

# MULESKINNER JOURNAL



**Reckless!**



**Journal Ten - April 2024**





## *Reckless!*

We played it safe too long.

For our Reckless! issue we searched for writers and characters who took chances, damned the torpedoes, abandoned wildly, loved irresponsibly, and were willing to jump into the icy stream to save the drowning dog.

We considered the caustic coworker, the rushed surgeon, the insecure date, the defiant teenager, all teenagers, that guy on the corner with bad intent, the ravenous eater, the negligent cop, and the political promise.

We even considered a “wreck-less” story: a lucky break, with a reckless spelling of reckless.

Enjoy!

We gotta run.

It's time to toss another tire on the fire.





# MULESKINNER JOURNAL

## JOURNAL TEN: RECKLESS!

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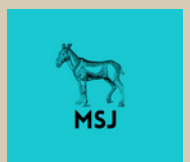
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## DAVID KIRBY

### OKAY OKAY SO VENICE ISN'T PERFECT

I am standing at a window of a hotel in Venice  
when a man joins me and stares out over the water  
with an expression that makes me think he is  
pondering the city's position as a major financial  
and maritime power during the Middle Ages

and Renaissance as well as an important center  
of commerce (especially in silk, grain, and spice)  
in the 13th century through the end of the 17th  
or perhaps musing on the paintings of Giorgione  
and Titian and the other Venetian masters,

all to a score only he can hear by Albinoni  
and/or Vivaldi, which is when he is brought  
out of his reverie by my presence and says,  
"G'day, mate," by which locution I identify him  
as either Australian or capable of doing a first-rate

Aussie impression, though what he says next is,  
"I'm a plumber, and what I'm wondering is, how do  
these people dispose of their solid waste?" Speaking  
of Italy, my friend who is going there soon is studying  
Italian on line and complaining that she wants to

learn phrases more useful than "the man has an apple,"  
but I keep saying look, already you know the words  
for "man" and "has" and "apple," ones she will  
certainly find useful in Milan and Rome and Naples  
in different basic combinations, the point being

that you have to master the basic level before going on  
to the *intermediate* and then the *advanced* one,  
which she most certainly will want to do, for if  
she stops at the *basic* level, she'll get nowhere,  
because you have to get to the *intermediate* level

CONTINUED...

in order to converse at the *basic* level and then  
to the *advanced* level in order to function adequately  
at the *intermediate*, which is the best any foreigner  
can hope for: the only way for a foreigner to be  
an *advanced* speaker is if they move in with

an Italian boy- or girlfriend, which seems  
an improbable likelihood for this particular friend.  
I like the way the man in the hotel in Venice thinks:  
my guess is that while most Australian plumbers  
in his situation would be looking ahead

to their next big Italian meal or trip back  
to Melbourne or Canberra, this fellow is trying  
to solve a problem the Venetians haven't been  
able to solve themselves, for while they have  
installed septic tanks under some 7,000 hotels,

restaurants, museums, cafes, hospitals,  
and private homes, much of their waste  
of every kind is flushed directly into the canals  
and in that way contributes to that city's unique  
odor: whereas Joseph Brodsky said that

the Venetian air is a one-of-a-kind mixture  
of coffee, salt water, and prayer, you wouldn't  
be entirely out of bounds if you added a fourth  
ingredient to that fragrant combo, especially  
on a windy day. Life is imperfect in Venice,

also beautiful, its beauty being found precisely  
in that which is "uneven, asymmetrical,  
and unbalanced," which happens to be  
the definition of the Japanese concept of wabi  
(an example of which might be a ceramic bowl)

as well as "aged" and "impermanent" or sabi  
(think of the patina on a rusty metal door),  
which two concepts combine happily in the phrase  
wabi-sabi. Nothing lasts, nothing is finished,  
nothing is perfect, in other words, and in this way

CONTINUED...

do wabi-sabi art works emphasize the process  
of making the piece rather than finishing it,  
an understanding of which is the first step  
on the way to satori or enlightenment. Perhaps  
that's why Michelangelo attacked with a hammer

the Duomo Pietà that he had worked on  
for years—"perhaps because his judgment was  
so severe that he was never content with anything  
he did," says Vasari. "The getting never feels  
as good as the wanting," says contemporary

novelist Lara Williams. People are imperfect.

Why shouldn't art be? Every jeweler I know says,  
"joolery," and while you may say maybe I don't  
know the right jewelers, half the realtors  
of my acquaintance say, "relator," yet somehow they

manage to sell a lot of big ugly houses. Try harder, Venice!

When asked why he practiced the cello  
three hours a day at the age of 93, Pablo Casals  
said, "I'm beginning to notice some improvement."  
Oh, wait, I have a better idea, don't.



## NANCY MEYER

### I ONCE MARRIED A MAN FROM ACROSS THE SEA

The warm clear Caribbean sea.  
We dove in fast the way I do,  
lived in the snow, 30-below snow.  
I snowshoed to the compost, same  
for the mail. We built a geodesic dome  
painted it blue. He was the only  
black man around for miles.  
White snow, white me, white farmers  
with their apple trees.

We tried to speak, *ah yup, stahm comin'.*  
*How many trees ready to tap?*

We moved to Jamaica when our son  
was four, ate fry fish and bammy,  
breadfruit from Uncle Colville's yard.  
And we swam in the sea, the aqua sea.  
He speared parrot fish, in forty foot dives.  
I trailed them, bleeding, on a wire,  
skimming the sea urchin spines.

I was the rare white face.  
Black cane cutters, black coral,  
black women with their baskets  
of yam and callaloo.

I tried to speak chaw mon,  
You cyan do dat. How they must  
have sucked their teeth behind my back.

We moved to California.  
Jungle Bunny, the kids jeered  
at our son. He cut off his curls.  
Never brought his Dad to school again.



## DAVID MILLEY

### SCORCHED

Halfway through the second semester of organic chemistry, Dr. Beiler's lab lessons progressed from simple, one-step demonstrations to more challenging, multi-week syntheses that called upon us to use the lab techniques we had already acquired in the weeks before. At the end of March, he introduced the class to the synthesis of sulfathiazole, an antibiotic used in World War II to treat burned soldiers, a treatment which had fallen out of use when less toxic treatments became available. This lab assignment was designed to be completed over six weeks.

Already two weeks behind – common for me in those days – I raised my hand, "Can we stay late tonight to catch up?"

Dr. Beiler smiled tightly, "Yes."

I had enrolled at the university the year before, over the objections of Dr. Beiler and his chemistry department staff, although I didn't know this then. I had a champion in the chair of the math department, who'd overseen my work in Stetson University's new programming classes in my summer after tenth grade: charting out algorithms, typing punchcards to calculate trigonometric functions, then running them through the massive minicomputer at the end of the hall. Dr. Medlin was delighted to have a student who shared his passion for computers.

Also, Dad had always fought for me to jump ahead. Dad threw all the force of his will behind getting me into college at age fourteen and into a chemistry major. My father demanded excellence from me for as long as I could remember. He pushed my older brother and sister, too, but he indulged them sometimes. With me, he was always stern, always remote, never content with what I gave him. I met Dad's demands, but I feared the result if I didn't. "You don't want to wind up digging ditches," Dad would tell me. Not a week passed, but Dad made a joke about disowning disobedient children.

Halfway through college by the second semester of Dr. Beiler's organic chemistry class, I had never really managed to get on board with the program. Always wanting more time to complete assignments, never working enough hours to get the work done, never getting

CONTINUED...

enough sleep, I met the low expectations of my chemistry professors. I found refuge in elective courses in other departments, but my accomplishments there never found their way back to my work in my major.

At the end of the third-week lab, unhappy with the way the synthesis was going so far, unhappy with the mistakes I made during the first two weeks – miscalculating the initial proportions of the initial reagents, washing some of my first precipitated crystals down the drain – I started over during that day's lab session with the first step in the sequence. It went much better. By late afternoon, I started on the second week's lab and finished it, too, a little after I missed supertime at the student union. The third step, I knew, would take longer, but I stayed in the lab to work on it after everyone else had gone home. I could hear only one other student on the floor, someone in the lab next door, just beyond the short hallway lined with the glass-enclosed hoods that were vented for carrying off toxic gases.

By midnight, I had caught up, halfway through the third step. I figured, if I stayed a little longer, I could get ahead, take it easier in the upcoming labs. So I began work on the fourth stage, finishing at about two in the morning. I pushed through, achieved step five quickly, around three-thirty. All that remained was that final step, one last round of solution, precipitation, purification, and re-precipitation, to get to the clean final yield. I could finish three weeks ahead of schedule.

All went well until it was time to dissolve the nearly completed yield of light yellow powder. Insoluble in water, it needed an organic solvent to be taken up completely by the liquid. The instructions prescribed the aromatic solvent benzene; it needed to be hot.

Into the round-bottomed flask went some three hundred milliliters of benzene and the yellow powder. I swirled the flask, but the powder would not dissolve. As I'd been taught, I mounted the flask in a stand over an asbestos pad, hooked a Bunsen burner up to the gas line and lit it. I turned down the flame, so that the liquid would heat slowly, and applied the heat. Every so often, I removed the burner and swirled the liquid. And slowly, slowly, the powder dissolved in the hot benzene. Until it stopped.

For ten minutes, the remaining powder stubbornly refused to disappear. Finally, it occurred to me that maybe the powder would completely dissolve in more benzene. I reached for the big reagent bottle, still half-full, and carefully began to pour the liquid into the flask.

Benzene, like gasoline, creates vapor in the open air. And, like gasoline would, over that open flame, it ignited in my hands. It set fire to the flask, inside and out, exploding it, then setting fire to the bench, and to ceiling, floor, and me.

My cries of "oh shit! oh shit! oh shit!" brought the other student – he was someone I knew, his name was Alex – over on the run from the quantitative analysis lab next door. Alex sized things up, grabbed the fire extinguisher, and put out the flames. But not before my hands

CONTINUED...



had blackened and started to peel.

I knew I was in trouble. I ran from the lab, ran from the science building, ran across the campus, hands not on fire, but burning more with every second. "oh shit oh shit oh shit," I wailed as I passed the student union and ran up to the nurses' office, "oh shit" I wept as the nurse opened the door and gestured me in. Alex trailed in after.

"I'll 'oh shit' you if you don't stop screaming," she barked. As I whimpered, Alex explained what had happened. The nurse called an ambulance. I begged her to put my hands in cold water - I knew this would slow the burning - but she refused: "It's a chemical burn, it might make it worse."

The ambulance ride to the hospital was swift, but felt endless. I moaned and begged for cold water for my hands. When I reached the emergency room, they gave me painkillers, which did not work. They wrapped my hands in plastic bags - garbage bags? They set my wrapped hands in a tray, and packed ice cubes around the bags. The sharp edges of the ice felt like they were slicing through the dry plastic. They wheeled me to my room and left me there, whimpering.

The candy striper came in, an old woman, moving slowly, to tend to the old man coughing in the other bed. When he quieted, I begged her to pour some water into the ice. She took one look at the plastic and the tray and the ice cubes and pursed her lips. She took the clean bedpan she'd brought into the room to the sink and filled it. She gently poured the water against the inside of the tray in my lap. Ice floated softly away from the plastic wrapping my hands. She touched my left forearm gently, smiled reassurance, and then she left. I slept.

The next thing I remember, another nurse put a pill to my lips and held up a cup of water. "Take this," she instructed, "It will help you sleep through the operation." And this pill did work to block the pain, along with the shot they gave me as they wheeled me into the operating room. But I remained awake while they cut away the plastic bags and the scorched skin that adhered to them, awake when they pulled away, sometimes clipped away, the charred, slimy skin that remained. I stayed awake and strangely chatty, commenting on the goings-on. At some point, I remember, the surgical nurse gasped, put her hand to her mouth and left the room. I hushed then. Silently, fascinated, I observed the doctor as he finished stripping off my skin, saw the doctor smear goo on my hands and fingers, and watched as they wrapped bandages over everything from my wrists to my fingertips. I fell asleep on the gurney back to my room.

