Philadelphia Stories

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WINTER-SPRING / 2025 / FREE

FEATURING THE PHILADELPHIA STORIES FICTION CONTEST WINNING STORIES — **SAINTS AND SHADOWS** ILENE RAYMOND RUSH
SWEET PENTATONICS JEFF RUSH / **THE LORD GOD BIRD** ANDY BOYLE / **RATTLESNAKE TRAINER** FRANÇOIS BEREAUD

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***Kites* by Janet Williams**
Janet Williams lived in Philadelphia for many years then returned to Arden, Delaware. She studied art and media at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, University of Delaware, and Philadelphia University. She enjoys painting outdoors and finds the changing light and all the nuances nature provides a challenge. Williams has exhibited in PA, DE, and MD. JanetWilliamsArt.com

***Crux* by Karen Bright**
Artist Karen Bright earned an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art and a BFA from University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Exhibiting since 1981, she has been the recipient of numerous awards, project grants and artist-in-residences. Holding the title of Professor Emerita, Bright recently retired from Monmouth University after a 39-year teaching career. Bright's evocative paintings and sculptures focus on the natural world and a concern for the environment. Studio Bright is located in Newtown Square. KarenBright.com

***Bright Crosswalk* by Gerald Purnell**
Gerald Purnell is a multi-award-winning fine artist and illustrator. He has two picture books in the Library of Congress permanent collection. He attended public school in West Philadelphia and graduated from Cheyney University, an HBCU, with a degree in Fine Art. He has worked as a department store window designer, telephone book ad creator, and Critics Choice Awards engraver. Purnell lives in South Jersey and just released "The Bully," an illustrated novel with 28 original drawings. ArtPal.com/GPurnell

***Dream Land* by Nina Yocom**
Nina Yocom was born and raised in suburban Philadelphia. She was exposed to fine art by her mother, a school volunteer who gave her an understanding of how colors work together, and her father, an award-winning photographer. Emerging as an artist later in life, she made a radical rediscovery of self. The medium of alcohol ink gives the ability to express her gratitude, hope, healing, and self-acceptance. NinaYocom.com

***Bloom and Grow* by Faith Costa**
Faith Costa is an artist from the New Jersey and Philadelphia area. Mostly self-taught, she is deeply passionate about creativity and self-expression. She shows her art at fine art and crafts festivals throughout the tri-state area. Her creative process is a blend of traditional techniques and personal exploration, allowing each brushstroke to bring forth vivid colors and textures with acrylics, as well as joy and inspiration to others. FaithCosta.com

***Mucky Pond* by Catherine McIlhenny**
Pastel artist Catherine McIlhenny lives in Harleysville and has been creating art in one version or another almost her entire life. The sky (particularly weather), fields and nature are the inspiration for her landscapes. She is a member of the Philadelphia Pastel Society, Pastel Society of America, and other local art organizations where she has exhibited in the Philadelphia region and has won awards for her pastels. Visit CatherineMcilhennyArt.com.

***Denim Door Gettysburg* by Erica Harney**
Erica Harney is a fine artist, scenic painter, and muralist. Originally from New York, she moved to Pennsylvania in 2008 after being accepted to the MFA program at Penn State University on a full scholarship. She established her practice in Philadelphia in 2011 and is endlessly inspired by the architecture of our region, which informs much of her personal studio work. EricaHarneyArtist.com

***Chaotic Yet Tranquil* by Kayla Bowman**
Kayla Bowman is a freelance graphic designer and illustrator from suburban Philadelphia. While Kayla enjoys working with various mediums, she finds particular joy in expressing herself through watercolor and oil paints. Nature is a profound source of inspiration, reminding her to appreciate life's beauty and the Creator of it. She finds purpose and passion in using creativity to bring joy, comfort, and encouragement to people around her. klabowman.myportfolio.com

Author honoraria made possible by the generous support of the Conrad Weiser Author Fund

Philadelphia Stories, founded in 2004, is a non-profit literary magazine that publishes the finest literary fiction, poetry, and art from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware and distributes free of charge to a wide demographic throughout the region. The mission of *Philadelphia Stories* is to cultivate a community of writers, artists, and readers in the Greater Philadelphia Area. *Philadelphia Stories* is a 501c3. To support *Philadelphia Stories* and the local arts, please visit www.philadelphiastories.org to become a member today!

SUPPORT PROVIDED IN PART BY THE PHILADELPHIA CULTURAL FUND.

Saints and Shadows

Ilene Raymond Rush – First Place Contest Winner

Part beagle, part spaniel, part God knows what, the dog–bedraggled with a bit of mange, no microchip--wandered onto their driveway the same day they learned that Henry was sick. Through her office window, she noticed it sniffing at the edge of the work shed in the early afternoon, but figured, much as the occasional deer that stumbled into their suburban Philadelphia yard, that soon enough it would wander away on its own.

But at twilight, pushing the trash cans to the curb, she almost stumbled over the animal spread across her path; for a second she believed it had died. She left the containers and knelt to the asphalt, setting her hand against the dog's flank, relieved to sense a faint rise and fall. And that might have been it, had Henry, who insisted on teaching his Wednesday night class despite the news, not suddenly swung his headlights to where the dog lay and she had jumped up, waving both arms to alert him that the creature lay inches from his tires.

Henry credited her with saving the animal, but if he had not arrived at that moment, she wasn't certain about her next move. It was possible that she may have left the dog in place, expecting that it would eventually rouse itself and leave. After all, various creatures roamed these once wide-open spaces, not only dogs and deer but feral cats, owls, small red foxes. Once, a neighbor posted a picture of a bedraggled cattle dog that turned out to be a dehydrated coyote.

The only pets in their house had belonged to Henry's son from his first marriage. The boy spent two weeks with them every summer. At four, he won two guppies from a hospital fair that he named Jack and Jill. After a week swimming in an unfiltered bowl murky from overfeeding, she came downstairs at breakfast to find both fish belly up. Quick, before the boy appeared, she scooped the two from the bowl with a spaghetti spoon and flushed them down the drain. When the boy awoke, she told him they had left early for day care and would return by afternoon.

At the time she worried the boy might realize the differences–the new fish she bought at the pet store to dump into fresh water looked smaller and healthier–but if so, he never let on. Four times during that visit she or Henry replaced the damned fish until at last, fed up, she washed the bowl and set it on the highest kitchen shelf. Out of sight, out of mind, she hoped. The funny thing was the son never mentioned the missing fish or asked where they had gone. Maybe he had never been that attached.

Of course, a parent wasn't a goldfish.

The night of the dog, Henry parked on the street and together they carried the animal through the garage into the house. It was not that it weighed nothing; it had a certain heft, but when they took it to the vet the next morning, the woman shook her head, mentioning malnourishment, mites, maybe heartworm or worse. They put the dog into the animal hospital, where the doctors reset a poorly healed broken bone, siphoned his eyes, and after two weeks of rest sent a bill for $5000 and asked if they wanted to take the animal home, or put him into a shelter.

By that time, Henry's biopsy had been reaffirmed, and the plan was set–chemo, followed by radiation with no promises. Surgery not a possibility. Did the dog sense that Henry was sick? The next-door neighbor, a young woman with pink hair who agreed to walk the dog twice a day when they had chemo, insisted that animals knew. When they arrived home after treatment, Henry spent and wanting only sleep, the dog often curled on the floor beside him, snout on Henry's slipper, refusing to leave his side. Exhausted, worried, she wanted to tell the neighbor girl that animals responded to food – Henry smelled of the feeding tube. And more than once, she had witnessed Henry sharing little bits of pancakes she had made for him while he could still swallow. But the neighbor girl shook her head.

"They know when things aren't right," she said.

Dogs eat their own poop, the wife wanted to tell her. Dogs lick their own butts. But it was no time to argue. Or maybe it was. She didn't know. It was ridiculous to argue about the dog; the dog was the least of everything. But even so, listening to the neighbor girl's ridiculous claims, she wanted to fight, to flail, to strike the walls, the furniture, even the floors but she held back because Henry needed her whole.

"It doesn't matter," she lied.

Three weeks later, and Henry slept nine, ten, twelve hours a day. The chemo was now five brutal days a week. He could no longer swallow, and he slept on the way to the hospital and on the way home. One afternoon they entered the house to find the neighbor girl curled up on Henry's special recliner, the dog sprawled across her lap, their limbs entwined like lovers. She tossed a look at Henry, but he stared at them as if they were Madonna and child, and rather than let her wake them, he went to a less comfortable wing chair and sat down.

"Let me," she said.

"No, it's fine," he told her, as the girl blinked awake, the dog stretching in her lap. Seeing them home, she flushed a shade that matched her hair.

"I..." she began.

"Such… beauty," Henry said. He waved one of his wasted hands.

Standing by Henry, she watched the dog jump from the girl's lap and wander into the kitchen to sniff for food. Before she said something she might regret, she went to the bathroom and shut the door. Fingers shaking, she ran the faucet until clouds of steam concealed the mirror, her image vanishing as she pumped liquid soap onto her hands building clouds of bubbles, then moving the frisson of foam from left to right, and right to left again, willing her anger to dissolve into the suds, concentrating until she floated above her body, looking down at the ridiculous sight of a grown woman jealous of what? A pink-haired girl and a stray dog? A man with stage four cancer taking pleasure in the graceful sight of two creatures entwined on a ragged La-Z-Boy. Ridiculous and yet, something did bother her, maybe the way the dog and the girl completed their family as if she, the person he had left his wife and son for, had not. As if the animal and girl filled things up for him in a way Henry had never mentioned but always craved.

Two and a half months and the house had changed. The living room, once a repository for photographs and philosophy journals, was now lined with Styrofoam-packed chemo supplies and cardboard cans of liquid nourishment. Cocktail tables held cleaning brushes, sterilizers, stool softeners, and Tums; the colors in the rooms had turned from turquoise to filtered grays. Time tipped over. Everything happened slowly and all at once. Henry held on as long as he could, making his way up the steps at twilight to ease into their bed until one day he could no longer climb the stairs, and had to spend the nights propped up in the old La-Z-Boy chair. When the chair began to hurt his back, the social worker suggested moving to the sofa and propping himself on pillows. He didn't want a hospital bed. Or at least, not yet.

Once or twice, driving home from chemo on I-76, she considered taking a sharp right turn over the barrier into the opposite lane, but what if, instead of ending a story that already was headed to a certain end, she made things worse. What if, instead of dying, they were simply thrown from the car with smashed limbs. Or they survived while a bus on the other side, packed with schoolchildren, rose into flames. Or if Henry survived without her–who would watch out for him then?

No one wanted the son to visit that summer, but he wanted to come. In August, she waited for him to ask questions about what was going to happen. If Henry might die. But to her surprise and relief, no questions arrived. At 17, on his way to college in the fall, he appeared oblivious to everything in the house, concentrating on having a normal visit, whatever the hell normal was. He helped–emptying the dishwasher, doing his own laundry, filling out forms he needed for school. He played with the dog, hiding treats in his pockets, letting the dog run over him, sniffing out bits of chicken and cheese. A picky eater as a child, the boy now ate everything and anything--delicatessen meats the pink-haired girl brought from the corner mini-mart, the occasional casserole dropped by a worried neighbor–Mexican, Italian, Chinese. Ice cream from a passing truck. In the two weeks he stayed, his face took on a roundness. For the first time, he developed a little extra chin that made him resemble his mother. Sometimes, when Henry's fever subsided, she left him in the living room watching the Phillies on TV and knocked on the guest bedroom where the son lay reading *The Invisible Man*, a book assigned for all incoming freshmen that year.

"Do you remember the goldfish?" she once asked.

On the bed, he didn't move. She knew it was an absurd question. It was so long ago. Two weeks out of a childhood mostly spent far from his father. And he was no longer four. His legs and chest sprouted hair. Rough patches of stubble clustered along his jaw. In the bed, he lowered the book.

"You mean the ones that died?"

"You knew?"

He nodded and smiled. "Of course," he said.

In September, five months after they got the bad news, Henry began to rouse. The oncologists had predicted this, not a remission but a time when he would feel better, a time of false hope. Despite their warnings, she could not help but feel renewed. Everything about Henry looked better–his color, his breathing, his sleep. For at least three weeks, she could help him again climb the stairs, where, winded but steadier than he had been in months, he insisted on washing his face and brushing his teeth on his own. Once he even shaved, leaving his cheek tattooed with tiny shreds of toilet paper seeping blood. And yet she knew to praise it as a sort of victory.

Released from the disease, freed from the horrific feeding tube and chemo, they talked of travelling, maybe to Greece. Or Portugal. They decided on Porto, a city that sat along the Douro River, where they could eat ceviche and drink green wine.

The doctors neither dissuaded nor persuaded; they watched, nodding, listening to their words with or without furrowed brows. When they shared that they had decided to visit Porto, the oldest doctor nodded.

"Don't forget travel insurance," he said.

"Isn't this remission?" Henry's mother asked over the phone. She had a friend in Tallahassee where she lived who worked in pediatric oncology – she had learned the terms.

"No," she told his mother. "It's something that can happen if the immunotherapy works, but it doesn't last. Everything is coming back."

The mother was silent on the other end of the phone. Her friend had told her that she–the wife–was too pessimistic, that to win the battle against cancer you had to fight.

"It's a war," her friend said.

The dog lay on the floor in a sunbeam, panting as if it had come from a run. She had noticed that lately, it seemed out of breath for no reason, but there was no way she was taking the dog to the vet. If it got sick in a way they could see, then, yes. But panting was not enough.

"You do you," she told the mother and, though she knew she would hear about it later, clicked off the phone.

On the flight home from Europe Henry started to cough up blood. By the time they reached the airport in Philadelphia, the crew had alerted ground, the rest of the passengers told to wait

while they wheeled Henry off the plane to a waiting ambulance. In the back of the van, they stabilized him, asking Henry if he knew the date, the time, the country where he had landed; she tried to see it as a victory when he scored one hundred percent. In her head, she ran down the list of people who needed to be notified: his mother, his doctors, his son. The girl who lived next door, who had taken the dog while they were away. Clutching Henry's hand, she saw his face contort with pain when they inserted a needle into his arm.

"Can we take him home?" she asked, although she knew the answer. Henry turned to her; his sickly pale face unmarked by the Portuguese sun. She leaned close to him, only to hear him ask, "Who will take the dog?"

Later, she believed he might have been hallucinating. He had a fever of 105 and though they tried everything, it took two days to get it down. By then his mother had arrived. When she rose to greet her, the mother took her folding chair, the one closest to Henry's bed.

"Don't you give up," she told Henry.

Standing beside the old woman, the wife wanted to slap her out of the way. Couldn't she see that Henry was tired, that he was burning up, that the last thing he wanted was to fight? But instead, she stood, arms crossed on her chest, watching his chest rise and fall, thinking of how she had found the dog, how she had rested her hand on his chest, how the dog had not moved, how if Henry had not appeared she might have pushed herself from the asphalt and let him go.

At three o'clock, two doctors entered the room and asked if she might follow them into the hall. The mother made to stand, but she told her to stay put. In the beige-on-beige hallway the doctors, one Indian, one Asian, bent their heads as if in prayer. Before they spoke, she knew.

When they left, she dialed the next-door neighbor girl.

"I'm at the vet's," the girl said, before she could say hello and fill her in. "The dog started throwing up at midnight," she said. "I thought you would be home, so I waited but he didn't stop so I drove him to the emergency."

"What?"

"The dog. Couldn't breathe."

"No," she said. Why had she called the girl? She couldn't remember.

"The dog," the girl said. "The dog." She pressed the phone tight to her ear.

In Henry's room, someone had come in and pulled a curtain around his bed and wheeled out the other bed beside his to change the room into a private one. A sign stuck to the door frame outside warned visitors to stay out: **Hospice care**, it read. Someone had put a catheter bag by the side of the bed; fresh specks of blood had been wiped from Henry's lips. The mother told her she would call Henry's son.

On the folding chair, the wife thought about how Henry and she had walked along the Douro River an hour each day. How he had tripped twice on the cobblestones but refused to go home early.

"We'll keep that between us," he said of his falls. How she had loved his confiding voice; how there were secrets between them that no one knew. Replacing the goldfish. Betraying and caring for his son. Pretending that he was theirs.

