The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge



The Corner Club Press February 2014







Volume III

Issue XII



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Any resemblance to actual events, persons living or dead, or locales in the poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

Dear readers,

As you can see, The Corner Club Press not only has a new website, but the magazine itself has a brand new design that should push the magazine further than it has been pushed in the past. The magazine had been difficult to manage with just two people, but now with a full staff, I am able to play a much smaller role without stressing over the submissions process and getting everything together.

So why have I decided to take a lesser role? Well, like all founders of anything, we find we want more for the thing we started. We can't do that alone. When Daphne retired, I knew I needed to bring on someone else to do poetry, so Mariah was willing to do that. However, things became more difficult because I was still having to go through the short stories, edit those pieces, then format the issue and get everything together. I then needed Mariah to go through and vet submissions so I didn't have to do that. However, that became a lot on her.

Then the magazine became a lot on me because of the publication of *When Stars Die*. You pretty much have a career when you've published your first book, because readers who loved that book expect you to continue publishing, so that's a job in itself. Also, I want to get hired at the current job I'm doing, as I go through an employment agency. This means taking on all hours given to me and not restricting my work schedule. I'm pretty much going to be doing freelance work when I graduate, so that job can be some stable income. Speaking of graduation, I'm doing an online college, and when I start that, it's more work, so I'll have to cut down on my own writing. I also switched dance schools and so am technically doing more ballet. Not only do I love it, but it's great for my fibromyalgia. My new physician even said it's why my fibro is not as bad as it could be.

Overall, this is why I'm stepping away. I'm still involved in that I want to know what's going on, but I trust the awesome staff of The Corner Club Press to make magic—and they have. They are now the backbone of this magazine, so ALL credit goes to them. I am so glad The Corner Club Press will not die. I knew when I started it that I was never going to let it die, and I have been very lucky to find people who want it to live.

Sincerely,

Founder, President, Web Designer

Amber Forbes

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Josef Krebs

Mr. Krebs has written three novels and five screenplays, and his poetry is being published in the Bicycle Review. He has been working as a writer and editor for Sound & Vision Magazine, writing film reviews, feature articles, columns, and interviewing filmmakers and other industry figures.

"Ghosts Last Night"

Dreaming of the trinity
Father, son, and death
Death is the go-between
Passing from father to son
From son back to memories of father
Which father rejects like all life
In his pursuit of death
He escaped the camps
But he never escaped life
Which dragged him back behind the barbed wire
By his actions and choices
Until he became one with the chimney.



Stephanie Valente

Stephanie Valente lives in Brooklyn, New York. One day, she would like to be a silent film star. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from dot-dotdash, NANO Fiction, LIES/ISLE, and Uphook Press. She can be found here: http://kitschy.tumblr.com.

"Gravity"

During a lunar eclipse, he folded up the charts: bent stars, burning out over sight lines,

candlestick bowling stories; letter writing; half drunk coffee cups – he told this to the nymph,

she wanted more: evergreens, willow tree branches, sea hymns, twisted ankles, the burnt sienna earth,

she called the weather vane guardians, met the man on a rooftop, under the moon light

together, they held and watched a piece of the moon dissolve into cosmos.



Holly Day

Holly Day is a housewife and mother of two, living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who teaches needlepoint classes for the Minneapolis school district and writing classes at The Loft Literary Center. Her poetry has recently appeared in Hawaii Pacific Review, Slant, and The Tampa Review, and she is the 2011 recipient of the Sam Ragan Poetry Prize from Barton College. Her most recently published books are Walking Twin Cities and Notenlesen für Dummies, Das Pocketbuch.

"The Haunted"

can't seem to get rid of your voice constant in my ear, the subtle constant clicking and clacking of your spoken vices and dreams, conversations that should

have ended when you walked out the door but they never end, they go on and on. see your face behind my closed eyes as if you were tattooed on the insides of my

eyelids and not some haunting reconstruct of memory, you can not be as beautiful as you are in my dreams, I hope I pray that

as you walk through your day, smiling pleasantly at strangers, that somewhere pressed against your soul is some painful, unshakeable photograph of me.



Umm-e-Aiman Vejlani

Umm-e-Aiman Vejlani has been published in several journals/magazines such as The Camel Saloon, The Commonline Journal, Voices de la Luna, Boston Poetry Magazine, and ebook Aqueous by Solstice Initiative, and she has written several articles that have been published on hackwriters.com. She also writes and has been published under her pseudonym, Sheikha A.

POETRY

"Breathe"

The early night outside chuffs and gibbers in an arena of creatures, grunting of insomniac beasts enveloping the atmosphere, wakeful

insects tapping their wings and feet in idle chatter with each other; all of nature rendezvousing on my battered but reliable porch shed

skipping, thumping on the creaking wooden planks in a game, I imagine, of animal roulette, no winning or losing, just wagering,

pecking moodily at the leftover grains from the morning scatter. I sit by my bed window listening to life breathing a little mile away,

as the night grows dense, the sounds of silence get heavier; I reflect on sturdy pasts embedded in weakened bones of resilient faith over

our youth that flows like forking tributaries across a wizened face of memories retained by remembering life in its optimism, tingling

the petals of a vision merry set in feral, warbling dreams, I know close by hope cavorts as wild courtesans from inside enclosures

ordinary in sight; the pattering of small things climbing tall poles. The settling whimpers as they brush and nuzzle themselves to sleep.

Their lulling mixing with sunny images of lungful chatter and chirrup under the curable warmth of tomorrow's sun; everything breathing.

inhaling high. Exhaling low. In rhythmic harmony of life connected. That is the sound of life outside: humming...breathing. All is forgotten.

John Grey

John Grey is an Australian-born poet recently published in International Poetry Review, Sanskrit, and the science fiction anthology Futuredaze, with work upcoming in Clackamas Literary Review, New Orphic Review, and Nerve Cowboy.

"Down Trails"

Yes. to traipse into the woods is to snub my nose at love. To touch a leaf in lieu of skin, listen for bird song instead of naked whispering... treachery, of course it is. Otherwise why is the trail marked so clearly.

Snowshoe rabbit, you're not her.
Shy deer, you're shy for good reason.
For all its banging, a woodpecker
does no damage to any tree I know.
Ferns, wildflowers,
my most gracious act
is not to pick a one of you.

So why is it, the thicker the wood, the more lovely the scenery, my thoughts start scraping on my brain's rough bark... ah, if only she were here.

But to think like this is to turn my back on nature. To imagine lips in lieu of wings, crave the fleshy fluttering instead of running brook... who can be true to anything? Yes, the trail is clear. But the markings are so subjective.

Lizzy Huitson

Lizzy Huitson is a writer of poetry and short fiction and has been published in a number of literary journals and magazines, including The Waterhouse Review, GlassFire Magazine, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, and Blue Lake Review. She has also published an ebook of poetry titled "Honeycomb Bones" (https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/276356). She keeps trying (and failing) to write a detective novel.

"The 17:37 to Basingstoke is Crowded"

Cross-legged, sore-boned, fragile as a poisoned bird's egg
I tried not to take up too much space.
That swollen city always left my nerve-endings bruised.
I pictured them, feathery, swaying in wet space like that acid-green seaweed.
"Touch me" is meant for a hushed voice but a hundred skins hollered it.



April Salzano

April Salzano teaches college writing in Pennsylvania, where she lives with her husband and two sons. She recently finished her first collection of poetry, for which she is seeking a publisher, and is working on a memoir on raising a child with autism. Her work has appeared in journals such as Poetry Salzburg, Convergence, Ascent Aspirations, The Camel Saloon, Centrifugal Eye, Deadsnakes, Montucky Review, Visceral Uterus and Salome, Poetry Quarterly, and is forthcoming in Writing Tomorrow and RATTLE. The author also serves as co-editor at Kind of a Hurricane Press.

"Autism Consumes"

my time like a sound-bitten stim, makes me perseverate. As hours slip past, I am repeating phrases like *education*, *services*, *accommodations* to institutions, parents, doctors. Autism eats my appetite without chewing, until I forget that I am a useless advocate without fuel, battle-fatigued, spent. Autism fills a house with sound, a room with fragments of what is broken, what is left.





A.J. Huffman

A.J. Huffman is a poet and freelance writer in Daytona Beach, Florida. She has previously published six collections of poetry, all available on Amazon. com. She has also published her work in numerous national and international literary journals. She is currently the editor for six online poetry journals for Kind of a Hurricane Press. Find more about A.J. Huffman, including additional information and links to her work, at http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000191382454 and https://twitter.com/#!/poetess222.

"De[at]traction"

You were stunning when we met. In silence, you smiled, winked, and waved. Never wavering as you wandered around me, electric, a current of semi-charmed confidence. Radiating gravity, a centrifugal force of longing, lust and loneliness abated. Then you spoke and broke. The enchantment faltering with every bizarrely original confusion of vocabulaic function. I could not comprehend your defective mental equalization of incongruous terminology. And you held no realized accountability for the problematic transposition of docility and desperation of contentment and actualized affection. I watched you weave your next failed fiction: A Fairytale in Futility. And I could see its ending. A catastrophic third act. All anguish and agony. Was it instinct or distinction that distorted the color in that moment's memory of your eyes? Or maybe mine?



Sharon Rothenfluch Cooper

Sharon's poetry has appeared in numerous international hard copy and Internet magazines. Her chapbook "Reach Beyond" was the winner of a MAG Press, International Chapbook Competition, and she has two other chapbooks, "Mood Magic" and "A Slice of Life," published by Tamafyhr Mountain Poetry. Twenty-three of her poems were presented in the play Soldier's Heart to sold-out audiences and recorded on DVD. Her latest published pieces are featured in the summer issue of Poetry Quarterly and published in the October issue of Flutter.

"Keeping Pace"

Words suck ego with their sting and I yearn for mine to pop out to keep pace for they are the seeds of life.

From darkness to awakening life has its own measure and slides between comments to make the great leap as words dissolve on your tongue.



Christy Hall

Christy Hall is a UK poet; he published his debut chapbook "Later, You Returned to the Sea" last year with Fire Hazard Press, and he is currently penning his first full-length collection. He graduated with a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Hull in 2010.

"A Moment's Harm in the Graveyard"

Say hello to Hendon for me, I said.

Did you make it to the Olympics? she replied.

We met in a coffee house in Golders Green, sat and watched the parade of Jewish families, shalom, hello, moving between bakeries, cafés and restaurants, halal.

Everything made you laugh; my northern accent, all of its foibles, and the names of tube-stops, especially and always Cockfosters.

I did visit the Olympic village; she returned to London one summer, and walked Traf.Square,

St.Pauls, Pal Mal – went as far out as Windsor.

There was a garden once, I remind her in email, deep in the heart of Farringdon, in the grounds of a church, where we sat for the first time alone and kissed.

You were all jostle and frisk, but a true English Gent must push to resist.

Pulling towards dusk, in August, amongst the gravestones, we kissed, kissed and kissed.



Theodore Templeton

Theodore Templeton writes from Michigan where he lives with his cat, Rami. He is intrigued by human interaction and questions the nature of human behavior. He is currently working on a number of short stories and two novels.

"Sirens on a Quiet Street"

I pull into my drive and hop out of my car. I unload the groceries, stroll up the flagstone walk I laid last year, and head up the steps of my little two-bedroom rental. The semi-enclosed porch is eerie in the shadows, and the hoot of an owl brings the hairs on my arms up in the cool night air. Beneath the single porch light, abuzz with moths and mosquitos, I notice a greasy smudge from a fingerprint on the lens of my glasses.

That's why I've been seeing things as if through a fog.

My hands are full. I'm carrying two plastic bags and a gallon of milk. I'll have to deal with the smudge inside.

The door is unlocked. I have no reason to lock it. No wife. No children. No worries. Just me. I'm young, 30, and I live alone. No need even for the second bedroom. My mother would love for me to settle down and give her a couple of grandkids. I know this, but I'm not interested. Not yet. I

know my choice to remain single has been a source of gossip in the family, in my office, and in my church for some time now. Even the ladies at the market seem not to understand why such a handsome young man (their words, not mine) would choose to not be with a young lady. A few have questioned whether I'm gay. I assure them I'm not.

My sister, Cybil, tells me nothing good comes to a single man. God gave men wives because they need the help. She's been telling me that for years.

I push the door open, thankful for the quiet neighborhood and good neighbors that give me no cause to keep my doors locked. No one will bother me here.

These are neighborhood watch folks. Gentle vigilantes. The kind of people who sit on their porches with walkie-talkies, waiting for a reason to chirp each other and ring 911. More entertaining than television? Maybe, but it's not my style. I keep to myself.

Another source of disquiet in my life. Is it so strange that a thirty-year-old man likes to be alone? I have hobbies. I work a respectable job at an insurance office. I take care of my lawn and my house. I play video games online with people from around the world. If that's so weird, I wonder, why are all these people I'm playing with doing the same thing?

And I paint. That was the reason for choosing a place with a basement. I needed an art studio. No one understands that art is my mistress, the only love I need at this point in my life.

I swing the door shut with a foot. It's dark inside. Strange. I'm sure I left the kitchen light on. I always leave the light on so I won't trip and fall and hurt myself, which is a real

concern since I'm an untidy guy. I have a habit of leaving pizza boxes and art supplies and other debris littered throughout the house in a way that would make my mother scream and my coworkers cringe. I'm not exactly a hoarder. My house just lacks what Mom calls a woman's touch. I tell Mom and my sister that my "landfill feng shui" is an artistic lifestyle, but I doubt they believe this. My sister stops by every couple weeks and lets herself in and cleans up a bit. A little irritating, but I guess I do appreciate it. Who wants to clean up every day? Not me.

I pick up on Saturdays. Sometimes.

I make my way through the hall, passing the bathroom and the main bedroom and crossing through the living room slowly without stumbling over the coffee table or slamming into the couch, an ugly green affair with gold patterns threaded through it that I picked up on a curb the summer I moved out of my folks' house. Thin streams of streetlight beam through the slats in the blinds. I make my way into the kitchen without killing myself and set the groceries and milk on the counter, flipping on the light and seeing that it was indeed off and not blown. Weird. I get an eerie feeling like walking through cobwebs in a stranger's basement, or warm breath on a chill night falling onto my neck. There's a sharp intake of breath being drawn through clenched teeth, like when the shower comes on and the water's too cold.

Did that sound come from me or from someone else?

There are eyes upon me, no doubt about it. Someone is here, watching me, eyes set on me like a prowling wolf. In my house. Waiting for me. An intruder. Someone come to harm me, rob me? Am I going to be on the news tomorrow? A stock photo provided by my parents to show what I had looked like in life posted large in black and white on the front page of the Jerkwater Journal?

Man Surprises Burglar: Shot, Killed.

No. Not in this neighborhood.

I shake the thought from my head.

But there is someone there, in the living room. I can see a thin figure facing me, can feel it watching me. A silhouette standing on the far side of the couch, in the shadows, like a ghost come to present me my future. I passed it on my way into the kitchen but hadn't known anyone was there, hadn't felt anything out of order until I'd flipped on the light. A slight frame, thin, shorter than me by a foot with slender shoulders framed by the window that faces the drive, a pale corona surrounding this shade as the street light filters through.

No time to clean my glasses. The world is still fuzzy.

What to do? Call the police? Charge? Speak? Who is this person, and why are they here? Maybe flesh, maybe phantom. I can't wrap my mind around the scenario. My voice has been stolen by the shadow in the darkness.

Before I can decide what course of action to take, before the scene unfurls itself, and I realize what's happening: a wispy, coquettish voice, the voice of a girl, speaks

from within the void of my darkened living room.

