

The Watermark

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From the Editor

Dear Reader,

This collection of pieces deals largely with loss of various kinds—of youth, of love, of home, of peace, of another version of self. I hope you might take comfort in some of these shared experiences and be reminded of humanity as a collective in the midst of division and strife.

As always, thank you for reading.

Alexa Koch
Editor-in-Chief

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Dean and David: New Year's Eve 2020

Bill Valentine

David, you're dead. What are you doing here?

Dead, Dean? Me, dead? I don't recall dying.

David, we talked the Sunday after Christmas. You called to ask about my grandson's health.

That's right. We talked, and you said you'd call me, as usual, on Wednesday. I watched some more TV, went to bed, but you didn't call. I'm here.

David, you're dead.

I missed dying? Like missing the last crosstown bus, but I'm here.

How did you get here, David?

As I usually do. I took Amtrak—the 11 a.m. train, but you weren't at the station; so. I just. . . I don't know. . . I just arrived.

David, you're a ghost, a spirit.

No, Dean, I'm just me, but . . .

Just a second, David, I have a call: Unknown Number. They keep calling me to renew my auto repair insurance. I blocked the number, but they keep calling.

As I was saying before you had to answer your urgent call, Dean. I must be dead. I can't be here.

No, you can't be here, David. This isn't Dickens, nor Stephen King, nor a re-run of the *Twilight Zone*.

No, I was strictly a nonfiction reader-viewer: Ken Burns, Doris Kearns Goodwin, David McCullough. . . How do you account for my visit?

You're in my head, David.

That would account for the clutter, Dean, but I do appreciate you having me. I guess we won't be having a scotch.

I can't drink scotch anymore—blackouts. I'll miss you, David.

I lived my life: my Manhattan third floor walk-up, Central Park, dear friends.

We bought you a lobster for New Year's Eve dinner tonight.

Lobster for your dead cousin, David. I've moved into non-life and no dinners. And all the conversations will be monologues in your head. I didn't die from COVID? After all I did to avoid the virus, dying of COVID would have been worse than getting hit by a cab as I crossed Broadway.

No, David, the medical examiner said: a cardiac event, natural causes.

My heart was ticking just fine, but cardiac while you sleep is better than being caught with your pants down in the Park Ramble. I'll be back, Dean. You know you have some nasty tangles and tau up here. You might want to check with your doctor. Sorry to miss the inauguration.

I will hold you in my heart, David.

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Perception

Robert Arsenault



She Lost Control

Elaine Happnie

Hiding in darkness

waiting for the sun to come in to heal her pain
some tint of color to shine through.

She takes a smile-pill to take away her sadness,
this transforms her into emptiness.

The pills now control her mind— dull her senses,
Cloud the paths to her dreams.

Is she happy yet?

The perplexity in her eyes says it all.

One day she loses control and clings to the nearest passerby,

Making a false friend, she gives up control,

And gave away her secrets. Secrets of her past.

With that done, her Secrets lose control over her.

A brief lifting of her burdens, frees her to see beyond them

To the light a sunburst bright path to something new.

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Plastic Smile

Jared Martin

We look up at each other over
dinner at our usual place.
You smile your plastic smile at me,
and I smile mine back at you.
You talk about your day.
We both know that this is almost
over.
Without knowing why, and maybe
you don't either, this doesn't work
anymore.
I still love you.
Maybe you still love me.
But our relationship is
unsustainable.
I will miss you terribly.
You were my first love and while I
may love again,
it will never be as unabashedly or
as unflinchingly as the way I loved
you.
You have loved before, and you
will love again.
It kills me to think of you with
another, recounting me to him,
as you recounted the ones before
to me.
It kills me to know I will recount
you to another woman.
We stopped working a while ago,
neither with the courage to admit
it.

But tonight I am with you.
We will leave this restaurant and I
will hold you.
I will kiss you with all the weight

of our once great love behind it.
And maybe you will smile at me
the way you used to, just one last
time.
We will go home and watch the
show you like.
I will complain about it, as I have
always done.
But I will sit on our couch, in our
home, and hold you close.
Then we will go to our bed and
warm each other.
Soon none of it will be ours.
Some will be mine and some will
be yours.
We will fight. Will you grow to hate
me?
Will I hate you?
In five years, will it matter?

We finish dinner and as we walk
outside I pull you close.
Soon this will all be over.
But tonight I am still yours and you
are still mine.
And while it will not be enough to
sustain us,
I still love you.
I hope that, tonight, you still love
me too.

Jigsaw Puzzle

Kate Flaherty

Early on you think it will be bigger than the dining room table.
 Pieces fall into place. Only the left side has “ends,”
 you go on building unable to see the picture,
 confident someday you will.

Then your dad dies, a big hole appears,
 All the memories, shared with no one else, vanish.
 You begin to rebuild.

After a few years some of the bottom edges appear,
 a childhood friend is suddenly no longer there,
 your Mum, another friend...

The holes are bigger than the picture.
 It's hard to see the image or even the colors.

I grow old but the number
 of pieces in the puzzle box seems to grow.

The left side started with pastels,
 like Seurat or Monet, blurry,
 then moved to darker colors,
 Bosch in the hard times,
 Mondrian in the bold ones.

Yesterday, walking through the dining room
 out of the corner of my eye—
 that's the only way to see—
 a painting by Magritte. Is Dali next?

Maybe that's why we had to invent heaven,
 so we could catch up with all those memories
 that disappeared when everyone we love
 walked into that misty valley
 taking our memories with them.

They won't remember the same things we do.
 We'll need to patch them together,
 more like a quilt than a puzzle.

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I am a Banana

Timothy Truong

“No one Asian does that! Asians don’t do that,” my mother screams, the creases on her forehead deepening with every word, flecks of spit spraying from her maw. Her shrill voice reverberates through my skull, its barbs latching deep into my soul. Shoulder-length coal black hair flies in every direction as she gesticulates wildly, a cat o’ nine tails lashing my face. I had just told her that I wanted to major in English and become a writer.

Tugging at the back of my sweat sodden t-shirt, I squelch into the backseat of a cab with my mother and father. The air is laden with Vietnamese humidity, a weighted blanket doing its best to suffocate me. It has been almost an hour since we landed in Ho Chi Minh City—sorry, Saigon—but I’m already imagining being on a plane home to Boston. The cab driver and my father begin talking as we pull away into the clarion of traffic. I’m still trying to jam the seatbelt into the socket. Unintelligible neon signs and eldritch palm trees outside form an abstract backdrop. The cab driver says something that I don’t understand. My father answers that this is the first time we have been home in almost twenty years, to which my mother nods in agreement. This is not home.

There is a boy at my high school who has just found out that my family is also from Vietnam. He says something in Vietnamese, but his brow furrows when he realizes that I didn’t understand what he said. I haven’t been fluent in Vietnamese since I was six years old.

“Oh, you’re a banana,” he proclaims, self-satisfied, as if he had just made a new scientific discovery. For some reason, I nod along and chuckle.

“Banana,” meaning someone who is Asian on the outside and white on the inside, is a term for Asians, originally coined by people of Asian ancestry, who are seen as “less Asian” for “abandoning” their cultural identity. Synonyms include “coconut” and “twinkie.”

An abridged list of the reasons I have been called a banana:

I am bad at math*

I have an American accent when I speak Vietnamese**

I have white friends

I don’t like eating fish, lobster, shellfish, or any other animal that swims in its own salted piss and shit

I said boba tea was “okay”***
I said I was attracted to someone who wasn’t Asian
I have no interest in becoming a doctor, dentist, or any other job
that requires me to spelunk inside of another person
I was born in Boston
I said I liked *Game of Thrones*****
My glasses had straight rims instead of rounded ones
I am not straight*****
I play Dungeons and Dragons
I don’t know how to use chopsticks
I don’t play flute, piano, or the violin
For no damn reason at all
*I do mean all of it. Everything from adding to multivariable
calculus.
**Don’t ask me what it sounds like, I don’t know either.
***I have since come to the conclusion that boba tea is “pretty
good” in general, please stop @ing me.
****This was before the last season had come out.
*****I’m bisexual. Thanks for asking.

What would you find if you sliced me open like a frog in a high school biology class? Would you peel me open like an actual banana searching for the whiteness you think lies underneath, as if my skin were a cheap Spirit Halloween costume? Would my organs be cloudy white like uncooked chicken breast? Are you expecting a cloth tag that reads “90% additive whiteness, 10% Asian concentrate, made in the U.S.A.”?

Every Lunar New Year, I open red envelopes with my family. I wear a jade Buddha around my neck that used to belong to my grandmother. I light incense on the anniversary of each of my grandparent’s deaths. I understand when people insult me in Vietnamese even though I don’t speak it well. I love eating banh mi, bún bò Huế, and so many other Vietnamese foods. I grew up watching Wuxia and Jackie Chan movies. My favorite poet is Ocean Vuong.

I spent all of middle and high school reading *Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*. I listen to Judas Priest and Eastern European folk bands with names like Waldkauz and Eluveitie. I eat hamburgers, fries, and drink chocolate milkshakes out of a glass from a 50s American diner. When I need to turn my brain off and relax, I watch Quentin Tarantino movies.

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Does this make me a banana?

Loneliness

Zoya Gargova

The moon— huge orange,
surreal decoration
hanging at my window,
is facing me.
I am waiting.
Not seeing the sunrise
burning up the the purple.
Not hearing the song of birds,
hidden in the green.
Not getting dizzy by
the lilac bush in blossom.
Longing for a touch—
the breeze of a sea wave.
Waiting for your lips—
chilled watermelon
on a summer day.
Dreaming of you.

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JFK Library, Columbia Point

Bill Valentine

I follow the newly named Grace Trail from its endpoint and embrace the change: the loss of the dirt path eroding into the bay. Now, a landscaped, asphalt walkway lined with four-foot lingams on the bayside, which sit atop the new seawall, as if I were walking to Shiva's holy shrine. A matte silver large-link chain connects each column and each

chain forms a crescent smile. From the bay this spring a reminder, a septic smell like the odor a walker might have noticed a century and a half ago released from the Calf Pasture Pumping Station, a collapsing Queen Anne grotesque, a cyclops hole in its roof, visible still on my right along with an

expanding mound of pulverized cement, UMass Boston's old science building, stripped of its red bricks, dumped unceremoniously in Parking Lot D. Calves and farmers vanished; the plant — a fenced-in ruin. Accept the changes. There is a new hill ahead: a mound created with fill from the new buildings' sites. Earth

laced with asbestos, now covered with wild grasses, a few shrubs. At the edge of the JFK Library property, the walkway columns become four-foot concrete flattop cylinders linked by tarnished large-link chains that bow like swings which a tourist might sit on or step over to take a panoramic picture of the city or the harbor.

