The Avalon Literary Review

Spring 2021

Welcome to the 2021 Spring edition of *The Avalon Literary Review.*

This is the 4th edition of ALR that we've released since the pandemic took hold a little over a year ago. We take some comfort in the fact that hope is finally on the horizon.

We send you our deepest thoughts of comfort and grace if you, like all of us here at ALR, saw Covid strike close to home. It's been a horrific year for all of us.

Please enjoy our latest collection of short stories, essays and poems. This collection was a strong reminder for all of us at ALR that we share so many common experiences, despite our distance from one another. We hope that, after a painful year of isolation, you will find solace in this shared experience as well.

Happy Reading!
Valerie Rubino
Editor
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Third Language of Third World

Kirtida Gautam

When a girl from a small town in India,
From a vernacular medium school,
Gujarati, to be precise,
learned that *swinging* means to go up
and down in the air, she was eleven,
already in grade six.
She had known this verb, in action
had sat on a swing,
had gone up and down.
But she didn't know the English word for it.

A Swing.

Not—*Zula*. Hindi.
Not—*Hinchaka*. Gujarati.
But—Swing. English.
Up and down didn't change.
She still went up. She still went down.

But now, she could open her mouth.
She was allowed to speak.
Express herself.
Her third language of her third world.
The first language of the first world.
English.

Harry
Jane O'Keeffe

I was peeling potatoes in a budding teenage feminist rage.

"Why don't you go on to the house and get some potatoes ready for supper?" my uncle had said to me.

I was sidelined before I could help corral the large herd of cattle we had spent all day gathering. "Sure," I replied. I never talked back or questioned my uncles. I was glad to be at the ranch on a horse with my mom's family.

"If you hurry you might have time to stir up a cake for dessert," he yelled to my back as I trotted my horse around the herd and headed towards the main house.

When I got to the house I kept my spurs on my boots to keep my allegiances clear and stomped around the kitchen. I was furious that only the girl was sent to the house to get food on the table. Men could cook. I was so busy being mad I almost didn't hear the phone.

"Is this the Neal Ranch?"

"Yes."

"Does Harry Andrews work there?"

"Yes."

"I need to speak to him right away."

"He's working right now." Unlike me who is stuck in the house cooking.

"I'm going to give you a telephone number and you make sure he calls that number as soon as he comes in. You got it?"

He made me repeat it twice and then told me he was the Sheriff of a neighboring county. I wrote it down and returned to my assigned project.

Harry had worked for the ranch as long as I remembered. My mom grew up on this ranch but moved away when she married my dad. A few years ago, she died of leukemia. I started spending my summers here with my aunt and several uncles who still ran the place with the help of men like Harry. The first summer after my mom died, Harry didn't say anything about that, but he did notice that I was spending a lot of time at the barn watching a mare and her yearling colt.

"Do you want to learn how to break a colt?" he asked me.

"Yeah." I knew who Harry was. The ranch hands didn't really have much to do with the kids. I don't blame them, we were obnoxious.

"You can help me with that one. But you have to listen to me. You have to be patient and work hard." It was just what I needed that summer. Now, hearing all the terrible things that some men do when they see a vulnerable child, I thought of Harry and how he showed me how to break a colt.

I was two potatoes in, not doing a sterling job, when the phone rang again.

"This is the Sheriff. Has Mr. Andrews returned?"

"No, I'll give him…"

"Have you ever met his son? Michael?"

"Uh, I think he was here once but I didn't meet him."

"Okay. Who else is at the house there with you?"

"No one. My aunt is usually here but she had a doctor's appointment."

"How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen. Why?"

"Listen. It's really important that I speak to Mr. Andrews soon. But if his son shows up there you need to lock the door. And don't answer it. Do you understand?"

"Uh, well, the door doesn't lock."

"What?

"Well, it never has, I mean as long as I …"

"Oh, good Lord, I'm calling the Sheriff in your county. If someone comes and you don't know who it is. I guess, well, hide."

"Okay but can you tell me…"

"Have Mr. Andrews call me ASAP." And he hung up.

Potatoes were no longer interesting. Harry's son was obviously in trouble. He did something and now I could be in danger and I didn't even know what he looked like. I wasn't lying to the Sheriff, there were no locks on the doors, not even on the bathroom doors - much to my consternation. People just seemed to know if someone was in there, but as I got older, it did freak me out.

I was hatching an escape plan involving going out the back door, running to the chicken coop, heading to the creek and doubling back to the barn. I would saddle a horse and head to the hills. Then the phone rang again.

"Your County Sheriff is headed to your place. He should be there in about an hour. Look, you need to know how serious this is. Michael Andrews killed two people in a restaurant in Haber today. He got away driving his dark green 1967 Ford pickup. We think he might be headed to his dad. But we don't know. Stay safe."

I sat there and thought shitty things only happened to me. I wasn't sure what I was going to do when Harry came in. We never had a real conversation. We talked about horse bloodlines on the way home after a long hot day, not his son Michael. I couldn't imagine what I was going to say to him after he called the Sheriff.

The sound of a vehicle approaching made me jump off my chair and crouch at a window. It was another uncle, back from his day at a different part of the ranch.

I met him at the door with the news. He listened silently and then went back to his rig. He headed out toward the dust of the cattle drive I had been banished from an hour ago. He returned with Harry,

I did finish those damn potatoes. It would be rude to stand there while Harry made the call. I fussed around the kitchen while Harry climbed the stairs slowly to his room. My Uncle came in and said he was taking Harry to Haber. I nodded and put the potatoes in a kettle to boil. There would be no damn cake.

I heard Harry come down the stairs and I started for the front door to say, what? Quickly I settled on *I'm sorry*, but Harry walked out the door, wearing a clean shirt, eyes straight ahead. I started to well up as he firmly shut the door, almost in my face, and strode to my Uncle's pickup. Before I could get too emotional, I started to get worried again. What if Michael showed up here? Was it worse that Harry was gone? When was our county Sheriff supposed to arrive to protect us? Was there a gun in the house?

My uncle came roaring back in the door. "I almost forgot to tell you. They found Michael, well his body, he killed himself."

A week later, Harry was back to work. I was still mad at myself for not saying anything that day but I saw that no one said a thing that morning. They just stood around in a circle and decided who was doing what and got to it.

That evening, after supper, I took a breath and said to Harry, "That mare I started, she's not taking the bit so good. I'm doing something wrong. Do you want to come out to the barn and have a look, see what's up?"

He stood up, took his plate to the kitchen sink and said, "It might just be the bridle you're using, but yeah, let's go look."

where shall we sleep tonight?

Sharon Lopez Mooney

I
your brown body lies easy
across our bed
in my room
where our two lives meet
babies created there
tears given and refused
only one night we slept
on the pillows of anger

no matter what else
our lives
have done apart
we lie there
looking at the dark
together
remembering each day
at least this once

we touch
each other's depths
i understand your daemons
you recognize my visions
it means something
to sleep next to you
really sleep
i trust you with my dreams

I want you in our bed
To warm my feet and ass
To hold my body
but this is my room
to write
and I do not want you
here tonight
still you come

to rest in our bed
you have learned to be hushed
but I can feel you press on me
from the far side of the room

unafraid
i have met myself
in these dark hours
with awareness you woke in me

my voice is clear
spreads fluidly
reaching from paper
to wall ceiling down
and I want to be alone

II
after so many years
when you walk away from me
i follow asking what are you mad about
you tell me nothing i do not believe
you are going to your own room again
alone with your books and silence
while i sit in mine words falling into poems
pushing down on keys that splay me on the page
where others will see

my fingers turn minutes into paper eons
in the middle of the almost full moon night
i crawl over your sleeping body
to my side of your bed
my desires fold our bodies together
yet i am glad you have committed
yourself to dreaming in the
curve you pressed into the bed

this space between us has spread
stretched farther than ever it has
we watch each other across busy lives
alert to danger but knowing
our feet are steady on solid ground
traveling the same direction
but tonight we do not consummate our bonds
you roll over encircle me in your warmth
sleep slides over us
giving ourselves to the night and the knowing of each other

Hotel Brokenheartsville
J.P. Whitney

The concierge had seen many types of heartbreak in his long tenure at the Hotel. The gut-wrenching ache of lost or unrequited love. Children mourning the loss of a beloved pet. The living mourning the dead, the broken mourning their loss of wholeness, the down-trodden simply broken. The concierge had seen it all, checked them all into Hotel Broken-heartsville. After so long, the practiced motion of making the proper diagnosis of heart-break, finding the right key, and tailoring his recommendations, was so effortless as to be nearly mechanical. In fact, though the concierge exulted in his work and ability, he was beginning to find it boring. He had half a mind to check *himself* in.

His next guest, a young woman with lines around her puffy eyes and an unnatural thinness, which suggested illness or lack of food, crept into the Hotel. She clutched the strap of her purse, keeping the beat up faux leather close to her body. Her head swiveled, her gaze directed up to take in the splendor of the Hotel, and the concierge allowed him-self a moment of pride. He took great pains to keep the Hotel presentable. The antique chandelier in the lobby was a dusting nightmare. The gold gilding and marble walls and columns looked best when polished to a high shine.

The young woman reached the plush, red-carpeted steps to his desk, and the conci-erge saw her more clearly. Her eyeliner swept asymmetrically upwards like broken butter-fly wings. Concealer couldn't hide the dark circles under her eyes. The concierge gave her his friendliest smile. The breakup cases were generally the most delicate, women *and* men.

"Can I help you, Miss?" The concierge already had the key off the wall. The Sympathy Suite would do nicely; his best listeners and supporters had reported for work today. And maybe a few kickboxing classes.

She approached the gleaming mahogany desk as if it were a feral animal ready to snap at any moment. "I'm sorry, but my taxi seems to have dropped me off at the wrong place. Where am I?"

"The Hotel Brokenheartsville, Miss."

She drew back in confusion, a broken chevron forming between her eyes. "But my heart isn't broken. And I don't need a hotel."

Bless the ones in denial. The concierge gave her a practiced, sympathetic smile. "*No one ends up here accidentally,*" he said, quoting the Hotel motto.

The woman looked at her watch.

"I suppose I'll take a room. I have nowhere else to stay and I just missed my flight."

The concierge nodded and pushed a thick, leather-bound guest ledger across the desk. The book, the newest of several dozen already filled and residing in the library, held hundreds of signatures in only its first month of use. Tear blots puckered and crinkled the pages, giving the front portion of the book added life and heft. Preserved heartbreak, the concierge liked to think. So much more beautiful than pressed flowers.

The young woman scrawled a signature and held out her hand for the key. The conci-erge chuckled and stepped from behind the desk. "Please follow me."

He led her through the grand route. Marble statues and fine paintings littered the walls in a tasteful array, and the doors they passed were thick enough to muffle any crying. Thick carpet gave the hallway a peaceful stillness. Finally, they reached the Sympathy Suite. He placed the heavy bronze key in her hand with a little bow. "Your room, Miss. Men can be so cruel." As he often saw.

She frowned and then her expression cleared. "I haven't been broken up with. Is that who stays here?"

The concierge blinked at her. Then he blinked again, so slowly his eyes closed several seconds. He had been wrong.

"So sorry, Miss, on behalf of the Hotel I give you my sincerest apologies." He was never wrong. He prided himself upon it. He had been the concierge so long he didn't know how to be anything else!

"Can I be of any actual assistance to you? Perhaps a sparkling water? No, I'm sorry, we're out of sparkling water." Damn those heiresses who had lost their diamond earrings in the ocean. Everyone knew you weren't supposed to swim with jewelry!

The woman rested against the wall. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, and the light of a nearby sconce cast into relief the dark blots under her eyes against the pallor of her skin. Fine bumps showed through her concealer, and her eye shadow sparkled a lackluster bronze too tired to be gold.

A new intuition struck the concierge. This was a new heartbreak. At least, new to him. A rarity compared to the other cases he saw daily of meanness and loss. His predecessor had described this rarity to him, had stressed the need for delicacy and extreme kindness as well as understanding. She had struggled with some existential burden too long, and it had broken her heart. Her brave human soul had hit a wall and wasn't sure how to put itself back together.

The concierge smiled at a new idea. It was perfect, just perfect.

"Miss, will you please come with me?"

The woman opened her eyes slowly, her gaze unseeing. She mutely followed the concierge, her zombie shuffle quiet on the carpet.

He led her to his favorite wing, though it seemed to see less use with every passing year. Towering bookshelves created a mahogany warren with a long, narrow passage that opened onto a sitting area. Austere, tall-backed furniture sat around a low coffee table with spindly, arachnidesque legs. The concierge led her past this somber area and through narrow, book-guarded lanes. The scent of lemon cleaner undercut that of the paper and wood, brightening the library.

The concierge stopped at a window nook. A long, wide, padded bench nested between two shelves, and pillows added plushness on top of the blue velvet upholstery. The large, latticed window looked out on a small rose garden whose plants were bathing in a light spring shower. Rain pattered against the window and distorted the view in kaleidoscopic drops.

The woman slowly woke as she looked at the cozy nook. Her eyes, distant before, now looked shyly at the concierge. "I can stay here as long as I want?"

"As long as you need, Miss. Feel free to peruse the library. I can't imagine anyone will disturb you."

She trailed a hand along the brushed bench cushion. The gesture was one of wonder rather than possession. "Would I be allowed to drink a cup of tea here?"

