles and waves to me.

"Move back," Hannah says. "She's got a good leg."

"What? No she doesn't."

But Hannah shakes her palm at me, urging me farther back, farther away. I walk towards her.

"Hey. You're coming back next year, right?"

"Maybe. My mom is still deciding."

"Deciding what?"

And then, sure enough, a deep, rubbery *whomp* rings out across the field, and Mom sends one flying into the gray sky.

Hannah sprints across the field, gets underneath the ball just in time to pluck it from the air. She throws the ball back to the pitcher but doesn't jog back to her position.

"Deciding what?" I shout once more. And then again.

But Hannah just stands there, staring at home plate, not answering.

Just as we get our third out, the clouds begin to dissipate, and the sky shifts from gray to blue like battlefield smoke, and we all run for cover.

Hannah's been assigned Dish Duty for all of dinner, and I don't see her again until we're all headed to the fire pit. Dan builds a bonfire, and we sit around it, listening to the crickets and cicadas, staring at light-drunk moths that fly too close to the flames. We listen to Dan's scary stories about the spectral inhabitants of nearby farmhouses or the variety of monsters that lurk in the woods. His stories are silly, or dramatic, but overall ineffective at inducing fright. None of us kids are afraid of the dark. As someone starts strumming a guitar for a sing-along, I see Hannah stand up. She walks halfway around the fire pit, nudges my foot with hers.

"Wanna go for a walk?"

We head into the forest. A summer breeze swirls through the branches, the leaves, making their moon shadows flutter. We arrive at the lake, shed our shoes, and walk around its bank. I feel the cool hug of mud around my feet.

"Sorry about this afternoon," Hannah says.

"S'okay."

"It's just that my mom didn't want me to say anything until we knew for sure."

"That you're not coming back?"

"That I'm getting better."

"What?"

We stop walking. Hannah stares at the moonlit lake, its inky shimmer. Then her face breaks into a huge smile. "It's actually kind of amazing."

Hannah tells me how her dermatologist has been incrementally increasing her exposure to UV light, and that, so far, she hasn't been burned.

"I don't know what to say," I tell her, because I don't.

"I know, right? I think my doctor is even more excited than my parents. He says I'm like one in a million. Can you believe that?"

Yes.

"We're still being careful, making sure I respond well to the treatments and that my tolerance is increasing, but if it's true, just think about it."

I do. I imagine Hannah outside during the day, walking along a beach, playing in a park. I imagine her with other kids, and while their faces are blurry, nondescript, I clearly see them basking in the sun's warm glow. They are unharmed and unafraid. They are not me.

I feel my face flush, and my vision goes watery with tears. I wipe my eyes before Hannah notices, grateful, once again, for the dark.

"So you're not coming back to camp then?"

"Well, I mean, not if I'm getting better. Mom thinks we should give the spot to someone more—"

"Sick?"

"Deserving." Hannah cocks her head and what's left of her smile falls. "Are you mad at me?"

We just stand there for a second. Fireflies blink on and off. Sounds from the sing-along drift through the silence. *This Little Light of Mine*. I never minded that song, if I even thought about it at all, but now the lyrics sound sickeningly sweet.

"No. You would be missed is all. Cameron and I would miss you."

"Aww," Hannah says, leaning in for a hug. "I'd miss you guys, too. You two are like my best buds here."

And while I'm so grateful to be this close to Hannah, to feel her body against mine, to have her arms wrapped around me, I'm even more grateful that she can't see my face.

Later that night, we all load up into a rented school bus. Dan stands at the front, tells us we're getting a special midnight tour of the Albany Zoo. Whoops and cheers bounce around me, echoing throughout the bus's metal interior. We wander through the Reptile House, staring at snakes and lizards indifferent to our curiosity. We see zebras asleep in the middle of a field, huddled together in a herd of black and white. The grand finale of our tour is the tiger exhibit. A crescent moon of moms and campers belly-up to the enclosure's concrete railing. Soon there's the clang of an unseen gate, and a group of tigers slowly pad out into the night. Everyone is instantly captivated—by the deep orange of their fur, their stripes as black as a new moon night. By the two cubs that drink from a makeshift watering hole, the pink wink of their tongues. Even Cameron nudges me in the side with his elbow, points to a massive tiger raking his claws along the length of a log.