When I awoke again, I was lying on my back in the hospital bed, bandaged hands suspended in the air above me, held there by tan elastic bandages around my wrists. Another nurse came in to check my chart, told me not to take my hands down, or my hands would swell and never heal.

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Four decades later, several years after Dad had passed away, Mom and I sat after breakfast at the enormous dining table they'd brought down to Florida all the way from the parsonage in Connecticut. We lingered over morning coffee, laid over the lace tablecloth her mother had crocheted for Mom as a wedding present. Plastic placemats protected the tablecloth where we sat. We chatted, our habit when I came down to Florida to visit her from my home in New Jersey. She and Dad had always talked for hours over a cup of coffee. It's a habit I share now at home with my husband Warren, who drinks tea.

Mom set down her cup. "I always felt bad about your Dad pushing you so hard. I wonder what would have been if you'd waited another year. Dad always jumped without thinking."

"Don't feel bad; I never minded. It was my superpower. It protected my secret identity. And in those days, it sure needed protecting."

"But I feel bad that I wasn't there to help."

"Don't." I touched Mom's hand where it lay on the table. "If you'd known what was going on, all the options you had in those days for dealing with a gay kid would have been worse. What could you have done? Taken me to a psychiatrist? Medicated me? Electroshock? Back then, doing the 'right' thing would've meant torturing me."

\*\*\*

Visitors came to see me in the hospital. Dr. Beiler came by, looking sad. He told me not to worry about things and went away again. My roommate, Dick, and a couple of guys from the dorm stopped in, big-eyed, to ask if I was okay. And, after making their way over from Daytona, my parents were there, too. Mom, comforting and kind as always, told me to be brave, that everything was under control, that everything would be okay.

Dad looked at me and, for the first time I could ever remember, he was crying, weeping silently, tears running down both cheeks.

\*\*\*

As I looked into my coffee cup, Mom recalled her friend Elsie. Elsie's gay son, Danny, had died from AIDS complications some years before, and so, in the years after I came out to Mom, Elsie had become her guide to coming to terms with her own gay son.

"I can't get over that I never knew you were gay. Even when you never married."

"Even after I'd been with Warren for twenty years?"

CONTINUED...

"Even then." She winced. "I'm the psychologist. I'm the one who's supposed to see these things. Elsie told me she always knew Danny was gay, even when she didn't want to admit it. But I never had a clue that you were." Mom took a slow sip. "But your Dad always knew."

"What?" I set down my mug.

"In that time when he was sick before he passed away, while he could still speak, he and I talked about it. He told me that he knew, even when you were a little boy, that you reminded him so much of someone in his family. Christopher, I think his name was."

"But I don't have an Uncle Christopher."

"I don't think he was your Dad's brother – a cousin, perhaps, or an uncle? Evidently, his family disowned him and he left home before your father went into the ministry. Your Dad said he never heard anything about him after. No one else in Dad's family ever talked about him, either, so it was a mystery to me, too. But that's why Dad was always so hard on you, why he pushed you so much harder than the other two kids. It's why, when the chance came, he wanted to get you away to college, to get you away from the kids in high school, safely away from the people here in town. He was terrified of what he thought life would be like for you."

\*\*\*

When I was released from the hospital, both hands bandaged but for my fingertips, I returned to the lab to find that nearly all traces of the fire had been scrubbed away – only a gray stain remained on the ceiling tile above the sink at the end of the lab bench. And new safety posters had been hung, two on every wall, depicting a childish, bespectacled character named "Doofus," who'd been drawn engaging in every conceivable sloppy, careless, or dangerous error in lab protocol: dropping test tubes, heating poisons outside a vented chamber, pouring chemicals over open flames, juggling glassware. "Don't be like Doofus," said the posters. "Don't be like Doofus," smiled Dr. Beiler, hand gripping my shoulder. "Doofus," grinned the student working at the next bench over. Dr. Beiler told me I didn't need to worry about completing any more lab assignments for the rest of the year. I slunk back to my dorm room.

In the following weeks, my roommate helped. Dick brushed my teeth, carried my soap and shampoo when it was time to shower. He tied plastic bags over my bandaged hands so that I could wash myself – the tips of my fingers had been spared. Dick even helped me with my shirt buttons. I managed my own pants; I went without belts for a few weeks. I wore my sneakers untied. Twice a week for the first three weeks, I walked back across campus to the infirmary, where the daytime nurse, a pretty, friendly young woman, leaned me backward in a chair, my head hanging over a sink, and washed my hair.

CONTINUED...

When the time came to remove the bandages, the nurse snipped them away in small pieces, very careful with the tiny bits that wanted to stick. Underneath, the new skin was bright pink, the color of a crayon, on the backs of my hands, my knuckles, and my fingers.

Those hands shone pink a year later, when I crossed the stage to take my diploma. I escaped to graduate school in Gainesville, where the fire did not follow me.

\*\*\*

Over the last of my morning coffee with Mom, I examined my knuckles, still pink after four decades. Some hair has grown back, except where the scar tissue formed. On cold winter days, in my own home up north, the backs of my hands still glow, almost fluorescent, and I tell Warren again about the burns that covered them so many years ago.

I showed the scarring pattern to Mom. She winced.

"I don't think I ever told you this," Mom said, "but you should know that your Dad's mother had a real temper. I always thought it was because she was so smart, and was never able to do anything with that brilliant mind."

"I remember that temper," I said, "I remember when we were visiting when I was ten. I overwhipped the cream meant for our dessert and it turned into butter. Aunt Marjorie and Uncle Ray had to restrain her. They sent me out to the living room, but I could still hear her screaming how stupid I was." I smiled wanly and leaned back. "Yep, I sure remember Grammy's temper."

"Oh dear. I didn't know that happened. I'm so sorry. So you knew. Grammy was very religious, too. Fanatical, really. And she hated being stuck at home, having baby after baby, never being able to escape." Mom paused again, a moment of reverie.

"Yes?"

"When he was still a toddler, a baby really, your grandmother scalded your father in the bathtub. The water was nearly boiling. She scrubbed his skin off when it blistered. He told me it was an accident, that she didn't realize what she was doing, but I've never really believed it." Mom shook her head. "He was in the hospital for weeks."

She slid her empty cup away from her. "Your father never could grow hair anywhere on his body. Like your hands, but all over."

I nodded slowly, remembering the day my father wept.

CONTINUED...

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While I was still in the hospital, before the lab was cleaned up and the posters were mounted on the walls, my friend Marsha, who wanted to be a photojournalist, snuck into the lab with her good camera and took pictures. Afterward, near the end of the year, she showed me photographs of the damage. It was superficial, but spectacular: broken glass everywhere; soot on every surface.

She had also taken a photo of the broken, blackened round-bottom flask on the laboratory bench. In the photograph, the flask still contained several grams of pure white, perfect crystals of sulfathiazole, shining in the char.



## DAVID MIHALYOV

### STRIKE ME LIKE A MATCH

I'm ready to ignite. A flash and then a slow  
burn, my head scorching. The smell  
of sulfur rises and obliterates the world.

Dishwater releases down the drain,  
your image in the soapy residue left behind.  
I couldn't keep you from being sad.

Directionless, we wandered the shore  
and I pulled fish from the ocean,  
lining them on the beach.

How do I help someone  
who won't help herself? It's been years  
since I've seen you in that dress.

The dark row of clouds behind the tree line  
rises like a bruised-purple mountain range.  
I want to be there, climb those peaks.

Though it's an altered landscape —  
a panorama that will shift in minutes —  
if I can see it, is it not real?

This scene should be serene.  
A field, empty except for the shading tree  
where we are trapped,

petrol being poured at the base.  
Kiss me with your gasoline mouth,  
I'm running out of fuel.





# NILSA MARIANO

## DOMINOES

Every morning we stretch and practice balance because we don't know how to fall magically, slowly. News reports warn the virus is now a pandemic. Yesterday's green lawn is today covered with snow. We make appointments and plan our run for vaccinations. Snowflakes fall outside our window as we open the painted wooden box, crafted in Puerto Rico, and shuffle red, white, and blue tiles. I swear the click and clack of the tiles are omens. Today is another domino day and the gringo is beating me at the game I claim came from my ancestors. The silence of my pout is broken by the sound of a snowplow threatening our mailbox.

He continues his imperialist wins in my cultural game. I caution myself to be a good sport to the one you love. I curse in prayers, Dios fucking mio.

We watch the beautifully intricate snowflakes, knowing the blue and green hand shovels are waiting to be put to work. News reports warn the virus is changing, evolving, spreading, knocking to get in. He scatters the tiles and again wrecks my score. The announcer lists the number of dead and infected by city and state, inside our house the wall of clocks tick and tock. I won't let him answer the door.



# MARIO DUARTE

## BECAUSE IT WOULD NOT STOP

ringing the man cut off his left ear.

He tossed it to the dogs. Still hungry,  
they would not stop howling.  
So, the man took care of them.  
And still his ear kept on ringing.

To the bluff by the river, he walked,  
a modern day siren in his head.  
When he listened to the rapids,  
the ringing stopped—drowned.

Walking back home, the ringing  
started again, louder than ever.

At home, in the garage, he took  
a chainsaw to his head.  
As his head rolled away,  
a bloody football, he swore.

"Fool, look at what you've done!"  
His poor aching brain grumbled  
"Put you damn ass hat back on!"

The man tried but his arms refused  
to move. His legs quivered.  
In oily darkness, his torso sulked.

"There is no end," he thought  
but then a shadow dropped  
over his eyes, and his mind  
was a slowly opening curtain  
of night and the stars started  
singing. Again, the ringing stopped.

CONTINUED...

The man was happy for the first  
time in decades, but when  
the stars stopped singing, well,  
he knew the ringing would never  
never stop, could never stop for him.





**ROBERT OKAJI**

**WHILE DROWNING I GAZE AT THE MOON**

This full moon confirms my cancer, the season's  
spite. I would be a happy drunk, if given  
opportunity. I'd spout poetry, sing  
at the top of my lungs (some irony here),  
interpret reflections from a bobbing boat.  
Instead, I email a friend, ask if his moon  
agrees with mine. It's 2 a.m., and I don't  
want to be awake, blowing my cool over  
inflation, health insurance and the market's  
inconsistencies. I'd rather sip cava,  
read Li Bai, munch on fig cookies. Dying sucks!





**BRUCE SPANG**

**THE GHOST OF FRANK O'HARA**

“. . .the waves have kept me from reaching you.”  
--Frank O'Hara

I'd walked that Fire Island beach  
halfway to Cherry Grove before  
the ocean disrobed beside me,  
sand the color of mahogany.  
O'Hara had stood where I was,

where, as the driver of the jeep said,  
“He was walking towards me. . . .  
He didn't even try to move, he just  
kept on walking.” The jeep struck him  
with such force he left a dent.

O'Hara had lain right here, a few steps  
from me, liver ruptured,  
leg shattered, 40 hours to live.

His friends wondered why he kept  
walking toward the jeep. Maybe  
it was because he was drunk—  
it was 2:30 A.M.—or because  
he saw a welcoming, a way out  
of non-writing, his being fed up  
with being too well known.

Why not walk into a gift  
even if it's coming  
at twenty-five miles per hour?

Why not walk toward the lights?

CONTINUED...

I had just been to a tea-dance,  
to chance I might strike someone's  
fancy. I danced one dance with someone.

Alone, the summer newly upon me,  
I passed through O'Hara's ghost  
and felt him latch onto my arm, ask,  
"What are you doing here?"  
He spoke about how gay men get by,  
for he loved language and I liked  
listening as he went on and on,  
never stopped, his sinewy, birdlike  
body loping down the beach.