The concierge nodded and quickly walked away to make her tea. Upon his return, after grabbing a fleece throw (the library tended to be drafty), the concierge found the woman seated on the bench with her chin on her knees. She accepted the tea and blanket with a smile that reached her eyes, and a deep sense of satisfaction overcame the concierge. He was good at his job after all.

He turned to go and stopped. The concierge turned to her once more and pulled a hotel pad of paper and pen from inside his suit. "Just in case."

The woman smiled again, this time a little color coming back to her face.

"Thank you."

The concierge bowed and left, knowing she meant for more than just the writing materials.

A Boat To Drown In
Bob Phillips

I can think of a lot of ways to die, and often do
Sitting in a deck chair, drink in hand,
sliding into the warm Gulf waters, as pleasant as it sounds,
would not be one of my favorite ways to go

Falling out of the sky is another of my least-favorites
Having my luggage scattered over New Mexico
with my jeans hanging on a cactus and my shirt on a tarantula
is a particularly disturbing image

No, I think expiring peacefully at a ripe old age is best for me
Propped up in my recliner with a big down pillow behind my head
The air conditioning set at 72 on a warm, sunny day

Dreaming of running from light into fog
on the middle of the fairway at Augusta
Finally hitting the ball straight down the middle,
but not able to tell you my score

On a stormy night
Marc Swan

doors and windows lashed with rain,
thunder like a bowling ball strike,
purple sky majesty
above the overgrown river bank,
in the doorway, a figure,
dark and quiet,
in our house freshly built
with a history we find out
from neighbors
in an afternoon social talk.
Where we live was a shanty,
clam shack in back, next door
to a dilapidated ranch
with a history of neglect.
Previous owner abused his wife,
tried to control her life,
followed her lights off
with the kids in the car,
told her how stupid she was
in front of family
and friends alike,
an angry man,
no redemption in sight.
On a crisp winter day,
went snowmobiling with his son
in the salt marsh river
turned ice. When the snow mobile
stuck, he tucked his overweight
body low to set it free,
back in his drive
collapsed and died—
end of story, maybe.
His home now owned by a man
of peace with his horticulturist wife.
They bought the land next door,
tore down the shanty and shack,
built the house where we live.
When storm winds rage,
drains rattle, rain pelts
window frames, a figure
stands alone—when I blink
he is gone.

Ephemera
Corina S

Am I sad? I don't know. I am curious and I will go there to see the body. I haven't seen anyone dead before. On the walls outside the church, there are tall wreaths with long purple ribbons dancing in the summer light air. *Our Condolences to you and your family* is written on them in golden calligraphic letters.

The day is very bright, so when I step inside the church, it takes me a minute to see around. Eventually, my eyes get used to the darkness, and I see him lying in the casket, which is white because he is a kid. I want to approach, but I am scared to. I wish my parents were here but they've gone to the island because my grandma is sick. I stay with my aunt and uncle for the summer and they both work right now. I didn't tell them anything. Perhaps they wouldn't let me come. We don't talk about death in my family.

The aroma of frankincense and the whispering voices bring bees to my stomach. On each side of the coffin there are two majestic golden candleholders. Two old women with black clothes and black scarves wrapped around their heads blow out the candles and put them away. I put my hand in my right pocket and I find fifty cents. I slouch over to one of the women and buy a candle. I light it and cross my chest. I don't know why I did that—I don't believe in God.

His mother, in black, seems as if she is putting the flowers —white roses, jasmine and purple orchids— in the casket, which completely cover his body. His facial expression is not peaceful. The white flowers contradict his yellow face. *This is the color of death,* I think. His brittle hands are folded over his chest, holding a flower cross. This cannot be him, *this is a doll made of wax,* I whisper in my head. I have brought some flowers, but I don't know what to do with them. I'm holding them tight and my palm is sweating. Shall I give them to his mother? Shall I place them on the feet of the coffin?

He never liked me, my dead classmate. He was always teasing me, saying very mean things to me. He used to say that I was ugly and a nerd. I hated him and loved him at the same time. The first time that I saw him in class, I felt butterflies. No, he was not handsome, but tall, skinny, with eyes the color of honey. He had a mole next to his thin lips. I observe his breathless face. Where is his mole? It's not there. An awkward thought pierces my mind. He is not dead; this funeral is fake. They are about to bury and mourn a hollow doll.

In the cemetery there are dozens of people. Around the graves tall pine trees are blocking the sunlight. I smell jasmine flowers. The whispers of the cool breeze on the leaves and the chirping of the birds sound like a paradox to me on this mournful afternoon. I walk very close to the hole that they are about to put him in. The gravediggers open the casket for the last farewells. His mother kneels next to him and caresses his face. She starts kissing his cold yellow complexion. I feel small spiky pains on my spine. The gravediggers patiently wait for her. She does not let go. She starts stroking his perfectly brushed hair. His disheveled head is disparate with the stillness of his face. Her sobbing husband gently pulls her from the waist

but she resists.

She starts singing lullabies. My neck feels stiff and sobs are climbing my throat. The priest approaches her:

"Maria, let him rest in peace."

"NO" she barks, "NO!"

My eyes unlock the tears. They travel freely down my face and throat.

The gravediggers decide to close the casket; finally she moves aside. They are going to put him in the hole and I can tell she is about to jump in. Her husband holds her. Her eyelids are shut and she murmurs something that I cannot understand. I grab some dirt from the dry ground and throw it in the hole, I remember that I've been holding the flowers all this time and I throw them too. But I miss the hole. They stay there on the edge and they seem thirsty. I am about to walk over when one of the gravediggers grabs the flowers and throws them inside.

I try to sleep, I am squirming in my bed. The image of my dead classmate dominates my mind. The yellow color, the glued mouth and eyelids. The blanket of flowers that were covering his tall body. It comes to me that I will never see him again. *Where is he?* I inquire in my head. He is two meters underground in that hole in the cemetery that is just three kilometers away from this house. I concentrate on my breath. I am breathing but he is not.

I feel the bees again in my stomach and they are coming towards my throat almost choking me. My chest feels trapped, I need to cry. I cannot breathe very well; every breath comes out with difficulty as if I am two meters underground in the white-for-kids coffin.

I try to remember him alive. *Do I remember his voice?* I panic. His voice contradicted the image that he wanted to present. It was high-pitched for a boy of his age and always breathy. *What about his eyes?* Wide and liquid. Beautiful eyes, I tell myself and I feel somehow relieved.

He died from an overdose. Heroin. I imagined him penetrating his see-through skinny arm with the needle. *How can a thirteen year old inject himself?* I knew that he was taking pills here and there, smoking some pot. But heroin!

The first and last time that he injected, they said in the news. His parents were divorced, they said in the news. The schools—*our schools*—are unsafe, they said in the news. My parents became alarmed and had called me hours after the funeral. They had heard about it and they wanted me to come to them on the island. Perhaps we would stay there for a while. Away from the capital. Away from death.

Do I feel unsafe? I ask myself. I don't know. I look outside the window. The light of the dawn, still weak, is coming in. I walk to the kitchen barefoot; the cool tiles feel good. I pour iced water into a glass. I drink it and my tongue feels numb. I walk into the living room. Silence, dead silence, everyone is asleep. The only sound, the blowing trees in the wind.

Phantom Tree
Mark Smith-Soto

The would-be flippers took out the great
magnolia that bloomed lordly over the lawn,
put the corner house on sale profligate
with improvements that pleased no one.

Price reduced! cries the sign on the curb,
third adjustment in as many months. They
must be getting desperate— a superb
location, a seller's market. I've walked this way

a dozen times since the felling, but June
will never be fragrant here again. A sense
of loss grips the property, of the life hewn.
The puzzled flippers are ruing their expenses,

their faces glum: What have they left undone?
Don't know a haunted house when they see one.

Mirror, Mirror
David Perlstein

Griffin can't make up his mind. E-Day is six weeks off, and he's called his team together for an important online meeting, a familiar procedure during the pandemic. Like every middle-manager in the organization, he must remind his people that the key to election polling is observing strict impartiality to keep data free from contamination produced by subconscious prompting. Their task is critical. Many pundits declare this election may be the most important in most voters' lifetime. Personally, Griffin takes no position.

Occupied by the here and now, Griffin faces an important decision of his own. Should he wear the more businesslike powder-blue button-down or, to put the team more at ease, given the grave responsibilities they will hear, go with the casual purple-gray-pink patterned shirt? If the former, a tie? Either shirt goes with his gray slacks, which will replace the jeans he's wearing now though he'll be sitting in front of his laptop. He hopes no one wears loud golf shorts let alone underwear. He suspects that some of the dozen people he manages have done that but hesitates to call their professionalism into question. Griffin views himself as anything but judgmental.

Minutes before going online, Griffin slips into his gray slacks and places both shirts on his bed. Eyes shut, he chants, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe." On the dot, Griffin greets his team. As they exchange mundane hellos, he studies their faces. These are good people. No one stays on Team Griffin unless they meet the standard he sets. Or at least come close.

The corners of his mouth turn faintly upward, as he asked himself, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?"

Griffin's wife, whose office also is closed, texts although they're in shouting distance. No time to prepare dinner. Work, work, work but no complaints. God is looking out for us.

Griffin offers no response. He's not ungrateful, just agnostic.

She offers two choices. She can pop a frozen pizza into the oven or they can order from the nearby Turkish place. Griffin's call.

Griffin turns away from his data-rich screen and does a cost-benefit analysis. The frozen pizza is cheaper. Virtually free since they already bought it. A replacement will cost significantly less than having two meals delivered. Or picked up. Picking up saves a tip.

"Griffin?" his wife calls out from what formerly served as their dining room. Texting won't come close to expressing her impatience.

"A moment," Griffin answers. The pizza will do but he really likes the Turkish food despite its exotic nature. Particularly the braised short ribs. Also the lamb chops. Of course, he's careful about not overdoing red meat. Maybe halibut with grilled vegetables.

"Griffin?" His wife's voice exhibits a familiar edge.

"Eeny, meeny—"

"Griffin, really!"

The Turkish restaurant is within walking distance, so Griffin puts on his mask and heads out. Following dinner, he'll get more work done then settle on what to do until bedtime. TV? Music? A book?

The restaurant's sidewalk tables are filled. Masks hug a few chins. Most diners are bare-faced. Would he eat among them? He's not sure the tables have been spaced at the requisite six feet. Even if so, chatting, laughing patrons emit aerosols that travel long distances. He's not ready. Not that Griffin is one to point fingers.

He approaches the front doors blocked by a table with to-go orders. He glances at his reflection in the restaurant's plate-glass window. A mixture of fading sunlight and shadow distort his image. He appears to be missing his right arm. He steps closer. His arm reappears.

"Come with?" Griffin's wife asks on a crisp mid-October Sunday afternoon. She ordered a special lipstick that has to be picked up at the department store downtown.

Griffin can't remember when he last left the neighborhood. Is it really safe? The store has put in place all the recommended protocols, and he hasn't read or heard about a problem. Still. On the other hand, a small adventure appeals.

"Griffin?" his wife asks. "I'm getting in the car in five minutes."

Five minutes can be an eternity when you weigh pros against cons.

She's in the garage when he calls out, "Coming."

After the lipstick pickup, she asks, "Need anything?"

"Not sure."

"Weren't you thinking about a windbreaker?"

Griffin rubs his chin.

"We're already here," his wife says. "Can't hurt to look."

Griffin scours the men's department. Two windbreakers appeal. One is standard fare. Beige. According to the label *Sahara*. The other seems more fashion-forward. He learned that term from one of his team members. Griffin considers himself neither fashion-forward nor conservative. A thought comes to him. The second jacket, while stylish, won't attract all that much attention. It's navy.

Slightly off to the side of a tall, slender mirror, Griffin tries on Sahara. Then Navy. Unsure, he holds up both. It must be the angle at which he's standing, because the mirror suggests that his left leg has vanished.

Late afternoon, Griffin sets out a jack-o-lantern laboriously chosen from a smaller-than-usual selection at the supermarket and a large black plastic witch's cauldron he's filled with assorted candies. A sign fresh out of his printer reads TAKE ONE in all-purpose Helvetica. He needed only fifteen minutes to settle on the font.

Griffin, himself childless, wonders whether parents will let their kids trick-or-treat. He's spoken with the few moms and dads on his team, but they hardly constitute a statistically valid field of inquiry. At least, he's prepared.

Silence marking pre-dinnertime, Griffin analyzes competitive polls. His tongue clucks. He's almost sure his organization's data offers a more reliable clue as to who will win the election. He's proud of the role he plays in keeping the public informed of what it's thinking. Unbiased and dispassionate, he sees two sides of every argument. He likes to joke that sometimes he sees three.

His eyes fatigued, Griffin listens for children and parents approaching the house. Hearing nothing, he goes to the front door. The street lies deserted. He glances into the cauldron and searches out a piece of candy as a pre-dinner treat. Or maybe for after. Lots of choices. Snickers bars, M&Ms, lollipops, Skittles, Reese's peanut butter cups. Overwhelmed, he retreats emptyhanded to the kitchen for something to drink. Water? Soda? Push the envelope with a glass of Chardonnay? Maybe Sauvignon Blanc? Seeking

an appropriate glass for whatever decision he'll come to, he grasps the knob on the cabinet door to the left of the sink. His image in the patterned glass stops him. His head, like a jack-o-lantern, floats free from his body.

"You vote yet?" Griffin's wife asks as Election Day enters its final hours.