On the right, I.M. Pei and Jackie Kennedy's tribute to the 35th President: a concrete masterpiece fronted by a nine-story atrium that mirrors the clouds and the ocean when the light is right. Just past the building, a plaza and a broad staircase that leads to the library's entrance.

I hold my cap on windy days as I approach

the flagpole and the plaza. The gusts of wind
 lift the flag and often swing and ring
 the bell that hangs at half-mast.
 When the museum is open, semaphore flags
 that spell out J-F-K and J-B-K hang from a crosstie

beneath the stars and stripes. We ignore the “O”
 Jackie added to her initials just as we ignore the
 mistresses JFK, a lady’s man, added
 to his bed. We realize our hero had his faults.
 As the path leaves the Kennedy plot,
 the columns become granite rectangles

connected with rusted small-link chains,
 which either sag or are attached taut
 at just the right height for an adventuresome
 toddler to wander underneath as a
 distracted parent fiddles with an i-Phone.
 Today, two geese maybe a nesting pair,

appear on the embankment above the path.
 They are generally on the university lawn—
 one eating, one keeping watch. They too might
 be aware to beware of coyotes. I walk up the
 hill toward the Student Union. I can see the
 Mack trucks hauling more of the atomized

science building, dumping it on the lawn
 that fronts the Wheatley building where a
 bulldozer builds and flattens the growing
 ash heap. Phillis Wheatley, enslaved, now
 often unread, published her poems in 1773
 and was then emancipated,

As I continue down the path, a path I
 walk each day alone since all others have
 been banished by COVID. I can see across the bay
 to Squantum, which planes today use as a land-
 mark as they approach Logan. During WWII,

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it was a training station for pilots.

Joseph Kennedy, the heir Papa Joe groomed, learned to fly here. John, a spare, met his father's challenge. A sickly, bookish, Irish Catholic Brahmin who grew up in Brookline, went to college in Cambridge, and was more at home at the Omni Parker House than he'd have been in the infamous Columbia Point.

I, too, an Irish Catholic kid, watched the inauguration on a snow day in the Bronx. Eleanor Roosevelt, huddled before the platform, not yet supportive of this intruder; Robert Frost, sun-blinded poet, unable to read, recited "The Gift Outright," which manages to ignore the colonizers' slaughter of Native People and the enslavement

of Blacks. JFK called on us to "...ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Seven year later I joined the Peace Corps, and on the 25th anniversary of its founding, I read a long forgotten poem in the capital rotunda. But first, I buried my father, joined the Brothers, lived a cloistered life, and missed

the blossoming of Camelot; remained ignorant about the almost nuclear war, and only saw the caisson, led by Black Jack, riderless, boots reversed in the stirrups, followed by his widow, on a small black and white TV we gratefully watched on that one day in November.

I live on a 350-acre landfilled peninsula, which one day the Atlantic will reclaim. COVID wanes here. Ruben, Danny, Adele, and Joseph— dead. Millions elsewhere dead, dying. I walk the Grace Trail: gratitude, release, challenge, acceptance, and embrace.

JFK Library cyanotype
Elaine Happnie



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Good Women

Sarah Hayek

There are scars beneath my skin
Scars embedded underneath hiding like they're sins

I owe myself an apology
For allowing broken men to touch that part of me

Invisible bruises between my thighs, for all the times I protected their lies
I loved them like the woman who birthed them, because, I did.

I gave life to them without the need to compress my body onto theirs,
Because, that's the holy in me.
Because, I'm a good woman, right?
For nurturing even when I'm decaying,
For loving even when I'm aching.

I owe myself an apology,
For allowing broken men to touch an inch of the soul in me
I deserved better.
But for some reason I stayed.
Maybe because I'm a good woman.

I stayed to make them feel alive,
I stayed because, I didn't want anyone to know I was dying.

They were broken.

I owe myself an apology,
For making my love available even in my grave.

I prayed for them,
Because they were broken.

I owe myself an apology,
For allowing them to trace fingers down my body;
imprinting my skin with hate like calligraphy,
Staring at my reflection feeling hatred reeking through me.

I owe myself an apology,
I'm supposed to be a good woman, to me.

I deserved better.
I knew better, but refused to do better.
Because, I knew I was better.
Better than to leave them broken, better than to allow them to break the
good woman that will come after me.

So I loved them, I loved them like I birthed them but all along there I
was,
Dying to save them.

You see... men... they have a habit of selling you white lies,
They tuck them underneath their sweet mesmerizing tongues that drip
of honey and tinted love,
they ask for something “real”
So I show them an inch of my depth but every time my soul got
mishandled with threats,
Because, that... “that was just too much.”

So now, I live my life with ghosts of could-have-been lovers because I
don't know how to show “less.”

I am a walking vessel of overflowed love,
I wear my tired heart on my sleeve,
Why did the world reconstruct to be deceived, to be cold and conceal?
How am I supposed to be loved when every man is raised to be hard, to
fuck without heart, to nut straight from the start?

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Anatomy of a Relapse

Jared Martin

Every fiber of my body is crying out for a drink.
I can feel it in my veins.
My chest is tight in anticipation.
I've been fighting myself for weeks.
I'm losing.
I've lost.
I've resigned to lose.
I'm justifying it.
I don't believe my bullshit.
But I've made up my mind.
I hate myself for it.
But a drink will fix that.

Will I be able to stop before I burn my life down again?

I'm a couple drinks in.
I can't write much.
I'm in that beautiful place where my skin tingles and I'm gently smiling.
I feel good.
And because of that,
I'm scared shitless.

I am alone.
I am empty.
Whiskey magnifies this.
And makes me numb to it.

On Homesickness

Maria Paula Tapia Betancourt

I'm racing against the sun as I head to the subway station. The smell of must and cigarettes attacking my nose. I try to focus on the music screaming in my ears instead of the woman next to me shushing her two sons or the man standing away from me, smoking, with a loose tie around his neck. I've been in this city long enough to know that I should keep to myself to avoid trouble, but still jump at every loud noise around me.

I am aware that I walk around this town like I'm a skittish cat, my coworkers have joked about it enough as we clean up. I am always the first one out of the cheap restaurant. I'm always eager to run home and wash the scent of grease that sticks to my clothes, hair, and skin. Scrubbing until my skin is red.

With every step I take, a sound like bells follows, the many colorful pins attached to my beat-up backpack making enough noise to draw the attention of the few people waiting at the station. From a distance, I hear some boys talking loudly, pushing each other, and laughing. They're so loud that I can hear them over the music, so I turn the volume up. Going over my assignments in my head to avoid paying attention to my surroundings. A few people turn to look at them, but I keep my eyes on the approaching train.

As the train stops at the station, we all move towards it in perfect harmony, not waiting for anyone to get off. No words are exchanged as we squeeze our tired bodies past each other, and we all take our seats as far away from each other as possible. The group of boys ends up sitting in the back left of the cart while I stand in the middle. What catches my attention are the interwoven Spanish curses stitched into the sentence of one of the boys.

"Mira!" I react to the words coming out of the boy like he called my name. Turning my head in their direction I take out an earbud to listen. It takes me a moment to make out his words over the sound of the music and the loud sounds of the subway moving. Screaming with every turn.

"Yeah, you. I like your pins." I look at my backpack and the familiar red, blue, and white, it's not the American flag. I thank him in English before I can even think twice about it and look away, ignoring his confused look. I can hear the boys continue chattering away.

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I find myself listening in to their conversation, the familiar sounds of vowels and pitches as they pronounce their *rs*. I can tell that for some of the boys, their Spanish is not as natural as they want to think it is. Their accents shift with every word like they can't make up their mind on who they are. I take a closer look and I notice that they're much younger than I thought they were. Baggy pants, baseball caps, and hoodies. Their baggy clothes hide away baby fat and long limbs they haven't quite gotten used to. Regardless they look like they belong sitting in the graffiti-covered subway. I can't help but think they belong in a way I never will.

I look out through a dirty window, and I notice the sun falling deeper into the horizon. Colors slowly disappear and make room for the night. Darkness spreads and I wonder what those boys are doing out so late on a school night. Do their *mamas* know where they are? Do they call them "Mami"? I wonder if they know that their *mamas* are probably pacing back and forth waiting for their boys, hoping they haven't been swallowed up by the jungle that is this city. I think of my own mother who worries. Who won't sleep until I text her, I'm home, despite being an ocean away. I think of her and my heart aches.

Worry comes so naturally to you when you're in an unfamiliar place, where your native tongue is foreign, and I can't imagine how terrifying it must be to raise your children in a place you can barely understand yourself. I can barely understand it myself despite my ability to blend in. I picked up English by watching American television as a child. Mimicking the words and mouth movements of the teenage girls on television as they chatted about clothes, boys, and school. Never mind that my own school looked very different from their own, that wasn't the point. The point was to learn how to be someone else. To dream about being someone else.

I wonder what my life would have been like if I had moved to the city at a younger age. Would I be like the boys in front of me? Never knowing the soil my parents grew up on. Or maybe seeing it only a handful of times on vacation and only carrying it in blurry memories from childhood. Learning Spanish from the words I pick up in passing from my parents after school or when they can afford to be home. Mimicking my Spanish teacher's tone as they teach me basic words like: *gato*, *carro*, and *casa*.

The same teacher who knows I'll forget it all by the next semester if I didn't know it already.

Maybe I'm just being silly. Being too hard on boys I do not even know. I watch them get off at their stop. A badly lit station I've never been to with overflowing trash cans, and I worry about them. But they are unconcerned, laughing and chatting the whole way. Arguing with each other about a game one of the boys lost and would not admit to. The bigger boy with the number seven on his hoodie teases his companion for being a sore loser.

"You just don't know when to let things go, do you?"

The others laugh. Throwing Spanish insults at each other.

This scene transports me to another point in time. Awakened a memory from when I was a child with my own school uniform, laughing with my friends, teasing them with the same words. The same youthful innocence. It feels like a galaxy away. But sometimes I blink, and I swear I'm no longer here.

I forget where I am and who I am.

I'm walking into one of my classes and the beat-up chairs and chalkboard take me to another life. One where I'm still home and nothing has changed. I haven't changed.

Sometimes this just doesn't feel like my life. Doesn't feel like it fits me. I try my best to mimic the steps of those around me, their words, and their stance. Try everything that gets me closer to feeling normal.

As the train takes off to its next stop, I'm left staring at their shrinking silhouettes as they disappear into the night.

As the train empties stop by stop and I'm the only one left in the car when it reaches my stop. My playlist reaches the end. I don't make any move to restart the track. Instead, I let the silence consume me.

I walk out of the subway station and the cold hits me like a punch in the face. It forces me into the present and claws into me, making me shiver. Eyes watering and a cloud of smoke extends itself from my mouth to the air. I burrow deeper into my dark jacket. My steps echo into the night and my backpack continues to jiggle its song. I can hear a dog barking at a distance and cars pass me occasionally. The neighborhood remains mostly quiet. Lights are turned on in some houses, the silhouettes of families laughing and sharing.