Out in the hallway she heard Henry's mother talking to the son, letting him know where his father was. *Henry was headed to a better place*, she told him, *a place of saints and shadows*. Nothing she would have said, but how kind of the mother to take that burden. She reached for Henry's hand, mostly bones now, and watched his chest rise and fall, her eyelids fluttering with exhaustion, letting the edges of things dissolve and meld. Sitting there, she remembered something she had blocked, how, when the boy had been 10 or so, his mother, Henry's ex, had sent the boy and the grandmother by train to spend Christmas in Philadelphia so she and her new husband could holiday in Acapulco.

It was the first time the boy visited in winter; he had never seen snow before. He arrived at 30th Street Station holding a cage that contained a lizard that belonged to the boy's fifth grade class. It had been his turn to take care of it over winter holidays and though the mother and new husband told him to leave it home, he had insisted it was his turn.

"A promise is a promise," he said.

In the car, the grandmother removed her winter coat to shelter the lizard, and when they reached home, set it by the kitchen stove. But in the middle of the night the lizard passed–maybe the rocky train ride all the way from Florida, maybe the sudden rush of cold, maybe the stress of being in a new place--they didn't know. Unlike the goldfish, there was no chance of replacing the lizard–the next morning was Christmas Day.

In bed, before the boy woke, Henry and she concocted a plan. After he opened his presents, they would tell him that during the night the lizard had somehow escaped and wandered off into the snow. That way, it might return.

But the grandmother reached him first.

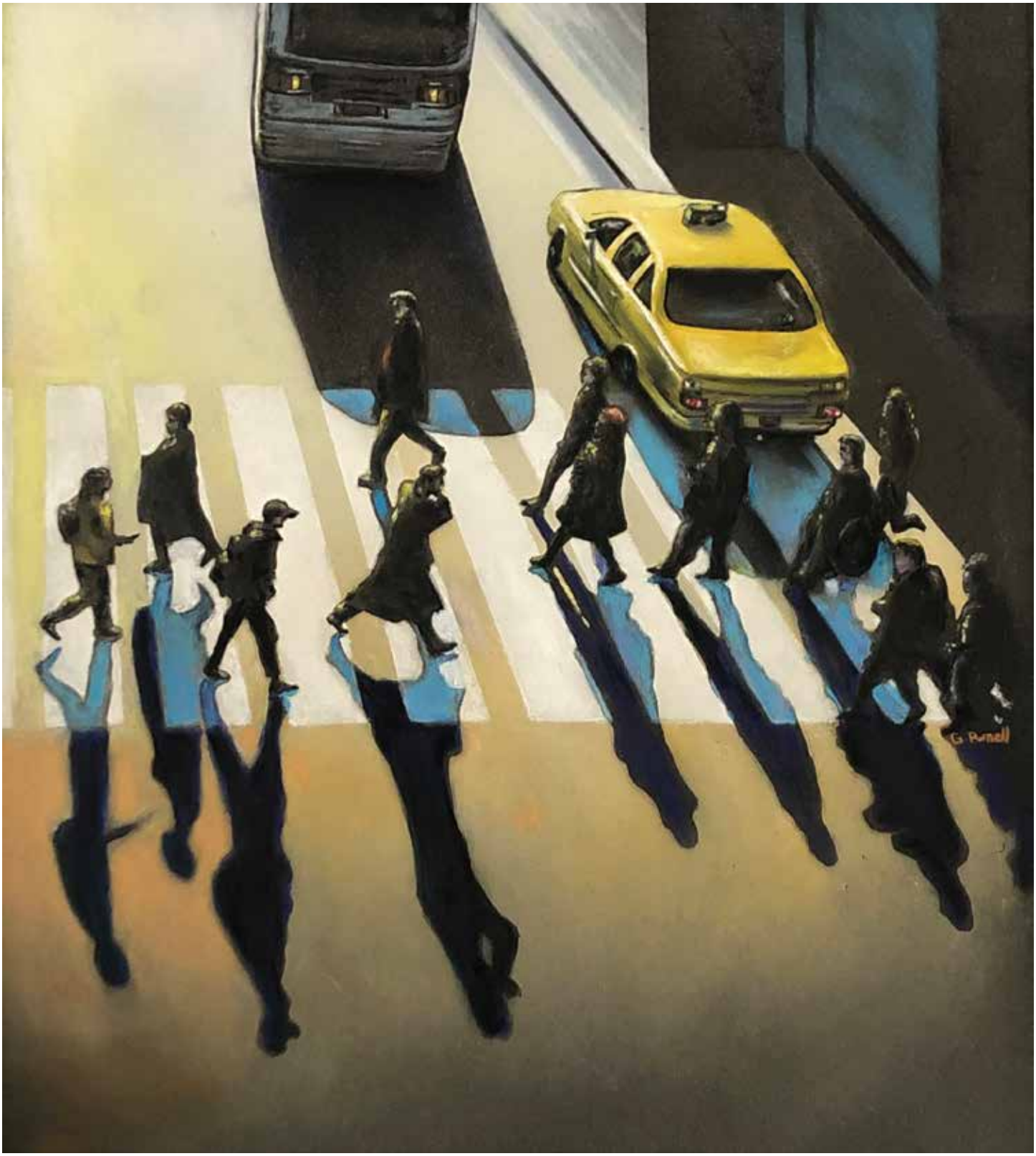
"Um-Gog," she told the boy. That was the name the class had given the lizard. "Um-Gog died. In the night."

How she hated her for that truth. Wasn't it enough that the boy had been uprooted from his home at Christmas time? Uprooted to spend the holidays with a father who–let's face facts–had pretty much abandoned him save for two lousy weeks of the year? What would a white lie have cost?

But now, as Henry's breath slowed into a ragged wheeze, she couldn't recall why she had been so mad. To protect the son, sure. But no matter what they said or thought, it was true: the lizard was gone.

The grandmother drifted back into the hospital room. Before she might offer her seat to the older woman, the grandmother set her hand to the wife's shoulder, pressing her into the chair. *I didn't know what to do*, she wanted to tell the grandmother. *I didn't understand*. But neither of them spoke. Instead, the two women sat, waiting, until dusky shadows outside the drawn blinds announced the birth of yet another day.

Ilene Raymond Rush has published fiction in a wide variety of publications, including *The Threepenny Review*, *Lilith*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Longform*. Her work has won an O. Henry Short Story Prize and a James Michener Copernicus Award and has been featured in a number of anthologies. Her essays and health journalism have appeared in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Next Avenue*, *The Washington Post*, and many other venues. Mother of two married children, she lives in Chestnut Hill with her husband, Jeff, and their senior pup, Augie the Doggy.



BRIGHT CROSSWALK by GERALD PURNELL

Sweet Pentatonics

Jeff Rush – Runner-up

It's while prepping my folks' home for sale that I come across the old instrument, its case tucked edgewise in a box of blue and white plates. The box is maybe one of fifty, the remnants of my mother's career, which are balanced in no discernible order on the exposed joists of their attic. Having put them off till the end, I bag what I think is trash, leaving the rest for the appraiser who will make the final calls. I'm moving fast. The attic's naked insulation cups the dry heat close around me. Mainly, I just want to be done.

But I stop when I find the case.

Because forget her collecting, the frakturs, the blue and white plates, the old board games she bought and sold, it was violins, although she would never call them that, fiddles, fiddlers, that my mother measured against. There was nothing casual about it. At concerts, ensembles, recitals and showcases all over the city, at the Settlement School and the Kimmel Center, she judged, as a singer might, whose playing lacked breath and who sighed over every note, fingering the rare ones who got it just right. People wanted her opinion. When her brother, then the concertmaster of the San Francisco Symphony, came to town, all stopped so she could attend every performance; more so, if he were soloing which he occasionally did. She listened rigid, one hand clamped over her mouth to catch an unwanted discharge, anything which might knock him off his game. Understandable, I guess. Right after the war, my mother and her brother had been what, close to child prodigies, performing together and apart. Yet, despite all this, I never once heard her play.

So damn if I'm going to miss my chance now. I stash the case in my car, then open it. Inside, nestled in what once had been reddish plush, the instrument is nothing but a small handful. One string still taut over the bridge, the other three sag off the pegs, their ends curl from where they had been wound, while the tiny ebony rest, its chin depression hardly the size of a quarter, hangs askew. The case breathes a blown-instrument smell, almost like a sax or clarinet, of sour spit, damp reed and fossilized rubber. I reach to remove the fiddle and then stop. I wonder if the smell itself might trigger something in my mother, so I shut the lid, planning to bring it on my next visit.

And when I close it, I remember something. Once, dismissed early from school, I had heard violin through a forgotten cracked window. The music was nothing I knew, a high looping rise and then a descent, in tune yes, but the lift shallow, the release empty, played just to get to the end. My gym class had been bench-pressing back then, and unable to both exercise and breathe, I would finish each set, light-headed and gasping, barely able to reset the bar. That's how she sounded, a held breath and then a discharge of relief. Over and over again.

Just hearing it was enough. Not the music, but the sad arc of her joyless practice. I was glad then that whatever had gotten my mother had not gotten hold of me.

One's elder parents, this odd reversal, comes in spurts. I get on with things, our current pleasure, my wife's and mine, is nurturing a rescue dog with a happy tail, and of course my patients, but then something takes me over. At the moment, it's their house, the realtor wants it on the market next month, and my brother isn't much help. Of course, the fiddle is my home-grown distraction, I could've ignored it but am visiting earlier than usual because I want to see my mother's reaction. And yes, I have this fantasy. Something, the fiddle, anything, will wake her, allow me to move her out of this locked place.

I watch her, eating at a round table with three other women. Ammonia scrubbed with just the undertow of urine, still smoky from cooking, the room hollows out in their silence, except for my mother's fork clinking against her plate. Her hand trembles, no that is too polite, it shakes. They had ruled out Parkinson's so nothing's left except the draining of memory. It is getting more pronounced each time I visit, a rhythmic reminder of her decline. One of the staff flips on a CD, seventies hits, loud in this soundless room. A woman at my mother's table starts to sing along. The Bee Gees, I think it is. Now a man from the next table joins in. They all seem to know it, maybe they sing it here together. I look at my mother, the one-time fiddler. What will she make of the Bee Gees? She raises her head, but then it's over. Lunch is done.

In her room, she crouches, knees up, on the edge of her bed, breaking off pieces of the dark Hersey's almond bar I always bring. Before the disease, her face had been sharp, overtly attuned, so when I was a kid trying out the cello, her perfect pitch would radar in and ping back from across the house. "You're flat," she'd yell, which was always. Give me a starting point, and I could whistle an accurate scale, but picking a note out of the air on an un-fretted string, only she could do that. I blamed her musical omniscience on some physical twist, a knotting she must feel deep in her ears of a tone so close. I can still remember the grimace.

DREAM LAND by NINA YOCOM

Now I consider her face from above, down across her forehead, over her eyes, and then across the bridge of her nose, her cheeks. A new pull of skin from her bone, a slumping. Seen this way, her features have grown increasingly broad, maybe more Asiatic if I can call it that, but I believe I can because it is who she and I really are. With her face less affixed, loose on her cheek, I can see the mixed heritage of our family, old Jews somewhere out there. My grandfather, coming from one of those now deleted villages east of the Carpathians, had the same broad, flattened features when he was tired, and so, I guess, did I after working long nights.

I slide my two hands underneath to bestow the fiddle. She looks. At first, nothing. She mouths the last bit of almond chocolate, then licks her fingers. Finally, she takes it from me, turns it over and shakes. Still nothing. No reaction at all. With the case on her lap, she begins to pick off the orange flakes.

"Remember?" I ask.

Her picking slows. She stares, then reaches. The silver clasps are rusty, their mounts misshapen with age. I bend to help her, but she bats away my hand. She, not me, will spring the case. Somehow, something rote kicks in, and she no longer fumbles. Once the case is unlatched, she hesitates, and I wonder if it will end there. Her hand, which had not been steady enough to hold her fork, stills, hovering above. Then she opens the lid, setting off the wind-instrument cloud, which dissipates quickly and is replaced by the dryness of rosin, the pickle smell of old varnish which must have grown gummy in the attic. She reaches and then stops. She looks up at me.

"It's yours."

She nods, then tries to lift it out neck first, but the sticky varnish glues the fiddle in place before it suddenly pops free, surprising her. Despite the child's size, she uses both hands to bring it close to her face. Somehow the one taut string still holds the bridge in place. She pushes the right side of the instrument

against her ear and taps the body, then explains, "Sound post."

I have only a faint idea about a sound post in a violin, let alone how to listen for it, but she's in charge now and I just watch. She lays the instrument in her lap and then slowly winds the peg while plucking the one sagging string. Its pitch tightens, raises, reaches something unmarked, but she seems to know, and then she stops.

Laying the fiddle carefully on the bed, she reaches into the case and pulls out the bow. Holding it up from the bottom, the horsehair that has worked loose flowers her hand. She looks as though she doesn't know what to do, then brushes it. Brittle with age, the strands break off with a crack, until the wood of the bow and only a few hairs remain. When she tightens the screw, they grow taut.

"Good dream last night." Mark, a former professor, historian, comes to me for what he calls this general retirement unease. A jean's guy, short, but sturdy in the arms and chest, he sometimes reports a migraine aura and asks that I kill the glare from the overheads behind me. While he's making the most of his retirement, writing a little, exercising, and learning blues guitar, he still complains of a queasiness he remembers from work, something like the migraine displacement, the blurring of a fast-turning background, and now he can't accept that there is nothing more to do.

"A girl, junior high it could be," he starts into his dream. "Nothing else I remember, except the pull. Didn't get it exactly."

From his gym-work I guess, he holds his back uncountably straight, more than I could ever do, as he perches forward on the sofa. "She sits in front of me wearing a sleeveless jersey tied up by a blue bow, I remember that distinctly because of how fragile it is, and I am looking." He stops for a moment, then starts again. "Yes, at her shoulder, where her sleeve would be. I know I shouldn't. Even in the dream, I know that. Still. I want her to raise her hand. Then she does. I can see, picture really, the first swelling of her breast. That is just enough. So far beyond me then and yet . . ."

And yet. . .so sweet. You can only imagine and with that, the intensity of pleasure that comes over you, but gossamer too, so quickly gone. And strangely I connect it to the fiddle, what was it, just three days ago.

My mother, who had known so much, forgot the scale.

When she had screwed up the bow, I suddenly feared she might sound like that time before, the held breathe, the joyless music, the gasp released at the end. Fearing that, I almost took it from her. But. . .

Squinting in concentration, she raised the instrument and skittered out a note on the one remaining string, her bow bouncing as she drew. Thin okay, but at least not that remembered pant. She lowered the bow, inspected it carefully, then raised it again and played a second note. One step higher, maybe the beginning of a scale, with more authority here, her bowing steadier now. Then she stopped. Her fingers still on the neck, her bow poised, she looked at me.

". . . and yet?" I force myself back to my patient.

"I imagined, yes. What I could not see. But also, it reminded me how fresh it seemed. Everything. When I started out."

"And?"

"Well, I lost that," and he falls back as he often does, his doubts about retiring, "I left work in a bad place," then a beat, a resignation that I let him work through, "but nothing I can do about that now, right?" and it runs out. "But okay, I did okay." He's still forward on the sofa. "Yup. I'm right here now."

He is here, yes, just where I want him to be, but it is now me who drifts. My mother played those two notes, then stopped. She dropped her hands but balanced that tiny fiddle under her chin. Nothing.

Maybe I should've let it go, but no. "A half step," I prompt, pushing her further up the scale.

But, "half step," the words, they meant nothing to her.

So, I picked up from the last note she played and whistled. A half step. She paused, looking up at me, then a sudden smile, her joy in rediscovering it.

"Your guitar's still going, right?" I ask him, out of nowhere, aware that it is me who's starting to drift.

"Doesn't matter how good or bad," he says. "Just the pleasure you get."

"Right." Our mantra. Pleasure without judgement.

Forgetting the scale, but not the tactile touch on the fingerboard, the drawing of the bow, my mother played and then stopped until I whistled the next note. A full step I whistled, then another full step. Note by note, her attack grew more confident. We came near the top, a half step, the queasy note, just worried enough that it pushes you over the octave, the turning, and then back down. And her face, concentrated, pulled tighter, that she could do this. I whistled. She played. A strange duet.