Settled on the living room sofa, Griffin shakes his head. His mail-in ballot sits on the coffee table. She mailed hers ten days earlier. His own mail-in ballot remains unmarked, but the post office will be open for another hour.

An hour, he contemplates, isn't all that much time, and decisions of this magnitude can't be rushed. As far as his organization's latest poll goes, it doesn't sway him one way or the other. Given the margin of error, the candidates went into the day statistically tied. Makes sense. Each has positives and negatives. How to weigh them? Their campaigns generated much heat but little light.

"Better hurry," his wife calls out from the kitchen.

Griffin resigns himself to not making it in time. Hardly the end of the world. Their polling place is open till eight.

After dinner, Griffin goes to cast his traditional ballot. The booth's curtain drawn, he stares at the candidates' names. He hears a few last stragglers come in, but the polling station is outfitted with half-a-dozen booths. Maybe more. He didn't count. What matters is that no voter should be rushed. He checks his watch. The eight o'clock deadline ten minutes off. He hopes this will prompt him to make a selection.

At eight, Griffin opens the curtain, keeps his gaze on the floor and graces the optical scanner with his unmarked ballot.

Near midnight, the media decline to announce a winner. Griffin turns off the TV and tiptoes into the bedroom. His wife snores softly.

The next morning, Griffin skips shaving and heads to the kitchen beckoned by the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee.

"Some election, huh?" says his wife.

He glances at the TV on the counter and grimaces. A beaming housewife holds up a container of laundry detergent.

His wife points to the newspaper on the island's granite top.

Griffin studies a photo of the winner. The smile. A smirk?

"What do you think?" she asks.

Griffin offers no response. A case could be made for the winner but also against. Whatever happens over the next four years, can you ever know if the loser might have done a better job?

His wife hands him coffee in a mug emblazoned with DON'T ASK ME. I JUST RUN THE NUMBERS.

"You didn't shave? I thought you have a meeting to do a post-mortem."

"Online, if you skip a day, it's hard to tell."

"I can. Get on with it."

Griffin goes to the bathroom, steps up to the mirror and peers at his reflection. Or where his reflection would be if there was one.

Love in the time of Coronavirus

Melanie Chartoff

For the first time in our five years of marriage, my husband hears me fart. As he lets his beard grow and I let my hair go, other things get let go, too. We've learned what we'll look like old and like it. Working from home, nowhere to hide, we laugh and weep more freely. As sickness surrounds, our foreplay prolongs its joy to drown out our sadness. On our eighth of an acre, we are Adam and Eve in Eden, picking onions, arugula, oranges, eating al fresco in our yard. We've joined the slow-food, slow-love, slow-life movement, staying in the moment, taking it day by day by day. . .

My Journey as a Mother and Teacher During the Pandemic
Amanda Collier

It has always been interesting to me how one doesn't realize that the last time he or she does something is actually the last time he or she will do it. I, like every other teacher in America, did not realize when the bell rang at the end of the day on a Wednesday in mid-March that it would be the last day my students would sit in my classroom. It was the last time that I would truly be their teacher. I was left to figure out how to transition all of the work both my students and I had done to an online platform.

As I was preparing myself for this adjustment, and picking the brain of my more tech savvy friends, I found myself in the role of preschool teacher as well. For my five-year-old, this was an extended Spring Break. She knew about the virus because of the news we had on at the house. I had also explained why we were no longer allowed to attend school. She knew it wasn't a good thing, but didn't know the extent of its impact on our lives. At that point, neither did I. Once I was able to process what had happened, and how to continue with my students in the best way possible, I began to ponder the most effective way to homeschool a preschooler.

The first day, after school had officially switched over from face to face to online, I opened the manila folder that I had picked up from her elementary school. It was full of preschool review activities. I was concerned she would quickly grow tired of the less than rigorous work, but I was determined to find a balance between my obligations to my own classes and making the last two months of school for my daughter as relevant as possible.

We quickly fell into a routine: I would make sure she was awake every day by 8:30, at the latest. We would both sit in the living room where an hour was devoted to review activities for her and online work for me. When we finished "school", we would go for a walk in the neighborhood so that she was getting fresh air and exercise. This routine worked well for about two weeks. Then reality set in, and it wasn't good. I was still required to go to school and be available online for my students twice a week for three hours. I was on the computer in my classroom or in staff meetings where we discussed what we were up against. Our principal would tell us to prepare enough assignments to be out for another two weeks. Two weeks later, we would have the same meeting to prepare for the next few weeks. This continued until the governor pulled the plug on the school year. When I talked to my students, or my daughter, I put up an optimistic front. Some might have considered that denial. I just wanted to remain hopeful, particularly for my seniors.

Not only did I teach seniors, I was the senior class sponsor. My students trusted and depended on me even though we weren't face to face anymore. They had questions about their assignments and the grade in my class — particularly because it was required for graduation. They were concerned about graduation, senior trip, prom, and spring sports. All I had to offer them was the uncertainty that we all felt. I didn't have any answers.

I was receiving an endless stream of text messages from both my seniors and yearbook students, who were working hard to make sure the yearbook was still com-

pleted on time. I became an emotional support for my students during the most challenging time of their lives. My own anxiety and frustration had to temporarily take a back seat to that of both my daughter and my students. The pressure to be there for each of them was exhausting.

As I sat down each morning with my daughter I was torn between helping her and staying in contact with my students. Eventually, my daughter became so bored with the packets that were being sent home, that she rebelled. She refused to do any of the work. I scrambled to find alternatives. I bought her workbooks that would both push and engage her.

One day, as I was begging her to her school work, she looked at me and said, "You make me do more work than my own teacher does at school." I stopped and looked at her. I was used to the *you give so much writing* or *you push so hard* comments from my high school kids. I had been trying to help my daughter, but now I could see that it had become too much.

I stopped with the paperwork and took a different approach. I introduced her to books about famous leaders and events. She played games online to learn Spanish. She began doing basic math problems. She became interested in geography and learning about different cultures around the world. Her at-home education, coupled with playing outside and reading every day, lessened my anxiety that I might be failing her.

Unfortunately, as her curiosity in the world around her flourished, I was drowning trying to keep up with my own work. I was sending out multiple new assignments each week along with grading past ones. I was also preparing for some form of graduation, trying to finish up a yearbook through Zoom meetings with my staff, while trying to meet the deadline for the finished project. It was overwhelming.

Throughout early April, when we were still not permitted to attend school in person, I remained hopeful that, at some point, I would be able to return to the classroom. And then the announcement was made. On April 9th, the governor made the decision that Missouri students would not be returning to school for the remainder of the year. I was heartbroken. That night I cried. I cried for my daughter who would not get any more field trips, playtime with her friends or a preschool graduation. I cried for my seniors, who would never again enter my classroom and share their frustrations, stresses, and happiest moments with me in person. I cried because I loved being their teacher and I knew they were as lost and confused as I was.

I realized I had to find another way to reach my students. Online learning had been successful with my sophomores. Most of them were engaged and stayed on top of their weekly assignments. But it wasn't the same. I missed the face to face communication and the way their personalities lit up my room. Zoom meetings, and the Remind app couldn't compare to in-person learning. However, this was the new reality to which we had to surrender.

I lost my seniors that day we walked out the school doors for the last time. Some of them began working full time, while others were simply passing time until the end of the school year. Little school work was completed, and I knew it would not get better. I knew I had to reach them on a human level while letting go of the school part, for a little while at least. I began checking on them, as they did the

same with me. My relationship with each of them transcended beyond the classroom, because it had to. I wanted to make sure that as people they were okay. During the time I had to be at school, my students would request a Zoom meeting just to talk. Not about assignments or grades. Just to talk. They wanted to tell me how they had been spending their time and how anxious they were to go back to a normal life, if that was even possible.

As May slowly came around, my daughter received her last preschool packet of work. She was so done. She refused to do any of it, until I told her that completing it was the only way she would be able to graduate preschool. I had resorted to manipulation. Once she heard that, she had all of the work finished in ten minutes. I realized that the teacher in me wanted to hang on as long as I could. I let it go. I congratulated her on completing preschool. Joy spread across her face. Meanwhile, I was still working to find a way to give the kids an actual graduation.

The school set the date for June 13th. I tried to finish up the yearbook. The stress, pressure, and despair consumed me. I wanted the school year that had been stolen from all of us back. Everything felt surreal. I watched my colleagues give up on sending out and collecting student work. I watched other colleagues spend hours in Zoom meetings trying to create a virtual classroom to the best of their ability. I didn't do either. I held on with blind faith that it would get better, and that the young adults that I was in communication with on a daily basis were reaching out to me as a person, not a teacher. That shift brought me closer to them in a way than it might have had we been in school. .

The day of graduation, I stood at the mic and welcomed those in attendance. I saw a room full of people who had come to celebrate their child's achievements despite a socially distant society. I looked out and saw my daughter. She may only have fragmented memories of these months. I wonder what those memories will look like to her. Will she remember the long days we spent at home together? Will she remember me pushing her and bribing her to finish another worksheet before going on a walk, because it was the closest thing I could give her to the normalcy of a school day? Will she remember my tears of sadness and frustration? Facemasks? Or will she simply remember how, despite our lives being turned upside down, a small community of teachers and students came together the best way they knew how and managed to love and support one another through an unpredictable and unprecedented moment in time?

My Alicia Experience
Suzanne Cushman

My cell phone rang. I picked it up and said hello.

"Do you have waterproof mascara?" My sister said, sounding cheerier than ever. "Yes," I said flatly. My sister and I know each other so well I was surprised she was asking if I owned waterproof mascara. This seemed like basic sister information to me.

At the same time I answered, a sultry voice which was not mine said. "This is our deluxe formula in Black Shimmer. Think of it as liquid patent leather shine." She said the last words slowly and dramatically.

I put down my pencil and pushed the phone against my ear to hear better. The knowledgeable mystery voice didn't stop. "Draw the brush upwards to the lash tips to gradually coat and gently curl each lash. It would look stunning on your eyes with the Smokey Gray powder shadow. Here, let's try it."

I could hear a little box opening in the background.

"My name's Alicia, by the way," the voice said. "What's yours?"

"Hi Alicia, I'm Lyn," my sister answered. "What about this highlighting powder? This looks pretty."

Now I was hooked. Lyn and Alicia were really hitting it off. I hadn't been part of a meaningful retail interaction like this in years. I'd forgotten how enjoyable the easy back and forth conversation could be when a stranger is fascinated by your skin tone.

I figured Lyn had called me accidentally on her cell phone. It was probably lying on the counter, turning her stop at Bobbi Brown Cosmetics into a conference call. I knew Lyn was at Bobbi Brown because I have borrowed her lipstick many times and that is the brand she always uses.

"I'll do this ... and that ... and that," Alicia said authoritatively. She clearly loved what she was doing. I could tell my sister and I were both falling in love with her.

"This is our semi-matte formula," Alicia said. "It's not glossy. Do you see what I mean?"

Lyn cooed "I do."

"Actually, you might like Desert Rose from our Nourishing Lip Color line, too. It's the newest color in our Rich Pigments collection. The color is suspended in a blend of luxurious, natural oils. It would be lovely on you. Especially this summer." She practically sang the last three words.

"And, it doesn't move all day!!" Alicia said as she audibly snapped the lipstick back into its case. I could hear two exclamation points at the end of her sentence.

"Now look at yourself in the mirror. The Desert Rose really speaks to me," Alicia said. "This is SO YOU!"

I could hear my sister shifting around. In my mind she was batting her eyelashes at herself in the mirror. I batted my eyelashes, too.

"I'll just ring these things up. Would you like this on your Nordstrom card?" Alicia was happy to help.

The line went dead. I stared at my phone as if it was suddenly hollow.

I wanted my own retail experience, with my own Alicia. I could see an opportunity.

My friend and I planned to do some errands together the next day and we could easily fit in a stop at the Macy's Lancome counter.

The next morning, I picked out just the right colored sweater to wear for trying on lipstick shades, double checked my teeth to make sure a bit of pepper wasn't still hiding somewhere and waited for my friend to arrive.

I met her at the curb and we sped off to the department store. Once we parked, we went directly to Lancome. It wasn't busy, but the one salesperson behind the counter was on the phone with someone. I scanned the make-up brushes trying to figure out how someone would use that many brush styles. The salesperson could see I was waiting. She held the phone away from her mouth and spoke to me in a louder voice than she had been using on the phone.

"Do you know what you want?" she snapped.

"Well . . . yes," I said. "I'd like a new waterproof mascara."

She spoke into the phone again. "Just let me get something for this person. I'll be right back."

She handed me a little silver box.

"Take this over there," she said and motioned to the Chanel counter. She can ring you up." I was dismissed. No compassion for my sagging brow line. No suggestion for hiding my deepening crows' feet, passed on in confidence.

I paid for my new mascara and left the store without meeting my own Alicia. Was this what singles felt when their match.com line-ups didn't work out? I bought a dark chocolate for the road and got out the shopping list for the grocery store.

I found the six things I was after and took them up to the check-out line. The girl at the cash register stopped when she came to my tomato.

"Oh no! This one's bruised," she said. "We'll get you another one." She handed the tomato to the bagger who darted off. Then she turned back to me and said, "We just got a really good shipment of tomatoes in from Mexico."

I thanked her and added that I liked good tomatoes, which sounded empty-headed as soon as I said it. Who would buy a tomato if they didn't like tomatoes?

"So do I," she said, with so much enthusiasm you'd think we just discovered we were from the same town in Northern Minnesota.