He had an advantage over me  
since he never aged, never  
collapsed in a stupor in his fifties  
with lung cancer or cirrhosis.  
Younger than me, striding  
as I was toward a light  
except this time the light was  
my weekend rental with a balcony

and a view he and I soon share  
while white waves came on,  
massive overtures rising up,  
crashing down as his voice—  
for I was still listening—  
became the voice of the sea.





AFTER DREAMS

Weather changeable, aces highlighted by a long sunbeam, he wins at cards but loses at chess, razing the board with headlong advancement, then nothing left to lose. A holiday joker, he says little about his wild youth, the wishes in his heart. What they made him do. When he walks the beach alone to Old Man's Head, spray pitting the sand, he sings full-throated into the wind's turbulence. His offspring and friends' blissful expectancy, their casual privilege, birthrights he never knew, irks considering his first holiday when he was twenty, a week in an old bus on blocks, the camping ground, a long distance from any beach, deserted.

At breakfast his kin had regaled each other with last night's dreams, a whirligig batch, each presented as trumps: lurid, zany, haunting; absurd feverish versions of life remixed, minds run amok. Embarrassed, they had heard his nightmare, a gash in the night like a frightened child's from cards dealt before his life became moored. He was just thankful he hadn't pissed himself. Their dreams, young and old, are a crazy match. Daydreams are different, private, unshared.

He seeks respite behind a droll mask for the private room of his mind. An easy mark, challenged at chess again, he accepts with grace, making the most of this chance to be kind, his battered heart a pennant fluttering over a distant field. When the weather clears to a scrim of clouds they are off again, radiant Camelot skipping in merriment back to the beach where he earlier thought he saw a sea serpent's head bobbing between waves in lattices of light, realized it was a swimmer's bathing-capped head. Left behind, he reaches for his book on film noir.

\*\*\*\*\*

Just the two of them now, the years staring them down, she sleeps in what was a children's bedroom, nerves ajangle, tossed by angry dreams on a bunk, saying she was afraid of hurting him after he lacerated a finger against a rock wall gesticulating when making a point, and she had driven him to town for stitches. Her heart pounded whenever she woke, she says, but shall only tell him much later how this flooded her with dread and desolation.

CONTINUED...

Melancholy, he hates jet skis, loves pens, struggles to give up finished things like his favorite holiday shorts now old parchment-thin. For his birthday she bakes a sultana cake, an accomplishment using their shack's oven. Careful with words, he praises the cake, remains quiet about his own waking dream in which her rejection had gutted him, turning back to his book about Theroux falling out with Naipaul, the end of the travellers' friendship, the disappointment.

They both cherish but don't share this rough beauty. He fishes to gaze at islands, to see a skimmer of light play on tide-swirled weed, beguiled by the sea's ancient susurrus. When he snags a submerged rock a boy snorkelling frees him, giving him an aquatic thumbs-up. He sees her above them watching this diorama, him, the boy, a ferry balancing on the horizon. A distant squall heads their way, the air swollen. She fiddles with her phone, dormant, out of range. He wonders what they will do when it rains.

\*\*\*\*\*







# HARI KHALSA

## HANNAH CHANA HANNA HANA

***1 out of every 391 baby girls born in 2021 are named Hannah.***

Before I had an online dating profile, I had a girlfriend, and her name was Hannah. Or it is Hannah; she's still alive, last I checked. Don't worry, I know how this all will sound, but I'm not that kind of weirdo.

The second Hana was an accident. Not an accident in that I accidentally dated her, but an accident in the sense that I did not know her name was Hana. Though I'm almost positive that is a lie. She worked at Trader Joes. They all wear name tags.

What are your favorite things to recommend?

Let's see, oh, so I love the Serat Cheese Spread, Serat like the wine, and there's this Meatless Bulgogi which is actually really good.

I went on two dates with Hana. The first, coffee. The second, dinner then ice cream and a walk in the park. We both agreed we had a great time. We kissed at the end of the second, and she told me I was a special person. We made a commitment to see each other again soon. I texted her the next day that I didn't feel the chemistry.

If you were on Tinder-Bumble-Hinge in Los Angeles in 2018 and you were a woman between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine years old and you had your settings set to "woman looking for man" with a radius set to LA + 25 miles, then you may have stumbled across my profile.

***I only date girls named Hannah\*. If your name is not Hannah, please do not waste my time. I'm serious.***

***\*All alternative spellings of the name Hannah are permitted.***

My mother had OCD. One-one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand. Her name was not Hannah in case you were wondering. Many people do wonder that. It was Beth. You may not believe me, but my accounts were filled with matches named Hannah-Chana-Hanna-Hana. They may have been there out of curiosity, or maybe because the apps favor

CONTINUED...

those who are movie-star handsome. I left out mention of my severe social anxiety, OCD, ADHD, and the rest.

***Hannah (Hebrew: חַנָּה, romanized: Ḥannāh) also spelled Hanna, Hana, or Chana, is a feminine given name of Hebrew origin. It is derived from the root ḥ-n-n, meaning "favor" or "grace."***

Two out of every ten of these Hannah-Chana-Hanna-Hanas agreed to go on a date with me. The riches are in the niches, my father would say. He ran a successful private investigation business specializing in workman's compensation fraud.

This was how I met Hannah.

Hannah was great. We dated for two years, after which we still weren't tired of each other, and so we dated for another two. I proposed to her on the beach next to the Santa Monica Pier. She said yes, though she had to think about it. She looked almost sad when I asked her.

You don't have to.

Of course, I don't have to.

Three months later we were married, and two months after that she died in a head on collision with a semi-truck while driving with a girlfriend from LA to Albuquerque.

I never had a relationship after that, a Hannah-Chana-Hanna-Hana, or any other names.

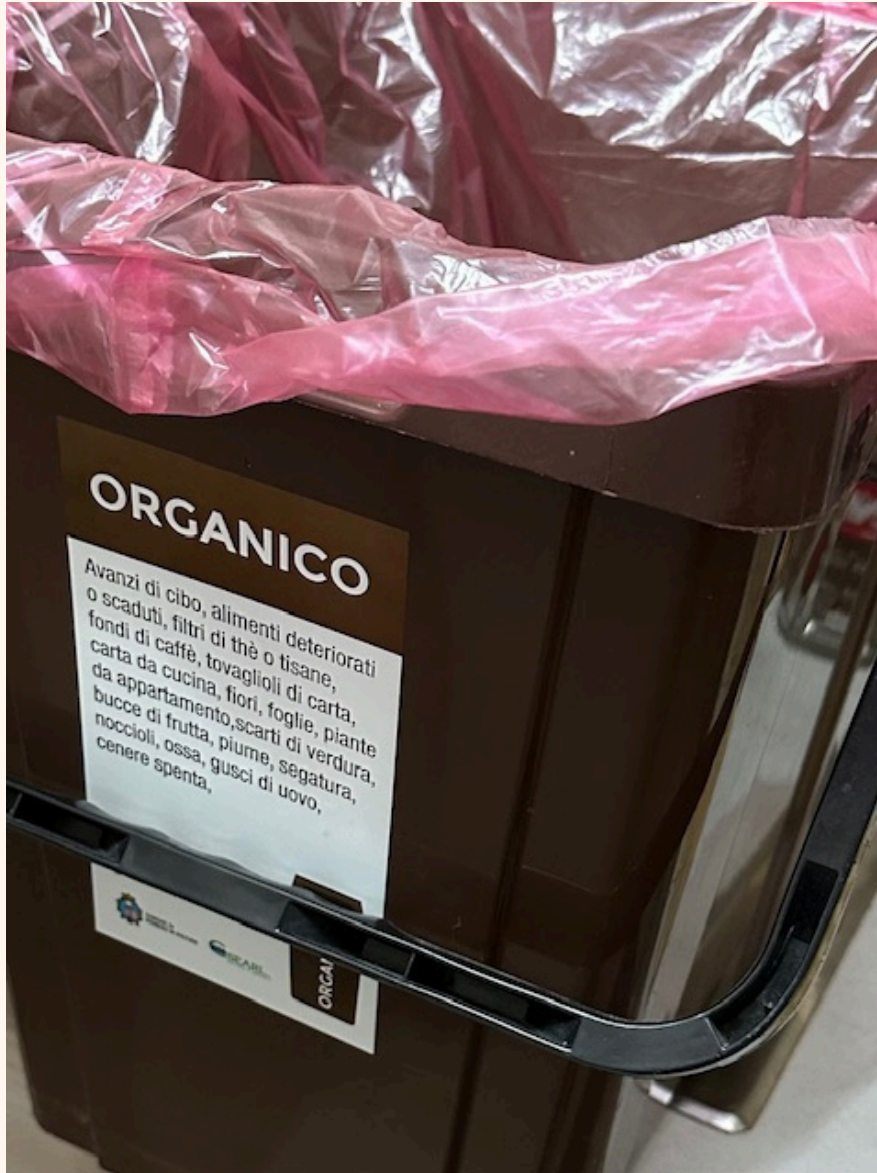
I started a website called Hannah.com. A place for Hannah-Chana-Hanna-Hanas to connect with each other. I paid a guy in Fresno five thousand dollars for the domain name. It would prove to be a bargain.

Last month we reached one million monthly visitors. Next month we're taking on our first advertisers, an online succulent company called SUQLNT, and an organic eyeliner company from Guatemala called Beauty Nature First.

I started a podcast. HannahAnotherThing. We opened an office in Barton Springs in Austin, Texas. I hired two employees to keep up with it all. Hannah and Hannah. They call us the three Hannahs.

***1 out of every 4,039,000 baby boys born in the United States in 1985 are named Hannah.***





## STUART WATSON

### PARTY IN THE COMPOST BIN

Taking the compost out  
for an introduction  
to its better nature,  
I note a tiny lettuce head,  
freshly coiffed and flared,  
poking above its dirt,  
and an overpopulation  
of writhing red wigglers,  
eager to turn apple cores,  
coffee grounds and onion  
skins into a festive event,  
like mid-morning coffee  
at the Starbucks on your  
hominid first floor.  
A big fat earthworm rips  
his shirt and wags his  
nightcrawler clitellum  
belly at a squirmy babe  
(at least, I think she's hot),  
hoping for a little  
writhe and rolling.  
What airline did they fly?  
How do they consort  
without a pool? Is there  
a worm that looks like  
Arthur Lyman? I heard  
a tiny combo strumming  
ukes in a slimy nest of skin  
from cukes, so lounge,  
so louche, nibbling loud

CONTINUED...

enough to wake the neighbors  
when that is what a worm  
calls slugs, and when a slug  
calls for just one more. Down  
the skanky street and up,  
a tropic party scene prevails  
beneath the heavy-lidded turning  
bin, fermented onion  
skins a kind of pina colada,  
for creatures without T-shirts  
stowed away in flip flops  
on a FedEx load from Calgary,  
eager to hit the salty  
peanut shells for toga time,  
howl at the moon through  
the bare and sleeping  
branches overhead. Surf's  
up enough for eggshell  
tube rides to tortilla wraps.  
Take a whiff. That's one dope  
luau at the fungus eating  
tangerine. Vermiculture  
has its action going on.  
Throws its pots. Paints  
its air with a chorus  
of drunken invitation.  
I never thought of winter  
rot as this, nor more  
of where it all could lead.  
I never thought I'd need  
to set my bait-rig rod  
and hook beside my door  
before I take my wife to bed.







# MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

## MR. NATURAL

You sneak into the house  
after midnight, tripping  
your balls off on Mr. Natural.  
Mom's up, watching Bogdonovich's  
The Last Picture Show on the tiny black & white  
downstairs. His masterpiece no doubt, but  
you don't know that yet.