"A scale can be beautiful, right?" I ask him, the past now lapping the present.

"Yup. Try to make them sing."

"How so?"

"You want them to kind of rise. Then crest."

Yes, yes, that's what my mother had done. Pulled tight that scale, stretched out so it almost wouldn't make it, then come full force as it turned over the top.

To illustrate, he hums, a few notes in sequence, not so on pitch, a flimsy scale, one of gaps. "Sweet pentatonics," he sings.

Pentatonics. No. That's not right. They are reduced scales, five notes instead of seven. Somehow that mattered. "Pentatonics? They're thin right? They skip notes."

"From what?"

My mother made it up and back over eight notes. No gaps. For some reason, that seems important. His scales are less notes, easier to play. "From the whole scale. The real scale."

"Do, re, mi."

"Yeah. Eight notes. The whole thing."

"A name I call myself'?"

"Stop," and then hear myself, the unexpected edge to my voice, "Your pentatonics. They're cheating."

For a moment I think he might stand, and he would be right to do so, but instead he smiles, then relaxes in a way I had not seen before. Letting go his straight back, he splays, loosely cocked, his shoulder slung over the sofa's arm. He's having fun. "That's a strange comment. Especially from you who says just enjoy it, never think of good or bad."

"I don't mean that," I fumble.

"You called it a cheat."

"Hollow," it just comes out. "You can fall through it."

"What?"

"The gaps." I had tried jazz sax once, another musical failure, played those five note scales. I can't describe it, but they made

me anxious. Holes where notes should be, a kind of emptiness. No knots to be untied. "Shapeless," I say. "Can be played with anything."

"Almost. That's the fun."

"But so baggy, loose, not perfect" and here I am, I had come full circle.

"Perfect," he echoes. "Ah."

Don't expect perfection was what I had told him, just the pleasure you get. Right? Easy for me to say.

We are both silent.

I move in my chair, cross my legs. He does not.

I am usually so good at it, the waiting, letting my patient choose her moment. But now, agitated I lean forward. Wanting him to say something.

But he won't. Instead, he just watches me.

The reversal feels new at first, then I remember it has happened before. Something takes me over, a sudden intensity, a need to assert, so strong that I break therapy. No that's not all of it. My patient catches me up, calls me on it, or so I feel, no, am dead certain about. And then I stop, but too late. Years ago, maybe two or three other times, or four maybe, and I was sure I had grown out of it.

But that's not the worst. After that, I can't go back. I can't forgive it. I never saw those patients again. My choice? Their choice? I don't know. "It seemed so important. My mother played. . ." I stumble. "Eight notes."

"Your mother?"

"I had never heard her play. And together. We did this scale. I. . ."

"Okay, okay," he says. "The gaps. You might fall through. Now I see you a bit." He is up, off the sofa. He is never the one who wants to leave. Grabbing his jacket. "Perfection."

"Next week?" I yell, trying to catch him at the door.

I am good, I tell myself, no, more than that, I have helped many patients, this I know, but "perfect" is all I remember. Driving, I am further buzzed. I'm on my way to pick up my brother, Jonah, who begged a ride from the Manhattan train.

Jonah has lived for thirty years in the same rent-controlled studio apartment high on the west side near Columbia. He comes down infrequently and had been cool when I told him. It's only a scale, he said, not a song. He knows nothing I tell him. But here he is, I hadn't expected he would show up.

My mother hugs him but does not call him by name. Me either.

"Came down just to hear you play," he tells her. Jonah is thin, almost undernourished, long hair over his eyes, unshaven, not stylishly so, wears creased cotton pants and a flannel shirt. Yet he is hearty in a way I am not, patting her back, elbowing over the encased fiddle so he can sit close to her, plopping half her Hersey's into his mouth. He has always staged scenes like this, just for me. Seven years separate us, forty-nine to my fifty-six, and even in high school, he celebrated a comfort I never knew, friends always over, tucking their sneaks up on my mother's collectable chairs which I thought would drive her crazy, but she loved it and knew them all by name. She'd chat, sports especially; after the fiddle, she had become a cheerleader. Jonah triggered a giddiness in her I never knew she had.

Despite his urging, my mother doesn't reach for the case, but instead turns to me and says, "Lots of notes, I counted them. Thirty, forty thousand I think." Her voice is different, girlish; not looking back, she is back, a teenager. "And I only got one wrong."

That has always been the story. Sixteen, dragged by her father to perform at some high school auditorium, she played the slow movement of the Mendelssohn violin concerto. The impresario, her dad had organized a sort of grand tour, churches, small auditoriums, synagogues, during which he remained backstage supervising. Alone this time, not with her brother, she had played well. Story: she forgot a note, she forgot where she was, she could've found her way back but did not. Terrified, she ran off the stage, not to her father in the wings, but out into the audience. That was it. The reason I'd never, or at least officially, heard her play.

"Nick just kept playing," she says.

But Nick is her brother. The story had always been that it was her alone. "Nick?"

"It was the Bach double, silly. Two violins. Thousands of notes."

Hearty or not, Jonah's patience is not my own. He pushes the fiddle case closer. "Come on, Mom. I came down," but she makes no move to open it.

"Two violins," she says again.

So, this image. Foundational to being a kid. The low high school stage, the light on my mother, alone, playing without music, fully exposed. Not true.

"Nick, did not. . ." she trails off.

"What?" I ask.

". . .stop."

I try to reimagine it. In pictures, Nick had looked about ten, in a sailor's suit, whites with a blue bandana around his neck, right after the war, victory in the Pacific and all that. But sailor's suit or not, he was not the one who stopped. And her father looked on from the wings. Such a good boy, the darling. Holding her fiddle down by her leg, she must've hated him. And he kept playing.

Alone.

Bach's perfect counterpoint, the two fiddles talking to one another, gone. There must've been holes in the music. I flash briefly on the pentatonic scale. You could fall through. "Just one violin?" I ask. "What would it sound like?"

"No," she says. "He played both parts."

So back and forth he must've played, raising questions with his part, answering with hers. He was good enough. He could do this.

Fiddle at her side, she watched. But why? She knew the music by heart. She had only missed a note. Why didn't she come back in?

"Then," she says.

And then what?

"I knew."

Through all their years of practice, their trolley trips for lessons downtown, sometimes three times a week, had she sensed he was pulling away?

Or maybe not. Could she have actually been better? But in that case, why? What's next, maybe she asked herself. How many women fiddlers were there, back then, right after the war? Could she have feared her virtuosity, what she would have to give up.

"I would never. . ."

So maybe she had done it on purpose. Without thinking, just waiting for an opportunity like this. Maybe she looked up

and saw her father in the wings. He pointed at her, insisting that she come back in, and that was enough. Disrupting everything, she left loudly through the audience. And Nick never stopped playing.

"You miss one note and it was not the same?" My brother asks. "Do you know how many mistakes I've made?"

If you're not perfect, you couldn't play at all, doesn't he understand? That was it. The end. One mistake. Then, you back away. With all those patients, the mistakes I had made.

"Come on Mom," Jonah says. "I want to hear you." My brother has come all this way. "Play," he says. He reaches for the case, fumbles with and then unsnaps the latches. He opens it.

The case is empty. There is no fiddle inside. I stand and look.

"Where Mom?" I ask as gently as I can.

"I gave it to someone," she says. "What would I do with it?"

A quick spin in the parking lot, then a push, is it playful, and my brother pins me against the car. Thin as he is, he has leverage and seven years on me. Up close, he smells like algae, as though he had been swimming in a still pond and forgot to wash, which he might have done because, somehow, he had just rented a bungalow an hour upstate of New York. Maybe he's doing better than I thought. "You know nothing," he says. "Big brother."

Thrown by the empty fiddle case, I have no answer. The weight of his body against mine, his bent elbow sharp in my back, his fishy smell, they are my only certainty.

"She had grown past the violin." No "fiddle" for him. "You were at college. She got into collecting, antiques, selling, did pretty well at it."

"It's not something you grow past," not willing to let it go. "Ever see her when her brother came to play?"

"She stopped going," he says as he releases me. "At least not every time."

And I consider the impossibility of this as I slide into the car.

Driving, I look over at him. Yeah, he's a mess. And he stinks. But he won't look back at me and for the first time I feel the absence of his acknowledgement.

"You shouldn't have brought it," he finally says, still looking out his window. "She wouldn't remember."

And maybe he is right. She has a choice of her memories; maybe without the fiddle, she is free. Or maybe it doesn't matter you had missed a note . . .

I had spread out her collectables, the Pennsylvania Dutch frakturs, the heavy porcelain, the blue and white plates in the living room. Dusty, wrapped in newspaper, maybe the real relics of my mother's life.

The rest of the house is empty. Tomorrow, it goes on the market.

Now the appraiser squats, picking through item by item. Unwrapping each, using the light on his phone to examine closer, he separates them into piles.

He comes from a good auction house, very selective in what they take. I wanted it to be the best because I had no idea. More than that, I really wanted to know. I realize I am holding my breath.

He examines a large serving plate with a magnifying glass. Blue and white, it is glazed with a hunting scene in the middle and decorative panels around the border. I didn't know, but my brother had once explained. It's called a charger. The appraiser unbends, shows me its edge.

"No chips," he says. And he's right. The glaze continues undamaged around the rim.

He hands it to me. I'm struck by how heavy it is. I remember holding the violin, how long ago was that, now the charger.

"Turn it over."

There is nothing on the bottom. Is that a problem?

"Early Chinese export. No mark means it's old. Later stuff, they were required to mark. Very high quality."

I had seen that charger, the one I held, displayed on the mantle whenever I visited. Before this, I never knew. I'm surprised by what a relief it is.

"Yeah, really good." He picks up a bowl, turns it over, also no mark. "Ten years ago, it would've fetched a fortune."

He stops.

"But the market has changed. It always changes. No one is buying this anymore."

And he writes a figure on his pad. I put down the plate, the charger, to look. The number is low. Could I do better? Maybe. But I know nothing.

In the dining room, the clink of my mother's fork has gotten louder. Her father, who had not talked to her for a year after she'd run off stage, later came to dinner every week, bringing fresh blue fish from the shore. Her brother died years ago. She is in a memory care unit, I brought her a fiddle, and it didn't mean anything. Probably, it was a mistake. In my pocket, I have a check from the appraiser.

Again, someone puts on the CD. The same song, Bee Gees I'm certain about it now. Someone starts to sing. Someone else.

She raises her head, puts down the fork. Her voice is thin, tired, watery. But she is not humming. Not whistling. She knows the words. "We belong to you and me," she sings. The music takes her over and she sways with the ballad. I would never have guessed. And, of course, unlike anyone else, she is spot on in tune.

My office is stilled, a muffled kind of quiet, dampened chair squeaks, papers shuffling, although maybe I am more aware of the silence this afternoon. I had left the time open. For two, three weeks. Finishing up my notes from the morning, I keep glancing over at the empty sofa. I had thought of calling him.

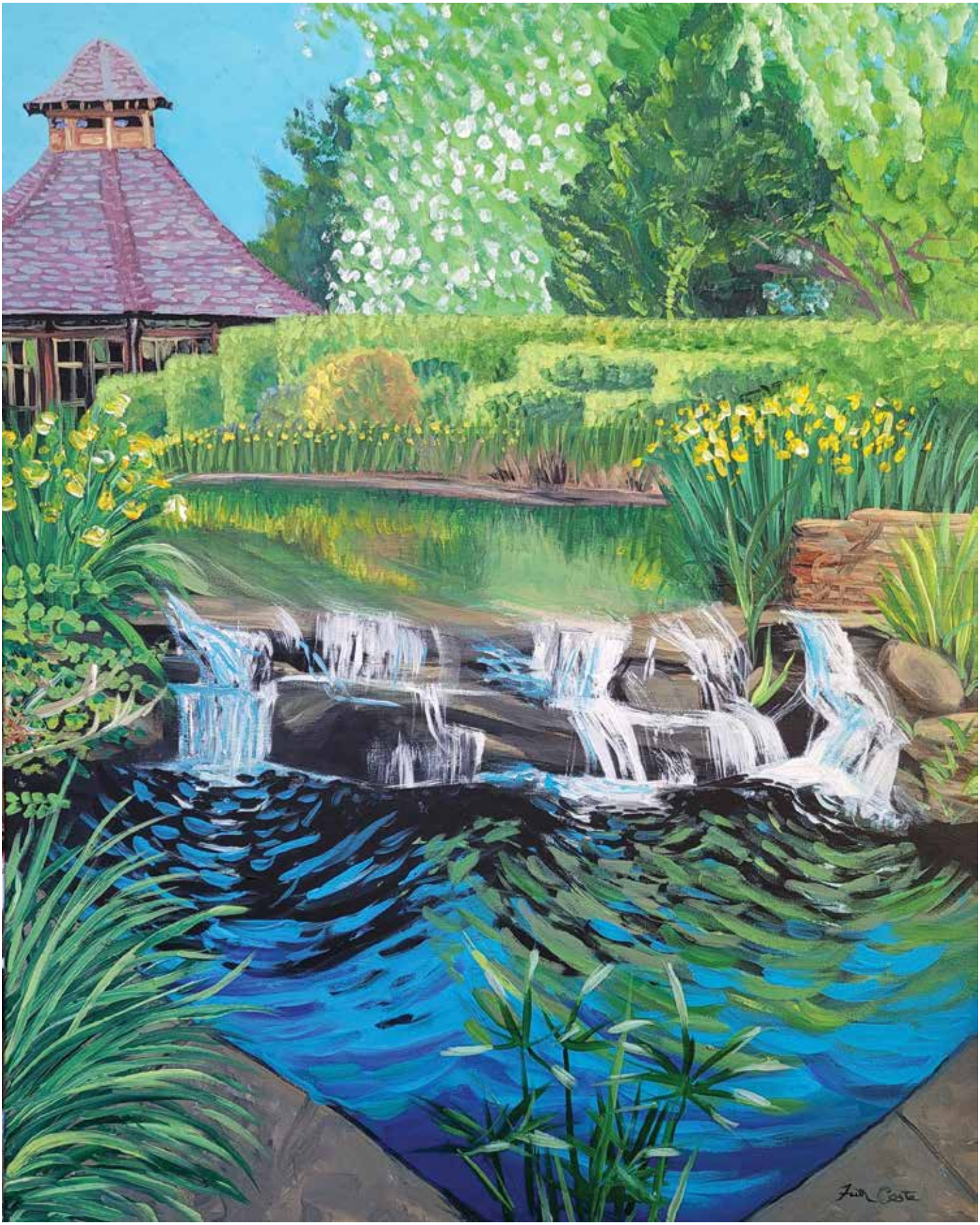
I think also of my brother. He was right about my mother, and he wasn't. She became a collector, a dealer. Based on the appraiser, she had done all right with it, better than all right. Jonah saw it, it was me who did not.

Still, collect frakturs, chargers, old board games, all you want, but to never again play the fiddle, that was a lot to give up. Maybe pick it up once or twice. Just for fun. A few evenings after a martini. Some chamber music in the living room. But I'm not even asking for that much. Could she have played it for me? That would have meant something.