"I like to roast two dozen at a time in good olive oil, garlic and fresh basil and use it for a quick pasta sauce. Your total is $41.57. Have a great day," she added.

Success. I had found my Alicia experience.

Screen Door Town
Cathy Porter

The moon appears
in the red of swollen eyes.
These streets pound hard
at night.

And danger falls out of cars
on summer nights in heat.

Dad comes home with a stranger –
mom passed out on the couch.
The neighbors talk at church,
drink rumors at the bar.

The beat-up guitar behind
the bed collects dust;
a hollow body with open wounds.

Dad used to play --
but life went out-of-tune.
A pyramid of cans on the table;
nobody hiring. Even the radio
doesn't work.

Yellow Perch
Paul Smith

When I was ten
I met a woman from Minnesota
on Trout Lake
at El Rancho cabins
she was the owner's wife
heavyset and vast
and had caught a mess of fish
she sat in a wooden patio chair
on her freshly mowed lawn
dipping her hand into a creel
and pulling fish out
one by one
as they flopped
then she took both hands
pressed her thumbs into the gills
of the fish
till their eyes bugged out
and they croaked
their mouths making a wet
sucking sound
my breath stopped
she said
'these are junk fish
good for nothin'
then she threw them
on the lawn
the mower had no grass catcher
grass clippings everywhere
green but turning to compost
sticking to the fish
its tail
its fins
and its gills
that didn't go in and out
anymore
to the clatter of
a Reo 'Flying Cloud'

Mosaic
Laura Gaddis

I knew

When the pain seared through my cervix, I knew what was happening. I knew you were coming. It was like lightning fired straight into the space between my legs, sending needles into my skin.

But that pain didn't stop me from denying it. I am too perceptive of a person.

I knew what was happening.

The evening before I had been sitting on the couch, in my normal spot, watching Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune, as had become my normal after-work-I'm-too-tired-for-anything-else activity. Stretching my legs out on the chaise portion of our couch minimally helped my swollen feet. That's when you decided to move. Like really move. For weeks, you had become stationary, like Sophia had been. The bigger you got, the less you flailed your arms--your right one stopping altogether--and your knees locked in bent positions. Your feet stayed clubbed, but that was not a surprise. At each ultrasound visit, I wondered if clubbed feet could un-club themselves. I prayed they would.

Now it felt like you had slid your head from where it had rested for the last several weeks clear to the other side of my stomach. Judging the pain that tore through my belly, I assumed you must have taken my extra uterus septation skin with you. It was the very uterine malformation that threatened the only home you knew.

I went to bed hoping to sleep it off.

When I woke up bleeding in the middle of the night, Jason called my OB/GYN. She asked him if I was having contractions. I told him I didn't know.

But I knew what was happening.

"She says we have to go to the hospital now," Jason said.

I put on my black yoga pants, the ones I wore when your sister Sophia was born, and when we left her behind. Inexpensive and bought on Old Navy's website, they were one of two maternity pants that I got when I was pregnant the first time. Those pants moved with me from Wisconsin to San Diego to North Carolina. I'm not sure why I held onto them. Maybe it was the memory attached. Maybe it was because of the price tag, and how they held up well. Or maybe I somehow knew I could rely on them again four years later when I would carry you.

The ride to the hospital with the level-four NICU was 30 minutes from our apartment. I knew every bump along the way. I knew the drive well from the weekly appointments I had to attend with the high-risk doctors. I knew how much difficult road lay ahead.

I knew.

Hoosier

When the orderly rushed into the emergency room to take me back and wheeled me down the hall, he said, "Congrats!"

I wondered why he said that.

When the nurse in the triage area took me alone to a room and asked me if I had been mistreated at all, I couldn't think beyond "no." My troubles were many, but did not extend that way.

When she then allowed Jason into the room, him sitting in the only chair positioned in the corner furthest from the monitors, she attempted to give us privacy from the hallway with a pink translucent curtain pulled over the floor-to-ceiling windows.

When the nurse strapped the sonogram monitor onto my belly, the kind that wrapped around like a headband, she couldn't find your heartbeat.

When I looked at Jason, his eyes were darting fast.

When the nurse had tried almost every place on my belly where the heartbeat should have been, I thought: oh no, not again.

When she finally located your beating heart, and tried to cover up her incompetence by saying, sometimes the heartbeat isn't where we'd think it is and we have to go to the opposite side to find it, I cursed my body for not waiting until your due date in September when hospital staff weren't fresh recruits.

When the new ER resident doctor (two weeks in) came to do a cervical check, his eyes came back up from the sheet filled with fear. When he said "I have to go speak with my supervising physician and I'll be right back" and he returned with the other doctor in tow, I wanted nothing more than to hold Jason's hand. Surrounded by too many medical professionals, he was as far away as if he had stayed in the waiting room.

When they told me they would try and keep you inside me as long as possible to give your lungs a chance to mature, I agreed to the two steroid shots.

When the nurse gave me a premade concoction in a brown plastic shot glass telling me it had magnesium and things I can't remember in it and it would help me in some way I didn't understand, I agreed to drink it.

When she also noted that it would taste rancid and salty, I held my breath and I downed the foul liquid.

When, after the taste wouldn't leave my mouth and I felt I might vomit, I practiced breathing out sharply through my nostrils as my orthodontist had taught me years ago when I gagged on having a mold made of my teeth.

When they said I wouldn't leave the hospital until you were born, I thought, it's too early, baby sprout.

When the NICU social worker came up and talked to Jason and me about how you will stay there after birth, I realized you might live.

When the social worker talked to us about how long of a stay we could anticipate, I wondered What is a NICU?

When the contractions started coming every few minutes, they brought in the anesthesiologist.

When Jason saw the anesthesiologist was wearing an Indiana University bandana, I saw him smile.

When he smiled, I thought of the time when we were first dating and I went to visit him in Bloomington.

When I thought of college, I remembered the time I visited Jason the spring of our senior year for the Little 5 bike race. I remembered how we laughed in the sunshine and drank tie-dye long islands at the local college bar.

When the anesthesiologist told me that he'd be prepping me for the C-section, I remembered where I really was.

When he told me where he'd be sticking the needle in my back, I worried about my spinal fusion. Are you going to be able to place the epidural, I asked.

When he said, I could also put you under a general anesthesia, if needed, I cried. I didn't want to not be awake when you were born.

When they wheeled me to the operating room, Jason had to sit in a room across the hall just until you are prepped for surgery, the nurse told me.

When the fluorescent lights shined into my eyes, I focused harder on them to help me forget what was about to happen.

When the nurse sat me up on the side of the table so the anesthesiologist could place the needle, I stared at her scrubs.

When he got it on the first try, I was guided back down to the table.

When the blue sheet went up, the one that shielded my vision from watching you be extracted from my stomach, I asked the anesthesiologist where's Jason? The Indiana bandana was the only thing I could see.

When he called, can someone get her husband back in here? no one responded.

When the nurses by my feet rubbed cold, wet cotton on my legs and poked my skin with metal instruments, they asked, can you feel that?

When I said no, they said, then we are ready to begin.

When the anesthesiologist saw my face tighten, he left the room to get Jason for me.

When Jason arrived, minutes later you did too.

When you were whisked away to the scale, we heard you release a tender cry. It was a sound we never heard with Sophia. It was one I wasn't certain we'd ever hear.

When the doctor was suturing my stomach, I turned my head to say to Jason, they almost didn't get you in time, and he said, I always trust a guy who went to Indiana.

Journey

We had only been in the NICU for a day or two. Our side of the room was spacious enough for four chairs--the number of visitors allowed at our daughter's bedside at one time. Her monitors were calm. Her heartbeat was steady. Her oxygen level remained above 90%, what the NICU nurses said it should be. There was nothing to do but sit.

At times, pockets of the NICU became loud, either with monitor alarms sounding, or the bigger babies crying, or the rustle of family coming through to see the tiny babies. This day, Evelyn's roommate, Journey, had visitors.

"Hi, Mom!" I heard Journey's dad say. He had a strange affectation I'd noticed over the last several days, that the more the situation seemed dire, the more chipper his voice became. It must have been a defense of some kind.

"Come on in here."

"How is she? Is she going to be okay?" his mother responded.

I motioned to Jason, tapping him on his arm. Mouthing to him was tough as the curtain didn't stop sound waves.

I pointed.

"No, Mom," the man said almost jovially. "She's not going to be okay." Perhaps he was trying to not make his mother feel bad for asking. Or maybe he knew his wife was listening, as she always sat quietly by the baby's bedside. But somehow, I suspected it was more than pleasing the others in the room.

"She has something called Trisomy 18, Mom," he said.

"Oh? What's that mean?" she asked.

I wanted to reach through the curtain and hug the man. I wanted to launch into the full explanation of what I had learned on the internet about Trisomy 18. I wanted to tell her that the baby has a chromosomal problem, that she likely won't survive more than a year (if she even made it out of the NICU), that she would require medical care until her death, that she would never learn to walk, talk, or have the giggle fits babies have. I wanted to tell the grandmother to do as her son was doing. I wanted to tell her to love Journey anyway.

As I listened, I watched Evelyn. She was peaceful. She slept always, hadn't even opened her eyes once yet. But being two months early, we had to be patient.

The night she was born, the orthopedic doctor and his nurse came and did an evaluation. Jason and I sat near the curtain. I had learned since her birth the night before that it was best for me to step aside. Let the experts do what they needed to do. What Evelyn needed them to do.

What I didn't know how to do.

At one point, the nurse came over to me. I don't know if she knew I was frightened, or confused, or both. She likely didn't know that we were expecting the joint contractures, but she must have sensed that amongst the chatter at Evelyn's bedside, and our hushed side of the room, she needed to say something.

"She's going to be just fine," the nurse said.

It was the first time a medical professional spoke with optimism.

"Really?" I said.

"We've seen this before. She just will need to be stretched out. Her wrists and knees. But physical therapy can help with that." The nurse patted my knee and smiled.

I thought about Journey. I wondered how for the first time, we got better news than someone else. Our baby was going to live. Our baby was going to get off of oxygen, out of the isolette, straighten out her wrists and knees and clubfeet. She was going to be just fine.

Journey's family would likely never take their daughter home. They would have to leave her behind, her lifeless body, one so tiny and fragile that it just couldn't handle the strain of maintaining a breath or a heartbeat. I saw everyday how her mother and father were watching their child slowly die. I imagined them walking out of the hospital empty-handed, just as Jason and I had done four years earlier. I imagined the hopelessness they might feel, just as I had. I also remembered how much love I had felt for Sophia. How the time I spent with her was unexpectedly filled with joy and wonderment. It wasn't until she stopped breathing that the sorrow came in. I hoped they also felt immense love and admiration for a human so small.

As I watched the orthopedic doctor measure Evelyn's feet, I wished that her family, too, would someday be told that everything would be just fine.

Harmony of Circles

Laura Mahal

I liked round things, like moons, which weren't always round. At least not when I looked with my naked eye. Then I came to know that slivers and quarters and halves made up wholes, and gaps between stars were not emptiness, but flushed full of possibility.

When I learned that round straws were tied up in turtles, intestinal blockage for the flow of iced liquids, I cold-turkey stopped with all plastic purchases, 'til I remembered that round was the shape of our planet.

Now I ration my selfishness to slivers and shadows and go halfsies and full-stop in new reckoning ways. And I'm bathed in moonlight both glassy and feminine, and my cycles are harmonized as turtles untwist.

Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things
Thomas Kearnes

The sudden noises echoed through the house, disturbing Maxine as she unpacked. The move to a suburb outside Indianapolis hadn't gone like she and Walter had hoped—amoral furniture movers, two missing boxes, broken dishes. Maxine's heart skipped to hear Persephone giggle upstairs and then the whir of wheels atop a wooden floor; her daughter had found her skates. Maxine wanted to shout at the ceiling—not indoors, we had a deal—but she knew Walter would never back her up. She could hear him: *Let the kid have fun*. She could feel his hand upon her hip. *After all that's happened, we need to embrace the light.*

Walter had adopted these noxious platitudes shortly after Athena's death six months ago. *Heaven has a new angel* ; Maxine had wept. *God brought this burden because we're strong* ; Maxine had wept louder. *Everything happens for a reason* ; Maxine wished she, too, had died inside that incubator, gloved fingers caressing Athena's frail form. Athena's heartbeat was as quick and elusive as a series of pinpricks.

Collecting the shards of a ceramic dinner plate, Maxine looked up to see Persephone in the doorframe. The girl dug her foot into the hallway carpet, a bull eager for its dance with the matador. The skate's back wheels spun uselessly.

"I'm bored. Everyone is old and stupid."

"It's only been two days," Maxine said.

"I can't text Aimee."

"You're too young to text."

"Can we have pepperoni pizza?"

"We're not getting pizza again."

Maxine shrugged and tossed ceramic shards into the trash can.

"No skates in the house, sweetie. We had a deal."

Persephone refused to obey, and Maxine refused to push the point. When her daughter asked to explore the block, Maxine nodded absently then started on another box. Persephone started first grade in two weeks, and Maxine seized any opportunity to distract the girl.

She's too young to be out alone, Walter would say. *It's horrible enough to lose one child*. Maxine would reply as she always did: *Darling, I'm so tired*.