"I've seen you," says the voice, lilting a soft siren song. "Watching me." A sound of breathy giggling? "It's okay," the voice whispers. "I've been watching you too."

I'm not aware that I've been *watching* anybody. What the hell is going on here? I am compelled to ask, "Who are you?" but my voice slams into the shadow and falls flat at my feet.

"It's me, silly," says the flirtatious voice. Amused as if pleased by this game.

But as I recognize the voice, I am not amused.

"Karen?" she says, as if wondering why I didn't recognize her voice. "From across the street."

But why would I recognize her? I don't know this girl. I've seen her, sure. One of the kids from the neighborhood. I speak with her father often when I'm outside, tending to the lawn, running out the trash. I might even call Jim a friend. But I've never spoken to this girl. I have certainly not been *watching* her.

With the melodrama that only a teenaged girl can produce, the shadow steps forward to be illuminated in the light from the kitchen. Now I see her clearly. Not a phantom, not a shadow, but young woman, maybe a girl—too hard to tell these days with the way girls develop young (or pretend to) and layer on makeup and dress themselves to flaunt, to encourage men to think all the wrong thoughts. These girls who are pushed by fading mothers to hurl themselves into adulthood too quickly. This girl, Karen, is in her mid to late teens, perhaps. Maybe twenty. Probably she's not. Too hard to tell, but I need to know because it makes all the difference in the world.

Yes, I recognize her now. A shameless girl, lying in the front yard instead of the back to sunbathe in a swath of swimsuit, and when she is clothed, she puts in effort to show more skin than the swimsuit reveals. Yes, of course such things are noticed. Even when a man does not intend to notice. I try not to notice, but I have. Of course I have. And that's her intention, isn't it? To call attention to herself through her body? And why? Because her body is all that gives her worth in our society?

I have not been watching this girl. That's her delusion.

Where is her pride? Her dignity? Where is her sense?

And what the hell is she doing in my house?

She steps forward again, inching closer, slyly, yet not shyly. Her sun-bleached hair is pulled back in a ponytail, her face made up like a faux geisha with more makeup than a Poison concert. She is wearing blue jeans too small for her and a top cut so low I can see the glisten of sweat in her cleavage. I am careful to keep my eyes on hers and not let them wander as I step back onto the linoleum.

"Don't be silly," she says, leaning toward me. "It's okay. I like it when you look at me."

"I have not been looking at you," I tell her.

"But you have," she insists. "And it's okay. I've been watching you too. Since the day you moved in. And I think I love you. From the first time I saw you. And you love me too."

I know. For certain now, I know. She's just a girl. A young girl. For only a girl can believe such nonsense. Love at first sight. Love without ever having spoken to one another! She doesn't even know my name.

Now, compelled by the prospect of trouble, nervous that real trouble is crouching at the door, I ask her age, and I'm more afraid than I've ever been before. I must know her age, for that makes the difference. If she says anything that ends in "teen," I'm already in trouble.

"What does age matter?" she says. Two more rapid steps toward me.

She's trying to get close to me, but I back away, putting the dining room table between us, careful not to get in range of physical contact with this girl.

"It makes all the difference," I tell her. "You're infatuated with me, and I'm flattered, but this is not real. This thing you want to happen is not *going* to happen. This thing you imagine between us simply can't be. It's not real."

I watch as understanding grips her, and her pretty features contort into a mask of resentment and hurt.

"I know you want me," she persists. "I want you." Her voice slows to a menacing crawl, all signs of coquettishness gone. "You don't get to reject me."

She lunges at me, quick steps, shoes clicking on the hardwood floor. Desperate for contact with me, she reaches out. I step away again but not fast enough. She is upon me, her lips pressing against mine, her makeup smearing and coming off against my oily skin and the scruff of my two-day-old whiskers. The smudges on the lenses of my glasses are so bad it's as if they've been smeared with Vaseline. She presses her soft body against mine, tries to slide her arms around me, but I'm pushing her back and moving away again.

"No," I tell her. "This can't happen. You need to leave. I need you to leave right now."

But of course she has no intention of leaving.

She comes forward again in a flurry of motion, face tilted to mine in violent supplication, and she reaches for my head to pull my mouth down to hers.

"I don't want you!" I shout. My fingers twitch and close, my hands become claws, then fists. Every muscle in me is clenched. "I never wanted you. And I don't love you. Now leave, damn it." I feel spittle fly from my lips. I don't know where it lands.

"But you could love me," she says, and she pulls her shirt off over her head with a flourish. "You could try."

This can't be happening. What the hell kind of sick trap is this?

"I will never love you," I sneer. "Now, get out."

I watch as her face contorts into a blurred mess of emotions ranging from anguish to hate, from fear to longing, but is any of it real, or is it only a mask? Her face is so hideous in that moment that I cannot imagine her ever again being pretty.

Through the tears, she spits a string of hate.

"You shouldn't have done this," she says, tears welling up in her eyes, her shirt balling up in her fist as she stands there in her lacy blue bra. "I wouldn't have told anyone."

Reaching out with cat-like quickness, she claws with her fingers, catching me be-

neath my eye and raking three jagged lines in my face. My glasses go askew. Heat and stinging pain rush to the flesh caught beneath her nails. Warm blood trickles to my chin as I watch Karen bounce through the shadows of the living room and vanish through the front door with her black shirt wadded in her fist, wearing only her blue bra into the night.

I adjust my glasses, the world a little more blurred now. I go to the door and look outside.

Karen runs into the street sobbing hysterically, shouting for her mother and her father, calling out for help. I run to the porch, wanting to speak, to defend myself against what I know is coming. But my defense, my only defense, is hurling herself into the protective arms of her mother as the neighborhood comes alive, and I feel the burning eyes of accusation boring into me from every window, every porch on the street.

I imagine that within minutes, I will hear sirens in the distance, and I will be shoved roughly into the back of a squad car, my hands bound behind my back like a criminal. I know that in this situation, an accusation is equal to a conviction, and, at the spiteful whim of an unloved girl, my life has come undone.

I cross the porch, the moths and mosquitoes still buzzing around the light, and stand at the top of the steps in the shadows of night. The street lamps glow beneath the dark sky. I smell smoke from cookouts and the freshly mown grass. People step from their yards and porches, moving slowly, shuffling like hermit crabs into the street and coming to see what commotion this is. Among them I see girls and women, the sirens I see all summer wandering the streets half-dressed, displaying themselves; most of them now are wearing halter tops or bikinis, their bodies exposed to the night. They look at me with accusing eyes, each one believing I've done something terrible to this girl who fled from my house and cried all the way home.

Karen is in her yard, her mother wrapping a towel or blanket around her slim shoulders in a ridiculous attempt to cover this girl's body, at last. I see Jim, Karen's father, marching steadily toward me with a fierce, determined mask on his normally jovial face. He's holding something in his hand, something like a club or a tire iron. In the shadows of the quiet street, he looks like something from a nightmare, something vague and formless drifting across the asphalt and coming to get me. My flesh ripples into goose bumps. His flesh flashes from shaded black to an alternating pattern of blue and red. I sense that he is not the worst thing that will happen to me tonight.

I feel the need to speak to him, to explain, but my mouth has gone dry. I step down from my porch onto the flagstone path that leads to my drive. Jim is angry, I know. I know what Karen has told him or led him to believe. But shouldn't I be angry? I'm the one who's been violated tonight. I want to tell Jim that his daughter invaded my home, that she violated me. Do I not have a right to peace and privacy? I want to tell him what she's done, but I know he will not believe me. After what Karen has done, no one will believe me.

The night is no longer quiet. A murmur has arisen. A woman is calling out to Jim. He stands before me. His face changes color, changes mood. Angry, calm. Angry,

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calm. Flashing lights with a hesitation of darkness between like a glimpse into a bleak future. Two shadows, eclipsed by bright lights shining behind Jim, join him. I'm blinded by the lights.

"I need you to head back home," a man is saying.

I hear Jim's voice as if from far away, accompanied by a smattering of unconnected words. "Son of a bitch," he says. "...daughter."

"I know," the other man says. "We'll handle it."

Jim's form recedes into the night. The other man approaches.

"I'm Officer Roy," the man said. "This is Officer Barnes. We need to ask you a few questions about what happened here tonight. Okay?"

"Okay," I say. I'm trying to stay calm, but I feel my legs wanting to run. I start pacing.

"Sir, I need you to calm down." This is the other guy now. Barnes. I can't see him because I'm facing the light, but he sounds like a little guy. I can picture his hand on his gun, ready to draw. He has that tone of the trigger happy.

"I am calm," I tell him, maybe a little louder than I intended.

"Could you stand still, sir?"

I force myself to quit pacing. I stand before these men, accused before they've asked me a question, condemned in the courts of their minds. I'm jittery, my muscles twitching. Why? I'm afraid now, but of what? I've done nothing wrong. I just need to make them understand that.

"State your name, sir," Roy says. He has a little notebook that flips open end over end, like those used by detectives in movies. These guys are really taking themselves seriously.

He's all business while Barnes is waiting for a reason to shoot me.

"Zach," I say. "Zach Sein."

"Is that Zachary, then?"

"No. Zacheus."

"Got a middle name, Mr. Sein?"

"Joseph."

"Okay," Roy says. "Date of birth?"

Seriously? This is what they came out for? I'm standing in the street in the dark on display for the entire neighborhood, the whole fucking world, and these guys want my stats? I feel like I'm at the doctor. They going to weigh me too?

"About how much do you weigh?" Roy says, and I lose it.

"Are you fucking serious right now?"

"Calm down," Barnes says. No "sir" this time, no "please."

"I am calm," I say loudly, "you little shit." I shouldn't have added that.

"That's it," Barnes says. "Turn around and put your hands behind your back." He doesn't draw his gun. I've been waiting for that. He seems antsy. Instead, he pulls out handcuffs.

"Are you arresting me?" I ask.

"Are you resisting?" he asks.

Roy remains silent. But I notice he's still writing in his little notebook.

I don't answer. I'm beginning to understand that anything I say will be the wrong thing to say. I understand my rights even as they are not read to me.

I turn and look at my house, the little rental where I found a piece of freedom. I was happy here, alone, away from the prying of my mother and sister. I'd found a place where I could be myself, by myself.

Barnes cuffs me, squeezing the metal clasps tight so they grind on the knobby bones of my wrists. My head is pushed down without ceremony, without grace, as I'm shoved into the back seat, wedged between the plastic-covered seat and the slanted hard plastic partition that separates the criminal from the law. The bare skin of my calves sticks to the plastic covering on the seat. I imagine a drunk pissing where I'm now sitting.

Through the window, I see my neighbors lining up to be eyewitnesses. None of them saw a thing, but each of them will give a statement.

I see Karen being ushered into the house by her mother. Neither of them glances my direction. I am no longer a thought. Jim stands on the sidewalk in front of the white picket fence lining his yard. He's still holding something in his hand. I can't tell what it is through my smudged glasses, but I'm afraid of it. Others are moving toward him, wanting to gossip, not wanting to let this excitement die down. It's no longer about me. Maybe it never was. Tomorrow I'll be a headline, on page six maybe. In a week I'll be forgotten.

The cops climb in the front. They don't look at me. Roy marks something down in his notebook. Barnes says something into the radio. I'm not even a thought in their minds anymore. Just another stop on their route.

"What will happen to me now?" I ask.

Barnes snorts one of those scoffing laughs that people force when trying to be condescending or cruel.

Roy puts his notebook away and puts the car in drive.

We move away through the crowd of onlookers. I make eye contact with a few. Most look away. Through the soiled lenses of my glasses, I can't really tell who they are. Barnes turns and looks at me from the corner of his eye.

"You had a young girl in your house. She left screaming and half naked. Your face is scratched from her fighting you off. What do you think is going to happen to you?"

I imagine now what will happen to me. I am going to a place where the privacy I want will not exist. The things that people imagine I did to that girl will be done to me. I'm beginning to panic. This back seat is too small. Too hot. I'm sweating. I need out. I need to get out.

But I can't.

I'm trapped.

I know what my sister will say. She'll tell me I should have settled down and gotten married. If I had a wife, this type of situation could have never happened. But what will

she be thinking while she's saying it? Will be she be thinking that I did this thing I'm to be accused of, this thing that has not yet been named? Or will she realize my innocence? Either way, she'll say what happened did not just happen but was caused by me. Living like a recluse. Not having friends or a lover. What kind of man choses to live alone and spend all his time painting? Cybil will have all the answers, the answers that will help her sleep while I'm "away."

But those things are still in my future. Perhaps Mom will get a good lawyer. Maybe I'll be home tomorrow.

In the front seat, Barnes is laughing at something. Maybe it has nothing to do with me.



FICTION

Prospero Pulma Jr.

Prospero's fiction and poetry have appeared online on Alfie Dog Fiction, Bewildering Stories, Every Day Fiction, Every Day Poets, Flashes in the Dark, Pure Slush, Short-Story.me, and Short-Story.net. Major magazines, newspapers, a flash fiction anthology, and an essay collection in the Philippines have also published his works.

"The Auricles"

She would have been just another lovely face sipping a caffeinated brew in a street café if Max had not caught her tucking her auburn hair behind her ears. Most men's ears curved at their tips. Hers tapered at their tips like an elf's, shimmering like crown jewels to his eyes. He bought a latte and took the table behind her, holding the cup over his lips while his other hand groped his bag for his tools. He chuckled when his fingers touched the jar and metallic implements. His cup was half empty when she picked up her bag and pushed her chair back. He counted to ten before leaving his table.

He walked many paces back, watching her red hair shining amidst a throng of brunette and blond pedestrians, feeling as if he was dragging huge metal balls strapped to his ankles. Twice he looked around to a voice calling him but heard only the roar of motor vehicles and the voices of hundreds.

Street signs and store displays had as much appeal as a torn dollar bill to him, but he read them more as she approached an apartment block with few cars and people on the streets. He stopped when she turned left into an apartment with flaking paint and thick columns on its façade. He sneered. Old buildings had aged locks that caused little trouble for his hooks and rakes. He watched her push a key into the main door and step inside.

He kept his head low and took slow steps like someone coming home from a double shift as he approached the apartment. Light was flowing from inside through a gap between the door and the threshold. The door yielded with a slight push. He surveyed the hallway. There was no elevator, and the two doors to either side were too humble to be apartment doors. Sharp footsteps were echoing on the stairway winding around the atrium. The woman was wearing stilettos. He stepped on the stairs.

"Hello, Ear Collector," a woman said.

Max did not hear the voice from outside but from within his head. Twenty bodies had turned up with no ears across the state over the past year, and the police branded Max the Ear Collector. He would stare at his collection of ears floating in jars of formal-dehyde like someone admiring a canvas painted over by van Gogh. "I'm a connoisseur, not a collector of cheap goods."

The footsteps grew louder but never seemed to go far. Horrified, he watched his feet following the sound. He glanced back at the stairs. Light fell only on a few steps before darkness swallowed the stairway.



"Of course you are. Come to my room." She giggled.

"Who are you?" Max pulled out the retractable knife from his bag.

"See my world so you will know." She said mockingly, "Careful with the knife."

Max's fingers gripping the knife snapped open, and the blade clattered to the floor.

"Where will you put my ears? In the prettiest jar, adorned by flowers?"

"I'm going to wear them around my neck when I'm through with you," he snarled.

"Watch your feet following me. Listen to your heart screaming in fear. Feel your body trembling." Her laughter was as sinister as the darkness building around Max. "You are my captive, my puppet that I can pull whichever way I please."