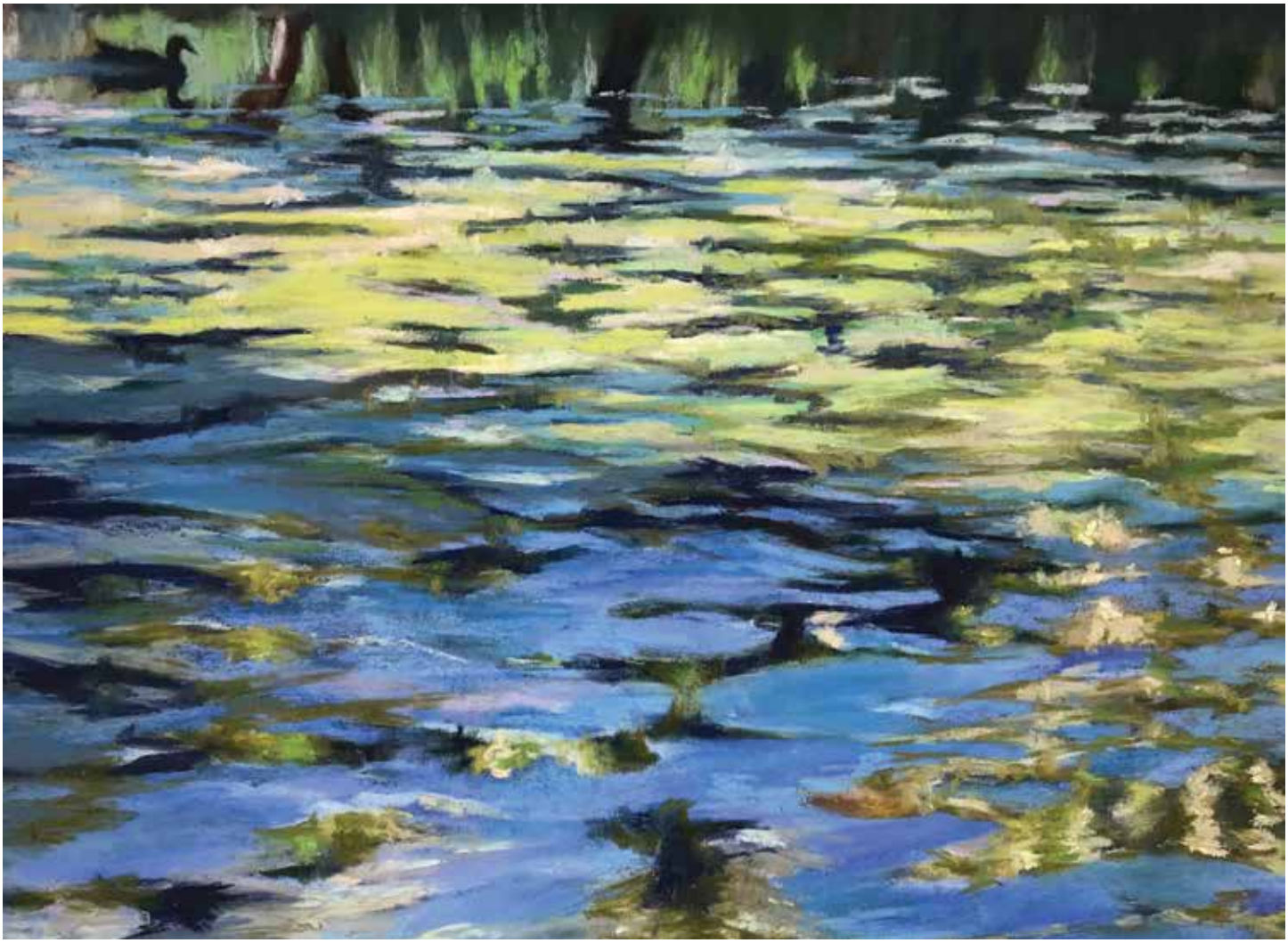
If it is not perfect, it is not worth doing. Maybe. But I bet she made some mistakes with that damn pottery, misread a glazer's mark or two, dropped one of those chargers, got taken here or there.

And so had I. . .been tired a few times. . .off my game. . .been stupid. . .

The session time is up. No professor. It's not going to happen. Next week, I'll schedule his slot for someone else.



BLOOM AND GROW by FAITH COSTA



MUCKY POND by CATHERINE MCILHENNY

I turn from my desk. And as I do, I change my mind. This time it won't be me who walks away. I want him to know. I want to know.

I dig out his number, get his machine. I start to leave a message, then change my mind.

Hanging up, I open my computer. Somewhere I have an app which gives me a musical note. An 'A', very simple, a starting point.

I call again. I don't speak. I whistle into the phone.

A normal scale until I hit the first gap. The missing 'D,' a half step, where the first knot should be. Instead, I jump right over it, whistle the next note, an 'E.' Easier to hear, got to admit. That sweet pentatonic. Not perfect maybe, but. . .back to the regular scale for a note or two until the last gap. A big one. No 'G' sharp, the leading tone that my mother played, the worried note, the push forward. Gone. Nothing there. I could fall through, but I don't. Instead, I hop right back to the beginning. Casual isn't it, without those twists in the ear, those knots to be untied. Maybe, but also a lot of room. Play around, try a few things, whoops, that's not what I'm after, screwed it up actually, but so what, get it next time. Five notes I whistle on the phone. That's my message.

Then I close the phone and turn back to my empty office.

Jeff Rush recently retired as a Professor Emeritus from the Department of Film and Media Arts at Temple University where he taught Screenwriting and Directing.

For the Bride in my DNA

Poem by Cassandra Whitaker

Village shuttered against night, clay stove fired up, the kettle steaming
in the damp. Her position set, the old Dutch-German requires it, a cook
to bank the fires to prepare the meals. His bed? She has her own, a right
to refuse the man; she made him sign his mark upon the deed she's folded up,
squared in her belongings, a quilt she patched with her mother, a bronze knife,
a single coin to pay her funeral. The bride could be called young in polite nations,
here she is the cook, a lover if she permits it. There is no church, no dowry,
not even a dress beyond what she made on her last name day, stitched like her
comfort depended on it, the dress, a sturdy enough coat against cold, rain,
the haymaking weather she will cook in, every day, for the rest of her days,
with a man who agreed to pay her, shelter her, and fuck her with child, in her
own time, or his own time, should he drink or take to anger, as men do.
She is given flowers to cover her from evil, a bit of dirt from her father's house,
a bit of ash from her mother's hearth. She doesn't believe evil is darkness,
she understands darkness divides evil into shadow, nothing can be trusted
with the eye. When the old man picks her up he whispers, I'll keep demon's fingers
from your ankles, and carries her into the house, and puts her down
like a basket of beets. He salts the stoop, strikes candles against the known.
They eat a stew with bread. He drinks to shatter her place. She hears the crack
of the whisky cask and tumbles into a well of worry. He visits her in those first hours
of darkness, the journey hardly off her, to keep you safe from it, from the evil
that would take you right outside the door. She knows she has no choice
in the matter, she's heard her mother's bed clatter; the demon is in the gaps
between spirit and man, how often he lifts it to his lip, how often he puts it away.

Cassandra Whitaker (she/they) is trans writer living in rural Virginia. Whit's work has been published in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Conjunctions*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Lamba Literary Review* and other places. They are a member of the National Book Critics Circle and an educator. *Wolf Devouring A Wolf Devouring A Wolf* is forthcoming from Jackleg Press in 2025.

The Lord God Bird

Andy Boyle – Runner-up

Eli steps out of his truck, slipping the revolver into the rear waistband of his jeans, pulling his red flannel over it. Belle loved this shirt. Said the pattern reminded her of that Italian restaurant he took her to on her seventh birthday. He inhales deeply then glides his hand over his chest, over the fabric, as if to assure himself, this is what he wants to do.

It is.

He grabs the green backpack, slinging it over his shoulder. His Razorbacks hat barely mops up the sweat already dripping from his brow, the eastern Arkansas humidity and heat mixing together like a wet slap to the face. Over the phone yesterday the guide told him to wear long pants, despite the heat. *The 'squitos are a real sumbitch in them woods.* Eli tells himself he doesn't mind the discomfort, his calves already encased in sweat. It won't last for long.

He steps across the rough gravel parking lot, the stones crunching beneath his boots, crackling like Belle chewing cereal. Only one other vehicle is parked at the other end, a brown early 90s Chevy S-10 pickup. Beat to shit but somehow still appears well-taken care of. The trees overhead offer some respite from the beating July sun as Eli approaches the truck, but not much. He's never been too lucky. The heat of the rocks beneath his feet burns. Like he's walking on coals, waiting to be roasted.

"Make it all right?"

An old man slinks out of the S-10. Gray craggy beard, long-sleeved white shirt with *SKOL* printed on the front. He's wiry, his brown cargo pants hanging for dear life on what little meat his hips have. Skin's tan but red at the same time. He wears one of those hats like Gilligan.

"Yup," Eli says, walking forward, hand already out for a shake. "Greg, I presume?"

"You presume correctly, good sir." No last names, which was how he was told this would go. Greg's got a cigarette in his right hand and slips it into his mouth before gripping Eli's hand. Rough palms, strong squeeze. Working man's palms. Eli knows Greg is feeling the same in return. Sizing one another up. When Eli lets go, Greg takes a long drag of his cigarette before pinching off the burning ember and setting the remaining heater in one of his pants pockets. "Find the place okay?"

Eli didn't but nods yes anyway. After he left Brinkley, he followed a winding stretch of unpaved roads with little to no signage, crisscrossing what felt like private land he wasn't supposed to be on. More than once he felt eyes on him and half expected a rifle round to careen through his windshield, ending everything before it even began. The Big Woods was near the Mississippi River Flyway, half a million acres of mostly pristine land, devoid of humanity. And where they were right now was a federal wildlife refuge within that. And what they were doing was very much illegal. Even getting this man on the phone had been quite the ordeal. A friend of a friend knew a guy who had heard of a dude who knew someone from the internet who met a man at a meeting. Secrecy abounded. He knows Greg here had probably looked him up, too. Made sure he wasn't a cop. Or a fed. But he's sure as hell Greg has no clue what Eli's really here for.

Eli peers behind the man, looking at a trail created by decades of footsteps, leading down to the swampy water. A metal canoe rests where the trail ends. Eli wonders how the man carried it there himself, and before he can ask that question, Greg clears his throat.

"Gotta have the talk," Greg says.

"The talk?"

Greg nods. "You a cop?"

Oh, that talk. "No sirree."

"You sure? Not even a little?"

"Damn sure."

Greg cups a hand around his right ear. "Just one more time for me, if you don't mind."

Eli smiles thinly. "I am not, nor have I ever been, an officer of the law." It's the truth and he says it as such.

Greg directs his piercing blue eyes at Eli, like he's digging into his soul. Tension mounts inside Eli, his hands turning to fists, realizing the older man might want to pat him down. Might find the gun. All this planning wasted because of one overlooked thing.

"Alright," Greg finally says. Eli feels his shoulders relax. "You got the money?"

Eli reaches into his right pocket and pulls out a wad of hundreds. "Half now, half later, like we said."

Greg's face grows taut. "Don't reckon that's what we said."

It is what they said. "It's what we're going to do."

Greg eyes Eli's outstretched hand. Two grand right there. The old man sucks on the inside of his lip, shifts his weight onto another foot. Everything going to shit and they hadn't even started.

"This right now," Eli says, pushing the money toward the

DENIM DOOR GETTYSBURG by ERICA HARNEY

man, "and if I get what I came for? *Double* that when we get back."

Greg's eyes light up like birthday candles. "Double?"

"Six Gs total."

"Just six?"

"That's more than we agreed, ain't nothing *just* about it."

Greg whistles softly to himself. "You good for it?"

Eli pushes the cash into the man's hand, making him take it. "I wouldn't offer it if I wasn't."

Greg peers at the money in his hand, looking through the bills. Probably making sure they're not sequential, like this is some sort of Hillbilly sting operation. Or just making sure the count is right. Eventually, Greg folds them up and slips them into a pocket of his cargo pants, pressing the Velcro down hard over it. Greg grins broadly, his eyes lighting up.

"Prepare to have your tits clean blown off, young man," Greg says before gesturing toward the trail.

It wasn't intentional, what would become his daughter's lifelong obsession. It's funny, Eli sometimes thinks, how an accident led to everything. Led to him following this stranger, Greg, down a trail into the vast unknown wilderness.

It was Belle's third birthday. Eli was running late getting home from the chicken plant. Not his fault. Dale had kept them all 60 minutes over—unpaid, of course, because Dale was a mean S-O-B, a petty tyrant who liked to throw his weight around. Racing down the road, Eli stopped at the good Walmart on the way home. All he had was thirty bucks. That got him a coloring book, a new set of crayons, a pack of stickers, and a plush toy. Hadn't even been thinking when he picked them up, really. It was only when he got into his truck and saw them laid out on the seat next to him he realized what he'd done.

The coloring book? Full of birds. The plushy? An eagle. The stickers? Yup. Birds.

And after he gave them to Belle—not even wrapped up, didn't have time for it, which got him a hard stare from Krista, which he knew he'd get some shit for after—his baby girl was never the same. Birds were all she cared for. Birds were her life. All she ever wanted to do was go look at the damn things.

Remembering it now, Eli feels like it was divine intervention. But what he really thinks is no loving God could do what came next.

"You do much canoeing?" Greg asks, breaking Eli from the memory, as the older man gestures for him to get in the front of the watercraft.

"Haven't really spent much time on the water, to tell you the truth," Eli says as he unsteadily creeps into the canoe, letting himself sit down on the bench. It's not the full truth, but it's close enough. He holds the sides as Greg suddenly pushes the vessel into the water while also hopping in the back with an unexpected quickness for an old man. Then again, Eli doesn't even know his age. Maybe he just looks rough. Everyone thought Eli was older than he was for a similar reason.

"Not too difficult," Greg says, picking up a paddle, using it to point at one by Eli's boots. "Just put that in the water and row. I'll tell you what to do, where to go. Ain't no rapids or anything like that to worry about. Barely much of a current."

Eli does as he was told, feeling strange having the man out of his view, sitting behind him. "Shouldn't you be in the front?"

"Nope," the old man says. "I do the steering from back here. I know where we're going. You don't know shit. That's why you hired me."

In the middle of the canoe sat their supplies next to the green backpack he'd brought. A dozen water bottles and a few gas station sandwiches inside a red cooler half-filled with ice, next to two boxes of Cheez-Its, two pairs of binoculars (Greg told him over the phone to not bring his own), a first aid kit, and a length of rope and green tarp. Everything else made sense but the last items.

"What's the rope and tarp for?" Eli asks.

"Just in case," Greg says, turning the boat eastward.

A bird squawks overhead, and Eli looks, trying to follow it with his eyes. But the creature was hidden somewhere amid the giant trees that stick out of the water like fingers of God, aiming toward the heavens. It's cooler closer to the water, but Eli already feels his armpits soaked with sweat. No turning back now. He was still doing this. A promise to keep.

"In case what?" Eli asks.

"Anything."

After that, Greg tells him they would be paddling for at least the next two hours and to enjoy the view.

This wasn't his first trip into these woods. Not even the second. Maybe his 12th. Perhaps lucky No. 13. Wouldn't that just make sense. Never before had he hired a personal guide, instead going with tour groups in the areas you're allowed to visit. Always coming home empty-handed. Looking for a sign this was what he was meant to do, and being told by God that no, not this time. Maybe not ever.

This is his last chance, he thinks as he paddles around a tree, there will be no more after this. No more money. No more willpower. Eli feels his gun tucked in at the small of his back, the metal somehow still cold against his skin as drops of sweat roll down his shoulder blades.

"Know much about it?"

Greg's voice crackles from behind Eli, startling him. They'd been paddling about half an hour in silence.

"A bit. I've read the scientific papers. Where they found it."

"That's all bullshit."

Eli turns and looks at Greg. A cigarette hangs on the man's lip, unlit. Eli asks, "What do you mean?"

Greg waves his wrinkled hand in the air like he's swatting away flies. "All bullshit. They ain't seen dick. Or they're just confused. Looking for the wrong reason."

"What's the right reason?"

Greg's smile slowly crests his face. "Now that's the question there, isn't it. If you don't come looking with pure intentions, it don't show."

A pain stirs inside Eli's chest, a fire burning up into his throat. If his reason wasn't a right reason, then no other could exist. He turns back toward the front, paddling silently, deciding whether or not he wants to say anything to this old man. To let it all out. To tell someone, anyone. But he's told nobody. Not even the priest after the service.

There's no way the old man could know, right? Unless he could read Eli's mind.

"Unlike them, I've seen it a whole lot of times," Greg says. "That's why I know where to go."

"You're going for the right reason?" Eli asks.

"No, not at all," Greg answers. "I'm going for money. Plain as

day. I think it knows that. But you?"

The words hang in the air. Eli asks, "Me?"

"You're here for something honorable. Something honest," Greg says. "I can tell."

Eli goes to speak but his voice catches in his throat. His nose burns, his eyes ache, but he pushes it down. No tears. Not now. He takes a few breaths, steadies himself, and whispers, "I hope so."