Twenty minutes passed, but Persephone didn't return. Maxine, however, didn't notice, busy lining the wall over the stairs with family photos. The only images of Athena were taken from outside her incubator. In one, her rubber doll-head turned toward the lens, black eyes empty and uncomprehending, and in another, her rubber doll-fingers reached nowhere, unaware there was nothing to grab. Maxine brooded over her two daughters' similarities: the puckered mouth, goldfish eyes, bowtie ears. Persephone, too young, hadn't been allowed in the hospital's nursery. Maxine and Walter secretly agreed with the staff's decision.

Maxine felt lacking in some essential way. She'd failed to tether Athena to the earth, and now she entertained horrid daydreams: a terror-minded teen storming Persephone's classroom; a twister sucking Persephone from beneath a mattress

slapped over the bathtub; a child pornographer stealing her from sleep. The girl's bedroom overlooked the neighborhood that Maxine and Walter had selected with a surgeon's precision. Still, dangers festered in other lawns, behind others' fences—dangers Maxine found so patent, her only means of coping was to swiftly deny their reality.

Why can't I see Athena, the girl had asked Maxine the day before Athena fell silent among the feckless beeps and mechanical sighs. *You promised*.

The land line's ring was foreign to Maxine—she didn't at first understand its meaning. It was Walter. They spoke in familiar, clipped phrases as if they were the leads in a screwball farce.

"Darling," Maxine said, "Persephone needs you here in the house."

"How will I pay for this house if I don't work?"

"She's upstairs sulking as we speak." The lie came easily to Maxine. Her skin pricked while she waited for him to take the bait. Her disappointment upon hearing his reply again pricked her skin, more sharply this time.

"It's a great neighborhood," he said. "Tell her to make some friends."

"We haven't been here long enough."

"This is a fresh start in a fresh place, honey. Let's stay positive."

Maxine felt alone in their large, unfriendly home with its cherry-paneled walls and dark-hued ceilings. For a moment, she remembered Athena's hand inside hers, her gloved hand. Actually, she'd been able to grip her infant daughter's entire arm. She'd felt the tiny being's heartbeat: too fast and too quiet. A car horn's bleat shattered her reverie. She glanced at her watch. Persephone had been gone a half-hour.

Maxine began her search. Peaceful Acres was the sort of fabricated neighborhood Maxine had ridiculed as a girl. She didn't resent the slight decline in economic status her move here signified; at least, she didn't *openly* resent it. The rows of dull and identical two-story homes hypnotized her. She spotted a group of children huddled in a knot, as if debating the next play in a football game. Above their heads, the end of a hockey stick bobbed in and out of view. Where had they come from? Though she'd dismissed Persephone's complaint about no children, she secretly agreed with the observation. Lavender Avenue seemed anemic in the kid department. Maxine did not trust large groups of children. She quickened her pace.

As she hurried, some children urged the others to disperse. They were dressed smartly, clean with expensive haircuts. As the crowd thinned, Maxine exhaled with relief to spot Persephone among the makeshift mob. The girl poked at something with the hockey stick. Maxine's relief evaporated, however, to discover what her daughter found so compelling.

The cat was dead, dead and fat. Its belly swelled like a full moon, blackened from the road's grease and dirt. Its right eye had popped from its socket and dangled onto the creature's angular, prescient face. Blood had dried into a dark burgundy pool though Maxine didn't notice any wound. The animal seemed ready to explode, an overinflated balloon, but Persephone kept stabbing it. Maxine worried it might rupture like a piñata, the remaining children snatching the innards as it they were Easter eggs.

"What on earth are you doing, sweetie?"

"Mommy, make it live again!"

Maxine stared at her daughter, oblivious to the departing children. The cat's remaining eye gazed at the woman, accusing her. She grabbed Persephone's wrist. The hockey stick clattered to the asphalt. They began across the street. Persephone resisted, but her skates betrayed her, all too eager to roll.

"What have I told you about that?"

"I didn't touch it."

"Don't get sassy."

Persephone glanced over her shoulder. "He needs a doctor, Mommy."

"A doctor can't help him now."

"But Mommy—"

The green minivan zipped past, missing Maxine and her daughter by inches. The driver swore at them and mashed his horn. Maxine fell to her knees, clutching the girl. Terror bubbled behind her eyes, the reality of what had happened (or what *almost* had happened) detonating like a cloudburst. Her skin turned moist, her heartbeat thudded. You can lose all you love in a moment, she thought. That's all the time God needs.

"You didn't look before crossing the street," Persephone said.

Her innocence stunned Maxine, rearranged her molecules. She laughed and finally released the girl. "No, sweetie," she said, "I didn't. Shame on me."

Maxine watched the girl skate toward their new home. She was small for her age, not quite delicate but certainly not robust. She feared Persephone would be too preoccupied with her own thoughts to put up a defense if faced with danger. She was like a magnificent butterfly bobbing on the breeze toward the grill of an eighteen-wheeler. Still, Maxine would never admit *both* her children couldn't thrive in the world.

She hoped that would be the end of Persephone's preoccupation with death. As Maxine settled into the house she'd begun to resent, she shuddered to find Persephone vegetating before Headline News, enraptured by the latest natural disaster or atrocity in the Middle East. She watched her daughter stand on the stairs, gazing at the photos of dead Athena. Walter dismissed her fascination as normal, hardly worth mentioning. "We should be thankful it isn't sex," he told her, hand on her hip. Maxine was not mollified. He suggested that they send Persephone to the city to visit her best friend, Aimee. "She makes our little girl so happy", he said. "Don't you want her to be happy?" Maxine sighed and flopped onto the bed. Walter's eyes lit up, amorous, but Maxine's hard glare doused his desire instantly.

"That Aimee kid is a juvenile delinquent," she said.

"Nonsense," Walter said. "She's just a bit of a daredevil."

"She set off the burglar alarm in our old condo."

Walter rolled his eyes, dismissed her.

"On purpose," she added.

He sat next to her. "It would get her out of your hair," he said. "Just for the weekend." He lightly grazed her shoulders. As his fingers increased their pressure, she recalled with a stabbing pain how she hungered for a touch that did not end in death.

"I'll think about it."

Late that night, hours after Walter sang to Persephone about a little teapot, short and stout, and Maxine looked on from the doorway, she jerked awake, startled to hear the front door close. She considered waking Walter, but couldn't bear more of his condescending "attention." Instead, she quietly headed downstairs. In the kitchen, she thought about grabbing a knife. Finally, she left the house unarmed. This was a safe neighborhood, she told herself. Persephone's boredom with it was as good an indication as any.

Lavender Avenue was abandoned. As Maxine reached the curb, she realized she'd failed to check Persephone's room. Walter would be incensed to learn that, she thought. Of course, this oversight was easily explained: Persephone had been the one at the door. Maxine had known it the moment she woke. The girl lurked somewhere in the still neighborhood.

After passing one dark house after another, too timid to step upon any lawns, much less peer into any backyards, Maxine saw a child-sized figure in the shadows between two streetlamps. As she approached, she recognized Persephone's night-gown and wild curly hair. This was the same spot where Persephone had disgraced the dead cat. The girl didn't look up at Maxine, but instead continued gazing at a dark stain by the curb. She didn't acknowledge her mother until Maxine's silhouette mingled with her own.

"What happened to him, Mommy?"

Maxine knew what she meant. "I don't understand, sweetie."

"Did it get up and leave? Is it better?"

Relief inflated Maxine like oxygen gulped by a drowning man.

"No, sweetie, God took him to Heaven."

She didn't really believe in an afterlife, a secret she'd hidden from Walter their entire marriage, and she was tempted to make a crack about Animal Control's slow response. She knew, however, a good mother would offer Persephone her hand and guide her back toward the house—no tears, no accusations, no anger—so that's what she did. Maxine called Aimee's mother the next morning. She insisted the girls spend the weekend in the new neighborhood. It's perfectly safe, Maxine assured the other mother.

She had rules for the girls. Failure to heed them would result in no dinner at Chuck E. Cheese and no new Pixar film. Of course, work took Walter away for the weekend. The upside, Maxine thought, was that Persephone would credit her and not Walter for this indulgence. After six hours of cackling and chattering while a storm threatened, however, Maxine made no resistance when the clouds cleared and Aimee demanded they go outside. Persephone slapped on her skates and followed her friend.

While the white noise of the house—the hums of the refrigerator, central air conditioning, and clothes dryer—soothed Maxine, she didn't truly relax until she sat down with a glass of red wine. Walter had insisted they share the wine on a special occasion, but she doubted he'd notice. She didn't think about Persephone or Aimee, she didn't think about Athena. Instead, Maxine thought about the house, how to manipulate its domineering persona into something warmer. First, she'd repaint the ghastly ceilings. She wondered if the Addams Family had lived there before her. Her

home improvement fantasies bewitched her until she heard the screech of tires and screams of children erupting directly across the street.

As if in a fugue, Maxine slowly rose to her feet. She calmly passed through the door into the neighborhood. She should call the homeowner's association about all this reckless driving, she thought. Her refusal to panic revolved around her faith that bad fortune would befall Aimee before her daughter. Aimee was reckless, insolent and rebellious; Persephone was merely curious about morbid things. Even the end of the hockey stick bouncing over the heads of another group of children didn't inflate her fear.

The kids dispersed as Maxine approached, and she was about to admonish her daughter before she realized that it was actually Aimee poking away at something on the asphalt. The girl's head whipped up at the sound of her voice. She dropped the stick and fled down the road, screaming and crying.

Persephone's body lay on the asphalt, her limbs jumbled like those of a sock monkey. At least one limb was broken, likely more. Bright red blood pooled beneath her head, the fluid oozing toward the curb. Her face was blank, as if she expected the sky to open and welcome her. Still in shock, Maxine knelt to check her daughter's breathing—there was none. *Please, God*, she thought, *not my other daughter. Not unless I can go with her.*

As Maxine choked out silent tears, however, Persephone blinked. Maxine recalled Dorothy's face as her relatives rejoiced over her return from Oz.

"Mommy!"

She forced Maxine's hand over her heart, the joyful muscle pounding.

"I'm not dead anymore!"

At St. John's
Richard Atwood

Today, I am feeling
sorry for myself.
Suicidal.

I remember the whole grief
of my life—the lack of love
—loneliness. I am poor.
In need of a friend, of
affection... someone
(alone in all the earth)
to tell me my poems are good.
That I am a human being.

Where I have been, where am I going?

The loss of her, and now
homosexuality...
where I've found: neither love
nor honor.

I've been to see
my fifth psychiatrist. I have
said my prayers. I work as a file
clerk—to only pay bills. Get
through school.

I forget: I have a beautiful body,
a pleasant face, good health...
and a decent person inside me.

I forget a lot of things.
That the sky is a beautiful
blue. That I live in America. That
somehow, I am still lucky.

Because today
I went to work—unhappy.
Feeling sorry for myself.

And I spoke to the woman beside me.

When she was fifteen
she was in Auschwitz....

I'm only 29.

Glamor Boy
Alan D. Tucker

If I could ask Glamor Boy one question, it would be this: "How well have you aged?" It's presumptive this would be an out-of-sight question, perhaps over social media, as his physical presence would render the question irrelevant—I'd know by looking how well he'd aged. It's been sixteen years since I last saw him, whipping his longish, feathered hair about, feeling his beauty. I remember him in a tight-fitting ensemble (is "ensemble" the right word?) that I'm inclined to call a bodysuit. I'm not sure of the colors, but it resembled the outfits worn by male figure skaters. And where else but The Lounge could someone pull this off? So confident was he, so sure of his movements. It really was grace, and damn, I'm comfortable saying this now: he was beautiful. Is he still?

I was always there on karaoke night. It was one of those Nashville staples, though perhaps of a more culturally subversive ilk than the unassuming visitor might expect, where the karaoke could be amazing. Sure, there was the occasional drunken sloppy singer, trudging through a Melissa Etheridge hit. But often enough, the singers were accomplished in some way, maybe even professional singers who had moved to Nashville to pursue music. Their talent found its purest outlet on-stage—singers who would not have been happy performing at the local VFW of their hometowns. The environment had to be right: the energy of a live show had to be in place, not just drunk people goofing off. My own aptitude landed somewhere between experienced and accomplished, regretfully a little short of that second adjective. But depending on my level of alcohol buzz when called to the stage, I could summon heaps of confidence and swagger—qualities rarely attendant on my sober daytime hours. One night, I stumbled through Prince's "Kiss," exposing the limits of my falsetto while good-naturedly acknowledging as much, the self-deprecating manner of which, I imagined, the audience appreciated. But on most nights, I fashioned myself a reincarnated Lizard King. You know who that is. Yes, it's a besotted, worn-out pose—a bravado powered by whiskey and lingering adolescence—but it worked. The boys along the bar liked it, and a date I brought there one night told her friend, "I like him like this."

Those were decadent nights. I miss them now. Strangely, a span of years passed where I didn't think about those nights very often, other than the occasional remembrance that they were fun and wild and, ultimately, untenable. Had the pattern continued, I would've landed myself in jail or rehab. A steady stream of whiskey and beer kept me loose and uninhibited, a sureness of myself soaring in circles above the roof. Well, not above the roof, but rather just beneath it, contained among the exposed air ducts, swirling—a communion of spiraling freedom, banking out from myself and every other young drunk in love with life at that moment, hangovers be damned. I danced with abandon, with everyone who entered my orbit; I tongue-kissed lesbians and let eager young men buy me drinks—they'd squeeze my knee and I'd laugh it off. And it was all okay. That sticks with me now: the okay-

ness of everything—a freedom of expression I haven't felt before or since.