A zookeeper tells us that most of these tigers were born here, which means in captivity. Which means they are forced to ignore their nocturnal instincts, to conform to the zoo's daytime schedule and perform for its sunlit pageantry.

That's what I see anyway. I see a group of animals who look angry and annoyed at being awakened to entertain some sick kids. I see their orange fur turned a sickly yellow in the light of the zoo's sodium arc lamps. I see one tiger rub its head along the side of another, both of them making a low, repetitive, guttural sound. The zookeeper tells us this is called "chuffing," that it's the way tigers greet one another.

Tiger chuffing sounds like Mom blowing her nose when she has a cold.

Over in the far corner of the enclosure, I spot a medium-sized tiger. She stares right at me, narrowing her eyes, and flashing her fangs. Then she turns her back to me, lifts her tail, and shoots out a jet of pee.

On the bus ride back to camp, I take one of the seats in the back, sprawl out, and feign sleep so no one can sit next to me, so no one will bother me. It works for a while (I use the bus's occasional bumps to sneak a peek). We hit what feels like a pretty good pothole, and I peak Hannah's legs beside my seat. She must know that I'm faking, that I'm not really asleep, because she stands there for a really long time. I force my eyes all the way shut, and when I crack them open again, she's gone.

At some point, my sleep feigning must work because I doze off. The next thing I know, Mom is shaking me awake. We're back at camp, back just before sunrise, the sky purpling, a red thread of light on the horizon. Everyone scurries inside and gets ready for bed.