You take a seat, not because you want  
to, your psyche feeling slender hands around  
its throat. But somewhere between Cybil Shepard  
falling off the diving board & Cloris Leachman falling  
for the young football player, your mother  
starts to talk about her old boyfriends,  
prom dates and the times she  
danced to Count Basie  
at Birdland.

At that moment, she seems quite small  
& frail and you want to hug her as she  
starts to cry. You want to forget the violent  
asshole asleep upstairs in her bed. You want  
to forgive her and say it's going to be okay, but  
it isn't, so you try not to watch her weeping.

The two of you alone in the light of the TV screen,  
in silence as Ellen Burstyn turns to daughter  
Jacey, Just remember, beautiful, everything  
gets old if you do it often enough.



## HELEN RAICA-KLOTZ

### PLAYING WITH BOYS

The letter came in a pale blue envelope. I ripped it open and read the small type. I had been accepted into Michigan's gifted and talented summer program for high school students, to be held for two weeks at Wayne State University's campus. I immediately stuffed the letter in the back of my underwear drawer. My mother found it five days later. She slid it across the kitchen table one evening, announcing she had called that morning and accepted the full tuition scholarship on my behalf. I would be leaving in a few months. I didn't want to go. I had already made my own plans to return to Interlochen Fine Arts Camp this summer to study music and be with Norm, the boy with the long brown hair, wide smile, and chipped front tooth. This is the boy I would meet in the cramped rehearsal room behind Groening dining hall to exchange deep wet kisses, pressing up against his lanky frame with a sense of urgency and purpose, as the echoes of the other students dutifully playing scales and sonatas swirled around us. We would both emerge sweaty and breathing deeply, his hair sticking to his neck in damp tendrils, my lips red and deliciously raw.

Later, after camp was over, he would write me letters on purple notebook paper, his small, elegant handwriting covering the page. Later still, I would travel to his house for holiday break via a fourteen-hour Greyhound bus ride. The bus ticket was a Christmas gift from my aunt, always a sucker for a good love story. His home was a large sprawling ranch in Bloomfield Hills, which featured a finished basement with real carpeting, a guest bedroom with an attached bath, and second family room with its own fireplace. He lived in an alternate world: two cars in the garage, a father who dressed in suits for work, a table that held candles that were actually lit for dinner. In preparation of my arrival, his family had placed a small Christmas tree in the bedroom in the basement and explained that while they were Jewish, they wanted me to feel at home. Norm gave me a bouquet of real roses and an extra small pink polo shirt, complete with three white buttons and a small green horse that rode on my upper left breast. In the guest bedroom that evening, I stripped off my flannel shirt. I put on the polo. I looked in the mirror. I flipped up the collar and smoothed the fabric over the rise in my breasts, the flat surface of my stomach. This shirt was a talisman. I was now someone else, a beautiful, powerful young woman who belonged in this upper-middle class neighborhood outside of Detroit, not the girl from the Upper Peninsula whose house was covered in tar paper and windows taped over with Visqueen, a Michigan basement filled with cords of wood for heat during the winter months, and a rusted Pinto station wagon in the one-car garage.

I was supposed to meet Norm back at Interlochen this July. He had whispered during our last

phone call he had bought some condoms. I had flushed with excitement. This was supposed to be a good summer.

But there I was that July, standing in a long line of teenagers at the university's student center with my battered vinyl suitcase at my side, waiting to register for my dorm room and get the mimeographed agenda for the next two weeks of "activities and opportunities." I was already bored, wondering how to make change from the twenty dollars my mother had given me so I can use the pay phone to call Norm tonight.

Then the boys arrived. Huey first, his stomach pushing out the top of his T-shirt and his converse sneakers turned in slightly at the toes, mumbling a shy hello. George was next, solid and squarely built, leaning forward to lift my suitcase easily with one hand, his button-down shirt tucked neatly into his khakis. And Cameron, with his long thin hands lifting and moving in front of his body as he told a joke, his green eyes flashing with laughter under a tumult of blond curls. They circled me, these beautiful, strange creatures. It is then I felt it, the power of my own attraction: my breasts and hips, my carefully curled hair and black eyeliner, my shy smile and steady gaze—it was working. These three boys were here, waiting for me to choose one of them. I was Goldilocks, drunk with the power of choice.

Huey was the first to try. He gave me a pull tab from a Coke can fashioned like a ring and crouched down in front of me. "Will you take this ring," he said. When I looked, I saw the desperation in his eyes. I laughed, took the ring, and turned away, pretending it was all a joke. He played along. He spent the next few days tagging along behind me, pulling out my chair and getting me an extra soda at dinner. I let him do this, but I kept him at a distance. I studied Cameron more closely, the most beautiful of them all. I decided he was the one I wanted.

But a week later, alone in a hallway, out past curfew, our kisses were awkward and shallow. We bumped noses, then tentatively tried again. Finally, we rested our foreheads together, fingers interlaced. We stood like this for a long time. "Friends?" I asked. "Sure," he agreed.

So I ended up at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra concert with George. I told him I didn't really like going to the symphony. I am used to playing in an orchestra, inside the sound. In this space, you are surrounded by the melody. The notes whirl off the page and fill your entire body: you become the music. In the audience, the experience is a pale imitation - Here, I feel trapped on the outside, with no door to get in.

This is what I wanted to say, anyway. I didn't say anything. I just sat in silence, shifting in my chair in the back row of the balcony. I looked at the crowd, the beautifully dressed men and women who spoke in soft whispers to one another. The men wore dark suits, their hair trimmed neatly, their shoes black and sleek. The women wore soft dresses, carefully coiffed hair, jewelry that sparkled in the low light. I was dressed in my pink polo shirt and Zena jeans. It smelled like money here, and I smelled like Love's Baby Soft and sweat. I didn't belong.

CONTINUED...

Then the curtain rose, and the musicians came forward, moving in unison, instruments gleaming in the spotlights. The conductor danced on stage, twirled around. We applauded dutifully. After I finished clapping, I realized I didn't know what to do with my hands. The music began, a Beethoven sonata. One lone cello sounded his notes from the far away stage.

George leaned over and put his mouth to my ear. "Listen," he whispered. His breath was warm and steady. He took my left hand and placed it, palm up, in between us on the armrest. Then he suspended his hand over my hand, fingertips touching mine. The back of his hand was pale, with a dusting of freckles. His fingernails were bluntly cut into clean straight lines. "Close your eyes," he whispered. I obeyed.

I heard the music. The violins and percussion had joined in, so the sound was louder now, but still so very far away. They were at sea, and I was on the shore. Gently, George pressed my middle finger down with his. "This," he murmured, "this is the center. Do you hear it?" His finger depressed mine more deeply. And I heard it. It was the first real chord. Then, as the music moved up the scale, he released the pressure ever so slightly on my middle finger, now pushing down my index finger. "And here we rise," he whispered, his breath warm on my ear, my neck. I felt the sound start to hum inside my chest. The music entered inside, pushed forward, spilled up and into me. When it rose again, he pushed my pinkie down. "Do you feel it?" I did. I felt the sweep of the music, the warm touch of his fingertips mine as he guided me inside the sonata, the music resonating through my entire body. This was the music, and something more than the music. When it was over, the audience applauded, but we stayed frozen. I realized I had forgotten to breathe. I took a quick, shuddering inhale. I kept my eyes closed.

I felt him turn my hand over, placing his fingertips underneath mine. "Your turn." And I played his hands: first one finger, then the next, anticipating the rise and fall of the music. His fingers were pliable, so very receptive, almost bending before I put on any pressure. This touch, this sound, was everything.

The movement ended.

I opened my eyes. The lights had come up; it was intermission. There was no music. I moved my hand away. I got up. "I have to use the bathroom," I said, I hope I said. I moved past George, down the aisle, into the lobby, and stood in line. When I got into the stall, I pressed my forehead, my face, my whole body against the metal door. I was trembling, and I could not stop. I took slow, shuddering breaths. I stood there for a long time. Then I opened the door, walked back into the lobby, and left through the double doors to Woodward Avenue. I walked all the way back to campus—the little white girl in the bright pink polo shirt, walking blindly past the burned-out buildings and homeless men lining the sidewalk, the whirr of the four-lane road distant in my ears. When I got to my dorm room, I took off the pink polo shirt, threw it in the corner of the room, and I curled up on the bed into a tight ball. I still felt the thrum of the music beating inside me.

CONTINUED...

The next day, I apologized to George for leaving. I told him I was sick, not feeling well. He pretended to believe me. We would not look each other in the eyes when we said these words. I would not look at him for the rest of the week.

Now, the three of us are sitting together for the last time before we head home. We are on the top of the Cass parking garage, the city of Detroit sprawling beneath us. It is night. The Fisher rises to the north, the Renaissance Center to the south, and the moving lights of traffic pulse in between. Cameron sits next to me for a moment, then leaps up to look over the edge, pushing his sneakers through the metal fence. Huey sits motionless on my other side, leaning slightly into me, his soft weight like a golden retriever. George sits apart. I look at his profile, but it is too dark for me to see clearly. Tomorrow, I will go to Norm's house before heading home. We will kiss and grope one another in the dark of his parents' basement, but when he pulls out the condom wrapped in brown aluminum with the serrated edges on the package, I will change my mind. He will be as gracious as a 16-year-old boy can be. He will be hurt when I break up with him a month later, on the phone.

But right now, I am here, these three boys and me. The one I didn't want, the one I did want, and the one who might have been just right. I close my eyes and push my middle finger down into the crumbling cement, feeling the sharp gravel give way slightly underneath my fingernail. It hurts, but I keep pressing harder, hoping to hear something.







# RENEE WILLIAMS

## MESS

It's never easy

the dishes stack up in the sink with last night's spaghetti sauce  
clinging to the plates like a wild child on a coaster ride  
gripping the safety bar.

The carpet is not vacuumed, trash taken out only because it smells  
with last night's spaghetti sauce a haunting reminder of a mind  
elsewhere  
with someone else.

Classes are canceled at the last minute because the teacher can get away  
with roaming around uptown with that guy  
and going to the C.I., or the Pub, or the parking lot of Dow Lake  
and making out like crazy.

Or she'll come to class, hair refusing to stand pat in a clip  
eyeliner smudged  
lipstick nonexistent  
but, oh, that smile on her face.

She'll live that life for awhile  
until her husband will want to know where she's been  
and why she isn't in the building after her class  
and why are the everyday chores falling by the wayside.

But that other life will pull her, grip her, possess her  
and though she may try to be who's she has promised to be  
it's only a matter of time  
before she lets go of the safety bar.



# TOM BARLOW

## CHANCE

At three a.m., the rest of the house out cold,  
Chance rises | dresses in black | slips outside  
to stand in the middle of the street | who doesn't  
need to tempt fate sometimes |

He closes his eyes | listens to the songs  
and slaughter of winged things |  
arms extended, his world expands like echoes |  
blood pounds on his eardrums | He rubs a thumb

against his index finger to feel the silk  
of the dark | He is the statue of that liberty which  
cannot be taken away | while he camps there on  
the centerline the tweaker kid a street over

takes his dope Dodge Charger out for a spin to  
rip the skin off the night | he turns off his headlights  
for a kick | Chance is not a stupid man, he can  
imagine many futures | He's not a pious man, either

but chooses this time to imagine he is lifted up  
through the trees, watching the glow of his city  
recede as he passes through a cloud toward the stars  
anxious for reunion | so when he hears the roar

of the hemi approaching | he is content to let  
the night decide whether he will sleep or not.



## BARBARA BENNION

### SOMETHING ON THE SIDEWALK

(groaning) Ach! Oh! Yes...yes it hurts. It may be broken. Here. Right here. Not my back, my hip. Don't touch me! Please. Don't. Ach!