And always in the center was Glamor Boy. Damn, could he dance! He had a diva's sass, and the confident abandon of a cabaret performer, too earnest for burlesque: there was no wink-and-nudge, it was pure, liberated sex. I never could figure out if he worked there. At times, he seemed to be in their employ, but most of my memories of him were of dancing, prominent on the little stage where karaoke happened, in-between singers. Shyness was foreign to him. The host would play some kind of contemporary hip-hop, and there he'd be, giving it all he had, his face transforming from joy to passionate concentration then back again, effortlessly, his arms a whirling helix above the cigarette smoke, his tight presentation a beacon for the sea of heads bobbing about in various stages of alcohol- induced ecstasy. He transcended the Lounge; he belonged in Studio 54, his young heart running free.

Maybe he delivered drinks, maybe he closed tabs—I never figured it out. Nor did I care to. He was as much a fixture as the portraits of the two women whom I never had the wherewithal to identify, despite it requiring no more than a question to one of the owners who were always there. I wish now I knew who those women in the portraits were, just like I wish I knew Glamor Boy's name, so I could social media stalk him, to see what he's up to and how he's aged—you know, the usual stuff. In my mind, he's perennially young, though I know this can't be so. I try to imagine him fat, middle age bearing down, but this type of imagining starts to feel irrelevant, so I become more benevolent, simply hoping that he's happy, wherever he is—hoping those fast-flowing quads have found a home.

One of those wayward nights, his attention fell on me. It was a strange feeling: this ever-present, peripheral, glamorous dancing man became aware of me, like I'd won a raffle—that kind of uncanniness—and a flirtation commenced. I had assumed my straightness was obvious, that those who identified as queer in my drunken little orbit considered me an ally and nothing more. After all, I had left this very bar with women. I realize now, though, that no one likely was paying attention to whom I left with (why would they?), nor do I assume they would care one way or the other. Among all the things that have ebbed with middle age, a tendency toward narcissism is chief among them. Proclivities aside, however, The Lounge was the closest I'd come to a true physical liberation: it forced me to examine my own inclinations, to define afresh what my boundaries were. I found that I enjoyed playing along a certain limit. It felt good to be hit on by people of any persuasion—to be wanted in a primal way, in the most basic human-animal way—was flattering. And I guess this agreeable flattery is how I ended up at one end of the bar—the end where the registers were, away from the front of the place, almost like a backstage area, though fully in view—taking a shot with Glamor Boy. I don't remember what the liquor was. All I remember was that a bit of it had run down my chin, and I must've been reaching or asking for a napkin when Glamor Boy promptly said, "I'll get that." A nice enough gesture—it made sense in the moment. But it was his method that caught me off-guard: he did not grab a napkin, but instead, he leaned in and licked the booze off my chin. Bold, and I appreciated it as such before I'd had the chance to

have any other feeling about it. I was open-minded enough, thank God, to react with a reciprocal, flirtatious generosity, as if, just maybe, I was bi-curious, like some debutante testing the carnal waters. I don't mean that I returned the favor, I just mean that I took it in stride with a big smile and maybe a playful laugh, which he seemed to enjoy.

Soon I found myself in the kitchen with him, face to face in the middle of the room, servers and cooks racing their well-worn paths, glancing but not staring. My presence in the Lounge's inner sanctum should have proven Glamor Boy's employment—why else would he be back there? But I still wasn't certain whether he actually worked for them or if he'd come by a sort of all-access pass—The Lounge's version of a hype man. One half-expects a pulsing bacchanale underway behind-the-scenes in a place like this, and maybe I imagined Glamor Boy as its ringleader—Dionysus in human form, his ivied scepter raised (you must excuse my hyper imagination; in fact, Glamor Boy's shoulders, neck, and head would have suited a bust of Dionysus well). Instead, the kitchen had the sad, gray feel of workers who just wanted to go home—workers hardly raising an eyebrow at my presence. It occurs to me now that I was likely only one of several men given the grand tour by Glamor Boy, a moniker which, by the way, is beginning to sound callous; I'm feeling a bit like an asshole for never asking his name.

It came down to this: he was unwilling to believe I was straight. That I'd never been with a man, and that I was not ready to cross that boundary and, perhaps, never would be. And all this feels, vaguely, like a shame. He just stared with a look of disbelief that somehow locked his smile in place, his boyish, classical face bemused, as if awaiting a punchline. I've often wondered about the fulfillment of his advance, had I been willing to accept. Would it have dislodged the iron trajectory of ensuing years? Would we still be in-touch, in even the slightest of ways—a social media connection, maybe, in which I looked at his updates but never engaged? Would that special knowledge I no doubt would have gained colored all ensuing relationships? Maybe, maybe not. It does seem like more decisions are made for us than by us, and that the best we can do is choose which moments to share and which to tuck away for private indulgence later.

Farewell Hoplea Road
Wendy Swift

When Danny turns forty in August 1993, I honor him with a time machine masquerading as a drum set so he can travel to his teen years when he was a drummer in a rock 'n roll band. The irony of restoring some part of his adolescence is lost on me. Later, I learn that early drug use and alcohol trap users in their adolescence since growth and maturity are stymied by addiction. As it turns out, he already had a time machine—it came in a bottle kept in the hall closet.

I can tell Danny is stressed by his lack of sleep and the way he paces the floor talking endlessly on the phone with his business partner. But in 1993, I think this results from trying to manage an import business and a law practice at the same time, not from misappropriating client funds. The drums, I believe, will be a terrific release, an opportunity for him to rock on and enjoy something for himself. I don't know anything about drums—what is a proper set-up or good quality, but I do some research and finally settle on a *Pearl*. The set includes a hi-hat, crash symbols, a stool and sticks carved from oak with just the right thickness for him to keep the beat with his favorite tunes. On his birthday, I ask Danny to pick up the girls from their grandmother's where they are visiting. After he leaves, I quickly assemble the pieces I kept hidden in the back of a storage closet. When they return, I throw open the double doors to our living room.

"Surprise."

"What's this?" Danny looks puzzled.

"Drums. For you. For your birthday. I know we've been talking about someday getting a drum set, and I thought it would make a great birthday surprise." I try to judge his reaction as he stares at the display arranged before him.

"Are you surprised? Are these good? The guy at the shop told me you could exchange them if they're not what you want."

"Oh my God, Wendy. They look great. I can't believe you got these. They're perfect. I don't need to return anything." He walks around the set, sits on the stool and makes a few adjustments.

"Well then, let's hear how they sound."

Danny is stunned, happily stunned. He tentatively picks up the sticks and warms up for a few minutes before taking a look at our CD collection. He selects the Stones, *Beast of Burden* and slides the CD into the player, settles back on the stool, picks up the sticks, listens and begins to play along. He hasn't lost his touch. For months afterwards, the Stones blast while Danny accompanies them. Sometimes the kids place their hands over their ears and run to their rooms when he hammers *Sympathy for The Devil,* but other times we dance joyously on our bare wood floors in our spacious living room. I love our family dance parties and the illusion we hadnothing in the world to worry about. Three years later, after Danny leaves for prison, the drums are sold.

I have a garage sale, also in August. The afternoon before the big event a few girlfriends experienced with tag sales, help organize tables of knick-knacks including toys the kids have outgrown, dishes I don't need, albums from our college days, and tools that never made any sense to me. Some larger items, like kitchen chairs, lamps, rakes and shovels are arranged on the front lawn. A large sign, is posted at the end of the driveway, "Tag Sale Today. Everything MUST Go!" A few days before August 24th, I tack signs to

Simsbury utility poles, publicizing the sale that will take place at 3 Hoplea Road. One friend arrives early that Saturday morning with a bag of bagels and coffees. We sit in folding chairs on the driveway. She attempts to make small talk to ease my anxiety as I prepare for strangers to descend upon my home. They will be eager to purchase the objects that have defined my life. As 9:00 am approaches, cars park on the street and strangers traipse across my lawn to take what was once mine and make it their own.

I sell my babies' changing table and the crib with painted balloons where each daughter slept until she was old enough for a bed. There are no more babies, only young girls startled to see their playthings, stuffed animals, outgrown clothes and books being haggled over by strangers looking for a bargain. A couple carefully inspects my Adirondack chairs, bought as a charming addition to our post and beam home. There's no patio or charm at Tuller Circle, and I hate to think of it as my home, so no, I will not be bringing the Adirondack chairs. The woman asks, "how much do you want for them?"

I stare at my white chairs, the pair I painstakingly painted, kneeling to ensure every side of the hardwood slats is covered, and tell her, "fifty." She takes a few paces back, regarding them from a distance before suggesting, "forty."

"Okay, they're yours." She gives me cash and I can see she's delighted to have snagged a good bargain. I walk towards the garage where another couple is debating the merit of purchasing my waffle iron. "Do we really need this?" the man asks his wife. "The kids will love it," she assures him. I see someone leave with my ice-cream maker and someone else wants to know how much I would take for the set of champagne glasses. I'm ready to give those away. There will be nothing to celebrate for a very long time.

I sell Danny's golf clubs, pretty convinced he won't need them where he went. I cannot imagine he will ever golf again because I can't see beyond the next day. I am wrong. Years later, when he is out of jail and remarried, he asks what became of his clubs. He thinks I might have saved them for his return and is annoyed to learn I sold them the summer he went away. What was I thinking? Certainly not that he would return to Simsbury one day, remarry, this time to a successful physician, and enjoy a new life replete with luxurious vacations and golf outings. But that's exactly what does happen.

As the day wears on, I pretty much shove stuff on people who show even the tiniest interest. I'm tired and I don't want to be left with things I no longer need or have the space to accommodate. I approach someone who's studying our outdoor equipment, "Would you like that tent? You can have it for five dollars." Once, Danny and I enjoyed camping. We camped in the Catskills, at Montauk Point and brought Julia camping with us to Acadia National Park when she was a baby. We loved waking in the woods to the sound of birds starting their day. In the late 70s, before materialism had a stranglehold on our lives, we sought opportunities to be close to nature. Finally, when the last customer leaves. I count my money and am surprised to see how much cash I have and how empty my garage has become.

That summer, I also give away the bunnies: Erika's Princess and Alli's Snickers. They are plump babies covered in soft and downy caramel-colored fur. We can't bring rabbits and their backyard hutch to our housing unit. We don't have a back or front yard at Eno Farms. Danny built the hutch with a recovery buddy he met at an AA meeting. After being disbarred, he had time on his hands to put together an elaborate bunny suite with two chambers where they could sleep and hide nestled in hay with plenty of space to hop around. The summer Danny leaves us, I take a job as a head counselor for a day camp where Erika and Alli can come to work with me and imagine their lives are like those of the other campers. The camp director agrees to take the rabbits since they'll be a hit with their

nature program. As sad as the girls are to say good-bye to their bunnies, they take comfort in believing they are safely situated in a good home. When the summer ends, they never see Princess and Snickers again.

Our piano will not make the trip to Tuller Circle. It's a lustrous black Kawai studio with silken keys. A real beauty—but there's no room for a piano in our cramped apartment. We bought it from the Hartt School and they're willing to buy it back, at a loss. I play, barely, considering I had years of lessons with elderly Mr. Genelli. My brother became proficient at "Moon River" while I concentrated on "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning." Despite, or because of my boredom, with learning piano, I want my children to have lessons. I cling to the parochial belief that learning to play the piano is a foundational skill, like learning to ride a bike. As it turns out, Alli is musical and at age four, climbs onto the piano bench and learns to play the beginner's piece, "Going to A Party." I thrill at having a musical child. I watch the piano roll out the front door and into the Hartt School truck. I know this is the first step, in what will be a series of steps, in bidding farewell to hopes and expectations, even if those expectations were undeserved to begin with. If the piano represents my image of a perfect family, selling it reveals the fragile façade we lived behind.

I also need to part with the redwood picnic table. It was one of the first purchases my parents made for their backyard porch in Williston Park where I grew up. They bought the table in 1949 and gave it to Danny and me when we bought our house in 1984. My brothers and I, all born in June, made wishes on candle flames atop chocolate cakes my mom baked and served to us at every birthday. We always sat expectantly at that redwood table. Photos from my sweet sixteen document my friends and me boisterously celebrating. We're standing at that table with balloons floating overhead. My father meticulously cared for the wood, sanding rough edges and staining it every year to prevent rot. At Tuller Circle, there would be no outdoor dinners on warm summer evenings, and besides, my father is dead. He will never know what became of this table purchased when he was a young dad, full of optimism for his life ahead.

The last item I sell is the wooden swing set—the one bought with money stolen from an ATM because Danny was working on a potential business deal with an ex-con who knew how to hack the machine and had cash that needed to vanish. Danny offered to help with that. The swing set includes a tree house and a short zip line that extends downward from a platform to a tree about ten feet away. It isn't safe for kids who come to play. However, mine are experienced at keeping their legs perpendicular in front of their bodies, lest they smash face-first into the adjoining maple. The swing set is constructed from cedar to last a lifetime—someone's lifetime, not ours. I sell it to a family whose daughter plays with Alli, thinking that this way, when Alli visits her friend, she can play on her swing set.