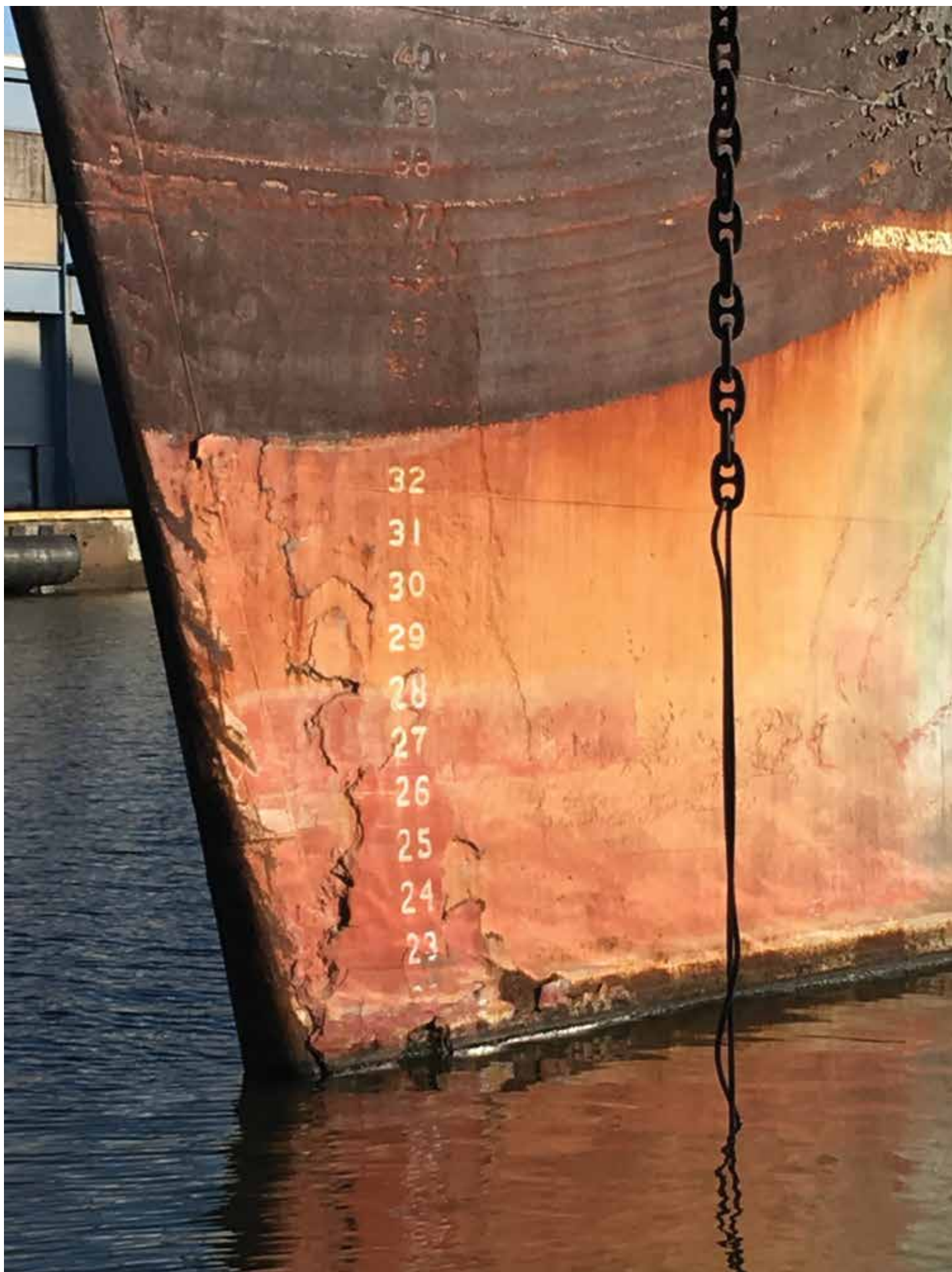
Maybe it's because I napped on the bus, but I have trouble falling asleep. I've spent the last few hours tossing and turning or staring at the ceiling. Finally, I sit up. I pull the curtains aside. Sunlight streams in through the tint, lending a lavender glow to the room.

*Why does Hannah get to be better? What makes her so special?* I think, even though I could answer that question a hundred different ways.

But maybe it's not just Hannah. Maybe the rest of us can get better too, can start being normal again. Maybe we already are.

I get up and dig through the dresser for some clothes. Cam-





eron rustles in his sleep, cocooned among his treasures like some Egyptian Pharaoh. As I ease the door closed and make my way through the hallway's shadowy emptiness, I think about my odds, the way hope can quickly devolve into delusion. I know I'm not getting better, and I hate that Hannah is. I want her to be sick and weird, like me. With me. I'd rather Hannah be sick and with me, than healthy and with someone else.

Maybe that cashier all those years ago was right. Maybe I am monster.

I grab the handle of the front door and take a breath.

Maybe if this doesn't work out, I deserve what I get.

Some kids have said getting burned feels like being stung by a cloud of bees; others imagine it's like getting pierced with hundreds of arrows—an invisible assault that is both localized and all-encompassing. But when I step outside and into the clearing, all I feel is the sun's warmth on my skin. It's a sensation that, after years of dormancy, ignites so many memories. Picnics in the park. Fourth of July parades. Dad and I at the beach, playing in the waves, and then secreting some seawater back to the sand to pour on Mom's back.

But then something happens. The warmth grows hotter and hotter, almost as if someone is turning a dial, exponentially increasing the output of sunlight. My memories get eclipsed by a searing pain, the sun's needle teeth tearing into my arms and face. I have trouble catching my breath. It feels like I'm drowning in heat. I try heading back towards the safety of the building, but doing so makes me dizzy. Pockets of nausea bloom and burst in my throat. My vision goes blurry. The cars in the parking lot and the woods beyond melt into one another.