Max's feet stopped at a door that opened on its own. "Max."

Max stared with mouth agape at the tall crown glittering atop her red hair and the rings sparkling in her delicate fingers. He forgot his threat to wear her ears as a necklace from watching the little gemstones embedded on her gown glittering. The gown curved at every curve of her body. He smacked his lips as his eyes went from her face, down to her bosom, her hips. Down his sight went until it stopped on a big jar resting at her feet.

"This is for you," she tapped the jar with her feet. "You see ears as trophies. I see heads as pricier than crowns. No, not just any head, but heads with great evil in them." She started stroking her neck.

Max grabbed his neck as blood spurted from his throat. He screamed from an invisible blade cutting the sinews and bones in his neck while she laughed and laughed.

Max wished he could see more than the man's sneakers, jeans, and shirt whose designs were similar to the shoes and shirt he favored over other styles. A backpack, identical to his favorite bag, was lying by the man's side. He started chuckling and looked down to see if he was wearing identical attire as the man sprawled on the floor.

His mouth frothed with bubbles when he screamed.

The woman tapped the jar. "You have all the centuries to revisit this day, Max."

FICTION

Richard Luftig

Richard Luftig is a professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio, now residing in California. He is a recipient of the Cincinnati Post-Corbett Foundation Award for Literature and a semi finalist for the Emily Dickinson Society Award for Poetry. His stories have appeared in numerous magazines including Bloodroot, Front Porch Review, Silkscreen Literary Review, and Pulse Literary Magazine. One of his published short stories was nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize.

"Twins"

You know there's sibling rivalry when your identical twin forgets your birthday. But that's the way it's been between Celeste and me for the last twenty years.

There's a belief in some Eastern religions that the first twin gets the best personality, opportunities, and karma, while the younger one gets whatever is left over. Let's just leave it at saying that I was born first by a whole twelve minutes.

It was always like that. I picked up language early. Celeste was slow to catch on and stammered when she did speak. I was the achiever in school. Celeste was a C- student and always in the principal's office. I graduated, got a job, and married a good, kind man. Celeste got pregnant, dropped out of high school, and eventually married a self-proclaimed handyman—probably because he was handy. The guy was mostly out of work and in trouble with the law. The good news is that she left him. The bad news is that she's been married and divorced twice since.

Now I've heard from a friend of a friend that Celeste has breast cancer. No one can tell me the prognosis.

Celeste and I might be completely different in our personalities, but one good thing about being an identical twin is that if I describe what I look like, I describe my sister. It saves time.

I'm forty-eight, and people say I'm still good looking. But the truth is I have to work at it. After three kids, I don't exactly have the body of the homecoming queen, but I exercise and try to lay off the carbs.

I have hazel eyes that don't show as well since I started wearing bifocals, as well as brown hair that lends itself to red when the light is right. Gill, my husband, says it's my hair that attracted me to him. That and my "cute ass." Unfortunately, that hair now needs a monthly tint job, and my behind is expanding faster than the universe. But overall, I watch myself and stay fit. And, knock on wood, I'm in good health.

Sometimes, I wonder if Celeste still looks like me. There's nature and nurture involved. We have the same genes, but she's lived a harder life. The last time I saw her, she smoked like crazy. In high school, she was quite the drinker, and I know she experimented with drugs. That stuff takes its toll.

It's not like I haven't tried to keep in contact. I send cards at birthdays and call

from time to time. My cards are never answered, and the only thing I get on the phone is her voicemail.

The few times that we met at our parents' house in Dayton, she barely spoke to me. It only got worse after Dad died. When our mother passed, Celeste pretty much blamed me for all the troubles in her life.

It really got bad after the funeral when we were going through Mom's things. Celeste moved from room to room, snatching up stuff: jewelry, the good dishes and flatware. It would have been one thing if she wanted them as keepsakes, but I knew she was going to pawn the stuff or sell them on Ebay.

What really clinched it for me, though, was when she wanted me to buy out her share of Mom's car.

"Like hell," I said. "That car is coming to me. Jason needs it." Jason is my twenty-year-old son, and his beater of a Pontiac had just expelled its last oil-fouled breath.

Celeste squinted, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. I have the same expression when I'm mad.

"And why is that?" she said. "There's two of us. We share the estate fifty-fifty. If you want the car, you buy me out."

I sat down on Mom's old sofa. "How come you're not counting all the money Mom gave you over the years?"

I saw that I hit a nerve. "Any money I got was a loan."

"Bull shit," I said. "Mom told me all about it. You didn't pay back a cent."

"So maybe it was a gift."

"For what, being Daughter of the Year? More like you kept getting in trouble, and Mom had to come to the rescue."

She took a loose cigarette out of her jacket pocket and lit it. "So what if Mom gave me the money?" she said.

"Nothing," I said, "except now I'm sure as hell not going to pay for half of her car."

After that, we made sure to be in different rooms. I let Celeste take whatever she wanted. I took very little, sentimental stuff mostly: photographs, a few mementos that I had made for our parents when I was in school, Mom's wristwatch that stopped running years ago. The rest could go to the Goodwill.

When we locked up, Celeste and I barely said goodbye. She drove north to Toledo, and I headed south to Lexington. Mom's house sold the next year, but with the mortgage, taxes, and lawyer's fee, my sister and I barely cleared five thousand dollars apiece. We hardly spoke to one another after that.

Now it's two years later, and I just learned that my sister has cancer. Maybe she is dying. And I don't have a clue as to what to do.

Three days after learning the news, I was still in a state of paralysis. Dozens of times, I wanted to call Celeste and make peace. She was my sister, my twin, and I missed her despite everything. But I couldn't make the call.

Once, I even dialed her number but hung up as soon as she answered. I felt like a fool. If she had caller ID, she'd know it was me. But if she did know, she didn't call back. That hurt even more.

That evening when Gill came home, my mind was made up. I was frying pork chops for dinner. He walked into the kitchen and gave me a kiss. Then, he saw my overnight bag by the table.

"You leaving me?" he said.

"Fat chance. After twenty-five years of marriage, I'm not leaving without a good alimony agreement."

He grew serious. "You're going to Celeste's." It wasn't a question. I guess he knew me better than I knew myself.

"I'm still not sure," I said. "I've gone over it a thousand times in my mind. All I've gotten so far is packing a bag."

He put his arm around my waist, pulled me close, and kissed my neck. I closed my eyes as the goose bumps raised on my skin.

"Go, she needs you."

"What if she turns me away?"

"What if space junk falls on your car as you're driving up the interstate? We take chances every day."

I took the meat out of the pan and placed it onto two plates. He took his and walked over to the table. Then, he stopped and picked up my bag.

"Pretty light. Either you aren't staying long, or you're planning on wearing the same clothes for two weeks."

I shook my head. "I don't want to jinx it. Plus, I'll spook her if she thinks I'm coming for an extended stay. For now, I just want to scope out the situation and see how things are."

He cut a piece of his pork chop. "And what if it's bad?"

I thought for a moment. "I don't know. I want to be there for her. But ultimately it's up to her. And given the history of our lives, I don't know if she'll sit for that."

Gill ate another forkful of his supper. "When are you going?"

"I didn't say that I was."

He finished off his iced tea. "Yes, you're going. Tonight. You can get a head start and stay overnight in a motel. Then you'll finish up the trip and arrive in the morning, fresh for whatever happens."

I know it doesn't make much sense, but I resented that he was so eager to get rid of me. "What about you?" I asked.

"I'll be fine."

"Yeah, if you consider a diet of pizza, wings, and Budweiser fine."

Gill laughed. "What's wrong with that? It has all the major food groups." He became serious. "Don't use me as an excuse. Your sister needs you. Maybe more importantly, you need your sister. You have to get things squared away between the two of

you in case things come to the worst."

This time it was my turn to kiss him. "When did you become such a master psychologist?"

He returned my kiss. "I always have been; you just never noticed it. Now, get the rest of what you need and go."

I did what Gill told me, but I wasn't happy about it. I spent a restless night at a Red Roof Inn north of Cincinnati. If nothing else, they had free breakfast.

The next morning around ten, I turned onto Celeste's street and pulled over six doors from her house. I surveyed the block. The homes looked shabbier than I remembered; they all had that tumble-down, in-need-of-paint look. The lawns had gone to dirt and weeds. It had been ten years since I was here. You need an invitation to visit someone.

I cut the motor and got out so Celeste wouldn't see me pulling into her driveway. I had no idea what her reaction would be. Maybe she wouldn't answer the door. Perhaps she would dart out the back and hop over a neighbor's fence to avoid me. The thought crossed my mind that she might point a shotgun and order me off her property. Of course, I knew all these scenarios were unlikely. Still, I left my bag in the car and walked up the sidewalk to her place.

Her house seemed even more worn than the others on the street. The paint was peeling, the porch sagged, and the eaves were rotten. On one side, the gutter was detached, and rain had poured off and eroded a hole in the ground near the foundation.

I pushed the doorbell. It was out of order, so I banged on the front door. Still, no answer. It never occurred to me that she might not be home.

I heard a noise inside. Not exactly footsteps, more like shuffling. Then silence. Maybe she had seen me and stopped moving in hopes that I would figure she wasn't there.

Finally, the door opened. I know we're twins, but at first I didn't recognize the person facing me. Her face was swollen, unsymmetrical with one check puffy and red, the other blotchy. She had dark circles under her eyes that gave her the look of a raccoon, and I could see that the whites of her eyes were bloodshot. Her lips were cracked, and her hair, now completely gray, was thin and in tufts, probably from the chemo.

"Grace, what the hell are you doing here?"

I know I shouldn't have said it, but her appearance shocked the sense out of me. "Good God, you look terrible."

"That's what you came all this way to tell me?"

"Come on, Celeste, at least say hello."

"Okay, hello. Now what are you doing here?"

I didn't want to discuss everything where the neighbors could see us. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

She swung the door open, turned, and walked inside. I followed her into the kitchen. She sat down at a stained Formica table with three mismatched chairs.

Thankfully, there was no ashtray filled with cigarette butts, and the room didn't

reek of smoke. Maybe she'd given up smoking.

She was wearing pajamas and a faded red robe clinched tightly around her. She looked washed out, like she hadn't slept in weeks.

"You want coffee? I got a jar of instant around here somewhere."

I took the offer as a good sign. "Sure."

But she didn't get up. "So, what are you doing here? I'm sure it's not a social call."

This was pure Celeste. Straight for the jugular. She'd done it since we were kids.

"I heard you're sick."

She tried to hide her anger, but I could see it in her tired eyes. "Who told?"

"Does it matter?" I said.

"It does to me."

I thought for a moment. "I'd rather not betray a confidence."

"That figures."

"Look," I said, "can we drop the tough-girl act for a second?"

She looked down at her hands. They were spotted and raw. I wondered if that was also a side effect of the chemo.

"All right," she said.

"How bad is it? And the truth for once."

Celeste said nothing as if she was considering the question. "I don't know."

I was incredulous. "You don't know?"

"I don't know," she repeated. "The doctor didn't tell, and I didn't ask. All I know is that I'm one-third into the second round of chemo. After the third set, they'll take another look and see if the medication is working."

I looked at her. Despite the bluster, I could tell she was scared.

"And the side effects?"

"They're tolerable."

"Really?"

"No," she admitted. "They're pretty bad."

I got up and cleared the dirty dishes off the table. From the looks of the kitchen, the house hadn't been cleaned in a long time.

"That seals it," I said.

"What does?"

"I'm staying with you."

I could tell this was not what she was expecting.

"I don't remember asking."

"I don't remember offering it to you as a choice."

"I don't want you here," she said. "I don't need someone clucking her tongue like some hen disapproving of everything I've done in my life."

I walked over and put my hand on her shoulder. "Look, let's start slow, okay? Just let me stay the night, make some dinner for us, maybe straighten up the place. We'll see how it goes. Then tomorrow, we can decide on things."

I tilted up her chin to meet my gaze. "Please."

Her gaze softened, and her eyes welled up. Then she caught herself. "Suit yourself. But nothing is going to be any different tomorrow than it is today. I feel like crap. Help yourself to anything in the fridge." She walked to the bedroom. "The television is in the living room, but I don't have cable."

All day, Celeste thrashed in bed. When I looked in on her, she was sweating and pale. I washed her forehead with a damp cloth.

After the third episode of this, I said I was going to call the doctor. Celeste struggled up on one elbow. "Don't," she said. "They'll just tell you that this is a normal reaction to the chemo."

She tried to smile, but it came out more of a grimace. "Sometimes I wish the medicine didn't work so well."

"I'm sorry," I said.

For the first time, she looked at me with something like love. It had been so long since I'd seen that glance. "Yeah, me too. And the bad news is that the later in the day it gets, the worse it is."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

"I wish there was."

She got to her feet, but it took great effort. "Tell you what. Maybe I can try some soup. Let's go into the kitchen and see what we can rustle up."

But it was a lost cause. Celeste said the soup tasted like salt and made her sick to her stomach.

"I wasted your time on that one," she said. "In fact, maybe your staying here is a mistake."

"It's my time," I said. "It's not like I have a full dance card at home."

She looked at the clock. "You like television?"

I really don't. "Sure," I said. "What's on?"

"Loser Vision."

"What's that?"

Celeste smiled. "My own invention. Jerry Springer, Maury Povich, and Dr. Phil all in a row. Trailer trash fighting over who's sleeping with whose boyfriend and which alchy is having carnal relations with the bagger at the Pig & Poke. Maury is my favorite. The show is a full hour of paternity tests. Come on, it'll be fun."

"I can hardly wait," I muttered. If Celeste heard me, she ignored it.

I followed her into the living room. There were two seats in the room: a broken-down overstuffed chair and a lumpy couch.

Celeste turned on the television and switched to the right channel. I took the chair, thinking the sofa would be more comfortable for her. She stretched out, her head propped on a pillow.

We watched show after show. My last thought before dozing off was that I hadn't realized that America was this dysfunctional.

I was jolted awake by a sound I didn't recognize. The room was dark except for the television that was playing some old movie. For a moment, I didn't know where I was. Then I remembered. Toledo. Celeste.

The sofa was empty. Where was she? I heard that sound again and recognized its origin. Celeste was vomiting.

I raced to the bathroom. Celeste was kneeling at the toilet, her head in the bowl, bowing to the porcelain god we'd called it when we were teens, and she was puking from too much cheap wine.

I knelt down and supported her chin with my right hand. Vomit and spittle dribbled from her mouth onto my fingers. I didn't care. With my other hand, I stroked the back of her neck.

"God," she moaned. "It hurts."

I brought my mouth down to her ear. "I know. Try to hang on."

Finally, she stopped and spit into the bowl. "My mouth tastes like crap. Would you get me a glass of water and a towel?"

I got what she needed, then slowly walked her back to the bedroom, supporting her weight on my arm.

The sheets were damp and smelled of medicine. I wondered if you could leak chemo from the pores of your skin.

I put on new sheets and pillowcases. Then I eased Celeste into bed. She moaned like every inch of her body ached.

"You rest," I said. "I'll be in the next room if you need anything."

She took my hand. "No, please don't leave me. I need you."

It had been a very long time since I had heard those words from her.

Celeste made room on the bed. "Come, lie next to me."

I squeezed onto the double mattress. "This is nice," she said. "Remember when we used to do this as kids?"

I laughed. "I think the mattress has shrunk since then."

She took my hand again. "You really are willing to stay?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

I jabbed her playfully with my elbow. "My home in Lexington is getting fumigated, and I need a place to stay until the chemicals wear off."