I think about my bare apartment full of strangers and I slow down my pace. I look up to the sky and I see nothing. Just dark endless sky, the city lights hiding the heavens. How can they live like this? I wonder while shivering in my boots. Missing the eternal summer I once was a part of.

Tall buildings surround my area of vision like they're caging me

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to the ground. I find myself begging for a fuse to burn. For the whole city
to burn out, turn quiet, and I just want to see the stars.

Mother's Piano
Sonia Valentine

keys
 ivory
 shiny wood with mahogany stain
 stood upright like a guard
 outside her bedroom door each
 day.

*girls giggling, gossiping, and dancing
 around mother's piano
 discussing new, future boyfriends.
 now
 grandchildren
 tinker with the old ivory keys
 while the proud grandparents
 remember the good, golden days.*

notes
 serenade
 Schubert's, Mama's favorite piece,
 she
 plays at dusk to erase
 the woes and worries of the day.

*my
 mother smiles
 wherever she is, that her gift gives
 joy, calms the heart and soul
 with waves of solace and comfort.*

hill
 up it goes
 to the most distant *barrio* next to
 a creek where people hid
 safe from the Japanese tortures.

down
 it goes to
 the house where only the concrete
 stairs
 remained, after the bombs
 destroyed everything on its path.

men
 GI soldiers
 sang around the piano amidst
 beer, nuts, and *lumpia*
loud harmonies blended and soared.

*joy
 envelops*

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Poster fragments, Montreal

Elaine Happnie



Providence
Robert Arsenault



The Watermark

Age of Decrepitude

Bill Valentine

Efron took a dozen shuffle steps
from his couch to unlock the door
for Dean bearing bologna sandwiches,
chips, Pinot Grigio, and brownies for lunch.

Back on the couch, Efron wedged himself
in like Raggedy Andy as Dean went
to the kitchen to plate food and pour
wine and discover a dozen morning

pills Efron had not taken out of his pill box.
Dean served pills and lunch as Efron stared
out his living window at the oak that shaded
the tombstones in the cemetery across

the street. His parents are buried there. He
fell when he last walked towards their grave.
His parents had made it out of the mill town
of their ancestors. Efron made it into a small

commuter college; into a white collar job.
No fatal childhood diseases. No army service—
a high draft number during the Nam war. No
entangling romances, except for scotch,

which didn't kill him, but brought him home
to this leafy New England town with mild
diabetes and toe fungus, which led to a

shuffling walk and a catastrophic fall,
a nursing home, increasing forgetfulness,
failing short-term memory, a lost driver's
license, dependence on a young relative

to shop, do his laundry, and take out the
trash; and for meals to be delivered; for

an aide to bathe him. Efron had reached
his golden years, decrepitude covered
in gilt, as he wistfully gazed at the gray
tombstones blanketed in autumn leaves.
Dean wondered, “Have we ‘simply... visited’ this world, or have we
listened
for Mary Oliver’s wild geese?”

The Watermark

Profile for Match Singles Over Seventy

Kate Flaherty

I drool, I fart I snore.

I'm not too sexy anymore.

I like to curl up with a book
in a comfortable nook.

I really can't hike;

I fall off my bike.

I'm not *Jeopardy* smart
but I have a good heart.

I'm not up on smartphone apps;
and I need help with childproof caps.

My cooking's a disaster
but Grubhub is faster.

My house is a mess.

I don't own a dress.

When I go through a door
I forget what I was looking for.

I used to travel
now I unravel.

I drink but don't smoke,

I like a good joke.

I never made it to billionaire
but don't really care.

What can I say?

Life got in the way.

Brian Meets Peggy

Hugh Stringer

Most people on Castle Island are observing COVID restrictions by keeping six feet apart. Some are sitting on benches. Except for a woman “of a certain age” who is sitting on one of the west-facing benches, most east-facing benches are occupied with people looking at the sunrise. It may be because we hear so often about keeping six feet apart, I feel I want to connect with strangers and there are a lot of strangers here this morning.

The salt spray from the bay renders Castle Island pretty much inhospitable for maple trees, but most of the trees here are maples. Few are more than 30 feet tall. They look stunted, like they’ve given up ever trying to become majestic champions. I know how they feel. I used to run to Castle Island every morning, but for the past year or so I’ve been walking here from L Street, always resting for a moment on one of the benches. Most days, I look for someone with whom I can chat and introduce myself but rarely remember my companion-for-an-hour’s name. This morning I say hello to the woman on a west-facing bench. “Hi, mind if I join you?”

“No, I don’t mind, now that the COVID restrictions are being relaxed, we need not worry about the six-foot rule, I’m just watching the sun rise.”

“But you’re facing west.”

“Oh, sunrise is best seen looking west. Look at the light in the treetops. As the sun rises, light descends until it engulfs the entire tree. At sunset, I sit on one of the east-facing benches and watch the sun set as darkness engulfs the trees from their roots to their crowns.”

“That’s a novel way of seeing the sun rise and set. I’m not a fan of watching the sun or the trees. I come here for the exercise and stop at a bench to rest.”

“You’re missing out on the best part of rest. Watch the sunlight in the trees. Eventually, the entire tree is bathed in sunlight. Waiting until it is, would be a way of prolonging your rest stop. Watching sunlight is something you’ll learn to do when you get to my age. And talking about my age, may I give you a couple pointers about growing old? I saw how you sat down just now. You sat like you’re not yet used to growing old. You got the blood flow correct. But after you sat, you looked like a decrepit old man. First, you must learn a trick women learn without being told.

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Because our skirts bunch up when we sit, we invariably look down to give our skirts a tug. Looking down puts our heads down and stimulates blood flow. Then to get our posture back, with our elbows above our chins, we touch our hair. This forces us to show off our figures— belly in, chest out— brings oxygen into your lungs. Then we smooth out our skirts with a tug or two. Everyone loves a smooth curve.

“But you’ll want to learn how to sit like a man. When you sat a moment ago, you kept your head down, looking between your legs. That’s good, as I said, it keeps blood flowing, but as soon as you’re seated, you’ve got to reestablish your authority. Run your fingers through your hair to push your forehead back. Then, put your thumb and forefinger on your chin and push back as if you were deep in thought. More to the point, touching your chin draws attention to your beard. It’s like saying, ‘Even though I’m sitting, I’m not slumping. I’m a man.’

“Standing up is another thing you’ll learn as you get older. How you stand makes all the difference in how you’re going to present yourself. The first step is what you already know—get your head down so blood flows into your brain. The next step is as simple, but inertia and gravity get in the way. They would have you tumble forward. You’ve got to stop the tumble and get set up for your next move. Think of it as if you were running a race, ‘ready, set, go.’”

“I’ll keep all this in mind, but men of my age have other, more immediate worries. We are so worried about ‘go’ that we never dare get to ready and set.”

“Over-sixty men are all pretty much the same. The more the anxiety about ‘go,’ the harder it is to get to ready. Fear of getting to ‘go’ puts a damper on the entire race; however, fear can be an aphrodisiac.

“My name’s Peggy.”

“Mine’s Brian.”

Three Deckers Dorchester
Elaine Happnie



The Watermark

Two Oceans

Sonia Valentine

I grew up in the Philippines,
with 7,100 islands, surrounded by
water,

yet, I do not know how to swim.
My uncle, a swimming instructor,
tried to teach me how to swim
with no luck.

My family went to the beach
once a year and stayed under a nipa
hut
eating fiesta food.

No one spread a blanket
on the coarse, black sand.
Only fishermen went out to sea
in their make-shift boats to make a
living.

For Filipino women, light skin is a
true standard of beauty.
I can still hear my mother reminding
me to
use an umbrella when I went out so
I did not get any darker.

When I came to this country,
I still did not enjoy going to the
beach.
Sitting on the sand, I looked out and
felt sad that my family
was across two oceans.

Now, we live on Ocean View Drive
and I appreciate the beauty of the
ocean
but after fifty years, there is still an

immigrant's vague sense
of longing for home.

While walking along the beach
trying to create poetry, Walt
Whitman "saw
the shore as place for wrecks and
corpses

on the sand: 'straw, splinters of
wood, weeds,
sea gluten, scum, scales from
shining rocks.'"

He realized that he himself will be
no more
than debris someday.*

Step on the brake!
I am on dark patches.
Farewell, Whitman.
Hello, Mary Oliver.

"I go down to the shore in the
morning
and depending on the hour the
waves

are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, 'oh, I am miserable,
what shall—

what should I do?' And the sea
says
in its lovely voice,
'Excuse me, I have work to do.'"*

Now, I take the Harbor Walk
on Dorchester Bay, and say to
myself

Stay in the light and keep
moving and breathing.

*"As I Ebb'd on the Ocean of
Life" by Walt Whitman
"I Go Down to the Shore" by
Mary Oliver

She grew up in the Philippines,
a nation of islands, yet
she did not learn to swim.
Filipinas did not swim. Her
uncle tried to teach her
with no luck.

Once a year, her family
went to the beach, huddled
under a nipa hut, ate fiesta
food, spread no blankets
on the coarse, black sand.
Only dark fishermen
went into the sea.

Fair Filipinas, true beauties,
used an umbrella their mothers
gave them when out in the sun.

When she came to New York City,
she did not enjoy beach trips,
sitting exposed on the sand.
She watched the Atlantic, thought
of her family two oceans away.

Now, she lives on Ocean View
Drive.
She appreciates the ocean view,
but after fifty years there is still
an immigrant's vague sense

of longing for her Pacific home.
Trying to create her poem,
she walks along the beach.

Walt Whitman, a Long Islander,
saw the shore as a place for
wrecks and corpses on the sand:

. . . straw, splinters of wood,
weeds,
and gluten, scum, scales
from shining rocks.

Whitman realized he himself would
be
no more than debris someday.

She is in a "dark patch."
She turns to Provincetown's Oliver:

I go down to the shore in the
morning
and depending on the hour
the waves
are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall—
what should I do? And the
sea says
in its lovely voice:
Excuse me, I have work to
do.

Now, she takes the Harbor Path
around Dorchester Bay, and says to
herself,
"Stay in the light, move, breathe."

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Sarah Hayek

6

2

One day you'll let me slip, and the woman who comes after me will try and write poetry hoping to replace the ones I wrote on your skin. The lines I left unfinished to make love to your lips, when mine are nowhere near.

You'll then make love to her body to forget the way I was able to give life without needing to press my skin onto yours, but she'll turn into a fuck to satisfy your ego that lies in.

You were never good at love,

Too ashamed to fall vulnerable in between a woman's skin.

After a couple rounds, she will sneak a glimpse into your eyes,

And she'll see me.

Just to be struck with the truth that no woman will get ahold of your heart like the woman you let slip.

I think you loved me, you just didn't know what it meant.