The sky swirls, or I do, but either way, I stumble and find myself on my hands and knees. The waxy blades of grass feel cool to the touch, and there is a blink of relief as my face is out of the sun, shielded by the back of my head. The pull to stay like this, to somehow crawl inside the safety my own shadow, is too strong, and my body goes limp.

I wake up in my room. A dull but persistent heat pulses from my body. I can feel my heart beat behind my eyes. Mom sits on the edge of my bed, applying aloe to my arm, which is swollen and blistered and the raw, inflamed color of a glazed ham. Mom must feel my eyes on her because she stops, lifts her head. Her face is puffy and slick with tears. Her eyes are as red as my arms.

"Hi," I say.

"What the hell? What were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry."

"No," she yells, startling us both. Two new tears leak from her eyes and trail down her face. "That's not good enough. You have to give me more than that."

So I tell her about Hannah. About how she's getting better, and how envious and angry and scared that makes me.

"I don't understand," Mom says. "Aren't you happy for her?"

"Yes. And no. Not completely. If Hannah gets better, she'll start a different life. She'll no longer need us. She'll leave and she won't come back."

"What makes you think she'd do that?"

"Dad did."

Mom goes silent. The wrinkle between her eyes deepens, and her mouth moves as if to say something, but nothing comes out.

I place my hand on her balled fist, give it a squeeze. "How long was I out there?"

"Two minutes. Maybe less. Katie saw you go outside."

"Is she the one that—?"

"Yes."

"Oh shit," I say, and Mom's eyes widen. "Sorry. Is she okay?"

"She got some minor burns. She says you've heavier than you look."

We just sit together for a while. Then Mom finishes applying the aloe and bandages my arms. She gives me some aspirin, tells me to get some rest.

The throaty rumble of the bus's engine wakes me up. Dan and Karen are taking everyone to Mega-Fun Zone, a bowling alley/arcade that touts the largest Laser Tag arena in upstate New York.

When they're gone, I decide I need some air. I get up and get dressed, wincing with each movement. I shuffle down to the fire pit, ease myself down in one of the Adirondack chairs. A breeze blows in from the clearing, cooling my skin and stinging it at the same time. Birds—or if you believe Dan's stories—bats flit through the trees.

I hear the rustle of leaves and swing my flashlight to the source, illuminating Katie's face. She shields her eyes, and I kill the beam.

"You didn't want to go bowling?"

"Nah," she says. "The used shoes gross me out."

"Thanks for saving me. I'm sorry you got hurt."

"No big thing." Katie waves off my apology, but I can see her hand is bandaged. She sits beside me.

"Still. Thank you."

"Of course. You know this morning was the first time in almost nineteen years that I've felt the sun on my skin. With each birthday the doctors and reporters return, marveling at another year, another record set. They all want to know what I'm doing, how I'm outwitting our disease. But in all of these years, none of them ever bothered to ask if I'm happy."

"And are you?"

"I am today. I felt needed. Instead of just hiding in the shadows, waiting for the sun to set, I got to save you from doing something stupid."

I pick up a twig, toss it into the pile of ashes and charred logs. "I wasn't trying to hurt myself. I just—"

"Wanted to feel normal? To feel like an ordinary kid and not a freak?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"I get it. You liked someone who didn't necessarily feel the same way?"

"Yeah."

"And in the anger and confusion of your heartache you did something foolish?"

"I suppose so."

Katie stands and smiles. She pats me on the shoulder with her burned hand. "Well then, you're in luck. Because that's about as normal as it gets."

---

Joe Dornich is the author of *The Ways We Get By* (Black Lawrence Press, December 2020). His stories have won contests and fellowships from *The Master's Review*, *Carve Magazine*, South Central MLA, Key West Literary Seminars, and the South Carolina Academy of Authors. Joe lives in Knoxville and teaches at the University of Tennessee.