"How about Gill? What will he say?"

"Gill's fine with it. He's the one who insisted on me coming. Besides, it's not that far."

Celeste kissed my cheek. "It would make things easier, maybe even bearable."

"Fine," I said. "Then it's settled. Tomorrow, I'll drive home, pack a bag or two, and come straight back." I looked at her. "Trust me, we'll be fine."

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. "I know," she said.

We lay like that for a while; I'm not sure how long. I thought maybe Celeste had

fallen asleep. She was still holding my hand.

"You asleep?" she asked.

"No, I'm just enjoying the moment."

"There's something we need to talk about."

"Okay, what is it?" I said.

"We're sisters, twins, right?"

I laughed. "You just discover this?"

She ignored my question. "We share the genetic stuff, right?"

I wondered where she was going with this. "We share everything."

"I have breast cancer," she said. "Think about it."

It took a few moments for it to sink in.

Celeste sat up. "You mean you never considered the possibility?"

I tried to think back. Maybe on some subconscious level, but I'd been worrying so much about Celeste that I had pushed the thought out of my mind.

"That doesn't mean..." I said finally.

"No, it doesn't," she said. "You've led a healthy life without the booze, cigarettes, bad diet, and drugs. But DNA is DNA, and we have exactly the same."

"It's pretty evident you've been thinking about this awhile," I said.

"Dr. Oz had a show on it. He was talking about women at high risk for breast cancer undergoing mastectomies as a precautionary measure."

I couldn't believe what my sister was suggesting. "You mean having my breasts removed before I even get sick? That's probably the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

Celeste looked hurt. "Is it?"

"Yes, it is. Given that logic, I might as well get my legs amputated on the chance that I might get diabetes."

"It's not the same, and you know it."

I sat up. "I know it isn't. And I appreciate you thinking about this. But right now, we have other things to worry about. We're going get this cancer knocked out of your system. Then, we'll worry about the 'what ifs."

I straightened out the blanket. "I'm going to make us some supper."

"I don't know how hungry I am," she said.

"That's okay. You eat what you can. All I want you to do is promise to try your best to get well. Is that a deal?"

Celeste began to cry. "I promise." She paused. "I love you, Sis."

She hadn't called me "Sis" since we were twelve years old.

"I love you, too."

Fifteen minutes later, I came back into the bedroom with sandwiches, crackers, and tea. Celeste was asleep, smiling. The worry lines were gone from her face, and much of the swollenness around her cheeks had disappeared.

It was the most peaceful either of us had felt in a very long time.

FICTION

Erin Srivastava

Though raised in the small rural town of LaGrange, Georgia, Erin Srivastava always dreamed of having adventures in distant lands. After working with child survivors of the Bosnian war throughout high school, Erin joined the Peace Corps teaching English in Madagascar until the coup of 2007 forced her to evacuate. She decided to complete her master's degree at Columbia University's Teachers College and then spent the next couple years teaching ethnically diverse students everywhere from the Bronx to Spanish Harlem to the Upper East Side. Having recently relocated back to Atlanta for her husband's work, when not traveling, she spends her time writing stories about young people's experiences growing up in a global community.

"The Rickshaw"

If only he had not eaten the street food. That one little Indian potato cake taken straight from that sidewalk skillet was now traveling through his intestines, wreaking unknown havoc—despite the guidebook's assurance that "it was safe for tourists to eat." Now, Anna's father was doubling over in pain and in desperate need of a bathroom. Still, Anna's mother, frustrated with the hodgepodge of fumes that characterized Old Delhi, anxious they'd never escape the labyrinth of market stalls, steamed at the idea of her husband using a *local's* restroom.

"They'll be disgusting, holes in the ground," she hissed, turning up her nose to the endless beckoning merchants as they hurried through the pedestrian maze. "Whoever runs it will probably want money."

"You just had to eat it, just had to be like them. You never listen to me. I told you that oily pancake thing smelt awful. You deserve everything you feel now for not listening to my warnings!"

Her mother pulled harder on her defeated father's arm, dragging his limp self more quickly along the streets as Anna kept up behind. Having radiant auburn hair that flowed well below her shoulders, Anna had received numerous inquisitive looks from the sea of brown-haired Indians—a schoolgirl had even excitedly approached Anna in the morning, asking for a picture together. But now, seeing Anna's mother greet onlookers with a shield of suspicion, they glanced away.

"Anna," she snapped, "put that camera around your neck for Christ sakes! Those men keep eyeing it and my purse."

They had only been in India for two days, a trip Anna's father assured would be like "visiting Aladdin's home." Yet during their first jet-lagged day, Anna's parents did nothing but watch Hollywood movies from their guest suite and eat salads from the hotel's Westernized restaurant. Had the air conditioning not gone out that morning, they'd probably still be there.

Now, as they maneuvered through the market's maze, resentment burned on her mother's face since her husband, who had pulled her away from the hotel pool to "ad-



venture forth," was sick.

As she had always done, thirteen-year-old Anna followed her mother's lead, gripped the camera tightly, and moved closer to her parents as they tried to find a familiar street leading back to the hotel.

"Honey," her father moaned, "I can't...make it...much longer. Must use bathroom. Lemme go...into...this restaurant."

Though a wooden board with *toilet* scribbled upon hung outside, it was not much of a restaurant. Rigged between two buildings amidst the alleyway, the "restaurant" consisted of a canvas tarp supported by rusted rods. At the opening, a leather-faced man with a long silvery beard and a white wrapped turban sat swirling a dubious mixture in a cast iron cauldron. Beside him, a wide-eyed woman squatted over another skillet, flipping more of those "treacherous," or so Anna's mother deemed, potato cakes. Noticing their approach, the man signaled to the woman, who stood. Anna noticed her eyes soften as she surveyed her father.

The woman nudged her skillet out of Anna's father's path, holding out her hands as if to help support him.

"Ugh! Just want our money," Anna's mother blurted, flinging her family away back towards the street. Turning back, Anna saw the two regard them with confused expressions.

"Need...bathroom," her father groaned. Despite her mother's angst, their hurried movements seemed futile amid the packed market crowd.

Then, Anna noticed that unlike the pedestrians, the rickshaws were proceeding quickly and effortlessly. Indians immediately stood out of the way as the small three-wheeled passenger carts pulled by men on bicycles peddled by. In fact, though most market-goers moved slowly through the dense alleyways, the rickshaw drivers proved most adept at crisscrossing the throngs.

Anna had never seen anything like a rickshaw—they certainly didn't have them where she lived—and she noticed that men of all ages and sizes drove them.

Her mother lugged her father around a cluster of children huddled on the sidewalk, unperturbed by their surrounding chaos.

"Ewww-ee, ouch....HONEY! My stomach won't wait much longer..." Her father's eyes frantically swept past stalls, hoping one might advertise a sanitized Western bathroom, pristine and shiny and papered.

A little way up, Anna spotted another young rickshaw driver and his cart standing passenger-less on the sidewalk.

"Mom, let's take one of these," Anna suggested, pointing at the empty rickshaw ahead. "Look how fast they move. Maybe the driver can take us back to the hotel quickly!"

"Anna! I can't deal with anymore 'cultural' requests right now! Christ, your father is very sick and we have to..."

"Owww," Anna's father distressingly interjected.

Anna's mother sighed at the reality of their predicament. They seemed no closer

to finding their way out even as Anna's father turned whiter by the minute.

"They don't speak English," her mother said. "How will we communicate with them?"

"The map," Anna pleaded, opening up the guidebook. "We'll just point to our hotel on the map! Maybe the driver will understand. At least, we could try; it doesn't hurt to try."

"Yeah, that's what your father said an hour ago, and look how he is now."

Her father winced, looking away.

Ignoring her protestations, Anna darted towards the young driver.

"Please, here, can you take us here?" Anna beseeched, pointing to their hotel on the map. "My father," she pointed back, "sick." Anna feigned retching. "We must go here quickly. Please, help!"

Looking at where Anna had fingered, the young driver nodded with understanding. A look of compassion spread over his face when he saw Anna's father trailing behind. Sneering but out of options, Anna's mother reluctantly agreed.

Climbing aboard, the three squeezed into the rickety rickshaw's bench as the driver mounted his bicycle in front. Anna was afraid they would tip backwards upon starting, worried that the little guy would be unable to support their weight, but within seconds, they were readily on their way, darting through the crowd.

Anna's mother gasped in disbelief. Her father moaned, leaning over to steady his stomach. Anna, with her mother finally quiet and her father temporarily eased, was finally able to relax. She took a deep breath, letting the wind whip through her long auburn hair. Like a boat parting water, Anna watched as they cut through the crowd with ease.

The market's alleys were so tight and crisscrossed with wires that the sun seemed to dance when it successfully reached the alley floor. Taking advantage of the moment, Anna took out her camera and snapped pictures of the passing sights. She snapped Indian women draped in layers of colors, linking arms and laughing as they blurred by. She snapped young boys in school uniforms playing tag around the legs of passing shoppers. A little toddler on his mother's shoulder waved as Anna passed.

Everywhere, signs plastered in foreign lettering drew shoppers' attention. Above, banners of orange, white, blue, and green, the colors of Indian nationalism, bisected alleyways. Every direction the rickshaw turned, everywhere Anna pointed her camera, colors radiated out, fusing with the smells and life that swirled before her.

"ANNA, watch beside you!" her mother shrieked as a second rickshaw driver pedaled up extremely close beside them.

Carrying a suited Indian on his cell phone, what caused Anna's mother to tense was not the passenger, nor the proximity, but the adjacent rickshaw driver's eyes. He stared determinedly at Anna as he pedaled closer to her and her expensive camera in hand.

To Anna, that rickshaw driver was one of the oldest-looking men she had ever seen; his face was long and creased, worn by years of labor. He wore a heavily wrapped

orange turban from which grey hairs peaked through. Lined with veins rippling from forearm to finger, he steered his rickshaw so close to Anna in her seat that, if desired, he could have pulled her off. Pedaling straight, the old driver took one hand off his handlebar and began to slowly stretch it towards Anna.

"The camera, Anna!" her mother, eyes wide in terror, screamed. She jerked Anna away, sticking her arms out front to protect her daughter. "He's trying to take the camera; hide it!"

The old driver, unperturbed by the mother's furious yelling, pedaled even closer. Again, he outstretched his long, wrinkled hand towards Anna. This time, it was dangerously close to where the camera rested in her lap. Yelling louder, pushing over her crumpled husband, Anna's mother wailed at their own young rickshaw driver pedaling earnestly in front.

"Help, he's trying to rob our camera!" Anna's mother yanked the camera from Anna's lap, slamming it around Anna's father neck, who was almost passed out in pain.

Her protestations dissolved amid the tumult of honking horns, blasting music, and shouts from vendors.

Unflustered, the turbaned old driver pedaled again perilously close, for a third time outstretching his fingers towards the surprised girl.

Whomp! Smack! Anna's mother walloped his decrepit hand repeatedly with her purse.

Wincing in pain, unable to steer straight, the old driver veered off onto the sidewalk, knocking the cell phone from his own passenger's hand, overturning a sidewalk stand laden with goods.

As they pressed onward, Anna looked back at the sidewalk commotion left behind. Though many shoppers were berating the old, grizzled driver with unknown foreign insults, the old man's eyes still followed Anna as she rode away. Something in his slumped shoulders, his confused look, pulled on Anna's own stomach.

"Good Lord, I knew this was a bad idea," her mother seethed. "This country is full of nothing but dirty food and dangerous people! I knew they wanted nothing but to steal from us."

Her mother's diatribe continued even after they entered their hotel. To their dismay, the local doctor attributed the father's sickness not to the potato cakes but most likely to the consumption of improperly washed vegetables. When the doctor asked if they had eaten any salad recently, Anna's mother balked.

The next morning, Anna's mother sent her downstairs to retrieve boxes of Cornflakes from the buffet bar. For the remainder of the trip, her mother swore they would eat nothing but American cereal. Passing through the white paneled lobby, Anna was about to enter the restaurant to fetch the cereal when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

Turning, Anna saw the suited Indian man, the passenger of the rickshaw driver that had tried to rob her, standing with a suitcase in hand.

"Excuse me, pardon my interruption for a moment," the suited man spoke, articulating each syllable with utter precision. "Perhaps you do not remember, but yesterday, I believe I saw you and your parents traveling in an adjacent rickshaw through the Old Delhi market. I, if you remember, was riding beside you. Funny that we should both be staying at the same hotel." He chuckled.

Anna looked around, wondering if she should run, but everyone in the hotel lobby seemed disinterested at the man's approach.

"Little lady, it is always hard to communicate in Old Delhi given the noise and congestion of the market's streets, but I wanted to let you know something that I think you and your parents were quite confused about yesterday."

"Um, okay," Anna said, amazed at the man's English, which seemed almost better than her parents'. With his pressed suit and leather luggage, he seemed nothing like the people her mother had railed so much about.

"Little lady, I have to check out soon—my cab is waiting outside—but I just wanted to clarify one thing. It seemed as if you believed that the rickshaw driver yesterday was trying to take your camera. I admit, I myself was confused about why he was pulling closer to you, but I was amidst a very important call."

His phone began to ring again, which the man quickly silenced. "Well, to clear up the confusion, the old driver was not, in fact, trying to steal your camera. You see, when I asked him afterwards to explain his actions, he admitted, quite dispiritedly, that he just wanted to shake your hand. Though that driver is quite old, I believe he has not seen many foreigners, and definitely nothing like yourself, my young lady, with such beautiful, bright red hair. Though a rather odd time to do so, he was just trying to shake your hand. Perhaps you could deliver this truth to your mother? She seemed quite upset. I do hope your family enjoys their stay in India."

And with that, the suited man took his luggage and walked out the hotel door.

Although knowing her parents were upstairs, underneath the covers watching BBC while awaiting their Cornflakes, Anna let her eyes linger as the man disappeared from sight. She wondered how her mother would react if she relayed the man's message, if her mother would even care.

Looking towards the restaurant's Westernized breakfast buffet, she wondered what else was different from what her mother had always believed. Perhaps Anna was now ready to try a different cuisine.



Meagan Cassidy

FICTION

Meagan holds a B.A. from Lake Forest College in English and politics, and plans on pursuing a master's degree in school counseling. She is originally from New York but currently lives in Chicago. Meagan is working on a novel that she hopes to have published.

"Jars"

It had been five years since that improbably sunny day in March. Maggie and Henry both knew it was his last day. He was too weak to throw off the bed covers, so she walked through the old house, alone. She picked up any bottle, jar, and container she could find, making several trips back and forth from the bedroom to dump armloads of vessels at Henry's feet. Eventually, receptacles of all sorts spilled onto the bedroom floor and all over Henry's unmoving body. A small tower of old mason jars covered his chest. Empty shampoo bottles rested in the space between each arm and side. Jugs that had once held laundry detergent lay on the floor next to jars still stuck with pasta sauce labels. It was time.

His breaths grew slower and shallower. She knew she had to work quickly. She grasped the first jar. Two strong yanks, and it was open. She drew the covers away from his body and inhaled his scent, a precise mixture of maple and the spine of a hardcover book. This was love and happiness and memories. His life and her life and their life.

She knelt at his toes and pressed the opening of the jar lightly to his skin. She drained every drop of Henry's scent from his right foot before sealing the jar and continuing. Slowly, she filled each container with the essence of Henry, the part of him that always revealed his presence before she even saw him, before he laid his hands over her eyes and yelled, "Guess who?" Now his body didn't smell like anything. It was drained of everything but limbs and the remains of her love.