A few weeks after selling and giving away what we cannot take, my friends and brother arrive to help move us across town. I don't want to take too much of their time so I hurriedly focus on emptying drawers into garbage bags and cartons and carrying items from one home and into another. I don't take time to reflect on the impact of this loss for my children or certainly for myself. I arrange for Alli to play at her friend's home, the one who now owns her swing set, where she is forced to face the humiliation of *her* playset belonging to her friend. Later, she tells me how her friend lorded the change in ownership over her. "Don't climb on that. This is my treehouse, you can't come in here. It's not yours anymore, Alli." The older girls disappear with their friends that day to avoid witnessing their childhoods packed into boxes and carried away for good.

Farewell 3 Hoplea Road. We will miss you.

Golf Widow

Arianna Sebo

How much is on the outside?
How much shows from the inside?
How much can I hide from you?
How much remains hidden through the years?
the lies
the deceit
the afternoon
trysts
Golf widow
Stuck in my condo
the girls at their jobs
Me stuck at home with
guacamole on my fingers
grass stuck to your cleats

Back to Where I Once Belonged

Renee C. Winter

I immediately regretted what I was wearing. It was the finale of my 50th high school reunion, a dance in the Chase Park Plaza ballroom, and I'd opted for the laid back version of "dressy casual". The Eileen Fisher look for women of a certain age. Elegant maybe. Sexy no. Left behind in my closet like a BFF I neglected to invite to the party was my cocktail dress guaranteeing curves and cleavage. My female classmates, however, whether drum majorette, beatnik or nerd of yesteryear, were all spandex molded into silk, lace, and sparkles. Not me. My outfit flowed rather than fitted; draped rather than dared; hung rather than hugged. I was torso-less. What had I been thinking? This jubilee celebration was perhaps my last chance to convince the Homecoming King he should have invited me to the dance. But I'd blown it. Even though my half-century post-graduation balance sheet registered two husbands (one past, one present), a thriving law practice, and one Lexus to my credit, within five minutes into the reception I felt "Loser" creeping across my forehead, spelled out in zits.

I wish Marjy were there.

What was happening to me? I was standing in a fancy hotel ballroom bedecked with crystal chandeliers and mirrored walls, but the emotions conjured up belonged in a scuffed up hardwood floored gym with black and gold crepe paper streamers hanging from basketball backboards. I was being sucked into a time travel vortex, leaving behind a successful marriage, two daughters and grandchildren, like items I forgot to pack. For goodness sake, I'd negotiated mega-dollar deals in corporate conference rooms. Surely I could navigate my way around balding, graying, expanding former classmates, still vying for the attention of yesteryear's Prettiest Girl in the Class. Almost 70 years old, we were actual seniors now entitled to all those discounts no matter the threshold. Did we really want to be 17 again? Even for one night?

Well, maybe.

We members of the class of 1965 were turning the clock "back to where we once belonged." That was the reunion's slogan scrawled across each invite and program. But dare we? Could I cherry pick my memories and extract from those complex teen years the fun times? Could I accept Ricky's bear hug without resurrecting the humiliation of not being invited to his sixteenth birthday party? Toss aside the shame of not affording the sports club dues? Forget the acne that made me want to hideout in the girls' re-stroom? I was there to celebrate. We all were. But celebrate what? The past and the present? Our shared history? Reconnection? All of the above?

My Midwestern hometown, St. Louis, Missouri is known for Cardinal baseball, toasted ravioli, and the significance of high school. Transplants to the city are surprised to learn that when locals ask the introductory question, "Where'd ya' go to school?" we are not inquiring about college, but high school. The answer is loaded with details about economic status, academics, even religion. The reply, "University City High in the '60s," unfolds to mean "white, middle class, and most likely Jewish". Back then the majority of UC students went home to picture book houses with expansive trimmed lawns. Over ninety percent were college bound, many invited into the sacred space of the Ivies. UC honors classes demanded four-hour math finals and a fifteen-page analysis of MacBeth.

Dancing every Friday night at the local teen club, we were into rock 'n roll. Not sex or drugs. Happy Days, without a black-leather jacketed, slick-haired Fonz. When a cheerleader got pregnant our junior year, we girls assured ourselves she had only done "it" once.

The fabric of our high school innocence was ripped wide open when the news of JFK's assassination crackled over the P.A. system.

"I was in driver's ed."

"I'd just stepped out of the gym shower".

"Ms. Bowers didn't make us finish the English test."

We 1965 U. City grads embraced this piece of our identity. These reunions every ten years were big deals, no matter which clique claimed you. The save-the-date card had been magnet-glued to my refrigerator door for months. Like many in my 700-plus class, I looked forward to the event with curiosity and excitement, mixed with a dash of apprehension. Checking the Reunion's Facebook home page and "liking" school photos shared by FB friends I hadn't seen since the 40th reunion became a daily ritual. My post challenging the use of the Indian, the school's former mascot, as the page's profile pic created a kerfuffle. I tossed aside my 21st century cloak of political correctness and, instead, wrapped myself in a key issue from adolescence:

"What's everyone wearing to the Saturday night party?"

Comments flowed:

"Just be comfortable."

"Whatever you would wear to a nice restaurant.

"Guys don't have to wear ties."

Marjy would have known without asking.

So there I stood at the entrance to the ballroom, fiddling with the silk teal scarf I'd carefully swirled around my neck that now seemed more appropriate for conferences than cocktails. The band kicked off with "Celebration," and I tapped my foot and twisted my faux gold pendant, regretting I'd left the real stuff at home. I watched as Editor of the School Paper Joey grabbed Member of Homecoming Court who had sashayed in wearing a silky black halter dress that molded to her body. He and I had been jitterbugging together since sixth grade, even had a brief fling after reunion number 20, in-between our respective marriages. But tonight he twirled another. Who was I to dance with? My husband was back home in California. A class reunion was no place for spouses. But tell that to Twelfth Grade Boyfriend Stan whose wife stood by his side, thus limiting my spots on his dance card. Worrying about being left on the sidelines while everyone else paired off, I felt unsteady, as though wobbling on my first pair of two-inch heels.

I needed Marjy.

To shrug off my wallflower demeanor, I meandered across the room. Heeding "hellos" from clusters of old acquaintances and friends, I kissed and complimented, sometimes sneaking a glance at a nametag in order to pull aside the mask of age and recall the youth beneath.

"Hi, Renee, it's you!" Pam greeted me with a quick embrace, her gold hoop earrings swinging. Reddish brown hair cupped a still smooth face that had earned her a steady high school beau. Botox? From 6th grade through 12th, Pam and I lived in nearby apartment buildings on the fringes of University City. The area was dubbed the "Loop" because it was where the streetcars completed and then re-started their routes; but we

all knew that the term also denoted the poorest part of the school district. No brick colonials with black shutters and big back yards on our streets. Rather, three-story apartments and alley ways were where we played ball or jumped rope.

Our mothers were the only single parents I knew of then. Mine a divorcee and Pam's a widow. Pam didn't have to explain or wonder why her absentee father never showed up and I'd envied her for that. We never talked about this shared status of ours: fatherless, living with a solo parent and Yiddish speaking grandparents from the "old country." We had traded outfits many mornings before first hour, deceiving others and perhaps ourselves into believing we had more clothes than actually hung in our closets. As I regarded the slinky black sheath defining Pam's still petite body as she stood in that ballroom, I wondered if I could talk her into exchanging clothes just one more time. Our friendship had languished after high school, like a mortarboard tossed in the air at commencement that neither of us bothered to catch. We now lived on opposite coasts, but at each reunion we'd plant seeds of reconnection, seeds we neglected to nurture. Maybe we reminded each other too much of the old neighborhood we had worked hard to leave behind.

Breaking from Pam, I found my spot at the table Stan had saved, thus sparing me the old lunch in the cafeteria pang: where do I sit? I dropped into the cushioned dining chair next to him, shook the crisp white linen napkin onto my lap, and gave him a hug. His familiar Old Spice fragrance was reassuring. In senior year I had regained my footing when the smart kids made it to the top of the ladder, soaring above jocks and cheerleaders on the wings of top GPA and SAT scores. Having a steady boyfriend who was Vice President certainly helped. I began to relax.

I surveyed the buzzing room from my new vantage point. Former jocks sat with chess club members, brainiacs mingled with brawn. Senior play stars huddled with stage crew, prom royalty with '60s radicals. After 50 years, the field had leveled. Social lines had blurred. Cancer, divorce, death didn't care if you were Prom King or AV Club President. By our age, we knew the demons out there. Most Popular Guy limped from the ravages of a brain tumor. Youth Group Pal had early Alzheimer's. Nerdy Guy in Biology was wheelchair bound as he awaited a kidney transplant. Football Star steered him around the room. I was one of many women in the room who'd endured breast cancer. My classmates and I were like pianos going out of tune one key at a time; but tonight we were there to make music.

The lights dimmed and the tempo slowed as the band played "The Way We Were". Most Likely to Succeed stood to introduce the memorial video. An expansive white screen descended and our chatter gave way to a medley of somber songs. Yearbook portraits flashed large. We were forced to recall the Vietnam War when we saw Henry, an early casualty who contracted spinal meningitis while in army reserve training right before Yale law school. Grade School Crush was killed in an auto accident. Smartest Boy had a heart attack. One woman had died just the prior week of lymphoma.

I could never adequately prepare for Marjy's portrait**.** My eyes wanted to halt the projector, take in every bit of her. Like the others, she was frozen in perpetual youth: the long dark hair that I had helped straighten embraced a flawless complexion that highlighted round brown eyes and smiling lips. Two decades had passed since I'd last smelled her L'air du Temps**,** heard her buoyant laughter, felt her welcoming hug. What had she been thinking about when the camera flashed? The

upcoming graduation party? Vassar College in the fall? Maybe. She wouldn't have known then that she'd crash law school gender walls. That feat encouraged me to take the same path at the age of 29 when I was floundering in both my marriage and my teaching career. Marjy also wouldn't have known that an aneurysm would kill her at the age of 47, leaving behind a 9-year old daughter, teenage son, husband, and me. I got the call as I was nursing my newborn, delighting in my miracle. Women in their mid-40s were supposed to be beyond childbearing age. They weren't supposed to be at drop-dead age.

Winding the tip of my scarf around my finger, I stared at Marjy's image, allowing her gaze to reassure me she would have loved whatever I was wearing that night, every flow, every drape. Letting her remind me that I was lucky to be there, in that hotel ballroom. At our fiftieth. Marjy had died one year before our 30th.

The video went on far too long.

The chandeliers reclaimed their glow more quickly than we resumed our conversations, after what seemed like a collective sigh. A waiter filled my glass with white wine, its clear shimmer contrasting against the orange and red blooms of the center bouquet. Gradually, the laughter returned along with our reminiscences of the once-upon-a-time icons like Hamburger Heaven, the local precursor to McDonald's, or Rinaldi's serving the thin crust pizza we grew up with.

I studied my tablemates, my buddies, who also made it to the fiftieth. Stan, dear Stan, had taken me to senior prom and graduation party, had written in my yearbook that I was "enchanting." Until Stan, no one had ever made me feel so cherished. He even hosted a going away party for me the summer after graduation when I ventured to Miami Beach to visit my runaway mother. She'd gone off to Florida to retrieve her second husband and somehow forgotten to return home. Stan never judged or questioned the oddities of my home life: the small stark apartment I shared with my older sister, the parents who didn't meet or greet. His acceptance enabled me to loosen the cloak of shame that had suffocated me.

Evelyn, seated at my left, continued to invite her home even though I was too embarrassed to return the invite. Next to her was Joey, who rewarded my love of journalism by appointing me his feature editor, providing me with a well-needed niche. All of us sitting there had nourished one another, had grieved Marjy's death together. These accomplished men and women were not just former classmates. They were participants in my story, in the early formative chapter of my life. They knew me "when"; when I was naïve, hopeful, vulnerable. Their embrace of me, warts and all, began long before the scholarly awards, the professional accolades, my life mate choices.

When I was unmoored from both parents, these high school friends were the anchors that held me steady and who helped enable me to launch. They carried me along the path to college and scholarships, just as my mother was insisting we couldn't afford tuition and my father was cutting off child support checks. They had been my lifelines. As always, being with them was like slipping on a cozy flannel robe. No one minded that the seams were frayed. They wouldn't have cared if I was wearing Eileen Fisher or J.C. Penney.

Fifty years after Pomp and Circumstance, we, the remaining members of the class of '65, were still standing and celebrating in our party clothes. We were doc-

tors, lawyers, teachers, salesmen, secretaries, a school bus driver, a former ambassador. We boasted hundreds of children among us, with more grandchildren on the way. Glasses clinked as we toasted the band's '60s songs…"oldies" like us. We pushed our life crises out of sight, like a jack into its box. On the dance floor we swung, strolled, and twisted the night away, knee and hip replacements be damned.

The band cranked up a Beach Boys favorite. I put down my Chardonnay, and turned to Joey, glad that I was wearing comfortable black flats.

"Come on, let's dance."

After all, who knew when our photo would pop up on that large white screen.

Like a Door Always Unlocked

Robert K. Johnson

The years that started after
that night we had to part
have been richer for me than I
thought possible--years filled
with college degrees, a job
offering good pay, a fine house.
And then you flash in my mind--
as if you stood on the deck

of a ship leaving port--
and all those passing years
become a town's main street
empty of shoppers in stores,
empty of sidewalk strollers,
of cars parked or in traffic,
empty of everything
except loss.