# Look Away

Susette Brooks

---

While talking to the colonel about how to administratively process Nicole's death, I volunteered to walk through the house where she was murdered. We started the conversation sitting on opposite sides of the executive desk in his office. A bookcase stood against the wall facing us. Plaques from his previous commands and a rack filled with dozens of commander's coins that he'd been awarded over his multi-decade career sat on the shelves. He had a large, hovering presence even while seated, but the power dynamic between us was the least of my concerns. Nicole was all I could think about.

"Contact HRO," the colonel said, "to find out who Nicole's next of kin is."

"I'm sure it's her sister," I said.

"I think you're right. When we know for sure, we can reach out and walk her through the benefits she's eligible for."

"Ok—"

"And someone will have to go to the house to see if we can get any of her equipment back."

When Nicole joined the Army National Guard, she borrowed a laptop, a load-bearing vest, a rucksack, and other tactical gear, which must have been somewhere in her rental home. I didn't understand why the supply sergeants responsible for maintaining accountability of our equipment couldn't file Nicole's gear as a loss. The U.S. government wouldn't miss a couple thousand dollars of stuff. But it seemed the colonel wanted someone to go anyway.

"I want to do it," I blurted.

"You're too close to the situation to have to see something like that," he said, "especially if you've never seen anything like that before."

As a second lieutenant, I should've said, "Roger that, Sir." I knew walking through a murder scene wasn't the type of experience I could prepare for, but I was certain I was strong enough to see whatever was on the other side of Nicole's front door. I had to defy the indirect order. "Sir, I can handle it," I said. "I'll be okay."

"Alright then," he said pensively. "Take a battle buddy with you so you're not alone."

When I walked out, I thought about the gravity of what I had asked, maybe a little unsure after all. I wondered how anyone would see something like that for the first time. I suddenly realized that on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, where some of my coworkers had been more than

once, death is forced into a soldier's line of sight, and then it's forced into their nightmares. I had never gone to war. I had never seen the kind of battle that spilled a friend's blood.

I didn't want to look away from Nicole's murder because I wanted to test the depths of what I was capable of feeling. When I was four, my brother's sudden death knocked my world off its axis. Weeks before his high school graduation, he died from a form of heart disease, of which death was the only symptom. I spent my entire life living in the shadow of a dead boy. Death was an ordinary part of my life. I thought about it often and anticipated its arrival. As a kid, the joy of getting a new toy quickly evaporated the moment when I realized that I could die at any moment too. The deaths of my grandmother, cousins, and uncle equate to more dying than most people will ever experience, but for me, those experiences were as ordinary as seeing shadows cast from moonlight.

Two decades later, one of my closest friends was dead. Nicole's death, unlike the others, was hard to believe. I could still see the blonde strands falling from her bun as she zipped around our office building from one errand to another. I could still see her bunny teeth as she chattered in laughter about a new guy she was dating. I felt pain now in ways that I've never felt before, but I thought it might be a fluke. Experiencing the death of my brother so early in life taught me how to die before I learned how to live. I was afraid my reflex would kick in, and I would get over the loss as quickly as the people who had only known of her. A part of me hoped seeing the crime scene would make my pain last.

Within a few days, the Burlington County police released the crime scene, so a coworker and I hopped into a government-owned vehicle and drove 30 minutes west from Fort Dix to Mount Holly. The South Jersey towns we drove through moved from sweeping farmland to suburban expanse. The houses we saw along the way looked like Monopoly pieces spread across green islands.

When we pulled up to Nicole's street in Mount Holly, I looked out the passenger window, realizing I still had a chance to look away. The houses on the block looked different from the others I'd seen on the way. Here, the houses lay nearly on top of each other, divided only by mismatched fencing. They had the same vinyl siding and over-flowing gutters. The sidewalks were broken and ripped up in places where weeds sprouted. Although it was Feb-



ruary, it didn't seem like greenery lived on that block in any season.