She gained five years of Henry from these jars and bottles and containers. For five years she washed her clothes in Henry's smell of maple and the spine of a hardcover book. Each time, she was careful not to pour out too much; she had to make it last. But now there was no more, and he was no more, and her clothes only smelled of dirty cotton. It was time to move on.

FICTION

Elizabeth Anne Emanuelson

Elizabeth Anne Emanuelson is a poet, a dreamer, and a great lover of books. Writing is in her blood, as both her mother and her sister write, and her mother is published for her work with historical fiction. And when Elizabeth isn't causing a Greek tragedy, reading a book, playing piano, or singing opera to the ocean, she frequents a keyboard for writing. Surrounded with books her entire life, she cannot live without them and aspires to write and publish her own someday, preferably in the genre of fantasy. Her favorite things in the world are very tall trees, mythology of all kinds, the ocean in the springtime, her family's antique piano, and a certain dark-haired male who resides in the vast, mountainous hills of Pennsylvania.

"As Infinite As the Soul"

Once upon a time, there was an annoying sixteen-year-old girl. She had long, curly red hair, icy-blue eyes, pale skin, and a little extra curve. Since childhood, she'd projected idealisms and expectations onto different young boys that caught her eye. Always the same archetype, the same look, the same bold personality. Dark hair, pale skin, dark eyes. Large shoulders, a crook in the nose. Bold and a leader. Sadistic, but also masochistic and sensitive. A warrior and a king. And she, his princess and lady.

But he was only real in her mind. Or so one would think. And she felt the weight of this mysterious and ecstatic sense of "love." Perhaps even unknowingly.

Yet she always searched for him. Since age thirteen, the dreams of him had echoed through her mind like an eternal silent song. Some with white towers, some with train stations, some on Chinese rooftops, some by a vast ocean. Darkness and passion glowed in his eyes, electric and intense, as if a stunning sun were within him.

And he loved her, like she was the most beautiful thing in the world. Like she was a star, and he was the night sky. Like he was the sun, and she was the moon. And sometimes in these dreams, she even saw him die. She would see the rain pour down his cheeks as he closed his eyes for the last time. It was painful, and she didn't understand it. And it hurt to think about, so she didn't try to. And the recognition of those dreams faded into the background of her mind.

But at sixteen, this girl was stupid and belligerent, always with crazed eyes full of impulse. Her heart was so sensitive and raw that the slightest stroke knocked her far down, like a tree falling off a mountain by a slight gust of wind. Constantly searching for love, constantly searching for herself. She didn't understand much of anything but thought she understood everything.

Then, one day, she woke up. She remembered the importance of those dreams and that she had not grown into the person that she was meant to be. Nothing about her heart being the way it was identified with who she knew herself to be on the deepest level. This girl was loud, impulsive, ruthless, and terribly self-deprecatory. The aware-

ness within her was exactly the opposite: a light always meant for darkness. A healer, full of patience, quiet passion, and kindness.

Upon this new era, there came a night with misguided phone conversations. At the time, she was involved with a boy with whom she would always have a link, but it was abusive. Vicious, silver tongued, and misleading, he always seemed to put her into a state of self-horror.

And on a strange and fateful night, upon a perplexing three-way phone call, she heard a familiar voice on the other line. There was silence in her mind, and such chills. She had heard that voice before, but she couldn't quite put her finger on where or when. All she knew was that she needed to hear from him again.

So she inquired about him to her boyfriend. Not too long after that, they broke their relationship off. The magnetism to his friend was powerful and undeniable.

He was a nineteen-year-old lad who lived in Pennsylvania, with dark hair and dark eyes, a terrible, powerful grin, and a crook in his nose. He mesmerized her. That first one-on-one conversation they shared, she *knew*.

The boy said he'd had dreams all his life of a woman. Sometimes she looked different in each dream, but she usually had icy-blue eyes and long, curly red hair. She was kind and gentle in his memories. Like the ocean, her favorite colors were blue and green, and she had a habit of pacing back and forth in a circle when she was worried. This girl had always done those things. This girl knew that the person he had seen was her truer self, the self she had not yet become but was supposed to be.

"What's your birthday?" he had asked in that first conversation. She had wondered why he had asked such a strange question, but suspected it had something to do with gift giving. As it turned out, they had the same birthday. He was exactly three years her senior, and she took it as a cosmic sign that their love was something woven by fate.

Nothing could describe the inexplicable sense of joy she felt upon hearing his voice and feeling his presence from so far away. Their love was the most real thing she had ever experienced, and every cell in her body craved to be with him. But he was in college, hundreds of miles away, and she was in high school, confused and suppressed. She bore the weight of her own consuming insecurity, and he bore the weight of the world's expectation on his shoulders.

As fate would have it, these two lovers fell out in a pit of tragedy and drama. There was jealousy, arguing, neglect, and rage. He fell ill and was hospitalized. The next thing she knew, she had heard news of his death. And all the world seemed to unravel with his absence. She hated herself even more for not treasuring the time they had together. It felt like she would never be able to fix herself, that her very life was worth nothing.

But she scraped on, went through many trials and errors, got her heart broken time and time again. Every time, it felt like the already broken remains of her heart were just crushed into tinier pieces of dust. She rarely thought of the boy; it hurt too much.

Life beat her down continuously for the next three years, but each time, she stood up, a little bit stronger than before, until she was invincible. And one day, she looked in the mirror and saw the confident, loving, and pure woman that she had always known herself to be. It felt like a miracle but also like the way things were meant to be.

Life continued as normal. She had lost all faith in love, mostly through trial and error. Then, upon a fateful night, an argument arose between her and a friend. That friend had told her that she didn't understand her heartbreak. She implied that because men fawned over her, her life had been easy.

Well, that didn't sit very well with her.

After verbally annihilating her friend, she concluded that she had not moved over and beyond her past with the boy from before. She looked back at every relationship and mistake she had made, and everything became transparent. They were all to compensate for his lack of being there, futile attempts to create the same connection she'd had with him. She felt pathetic, but she was happy to finally understand her heart.

As fate may have orchestrated, and after some inquiry, she came to the shocking discovery that he was very much alive and well. The knowledge of his death had apparently been a hoax mutual friends had created to separate them. But he seemed healthy, happy. And that was all she'd ever wanted. Although joyously aglow, she was nervous to approach him. She didn't want to recreate the hardships of the past.

So when she contacted him again, it was not with the intention of retrieving the love they'd shared, but with the intention of settling a wound within her, and to clear up any lies he may have heard about her, to show him that she still cared. But she was so afraid that he would not welcome her in his life again.

Of course, after one phone call, hearing his voice after three solid years of silence, she *knew*. Quite like she did once before. She still loved him as much. And he still loved her, even more this time. But they were hesitant. They wanted to know if what they thought they had was as real as it felt. After all, she had only seen his face in pictures.

So when she went up to see him, she wasn't very surprised. Gazing into his eyes, caressing his face, kissing his lips, and even watching the manner in which he walked. It was exactly as she'd dreamed as a child. And she knew, now more than ever: He was the love of her life.

And they both discovered something precious that perhaps they had always known. Their love was painted in dreams and written in the stars. But beyond all these things, their love was as infinite as the soul.



Clifford Hui

FICTION

Clifford Hui is fully retired and writes fiction when he's in the mood. Some of his work has appeared in The Yolo Crow Literary Magazine, The Storyteller Magazine, The Cynic Online Magazine, Fiction on the Web, The Green Silk Journal, and The Wandering Army. When he's not writing, his mood revolves around his collection of aloha shirts, his garden, and his main squeeze. He lives and writes in Concord, California.

"Our Choices"

Felix entered my life when my son, Dan, brought him home from the bird store. Like other sun conures, Felix displayed a brilliant blaze of sun colors. His head and body glowed fiery orange, flickering between yellow and red at different angles, and his wings displayed yellow feathers trimmed in green. A white ring outlined his dark eyes, highlighting the intensity of his gaze.

As Dan started high school, he researched the many birds available and decided that a sun conure had what he wanted in a pet bird. Sun conures, small members of the parrot family, grow to slightly larger than a parakeet and can live to fifty years. Dan saved his money from mowing lawns and washing cars, and after discussions with me, he brought Felix into our family. Felix was a chick too young to fly and barely old enough to feed himself, so he required a lot of attention. Dan provided it. He hand-fed Felix bits of apple and birdseed and talked to him at every opportunity.

As Felix grew, he and Dan became great pals. Felix hopped or climbed to the side of his cage nearest to Dan when Dan came home from school. He fluttered his wings and hopped from one foot to the other until Dan let him out. He climbed all over Dan, exploring everything, nibbling on Dan's ear, climbing around on Dan's shirt, tasting the buttons, climbing down inside to explore, and hanging upside down from the hem of the shirt when he emerged from the bottom. When Dan settled in to do his homework, Felix sat on his shoulder or the back of his chair. Dan invited many of his friends over to meet his new pal. Felix was friendly with everyone and would sit on an offered finger or perch on a handy shoulder to investigate earrings, eyeglasses, and buttons.

Sometimes Felix flew across the room to perch on Dan's shoulder. Because Dan didn't even try to "house train" Felix, Dan usually wore a small towel across his shoulders. When he didn't, he often had to change shirts earlier than planned. Even so, Dan always enjoyed these visits.

"Hi, Felix. How's my pal today?"

"Worbl worbl."

"Oh, I know how it is, believe me. Some days are just a drag, and others are just hoppin'. This is one of the draggier days, isn't it?"

"Chip-chip. Muddir, muddir, muddir."

"Well, we could always play checkers if you had a bigger beak. Maybe you'll grow one later. Why don't you work on that?"

"Cherp. Muddir, chip."

"I know. I know. Sometimes life just doesn't seem fair. I'll get you a cracker. A good cinnamon graham cracker always brightens a bird's day, doesn't it?"

Dan got out a small piece of cracker from Felix's personal cracker box under the kitchen counter and walked back to his cage. He leaned down so his pal could step onto the top of his cage. Then he offered the cracker.

"Tweet." With careful attention, Felix took it from Dan's fingers with his beak. Felix then balanced on one foot while he used the other to hold the cracker and proceeded to whittle away at its edges, producing a gentle shower of crumbs.

After Felix could fly for a while, we discussed clipping his wings. Our major concern was that Felix would fly through an open door and be gone. That, we agreed, would be a tragedy. With clipped wings, Felix's opportunities to fly away through an open door would be eliminated. However, so would his independence around the house. We didn't know how much a flying bird's self-image was bound to his ability to fly, so we feared that clipping his wings would change the personality that brought us so much pleasure. After much discussion, we decided we would be cautious about opening outside doors around Felix, and his wings would remain unclipped. Felix continued his life as an active and aerial member of the household.

When Dan went away to college a few years later, I became Felix's caretaker. Every day, I gave him clean water and fresh fruit, and I reloaded his seed dish. During the day, I offered him a peanut or a piece of cinnamon graham cracker as a treat. Dan came home often that first year and got a summer job in town. But in the years after that, his visits home became rarer, and he got summer jobs on the campus at college. Felix and I grew closer.

Mature sun conures are one-person birds. In contrast to the behavior of their youth, when they get older, they bond with only one person. They ignore or scold everyone else. Felix matured and developed this behavior with me after Dan left for college. And so, Felix became my bird, and I became his person.

By this time, Marj, my wife, had been taken by cancer for about a decade. Marj and I had had a great life together, successfully meeting the challenges of two careers, raising a son, and the myriad other issues that arise in life. When she died, I was devastated. In the next ten years, some friendships loosened while others grew stronger. My friendship with Barbara, a close friend of Marj's, provided a friendship that grew stronger. She was always understanding and helpful as Dan and I wended our way without Marj. I spent more and more time with Barbara.

Felix had a cage large enough for a full-size parrot, with bars, not wires, almost as high as my shoulder, making its wheels a useful feature whenever I needed to move it. I always imagined its dark forest-green color enabled Felix to feel as though he were in his native habitat, although he'd never seen a forest. For most of the time, one of its

several doors stood open, and when hungry or thirsty, he just clambered down inside where his dishes awaited him.

Felix spent his days on top of his "room," surveying my domestic life. From his vantage point, he could see the family room with its television, the kitchen and dining area beyond. He also had a good view of the door to the garage so he could see me leave for work in the morning. When I returned in the evening after a day of running the advertising department at the local paper, he greeted me with an ear-splitting "SKREE-SKREE!" I always gave him a treat afterwards, and we talked about the day's events.

Felix also had a clear view of the front door and the frosted glass panels on each side of it. When Felix saw the blurry images of visitors through the frosted glass, he announced them. Barbara, my most frequent visitor, stopped ringing the doorbell.

At night, Felix slept on top of his cage in a tent-like hutch I had constructed there. I covered his hutch and cage down past his open door with a large piece of cloth so he felt private and secure. He entered his cage by climbing down inside his cloth cover, and sometimes I found him inside having breakfast when I uncovered his cage in the morning. He looked up to see who disturbed his meal and then, after giving me his it's only-you look, continued eating.

After our respective breakfasts on weekend mornings, Felix sat on my shoulder (on a towel), and we read the paper together. Afterwards, I put a half page on the bottom of his cage. He clambered down below and spent the rest of the morning shredding the paper. After finishing, he climbed to the top of his cage and let out a "SKREE-SKREE!" in his best ear-splitting declaration.

I usually handed him a peanut. "Peanut, Felix. Peanut." He took it in his beak as though it were a delicate gem. He balanced on one foot, held the peanut shell upright with the other, and shredded the top of it, exposing the prize inside. At a leisurely pace, he took small bites of the nut meat and mashed them against the inside of his upper beak with his tongue, as though savoring each morsel before swallowing. When he finished with the first nut in the shell, he started on the next one below. Felix did not rush eating a peanut. Being one of his special pleasures, he enjoyed it as long as possible.

Because Felix removed pieces of fruit clinging to his beak by shaking his head, there were bits of orange, apple, and banana stuck to the inside of his cage bars and some on the nearby walls and the surrounding floor. I could clean the walls and floors with water, a little soap, and a brush. The cage, however, needed the use of a hose, something best done out in the yard. The multicolored flecks of fruit that formed a fuzzy coating on the inside of Felix's cage testified to the cage's ground-zero status for Felix's beak cleaning.

We could coax the young Felix into a smaller transport cage before we opened the sliding glass door to move his cage outside for cleaning. The mature Felix, however, hated the transport cage, and I had to force him into it. This elicited lots of screaming and wing beating. I hated that part. So one day at cage-cleaning time, I tried a compromise.

I set up a perch on a table in the main room along with some peanuts and crackers. From there Felix could look out the sliding glass door to see me in the yard cleaning his cage while he worked on his treats. I wanted him to see his cage so that he knew that his personal room, his home, his sanctuary, had not gone away. I hosed it down, scrubbed it with nontoxic biodegradable soap, rinsed, and dried it.

I rolled it up to the sliding glass door. Felix watched me. I slid open the door and, with my back to Felix, started to pull his cage into the room. I felt the brush of wing feathers pass my ear. My heart skipped a beat as I looked up. Felix had flown through the open door and was outside. I saw him sitting on top of his cage, ready to ride it back in.

After I brought them both inside, I smiled at him as I closed the sliding door. "Well, Felix, it sure is good to have your own room back, isn't it?"

"Chip-chip."

"It's all clean now, but you probably don't care about that part."

He put his head back and let out a "SKREE-SKREE!"

He remained on top of his cage while I reassembled his sleeping hutch and hung his toys back inside. When I returned his food dishes, now reloaded, he went in to eat.