You wrapped the letters with a laugh,

To satisfy the ego that lies in.

Onward

Jared Martin

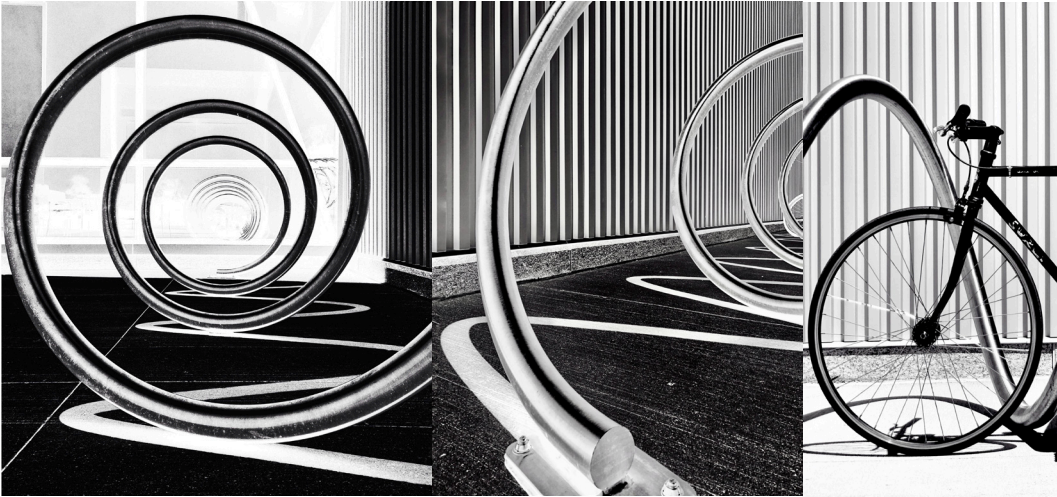
The past smiled on me
like the glow of a golden sun.
I held onto them,
our memories,
as tightly as I could.
Until, like grains of sand,
they slipped away from me.

I have since grown old,
in this cold and lonely place.
But I press on,
leaning forward,
To a glow over the horizon.

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Spiral Quintet

Ellen Foust





Recumbent Bike

Hugh Stringer

A woman is seated on a bench at the Longwood Ave. T stop when a guy on a recumbent bike approaches the bench, stops, locks his bike to the rack, and sits down. The woman leans over toward him and asks if he likes the recumbent.

He says he does. Recumbents are safer. "I'm tall and tall guys' heads are too far from the ground. We must balance a bug head at the end of a long body. It takes us too long to get our hands up to protect ourselves in case we fall."

At this, he introduces himself. "I'm Ed."

"Ed, I'm AnnMarie. I think I know you from Beth Israel Hospital. Didn't you used to work there?"

"Ya, I worked on the second floor."

"Didn't you used to change your clothes in a conference room on the ground floor? If I remember rightly, I once told you you couldn't use the room as a locker."

"So, at last we meet. When we first met, I used to lock the conference room door and change, putting my sweaty tights on the conference room table, and then put them into my paniers. We'd only spoken that one afternoon. In fact, I hadn't spoken at all. You just chased me away. This was ten years ago; how is it you recognized me?"

"You made quite an impression on the girls in the office. We had been watching for you for a month or so before I told you to stop changing in the conference room."

"You mean I got all that attention and didn't even know to thank you."

"Well, now I'll give you a chance to thank me. Would you like to go for coffee in the cafeteria?"

They walk to the crosswalk and wait for the pedestrian crossing signal on the Jamaica way. They're so caught up in conversation that they miss the first "walk" signal.

As they're walking, even after the foot traffic had diminished, they bump shoulders. Neither of them steps away from the other as they continue walking up Longwood Ave. AnnMarie says she is going to meet her husband at the bike rack at 5:00. "A while ago, you said tall guys are prone to falling. Well, my husband's tall and you're right; he is prone to falling, falling in love."

Ed says nothing for a moment or two. He's not sure what he's heard but knows AnnMarie has said something he should respond to. He thinks their bumping shoulders may have misled her into thinking he wanted something more, more than just flirting, perhaps. She may think he's trying the tall-guys-falling-in-love rule. He wants the benefits of rubbing elbows without the consequences of getting involved. He must avoid revealing how he too wants love without consequences. He thinks talk about the hospital would deflect the conversation away from her husband.

"How about your friends at BI?" Ed asks. "Do you still work there?"

AnnMarie knows Ed wants to change the topic. Next, he'll say she should talk to a friend. She wants to talk to someone, but not a friend, and certainly not a colleague. Colleagues like nothing better than to gossip about office romances and friends will forever think you're stuck in a troubled marriage, maybe they'll even make a play for your husband.

"Yes," she says. "I still work at Beth Israel, but I'm quitting. It's the office gossip, that's why I'm quitting. I need to talk to someone who won't remember what I say. I want someone who will not give advice or support. Friends are no good; they remember. Colleagues are no good; they gossip."

AnnMarie looks at Ed and thinks of their brief encounter ten years ago. He's just what she needs, a man to whom she can tell her troubles and then say good-bye, someone with whom she can fall as if from a recumbent bike, without getting hurt, someone with whom she can cry without the shame of self-pity.

AnnMarie says she doesn't really want coffee. She tells Ed she doesn't want to risk an office colleague seeing her in the cafeteria with a stranger. "Let's go somewhere where we can talk. How about the conference room on the ground floor? No one ever uses it."

Ed looks at AnnMarie. He sees she's taking charge. But it's a man's job to be in control, he thinks. She asked him to go to the cafeteria, not the conference room. He squares his shoulders and tells himself there's no reason to be afraid. She's all flirty and innocent, but not a child just out of nursing school. Whatever happens, it won't be loaded down with her tears and rage. Unless her husband... "What time does your husband get off work?"

AnnMarie thinks this poor boy is worried. She says, "I'm meeting

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my husband at 5:00. I'd like nothing better than for him to see us together. It would give him some of what he's giving me. But I'm getting the heebie jeebies thinking of how such an encounter would play out. I keep thinking of myself as a kid just out of college trying to get up the courage to cheat on a boyfriend."

Ed says, "I'm reliving the fear of being seen naked here in the conference room. It's a nightmare I have every so often. I dream that I'm changing and a woman, it's a woman's voice, she's a presence with body, curves, and a face. She enters while I've got my Spandex tights only half off. They're stuck around my ankles. In the dream, I'm on the precipice between awake and asleep, I know I'm in a nightmare, but it's a nightmare I can't get out of. I can't get the pants on or off. A woman asks, 'who told you that you were naked?' Then I wake up.

"AnnMarie, in my dream I felt shame. Now, here I am living the shame.

"Your name is AnnMarie, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm AnnMarie, but I feel like Mrs. Robinson. My husband is having an affair. Yes, there's shame. Shame that I'm not good enough. Is Ed your real name?"

There's a knocking on the door and a voice, "Hey, is anyone in there?"

AnnMarie answers, "Just a moment; could you come back in a few minutes? Thanks."

With her back to Ed, AnnMarie is pulling her bra on, with the cups facing her back, the fasteners up front. She wiggles her torso while pulling the ensemble around, getting the cups and fasteners where they belong. Once everything is aligned, she pulls the straps up over her shoulders. "Wa-la," she says. Still with her back to Ed, she asks him if he's ready. Ed, with his back to her, pulls his bike tights up and over his privates and then pulls the front of the tights away from his body so everything falls into place. He then turns around to face AnnMarie and says, "Whoever invented Spandex eliminated the need for a jockstrap."

AnnMarie opens the door, pokes her head out and gives Ed the "all clear." She leads the way as they walk to the cafeteria. She insists on separate checks. After paying for coffee and a bagel with cream cheese, she walks to a table in the corner. Ed gets the same, coffee and a bagel.

Contrary to her first impression, AnnMarie thinks Ed is not the right man for her. He's not a "take charge" kinda guy. She wants a no-guilt, no-commitment affair. Ed won't do. Just look at how he got the

same snack as I did. He has been following my lead ever since I asked him about his bicycle, and how he made me feel like Mrs. Robinson. There's no independence. She thinks, "Ed, you remember how we were walking together? How we were touching. What were you thinking?"

"I felt uncomfortable. I was thinking of using you to try to get over my fears. You said you wanted a friend who'd not remember things. Well, I want a girlfriend who won't remember the things she does to me. As a kid growing up there never was any touching. I want to learn how to touch."

AnnMarie needs a moment to digest what Ed said. She thinks Ed needs a mother, someone who will kiss and teach him how to cuddle. She says, "Ed, though no one has ever said anything about meeting again, we can't meet again. Your needs aren't the same as mine. You need multiple meetings to build up trust. I need one discreet meeting to talk to someone about my marriage. I want to tell someone about all the pain my husband has put me through. You want to get close to someone, I want to hurt someone. You want long-term touching. I want a once-in-a-lifetime touching. You need someone you can talk to about your mom. I need someone I can use to forget about my husband."

Ed started to sob. Then he started shaking. AnnMarie wanted to hold him, tell him he'd be alright if he found the right woman. She couldn't not hurt him because they'd already gone too far. They'd already become more than friends and she couldn't get rid of him, painlessly. She pulled a few napkins from the napkin dispenser and gave them to him and said, "Ed, I know you feel rejected, but it's me. You are wonderful. I'm rejecting you because the timing isn't right. In confiding in you, I was thinking of using you to build up my strength. I, too, feel rejected. Time is rejecting me. You remember the line in Shakespeare? Something about star-crossed lovers? Well, we're at different times in our lives."

Sobbing, Ed blurted out, "You can't just walk out of my life... after all we've shared."

AnnMarie couldn't just walk away. She said, "Today's Wednesday. Let's say a week from today we meet at the Muddy River T stop bench at 2:00. If you're not there I'll know you've decided to keep today as a special moment. It's something we both can cherish forever, but the timing wasn't right. Rain or shine, I'll be there. Anyway, Wednesdays, I meet my husband at the bike rack at 5:00."

Wednesday afternoon Ed was at the park bench early. All week

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long he had been thinking about what AnnMarie had said about timing, that the timing wasn't right. What timing was she thinking about? From his perspective, the timing was perfect. She wanted an affair. He wanted an affair. If timing is destiny, destiny brought them together. But he had to admit that if you would read this in a romance novel, you'd say their affair had an unbelievable plot line. They've nothing in common. She's married, he's single. He wants someone who will kiss and hug him. She wants someone who will stop kissing and hugging her. He wants affection. She wants freedom. As he muses over their destinies, the Green Line trolley pulls into the Longwood Ave. station. What better metaphor could he ask for? The Green Line does go downtown, but if you take this train, you'll get to Newton. If I want affection, I'd best look for someone who wants to go there.

AnnMarie got to the bench a few minutes after 2:00. She suggests a walk along the Muddy River. "If we walk into Brookline, I'm bound to meet people I know from BI."