Krista noticed Belle's cough first. She wanted to take their seven-year-old daughter to the doctor right away. But with the chicken plant's basically non-existent insurance, and with his hours already getting cut as is with talks of the company closing down the whole operation, money was tight. Shit, when the hell wasn't it? The best they could afford was the free clinic in Pine Bluff. After waiting for five hours next to a still-drunk man with a broken arm while people in nearby seats coughed much louder and harder than his daughter, the overworked doc gave Belle some antibiotics—from a sample pack, Eli noted—and sent them on their way. *Just a cold, nothing to worry about.*

Eli didn't even think much about it. Kids got sick. Then they bounce back. When Belle first started kindergarten, she was sick every other week. Her nose ran so much Eli used to joke someday it'd be able to run a marathon. But a few weeks after that doctor's visit, Belle wasn't any better. And after Krista begged him to do something, he finally ponied up and took his baby girl to a doctor. *Sorry, but your insurance won't cover this visit,* the woman at the front desk said after they had already waited two hours to be seen. He gave the woman one of his credit cards he knew wasn't maxed out and started making plans in his head on how to pay for it all.

The doctor seemed barely out of medical school. Skinny and blonde, Eli wasn't sure the kid had even started shaving yet. After about five minutes, the young buck said there was nothing to be afraid of. Just a bad cold. A viral infection. *Kids get sick. Then they bounce back.* His own words coming back to him. *What about her being tired all the time, doc? She doesn't eat much.* The doc repeated himself: *Just a viral infection. They bounce back. Nothing to worry about.* The sumbitch even patted Eli's arm while he said this. Like he was talking to a child himself. Eli wanted to pop the guy in the jaw, teach him some manners. But then the doc gave Belle a grape lollipop and told her she'd be feeling better in no time. Eli got the bill at the front desk, his eyes wide at how such a short visit that didn't do shit could cost so goddamn much.

Wasn't until later he realized they'd charged him $10 for the lollipop.

Belle didn't get better. But she didn't get worse, neither. Krista thought maybe it was asthma. It ran on the side of her family. Said even she would get to hacking and coughing after her shifts at the Big Banjo Pizza Parlor. Doctor had ruled out asthma, he told her. *Well, it's just a cold, right?* Eventually, they just forgot. Belle coughed. That's just what she did sometimes. Nobody paid it too much mind. It didn't seem to bother her none. And the thing that tugged on Eli's heart the most, is he knew he should do more, watching his baby girl cough like that from time to time. But he didn't do anything.

Until one day, about half a year later, while they were out in the woods, Belle in a light long sleeve shirt, peering through the binoculars she'd gotten after selling umpteen Girl Scout cookies, hoping to see a certain type of wren—he'd never been able to identify a damn thing—his baby girl pulled her head back and sneezed. He reminded her to cover her nose, and then she sneezed even harder into her elbow. And when she looked at it, the crook of her shirt was covered in deep crimson. Her upper lip and nose speckled with blood. Her eyes full of fear.

"So you've seen one," Eli says to Greg in between soft strokes. It'd been about two hours since they last said much, other than Greg occasionally giving directions. The rowing had become meditative at times, Eli's mind going blank to anything other than the sights and smells around him. The occasional scream of a bird. The stench of rotten eggs periodically floating into his nostrils. The cool wind, offering respite from the sun that sporadically beat down in-between the canopy.

He looks back at the older man, whose eyes are focused on the treetops, always scanning.

"A-yup," Greg says, nodding slowly a few times, like he's having to convince even himself. "Wouldn't be taking you out here if I hadn't."

"How many times?"

"How many times what?"

"Have you seen it?"

His eyes dart to Eli. "Every time, brother. Every goddamn time."

Eli scoffs at that. "Impossible."

"That's the thing," Greg says, thinking through his next words, scratching at the gray stubble near his Adam's apple. "You know, let's move by that tree over there, next to that cropping of land. Rest us a spell. I'm getting a bit hungry. Bout lunch time anyway."

"Are we close?"

"We're not far."

In the distance, Eli thinks he hears the sound of an outboard motor, a chugging drone of machinery, but that's muffled by the sound of them maneuvering over to a giant cypress next to the shore. And then the sound's gone, if it ever was there. Eli turns around in his seat, facing the old man. Greg pats the tree's bark, gives it a grin like he's seeing an old friend.

"These have been growing since before Columbus landed in the New World," he says, taking a sandwich from his mini cooler, his eyes staring at the green backpack before offering the food to Eli. "You know that?"

Eli takes the sandwich from him and unwraps the plastic, pocketing the wrapper, ignoring the green backpack as much as he can. He shakes his head, unsure how to answer his navigator. He takes a bite and swallows quickly without really tasting anything. Greg grabs a bottle of water and unsnaps the lid before drinking half of it in one go. He wipes his beard and screws the lid back on.

"I was raised Baptist," Greg says, "But I never cotton'd to the idea of a big man in the sky, knowing everything we were going to do, in control of it all. Never made much sense to me. You?"

"Catholic."

Greg winces. "Damn, that's the pits right there. All that kneeling and standing. All the life sucked out of the service. Them priests? Heebie jeebies, man. Sorry, rude to speak ill of another man's faith."

Eli shrugs. "Ain't religious anymore."

"No?"

Eli chews another bite. "If I ever meet God, I'm going to

strangle the mother fucker."

Greg's eyes go huge. Eli thinks he's said something wrong, maybe hurt the man's feelings, but then the old codger laughs. It's higher pitched than Eli expects and goes on long enough that even Eli manages to grin. Just a little.

"You got fight in you," Greg says. "Commendable."

"I'm not so sure of that."

Greg grabs a sandwich for himself and delicately peels off the wrapping before taking a bite. He points it at Eli while he talks. "What I was getting at is I wasn't raised to believe in miracles. But what we got here? What I'm taking you to? That's what it is, man. It's not supposed to be here."

"You said you always see one."

Greg pauses before taking another bite, nodding slowly. As he chews, he looks around, aiming his head toward the shore. "Back through there's where I saw my first one. My grandaddy took me when I was knee high to a duck."

Eli's breath catches, his heart beating stronger. Beyond the shore, the trees are bunched together, so close that it's impossible to see more than ten yards. "Is that where we're going?"

"I don't think so. Not today."

Eli makes a face. "How can you be sure?"

"Only sure of three things in this life, Eli." He holds out his hand, index finger out. "One, we're all going to die. Two, the Dallas Cowboys ain't ever going to win another Super Bowl. And three—"

The crack echoes around them as something whips past Eli's head and slams into the tree next to Greg. The wood splinters, a small hole barely visible, inches to the right of Greg's face.

It takes Eli too long to realize what it was. And that's when the second gunshot hits Greg.

They called it pediatric non-small cell lung cancer. It was so rare that when Belle was finally diagnosed, the oncologist at the Arkansas Children's Hospital said she was one of only a handful of cases in the entire state. Eli gripped the chair when the doc said this because the man seemed almost excited, like he was getting to play in a whole new sandbox. Krista immediately broke down, head almost in her lap, sobbing quietly. Belle was in a nearby playroom with some other kids. He wondered if all their parents were getting similar awful news.

"What are our options?" he asked, trying to remain as stoic as possible. Be the man. Be the hero. Be what was expected of him.

The doctor's face turned grim. "Unfortunately, it's metastasized."

"What's that mean?" Krista managed to ask between tears.

"It's spread," Eli said, fighting the urge to cry himself. "Right?"

The doctor nodded. He had gray hair, a brown goatee. Eli thought the man dyed it. It looked off. All he could focus on now was the man's chin.

"I won't sugar coat this," the doctor said. "The outlook isn't great. If only we had caught it earlier, even a few months—"

"You piece of shit." Krista's words cut into Eli like a dagger. He couldn't turn to face her but felt her eyes drilling into him. Eli kept staring at the doctor's goatee. "I told you something was wrong. But you didn't take it seriously."

His wife's voice cracked into stronger sobs then, her head back in her palms as she heaved up and down. He reached to console her, but she shrugged away his hand, as if his fingers were fire. Eli leaned forward, running fingers through his hair. "What can we do?"

"There are some options," the doctor said. "Surgery. Chemotherapy. Radiation. But I need to warn you, sometimes the cure's worse than the disease."

Eli imagined his daughter in the other room, unaware of everything going wrong inside her body. His seven-year-old daughter who loved birds. Who had just seen one called a gray catbird. Eli told her it didn't look anything like a cat. Belle smacked him on the arm, told him to stop being silly. His baby girl looking up at him with all the love in the world. That he would protect her. That everything would be okay.

He finally broke, his own tears coming now, as he told the doctor, "You're going to do whatever you can to save my daughter."

"Sir, I need you to prepare for—"

Eli stood then, pointing at the man. "You're going to do *everything*."

Greg falls backward, landing partially on the shore, rocking the canoe just enough that Eli loses his balance and also falls backward. A third bullet whizzes past his ear, so close he imagines it bristling his hair. Eli lands on his back, hard, the wind knocked out of him. He lays flat, the sides of the canoe tall enough to provide him just enough cover, his mind racing. From here he can see toward the shore, but not behind him where the gunfire came from.

Sounds of movement from the shore. Greg's shirt is covered in blood as the old man scrambles to the other side of the giant cypress. They briefly make eye contact, exchanging fear.

"We told you Greg," a man's voice calls out, elongating *tooooold you*. A taunting tone, somewhat sing-song. Arkansas accent. He's not close, but not far either. "We done told you. You wanna be in our swamp? You gotta pay. And you ain't paid diddly shit."

"You tell him Darryl," a second, higher-pitched voice says. "You tell him good."

"We gave you enough warnings," says what Eli assumes is Darryl. "And you plum ignored that shit. Well, my daddy ain't in charge no more. Whatever agreement you had? Done. Now, how about—"

"Fuck you Darryl." Greg yells from behind the tree. His voice weaker than before, scratchy. From behind the tree, his hand sticks out, covered in blood, middle finger raised. "I ain't payin' you or your inbred brother a goddamn dime."

Another gunshot just as Greg's hand moves into cover. It misses.

"I ain't inbred," the second voice says. "That's not nice, Greg!"

"Quiet, Alden," Darryl says. "We're trying to conduct a business transaction here."

"Funny way you do business," Greg shouts. "Shooting a man."

The world is silent for a few seconds. Eli's heart thuds loud in his ears, almost drowning out all other noise. He's not sure how thick the canoe's sides are. If they'd even stop a bullet. Fuck. The gun. He slowly and awkwardly reaches into the small of his back to retrieve the revolver.

It's gone.

"Now, we got a proposition to make for the man in the boat,"

CHAOTIC YET TRANQUIL by KAYLA BOWMAN

Darryl says. "You listening?"

Eli's hand feels around behind him. Nothing. After he pulls his hand back, he yells, "You tried to fucking shoot me."

"Yeah, well, we didn't, did we?" A pause. "Let's keep this real simple, boatman. You give us whatever money you got. Keys. Wallet. That sort of deal. And we let you skedaddle on out of here."

Eli thinks through it. "I don't know where I even am."

"Not our problem, honcho," says Darryl. "That's the deal."

"How do I know you won't just shoot me as soon as I look up?"

"You don't," Darryl says. "But we ain't gunna. Unlike Greg, we abide by our deals."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Eli asks.

The two men laugh. Eli chances a quick glance over the canoe's edge. A wooden boat, painted green, with an outboard motor. One tall skinny pale man with a thick beard holding a rifle pointed toward him. Another man, shorter, fatter, tanner, with a shaved head wearing a brightly colored Memphis Grizzlies jersey, a large revolver in his hand.

Eli ducks his head down, his heart jumping in his throat.

"Could've shot you right then and there, hoss," Darryl says. "Had you dead to rights. But I didn't. Ain't gunna."

"Answer his question, Darryl," Alden says, prodding. "About Greg. He deserves to know."

"He does indeed," Darryl says. "That man you hired? He ain't seen shit."

"That's a goddamn lie!" Greg shouts before starting a coughing fit.

"Oh he'll take your money," Darryl says. "Got himself a nice little trick. Tells you a big tale. Probably said he first saw one over in them trees with his grandaddy, right?" Darryl pauses. "Yeah, I thought so. He takes you out here, makes you *believe* in him so much, gets you good and riled up, then finally, he points, gets all excited, and you see something and your mind does the rest."

"But you actually ain't seen shit," Alden says.

"You lie!" Greg yells. "That ain't true!" But there was a hitch in his voice. Eli didn't think the man fully believed himself.

"It's a good scam, I'll give you that, Greg," Darryl says. "But you owe us our cut. Maybe next time you run this scam—*if* we let you out of here—you'll know we mean business."

Something glints near Eli's foot. Something metal. He shifts in the boat, trying to get a better look. But the red cooler is blocking his view. So is the green backpack he brought. His chest tugs at seeing it.

"So, boatman, what'll it be?" Darryl asks. "Now that you know that conman's gotten you good. Gotten you all mixed up in this mess. You give us what you got, you head west, you'll eventually find civilization. And you forget all about ol' Greg here. And what you're looking for."

Eli's breathing goes heavy, his body lethargic. Like he just had a giant meal.

He imagines Greg behind that tree, cowering and helpless. An image flutters in his mind of Belle, looking so scared.

And Eli knows that God takes us all eventually and so while we're here, we should do the right thing. We should keep God at bay as long as fucking possible.

Eli knows what he has to do. His body tenses. His plan unfolding.

He never intended to leave these woods.

He doesn't care what these men say.

He's got a promise to keep.

They'd lost the house by the time Belle had finished the last round of radiation. He'd mortgaged everything he could, paying for her treatment. The plant fired him for missing too many shifts, after sitting with his baby girl during the chemo treatments that didn't slow anything down. No, they just made her sicker, made her feel like garbage, but he kept telling her she'd get better. The next treatment would work. Now she wore a beanie with a blue bird on it, keeping her bald head warm in the frigid temperature of the children's hospital, a giant book of illustrated birds on her chest as she flipped through the pages, her eyesight getting worse by the day. Her favorite bird changed nearly every week. Currently it was the barn owl. He wondered how many more favorites she'd have.

Krista hadn't moved with him when he got an apartment. She'd stopped showing up at the hospital when he was there. Blaming him for Belle's cancer, her slow death. And she was right, he thought. It was his fault. Eventually she'd been banned from the hospital when she showed up drunk or high or both and tried to fight an orderly. Her phone had been turned off. Last he heard, she'd moved in with a cousin down in El Dorado.

But Eli was here every day. The staff pitied him and her, letting him spend as much time as he could, damn the visiting hours. He'd gotten the hospital to get them a room with a view of a nearby copse of trees. When Belle felt good enough, he'd hold the binoculars to her face as she scanned the branches, calling out the birds she saw. Eli didn't know if she ever actually saw any, but he kept dutiful tabs, filling out her birding journal. *A ruby-throated hummingbird! A chimney swift! Daddy, I think I saw a blue jay!*

She flipped through the giant illustrated book now, one he'd gotten from the library, and her eyes turned into saucers on one page. A beautifully drawn bird, with red plumage behind its head, a white streak down its black wing feathers, a yellow beak. A woodpecker. Not just any: The caption called it an ivory-billed woodpecker.

"The Lord God Bird," she said, pointing. "That's what these are called."

Eli repeated the name in his mind: *The Lord God Bird.* Huh.

"Fancy name for a bird. Why do they call it that?"

She shrugged her tiny shoulders up. "Daddy, did you know they thought these were extinct?"

"I did not, baby girl."

"But they saw one in Arkansas. Lots of people have gone looking for it since." She stared up at him, excitement in her eyes. "When I get out of here, can you take me to go find one?"

He looked out the window, unable to look at her, as he nodded his head. He did what parents have always done to their children. He lied to protect her.

"I promise," he told her finally, running his hand along her cool face. "If it's the last thing I do, I'll take you to see this bird."

She was dead the next morning. He had her cremated, unable to bear looking into a coffin and seeing her again. The funeral was sparsely attended, the priest going through the motions, unhappy he didn't have a coffin but doing his job anyway. Afterward, Eli put her ashes in a jar, setting it in her green backpack she always wore whenever they went into the woods. Her birding bag, she called it.

And he promised her, in the house of the Lord, that he'd take her to see her bird. And then he'd join her.

Eli leans up in the canoe, hands raised as best he can. He expects a bullet to take him right then and there. But when it doesn't, he turns toward the two men in the boat, their guns pointed at him.

"We got a deal," Eli says, raising a single finger. "On one condition."

Darryl snorts. "You ain't exactly in what one would call a bargaining position of strength, boatman."