After that first time, he always ate his snacks with one eye on me cleaning his cage. When I opened the door to bring his cage back inside, he always flew past me and sat on top, riding his cage back into the house. It became our routine.

After Dan had finished college and had been pursuing his own life for a few years, the house seemed larger than I needed. When I came home from work or from an evening with Barbara or my other friends, Felix's greetings from across the room almost echoed in the emptiness. Downsizing the house looked attractive, but moving my household seemed so daunting. Moreover, breaking away from the echoes of Marj's presence in the house might be wrenching. How would it feel to leave it? To be in my "own" house? Marj and I had remodeled and redecorated this house together. We had a lot of emotional equity in it. The convenience of a smaller house may not be worth the inner turmoil of leaving this one. I discussed moving with Felix.

"What do you think about moving, Felix? Would you like to live in a new house? You could keep your same room. I'd make sure you wouldn't have to give up your room."

Felix cocked his head and looked at me with one eye.

"We could move to a smaller house so we could talk to each other even though we are at opposite ends of the house. What do you think of that?"

He went to his food dish and started poking around in his seed dish.

"Maybe our new house will have a better view through the window for you. Would you like to see lots of trees like a forest? Or maybe you'd like colorful flowers. What do you think?"

Felix started eating his seeds. When Felix ate seeds, he shelled them in his beak and spit out the hulls. A steady rain of hulls fell towards the bottom of his cage. Some

landed in his seed dish, and he had to push past them to get to the whole seeds. When the hulls got too deep, he brushed them out of his way with a couple of quick sideways flicks of his beak, scattering hulls and seeds everywhere. Despite my best efforts at sweeping, the floor near his cage remained perennially crunchy.

"Our move could be a big adventure. Would you like to have a big adventure?" Felix raised his head up from his seed dish and looked at me. Then he went back to eating.

"At least we would stay in town. I wouldn't have to get a new job or new friends. You probably don't care about that part. You scold everyone except me, anyway. In fact, when I have friends over, you make such a screeching racket, I have to cover your cage to quiet you down. I wish you would at least be friends with Barbara."

Felix ignored me.

After dinner one evening, I watered the houseplants with Felix perched on my shoulder, supervising and occasionally offering advice. After finishing, I thought I would pour the water remaining in my watering can into the potted plants outside the back door. Usually, I put Felix in or on his cage before I opened the door. This time, however, we were having such a great visit that I hated to end it.

"If I step outside for just a minute, Felix, would you stay right here on my shoulder with me?"

"Cherp."

I made clicking noises to sooth him as I eased open the door. I stepped out into the darkness the one step to the nearest pot. I could feel Felix shifting weight from one foot to the other and back again. I made more clicking sounds. With my most soothing voice, I tried to keep him calm. I bent down to water the plant, and Felix launched from my shoulder with the sound of whirring wings and a rush of air.

I looked up to see him flying back into the house, across the room, and landing on the rim of the potted plant by the wall farthest from the door. Then he walked on the rim around to the far side of the pot.

I approached him while offering words of support and held out my hand so he could climb onto my finger. I held him close to my face as I walked him back to his cage. "Everything's okay now, Felix. We're not going back out there. It's pretty scary when everything is dark, isn't it? We'll just be in the house now. You're home. Home." I put him into his cage, and he stepped off my finger. He remained inside for the rest of the evening, not even venturing up to his hutch by the time I covered his cage that night.

I looked through the housing ads to see what was on the market. I wanted a small house with a pleasant backyard. It also needed a large door to the back, so I could get Felix's cage outside to clean it. And I wanted the house close enough to downtown so that I could continue to walk or bicycle to most of the places I frequented. There were not many choices. I drove by a few candidates but rejected them for different reasons.

Between the challenge of moving my household and the paucity of housing options, I put off making a final decision.

One sunny spring morning, from his perch on my shoulder, Felix had helped me water the potted plants inside the house once again. I eyed the thirsty plant in the pot outside the back door. "What do you think, Felix? Shall we water that plant outside? You can be a brave bird this time and stay on my shoulder, can't you?"

"Chip, chip." He walked across the back of my neck to my other shoulder.

"It's not dark like the first time we did this."

He fluttered his wings.

"Today is very bright, so it won't be scary."

I made clicking sounds as I walked to the door and eased it open. I looked at Felix. He had bent down slightly, sort of crouching. I stepped outside. "Felix, you're such a brave bird. You're very calm." I emptied the watering can into the pot, all the while making clicking sounds, and turned to enter the house. Then, I felt a gust of wind generated by two small wings, and Felix's feet left my shoulder. I jerked my head up just in time to see him disappear over the roof of the house.

"Felix! Felix!" Panic rose into my throat. I ran to the front of the house but couldn't see him anywhere. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I checked the trees nearest the house but saw no orange fluff anywhere. I gasped for air.

Felix was gone. I felt sick. A rush of thoughts crowded into my head. Why did I do something so foolish? Just because he seemed at ease with his life with me didn't mean he would never choose to leave. How would he fare out there on his own? Could he find enough food? Would he avoid cats? He'd never even seen a cat.

I pulled his cage into the backyard. If he flew by, he could recognize it as his home. I grabbed a few peanuts and graham crackers and went out to walk through the neighborhood. I walked up and down those familiar streets and checked every tree while calling, "Felix! Felix!" An hour later, my agony had not eased.

Back home, I put fresh fruit and seeds into his cage and peanuts and graham crackers by his hutch on top. I looked out at his cage frequently, and sometimes I stepped outside. I wanted to see Felix perched on the fence or someplace close. I wanted him to fly over to me and to land on my shoulder. I wanted him to chirp to me about his adventures. I never saw a sign of him.

For the rest of the weekend, I dragged myself around the house, worrying about Felix. I kept looking out at his cage, hoping so hard to see him that I almost expected to see him. I had my morning coffee without a warm bird on my shoulder, and I felt cold. I cleaned the seed hulls from the floor where his cage had been, and the area remained clean all that day and all the days after that. I went about my weekend morning routine without the soft background sounds of a bird shredding a newspaper.

A week passed with no sign of Felix. I told myself that he would never return, but in my heart I held on to a shred of hope. Barbara was very sympathetic, even though Felix had always screeched at her. After two more weeks, I decided to sell his cage. With this final acceptance, I felt relieved. A chapter, the Felix chapter, of my life had closed.

To mark the occasion, the next morning I went to the neighborhood coffee purveyor to read my paper over a cinnamon-enhanced latte. As I walked home, I noticed the sky seemed to have a sparkle in its blueness, and the air carried the mixed fragrances of the many flowers in bloom. It seemed like the perfect day to think about a new start to my life. Maybe moving wouldn't be such an ordeal. I wouldn't have Felix's needs to consider, just my own. And then there's Barbara...

I'd talk to Barbara about moving. I hadn't told her I had been considering it, and now that it was more likely, a talk with her might help. She seemed to understand what I needed and was always supportive.

As I approached the front of my house, my thoughts were interrupted by a familiar "SKREE-SKREE!" I looked up, and there in the lowest branch of a nearby tree perched a familiar fluff of orange, yellow, and green feathers. I stopped and looked up at him with a smile that went all the way to my heart. "Hello, Felix. How're you doing?"

Felix rapidly shifted his weight back and forth between his feet and fluttered his wings. Then he tilted his head back. "SKREE-SKREE!" he replied.

"Have you had some good adventures? Are you ready to come home now? Let's go home." I held out my hand so he could perch on my index finger. "Home. Home. Let's go home."

He turned his head to look at me with one eye.

"Let's go home now, Felix. You can have a cracker." I paused, then repeated, "Cracker." I saw no response. "You can have a peanut. A peanut." He rapidly shifted his weight between his feet and fluttered his wings again. He seemed almost persuaded.

I stepped closer with my arm outstretched. He could almost step onto my finger when he relocated himself to a higher branch. I couldn't reach him there.

I took a slow step back, still holding my arm out to him. "Let's go home, Felix. Home. Peanut." He tilted his head and looked at me. I took another step back, watching him, hoping to draw him to me. "Peanut, Felix. Peanut." I paused and then took one more step back.

Felix launched himself from the branch, flying toward my outstretched arm. Then, in a rush of wing beats, he flew past my arm, over my head, and across the street.

I watched his bright colors get smaller and smaller as he passed over the neighborhood roof tops. He disappeared when his flight curved to the right behind some sycamore trees. I stood there in the morning quiet, straining my eyes at the blue sky, searching for a fluttering puff of colorful feathers. The sky remained empty.

Without Felix to attend to, my life was much simpler and freer. I didn't have the hassle of seeing that he always had a supply of fresh fruit, clean water, and seeds. I didn't have to clean his cage and scrub the nearby floor and walls. But I still missed him. I missed the chats we had. I missed him flying over to sit on my shoulder to visit. I

missed how we understood each other.

Although he'd had many opportunities to leave, Felix repeatedly chose to stay. In the end, however, Felix changed his mind. When I saw him that day in the tree by my house, he could have come back with me if he wanted. He had to choose between his old life of safety and comfort but confinement, and a new life of excitement and danger but freedom. After trying it for a few weeks, Felix knew what a new life had to offer. He made his choice.

Now was a good time for me to make mine.





Wade Fox

FICTION

Wade Fox lives outside of Denver with his wife and two children. He has spent many years involved with writing and books, including working as a bookseller, freelance writer, and as an editor for Lonely Planet Publications, Whole Earth Review, and Ten Speed Press. He has published fiction and poetry and has taught writing. He currently teaches at the Community College of Denver.

"The Kiss"

As a teenager, I used to curl up in the bottom of the hall closet among my mother's musty old dresses that had fallen from the hangers. It's an obvious metaphor—one I didn't get at the time—but it also happened to be true. Of course, I did it for a practical reason. We didn't have air conditioning in our house, and when the summers started to heat up, it was cool, comfortable, and dark in the closet. And I liked the privacy.

When I couldn't get time in the practice room at school, I used to go in the closet to practice the piano. I played scales in my head. Sometimes, I would just close my eyes and watch the music on the staff and hear the notes playing. This was something I thought everyone could do when I was younger, and I was surprised to find out was unique. I could lie there in the dark for hours, hearing whole songs that way. Other times I would see the keyboard and my hands playing the music. Some people might say I was in the closet for other, less-obvious reasons, but this wasn't true. I just enjoyed my time in the closet.

That's where I was when my sister brought Bobby McMillan home. My mom was working late at the club, and I guess Meg thought Bobby and she would have the house all to themselves. I heard the front door slam as they came in. I heard a low voice but didn't recognize it. Meg laughed at something. I stayed where I was, enjoying the safety of my hiding place. It was nice to listen to the sounds of the world without participating in them. Meg turned on some music, some eighties pop she was into at the time. And I stayed where I was, just listening. I thought briefly about how I would explain myself when I had to leave, but then I thought, why leave?

When the door opened, I tried not to look surprised. The boy was muscular, though not tall, with weightlifter's arms and a stocky upper body that made him look like a bowling pin balanced on end or one of those musclemen in old cartoons. If standing, I would have been taller than him, though I was a year or two younger. He wore a football jersey and running shorts, and he was barefoot. A jock—he was definitely Meg's type. He stood on his toes and looked for something on the top shelf then shouted over his shoulder, "I don't see them."

When he turned back around, he saw me and stopped. He ran a hand through his dark hair. He arched one eyebrow. "Hi," he said. I nodded and tried not to look like anything was unusual about being curled up in the bottom of a closet. His eyes looked

sleepy, and his full lips were pinched up, with one corner turned up in a wry smile as if the two of us had just shared a private joke that made him want to laugh. I wanted to kiss him right then. He shut the door, and I was back in the dark with my thoughts.

I had just begun to ponder the strange feeling that had come over me at the sight of those ripe lips when the door opened again. Meg stood in the doorway. "What are you doing?" she said. She glared down on me with all the scorn a sister could muster. "Jesus! Grow up and get out of there." She grabbed a cookie tin off the top shelf then slammed the door.

Out in the hall, Meg's door was closed. I turned the knob gently, but it was locked. Placing my ear against the door, all I could hear was the ocean roaring far away. I went in the kitchen and grabbed the last four Oreos from the bag and ate them while I sat at the kitchen counter. I brushed the crumbs onto the floor and kicked them under the counter. Then, I made myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and went into the backyard, slowly sliding the glass door shut. The grass was tall and brown, and the flower beds along the house were planted with hard dirt and dry weeds. We never worked out here and almost never came out here after my dad left. I sat in the flower bed with my back against the wall, in the shade under Meg's window, and ate my sandwich. The window was open—all our windows were open that time of year—and I could hear Meg and the boy talking and the slow creak of the springs in her bed. When their voices stopped, I knew she was kissing him, kissing that smile meant only for me.

I was sitting on the couch, playing piano on the edge of the coffee table, when Bobby came out of Meg's room. My fingers drummed across the wood, and the music sounded in my head. Bobby stood, shirtless, in the entrance to the room, watching me. And I watched him, though I tried not to show it. I rocked soulfully at my instrument, playing at different tempos, hearing my rhythm section behind me. When I played like this, I could convince myself that I was actually at an instrument, that I was not wearing away the edge of a battered, chipped, and stained old coffee table. "What are you playing?" Bobby said, and the music crashed to a halt.

I looked up, and again I saw the smile, the shared joke. "Monk," I said, wanting to say something more.

He just nodded. "Got a smoke?" he said. I said yes and ran down the hall to my mom's room. I rummaged in the bottom of her panty drawer and came out with a couple Winstons and a book of matches. Back in the living room, Meg and Bobby were sitting on the couch with their arms around each other.

She looked contented and happy, willing to put up with me for a few minutes at least. "Hey, brat," she said when I entered the room. Her curls were a bit matted. She wore a gray pair of sweat shorts and a faded T-shirt with a picture of the Go-Go's on it. Like Bobby, she was barefoot, and her toenails were painted pink. The two of them rubbed their feet together. I hated her.

I struck a match and lit a cigarette, breathing in the hot sulfur and tobacco. Passing the smoke to Bobby, I let my hand touch his. His hands looked enormous next to my

slim fingers. I lit another cigarette for myself.

"Bobby," Meg said, "this is my little brother, Eric. He thinks he's John Coltrane." "Not Coltrane. He's a horn player."

"Thelonius Monk," Bobby said. I admired the natural way he smoked. He touched the cigarette to his lips and inhaled luxuriously, like a French film star. "Straight No Chaser," Bobby said and let the smoke trail out of his nostrils.

"How did you know?" I said.

"Music appreciation," he said, then snorted. If I didn't love him before, I loved him then.

They left not long after that. "Nice to meet you," Bobby said with a smile and a wave as they walked out the front door. I had to agree. I peeked out the window as they drove away in Bobby's truck, waiting until they turned the corner. Then, I waited for several minutes, watching the street. I scrambled to Meg's room and quickly scanned her dresser and bookshelf. They were both covered with dolls and knickknacks. My mom wouldn't be home till late, but I left the door open. I didn't want Bobby and Meg to come back without me hearing them. Then I ran into the front room and locked the front door. I took another look out the window. I dug through Meg's drawers and found the bra I liked, and I pulled a red dress from her closet. I ran down the hall to my room, as though someone were in the house with me and I was trying not to be seen. I closed and locked my door. I was excited and scared, breathing quickly, and my heart was beating rapidly. I rummaged through the bottom drawer of my dresser until I found one of Meg's lipsticks that I had hidden there.