My name? Phyllis Penmore. No....not Fenimore, Penmore. Eighty nine. That's right, eighty nine. ....Two seventeen, nineteen twenty-eight..... I..I..live at thirty two Elm Street.

It's Wednesday 2024. No, I didn't faint. I tripped. What? I dunno...a crack...a rock...an ant. Where am I? Here! Where else would I be? I'm sitting on the sidewalk right in front of you.

No I can't let you unbutton me. It's cold. Icy cold! Don't tear my blouse! My heart? It's fine, I swear it's as good as your heart. Yes. I took a...a... Levo...Lovo....lovostatin, levothyroxin, baby aspirin, vitamin B-12, Vitamin D, multivitamin...this is ridiculous.

Ouch..ouch...ouch! I said don't touch.! Who....who are those people staring at me? On cement! In my bra! In January! .....You are doing your job, but tell them to put those cameras away I look awful.

What? Phyllis. My name is Phyllis. P-H-Y-L-L-I-S P e n m o r e. ....The President? Biden of course. ....God damn it, what is this, I'm in Tarrytown. Born on two seventeen twenty eight, I said two seventeen twenty eight. It's Wednesday in January and I'm freezing. What's taking them so long? Yes, cover me up BUT DON'T TOUCH MY HIP!

O.K but I'm an athlete and you can't lift me that way!. Put your arm here. I don't care if you're an EMT, that's not going to work. Let me do it. Yes I can! Ach! Don't don't don't....woooooo....

(Breathing heavily) Thank God, we're in. Turn on the heat. Wrap me up. Strap me up? Where do you think I'd go? No, I don't need oxygen. One finger. I see one finger. I am breathing. My name again? Are you demented?

What's your name? Hello Dennis. Dennis Flanihan? (speaking fast and running the sentences together) I knew a man by that name back in "45" he was a mortician...you don't look like him he was pale and skinny and had a twitch and he was so broke he had to borrow my father's Ford to drive the corpse to the mortuary and it was against the law. He sat the corpse in the front seat and when he passed a cop he smiled and tipped his hat

CONTINUED...

and.....what kind of hat are you wearing? I am calm. Is that the driver? Looks seventeen. His name is Grover? Hello Grover. Hope you know how to drive. What's that a siren? The police? Tell Grover to slow down.

Young man I appreciate your effort, it's just that I'm not used to being in this position. You're welcome but don't thank me, I didn't do anything.

Noww where are we? You can't leave me here, we're just getting to know each other. Don't...don't drop me..... Your card?. Sure I'll remember you. Everyone should have an EMT handy, and a safe driver too. Goodbye Dennis, goodbye Grover, thanks for not having a crash. Yes, I'll write a letter of recommendation but give me a Kleenex something's dripping over my eye. Blood! I'm bleeding! How did blood get from my hip to my eye? Give me a dozen Tylenol.

I'm Phyllis. Phyllis Penmore. P h y l l i s P e n m o r e . Two seventeen twenty eight. I live at thirty- two Elm Street.

Ach! Just remembered. THE MEATLOAF'S IN THE OVEN! Call the police, call the fire department. The key's under the frog. Tell them tell them they can eat the meatloaf.







## RIKKI SANTER

### PACKING WITH LILITH

Parked under a streetlight, Lilith finishes  
her Lucky and tosses its butt out the window  
of her oxblood Buick Riviera.  
Her mindstage is seismic, the buzzing edge  
of her looking deliciously full of herself.  
What I'm saying is she doesn't care  
if we think of her or not.  
We walk arm in arm, our cobalt tresses  
abundant and a Zig-Zagged joint between us,  
feral in our adolescent Eden.

We wonder if she's been watching for us.  
Tonight we could be her hand-me-down  
legends, another crop of invasive species.  
Her spiked-heeled potions lace our nostrils,  
her snake print coils around our torsos.  
We began as obscure girls pranking  
boots and mittens in school cloakrooms,  
then graduated to sipping the sweet burn  
of peppermint schnapps behind the strip mall.  
In our matrix of imagined power,  
we taunt a homeroom's teenaged mother  
or post another night's rendezvous  
with those sophomore guys at 7-Eleven,  
rowdy hook and snag of zippers.

O, Lilith, ghost of patriarchal fear,  
first sister icon reclaimed by these sisters,  
we imagine you straddling rabbis  
of Talmud and Midrash while wedging  
fish hooks into their quivering tongues.

CONTINUED...

Our voices trill like screech owls,  
we are punk rock goddesses  
dancing around a bonfire, clitorises  
blooming in moonlight.  
Not quite fiends, we like that judgment  
will follow us home. But Lilith doesn't  
see our waving as she tosses  
three Macy's shopping bags  
onto her front seat and lays down  
the rubber like nobody's business.





## COREY VILLAS

### TINDERBOX BLOOD

The boy finally had enough. For the last couple of weeks, his old basset hound, Elvis, had been attacked by something, cut up and bloodied on more than one occasion. He wasn't sure what it was, but something was coming up on the porch to get the dog's food. Another dog, maybe? A fox? Maybe a big cat. Didn't matter. It was going to stop. Tonight.

The hot evening air finally began to break. Inside, he boiled water on the dilapidated gas stove. A single lightbulb hung from the ceiling, casting a dim, yellow glow throughout the kitchen. He ate a sliced tomato and leftover biscuit from that morning's breakfast, his nerves running hard. He peeled back the curtain on the door's window to make sure Elvis was on the porch and had plenty of food, getting ready for whatever might come their way. Like all other Wednesdays, Mom was at church – probably praying for Daddy. He was glad she wasn't home tonight.

As he looked out the window at the tranquil orange sunset, he wondered if he had the balls to do what was needed to protect Elvis. He wished his Daddy was here to handle this and not in the pen for beating the hell out of some drunk asshole for getting handsy with Mom one night in town. He beat him a little too good, damn near strangling him to death. That was enough for the judge to send him away. One year down, two to go.

The boy felt his face get hot, like any other time he thought about how his Daddy did what he did. He always had to put on a fake smile when folks in town asked how his old man was holding up. His answers were always polite, of course. He couldn't say what he really thought, though, knowing Mom would've jerked a knot in his ass if he did.

As the water came to a boil, he heard a commotion on the front porch, then a loud moan from Elvis. He grabbed the pot of water by the handle and ran to the door, his heart racing, his temples pounding. He flung the door open and saw a possum sinking its teeth into the old dog's neck.

In one swift motion, he kicked the possum square in its side, sending it sailing, hissing as it flew down into the yard. Before the possum could escape, the boy raced from the porch and dumped the scalding water on it. It let out a brutal wail, twisting in agony. The boy raised his foot and stomped, roaring as he crushed the possum's skull under his boot, feeling the crunch of bone through his heel. The possum was dead immediately save a death twitch or two. The boy tilted his head back, looking up towards the dusky afterglow in the

CONTINUED...

darkening sky, and heaved a long sigh of relief. A wave of release left his body, sending chills up his spine. When he came to, he picked up his foot and watched blood drip from the sole of his boot into the matted grass beneath him. Bone and brain were smashed into the ground, nothing left of the possum's head.

The boy wiped the sweat from his forehead and sat down next to the bloody mess. He leaned over and examined the remains. "That's what you get for fucking with Elvis." He looked over his shoulder towards the porch, and saw his dog laying there, licking his wounds. As he pondered what had just happened, he lowered his face, his eyebrows furrowed. Then, he pulled his knees to his chest, and wept.







## BETTY BENSON

### THAT TIME

my nineteen-year-old self rode from campus on a bus that stopped 50 miles short of where I was going to visit my sometime boyfriend whose name I don't remember so I decided to hitchhike the rest of the way a car with a bunch of drunk-stoned people picked me up passed around joints Southern Comfort until I was buzzing too not so much that I didn't notice how fast the car was going not in the right lane but moving over the double yellow line into the left lane as it passed a row of cars—one—two—three—four—five—by then we were all counting though we stopped when we realized we were on a hill with another car coming toward us over that hill the weird thing was I knew we were going to crash time turned elastic stretching out so I could hear the wind like angry wings flapping in the open windows I could even see my parents sitting at home ignoring each other not thinking of me though they would wonder what I was doing in the middle of nowhere with strangers I was pretty sure they would miss me if they stopped blaming me this is where there is a collision of memory-truth I can still see terror in the eyes of the other driver as he drove at the very last second into the ditch turned over—over—over—over I want to believe he jumped out to shake his fist at us we were driving away our driver was laughing I was shaking really shaking so much shaking the guy next to me in the backseat said I can feel your body shaking I was shaking not because we almost crashed I was shaking because that time was the first time I knew really knew how easy how possible how very possible it would be for the world to go on without me



## KAREN TOWNSEND

### BLIND

She didn't want to kill this one. To all the others, she was the pretty little nanny, no more than an opportunity. David saw her soul.

The cliffs overlooked the sea, edged with trees and a well-worn trail, and the afternoon sun spilled warmth across their faces as she and David walked side by side along the familiar path. Mara inhaled the blended scents of crisp cypress and sea brine—land and ocean. She resented both, belonged in neither.

"Not much to say today," David remarked. "Thinking about anything in particular?"

Mara had worked for the family nearly two months now, and her afternoon walks with David had become the best part of her day. She couldn't speak to him unless she brought the baby with her, and today they walked at naptime. She remained silent.

At first, Mara had assumed David was like every other man. But in the weeks that followed, she found him gentle. Kind. Generous in his estimation of her. He found her curiosity refreshing—took her seriously and gave honest answers. He even asked her questions in return, building conversations of substance that captivated her mind. No one had ever been interested in her thoughts before—only her physical attributes.

Mara slipped her small white hand into his. He couldn't see its contrast against his sun-bronzed skin, but he could feel more than most, and drew a quick breath when he felt the porcelain texture of her hand against the raised veins of his forearm. His fingers tightened gently around hers. He stopped walking and turned to face her, staring into the space just above her eyes. "I love you, Mara," he whispered. "Surely you know this by now."

She had wondered. But unlike the pointed stares of the others, his eyes took in none of her body. If he loved her, it wasn't the way the others had. She'd grown used to the hunger in their eyes as they tried to feign disinterest, the need behind their gaze that slid across each of her curves. She was no more than a stranger, and yet they did the most ridiculous things to prove themselves worthy of her attention. She found them stupid, hungering for someone they knew nothing about. Her dainty physique made them feel masculine, her delicate sensibilities made them feel needed, her quiet nature intrigued them. They felt powerful even as they sacrificed everything beneath the altar of her smile. She liked letting them

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believe in their power. She relished the shock in their eyes when they discovered they were at her mercy—and she had none to give.

The wind swept Mara's dark hair back from her shoulders, and David reached a tentative hand to her face, placed his palm on her cheek. She closed her eyes, savoring the whisper of his touch.

"So delicate," he said, cradling her chin. "Small and strong—fierce." He sighed. "Somehow you manage to hold it all inside," he said. "Your self-control is astounding."

Control. She had long since mastered control. But self-control? She was still working on that. Everyone who could confirm this about her was dead.

When she'd arrived at the estate, word of her past employers' scandals had already reached the family ahead of her. No one ever thought to connect the obvious dots—Mara was small, wide-eyed, and she'd polished her sweet demeanor until it glowed like the silver on their tables. She rarely spoke, and when she did, her voice was so melodious and childlike that her innocence was undeniable. Clearly, she knew nothing of the world's evils except the trauma of the deaths on those estates. Her employers pitied her for the weight she'd been forced to carry— orphaned and alone in the world, haunted by too much death, followed by the bad luck of position after position filled with the drama that seemed to plague so many generationally-wealthy families.