Harper
Robert A. Gunn

My name is Harper. I am six years old. I love bacon and cheese treats. I also love chasing tennis balls in the driveway. Hank, my human, says I'm not very good at it, but my playing always makes him smile. Sometimes I like to keep the ball in my mouth so he has to take it from me. Even though I slobber on it, that makes him laugh. I love making Hank laugh. He is the smartest; the handsomest; the nicest human in the world. He takes care of me. For, you see, something is wrong inside me. I don't feel good anymore.

I found Hank at the shelter. I can't remember how I got there, but I was caged in a pen. It was a scary time in my life because I didn't have a human of my own. There were humans who gave me food and water every day, who let me walk and play outside for a while, but they were distant; their hearts seemed far away at a place I could not reach. I could not make them happy. I was lonely even though there were other dogs at the shelter.

One day I raised my head and saw Hank. He was standing outside my pen, looking the other way. I could sense he was sad. Dogs know things like this, though I'm not sure how. I sat in front of my pen, waiting for Hank to see me; sending him a message with my mind. He received it and knelt down to take a closer look. Sometimes, my tail has a life of its own and it began thumping so fast it sounded like I was playing the drums on the concrete floor. I gave Hank a big, happy smile. He smiled back.

Hank took me home and made me the happiest dog in the world. I had everything I could ever want. Plenty of dog food and tasty treats. Fresh water from the faucet, though I liked to sneak a drink from the big bowl in the bathroom when the lid was up. Chew toys everywhere. My favorites were tennis balls. I loved chasing them in the house; in the grass; the driveway; wherever Hank wanted to play. Hank played with me every day; regardless of how busy he might have been or how late he came home from work.

Here's how I knew it was time to play. Hank made himself a drink he once called a Tom Collins. If I wasn't already beside him, which I usually was, he would call for me.

"Harper! Come here, Harper! Are you ready? I made a Harper Collins. Just for you, big guy. Let's play with the ball."

Can you believe it? My human named his special drink for me. Without a doubt, he's the cleverest human who ever lived.

I'm not sure when it started, but I began feeling funny. I didn't have my usual energy playing fetch. I always did, mind you; I never wanted to disappoint Hank. I chased and played to make him happy, but it tired me much faster than before. My food didn't taste the same, and I didn't want it as often. My collar became loose, even when a funny puffiness started to appear around my neck.

One day Hank knelt in front of me, placed his hands around my face and said, "Harper, are you feeling okay?"

I happily wagged my tail and licked his face. I was always happy when Hank touched me.

A worried look appeared in his eyes. I hated to see that. It made me want to please him even more. "I think you've been losing weight, big guy. We'd better see Dr. Franklin. You want to go for a ride in the truck?"

My tail went into overdrive. I loved riding in the truck. Hank got my leash though he didn't have to fasten it because I always obeyed him. I leapt into the front seat. Hank low-

ered the window so I could stick my head out and sniff all the delicious scents in the air. A lot of dogs hate going to the vet because they get poked in funny places, but not me. It gave me a chance to meet more humans; to make new friends.

Dr. Franklin ran a bunch of tests. I was eager to please and did what he wanted me to do. Hank was worried, I could sense it, so I gave him lots of kisses. Dogs can't kiss like humans do, so we lick noses. It seemed to help; Hank smiled and petted my head; scratched that little place near my butt I can never reach with my mouth. Oh, how wonderful that felt.

A few days later, I was napping on the couch next to Hank when his cell phone rang. He had it set to sound like a barking dog. I loved that, though it always startled me and made me alert.

Hank said nothing while the person on the other end talked. His face grew long; I could sense the sadness building inside. I placed my head upon his lap to comfort him.

"An aggressive form of lymphoma? How?"

He listened.

"What are his options?"

He listened again.

"No. I can't put him through chemo. It isn't right."

Pause.

"How long does he have?"

Silence.

"Is that all?"

When Hank ended the call, he took me in his arms, buried his face against mine and cried. I licked his face because I knew he was hurting. *Please don't be sad,* I said to him with my mind. *I'm here to make you happy. I want to hear you laugh again.*

"Oh, Harper. Of all the bad luck. Why you?"

I put my paw on his arm; licked him like his skin was made of bacon and cheese. I wagged my tail to show him how happy I was. Hank was the best human ever. He had the best voice. The best laugh. The best smile. I wanted him to know I was a good dog. I would do anything for him.

Hank pulled himself away and said in a strangely tight voice, "I'm going to make a Harper Collins. You ready to play?"

For the next several weeks, that's what Hank and I did. He would make the drink he named for me, grab a handful of tennis balls and take me outside to play. Although I loved playing, each day it became harder and harder. I couldn't chase the balls like before. My eyesight seemed funny, and I couldn't focus on the bouncing ball. I sometimes tripped and fell on my face. In the past, if I had done that, it would have made Hank laugh. Now I saw sadness in his eyes. Sometimes there would be a tear there as well. Still, I played with him. He was my human. I wanted to please him.

I wasn't hungry anymore and I couldn't eat my normal dog food, so Hank bought moist food that came in little white containers that tasted wonderful. At least, it did at first, but it grew harder for me to keep it down. And I wanted it less and less. Sometimes, Hank fed me with a spoon. He gave me pills he wrapped in little pieces of cheese he said would make me feel better, so I obediently took them because I knew he wouldn't tell me something that wasn't true. But I never felt good.

One morning, I awoke and walked into the kitchen. I sat down on the floor, and for some reason I hung my head. I had no energy. I didn't feel well. I wasn't hungry. I wasn't thirsty. I just wanted Hank to hold me.

When he saw me, he rushed over, knelt and said, "Harper, what's wrong?"

I licked his nose and thumped my tail, though that was difficult to do.

Worry lines etched his face. He stroked my head; scratched my ears; hugged me. Although I didn't feel well, I knew how lucky I was to be with him.

He pulled out his cell and called the vet's office.

"Ready to go for a ride in the truck, Harper?"

We went out the front door, but after I took a couple of steps my legs no longer did what I told them to do. I sat in the grass and looked at Hank. I tried to tell him I was sorry with my eyes. That I wasn't being a bad boy on purpose. Hank saw what was happening, picked me up, carried me to the truck and gently placed me in the front seat.

We took off; my head resting near Hank's leg. I didn't have the strength to hold it out the window and sniff the delicious scents in the air. I started panting heavily. I was having a hard time breathing; my drool dampened the cloth seat. Hank kept looking at me and I tried to smile, though I felt weak and tired. I wagged my tail once, but it too didn't feel like moving. He softly placed his hand upon my head and kept it there the entire drive.

When we reached the vet's office, Hank carried me to one of the little rooms and placed me on a metal bed. It felt cold, but I wanted to be a good boy so I didn't complain. Dr. Franklin came in and examined me. Carrie, his cute assistant, helped him.

Hank and Dr. Franklin began talking in low voices. My hearing, always so good, wasn't working very well, so I couldn't understand what they were saying. When they finished, Dr. Franklin and Carrie left the room and closed the door behind them. Hank came over to me. There were tears in his eyes. He was hurting. I never want to see him in pain.

He brought his face close to mine and cradled my head in his hands.

"Harper. My handsome Harper. You are the best dog in the world."

I wagged my tail once. Thank you, Hank. You are the best human.

"You're Hank's big guy, aren't you?"

Of course, I am.

"Do you want me to make a Harper Collins? Go outside and play with the tennis ball?"

Always. Whatever I need to do to be with you.

Hank closed his eyes and held me tight. He sobbed quietly. I grew worried because I didn't want him to keep hurting. I'm here, Hank, I said with my mind. I will always be a good boy. Whatever you need from me, I will do it to make you happy again.

After several minutes had passed, Hank raised his head, wiped the tears from his eyes and smiled at me. I smiled back the best I could. He opened the door and Dr. Franklin and Carrie came in. They wrapped something around my leg while Hank once more gently cradled my head; his face close; his eyes upon mine.

"Harper. You're the best buddy I ever had."

I smiled and held his gaze. I began to feel sleepy. I kept looking into those eyes. Those wonderful eyes of my human. I saw what was in them and gave it back to him. *I never want to leave you, Hank. I'm so happy with you.* As my eyes grew heavy, I kept my focus on Hank's face, the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. Then they closed, and I went to sleep.

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Richard Atwood lives in Wichita, Kansas. He has published three books of poetry. He has also been published in several literary journals; authored 3 screenplays, 2 large stage plays; and an m/m erotic-romantic fantasy with a GOT ambiance (*Chronicles of the Mighty and the Fallen,* under Richard McHenry). Rick is retired from the health-care field and remains alone, with two more poetry manuscripts in progress.

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Amanda Felice Collier has been teaching both high school and college writing for ten years. She has published several pieces of work over the past few years and is most proud of the writing that she has created recently, which is about being a mother.

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Robert K. Johnson, a now retired English Professor, taught at Suffolk University in Boston for many years. He has been writing poetry for even more years than that. He has had several collections of poems published. He enjoys writing poems about writing poems and writing love poems.

Thomas Kearnes graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with an MA in film writing. His fiction has appeared in *Gulf Coast, Berkeley Fiction Review, Timber, Foglifter, Hobart, Gertrude, Adroit Journal, Split Lip Magazine, Cutthroat, Litro, PANK, BULL: Men's Fiction, Gulf Stream Magazine,* and elsewhere. He is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee and three-time Best of the Net nominee. Originally from East Texas, he now lives in Houston and works as an English tutor at a local community college. His Lambda Literary Award-nominated debut collection of short fiction, *Texas Crude,* is now available from Lethe Press at numerous online booksellers.

Laura Mahal is a copy editor who poets on the side. (She's supposed to be writing fiction, but poetry is a siren song, as well as a sustaining pastime during pandemics.) Her poetry appears in *Encore 2020, Veteran's Voices, Sunrise Summits, Charlie Mike, DoveTales,* and *Chiaroscuro.* She is currently working on a novel for the Book Project—you can find more of her work at www.lauramahalwriter.com.

Sharon Lopez Mooney is a mid-westerner by birth and words are her heartland. Her intention is to put her shoulder to the wheel of change and hope with all she writes. She is a retired Interfaith Chaplain and lives in Sonora Mexico. She regularly visits her family in California where she spent 40 years and where she began her writing life. She believes poetry is our essential communication and is grateful to have publications that make that possible. Her website is: www.sharonlopezmooney.com

Jane O'Keeffe holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University. Her writing has appeared in *The Sylvan Echo, The Sun, The High Desert Journal, Thickjam* and *Word Riot.* She lives on a cattle ranch in Adel Oregon on the edge of the Great Basin with her husband, her son and his wife, two perfect grandchildren, dogs, cats, horses, lots of cattle and for some reason, two mules.

Stories by **David Perlstein** have appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine, Reed, pacificReview, Summerset Review* and *Oyez Review.* His new novel *2084* will appear later this spring. David lives in San Francisco. More at davidperlstein.com.

Bob Phillips is a freelance writer living in North Texas. He started reading and writing poetry later in life and was quickly published internationally. Bob enjoys a quiet life with his wife and Doberman puppy. He has three children and two grandchildren.

Cathy Porter's poetry has appeared in *Plainsongs, Homestead Review, California Quarterly, Hubbub, Cottonwood, Comstock Review,* and various other journals. She has published several chapbooks. Her latest collection, *The Skin of Uncertainty,* is now available from Maverick Duck Press. Cathy is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, and serves as a special editor for the journal *Fine Lines.* She lives in Omaha, NE with her husband Lenny, their dog Marley, and cats Cody and Mini.

Arianna Sebo is a poet and writer living in Southern Alberta with her husband, pug, and five cats. Her poetry can be found in *Kissing Dynamite, The Coachella Review*, *Capsule Stories*, and *Lucky Jefferson*. Follow her at AriannaSebo.com and @AriannaSebo on Twitter and Instagram.

Corina S has not officially studied creative writing but she has written from a very young age. She's a psychotherapist and recently won the first prize in *LISP's* (London Independent Short Story Prize) 4th Quarter 2020 Competition for her short story *Parents' Evening*. Currently, she is working on a short story collection with the title *Positive Symptoms.*

Paul Smith writes poetry & fiction. He lives in Skokie, Illinois with his wife Flavia. Sometimes he performs poetry at an open mic in Chicago. He believes that brevity is the soul of something he read about once, and whatever that something is or was, it should be cut in half immediately.

Mark Smith-Soto's books include *Time Pieces* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co., 2015). *Fever Season: Selected Poetry of Ana Istarú* (2010) and *Berkeley Prelude: A Lyrical Memoir* (2013) published by Unicorn Press. Awarded a 2006 NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing, he's had work in *Kenyon Review, Literary Review, Nimrod, Rattle, The Sun*, among others.

Marc Swan's fifth collection, *all it would take*, was published in 2020 by tall-lighthouse (UK) https://tall-lighthouse.co.uk/marc-swan/. Poems are forthcoming in *Concho River Review, Gargoyle, Coal City Review,* among others. He lives in coastal Maine with his wife Dd, a maker and yoga teacher.

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J.P. Whitney is an aspiring author from Wisconsin. She is currently working on a fantasy trilogy where Death and Life are closer than you think.

Since retiring from the practice of law, **Renee C. Winter** has traded billable hours for more writing time. Her personal essays have appeared in such literary journals as *Catamaran, Exposition Review, Qu, Coachella, The London Reader, Star 82 Review, 34th Parallel,* as well as in the anthology, *Tales of our Lives* (2016, ed. by Matilda Butler). Renee currently lives in Santa Cruz with her husband, and is a volunteer writing teacher at the local jails, an experience that has shown her talented writers are found everywhere.