They walk on the bike path till they reach a park bench where they sit down. Ed asks AnnMarie if she'd thought about timing. AnnMarie doesn't answer, but asks, "How about you?" Ed is as non-committal as she. She says, "if you've nothing to say, we'd just as well go back." Ed slides over so he's sitting with his elbow touching hers. They remain seated, silently, for the longest time. Then AnnMarie says, "My husband is torturing me. Why, just this morning he put half n' half in his coffee. Then he kissed me good-bye, passionately. I know he's thinking of his paramour. She puts half n' half in her coffee."

Ed knew AnnMarie was telling him something about her marriage, but she was not clear about the torture part. "Personally," he says, "I like half n' half. And I'd like someone to kiss me passionately, whenever."

"I'm sorry. It's not your fault, but you don't know about marrieds and never will 'til you get married. If we're to understand one another, you need to be in the same boat as I. You have to learn about how spouses torture one another. The passionate kiss was to show me he was in charge."

"AnnMarie, here we are on one of the world's most beautiful bike paths. The sun's shining, the sky's blue. We're sitting in the shade of centuries' old oak trees. It's the most romantic spot, at the most beautiful time, but I can't see the trees, or the sun and sky. I'm starving for someone to love me. Couldn't you be that someone, for an afternoon or two? After that I'll let you go. Let's begin now, let me love you and let

me think you love me.”

“Ed, you’re being a bully. I tell you my husband is torturing me, and you reply that you want someone to torture. You’re behaving just like him. ‘Shut up and hug me’ is his answer to everything I say, and you tell me to shut up and hug you. Love isn’t something you can turn on and off like the TV. We’re going too deep too fast. Day and night I’m thinking of my husband making love with his soulmate.”

“AnnMarie, maybe we should both lighten up a little, go to a hotel, rent a room for the afternoon. How about the Inn at Children’s Hospital? Let’s see if your husband’s recipe works for us. Let’s both be bullies. First, we do the making, then we do the loving. When we’re done with both the making and the loving, we can check out the trees.”

A week later Ed and AnnMarie meet at Children’s Hospital at 2 p.m. Ed fills out the registration form and they proceed to their room. As soon as they’re comfortably nestled together in each other’s arms, AnnMarie says she has been seeing a doctor, an intern from the Mayo Clinic, and they’ve been going to Cambridge for lunch. “He has a parking spot, in the BI parking lot, reserved, on the ground floor.”

Ed remembered AnnMarie had wanted a “take charge” kinda guy, a guy who wouldn’t make her feel like Mrs. Robinson. At the time, he felt rejected for a nobody. But knowing she was being courted by a physician, one with a ground-floor parking space, there was nothing to do but accept her decision and move on, no hard feelings. He told her he’d always remember their hugs and kisses.

AnnMarie told Ed she didn’t want to hurt him, but “Isn’t this love? You want me to hold you. That’s what you want, isn’t it? Someone who will hold you, someone whose memory you’ll cherish and never forget.”

When they were ready to leave, they left their room and approached the receptionist. Ed asked for the check. After the credit card was approved, AnnMarie gave Ed some cash and said, “Let’s celebrate the destiny that brought us together. We contributed to each other’s lives, 50/50, unselfishly and for forever.”

A week later Michael got off work at 4:30. He and his wife usually meet at the bench on Muddy River at 5:00, but this afternoon he got to the bench a half-hour early so he’d have time alone to think over what he was going to say to AnnMarie. They had been married for years but it felt like they never talked. Lately, she had been saying that for the entire time of their marriage and even during their courtship, she thought he

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was gay. It was past time, Michael thought he must make himself clear.

Michael walked along the river trying to think of what he wanted to tell AnnMarie but couldn't get his thoughts straight. He couldn't explain to himself why AnnMarie's fears hurt him so. He knew if he were to say this, she would say, if my fears are not true, then why do they hurt you?

As Michael sat on the bench, he realized he was trembling, no, he wasn't trembling. It was just his lips, his lower lips. He felt as if he were having some kinda fit.

When AnnMarie sat down next to Michael, they had the bench to themselves. He said, "AnnMarie, I can't take it anymore. It's not that I don't love you. I do. But in saying I'm gay, you're saying you don't know me. Worse, you're saying I don't know myself."

"Michael, you know I love you; but ever since we've known each other, and now more than ever, you have loved your men buddies more than you've loved me. Now it's Tracy. You see him every day. Before Tracy, it was James."

"Of course I see Tracy every day. He's the department chair. But that doesn't mean we're lovers; and of course I used to see James. Until he moved away, he was my running buddy."

"Why are you so defensive whenever I want you to talk? You're soulmates. Why won't you say so? You talk about trust? Am I not entitled to trust my own eyes and ears? Michael, I can't deny what I see and hear."

"AnnMarie, trust your eyes and ears and let me trust mine. I'm not gay. Let's just love and trust one another."

"Michael, have you had anything to drink since breakfast? You look funny. Maybe you're just dehydrated. Let's get a couple bottles of Gatorade and have supper in the cafeteria before we bike home. We've nothing in the refrigerator."

Waste of Time
Robert Arsenault



The Watermark

Poem with No Confession

Bill Valentine

I'm going to write a poem with no confession,
but maybe, just maybe, it will include a rhyme.
Who needs another dour expression
of an agonized soul's time as abuser or abused or both?

Does anyone care to know that I never climbed
over a bridge rail; sat in a closed garage
as my little auto ran; had a suicidal parent, or
mixed pills and bourbon to excess?

There's no need to confess to lusting voyeurs:
blackouts, frauds, deceptions, depressions, phobias,
peccadilloes so inconsequential, so mundane
that even a priest in a confessional would
know I am a mere venial soul.

Confession would be toadish;
croaking on a lily pad to the damsel-
flies which hover overhead. Be honest.
Confessional poetry, like writing without a net,
must be merited, earned, and suited to the convention.

Paul Bunyan

Kate Flaherty

As far as I know, Paul Bunyan still stands
Twenty-five feet tall on top of
What used to be a hardware store
But now houses a Vietnamese café.

Paul is facing north perhaps looking
For some trees to chop.
A few have taken root on the west or pink
Side of the Sandia Mountains,
The eastern border of Albuquerque.

Paul is a kind of landmark, just south of Route 66—
His red plaid shirt, blue jeans
Red knit cap, black beard and moustache
And of course, his large axe.

He made a kind of sense
atop a hardware store,
A manly man—
Ready to chop anything
That needs chopping.

When I googled up “Paul Bunyan
Statue in Albuquerque” a local TV station
Showed the Nguyen family receiving an award
For restoring Paul to his rightful shape.

Seems he had lost his arms as well as his ox
Since I last saw him face to face some twenty
Years ago. Now he proudly shows the way
To the May Café which sells more pho than
Enchiladas or ten-penny nails.

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Wrapped Around a Rock

Elaine Happpie

I threw a rock through your bedroom window/ your window on the
third floor

I threw with perfect aim.

I threw a rock through your window/ to hear shattering glass.

Echoing my shattered heart /and torn soul.

Crash, smash /a painful blast /an explosion of emotion

My heart beating, racing as I walked away. I threw a rock through your
window.

It felt so good.

Little Ice Age
Stirling Newberry

It was cold as a shock for an early September, at least as Norleans reckoned it. Back when Robert E. Lee was dead it would not be spoken in that kind of way. Even in Trina's lifetime, it would be obscene to phrase it in those terms. Katrina recalled when the weather was, well, the weather. Out in California, it was climate, where the days run into each other like a procession of days just like the last, and nights that were similarly inclined. But here in Bayou, Louisiana, they still had Weather, with a capital "W," even a Girl Scout knew that. But now the weather disturbed everyone, but especially Katrina, in an eerie contemporary zone. Fishing her eyes over the sparse road with trees going up the middle on the divider and poles on the edges, this was a distant New Orleans from the picture book spread. Though the city was dying, it sent out waves, a fortress besieged.

The name was given to her as a joke, in that way which the Little Years spun things. It was a very hot August late in the summer months and her father, over his fat hands, told the ob/gyn nurse: "Well I suppose you should call her Katrina." He smirked because at the time it was a tropical storm. In those days, what the father wanted he often got, as was said: "good and hard," with a reference to H.L. Menken on Democracy. Trina chuckled because the father often got what he wanted; the mother made sure that her family got what it needed. Even when her firstborn was technically out of wedlock. Marriage was inevitable.

As she was walking down on high-rise heels, her overstuffed bag was long to burst with her weekly assignment. It was Monday and that's the way it was: assignments galore. Until she could put those little letters after her name, it was all she could want, it was all she could wish for, and it was all that she could bring into being from her tiny body. No ancestor could say "I am a college graduate" until her mother. She walked along the stifling pavement, so far from the French Quarter where her ancestors used to cry for bread, and another thought began to gnaw at her psyche, with a smooth face and an uplifting turn of back. She almost, but not quite, plunged it into the deep unconscious where it should, in truth, belong. But her attire was out of some other era, light blue decorated with lace (which her mother preferred) and did not account for truth the way our ears contrived it.

Scanning the bungalows and shotgun houses along with the old

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Ninth Ward until her eyes alight on the one which, for as long as she could remember, was home. Shotgun on Tupelo Street, in both reality and her memory. Her mother was the General and since daddy's death, she could say so in public. Her momma still ruled the kitchen with an iron glove, and there was iron all the way down. In Katrina's odd moments she would admit that this was the way that she had grown accustomed to it and would not have it any other way. But admit this to someone else? Never. But there was also her grandmother who all of the children called the Sweetmommy because when she cooked there was always some sort of sweet thing that rolled around the inside of the mouth. But the days where there were happiness were now few and far between. That is why they called it an "inundation" and meant every syllable. Katrina still remembered the flooding of the streets in picture books with the submerged roofs of cars. The reality was unknown to her.

Up the short pedestrian stairs and in. Then she walked in with no more fuss than could be expected from a member of the family. Everything was still the way that she could remember it if she tried. Is true that the young'uns were now grandchildren, and that made Sweetmommy a great-grandmother.

"Well look who we have here. My best student." Of course, this was Sweetmommy. A wide frame with open arms that begged for a hug from her grandchild. She gives the kids free samples of this.

Then her mother asked: "How were your classes today?"

"It was the usual, assignments till the students' eyes cried." Automatically she checks her shoulder bag for essentials, but everything was still there, just like last time. And the time before that. Ad infinitum. Zero would never be her hero.

Her mother twirled around to stir the gumbo and asked from the back: "Do you think you will be able to survive this semester?"

"I always do. Every teacher says I am precious." With a swoop on the last vowel. She had learned about Milman Parry and the oral in Western Lit.