They were always gentle during the interview process, rarely pushing for deeper answers. And if she allowed her eyes to fill with tears, they dropped the matter altogether, not wanting to further injure a traumatized girl. Here she would find no such horrors, they'd assure her. Here she would be safe. They praised her for finding a way out, seeking another position—so impressed by her courage. Former nannies had been weary, unable to cope with sleepless nights, colicky infants, tantrummy toddlers. But in Mara's arms, babies quieted immediately, toddlers grew wide-eyed and silently well-behaved. She was best with the very young—able to quiet the fussiest of infants with her sweet voice.

David's voice softened, returned her to the present. "Anger is grief with no answer," he whispered. "You've never told me why you're angry."

She was angry because she remembered. A siren's memory is fully formed at birth, and Mara remembered it all. The disgust on the faces of her people when they saw her human legs. The shame in her mother's eyes when her baby's body exposed her for betraying her people with a man. A siren with no tail belonged nowhere—least of all in the sea. They'd left her on the beach to shrivel in the sun. Deformed. Unfit for siren life.

Mara had no room for grief. Anger was power. No one but this blind man had ever guessed she was angry, and now that he'd named it, she felt strangely exposed. He loved her for the

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strength in her silence. She loved him for seeing beneath her surface. She had no past in his eyes—only future. Others wanted the version of her they'd imagined to be true. Once they knew her, there was nothing but fear. Did she want David to know her?

Lydia hadn't feared her—not at first. She'd spoken lovingly into the infant's eyes as she rocked her, told her how she'd stood on the beach every morning longing for the baby girl she'd lost, and the sea had granted her another child. She took Mara in, held her to her breast, used her to replace the baby she'd buried beneath the waves. The painful nursing grew more intense as Mara grew. Lydia's milk had mixed with blood, and she'd given all she had to satisfy Mara's relentless thirst. No one suspected the woman had been drained by a child—a toddler. Mara could go months without feeding, but if it was offered . . .

She regretted Lydia's death. She couldn't forget Mama's vacant gaze, the release of her arms and the way she'd slumped to the floor, twitched once, then moved no more. Mara had enjoyed the way Mama treasured her—hadn't meant to hurt her. The pain of being alone again had built a scream in her throat that, without a voice, had no release and lodged in her stomach instead. But the guilt that used to nag Mara produced nothing useful, so one afternoon she'd let it go. Now Mama was no more than a distant memory.

Mara laid her head against David's chest, and he wrapped her in his arms, enveloping her in his warmth. "Grief fades in time," he murmured. "I wish I could've spared you the trauma." He didn't have to say it out loud. Dead men. Dead children. Everywhere Mara went, death seemed to follow. He shifted his weight and leaned back against a cypress trunk, holding her close.

It wasn't hard for Mara to find work. All nine families had recommended her highly, raving about her comforting presence with children, their fussiest infants always quiet in her arms. Parents just wanted the crying to stop, wanted the serenity of their households to be restored. When little ones hushed in her presence, families hired her on the spot.

If David had known why the children were quiet, would he still view her the same? Would he understand how she needed them—how she borrowed their voices? Would he consider it theft? She hadn't killed a child in years, and she always gave the voices back.

She kissed the back of his hand, released herself from his embrace, and tugged on his arm. He smiled, followed her lead. They walked hand-in-hand along the ridge as the sun sagged on the western horizon, the fragrance of the cypress fading as their path began to slope toward the sea. David tightened his grip, and Mara instinctively steadied him as the soil grew sandy beneath their feet. It was a comfortable silence despite the rage building in Mara as she cast her eyes over the ocean. Everyone assumed a quiet girl to be gentle. But her calm surface belied a turbulent undertow.

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There were always extenuating circumstances—tight alibis. She'd made sure of it. The first two had been infants. The next three toddlers. As her strength had increased, she'd needed greater supply. The teenage girl had been interesting. But the last three—the men . . . she liked men best of all. They tasted of strength. Power. The first man was a challenge. A risk. A plunge out of boredom. She suppressed a smile at the memory. That craving he'd awakened in her—no longer a need for sustenance, but a thirst to feel it again—the way he'd crumbled at her command. His helplessness as she'd compelled him closer. It was intoxicating.

Men were . . . unkind. Roger, who'd found her alone at the edge of the pond that day. Jeremy, who'd stayed in the jacuzzi long after everyone else had left. Frank, who'd begged her for a night swim until finally, she could resist her craving no longer. Each one hungry. Forceful. They deserved what they got.

"None of it was your fault," David whispered into her hair.

No one had ever seen her so accurately. He was right. She'd had no say in any of this. No voice. All vestiges of shame had long evaporated in the pleasure of the game.

She was a toddler when she stole a voice for the first time. Mama told her no—she couldn't go near the water; it was too dangerous. But Mara ran from her, toppling into the tide as she tripped on the uneven sand. Mama rushed to right her, and when Mama's feet touched the waves, Mara felt the jolt—the pulse of Mama's aura. Her voice elongated, weaving toward Mara in the water like threads floating in the current. Mara reached for them with her own pulse and caught Mama's scream in her mouth, and suddenly she was laughing, playing with the sound of Mama's voice in her own throat. The shock on Mama's face was the most fun of all. But when Mama moved her lips to scold Mara, there was no sound. Mara babbled toddler talk in Mama's rich alto, laughing with delight, and Mama's eyes grew wide with fright. She scooped up the child and rushed her to their cottage where she dried her off and put her to bed, regaining her voice just in time to sing her nightly lullaby. It was softer that night, but Mara heard it quiver.

Mama feared her after that. She tried to act the same, but Mara felt the truth.

Mara tugged on David's hand, leading him toward the water, but he balked. "It's not safe, Mara—I can't swim," he warned. "I could accidentally pull you under." But his naivete only deepened her desire. She reached for his face, stroked his jaw with one small hand, and he closed his eyes, swallowed. "I can't," he whispered. "Let's walk back to the house." She knew the accident had left him blind. He didn't like being around water.

But Mara did. In the water she felt the aura of a person's energy. Normally, she'd lure her victims into water to steal their voices, suck away their strength, compel them to do her bidding. Water intensified her thirst. Revenge against men. Revenge against the humans that had tainted her blood. Revenge for never being given a choice. For having no voice.

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It was different with David. If she could get him into the water, she would feel him in a whole new way, and he would see her even more clearly. Men always saw her differently in the water. It swirled around them with the aura of her essence. And once she knew they'd seen her true intentions—that's when she'd compel them. They did everything she wanted before she drained them dry. They were always alarmed when her voice was their own, stolen from their throats without their consent. That was her favorite part—the shock on their faces. That moment they realized they were prey. That final emotion—terror edged with desire. They died wanting her, enraptured even as she fed. Sometimes, their blood still wet on her lips, she sang to them in their own voice as they faded—mute as their lives ebbed away. Once she took a man's voice, she never gave it back. The voice died on her lips as the body grew cold.

All she wanted this time was to feel David's aura, for him to feel hers. The water was the only way. She tugged on his hand, pulling him off balance, and he took one step forward to steady himself, foot splashing into the froth as the wave drew back from the shore. He gasped and she felt the tremor in his fingers. His fear was endearing, charmed her. She wanted him to trust her. She would never let him drown.

She pulled again, and a second foot splashed into the edge of the ocean. His heart was pounding now—the sound made her salivate. Warm blood surged and throbbed beneath his skin—a network of flavorful veins with only a thin layer of skin to separate him from her.

But the voice was all that mattered. She felt the water connecting them as they stood thigh-deep in the sea, the vibration of his voice pulsing with each heartbeat—unbelievably sexy. Unbelievably mouth-watering.

"Don't worry," she said, commandeering his voice.

David's mouth dropped open and one hand flew to his throat, feeling for the missing sound. His blank eyes darted aimlessly with growing awareness. He was afraid now. She giggled. "I said don't worry," she said again in his rich baritone.

He tried to speak, clutching at his throat, but there was no sound—only panic blanching his face. She wouldn't need to explain; he would see her truest self when he came deeper—love her even more passionately. He was the only one who deserved to—the only one who'd ever wanted to. The realization was exhilarating and filled her with a new kind of thirst. "Deeper," she said. But he was frozen in place, one hand at his neck, the other trying to extricate itself from hers.

Desperately attempting to untangle their fingers.

He was trying to leave her.

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Leave. Her.

She raised one quivering hand to her hair and ran her trembling fingers through it.

Not him. Not David.

Anger surged to overtake her in one unstoppable wave.

"Come." She commanded him with his own voice.

And he obeyed.

He didn't struggle as he sank beneath the moonlit surface, arms encircling her waist. He didn't even close his eyes. They remained open as she found his jugular, sank her teeth into his throat. He stared straight ahead through the kelp as she fed, frenzied, so desperately in love as she consumed him.

When it was over, she hovered before him in the current, swallowing the last of his warm blood, and her eyes anchored themselves on his dead stare. His voice disintegrated in her mouth as she opened it to scream.







# MAGGIE NERZ IRIBARNE

## SLIM DIFFERENCES

I noted the decrepit state of Mr. Talbot's shoes before stepping over his legs, a motion I'd performed for over a year. He slept in my shop's doorway, as he did every night, mostly because I no longer tried to stop him.

"Mr. Talbot," I said, always very respectful, "It's time to get up." I tugged at his arm.

It's not like I was afraid to touch a homeless man. I made a point of it.

Not very long ago, after engaging him in several conversations, I learned that Mr. Talbot and I were not very different. We were only two years apart in age, divorced, college graduates. We'd both lived in Newburgh our entire lives. Talbot said his mother bought their entire family shoes at Fogarty's. She knew my father. And we were both recovered addicts, although different addictions, and he was not totally recovered, like me.

No, we were not as different as I originally hoped.

"Morning, Fogarty," he said. His thinning hair and baggy sweatpants contrasted with my neat comb-over and pressed khakis. A post-divorce point of pride: I did all my own laundry and ironing. He shook out his legs and arms, stamped his feet, cracked his neck and knuckles.

"I'll get your coffee," I said, my voice competing with an early morning siren.

"Thanks," he said, shaking his head in what I assumed was dismay at the state of the world.

We had numerous discussions about Newburgh's decline. We both recalled when the city possessed just two police cars.

I unlocked the front door and headed to the Keurig machine in the office.

It was a fresh early summer morning, a nice day for Talbot on his bench in the park, I reasoned.

After fixing his coffee in his usual mug, I journeyed back to the front of the store, passing through the dwindling inventory. Fogarty's shoe store, opened 50 years ago by my father,

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was officially on its last legs. The bulk of the shoes would be sold at incrementally lowering prices until they were all gone. I didn't expect them to last much beyond the big Labor Day sale.

I handed Mr. Talbot his coffee and a hot rag with which to wipe his face.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

I assured him I slept fine, tamping down the memory of my own warm bed as I stood on his cold slab.

After coffee, Mr. Talbot swept the front walk, as was his custom, and headed out for the day.

"Much obliged, Fogarty," he said.

A nip of a nod and off he went, shoes flapping.

My heart swelled a bit as I watched him saunter off to the park. I decided right then and there I'd save a pair of Florsheims, my best pair, in Talbot's obvious size ten. I'd save them as my parting gift. After Fogarty's final sale, I'd head to that park, kneel down, like Jesus when he washed the feet of his disciples, loosen his threadbare shoes, slip them off his feet. I would resist my ever-present gag reflex. I would never want to offend Mr. Talbot, not again.

I would gently slide on the new shoes, buff them a little for shine, as my father did.

I'd put my hand in the crook of Talbot's arm and help him rise up off his bench, praise him as he strutted in the sunshine, thanking me.

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As summer lurched on Talbot and I kept up our morning pleasantries. I continued marking down my inventory, never mentioning a word of the shop's demise. There was no need. Talbot's pair of Florsheims sat on a special place on the shelf, awaiting the final sale.

In mid-August, a bald man introducing himself as Cope entered the store. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and jeans.

"I hear you're closing up," he said.