I thought about being at the house a few weeks prior. That night had been one of the few times when Nicole and I made plans that we actually kept. Before heading to a local bar, I stepped inside to meet her boyfriend and her father. Both men were polite and soft spoken. We exchanged a few pleasant words, and then Nicole and I left, not knowing that in a few weeks two people would be dead, and the other would be the murderer.

At the bar, Nicole and I shared drinks, laughed, and took a few photos. One image is tattooed in my memory. We sat cheek to cheek, smiling ear to ear. The background was a cacophony of vibrant reds, blues, and greens. I could still hear the clattering glasses and drunken conversations. We were both safe from jealous boyfriends, troubled parents, and the grind of everyday life because, in the moment, none of that mattered. Nicole didn't have to complain about her boyfriend's rage and I didn't have to wag a finger at her insisting she leave him. We both felt free.

Staring at Nicole's house now spoiled the sweet memory. A feeling of dread hung onto my shoulders and weighed me down. I walked up to the threshold knowing that on the either side of the door Nicole's boyfriend had bludgeoned her and her father with some object the police wouldn't name, while her teenage sister lay asleep in the attic. She woke up the next day, walked downstairs, and found her family laying in pools of blood. Nicole's boyfriend was still in the house. When her sister saw him, she ran outside with her cell phone and called the police.

At the door, Nicole's family-friends greeted us. They had been at the house for hours, getting rid of trash and recovering personal items the family wanted to keep. There was no turning back now. The front door opened into the living room. The couch where Nicole's body was found sat in the middle of the room. Blood was splattered on some of the cushions and soaked into others. Heaps of clothes were strewn across the floor. This is when I realized the police don't clean up crime scenes; they just take what they need and leave the rest for someone else to figure out.

I followed the narrow hall that connected the living room to a stairway on the left followed by a small bedroom and then the kitchen. A headboard leaned against the wall on my right. It came from the room where Nicole's father slept. The headboard was pale green and had splatters of painted flowers and blood.

I walked up the misshapen steps to the second floor. I was careful not to graze the walls. In Nicole's bedroom, there was blood splatter on the walls and on light fixtures and soaked into the carpet and into blankets. I didn't know the details at the time, but after the murders were complete, Nicole's boyfriend walked up to the bedroom with a knife and tried to kill himself too.

I stood in silent horror. My coworker walked in from behind me. He cursed under his breath, disgusted by the damage done to an entire family. I wished he would keep quiet. The moment we were standing in was already horrible. No one needed to speak the obvious truths. I don't believe in god, but I needed silence—to pray, or, to just send as many loving thoughts to Nicole as I could. I had no room in my heart for anger toward the murderer. Instead, I wanted to fill that space with love for Nicole.

After sifting through a dresser to see what we could find, we walked to the closet. The door was ajar, so my coworker opened it. Nicole's military gear spilled out. We realized we would have

to trash it all. The equipment was blood-stained. I couldn't believe the splatter reached inside the closet. There was nothing about Nicole's murder that made sense.

That night, as I lay in bed, my thoughts rattled in my head. I wanted to know the particulars about Nicole's murder. I told myself that knowing the why and the how would somehow help me find peace. I believed knowing would be better than wondering. I realized that, after learning the truth of my brother's death, I had nightmares. I saw my brother's heart, like armed guards, blocking his blood flow. The blood had nowhere to go, so in a desperate rage, it strangled his lungs, forcing out his last breath. I still can't look away from that painful knowledge. I suddenly understood I didn't need war to prepare me for anything that doesn't already haunt me.

---

Susette Brooks is writer, editor, and educator. She is a graduate from the MFA in Nonfiction program at Goucher College and is the former Creative Nonfiction Editor at Philadelphia Stories. Susette is working on a memoir in essays about the lies she's told as defense against childhood traumas. Visit her website: [www.susettebrooks.com](http://www.susettebrooks.com).



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