With that, the conversation went into minute detail of her Master of Fine Arts classes. First around the kitchen and then at the fine oak table in the dining room. The dining table was her father's prized possession in the flood. Trina had been told multiple times of the story: how it had been placed inside a nearby apartment building, where her father had a friend, and the machinations were the friend wanted "payment" for its return. That was the last either of the two families had spoken.

A rock had reached through the shotgun house's back window two years later, but no one had any proof of who did it. There were other things to worry about. That was the event that Trina could just remember: her speaking began. And it started her loquaciousness: non-stop talking from her. "What was that? Why did someone throw it? Was there a reason? How could he throw it?" To which Sweetmommy replied: "Hush your mouth."

Trina was a middle child and *momma*, however, knew something was up. So, she pushed and pressed hard on the system. The men who were elected to positions had their own reasons for going along. Trina graduated from high school at 12. She finished her bachelor's degree in three years. Each step the General was behind the master plan. *Bazamataz!*

It was at this point, with the pecan pie being served, that Trina said: "I would like to go to the university's library." Her skirt grappled on the oak chair as Katrina waited for the answer.

The General looked sternly. "Are you sure that it is studying that you want to do?"

Trina only nodded.

Sweetmomma nodded and added: "Be back by 10 because is 9ish when they close."

It is at that point that Trina responded: "That is only if you want to check something out, but it runs 24 hours a day to study during the week, and I need the references. Can I go until 11?" The act of pronouncing references doubled 'fer' and 'nces' to half their normal length making it almost sound like 'fences.'

"Well now, if that is the case then we should let your mama decide."

The General listened and finally said: "Just so long as you do not touch the three *Bs* and you really do mean to study." Boys, booze, and "backward" which means cigarettes in some place that her mother used to frequent.

Trina grabbed both the bookbag and oversized white purse and followed the General out to the run-down red Ford Escape. Trina was loaded and her mother drove her to Tulane, knowing just where the library was.

"I have a question." Trina's eye said she had a secret.

"What is it?" Momma asked, really thinking about maneuvering the car so as to get a bead on Freret Street when she turned off of

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Broadway. There was a short movement of the light blue signage for The Boot on the way by, which prompted momma to stare along the street and declare: “I certainly will not want to see you in that student-run establishment anytime soon.” The words were clipped and precise and most definitely formal in their denunciation.

“Promise you directly that that never did cross my mind.” The very idea of packing your flesh into the cavernous brown building was not appealing, though for different reasons than Trina wanted to discuss with the General. “Can I ask the question later then?”

At this momma did soften a bit and reply: “You can ask me on the way home.” What momma was looking for was the deflation that came with the plot to get a ride home from someone else who was also was deflated. Momma did not see that but that was because she was not looking hard enough. Trina silently noticed and thought momma is complicit though she does not know for what but begs and pleads to swallow. Look at momma: we will all go together when we go. Trina lurched out.

And with that Katrina was free as a gull. She kept her word: she was going to the library. She entered TU’s view of the universe from the logo on the walls onward.

Howard-Tilton Memorial Library was, in the southern way of thinking, a modern building and set out from the street. White with decoration from the tight pillars and a large two-story white-on-the-outside-and-black-square-on-the-inside cap with only pine trees to guard its entrance. Katrina walked in a daze because this was her third place: not home on the defensive, not the lecture halls into which was poured knowledge on the offensive, but that place where she thought about all the problems which afflict her, and there were many, especially ones which could not be brought up in front of the family. Because while the General was worried about the cognition, there was also a blooming of the body which only time or special medications could contain.

At first, she went down to the stacks and procured several books that she had been intending to read. One or two of them was for class but being a voracious reader meant that class reading was only the beginning. She privately scoffed at those students who complained about the amount of reading and the amount of memorization that the reading required. There was a chair which she had grown accustomed to in the time that she had been at Tulane (after having transferred from the University of New Orleans, which momma considered too up-to-

date for anyone's taste.) And in this chair, she nestles herself and begins to read Fagan, a sample of Spinoza, from the tome of readings which assigned Joyce, and T.H. White on the proper way of speaking English. Leave behind the copy of Chekov's short stories on the shelf which she found boor-ring. C'est coeurs d'ennui.

While the white school wooden chairs were her mother's taste, they were much more of a chaise lounge moderne where she could luxuriate. And think, reason, consider, cogitate. But also wander through the tribulations which afflicted her.

Then Trina rose. There was a breath that was frosty. The person it came from was just coming in through the outdoors. Katrina turned and saw his thin face beneath a raspberry beret. In the evening all coats of gold and gems from Zanzibar in his ears. He was, of course, not so young as she was, which was part of the attraction to her. And him for her. Suddenly, a pigeon lit on the windowsill outside.

"Prince, however did you get in here?"

The jacket was leather, and the zips were closed to the cuff. The dungarees were sharp and newly purchased. It was obvious, to him, that he fit the stereotype of a student with a flourish: down and out in a form-fitting way with a hint of sleek.

"I know a way in where they do not check your ID. Collapsodismo— here I am."

There was a warmth in her cheeks and a hidden flush that spread all over her face. She dove her hand to grab from her drawstring (Everly Coach, natch, only online) the perfect thing for her Honesty touch-up (her momma had heard it was recommended) but his hands were faster.

"Ya doneed anything on your face, I like it just the way it is." Crescendo crashing on the "way."

"You don't mean any such thing but thank you nonetheless." So, stretching her hands to the wisps of his beard, yet she stopped. "We can't do much in the library. You can only take me away for an hour at best."

"Su wen enough." Imitating the age-old radio to reference the man and his rules. She fenced in her knees in a defensive move but inside she ached. She wanted him to do something— anything— so she could say "No" in some definite fashion. Oh, how she wished for that. Upon all the living and the dying.

Then Katrina pulled herself together. It was a change that radiated through the hall as she stood up. It was her taking command.

"I need to freshen up, but I will be back." She winked at him and

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plowed off to the ladies' room. Prince looked around at the girls with a pounce but then focused on the way that Trina would be coming back to him.

And in some minutes, she was there all in a glow.

He allowed himself to blink at the fine sight of her visage. De-
lively. "You sure take your time, but it is worth the weight, sha." He
touched the back of his beret and seemed to be smitten. From her, this
elicited a warm giggle.

With a curtsy. "Shall we go?"

He mock bowed. "Shall we dance?"

"Mais yeah." Almost the hint of an exclamation point.

At so, they left for a few blocks to where his car was parked. On
one hand, it was a dark blue old Mercedes, on the other, it had a gash
down the driver's side along forward and back. She pretended not to
notice. The place to go, to his standard, was the most invincible One
Eyed Jacks, with its luscious purple and gold wallpaper and the lives'
of live sound on the collage in the hall. It was the finest, she thought,
of French Quarter and the review out of Moulin Rouge. Mob scenes
every night with the bounciest of babes flaunting the bustier and hips
who tempt you with Marmalade on their pasty green faces. Prince truly
was a prince among nobles of the trade: he both gave tips to their girl
and received from the mélange of needs looking to get a flood of crank,
crack, China Girl, and cheap hot meth with a chaser of heroin. Free
at first to hook young, innocent faces turned into tomorrow's clientele.
Between times he told her stories that often ended with a crash to which
she listened intently. Then the music came and seduced (Want to give it
a go?). He whispered to Trina that he had the rumba with another lady
for business but planted a kiss on Trina's ear. (Voulez-vous coucher avec
moi, ce soir?) Katrina watched him as he crumbled his way because he
glanced back at her. But his hand was elsewhere, as in Saint Elsewhere
to an allegro simpatico. The one thing is that Trina did not partake of
refreshment-addled festivities— even alcohol was verboten. She knew
that the General would know as the rising of the brass. And anywho, it
was the internal fix that she wanted: a galliard internal. There is more
to life than the material world.

Out of the corner of her eye, Trina imagined she saw a woman
at the bar, streaked with blonde rings and purple lips. All decked with
leather across her buxious black frame. Trina looked again to say
"Where y'at?" but the woman was gone. Trina looked around because

the diamonds alone would have stood out.

In fifteen minutes, Trina realized that she had to go but fortunately Prince had just returned. A few long galocher and then they were back in la voiture near the river. There was a wind on the boulevard which shivered its way over neutral ground. Then she was left on Freret waiting for her momma. The General picked Katrina up but they drove in sullen silence.

Trina knew there was trouble and did not even try to hide from the rock or the Lord, for she knew she was a Sinnerwoman. Finally, the shotgun home and within it the following scene played out, with three players: the General, Trina, and the belt—with a prop: a box of condoms. At first it was a couple. Accusing, excuses, pleading. Then the belt came out: a long and pointed tongue belt. A belt that would lash the legs and buttocks with welts that bled. This was not the first hammering that Katrina suffered but it was the most brutal. Trina cried, Trina bawled, Trina yowled, scraping and scrooching. Yet the whip kept coming down.

And then, the young girl snapped. Trina picked herself off the plaid, well-worn settee. Trina tore out of the house. Then she took the side streets to avoid being caught. It rained but she kept striding. Eventually, an ancient Chevy Malibu in yellow stopped and a fat middle-aged man rolled down the passenger side window.

“I cannot believe you are just taking a run.” The eyes spoke, and they spoke of sadness and grief. The torrent watered all the trees, grass, and people. It washed Trina completely until she was a drowned bird.

“I was going to a place. My boyfriend lives there.” There was a pleading which matched his.

The door opened then, and he asked where it was. She told him. He drove her there with no fuss. He remembered how that age went.

Then she asked a question: “What is your name, kind sir?”

He flushed: “Lehrer.” Then he lit a fag, draining it into cancer. The automobile left with broody, bloody intention in a soot spleen. As the automobile winked out, Katrina felt that she had been schooled by a teacher. Yet, it was still nibbling at her mouth what it was.

The apartment house was... less. The windows were decidedly antique, and the doors forgotten. There were irises in the pots and a wisteria down at the street level. It occurred to her how she had read of the poverty of St. Cloud, but never truly grasped what it meant. The apartment was among few places with green all alisting. The others

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were too poor. The street was cracked into little hills o' beans. Now the poor really lost its "o" and "r."

However, she did not go to the front door, but the back stoop. It was a riff in several of his histories. She pulled the screen door and pushed the whitewashed tomb into the kitchen. There was an engulfing silence. Across the kitchen to the darkened sitting room in brown. The television was unlit. And on the overstuffed rocker was the body of her Prince. Laying with a face that was lit blue from the opioids, another mindless crime.

Then the back door stretched, and Katrina turned, and saw. It was the face of the temptress moon with ringlets still in tow. There were Mercedes keys on her belt.

The mouth spoke but none of her face was in the right syncopation: "I think you should leave here. No one wants to find you in the orgies of bacchanalia."

"What are you doing here?"

"It is my pad; he was just roomin'."

"I do not have any place to go."