"Where'd you-? Anyway. Not quite yet," I said. "I still have shoes to sell."

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"I'll give you 5000 for the-how many you say?"

"I didn't. I have a big inventory. Top quality shoes. They're worth a hell of a lot more than 5000."

"Cash?" he said, hands in pockets, ogling the place.

I had not expected that word. Cash. I never saw cash anymore. Cash.

"Let me think about it," I said.

"Now or never," Cope said. "This is my one day in this town and I'll give you cash. 5000. Now or never."

"Let me see it," I said.

He pulled a stack from his man purse, slapped it on the counter.

"May I?" I said, lifting one bill off the top. I held it to the light.

"Okay," I said, dismissing a buzz of brain-nags. My ex always accused me of never taking chances. My face heated with the giddy rashness of the change of plans. I grabbed the wad and shoved it in the register.

He moved to the door, propped it open, whistled.

A chubby guy with a tattooed neck entered with a dolly.

In minutes the entire inventory, including Mr. Talbot's shoes, were sold to Cope. I stood alone in the depleted space, throat caught between a laugh and a sob, clutching a framed photo of younger versions of my father and me, shaking hands in the storefront, now Talbot's sleeping spot.

Just go buy Talbot a pair of shoes with that cold hard cash in your hot little hand, I told myself.

But, Charity begins in the home, that's what my mother always said. Put yourself first, that's what she meant. And hadn't I already done a lot for old Talbot? The store, every pair of shoes, was my father's legacy. I wasn't about to give any of it away, for free.

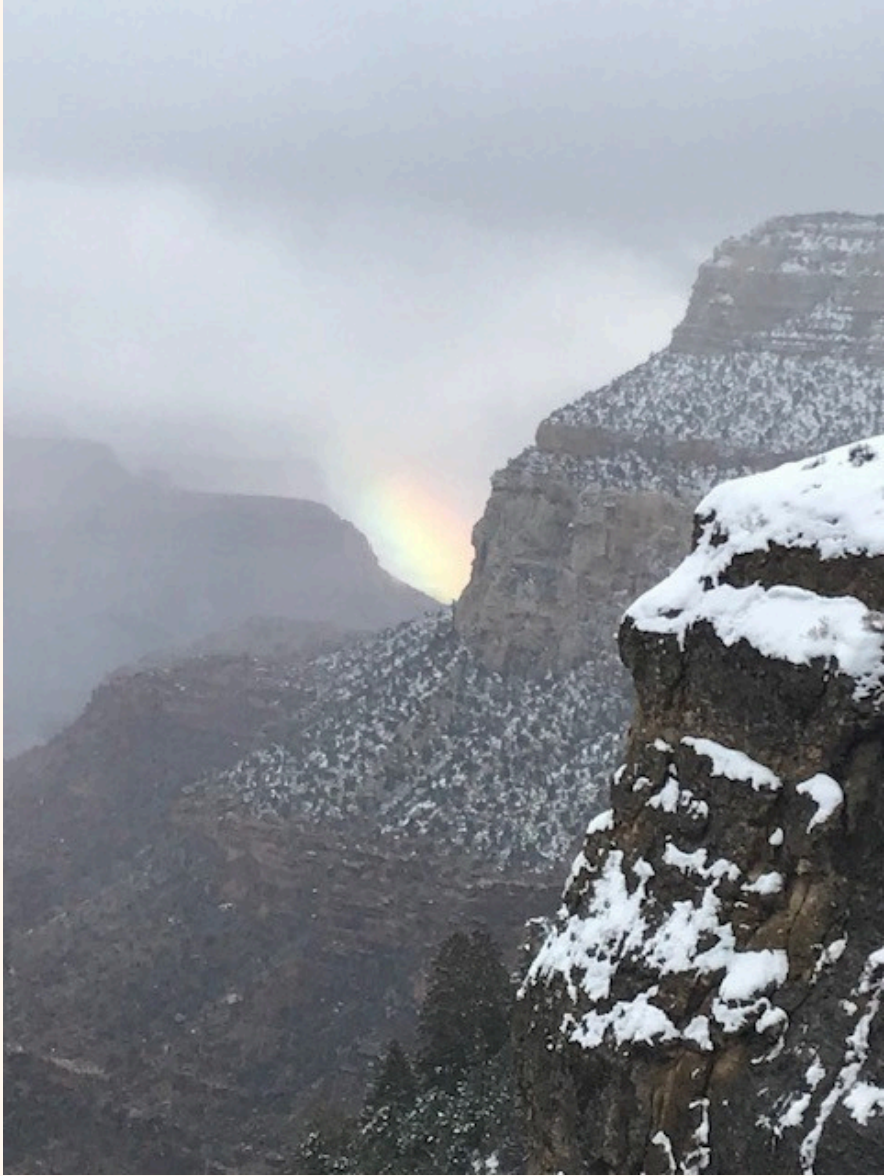
That day, that very same day, I pulled my personal effects, even the Keurig machine and all

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the little pods, slapped up CLOSED and BUILDING FOR SALE signs, and left, classic Buster Brown and Stride Rite posters still hanging on the walls. I was getting the hell out of this crumbling city, heading down south somewhere.

Before I took off there was one last thing I had to do. I removed Talbot's sleeping accoutrement from a closet and left it there for him, on the street, unnoticeable amidst the other piles of trash scattered here and there on the block. I hoped no one would take it, that he would find it. He'd need it to sleep. It was my parting gift, the right thing to do, after all.







# KIM MALINOWSKI

## THE GRAND CANYON

I want to take his hand—lead him for once  
into unexplored terrain.  
Climb uphill while he desperately follows,  
not needing to see the sunrise,  
needing only to see me  
needing the sunrise.

I want him to clumsily clasp my hand,  
callous to callous,  
palms sweaty,  
the canyon feeling as ancient as starlight.

We will stand under the starriest sky  
we've ever seen  
together.  
I will feel the weight of his frame behind me.

I cannot say if we topple,  
but I will walk to the rim's edge,  
farther than wisdom,  
and he will scream over the chorus of grit  
patterns of dreams,  
and he will yank me back.  
Do I want to go back?

I want to be part of this canyon.  
Yearning hurts too much.  
I could be part of history's erosion.  
Part of the unmapped stratigraphy.

I want this man to breathe me in like I  
inhale the ancient breeze.  
He already knows my history,  
and what the lines on my palm foretell,  
even if he doesn't believe it.



## DALLAS NOBLE

### A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

It was a hot July night after his senior year of high school, and Eddie Macmillan was bored as hell. He was working the night shift at the Walmart in Bensalem, Pennsylvania, one of those cities that grows horizontally, built by companies whose massive stores were the size of toppled skyscrapers, surrounded by nothing but farmland and highway and defunct factories for miles in every direction, except for the few decrepit clusters of houses that nestled in their shadows like parasites on the back of some huge whale.

The glow of summer had faded weeks ago and now Eddie was just floating, suspended in his own life like one of the millions of water droplets in the humid air. It seemed like the whole world had sunken into a stupor fitting for the heat. Eddie didn't have anywhere he needed to go, nor did he have anywhere he particularly wanted to go. But by the time the woman walked in that night, he had spent almost twelve hours in the Walmart, working two shifts, and he knew he didn't want to be there anymore.

It was 10:38pm, according to the digital clock on Eddie's cash register screen, when she appeared framed between the sliding glass doors at the front of the store. She was the fourth customer Eddie had seen that hour, and she was walking fast, almost running, leaning forward as if pulling against some great force. She came to an abrupt stop next to the customer bathrooms, pulled out a pack of Camels and a lighter, and moved to light one up.

"Ma'am," Eddie called, hurrying over, grateful for the chance to leave his stifling corner of the register. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you can't smoke in here."

From close up, he could see that she was about to cry. Her breath came in little gasps; a few tear streaks had already cut white lines into her cheeks. As Eddie approached, she dropped the lighter into her purse and began to stuff the Camels away with shaking hands.

"Sorry," she said. "Sorry. My bad."

She was young--barely in her twenties, probably, not much older than him. Although the night was sweltering, she wore a thin cardigan with sleeves that drooped over her fingers, flip flops, and cutoff jean shorts. She had flat brown hair, and her belly pushed large and round and taut against her grey tank top.

Eddie stared dumbly at this for a few seconds. He didn't know why it so transfixed him.

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Maybe it was just surprising. "You're pregnant," he said.

The woman stopped fiddling with the Camels abruptly and looked up at him. "Um...yeah," she said.

"Isn't smoking...bad for babies?"

The woman shrugged, regarding him with a mixture of confusion, wariness, and something else--anger, maybe, or reproach. The glint of someone ready to defend herself or run. Her shoulders were shoved up and forward as if trying to push the rest of her body away from him.

Eddie suddenly realized that he had been gawking and snapped his mouth shut, blushing. "I'm sorry," he said. "That was a stupid thing to say."

"S'okay," said the woman. She looked down. Her mouth moved as if she was still speaking, but Eddie couldn't make out any words. He thought he might have heard a whisper, almost seeming to come from somewhere behind her head. It sounded like, "Kid's fucked anyway."

"...Coffee." The woman's voice shook Eddie out of a stupor. "He sent me in to buy coffee. Can you tell me where to find it?"

"Oh, uh, that way." Eddie pointed behind him and to the left. "Aisle 13."

"Thanks," said the woman. Eddie stared as she shuffled away, then realized he was staring and looked at the floor.

When the woman came back ten minutes later, Eddie was picking at his fingernails and reading the magazine covers at the next register for the fourteenth time that day. At almost 11 o'clock on a Tuesday night, there weren't many people at the Walmart. A few geriatric employees worked one out of every three registers behind him. Eddie had thought that, for some reason, she might avoid him, but now here she was, setting down a can of Folger's coffee.

Glad to have something to do other than read magazine covers, Eddie made a mental list of her purchases as he scanned them: three cans of Folger's coffee. Two boxes of coffee filters. A bottle of ibuprofen. Concealer.

"How are you tonight?" he asked her, in the polite but detached way that cashiers are supposed to ask customers how their days are.

"Okay," she said in a small voice. "Yourself?"

Eddie decided to forget about protocol. "About to fall asleep, honestly."

That earned him a laugh. Her laugh was so wispy it was see-through. But it was there. "I guess it gets pretty boring here."

"Yeah. No kidding." A pause. Beep, went Eddie's scanner. "What do you do for work? Is it boring there too?"

"Oh, I don't really do much. Just stay at home. Once my--my daughter's born, I guess...."

"But what do you do now?"

"Nothing. I do nothing."

Eddie nodded. "I get that." Beep. "But even when you're doing nothing, you're doing something."

The woman looked down. "I just don't get out of the house much."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

Eddie looked up. Something in the tone of her voice made him do it. The tears that had cut white lines into her cheeks earlier had also washed clean the skin beneath her eyes, revealing it to be mottled with blue-green bruises. They were pale, mostly healed, but there were new ones too, reddish purple welts standing out where the makeup had washed away but blending into her foundation at the edges.

He knew what this was. He had seen it enough times before. He remembered seeing his mother in the bathroom when he was ten, washing off what he knew of her face, revealing a new one of swollen reds and greens and blues and yellows.

Looking down again, trying to keep his tone casual, Eddie asked, "How'd you get those?"

"Get what?"

"Your cheeks."

"Oh, um, I--" the woman stammered. She wasn't used to making things up. Not yet. Not like the others he'd known. "I just fell. On the stairs."

Eddie nodded. "Pretty nasty fall."

"Yeah, it was."

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Eddie finished scanning. "Seventeen twenty-three," he told her.

The woman paid with two ratty ten-dollar bills. Eddie opened the register, took out two dollar bills, two quarters, two dimes, a nickel, and two pennies. If she didn't want to talk about it, he couldn't make her. He hadn't expected anything otherwise. You had to be careful with these things.