Eli shakes his head. "I got four grand in my pocket. My truck's probably worth about double that. Credit cards are maxed out, ain't worth shit, but you can have 'em. Only thing I want"—He points down toward the green backpack—"is that backpack. I can show you what's inside, if you like."

"What is it?" Darryl asks.

Eli sucks in his cheeks, holding in his emotions before letting out a stifled breath. "It's my baby girl."

"What?"

"Her ashes. Promised her I'd take her to see a Lord God Bird someday." He pauses. "Then she died."

Darryl pulls his face back from his rifle to look at him. "Jesus, man. Really?"

Eli feels the tears dripping down his cheeks as he nods vigorously. He can't talk, the giant lump in his throat. The grief washes over him for the thousandth time. It doesn't hurt any less.

"I'm going to reach down for the backpack now," he finally says, gesturing. "Then I'll show you her ashes. Then I'll go."

"Slowly," Darryl says, his face back to his rifle scope. Alden points that giant revolver, single-handed, nervously looking at his brother.

Eli kneels and grabs the green backpack with his left hand. And at the same time, he grabs something else with his right, holding it behind the bag. Awkwardly, he unzips the backpack with his left hand, and in the other, gets a better grip. He turns the opening between the zippers toward the two men, just a little. They peer toward him.

"Can't see anything," Alden says.

Eli turns the bag toward them just a bit more and the two brothers lean forward and—

It happens in slow motion.

Darryl looks away from the rifle for a second, squinting. Alden moves his gun to the side to get a better look. Eli brings up the revolver he's hidden behind the bag and at the same time pulls back the hammer. He aims and fires twice. The first round misses. The second doesn't.

Alden grabs at the side of his neck, arterial red spraying immediately onto Darryl, who's already moving his head back into position behind the rifle. Eli points and fires a third time. Miss. Aims for a fourth—

A force slams into his thigh and Eli screams, falling out of the boat onto the shore. He scrambles quickly, the pain intense, as he tussles behind the giant cypress. Greg's leaning against the bark, his shirt covered in blood. Eli strips off his belt, using a nearby twig to make a tourniquet on his leg.

"You killed my fucking brother!"

Darryl shouts as Eli takes a staggered breath, trying to push away the pain. Trying to think.

"Is it true?" Eli grunts to Greg.

"Is what true?"

"You fucking know what I'm asking."

He stares at Greg, digging into the older man with his eyes. Greg's skin is pale. The bullet hit him in the right shoulder, but the bleeding seems to have slowed, Greg holding a red stained handkerchief over the wound.

Greg closes his eyes. "I seen it. I really did. More than once."

"But not every time."

The man's chin trembles as he shakes his head no, his eyes closed for a few seconds. Then he opens them. "I didn't mean nothin' by it. People thought they saw what they saw. Who says they didn't?"

Screaming echoes through the trees as Darryl sobs for his brother. "Y'all are dead. You hear me, you fuckers?"

The words send a chill through Eli, trickling down his spine and arms. He stares at his gun. So does Greg.

"Heard three shots," the man says. "So you got three more."

"Gotta make 'em count."

Greg scans the nearby land. "He could just flank us, get into those trees there, take us out, one by one."

"We need a distraction."

"Ain't gunna be me," Greg says. "I can't run for shit."

Eli looks at the man. "How's your aim?"

"My what?"

Eli holds out the revolver. "You do any shooting?"

Greg looks at him, realizes what he is saying. He takes the gun, spins the chamber, looks down the barrel's sight, checks the weight in his hand, then nods. "State champion. High school."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Back in the stone age, I reckon."

Greg smiles, his teeth gritted. "I keep up. I practice."

"Even with that shoulder wound?"

Greg lifts the revolver with his left hand. "I'm a leftie. Always shot one handed anyway."

"You better not miss," Eli says, turning toward the other side of the tree.

"I ain't."

They always say having a child changes you, but Eli never believed it until Belle was born. It was like a transformation. He was just a married man one moment. And the next, he was forever a daddy. Belle was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, even still covered in goo while her mama held her to her chest. He was scared to hold her, thinking he'd do it wrong. But he did anyway, cradling her head, and she stared up at him. Those blue eyes, those clear blue eyes she got from Krista. He looked into them and right there, right then and there, he knew he would do anything for her. Give her anything. Cut off his own hand to feed her if it meant she'd survive another day. Every cell in his body had a new path, a new direction.

To give his baby girl everything she'd ever want.

Before he steps out from behind the tree, Eli closes his eyes and says a quick prayer. He asks for a miracle. *For my baby girl, Lord. Let me survive this. For her.* And when he opens his eyes, and whispers to Greg, one, *two*—

He steps out with his good foot and turns sideways, making himself a smaller target. Waiting for the sting of a bullet.

But the other boat is empty.

He hears the cock of a gun, feels cold metal pushed into

his head. Smells Darryl before he sees him. Tobacco spit and cigarettes and body sweat and Mitchum deodorant. The man's eyes are wet, his lip quivering, his face stained with his brother's blood.

"Only felt right to do you with Alden's gun," he says.

Where was Greg? his mind races. But then he realizes what must've happened. From this angle, he was blocking Greg's shot. Sharpshooter or not.

"Hope you're ready to meet the devil you sunuva—"

And then Darryl gasps. From this distance, Eli watches as the man's eyes go up, looking at something in the sky, tracking its movement. Darryl's jaw goes slack, his face filled with amazement.

"It's . . . it can't be," Darryl says. The gun no longer pressed directly on Eli's head. Just a few inches back. Just enough. Hopefully enough. "It's so beautiful."

Eli lets gravity drop his body to the ground. Two gunshots ring out. Eli curls into a ball, waiting for a third to come, wondering if his body's gone into shock, if he's already dead and his soul's floating above himself, experiencing it all.

Darryl's body falls with a dull thud, the gun landing a few yards away, the barrel smoking. A hole directly in the man's forehead.

"Still got it," Greg says, his left arm outstretched with the gun. "You good?"

Eli pats himself, expecting to find a spot gushing with blood other than his leg. But there's nothing.

"You?" Eli asks the older man as he pushes himself to stand, holding his injured leg.

"Darryl's close up game ain't worth spit." Greg lowers his arm. "But I think I'll make it."

Eli squints toward where Darryl was staring. "What was that? Why did he look away?"

Greg pauses, moves toward him, his voice shaky. "Wasn't lying when I said I could tell your heart had pure intentions." He hands Eli the gun, wipes his wetting eyes. "He saw one."

"Saw what?" But deep down, Eli already knows the answer.

"Told you it was a miracle," the old man says, kicking Darryl's lifeless body with one foot. "Now, if we take their boat, it'll take us half the time to get back. Might make it out of here alive at that pace."

Eli hesitates, staring at the revolver. Two bullets left. He puts it in the front of his jeans then moves toward the canoe. He lifts the green backpack, taking out the jar and unscrewing the lid. While he does this, Greg wades through the water toward the other boat, pulling Alden's body into the water before dragging the boat toward the shore.

Eli swallows then dumps his daughter's ashes into the nearby clearing. Where Darryl was staring. Doing what he promised his baby girl.

Two bullets left, he thinks again. He takes the gun out, holding it in his hand. Remembers what he planned to do. Pulls back the hammer.

Something flutters overhead. A shadow, a black and white mist. A hint of red. There, and then it's gone. If he even saw it at all.

A thought:

She'd want him to keep looking for more birds.

Eli releases the hammer. He drops the gun and heads toward the boat.

Andy Boyle is a Chicago-based writer whose work has been in *Esquire*, *NPR*, *NBC News*, *the Chicago Tribune*, and more. A longtime journalist, his work was cited in the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News. The author of two non-fiction books with Penguin Random House, his short fiction has appeared in *Uncharted Magazine*, *MetaStellar*, and *Rock and a Hard Place Magazine*. He is also the winner of the 2023 Mystery Writers of America Midwest's Hugh Holton award.

Divine Property: Tin Cup

Poem by Tim Gavin

I watched the blind beggar drag his body
into the shadow of Broad and Samson,
his hands like ash, his face half-covered
by an old hat he treats like an heirloom.
His cup was there, waiting like an open mouth,
the faint sound of coins bouncing against
its tin skin, each ping like a cracked bell
calling for something bigger.
He could tell a nickel from a dime by the way it settled,
its spinning stopped cold, and he must have felt
the difference between mercy and mockery—
the penny tossed by a man with rings on all his fingers,
the same man who spat once and crossed the street.
And the sign beside him, "Love Your Neighbor,"
written in some shaking hand, curling at the edges,
greasy with fingerprints by a friend in exile
bent away and ashamed of this kingdom.
I think about the weight of his bag, the bottle tucked
under his coat, warm against his ribs—his only comfort—
and I wonder about the composer of that sign, if he believed it,
if he too sat here once, holding out his hands.
He knows the sound of justice, the ache of an empty cup,
the slow, careful way hope folds itself into a corner
and waits for someone who knows its name.
And I want to ask him if he remembers
a song or a prayer, or if he only listens now
to the shuffle of shoes, the endless clicking
of heels on pavement, the city moving past him,
never stopping. Would he recognize my breath
if I knelt and dropped a quarter wrapped in a twenty
or would I become just another sound,
another dull thud in the cup's wide-open mouth?

Tim Gavin is an Episcopal priest. In addition to his most recent publication, A Radical Beginning (Olympia Publishers, 2023), he is the author of Lyrics from the Central Plateau, a chapbook of poems released by Prolific Press in November 2018. His articles, essays, and poems have appeared in *The Anglican Theological Review, Barrow Street Review, Blue Heron Review, Blue Mountain Review, Cape Rock, Chiron Review, The Cresset, Grow Christians, Digital Papercut, Evening Street Review, Library Journal, Magma, Poetry Quarterly, Poetry South, Poetry Super Highway, and Spectrum*. He lives with his wife, Joyce, in Newtown Square.

Rattlesnake Trainer

François Bereaud – Runner-up

"Rattlesnake trainer?"

"No, dog trainer. I'll train dogs to avoid rattlesnakes."

"What? That can't be a thing."

"It is."

"No way."

"I'm not a liar."

"I never called you a liar."

"It beats selling crypto."

"Hey, that keeps the roof over your head."

I hang up before my brother can say anymore. And before I tell him to fuck off. And before I tear up. I turn up the car radio– it's my brother's car-and wish I could not think about how in the last year I'd been a waitress, call center representative, substitute church custodian, and apprentice chimney sweep. Now this. I didn't lie when I said I wasn't afraid of snakes. I didn't have to lie when they didn't ask me about my mental health.

The first dog, Elli, is small-medium gray mutt. I put the shock collar on then lead her to the ring. The ring is made from a one-foot-high plastic fence which I stake into the ground. It's about twelve feet in diameter and one foot high. Enough to keep snakes in. The snake box is on the far side. Four baby rattlers all with muzzles. We use babies because they're the most dangerous, they can't control their venom. We feed them ground turkey with some sleeping powder stuff. When they crash, we put on the muzzles then drop them in the box. I imagine they wake up mad. I bring Elli into the ring and unleash her. She sniffs and pees on the dirt. I walk over to the box. I hear them moving. I open the door. Nothing happens. Then one comes out. Then two. Elli comes over, nuzzles my knee, not even looking at the four snakes just a few feet away. One sidewinds like crazy. Elli turns towards it. I grip the remote tight, ready to shock her if she moves in their direction. She doesn't. That snake lunges at another. It rattles. Elli walks away. She could care less. I'm not sure what to do. My throat tightens. I also can't remember how we get the muzzles off the snakes but that comes later.

My brother is dozing in his lounger when I get home. It's dusk but I can see the dark circles under his eyes. I get a beer from the fridge and sit near him on the couch. I put the can in the crook of one arm and try to open it with my unbandaged hand. It spills and drops to the floor. "Shit." My brother opens his eyes and spots the bandage right away.

"Oh god, did you get the serum?" he says.

"What?"

"Serum, anti-venom."

I want to laugh. "It was the last dog," I say. "I shocked him and he bit me. No big deal."

I feel his warm hand on my forearm. "Really"

"I don't lie," I say.

I close my eyes and hear him exhale. "I know," he says. "Did you like it?"

I hear the sound of the snakes moving through the dirt, something between a broom and the tide. "Yes," I say, eyes still shut.

"Good." He squeezes my arm. "Let's celebrate. I'll get you another beer."

I open my eyes, watch him move slowly toward the kitchen, and think just maybe.

I work Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays for High Country Kennels. We board dogs, run various canine behavior clinics, and hold "Rattlesnake Aversion Training" most weekends. We're a small outfit, three employees, and the owner, Robert. After my third rattlesnake session, Robert holds a longneck beer and watches as I remove the snake muzzles and put them back in their enclosures. "You know," he says between pulls on the bottle, "you're a natural. I've never had someone take to the snakes so quickly. You have a future here." Compliments are hard for me so I look away, needlessly triple checking that I've secured the latch.

"Thank you," I say without facing him. "I like animals. I almost got a job at the Humane Society a while back."

He snorts. "Bunch of motherfuckers over there, they almost ruined me. Corrupt bastards, lucky you didn't land with them."

I turn to see him finish the last half of his beer in one swallow, eyes hard. He walks silently to his office. I grab a rake to smooth over the training area.

At home, I tell my brother about Robert's reaction. He doesn't look up from his laptop and I fix myself a bean and cheese burrito. "Did you finish the jalapenos?" I call out.

"Found it," he says.

"What? I don't see them."

"2017. Lawsuit in county court. The Humane Society sued him and he countersued."

"What are you talking about?" I give up on the jalapenos, roll the tortilla, and put it in the toaster oven. My brother makes his in the microwave.

"Your boss had a legal battle with the Humane Society. They sued him for cruelty to animals, both snakes and dogs. He countersued for defamation. It doesn't look like anybody won but must cost him a pretty penny in legal fees. All public records if you know where to look."

And my brother does. He dropped out of law school after one year. His reason for mostly not talking to our parents.

"The shocks aren't so bad," I say. "I got one - fuck!" I look at the singe on my fingertip where it touched the toaster oven coil.

"Yeah, but you knew what was coming, you got to prepare for it. The dogs have no idea. And as for the snakes …"

I turn off the cold water and look in his direction. He's still immersed in his laptop. "How do you know all this?" I say.

"Google."

"When?"

"Right after you got the job."

"Why didn't you tell me then?"

"You were excited about the job."

I was. I am. I bite my burrito. It's bland with no jalapenos. I think about throwing it at my brother.

Tuesdays are slow at the kennel and mostly dog free. We get lots of weekend bookings which can extend to Monday so I clean stalls for most of the day with the other woman who works here, Araceli. She's shy like me and I hear the sounds of her hosing down and scrubbing adjacent stalls with no conversation between us when we cross paths. Robert is very fastidious about the cleaning process so it takes more time than one might think. We have four dogs here today and they each need to be walked. On a light day like today, we can walk them a half mile down the county road to a small park where they can run off leash if the owners have signed the consent form. This service Robert sees as premium and involves a surcharge.

By our 10 am break, Robert is still not here which is a first for me. I only got in because Araceli has a key. She's been here longer than me so has earned that trust, I guess. I want to ask her if she knows about the lawsuit but most people don't search for six-year-old county court cases.

We take the four dogs to the park and watch them romp around. We're alone except for a man who sits on a bench at the park's far side. I can't tell his age but he appears to be smoking. Without prompt, Araceli tells me she will be gone next week. Her brother is getting married and she will be traveling to Mexico, Oaxaca State, for the wedding and festivities. She doesn't appear too excited and I don't want to pry so I just say, "That's nice. Will the weather be good?" She tells me nights are cold this time of year but the days should be okay. Suddenly, I want to ask her many things like how long she's worked at the kennel, whether or not this trip is paid vacation, and what she thinks of Robert. Instead, I say, "Do you like your future sister-in-law?"

She squints as if she doesn't understand the question before saying. "No, I hate her." I turn my head and she explains that the woman was in her grade at school and never talked to her. She considered her family to be of a higher status than Araceli's. Now that Araceli's brother has made good money selling cell phone service, she's okay with their family. "She a fucking snob and mean." I've never heard Araceli swear or talk so much and I've completely forgotten about the dogs, but some barking then shouting brings me back. The man is now half the distance from us and is yelling at Logan, a small-medium, mostly white pit mix with a tan star-shaped mark on his forehead. He's sweet but excitable and jumps around the man's legs. Araceli and I run toward them.