"No, you just don't want to be there right now. You are not the first to lay bewitched under the power of his gab and inquiries, though you may be the last." Emphasis on the word *may* as if there was still doubt.

Trina glance at her prince and then retreated to the streets and stars, like poison birds. She drifted over the boulevards and bridges. For a while, she went into an open Apostolic church. As she left her glance recorded a terminus where holy water had rested. Then went out to the land where once beguiled the old lamplighters at work. She ambled in the streets until near dawn, when a hung dog and blustering cock fought on a house roof over the night ending and the day beginning. A car stopped and pulled over on that row of houses. A familiar car. And then Sweetmomma put her head out.

"Child, it is time to come home." Caressing with a soft voice.

"I will. But only if that stitch is thrown out."

"You drive an impossible bargain."

"You were the mother once, you were the teacher, once. You may be sweet, but you're the one who found me. Not the General." The words bit hard.

"It will take more than a strap to be set free. It will take some time."

“Time is what I have, mostly.”

Sweetmomma looked and realized that this one was ready to fly. She pulled her head in and very carefully checked everything. Then the Escape drove off, into the east. Katrina would see the car again, when she got home. Later. Until then: peace of elegy, as the show of dawn was breaking.

Vatican rag is out, and instead, Katrina metaphased in onomatopoeical song in the pantomime: “It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns.” The ache which gripped her a moment ago was blasted; what remained behind was the realization of the warmth that came afterward: the little ice age blooming.

Fin.

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On Reading The Obituary Of A Nobel-Winning Japanese Physicist
Kate Flaherty

On Reading The Obituary Of A Nobel Winning Japanese Physicist,
Toshihide Maskawa 2-7-40 To 7-23-21

Symmetry is “the lamppost” that physicists
look under in their search for order,
says Dr. Turner, a cosmologist.
For example, the six points of a snowflake
are supposed to be symmetrical but rarely are.

In the war between matter and antimatter,
there is no exact symmetry,
or else the universe would not exist—
antimatter/matter would cancel each other out.

Physicists search for things they cannot see,
mostly by math.
Proof comes with the aid of linear accelerators.

The man who discovered quarks,
the fundamental particles
that make up the nuclei of atoms,
found the name for them in “Finnegan’s Wake,”
“Three quarks for Muster Mark!”

Dr. Maskawa felt the four types of quarks
that were known: “up” and “down” and “strange” and “charmed”
were somehow missing something.
He found two more types of quarks which he called
“top” and “bottom.”
Physicists must feel the world is topsy-turvy.

All quarks aside,
if matter should somehow come into symmetry with anti-matter,
would the universe end with a whimper or a soft poof?

Obituary, NYT, Dylan Loeb McClain, printed in the Boston Globe 8-23-21

Three Bears
Jennifer Phan



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Companion

Jared Martin

I stopped for a moment
and the feelings that had been lurking in,
stopped their measured pace
and in that moment enveloped me.

Loneliness

Despair

Melancholy

In that moment that was all I knew.
Within my chest I felt a longing,
but I knew not what for

A Cry for Love

Sarah Hayek

Love scares you,
but it weighs deep beneath your skin,
rooted in your body and veins like the words of God.
It echos at the edge of your heart like Harmonic pain songs.

You call love a tragedy because you are afraid of surrendering your soul
to an idea, scared of becoming a refugee who is in need of saving.

I know late at night, you become homesick in your own bed because the
yearning of another's presence becomes too strong to brace.

In search of peace during the late night tides, your silk covers fail to
comfort your lies, so you smoke up your system to ease what's left inside.
Filling up your lungs with smoke, holding it hostage, denying to aid your
wounds.

Your heart screams for intimacy, somewhere through its bottom layers
of flesh, the desire to intertwine your soul with another haunts you, to
feel safe beside a body, to feel its heat warming your skin, maddens you.

It's okay to fall vulnerable, to open yourself up in the hands of another.

There's no shame in being broken, take pride in the pieces you carry.
That's how love finds its way in, through the cracks, like empty lines
waiting to be filled in; a melody waiting to be sung.

Being broken is not a reflection of your lack of devotion.

I will happily shrink my heart to fit perfectly between your ribs, in case
the day comes where yours overbleeds.

I've memorized the rhythm of how your heart beats, just so I can
defibrillate it back to life, when the love tips over.

We often make love in silence.

We make love with no movements.

Leaving it up to our eyes to express what's too timid to be exposed.

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And often times, I understand what's said with no words.
How your eyes swell up to hold back the tears.

Let me serve your spirit, how will you grow without a little water to help
nurture your limits?

I can protect you from your sins.

Look me in the eyes, and I promise you'll find your way back to your
God.

Come in closer, show me what's in your mind, and bring it closer to
mine.

I Hate to Say Goodbye

Zoya Gargova

I hate to say goodbye
when I have to leave and go away
as it makes me die a little every time:
I hate to say goodbye

I hate to say goodbye
to my loved ones when death grabbed them
and there is no way to fight or win the battle:
I hate to say goodbye.

I hate to say goodbye
to all the memories of painful days with sparks of laughter
when kids were young and life was swirling:
I hate to say goodbye.

But there comes the time when
not knowing, wishing, least expecting
you have to say your last goodbye:
I hate to say goodbye.

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Winter Street

Robert Arsenaault



Brick & Mortar Ghosts

Jared Martin

The theater where you'd
lay your head on my shoulder.
The park you tried to make me jog.
The drafty studio we shared.
Our Tuesday night spot.
A city haunted by a life that is no longer mine.
No longer ours.
These brick and mortar ghosts
make me remember
All that I wish to forget.

The Watermark

ABC

Stirling Newberry

A bullet popped out. Beneath the stone tile and the stone brick that had laid together for generations among the mortar, it leaped into space. The man who hunted for it was Duncan, an American. A beefy, taller-than-tall-than-tall American whose musty-blond-with-gray hair flowed. There was the stubble of a beard that he had shaved on the Lockheed C-5 Galaxy just before landing at Kabul. He remembered the scowl from one of his seatmates when he came back from the lavatory having done the deed.

That is when the moment happened, he smirked and said at the seatmate: “A, B, C. Although I said to my wife that I would not shave my beard before I left Ameroooca. But the orders said no beard once I hit the ground in Kabul, therefore it had to be shaved in the air. See?”

There was nothing but a roll of the eyes. But his seatmate understood, women were like that. As the expression goes: even a soldier has to have a soul, even if he is a contractor. But that was before the ops got going. Now Duncan was here on a dusty road that wound its way towards the capital of Afghanistan. He was doing repairs on a hovel largely out of payback towards the local headman, though Duncan called him “Juju man” in private, it rang a distant chord with him going along.

But that was past. In the now he was surrounded by the mountain air with the only hovel in this land. He looked down to the ground.

“You know,” he said, “we can fix you up in a new place.” The rungs on the ladder groaned.

The answer came from a rough-shaven Pashtun man, considerably shorter and slighter with a crook on the left side of his mouth.

“The old way is the better way.”

But he watched the finishing hammer as the claw grasped to see if there was another shell. There wasn't.

“I have not seen any stray bullets careening around.”

“They have not happened here since the old days.” Absentmindedly, the Pashtun flipped a coin over and under his knuckles but then put it away.

“Which old we talking about, exactly? End of 1979? Say, December 24?”

The Pashtun stood a moment in his Afghani trousers and boots.

Then laughed.

“This is a joke? Bullets used to be common when you Americans first came. The world was different then.”

“Drier.” The sun had pulled out from the roof into spring-like lands. There was a gray-green fuzz on the hills and on the distant horizon.

“Though the joins had not cemented.”

“Nor the partnership,” replied Duncan. He looked back down the valley to see if men were walking off the road. Could not be too careful because bullets didn’t just lodge in houses or bazaars. He glanced overhead into the bluest of air. No vultures or ravens turned in the sky.

“You seem more comfortable laughing.”

“I kept some amused. Repeat for me your name again, I almost have it on my tongue.”

The Pashtun slowly pronounced his name again: “Khandawar.”

“I will try to remember it, this time.” Coming off the ladder he stamped his L.L. Bean boots, for not being military had advantages. In his pouch, he counted the nails and screws. The contractor realized he needed to change tack. “Do you want a spigot pipe for water? I can just about do that tomorrow.”

“And where do I get water from? Every week my grandmother goes down to the well at the bottom of the hill.”

“She handles that drum?”

“One of the young men pushes it for her.” The Afghani man looked at his clothes. On the top level they were of a hippie-derived style, on the other hand the ensemble was neatly pressed and well-crafted in color. “You are very careful.”

“I try to be meticulous.”

“Sorry, I do not know that word.”

“It means very careful and precise.”

“Maybe I should be careful when I laugh around you.”

Only then did Duncan fix the hammer on his construction belt. He almost tried a greeting in Dari but thought the better of it. But the Pashtun saw something on his face. A perplexment, perhaps.

“You want to say... what?”

“Nothing, I just was remembering my time at Languages School.”

“What did you learn?”

“What I did not learn was any form of speech in Dari or Pashtun. Only a little writing.”

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The Pashtun man paused perhaps to clasp hands together. “This is another joke. You must have made people laugh.”

It was strange because Duncan never thought he was gifted with the art of glee or gab. He looked into Khandawar’s eyes and saw that look which people in World War II called “the thousand-yard stare.” Off to an unknown future.

He saw it as a poster many times at his uncle’s apartment in Burlington, Vermont up on splendid Lake Champlain. It was an apartment along a side street on the main drag. It was the only metropolitan area in the state, and then only when they waited for the students to come back. He saw it many times in the apartment when his mom sent him up on the creaky Greyhound bus to parts unknown. The poster hung there in his uncle’s study. When his uncle was alive, that is. It was in Life having come from death.

Another connection with his uncle: a base, he learned languages there where his uncle had learned to kill. It was down in old Virginia way, a vision which was fresh because it was different. It was amazingly humid from the river’s seethe and amazingly heated from the bay’s deep growl. The tin can buildings were lined up just so after your eyes had been bedazzled by the old pink brick edifices that lined the boulevard. Old hiding the young.

Memory is a funny thing: as Duncan remembered the crush of his boots on the sand: snap, crackle, pop. That was also the cereal he had for breakfast. The first thing he looked upon was the creased military uniform of a junior officer: hair was brown with no gray and all fabric was crisp. As far as Duncan was concerned, he was the other side.

Then came the first words from the Army captain’s mouth: “You must be a contractor.” There was a southern hymn on the downside which smoothed the drone of diction. And a universal awe at the one-foot difference in height.

“It shows, doesn’t it? I left the Grateful Dead stickers at home... Do I say ‘sir’ as a civilian?” Duncan did an imitation of the hymn-like theme. But no homage to its melody.

“Not required. Get ready because this is a fast indoctrination to language, culture, and mission. Got to hurry.”

“What is the rush?”

“I have to teach the young First Lieutenants about the basis of containment. Atomic, biological, chemical.”