I kicked off my sneakers, pulled off my T-shirt and jeans. I pulled the bra over my shoulders and struggled to hook it behind my back. Then I stuffed it with knee socks. I hated how I looked. It never looked real until I put on the dress. I looked sad, skinny, and pale in that stuffed bra and a pair of white briefs. I pulled the dress over my shoulders and wiggled to fit into it. That was when it felt most real, and I felt most feminine. Because I couldn't see myself, I could imagine myself with full hips, a slim waist. I turned to inspect myself in the mirror and squeezed at the bra until my breasts looked more natural. My legs were pale and skinny, and the dress showed off my shoulders, which were still as thin as a girl's. I took a small mirror from under my bed and inspected my face. Although my face was smooth, I still looked wrong. Leaning close to the mirror, I slowly applied lipstick. My lips were a deep blood red but disappointingly thin.

Dropping the mirror onto the dresser, I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes. I imagined that Bobby was on the bed with me. Softly, he touched my face, my full red lips with his fingers. He leaned toward me, and slowly, softly, we kissed. I stuck my hand under the dress, continuing to imagine Bobby and me together.

The next time I saw Bobby, I was at school, sitting alone at one of the vandalized picnic tables scattered around the vast open square of cement that students knew as

the "Flat." Desultory groups of kids sprawled on and around the tables in many different poses of indifference. Loners like me tended to sit on the cement planters, but if we got there early, we were guaranteed a table by ourselves since no one would face the shame of sitting with an outcast, which I most assuredly was. My biology class before lunch was nearby, so I sat alone, eating a dry peanut butter sandwich and watching the empty center of the Flat. That space was taboo. No one could endure the scrutiny of their peers as they crossed that vast emptiness. All during lunch, kids skirted its edges but never dared cross it directly.

I was munching on my peanut butter sandwich and glumly reflecting on the upcoming PE class and the general pointlessness of my life, trying not to look directly at anyone, which predators might perceive as a threat, when Bobby strolled out to the center of the Flat with a football tucked under his arm. He shouted, "Chuckie!" and pitched the ball straight at his friend's head.

At the time, Chuckie was looking the other direction, talking to a girl. He wore a football jersey and a Stetson. Chuckie turned, holding his hat on with one hand, and snatched the ball out of the air with the other hand in one fluid movement. Both of the boys laughed, acting as though no one was there but the two of them. I watched Bobby and envied his self-possession. The two of them tossed the ball and shouted back and forth in the hot center of the Flat. I watched Bobby move; his movements had an economy I could never duplicate—short snaps of the arm to pass the ball, quick spins, just enough movement but not too much.

Just as I was thinking this, Bobby saw me. Chuckie seemed to disappear instantly from his awareness. "Hey, Eric," he shouted, pointing at me with the tip of the football, and I flinched, thinking I was about to have a football rocketed at my head. Then Bobby trotted toward me. Chuckie turned back to the girl he was chatting up.

Bobby dropped casually onto the bench across from me. "How's your sister?" he said.

"Hey Bobby," someone shouted, "who's your boyfriend?" Laughter scattered around the Flat. Bobby flipped them off without looking. "What a bunch of dicks, huh?"

I was surprised that Bobby was even talking to me, but that was what I had liked about him from the beginning. He had seemed friendly to me. He seemed to actually like me, and he seemed unafraid of the teenage social system that said he couldn't be my friend.

"You still playing music without a piano?" he said. I nodded, so enamored I was afraid to speak.

"That's amazing," he said. He shook his head, and that smile returned. "How do you do that? You can hear all those songs?"

I took a bite of my sandwich. I hadn't ever really talked to people outside my family about it. "I can just hear it. It sounds real. I can see the keys, hear the music." Then I looked down, afraid of watching his mouth anymore.

"You're a fucking genius. It's too bad you don't have a piano of your own to play." He watched the people wandering around the square and avoiding eye contact with

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each other, trying to be invisible. I watched him, carefully, stealing looks at the side of his face. "Maybe your sister can bring you over to play on ours some time," he said, smiling at me. "My parents used to try to get me to play—but I'm tone deaf."

"That would be great," I said, forcing myself to look straight at him. He was blindingly beautiful to me right then, his kindness, his warmth.

"Great," he said, standing quickly. "Chuckie!" he shouted and rocketed the football at his friend. "Have Meg bring you," he turned back and said. "She knows where I live."

I just nodded, and he jogged away across the square, ending our first private audience.

Soon after, Meg drove me over to Bobby's house. All the way, she chatted with me and seemed happy and friendly. I thought of Bobby and talking to him. I couldn't believe that he had invited me over. I looked out the window and played love songs in my head. I was thinking about his smile and the way he had talked to me so easily, and I wasn't noticing Meg.

When we got there, Meg pulled up in front of Bobby's house, and I climbed out of the car. The house was a lot bigger than ours, in an area of town with old trees and large houses set back from the street, with immaculate lawns tended by gardeners. As I climbed out of the car, I thought of what I was going to say at the door. I imagined him leading me to a grand piano, listening to me play. I imagined all sorts of things before I heard the door on Meg's side slam behind me as I was walking up to the door. "What are you doing?" I said.

"I'm coming in," she said as she trotted up the walk, smiling the happy smile that I only now understood.

"You don't have to. I know Bobby. I'll be fine," I said, hoping that, miraculously, those words would drive her away.

"Don't be a moron," she said, laughing. "Do you think he wants to see you? Mom didn't want him at our house, and I needed an excuse to come here. What a dork."

She sailed past me and rang the bell, and I slowly followed her up the steps, noticing only then that Meg was very dressed up and made up. I stood on the step with her and looked her over. Her hair was in ringlets, and she wore bright red lipstick. This was clearly a set-up.

When Bobby came to the door, he wore his usual jersey and jeans, but he looked her over and whistled. Then he winked at me. "Your sister's one hottie," he said, to my embarrassment. Meg laughed and told him to shut up. Then they kissed as I watched. She leaned into him and tilted her head up, and he touched her face gently with one hand. I felt like crying.

Bobby led us in. The house was huge and clean, nothing like ours, and in the heat, it felt cool. Off the foyer, a staircase ran upstairs, and another room to the left held bookcases and a grand piano. Nothing looked like it was ever used. Bobby smiled at me, and he said, "Help yourself," and waved at the piano. Then he led Meg upstairs, leaving me standing alone in the foyer. I didn't know what to do. What if someone was

there? I looked in the room, and it was empty.

I slowly walked to the piano bench and sat down, but I was thinking of Bobby and Meg. I began to play, softly, and I imagined Bobby's body. I imagined him beneath me. I imagined kissing his body, his face, his mouth. I played a soft and lonely blues song until Meg came in, smiling, and took me home.

In the next few weeks, I returned several times to play, always watching as Meg and Bobby laughingly wandered upstairs, leaving me alone. Bobby was always friendly and sometimes spoke to me for a while, but I never spent any time with him. Still, because of his kind nature, I imagined he was my friend. I always imagined spending time alone with him. At school, I looked for him in the halls and in the distance, and I returned to the Flat, hoping I would see him and talk to him. Sometimes, I thought I saw him in the distance, and a surge of excitement ran through me. I almost shouted his name then realized it was Doug Felt, an asshole that would rather kill me than talk to me. When I did see Bobby, I would wave or try to talk to him now.

Once, I saw him in the hall with a group of his friends, a group of football jocks hanging in the hall together. They were all tall, broad shouldered, and menacing in their matching letter jackets, but I didn't notice any of them. I ran straight to Bobby, who was leaning against a locker and talking, his back turned slightly to me so I could see the right side of his face. I almost shouted his name because I was so happy to see him, but instead, I just touched his shoulder.

He turned, looking suddenly surprised, and immediately I was aware that he was frightened. He looked around at the other guys quickly before looking back to me. And then he returned to his laconic pose. He relaxed into the locker and crossed his arms. I couldn't see anyone but him.

"Hey, what's up, Eric?" he said.

"Bobby," I said, realizing I didn't know what I wanted to say to him, "can I come by tonight?"

There was some laughter from the group, low and a little dangerous sounding, and I looked up, suddenly aware of the group that surrounded me. They were all watching me. "He wants to come by, Bobby," someone said, and he laughed a predatory laugh.

"This is Meg's little brother," Bobby said.

I looked back at Bobby at the sound of his voice. "I want to play your piano," I said, and the group laughed even louder, making me realize I was in danger.

"Your piano," another voice snorted. "Maybe he should play your organ," and the whole group laughed.

Bobby looked worried. "Fuck off, you guys." He turned to me, scowling. "Eric, can you just get lost," he said, and he gave me a small shove to get me moving.

I turned and walked away, listening to the laughter and derisive comments of the group but thinking of Bobby and the look of anger on his face.

After that, I didn't see Bobby for a while. I wasn't invited to his house, and Meg

went to see him alone. I lay around the house, mooning for him, and imagined talking to him as I played love songs. I called his house a few times and hung up when someone answered, and once I left a message on his machine, acting friendly and casual, pretending nothing had happened and asking if I could use his piano. I waited, but he didn't call back. I wanted him, to see him, so badly that I began walking the streets after school and the halls at school, trying to find him. I went to the football field after school and sat in the stands to watch him play. I was afraid someone would notice, as I wanted Bobby to notice.

Finally, on a Saturday night when I was home alone, I decided to go see him. I took a bus across town, clutching a brown bag with bottle of Schnapps I had taken from my mom's cabinet and had been drinking for courage. I was warm in the back of the bus, breathing peppermint fumes and imagining what I might say to him. Thinking of it now, I didn't know what I imagined would happen, except that I believed that somehow we would become friends. I didn't expect anything from him, but I imagined his mouth, his cheek. I imagined that we would hang out and talk and that somehow we would be friends again. I bent down so the bus driver couldn't see me and took a furtive drink from the Schnapps in the brown paper bag.

The bus let me off a few blocks from Bobby's house. It was a cloudless summer night, and through the trees that arched over the street, I could see the moon. Crickets sang in the grass, and somewhere in the distance, I could hear voices. I was comfortably drunk, and I strolled slowly through the empty suburb.

As I walked, I imagined what I might say to him. I couldn't think of a good reason why I was there on Saturday, half drunk, halfway across town. I thought of every variation on "I was in the neighborhood." None of them worked, and I decided that I wouldn't think about it.

The house was all lit up when I got there, and several cars were parked in the driveway. I could hear laughing and shouting from the backyard. I almost turned back right then. I should have turned back, but my Schnapps warmed my heart and led me on. I thought that maybe I could just wander into the party and not be noticed. Timorously, I walked up to the front door. I could see a couple guys in the front room through a big window, drinking beer and laughing. I knew them: jocks who had harassed me in the halls before, brutal young men who seemed exuberant in their strength. Drunk, I wasn't scared of them, though I should have been. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. I knocked again. I thought about turning around, but I suddenly realized that I had an excuse. I rang the bell bravely. I thought of how happy Bobby might be to see me. I pulled the bottle of Schnapps out of my pocket and shook it and listened to it slosh. I even had an offering. Finally, after I rang the bell again, the door opened, but it wasn't Bobby who answered the door...It was another guy from the football team, a big linebacker. He wove in the doorway, obviously drunk. He towered over me and looked like a giant shadow with the light behind him.

"Is Bobby here?" I said, barely whispering. I thought about turning around, but it was too late.

The figure stepped onto the porch, very close to me, so that I could smell the beer on his breath. "Are you a friend of his?" He gestured at me with a beer can. I wasn't sure what the gesture meant.

I stepped back off the porch and mustered up enough nerve to speak. "I'm here for Bobby," I said in a quavery voice.

He stepped back and waved down the hall. "Come on in," he said, but his voice didn't sound welcoming.

I noticed a couple other guys had gathered in the hallway behind the hulking figure, and they were smiling and laughing. "Bobby," someone shouted, "your girlfriend is here," and there was more laughter.

I was about to run away when Bobby pushed his way through the crowd. "Eric, what are you doing here? Where's Megan?"

"She's not here," I said, feeling relief at seeing Bobby but noticing that he looked worried. He seemed unable to look directly at me. He kept looking around at the other boys. "I heard you were having a party, and I brought something to drink." I raised the bottle and shook it. "Just a little drink between friends, right?"

Bobby stood there watching me and not saying anything. "Are you gonna have a drink with your girlfriend, Bobby?" someone said.

"Shut up, asshole. This is Megan's little brother."

"Little sister, you mean. She's got a crush on you."

I looked around, suddenly realizing that I was surrounded; they were boys, but they were all bigger than me, muscular, clean-cut, healthy, all muscle and aggression. I backed away, looking at Bobby. He just watched me with the same anger as the rest of them. Tears formed in my eyes, and I felt my face constricting. When I backed far enough away, I turned and ran. I heard a bottle hit the street behind me and more laughter. "Run, faggot, run." I thought I heard Bobby laugh.

Several blocks away, I sat at the bus stop and drank some more Schnapps. I found myself crying, sobbing at the hate I felt from that crowd, from Bobby. Deep sobs shook me, and I let my head drop to my knees. I was there, waiting, not knowing when the bus might come, drinking and intermittently crying, when I heard the voices. In the distance I saw a group of the boys coming, huddled together, laughing, shouting. I looked quickly around for a place to hide, but there wasn't a place that seemed hidden enough. I got up and started to walk away from them, looking back occasionally, trying to be unnoticed. But then I heard a shout from them, and they started running toward me. I ran as fast as I could, dropping my bottle on the street and stumbling and panting. I was scared and confused. I couldn't believe what was happening. I felt like someone in a dream, unable to run fast enough, and then they were upon me. Hands grabbed me and pulled me around so that I was facing the group of boys who obviously hated me. "Where are you going, faggot?" one of them said. Right in the middle was Bobby. He looked angry and frightened.

"Bobby," I said, but he didn't say anything. I repeated his name softly. He just

watched me. He hated me for loving him. "But you're my friend," I said. My voice was choked, and I gasped for breath. I looked around me. I recognized all their faces and the faces hidden behind their faces. I wanted to run. I would have given anything to run. "I thought you liked me," I said to Bobby, and the other boys laughed at this. "Please," I said, and I looked at his beautiful mouth and thought that he was going to cry, the way his lip quivered.

Then he hit me hard in the face, and I fell against the boys behind me. I couldn't see. All I felt was pain, and I heard the other boys shout. "Faggot!" someone said. "Hit him," said someone else, and Bobby hit me again. Then, they were all hitting me, and I covered my head and cried and tried to curl in a ball, but they held me up and shouted like animals and hit me again and again.

Then someone said, "Come on. Let's go." I felt oddly distant.

Someone said, "Come on. Hurry." They let go of me, and I dropped to the sidewalk. My head hit the cement, and I saw a quick flash. Then I couldn't see really—just the cement a few inches from my face and the little sparkling flecks in the cement and a dirty wad of gum baked into the cement. The ground was still warm and comfortable from the day's heat, and I just lay there, watching a spot on the cement a few inches beyond my nose.

A sprinkler came on and chattered in the background. I could smell the wet grass. I lay there a long time. The crickets hummed. A dog barked. Blood dribbled from my face and pooled on the sidewalk in front of me. My face hurt; my body hurt. "But you're my friend," I said to no one. "I love you."

I didn't hear Bobby when he returned. He lifted me up and turned me around, and I collapsed into his arms. I was blinded by his truck's headlights. He held me up. "Are you all right?" he said. "I'm sorry, Eric. I'm sorry." He was crying.

I held on to him. His body was warm, and he smelled healthy, like warm bread. His eyes, only inches from mine, were red, and tears ran down his face, and snot ran from his nose. His lips were twisted as though he were the one who had taken the blows instead of giving them. I leaned into him, and he didn't pull away, and then I kissed him slowly, imagining that he returned the kiss, and again he didn't pull away. When I pulled back, his face and lips were smeared with my blood, and I was crying again.