"Get your damn dog away from me!" The man looks about forty, receding hairline, skinny, and red-faced. His accent is British.

"Sorry sir, he's harmless, just high energy. Logan, come." I yell.

"These dogs are not harmless; they should be eliminated like we did at home."

I remember hearing something about Britain killing all pit bulls. I call Logan again and he looks at me but then turns and jumps toward the man's leg. He's not very well trained. The man kicks him squarely in the ribs, hard. Logan gives an awful squeal and rolls on his side just as I reach him. Araceli is a step ahead of me and before I crouch to tend to Logan, I see her rush the man and slap him across the face. "Aiieee" he yells. She must have hurt him. I freeze, having no idea what to do. Logan yelps. Araceli stands directly in front of the man, her face red, a rivulet of sweat across her cheek. The man raises his hand. My throat catches and he takes a step back. The slapped side of his face shows her handprint. "Fucking bitch," he yells, spit flying with the expletive. Then he walks off.

I drop to the ground in front of Logan. My legs are twitching and my shirt is soaked. He's still on his side but quiet and not breathing too hard. I offer him my hand and he licks it, which I hope is a good sign. I feel the heat radiate from Araceli's body as she puts her hand on Logan's side. She strokes him gently, her fingers probing his fur. He responds by sitting up and poking her hand with his nose. "I think he's fine," she says. "Nothing feels broken. Maybe you should get the other dogs."

Shit. I've completely forgotten about them. There's so much I want to ask her again, but I say nothing and get up to find our other charges.

We walk back to work without talking about the man as if our silence will erase the whole experience. Araceli tells me that she was studying to be a vet tech so she's examined many injured dogs. She stopped the program when she got into some debt due to a car accident so now, she has three jobs instead but hopes to go back. I feel guilty thinking about how I only have one part time job thanks to my brother. Just before we get back to the kennel, her phone buzzes. "Robert," she says.

"Were we out too long?" I ask. I can't lose this job.

"No, he's not coming in today, we're on our own."

The rest of the day passes normally, the incident at the park unmentioned. I don't ask about Robert's absence or how often he messages her or if she's ever slapped someone before. At the end of the day, we make sure the dogs have adequate food, water, and outdoor access. They'll be alone twelve hours which seems like a lot but what do I know about kennels. There are no rattlesnakes here, Roberts keeps them somewhere else and brings them to our workshops in the wooden box. We leave together and Araceli locks the door. "That was quite a day," I say.

"Yes." She has bags under her eyes.

"See you Thursday?"

She nods and walks to her car. My brother's message comes

in as I start the car.

Heading out for a drink with Raj. Thai on the counter. Check this out.

Raj is his best friend and Thai is my favorite food. He's sent me a link: "The Proficient Pup". It opens to a page which says "Stop Worrying About Snakes and Start Enjoying Nature Again". I scroll down and see a note. "We do not use live snakes or shock training." I curse my brother and X out of the site, knowing I'll come back to it.

I mostly stopped talking to my parents after my father told me to "Suck It Up" when I told them college made me too sad toward the end of freshman year. I can't say exactly why it made me sad. I liked some classes, disliked others, had a few friends, one relationship. Maybe it was all my parents' friends who said "You must be having the time of your life." Or the rows of students in the Psychology 101 lecture, everyone looking at their phones as if their devices, not Jung or Piaget, held the secret to life. Or the endless talk about sorority and fraternity rushing. Or the fetishization of football. My father said I should never have chosen the large state university with my fragile mental state and that I could still transfer to a small liberal arts college with no Greek life or football if my grades were good enough which they weren't. I told him to fuck off in my head and stopped calling, then moved in with my brother after the year ended, a second college dropout in the family.

Now we don't call and we see our parents, who live less than two hours away, but twice a year, Christmas and their Labor Day party, a tradition they love for reasons neither my brother nor I can understand.

My brother picked my favorite Thai dish, yellow curry with tofu and vegetables, and I eat half of it before I open up the site he sent me. They advertise a "progressive" training method with no shocks or live snakes. I find an attached infographic which detailed the reasons why this method was preferable to and more humane than the old one. The woman who runs the training has a graduate degree, used to work at the zoo, and also does canine massage therapy. I feel warm, shameful, dirty even. And I remember Robert's anger at the mention of the Humane Society which now seems like defensiveness. I'd have to face him on Thursday. And what if Araceli was wrong, what if Logan wasn't okay? Would we confess what happened? I put the last piece of curry-soaked zucchini down. My head is starting to hurt. I spot the phone number at the bottom of the Proficient Pup site.

My last job was as an apprentice chimney sweep for a one-woman business, owned by Margaret, a retired Navy captain. Now she spent her time on roofs. I told her I wasn't afraid of heights or getting dirty. She offered me a position on the spot, said she'd like to find someone to take over when she decided she was too old. On the first day, I watched her complete two jobs. Day two she said I could help. The first house was owned by an older couple, it had small rooms with pictures on every surface, grandkids, vacations, and the like. They had a woodstove in the living room and I cleaned from inside while Margaret worked from the roof. Since it was summertime, the house was warm and the woman offered me iced tea. I worked slowly but Margaret said I did a good job.

The second house that day, Margaret described as "crazy". It was a large modern home which looked like it had been built with connecting Lego cubes, stacked without much rhyme or reason. There were three fireplaces; we were to clean two of them the family claimed to use, though Margaret suspected they hardly used them at all from how clean they were the year before. A teenager answered the door, shirtless, a scrawny muscular type with pale skin. He nodded at Margaret but gave me a long up and down look as if I were not covered by my dirty shirt and jeans. On the first chimney which was the highest, we followed the same procedure as before. While I cleaned the fireplace inside, I could hear loud rap music coming from one of the upstairs cubes. After inspecting and complimenting my work, Margaret asked if I'd like to reverse roles on the second one. This chimney was much lower, on top of one of the cubes next to a higher stacked part of the house. Near the chimney was a large sliding door covered by blinds which had to lead into the second floor of the house. With a flat roof, the work was easy. I liked the soreness in my arms as I worked the long brush. I could tell there was very little soot to remove, but kept at it, wanting to impress Margaret with my work ethic. The roof was hot and I stopped for a drink from my water bottle giving the neighborhood a look around. The lots were big with expansive lawns and pine trees separating the houses, a mix of older and more modern, though none as unusual as this one. I turned back toward the house. The blinds had been opened on the sliding door. The teenager stood at the window, fully naked, one hand furiously stroking his erect penis, a shit eating grin on his face. Bile rose in my throat and I made a sound between a scream and a retch. I grabbed the brush and scrambled down the ladder. Margaret met me at the bottom with a questioning look–she'd obviously heard my noise. I was shaking.

In her truck, my fingers gripping the armrest tight, I told her.

"Prick," she said, keeping her eyes on the road. I waited for her to say more, but she didn't.

I couldn't leave it there. "Isn't that like some form of sexual harassment, couldn't we–" I stopped short at her snort.

"Little fucker," she said, "probably going to join the Navy. You know how often I saw that kind of shit?"

"Yeah, but does that make it okay?" I felt my tone rise.

"You think you have a case here?" Now her tone rose and she glanced in my direction as she changed lanes. "He was in his own house. How many times a day do you think he jerks off?"

I didn't have an answer for that. "Look," she said, "what happened wasn't good, and I hope never happens again, but you see some weird shit in people's houses. I can tell you're upset but I have to know that this is the right fit for you. I can't have someone jittery on roofs."

"I'm not jittery," I said much too loud.

"You are." The Navy captain's voice. We rode in silence. When she dropped me off near the bus stop, she said she had no jobs for the next few days but she'd call me.

She didn't.

The work day Thursday starts normal. Robert is at his desk when I get in at 9. He gives me a nod, no indication of his poor mood the last time I saw him. Araceli shows up at noon, also giving me a nod as if the events of Tuesday never happened. Jorge is in today. He's quiet and does accounting or something else computer based for Robert. We've never said more than hello. Today I have four stalls to clean–I notice Logan went home–and then shorter walks with the five dogs that are here.

By two o'clock, I've finished my work along with two check-ins. On Thursdays I'm scheduled until 4, but Robert often tells me to go home early if there's little to do. Araceli is out back in what I think of as the rattlesnake pit, giving a one-on-one dog training lesson. Today her client is a young man with a rambunctious boxer. Araceli patiently explains to him that he's the master and gives him techniques on how to cue the dog for certain behaviors and reinforcements when the dog gets it right. I watch her, sitting on a shaded bench, the hot sun feeling good on my ankles. I think about how she should be a vet tech or even a vet. She's leading the dog through heeling when Robert calls my name.

"Be ready for a clinic Saturday," he says when I turn toward him.

"Oh. I didn't see one on the schedule."

"It's not. This one is strictly for a few of my friends. They hike a lot in the backcountry with their dogs. I want to give them the experience without the crowds."

Crowds? We cap our rattlesnake trainings at 10. "Okay," I say. "You want me to lead it?"

"Of course," he says. "Bring your A game. And feel free to go if you've completed your work today." Then he goes back inside.

I feel dizziness as if I'd stood up too quickly. What does any of this news mean? I look back toward Araceli who's watching the man trying to get his dog to heel. Even I can see he's doing it all wrong. Her face belies no frustration as she again shows him proper form and posture. I want to grab her and ask more of my questions but I can't interrupt so I go home instead.

My brother and I watch a movie that night. I try to get him to go out and see Barbie with me but he says he's tired. He chooses a movie about two Syrian girls whose dad is training them to be competitive swimmers. When the political trouble starts, they're forced to leave the country and become refugees. It's beautiful, based on a true story, and so sad. I cry quietly through the last twenty minutes hoping my brother won't see.

"You never cry at movies," he says. The credits are running and he stands, popcorn bowl in hand.

"Work has been weird," I say, not looking at him, not wanting to see his reaction at one more possible failure.

I hear him take a step toward me and I look up. He leans down and kisses the top of my head. I let out something between a cry a snort and a laugh and a plume of mucus-y snot lands on my jeans. He laughs. I laugh and this time spit flies from my mouth falling exactly on the mucus spot. "Gross," he says, but I can see his wide smile, "and goodnight."

Friday is a slow day. My brother decides to work from a coffee shop so I clean the apartment. As I scrub the bathroom, I remember that Araceli is traveling to Mexico today. She won't be at work tomorrow when Robert's friends show up. I turn the music up, hoping to push this thought from my mind. With the apartment done, I set out to walk the mile to the grocery store to buy the fixings for enchiladas, my brother's favorite. Walking there, I decide to make the green sauce though I know the one I buy in the can is perfectly acceptable. I open a browser for a recipe and "The Proficient Pup" website stares back at me. I call.

"This is Katy." The owner with the advanced degree and zoo experience.

"Hi. I was hoping I could ask you a few questions."

"About your dog?"

I explain who I am, that I love dogs, and where I work though I don't name our kennel or Robert. Before I say I want to learn more about her approach, she interrupts.

"Shock training is cruel. It's unethical."

"But I got shocked, it didn't really –"

"Bullshit." I don't have an answer for that. "Look, I gotta go," she says. "I suggest you read through my website. Bye."

I had read over her website. And I need my job. And it could save a dog's life. Or at least that what our website says. Enchiladas, I need to focus on enchiladas.

Robert's truck is there when I get to work Saturday morning at eight. "Morning," he says loud when I come in. "Donut?" I see a pink box on the table. This is a first. I say no thanks and start to set up, his friends are coming at nine. I take out the fencing and the stakes, trying not to think about yesterday's phone conversation.

The friends are two men. Standing with Robert, the three of them could be triplets, each tall and lean with salt and pepper hair. Robert introduces them as Greg and Cork, not saying if the latter is a nickname. Greg's dog is a yellow shepherd lab mix, a strong male dog with a beautiful flaxen coat. Cork's dog is a female German short-haired pointer. Both dogs are young with plenty of energy which I knew could make for a challenging session.

The men stand on the patio under the shade umbrella. The dogs run along the outer back fence. Robert brings out a thermos and three red cups which he fills. "Bloody Mary?" he calls to me as I make sure the training circle is perfect. My hands shake a bit as I recheck the stakes. I mouth "No thanks" in his direction.

"So, what about those snakes," someone, Greg I think, says too loud.

Robert laughs. "Okay, okay, let a man finish this drink." The trio is into the second thermos. I stand sweating in the shade of the lone tree, a desiccated palm, the dogs sprawl near me, having quickly expended their energy. Robert takes a long gulp from his cup, then sets it too close to the table's edge causing it to drop to the ground. I see the last of the red liquid ooze from the cup into the dirt. It looks like congealed blood.

Robert sways a bit as he carries the box of snakes into the ring. He puts it in the center of the ring, which is not normal, while I get the shock collar on the lab mix who we've decided will go first. Robert opens the door to the box and gives it a kick, also not normal. "Here we go," he says, his voice a bit shrill, face red.

"Shit, we got some live ones," Greg yells.

I walk the unnamed dog, they didn't tell me and, after spending twenty minutes watching them, I'm too embarrassed to ask, toward the two snakes which have come out. The lab takes an immediate interest and tugs in their direction. He's strong. I release the spring-loaded leash a bit and grip the shock remote tightly in the other hand. Yesterday's phone call comes roaring back. He reaches the end of the leash and pulls again. My feet are well planted but it still takes much of my counterweight to hold him back. I let out another two feet of leash and he moves forward. There are now three snakes out and all rattle. "Fuck," one of the men says and I shake just a bit. Concentrating on the timing, trying to push Katy's words from my head. Two more steps and I push the button. The dog yelps and jumps back. He recovers and takes a small step toward the snakes who are

synchronously spinning and rattling. I shock him again. Again, he yelps but this time when he gets his bearings, he shirks away from them. I try to edge him in their direction but he pulls away. Success. Maybe this is fine. It could save his life one day. I look back at the men. Their glasses are raised. Robert is now drinking out of a blue cup. Cork holds his pointer who seems a bit agitated by what has gone on in the ring.

The pointer is Olive. She's much lighter than the lab mix but squirmier when I attach her collar. The snakes are now across the ring up against the plastic fencing which has holes but far too small for them to get through. Olive leads me in their direction. Despite her bounciness, I feel steadier. Approach, rattle, shock. A couple of times and we'll be done. When she gets within two feet, I hit the remote. Her scream shreds the air and I feel the breakfast cereal in my gut seize. That isn't a sound a dog should make. *Shock training is cruel.* She jumps backward and her toenail digs into the gap between my jeans and the tongue of my sneaker. She yelps – this time normal – as she gets her footing and I resist the urge to hug her and instead pull her back, sticking to protocol. The men are quiet. Cork looks concerned.

A bead of sweat drips toward my eye but I don't have a free hand to do anything about it. I take a step back thinking this might be a one and done, for some dogs it is. But Olive perks up and pulls toward the snakes who are continuing to explore ways to escape the fencing. The sweat stings my eye. I let her lead and she keeps on. Again, at a two-foot distance, I shock her. The scream is less but still a scream. "Damn," I hear Cork say after Olive straightens up.

"Some of them are stubborn," Robert says. Once again, Olive pulls me toward the snakes. When I shock her the third time, she lets out a whimper as her whole body shudders and she collapses to the ground. I immediately drop to the ground and Robert yells my name. I don't touch Olive and she gets up. *It was a small shock, she has to be alright.* I've gotten one. This time she stands still, eying the snakes but not moving in their direction. Then she takes a tentative step their way. I hold firm and do not let any more leash out. She pulls. "Let her go," Robert yells. I look in the men's direction. Robert's face is red, Greg's eating a donut, and Cork looks confused. "One more time," Robert says, "that should do it."

"No." I say.

He takes a few steps forward, almost to the fence. "Do it. One more time. She's stubborn."

"No." He steps over the fence into the ring.

"Robert-" Cork says.

"I got this." Robert holds out his arm to dismiss Cork. Then he glares at me. "Give me the dog."

I think about Araceli slapping the man. I think about Syrian girls swimming to sanctuary. And Katy's words. I shake my head.

He takes another step forward. "I'm not asking you again, give me the fucking dog."