"Oh, and could I also have a pack of cigarettes?" said the woman. "Camels, please."

Eddie turned and reached for the cigarettes on the shelf behind him. "You over eighteen?"

"That should be obvious."

"Yeah. But I had to ask." Turning back, Eddie went to give her the pack of Camels, the woman extended her hand to accept them, and there, in the middle of her palm, were three fresh, smoldering cigarette burns. Eddie froze.

Realizing what she had done, she retracted her burnt hand in horror and snatched the change from him with her other hand. But she too seemed to have no idea what to do next, and she just stood there, staring at the floor, lower lip trembling.

As Eddie looked at her, standing there in her cutoffs with her lips trembling and her hand clenched into a fist around her cigarette burns, he was seized by a strange compulsion. He cleared his throat to chase away the silence.

"Have you ever thought about going to Pittsburgh?" he asked.

"Pittsburgh?" the woman echoed.

"Or upstate New York. Maybe even Canada."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I've always wanted to see Canada—haven't you?"

"I guess. I don't know." The woman shrugged. She looked at Eddie with new suspicion, drawing her gaze further back into her skull.

"It's just, it's not like I have any reason to stay here," Eddie continued. His hands fiddled with the box of cigarettes of their own accord, turning it over and over and over and over. "I have a car."

"I don't know you."

CONTINUED...

"But if you did. Would you want to?"

The woman shook her head sharply, three times, as if trying to shake away the thoughts that were lodging there like spiderwebs. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. "I don't--"

"You haven't ever thought about it?"

The woman opened her eyes again and in them, pale and watery, Eddie saw her answer. He nodded once, slowly. Neither of them broke eye contact.

"There are ways," said Eddie. "I wouldn't have to stay. But I could, I could...I could help. If you wanted. I only make minimum wage here, but I've been saving--"

"He would find me."

"I could protect you."

She shook her head, quick and scared, like a rabbit. "You don't know him. He's--"

"There are ways. I've seen how it works. There are ways for you to be safe."

"But the baby--"

"What other option does she have? What other option do you have?"

"..."

"..."

"The only one." Suddenly, like shutters slammed closed over a window, the woman's eyes were hard and guarded again. "I shouldn't stay too long. He's waiting outside for me." She started to collect her items, sweeping them into a plastic bag. In his distraction, Eddie had forgotten to bag them. Hurriedly, he reached over to help her, fumbling with the box of cigarettes he had been turning over as he dropped it into the bag.

"I didn't pay for those yet."

"Take them."

The woman flinched in protest but said nothing. She stared fiercely down at the grey vinyl of the conveyor belt the whole time. "Thanks," she said, and it sounded like no more and no less than if she had been thanking him for the Folger's.

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"Our pleasure. Have a good night," said Eddie. The same worn reply they were taught to give all customers.

He felt cut and dried again. Flattened and pressed out and thrown on a shelf. The rush of emotion from earlier receded suddenly, leaving him confused and unsteady and numb. As the woman turned to leave, the unexpected glint of her wedding band in the fluorescent lights caught Eddie's eye. "Hey," he blurted. "Um, take care of yourself."

The woman's eyes flickered up to his for one last, quick glance before fixing themselves back to the floor. "You too."

He watched the sliding doors part for her and the darkness outside swallow her in silence. If there was one thing Eddie Macmillan knew, it was when to give up.

When his shift was over, Eddie lingered by the cash registers longer than he normally would, lost in thought. He felt strangely as if he had failed at something. He also felt like someone other than himself. He had never been the sort of person to act on impulse, or even the sort of person who had impulses. But tonight, something--maybe the same thing that had driven him to speak to the woman earlier--told him to grab a pack of Camels from the shelf and go outside, and so he did. He stuffed two dollars into the cash register and walked to the smoking area outside the employee entrance.

The night was heavy with the promise of rain. Eddie hadn't brought a rain jacket. He dug through his backpack in the dark, looking for the lighter that he kept mostly for friends. Of course he'd tried cigarettes a couple of times in high school, but Eddie wasn't a smoker. Now, though, he found the lighter, placed a Camel in between his teeth, and, after a few unsuccessful tries, lit up. He coughed torrentially at his first inhale, and at his second one too. The burn of it in his throat created a sensation similar to crying. Finally, he took a long, shaking breath in and exhaled a stream of smoke into the air, feeling the remnants settle into his lungs. The employee entrance faced the back of a Costco warehouse. If not for the glowing end of his cigarette, the unbroken darkness would have swallowed him up just like it had swallowed her an hour earlier. He wondered where she was now.

The unfamiliar sensation of smoke was making his eyes water. Blinking softly, Eddie leaned back against the white face of the WalMart, took another drag, and tried to go back to not thinking.







## AUTHOR BIOS

**David Kirby** teaches at Florida State University, where he is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English. His latest books are a poetry collection, *Help Me, Information*, and a textbook modestly entitled *The Knowledge: Where Poems Come From and How to Write Them*. Kirby is also the author of *Little Richard: The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, which the *Times Literary Supplement* described as “a hymn of praise to the emancipatory power of nonsense.” He is currently on the editorial board of *Alice James Books*.

**Nancy L. Meyer** she/her avid cyclist, community activist and experiential educator from the unceded Ramaytush Ohlone lands of San Francisco. Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, published in many journals including: *McNeese Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Sugar House Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Gyroscope*, *Nebraska Poetry Society*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*. In 9 anthologies. Recipient of a Hedgebrook Residency.

**David Milley** has written and published since the 1970s, while working as a technical writer and web apps developer. His work has appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Bay Windows*, *Friends Journal*, *RFD*, and *Feral*. Retired now, David lives in southern New Jersey with his husband and partner of forty-seven years, Warren Davy, who's made his living as a farmer, woodcutter, nurseryman, auctioneer, beekeeper, and cook. These days, Warren tends his garden and keeps honeybees. David walks and writes.

**David Mihalyov** lives near Lake Ontario in Webster, NY, with his wife, two daughters, and beagle. His poems and short fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *Ocean State Review*, *Dunes Review*, *Free State Review*, *New Plains Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, and other journals. His first poetry collection, *A Safe Distance*, was published by *Main Street Rag Press* in 2022.

**Nilsa Mariano** studied at Brooklyn College and she has a Masters in Comparative Literature from Binghamton University. She did storytelling in local schools and performance poetry in the community. Nilsa grew up in East New York and Williamsburg, lives in Syracuse. She has been published in *Stone Canoe*, *Five Minute Magazine* and *MicroFiction Monday* and *MuleSkinner Magazine*. Nilsa had a story published in the inaugural edition of *Chicken Soup for the Latino Soul*. Thank you for your consideration.

**Mario Duarte** is a Mexican American writer. He is an Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate who lives in Iowa City. His poems and short stories have appeared in *Arkana*, *Emerald City*, *Ocotillo Review*, *Red Ogre Review*, and *Rigorous*, among others. Recently, he published a poetry collection *To the Death of the Author* and a short story collection *My Father Called Us Monkeys Growing Up Mexican American in the Heartland* will be published soon.

**Robert Okaji** holds a BA in history, and was recently diagnosed with stage four metastatic lung cancer. He lives, for the time being, in Indianapolis, and his work has recently appeared in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Shō Poetry Journal*, *Stone Circle Review*, *Only Poems* and elsewhere.

**Bruce Spang**, former Poet Laureate of Portland, is the author of two novels. His most recent collection of poems, *All You'll Derive: A Caregiver's Journey*. He's also published four other books of poems, including *To the Promised Land Grocery* and *Boy at the Screen Door* (Moon Pie Press). He is the poetry and fiction editor of the *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*. He teaches courses in fiction and poetry at Great Smokies Writing Program and lives in Candler, NC.

**Ian C Smith's** work has been widely published. He writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island, Tasmania.

**Hari Khalsa** studied filmmaking at Santa Fe University of Art and Design and is the founder of The Southwest School of Storytelling, which holds creative writing programs in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His work has been published in *Muleskinner* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*.

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## AUTHOR BIOS

Honored for his work at newspapers in Anchorage, Seattle and Portland, **Stuart Watson** has placed literary work in *Bull*, *Yolk*, *Barzakh*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Bending Genres* (Best Microfictions nominee), *The Writing Disorder*, *Reckon Review*, *Sensitive Skin*, *The Muleskinner Journal* and other publications, all linked from [chiselchips.com](http://chiselchips.com). He lives in Oregon.

**Michael Loderstedt's** first book of poems *Why We Fished* published by Redhawk Publications in 2023 received a silver award from the UK Poetry Book Awards. Recent writings have been featured in *Naugatuck River Review*, *Muleskinner Journal*, the *NC Literary Review*, *Bangalore Review*, *Poem for Cleveland & Musepaper*. He was awarded a 2020 Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Literature, and currently lives in Cleveland, Ohio near the shore of Lake Erie with his wife Lori and son Ethan.

**Helen Raica-Klotz** teaches writing in the English Department at Saginaw Valley University and in regional correctional facilities, homeless shelters, and local libraries—any place where she can find people who have something to say. She has written two non-fiction books, *Empower Me* and *Journal Me*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction has appeared in various places, including *Riverrun*, *Walloon Writers Review*, *Bear River Review*, and *The Dunes Review*, and *Cardinal Sins*.

**Renee Williams** is a retired English instructor, who has written for *Guitar Digest*, *Alien Buddha Press* and *Fevers of the Mind*.

**Tom Barlow** is an Ohio writer of poetry, short stories and novels. His work has appeared in journals including *The Muleskinner Journal*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Voicemail Poetry*, *Hobart*, *Tenemos*, *Redivider*, *The North Dakota Quarterly*, *The New York Quarterly*, *The Modern Poetry Quarterly*, and many more. See more at [tombarlowauthor.com](http://tombarlowauthor.com).

**Barbara Bennion** is a former dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company and has served on the dance faculty at The University of Colorado and Marymount College. She began writing plays in her sixties, and is particularly interested in the relationship between rhythm and words. She is a member of the Westchester Collaborative Theatre and The Dramatists Guild. Now in her nineties, she is still writing and dancing.

In 2023, **Rikki Santer** was named Ohio Poet of the Year. Her twelfth and most recent poetry collection, *Resurrection Letter: Leonora, Her Tarot, and Me*, is a sequence in tribute to the surrealist artist Leonora Carrington. Please contact her through her website, <https://rikkisanter.com>.

**Corey Villas**, born and raised in North Carolina, is a graduate of Auburn University. His work has appeared or is scheduled to appear in 2024 in *Poverty House*, *BULL Magazine*, *The Milk House*, *The Argyle Literary Magazine*, and *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*. Corey is a proud husband and father of two.

**Betty Benson** is a poet and writer living in Minnesota. Her work has appeared in *RockPaperPoem*, *Glacial Hill Review*, *The Best of Choeofpleirn Press* (2023), and others. She was a 2023 finalist for both the Small Orange Emerging Woman Poet Honor and for the Derek Burleson Poetry Prize.

**Karen Townsend** explores the deep sea of the human psyche through speculative fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and a hunger to build creative community in Virginia where she explores personality theory and looks for her next adventure.

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## AUTHOR BIOS

**Maggie Nerz Iribarne** is 54, lives in Syracuse, NY, bakes up sometimes crispy, sometimes dense, sometimes fluffy cakes of curious people and places, recurring thoughts of dread, haunting memories, and the occasional sugar cookie. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

**Kim Malinowski** is the author of "Home," "Phantom Reflection," and "Buffy's House of Mirrors." She has two forthcoming books. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and the Rhysling Award. She writes because the alternative is unthinkable.

**Dallas Noble** is a writer and musician from Hopewell, New Jersey. They currently reside in Delaware with the other members of their string quartet, the Trellis String Quartet, and a plethora of other musical friends.

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LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.