“Many specialties under your hat.” If he did not mention the hat

was pointed it was because of effort.

“Linguistics is not my forte.” The captain scrutinized Duncan up and down and it sent a shiver on the tall civilian. The military man continued: “First time in Central Asia? Not going to be too brown for you?”

“I’ll get along fine—it’s not like we are going to Glennross. By the way, then, where is a bathroom?”

“We still call it the latrine. It is the building on the left.”

“Thank you kindly”—Duncan looked for the name— “Captain Cotton.”

“Be in class in 15.”

“Yes sir.” With a rich green flatness on the “sir.”

Then his eyes turn to the present, in the ruined road toward the apex of Afghanistan. Duncan turns toward Khandawar, full face because he learns on his first day that over the shoulder could be conceived as impolite.

“I have to go now. Are you sure you don’t want me to put you on the list for a new home?”

He got the thousand-yard stare back as if the Afghan man was looking to the horizon and beyond. Finally, the resident of the home said: “My son is in the military. I will tell him to ask to be with your bodyguard.”

“Thank you kindly.” Though in truth, having to keep an eye on another person was a pain from the collar of the neck, down.

An army-green bus came by to pick Duncan up. A heavily armored bus with leatherette-lined seats, but still a bus because there was installed a plexiglass shield between passenger and native driver. Duncan wondered which way the glass protected because he did not feel safer, to say the least. But he plopped down near Alec Blake, and after a bit of hesitation: “I hope you did not see anything untoward today.” There was one other military man aside from Alec: straight and almost at attention.

“Got a middle-aged man to sign up for a new condo. That’s six extra units this month. And you?” Alec actually listened for an answer.

“You and your Always Be Closing attitude. My bit was repaired two elder huts.” Duncan ignores both the Afghani driver and the Military Police Office.

“That does not sound promising at all. Sure it wasn’t thatch?”

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“They’re happy.”

Alec looked at the driver realizing that the next words out of his mouth would be “worse than a crime, it would be a mistake” because he was about to prattle on that the contractors did not worry about Afghan happiness.

Always Be Closing: move the native population from ancestral homes to shiny, new boxy condos made out of ticky-tack. The home was cheap, but the money would come in little ways: electricity for example. Duncan thought this “Now I’ve got you, bleep bleep, bleep” formula was going to hurt the Coalition one day. Soon actually, thus he bore a note in his pants pocket from the Major in charge of his rebuilding group to reconsider his return to the States. He knew that while he did not upsell, he kept the local chiefs content by fixing houses for the locals and thus was useful, “useful” in quotes. Every local honcho was corrupt as all get out and need to be kept on side. A little grease must be provided.

“What’s so funny?” Alec’s Brooklyn accent interrupted Duncan’s chain of thought.

“Nothing, just halfway through a busy week.”

“ABC.”

“I’ll wait for TGIF.”

“You’ll be waiting a long time down on corner street U.S.A. This is my fifth tour because there is nothing back home in our country.”

“Well, at least we have pot now, sort of. I’ll go back to numbering trees.”

“Who is paying for that?”

“Interior.”

“Well trust me on this, there is a great deal more in protecting the country than in living in it.”

“Which basically means there is more dying for the country than living for the nation.”

“So how did you come by this racket?”

“My uncle was a medic in some war without honor in a country without peace. I wanted to serve, just at contractor wage-scale.”

“Vietnam? Did not like to be shot, did he?”

“Oh, he likes to shoot, just not being shot at. He’s one of them.” Then he amended: “There also was a thought he might want to be a doctor when he got out.” He remembered going out to shooting afternoons with his uncle and ex-aunt. Noisy affairs.

Then there was a pause that grew to an interruption. At least,

Duncan could soundlessly think rather than mindlessly talk. That is the way with halts in conversation, sometimes you could cut them with a paring blade.

On Friday he was back in Kabul, at the headquarters, when he bumped into a young Afghani soldier whose face he ought to remember. A look of surprise grafted itself onto Duncan's face almost by accident. Then nonchalantly he said: "I should remember you, but unfortunately I cannot quite remember the scene." Duncan waited for a moment to let an MPC go by.

That it was an Afghani man was clear in the face and he had a uniform one size too large. He also had a small hint of a beard. "You probably remember my father, rather than me. He asked me to join your team because he said you were going north." There was another one of those pauses but Duncan strangled the pause with a knife. There was a thud inside his head because that information was restricted but then he remembered that the father was connected to the mayor and some other would-be officials in a very small part of this war. That means Duncan moved to a more guarded stance and tried to begin again.

"In the north, there is a bridge that needs some attention; it is quite old, and higher-ups want to know whether it should be repaired or simply started over again."

"And they picked you to determine this?"

"One of the things that senior officers know is who actually gets the job done. And, on this occasion, they have picked me. For some reason."

"I am sure that you are the best."

"You're already talking like an officer."

"It must be your way to flatter your subordinates."

"No, just a habit." Which, thought Duncan, you share.

That night on his bed he viewed a different world, in a place where the internet flows like water. There was no email from his wife so he sent one out into the void, and hoped it settled between the other stains in her mailbox. To be read from subtropical drizzle on Washington's coast in however many hours would come to pass.

It had no leavening, but he sent it out. To a place where women are not hidden in any respect. He hoped it would be only children who would interrupt her.

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On the next day, yes, a Saturday, Duncan was in a strange place indeed: a military base with precious little military. Some loose white buses and piles of crates covered by a wall of concrete. But no orange-brown butterflies because the nectar had already run dry. Around the rim ran a concrete bulwark and outside the main road along the Kabul River with traffic wallowing on the ramps. Sandbars looked up from the river at the counterparts on the tarmac.

It was at this point that Duncan realized that it was underground that he needed to go, and so he went. Blown-out beige walls greeted him. None of the tidy micro-clean of the developed world. A fortress standing on the edge.

Inside the double-wide door was open, and a man looked upon him with quizzical interest. Duncan flashed his badge and was let in. To wait for his guide. He did not wait for long but a little while, enough to make the ears steam. Lightly.

Then they were walking and looking up and the guide asked:

“This was arranged rather quickly. Strange for a low-level job.”

“You’ll have to take that up with your command.” It was a retort, and both knew that: if there was funny business, it was on the Afghani side. The guide left him at the arsenal with a view to the shooting gallery from the back. Instantly Duncan recognized his man. Or rather the plunging shot which rang out from his weapon which identified him. There he was, blazing away at a pace like kingdom come. There was a satisfying crunch with each shot. The shots were center pointed; clearly, the young Afghani was superb as a marksman.

The young man slid the headphones off and turned to recognize the contractor instantaneously. Duncan made quick work with glum face and handed him a sealed copy of the orders. There were only nods at that point.

Soon Duncan left the stultifying air for the base.

It was night in the northernmost part of Afghanistan, in the crinkle mountains before Tajikistan. It is cold beyond cold. This stream coughed its way to the Kokcha River in its multi-banded flurry of multi-layered slurry and the main road which mimicked it. The convoy steams its way to the base with the main driver scowling at the local guardsmen. The guardsmen knew that they were not getting a bribe from the US military but that is alright since there were easier pockets to pick with leaden hands under leaden heavens. Not on the World News Tonight

with David Muir, that's for sure.

Duncan and his crew were here to address to state of the truss that connected the northern part of the provinces. All the time Duncan counting the seconds to his leaving. In World War II, say at Market Garden, a scene like this would have been set to swirling rain. The rain which covered your face after having drenched your hood on your parka and slid down your back. But there was not here, and instead, the cooler breeze flowed down from that North with only sand and cold as its legacy. There were hulking trucks carrying both GI regulars and Afghan forces. He backslapped the American security guard, hard, and then peered over the side.

It was a long way down to the muddy wash that passed for stream between two stone mountain passes. There was no green on the rocks. Duncan cracked a smile, recalling one of his children chanting "Slime!" with every running step.

The signs of the trestle staying up were not good. His uncle would say: "It's trashy, so trash it. It isn't human." Everything yet was of old beam without knots, but dilapidated. He also checked for munitions; in case the Taliban were going to blow the span while he delved. Looking back at the men, they were, unfortunately, milling around. Duncan went back and took pictures on his phone for reference, for in the morning he studied all of the photographs and, by nightfall, decided to go back again for another look.

Alone.

Duncan thought he could disappear in a stasis in the dark, thus he headed out to borrow a truck from the motor pool. It was illegal to borrow. But better to ask for forgiveness than beg for permission. He learned the lesson, in clubs. Then was no chance for him to creep so he did not bother. Ambling along between the temporary buildings, he saw a few military people taking communion from a priest with the light from a nearby barrack. He vaguely heard the words of atonement: the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost. The drone of purification made flesh and blood.

Then he set his footsteps towards the motor pool with a particular truck in mind. Step by step, foot by foot, the truck came in to view, awaiting orders. He had some. He stepped up, opening the door. With his foot just inside the driver's side, he heard a snap of fingers. Duncan turned around. It was the man in the young Afghan military uniform with his beard slightly longer. With a pistol. Pointed straight at Duncan's

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heart. Duncan knew he did not miss.

It screamed more like an M79 Grenade Launcher with a wide hungry maw for coin.

The American pulled up to his full height. “You are not going to shoot me on the base, are you?” The voice sounded like a wisecrack but did not feel like it.

“This is an insult that was delivered to my father, to take our house away, so I know that I will not make it through to the morning. Thus, it does not matter where I shoot you as a great husk, only that the deed has been done and recorded in remembrance. My life is meaningless compared to the vengeance. Even your YHWH knows the power of that.” The first three letters of the new hijāṛ order are YWH. ABC in another tongue and a pun on their view of an unfinished being who needed a name.

“I can recognize a home rather than a house, I tried to live and let live.” Duncan’s time was gassed, he thought, but then his eyes smiled. “Go ahead and shoot me.” He spread his hands.

Then a shot rang out. But it was not Duncan who rolled forward with the bullet, instead, an MPC had stealthily pulled up behind the Afghani, because the MPC had seen the Afghani slide the Beretta up his sleeve. And, of course, the MPC followed him. The Afghani soldier flowed blood from the mouth.

“Thank you kindly.” And a nod.

“You should not release a truck from the motor pool, sir. The sergeant closes the books till tomorrow.” It was a straight reply from the clean-shaven face.

The heap of a contractor looked around, at the mountain peaks, then at the sergeant. He scratched the stubble on his chin for the difference between them. He wished and dreamed it in a waking nightmare to travel the gap between mental ridges and communicated through the skull, though he knew MPC would never do because the MPC could not grasp the nettle flight with bars of solid brass. Duncan knew this but vainly tried to make the MPC understand like a vial of sand seen by an eagle in flight. He took the commanding bearing that he learned from his uncle. “I’ll be on an airplane before close. You should all but consider doing the same.”

Fin

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