I take a step forward and hand him Olive. Then I step around him and over the snake fence. I half jog to the big fence which encloses our yard and hurl the remote over. On the other side is an undeveloped scrubby lot, it'll be hard to find. And it's our only one. Robert always stresses to be careful with it as he hasn't gotten around to getting another one. Then I run. Past the men and into our office. "Fucking bitch!" Robert screams. I tear through the front door without looking back.

I stop running about five minutes later. I'd looked behind me a few times. No one. I'm off the county road and bus line and in an unfamiliar neighborhood with small, well-kept houses. At a shaded intersection, someone has placed a bench near what looks to be a path leading into a small canyon. I sit. My face burns but there's also an unusual calmness, the normal wave of anxiety isn't there. I've lost another job to be sure. But it's a job I should have lost. I sit letting my body cool. I left my water bottle at the kennel.

After a while I pull out my phone to call my brother. There's a text message.

Hi. You called me yesterday to ask about shock training and I didn't catch your name. I stand by what I said–it's cruel and not ethical–but I'm sorry if I was harsh. It was a tough day, one of my employees just quit on me. Come by and I could show you our training methods. If you are as passionate about dogs as you say, maybe we could discuss some hours here if it's a good fit. Katy.

I read the message three times. It's real. I call my brother.

I have job news.

And I need a ride.

François Bereaud is a husband, dad, full time math professor, mentor in the San Diego Congolese refugee community, and mediocre hockey player. He is the author of the collection *San Diego Stories* published by Cowboy Jamboree Press. In 2026, Stanchion Press will publish his collection, *A Question of Family*. He has been widely published online and in print. His work has earned Pushcart Best of the Net, and Best Small Fictions nominations. He serves as the fiction editor at *The Twin Bill* and reads for *Porcupine Literary*. Links to his writing at francoisbereaud.com.

Infinity Curve with Cheesesteak

Poem by Stacey Forbes

My brother looks me in the eye when we
talk – always. Even driving through Philly
at rush hour after the airport. He drives
with his left knee, both hands going up
with questions, out for emphasis, pointing
at landmarks – like the cheesesteak
place we passed at 70 miles an hour,
the c and the e in the neon sign dark
because, bullets. He plays drums at Temple
and works with street kids and stuffs himself
with all the life he can find. The sketchier,
the better, he says. He's still going on about
cheesesteaks, wants me to know how good
food works. If you're not running scared
to the counter and back to your car, you're
eating average at best. I'll take my chances.
I'm not here forever. Have you called mom?
He means he won't live in Philly for long
but suddenly my stomach feels him gone,
sees my own hands white knuckling
the wheel, turning down the safest streets
with a broken heart and a hungry mouth
that wants another hundred miles of American
cheese and sautéed onions, driving so fast
you'd think God was tapping his foot, talking
about everything out loud as if our lives
depended on it, because they did.

Stacey Forbes is the author of *Little Thistles*, a poetry chapbook published by Finishing Line Press as the winner of their 2023 New Women's Voices competition. Stacey's work appears in some of the publications she loves, including *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *New Ohio Review*, *Terrain.org*, and *Split Rock Review*. Born in Pennsylvania, Stacey now lives and writes in Tucson, Arizona.

Ruby: A Meditation on Friendship in the City of Brotherly Love

Ashleigh McAneny

I disliked Ruby from the moment I met her. It was my first day as the administrative assistant at a brand-new company, and she could not be bothered with the new girl. To be fair, in the accounting department it was the busiest time of the month, and she was clearly frazzled with all of the billing that needed to go out the door. I told myself to give her a chance, but as the weeks went by it became clear that she was brusque and abrasive, and she had this way of talking to me that made me feel like she was ordering me around. And so, our feud began.

For the first few months, we largely ignored each other when we passed in the hallway or the lunchroom, but then the day came when my company promoted me to an accounting clerk position. I was elated until I discovered that my trainer would be none other than Ruby, and my figurative balloon of excitement popped and fell in sad little pieces to the floor of my cubicle. The friends I had made around the office told me to simply ignore her attitude, but that's easier said than done when you are spending hours on end together.

"Accounting always has to work on weekends during month-end. That's just the way it is," she told me one Friday afternoon as I prepared to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow at 9:00 a.m. and we'll get all of the billing done."

"How long will that take? I have plans tomorrow night." I didn't tell her that I had a date with a cute guy from the office, and that there was exactly 0% chance that I was staying past 4:00 p.m.

"I don't know, Ashleigh. We work until it's done," she huffed before shutting her office door in my face.

So, I showed up bright and early on Saturday morning, and worked… and worked… and worked. The billing was definitely not finished when I knocked on Ruby's door at 4:00 p.m. sharp to tell her I was leaving, but I didn't care. I was 23 years old and not ready to work my entire Saturday away, especially not to help someone who had sprung it on me the very afternoon before. Of course, this didn't sit well with Ruby and she told me as much.

"That's really disappointing, Ashleigh." (That condescending tone, ugh.) "I thought I could count on you to get the work done. I guess I'll just stay all night finishing it, so show me where you left off."

"Everything is on my desk, you'll figure it out," I said flippantly and walked out the front door. Later that evening, though, I started to worry. What if she told our boss that I had shirked my duties? What if she claimed that I'm a liability to the accounting department, and that I should be fired? My first real job, and this woman would ruin it all, or so I was convinced by the time I walked into the office on Monday morning.

Turns out that she did figure it out and got all of the billing done. It also turns out that she did not, in fact, tattle on me to our boss. I was shocked, and I felt this little piece of melted ice fall from the iceberg that was my dislike for Ruby. Sure, around the office, we still called her "Rude-y" or "Moody Ruby" among ourselves when she was on a rampage about something, but I also begrudgingly began to respect her. She had a strong work ethic that I could only hope to emulate. She was very intelligent, and a great problem solver. Most of all, on the few occasions that her stony façade cracked, she had an infectious laugh. Maybe I didn't dislike her quite as much as I had originally thought.

My work situation soon changed, however, because I was promoted again to a financial analyst position with the opportunity to work from our Center City office. I couldn't believe my luck! It seemed like a dream to take the train into the big city every day and have my very own cubicle on the 22nd floor of 1650 Arch with expansive windows that looked out toward One and Two Liberty Place. I began to take walks every day at lunch, exploring the neighborhoods around my office. I wandered east on JFK Boulevard to City Hall, then back west to 30th Street Station. Some days I walked northwest toward the Franklin Institute and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, but other days I chose a southerly direction toward the leafy haven of Rittenhouse Square. The city was mine to discover, and I soaked in my lunchtime explorations like sunshine.

As my love for Philadelphia bloomed, so did my obsession with photography. I adored the city's architecture and started taking pictures here and there of interesting buildings, trees, and streets I saw on my daily walks, posting my favorite shots to my Instagram. Roaming one day around Fitler Square, I found myself face-to-face with a lime-green house and its cherry-red door. It was so visually pleasing that I immediately raised my phone

camera and snapped a picture. The next street over revealed a lemon-yellow door within a pale gray brick façade, and the following street showcased the most cheerful and ornate Kelly-green door adorned with a shamrock wreath. My mission on my afternoon walks became finding new and interesting doors. They were the hidden treasures to be found past the hustle and bustle of Center City with its towering skyscrapers and streets teeming with people dodging steam rising from sewer grates. My solitary photography walks were the best part of my work days.

The old saying goes that absence makes the heart grow fonder. True to that phrase, the less I saw Ruby, the more we talked. We remotely collaborated on work tasks more often, and we did so in an increasingly friendly manner. My respect for Ruby continued to grow, and I could sense that her respect for me was also blooming as I matured in both my personal outlook and my accounting role. Then, a year after my move to Philadelphia, our company announced that our offices were merging, and that we would all be working from the Center City office. On the day of the move, I helped Ruby settle into her cubicle right down the hall from my own. Ruby had been staunchly against working in the city, turning her nose up at the idea and voicing her displeasure at every opportunity, but as she marveled at our shared view, I had a hard-to-explain feeling. I sensed that she was masking her fear of the city with haughtiness so as not to show her vulnerability. It was that realization that gave me an idea.

"Hey Ruby, why don't we take a walk and go grab some lunch?" I asked her. After a moment of hesitation, she agreed. We set off into the bright sunshine and strolled over to the food court at One Liberty Place. Sneaking a peek at Ruby through my sunglasses, I could tell by the way she tilted her head back to look at the skyscrapers that she was impressed by the architecture. By the time we had eaten and worked our way back to the office, Ruby seemed happier about being out and about in Philly. The next day, when I asked if she'd like to go for a walk at lunch, she almost jumped out of her chair and excitedly exclaimed, "Yes, count me in!"

This lunch walk, I decided, would be different – I wanted to show Ruby more of the city that I had fallen in love with over the past year and a half. On this day, I guided her to Rittenhouse Square. There was a bustling outdoor art market being held in the park, and we wandered from stall to stall, stopping here and there to admire the miniature watercolors depicting Boathouse Row and the canvas photography prints of the skyline looking across the Delaware River from the Camden Waterfront. I bought an etching of a bluebird; Ruby bought some greeting cards to send to her family. They lived in New England, and Ruby confessed that she missed them dearly and sometimes considered moving home to be near them. Another crack in her tough façade had appeared, and I felt awful that she must be lonely without her family nearby. My family had always been close – what would it be like to be far from them? What kind of person might I be without the steadying presence of my loved ones? Hearing Ruby's situation gave me a deepened understanding of her outward behavior.

As the months went on, our lunchtime walks became daily happenings. I still loved finding beautiful new doors and revisiting my favorite ones. As the city prepared for Halloween and then Christmas, festive seasonal decor began to appear on many doors, much to my joy. Ruby, on the other hand, favored windows. She saw these as eyes to the people living in the houses behind them, and she especially delighted in seeing house cats perched on inner windowsills, basking in a sunbeam or playing with a curtain. I showed Ruby my Instagram profile full of my door pictures; she promptly set up her own Instagram and began posting her lovely window shots. Our walks were the highlight of my day, as it was so nice to share my thoughts, ideas, memories, and hopes with Ruby, and to hear hers. Some days, we just wandered in silence. The only sounds were the occasional "Oh look over there" or "Let's walk down this little street," the birds chirping in the trees, the far-off honk of car horns, and the crunch of our footsteps on concrete, leaves, or snow.

Ruby and I began to meet up in Philadelphia on weekends. We took the ancient elevator up to the observation deck under William Penn's statue at City Hall and reveled in the view. We sneaked up to the conference area on the 33rd floor of the Loews Hotel and were equally entranced by that vantage point. I watched Ruby fall in love with the city much as I had the year before, and by spending this time together I discovered that she wasn't the brash, mean person I thought she was when I first met her. She was a kind, thoughtful, smart, funny, wonderful human. I just had to gain her trust to see the soul inside.

A few years after Ruby's move to the city office, our company announced they were moving all accounting operations to Houston and offered to pay for each employee's relocation. Ruby took the offer; I found a new job in the area. I couldn't leave my family or the city I loved so much, but Ruby was ready for a new adventure. On our last day in the office together, Ruby helped me pack up my things and then we embarked on one last walk. We found ourselves in the sanctuary of the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul. Neither Ruby nor I are particularly religious people, but we sat quietly together in a pew admiring the grandeur. Ruby, of course, found the stained-glass windows fascinating, while I was in awe of the ornate front doors. In that moment I realized that, despite our differences, being able to bond over the city we had both come to adore was what had created a lasting friendship.

It's been eight years since I last saw Ruby. She did indeed move to Texas and remains there to this day. I, meanwhile, met my now-husband and moved to Wilmington, Delaware. Ruby and I mostly keep in touch over social media. I miss her and wish we spoke more often. I hope in the future we can reconnect in person, but whenever I post a new door picture on Instagram, I think of my special friend and those golden days we shared in the City of Brotherly Love, and without fail, I smile.

Ashleigh McAneny is an emerging writer and photography enthusiast whose works have appeared in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Stonecrop Magazine*, and *Reader's Digest*. She particularly enjoys writing creative nonfiction and fiction, and photographing colorful doors. Born in Philadelphia and raised in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, Ashleigh earned a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies from Villanova University. She now resides in Wilmington, Delaware with her husband and their dog. You can find her @ashleigh_erin on Instagram.

A Photo of my Grandfather (Sumter, SC circa 1928)

Poem by Darryl Holmes

Staring from an old black and white
with brown tones hinting of color
my black grandfather frozen in a chair like a general.

Boots above his ankles shine like the skin
of a river in sunlight
bluestone breathing in his eyes.

The wall behind him bare
plaster scarred in unusual patterns
lips locked in place like southern ice.

So erect
only his back's shadow brushes the chair
his fingers pointing down at the fading linoleum.

He sits with too much importance for his time
tweed jacket open
tie the width of a garden snake
the confidence of his left leg crossed.

I can feel his come and get me calm

the coolness that cut through a man at a poker game

the invitation to the cops when they came to the door

why my father said they refused to enter.

Darryl Holmes received his MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University where he also served as an editorial reader for "The Literary Review," the university's international journal of contemporary writing. In the past few years his poems have appeared in *Water-Stone Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *African American Review*, *Obsidian*, *River Heron Review*, *Kind Writers Magazine*, *Jelly Bucket*, and *Toho Journal*. His first book "Wings Will Not Be Broken," was published by Third World Press in Chicago. He lives in NJ with his wife and youngest son who attends college in PA.

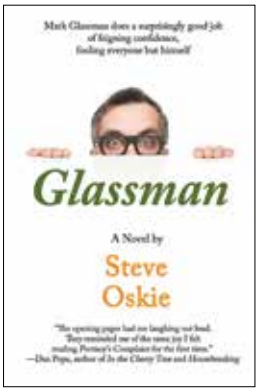
Insomnia, Part XXII

Poem by Alan Elyshevitz

Within the salon's dark cough, beauticians
glue fingernails to their anchorage.
Enslavement to labor is nothing like sleep.
Awake they wait for papers whose likelihood
is quantum mechanical. They consume, pay
taxes on tobacco and tea, and move through
a city as though stickless in a kennel
of unfamiliar dogs. Where they were born
they welcomed eggs without salmonella.
Extractive industry propelled a century
of blackened air. At night they could feel
atmospheric mud and the breath of siblings.
And into the night they would evacuate
to flee the earth's hand-wringing. Here, they
subsist on a translated diet. They must train
the tongue backward and learn to swim
through natives' suspicion. Headlong, they plunge
into the mainstream with so much fervor, so little rest.

Alan Elyshevitz retired as an assistant professor of English from the Community College of Philadelphia. He is the author of a collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund* (SFA Press), a poetry collection, *Generous Peril* (Cyberwit), and five poetry chapbooks. Winner of the James Hearst Poetry Prize from *North American Review*, he is a two-time recipient of a fellowship in fiction writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

CAPSULE REVIEWS



Glassman
by Steve Oskie
Review by Margaret Saraco

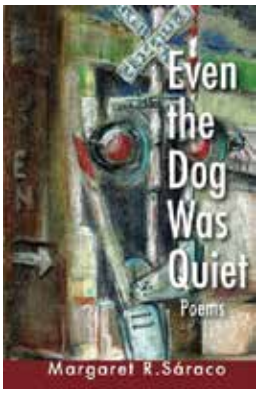
In this semi-autobiographical novel that takes place in Philadelphia and on the Jersey Shore, author Steve Oskie and his main character, Mark Glassman, have much in common: both are college dropouts, both have the same taste in music, including the local scene, both grew up in Philadelphia, and both worked many "interesting" jobs. In this *coming-of-age* novel, Oskie takes readers on a journey through the times and tribulations of growing, reminding us that everyone moves at their own pace.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org

In the Museum of My Daughters' Mind
by Marjorie Maddox
Review by John Sweeder

In a collection of 34 ekphrastic poems that were originally inspired by the author's 2018 visit with her studio-artist daughter, Anna Lee Hafter, to Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum's (AVAM) exhibition entitled The Great Mystery Show, Marjorie Maddox responds to her daughter's inspiration in both an intrapersonal and interpersonal perspective. *In the Museum of My Daughter's Mind* pays a homage to a beautiful mother/daughter relationship and their mutual love for creativity by melding the movement of visual art with the beauty of words.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org



Even the Dog Was Quiet
by Margaret Sáraco
Review by Nicole Conti

In *Even the Dog Was Quiet*, Margaret R. Sáraco crafts a haunting and emotional collection of poems that delves into the fragility of memory, loss, and the resilience of love.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org

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