He wiped his face with his sleeve. "I'm sorry."

He drove me home. He seemed scared—almost in shock. He kept repeating that he was sorry and asking if I was all right. He said several times that I should have stayed away. Once, he got very upset and shouted, "What did you come over for? Why didn't you stay away?" I was silent, listening to his steady tirade and watching the darkness zoom past.

When we arrived at my home, he pulled me out of his truck in front of the house and dropped me onto the lawn. He ran around to the other side of the truck and climbed in and then drove away. After a long time, I pushed myself up and stumbled to the front step. I struggled to get the key in the lock and open the door. The house was

dark. Leaving the lights off, I felt my way to the closet. I curled up in the bottom, among the musty smells of old clothes, and shut the door. I waited for the music. I tried to summon it, but all I saw were Bobby's lips, covered in my blood.







Katie Bohn

FICTION

Katie Bohn is a writer and lover of all things literary. She writes stories and essays by night, does PR for a Big Ten university by day, and blogs at www.the-decklededge.com/.

"When the Bough Breaks"

The strange man showed up at my door on a Tuesday morning, a day on which I never have visitors. I rarely have visitors at all these days, so I was startled when I heard the doorbell ring at 8:22 that morning. I struggled to get up from my old, sunken armchair and made my way to the door, knees creaking.

I peered through the blinds. The man was young, younger than me anyway, and he was shivering against the cold. He didn't have a hat covering his scruffy blond head, and I didn't see a scarf or gloves either. I guess not dressing for the weather is typical of young people these days. I wanted to invite him in and get him out of the cold, but I felt uneasy. I didn't know this man.

I had decided to turn around and wait for him to leave when he caught my eye through the blinds. His face lit up as he waved. Damn. I was caught.

"Dorothy Bensen? Hi," he said as I opened the door. "My name is Officer Pencek." He used a shivering hand to flash me his badge before drawing his arms back around himself.

I think at that moment I knew, somewhere deep down in my belly, why he was there, even before his next words.

"I'm here to talk to you about something that happened a long time ago." Here we go.

I don't remember inviting him in, but I must have because the next thing I remember is pouring two cups of hot tea in the kitchen as he sat down on the sofa in the next room. My hands shook as I carried the mugs through the entryway from the kitchen. He was taking off his coat, revealing nothing but a thin tee shirt underneath. I tutted softly to myself as I handed him his tea.

He nodded and smiled in thanks, holding the steaming mug close to himself, trying to absorb the heat. I sat down across from him and said nothing, waiting for him to begin.

Officer Pencek smiled nervously and pushed himself to the edge of the sofa, clearing his throat.

"You were six years old when Meredith Bloom disappeared," he said, cutting right to the chase. This wasn't a question but a fact.

I nodded. That was true.

"You were also the last one to see her alive."

Also true.

"Her killer was never caught."

I looked to the ceiling, remembering all those nights I spent in fear, sure he was

coming for me next.

"But now, we think we got him."

I closed my eyes tight, not wanting to revisit the past.

"How good is your memory of that night?"

I swallowed, trying to collect myself before answering.

"I remember everything."

* * *

Sixty-five years later, I still remember everything about that night. My memory may be going when it comes to doctors' appointments or where I left my glasses, but that night remains clear, no matter how much I wish it wouldn't. Snatches of it will come to me at the strangest moments, and Meredith's face still pops up in my dreams. It's always the same terrified expression.

It had been a perfect evening, just two weeks before Christmas. The night was still and clear and huge; fluffy clumps of snow fell silently from the sky. The street lights beamed on the street corners, illuminating the pavement just enough that we could see, but not so bright that it ruined the spell. The flakes fell lightly on the street, undisturbed by cars. I remember thinking that everyone in the world must be huddled in their houses; it was so quiet.

I was sitting in my room, staring out my window at the house across the street. That's where Meredith lived. She was my best friend. Everyone loved Meredith, kids and adults alike, but she was shy and didn't let most people in. But the two of us, we were like sisters. Oftentimes she would shine a flashlight into my window, blinking it on and off, and that signal meant she wanted to meet outside and play. The night was so pretty, I was praying I would see that light shine out of her window.

Around seven o' clock, I did. The light came, bright and insistent, and I wasted no time running to ask permission to go out. My feet thudded down the smooth floorboards in the hall, almost slipping in my socks as I rounded the corner to go down the stairs.

My parents were sitting at the kitchen table, Dad reading a newspaper and smoking a cigar, and Mama crocheting a hat for the baby that was supposed to come in the spring.

"Can I go outside and play with Meredith?" I asked, slightly out of breath as I stood with my hands on my hips.

Papa looked up, startled out of his reverie, but Mama just kept on crocheting. He looked at the clock and frowned.

"It's a little late, don't you think?" he said.

"And dark," Mama added, not looking up.

"Please?" I wheedled, standing on my tiptoes and clasping my hands together, hoping I looked cute.

Papa sighed but eventually said it was all right, probably so he didn't have to hear

me whine.

"Thank you!" I yelled as I raced out of the house and into the yard. Meredith was already waiting, grinning, and the soft light from the street lamps lit up her hair like a halo.

I loved Meredith fiercely—in a way I now believe to be possible only before husbands and babies, before life really happens. She was older than me, eight years old as of the month before, and taller, but more fragile than me somehow. She had shining blonde curly hair and deep brown eyes that seemed older than she was. Light freckles splashed her nose, and she was always laughing, even when a sadness showed up in her young eyes.

That night we clasped hands and ran through the crisp night air. We tried to make a snowman, but there wasn't quite enough snow yet. He looked crumpled and small. Then we lay in the middle of the street and made snow angels until a voice from cranky Miss Ambrose's house yelled that we shouldn't be in the road and that we'd wind up getting hit. We ran, giggling, into Meredith's yard and huddled together, conspiring about what to do next.

I stood there, my hands on her shoulders and my forehead pressed against hers, and forgot about everything else. There was no school or parents or anything bad in the world. There was just me and Meredith as we stood swirling and laughing in the snow.

Then we heard a slight crunch of snow behind us, and we stopped laughing. When we turned around, there he was. That's when he appeared.

* * *

"I have some headshots for you to look at," Officer Pencek said, reaching for his coat and pulling out a short stack of wallet-sized portraits out of the pocket. He laid them on the coffee table one by one, like he was dealing cards for a game of poker.

"I want you to look at these photos and tell me if any of them look like the man you saw that night."

Officer Pencek sat very still, not looking at me or the pictures, trying to ensure he didn't accidentally hint at which portrait he wanted me to choose, knowing if I picked the wrong guy, his theory would be toast.

I leaned forward and studied the photos. They were six yearbook photos from 1947, a year before Meredith disappeared. I scooted to the edge of the sofa and ran my eyes down the line. My heart sped up when I reached number five. There he was, with the same wide smile and dark, lank hair. The man in the sixth photo looked similar, had the same eyes, but not quite, not him. I reached out and tapped a finger on the creased and weathered photo.

"That's him."

The boogeyman has a face, and I saw it that night.

He came out of nowhere. One moment we were alone, and the next, we were accompanied by a strange nineteen-year-old man. A boy, really, but at the time he seemed so much older than we were. At first glance, I thought he was ugly. He had bad skin, small eyes, and greasy hair that flopped onto his forehead. But then he smiled, and his teeth were white and perfect, and when he spoke, his voice was like bells, clear and sweet in the winter air.

"Do you girlies want to go sledding?"

Sledding! The snow was falling faster now, and I figured he must know of a hill nearby that had enough piled up.

"I love sledding!" I said. Meredith started to shrink away, but I clasped her arm tight as I tried to keep myself from jumping up and down in excitement.

"Great!" the man said. "I know just the place. Come with me." He reached for Meredith's hand. Her eyes grew wide, and she shook her head, and when she didn't give it to him, he grabbed it.

"I just need my hat!" I said, and as I turned to run to my house, Meredith's eyes met mine, and it was like she was pleading with me not to go. She looked scared, so scared. But I wanted to go to sledding so badly that her face didn't register. I turned and ran inside, blowing past my parents as quickly as I could to try to avoid questions. The door slammed behind me, echoing through the street as I raced back outside.

When I reached Meredith's yard, huffing and puffing as I pulled the mittens Mama had knitted me onto my hands, she was gone. My smile quickly faded as I looked up and down the street and saw that my best friend and the strange man were now nowhere to be seen.

I drifted up and the down the street for a few minutes, scanning the neighborhood and softly calling Meredith's name. I was calm for those first few minutes; I simply thought that they had left without me, and I was bitterly disappointed. But I grew nervous when I remembered the look on her face when I left, and how swiftly he had grabbed for her hand. And now it was getting colder... Pushing the thoughts out of my head, I put my still-cold hands in my coat pockets and kept looking.

I eventually made my way to the huge elm tree on the edge of the deep woods that marked the end of our street. I was about to turn around, telling myself that Meredith must be sledding right now, that she had done this on purpose because she had wanted to have all the fun without me. But then I saw something at the foot of the tree and bent down to look closer.

It was Meredith's scarf. And it was covered in blood.

* * *

No, I had never forgotten that man. But until now, no one had thought to bring me

pictures. No one thinks kids remember anything. Or old ladies, for that matter.

"How did you find him?" I asked, clearing my throat.

"Deathbed confession from his own mother," Officer Pencek said, looking pleased with himself as he collected the photos and tucked them back in his jacket pocket. "We reopened the case and realized what a shoddy job they did back in 1948." He chuckled to himself, and I smiled thinly, indulging him.

"He was originally a person of interest," he continued, "but they let him go because his father was the minister of a church, and his mother covered for him with a false alibi."

At the word *minister*, I snapped back to attention. Son of the minister! I knew him, had known the Trolley family. Their house had been just a block or two down from ours; it had been even closer to Meredith's. My stomach grew sick at the idea of living so close to her killer, and I had to get up for a glass of water. All those nights I had spent clutching my covers to my chin, sure he was right outside my window, convinced he was coming after me next. Countless times I thought I caught glimpses of his hard, beady eyes or wide, bright smile but told myself he was miles and miles away...

I stood in the kitchen, gripping the counter, forgetting what I had gotten up for. And then, a faded memory of being in the minster's house: I couldn't have been more than three years old, and a strange teenage boy asked me if I wanted to go play in the woods with him before my mother came and ushered me away...

* * *

When I finally ran home and told my parents about Meredith being gone and finding her bloody scarf, they went straight across the street to her family's house. In those days, you didn't have to wait twenty-four hours to report someone as missing, and Meredith's mother became hysterical and called the police almost immediately.

The police came slowly at first, but soon swarmed to our little street, sending out a search party in every direction. But no one found Meredith or the strange man that night. No one listened to the six-year-old girl telling them about the scarf by the woods. They kept saying he would have tried to get Meredith as far away as possible even though they couldn't find any tire tracks as the snow continued to fall, and there were no footprints to be seen except their own.

No one found her that night, but someone did a few weeks later on Christmas Eve. She had been tucked under a log in the forest, maybe ten feet from where I had found her scarf. She had been stabbed to death. She had probably been dead by the time I came out after getting my hat and mittens. My parents didn't tell me (they later made the excuse that they were waiting until after Christmas), but there were so many police officers and reporters flocking to her house that I quickly learned the truth.

I had gone outside to get our mail when I heard a couple officers talking loudly in the street.

"Yep, he got her real good," one said, spitting a stream of tobacco juice. "And she

was frozen almost solid."

I didn't say a word to anybody; I just went to my room and cried. All I kept thinking about was the look on Meredith's face when I had turned to run inside. I had been so excited to go sledding that I had ignored how frightened she looked. Meredith had been scared to death, and he had chosen her even though I had been the one that wanted to go.

* * *

"All right, well, I think we're good here." Officer Pencek smiled broadly as he stood up, so much more confident than when he had arrived. He gathered his coat and shook my hand before hustling out the front door. I heard him whistling as he walked to his car.

He had taken a written statement confirming that I had identified Tim Trolley, the light-haired man with the small smile, as the man I saw that night.

The trial proceeded quickly soon after, as did his conviction. I stood outside the courthouse the day they announced his sentence, waiting behind the barriers until they brought him out in handcuffs.

I was shocked to see how old he was; he had been frozen in my mind as the nine-teen-year-old he had been on that night all those years ago. He was 84 now but still looked big and muscular and mean with a scowl on his face as the officers yanked him down the courthouse steps.

They led him to a police car only about six feet from me on the other side of the barriers and would presumably be carting him off to a cell somewhere, where he could never hurt a little girl ever again.

They stopped him by the back door as they opened it, and in that moment, he turned and looked at me. It must have been only a few seconds, but it felt much longer. He looked straight into my eyes, and his scowl turned into a wide grin. He nodded at me, and in that moment I knew he remembered me. I quickly turned and scurried to my own car, convinced that he had put a mark on me and would come after me as soon as he had the chance.

I sped away, wanting to put as many miles as possible between us.



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

with Shannon Thompson

by Sebastian Starcevic

How long did it take you to write your first novel?

My first novel, *November Snow*, took me a little over a year to write, but it doesn't take me nearly as long now. My recently published novel, *Minutes Before Sunset*, took a few months, but the complete trilogy took two and a half years. Interesting fact: I started writing *Minutes Before Sunset* seven years before it was published.

What do you think makes a good story?

Personally, I love the voice. I could love a story where nothing happens, but the characters are beyond interesting. Characters are my other favorite part of stories. When I'm reading, they don't necessarily have to be likeable, but they have to challenge me. However, it doesn't hurt to have a remarkably dense tale full of action!

What was it like getting published for the first time?

Very exciting, and it is every time because it's been different every time. For instance, *November Snow* was a sponsored self-published novel, and then I was featured in a poetry collection, which was dedicated to my late roommate. After that, I signed with AEC Stellar Publishing, and *Minutes Before Sunset* was born. I've learned a lot from all of the different types of publication, and I can't wait to learn more in the future.

How do you prepare for writing a novel? What type of planning do you do beforehand?

I nearly have everything mapped out before I ever start, but things still change as I go along. I also draw maps and collect pictures. I wrote about this on ShannonAThompson.com, and I show ways others can make digital maps for their novels. In terms of the writing process, I start with only dialogue. I write it all out before doing anything else; then I add location and basic description before returning once more to fill in everything else. It probably is strange, but it works for me.

Do you have a particular writing style or any odd writing habits?

I know I talk to myself and make faces when I'm trying to figure out what expression a person would make, but I'm most amused when I take out my hair bun and numerous pens fall out. Just goes to show how much I get distracted by my fantasy land.

Where do you draw your inspiration and ideas?

I actually suffered from night terrors and nightmares as a kid, but there was also an inbetween place—a place where I couldn't differentiate between reality and fiction, and I remembered it all. That's where most of my inspiration still comes from today. My work ethic, however, comes from a sense of mortality. My mother suddenly died when I was eleven, and it really forced me to realize life wasn't guaranteed, and I wanted to make the most of it. Her death along with my roommate's recent death have really pushed me forward, and I'm very grateful to still have such supportive and loving family and friends around me as I continue to follow my dream.

Lastly, do you have any advice for aspiring authors?

The mantra I've always used is "Write with passion; succeed with self-discipline." I think it works, because it reminds you how much you love what you do while also clarifying it takes hard work and dedication to finish it. You will have to make a lot of sacrifices, but, in my opinion, everything is worth it.





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