

# RUBBERTOP REVIEW

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# Editor's Note

Well, here we are in the middle of a pandemic.

Our daily lives have been disrupted. We've found ourselves isolated. The future remains uncertain.

I can't speak for everyone, but I'm someone who thrives on routine and structure, both of which have been temporarily ripped away. Days no longer begin with showers, personal care, or preparing to go out into the world. In fact, some days almost don't begin at all.

The quick spread of SARS-CoV-2 has drastically changed the way we operate. We no longer meet in classes, and I feel for my students, for my classmates, for my professors, for those graduating with nary a whisper, and for all of us who have been forced to adapt. Families are finding themselves out of work, or working from home, and overwhelmed with each other's presence. We hear stories of people getting sick—or worse, we have loved ones who are fighting against COVID-19. We take precautions when we do need to go out, nervous that this imperceptible enemy might make its way back into our households.

These past few months have been stressful for everyone, but we're doing it, and we'll make it through this.

It's hard to say how long this is going to last, and with any luck, you're reading this from the other side of the pandemic. Every nook and cranny of our society is currently reeling under the pressure of the virus, and the repercussions will last for some time. People, businesses, and schools are all struggling. Here, at The University of Akron, we don't know when in-person classes will resume, and there are already warnings that the future of the University will not look the same, as emergency actions and budget cuts are being made to soften the financial blows that the virus has wrought.

This is *Rubbertop Review's* eleventh year. The journey here has been arduous, filled with speed bumps and at times full stops. But it's our eleventh year. This journal, like all of us, is persistent.

Throughout all of this, one saving grace has been the blessing of time. Sometimes, maybe we have too much of it. I've fallen back on my favorite stories, television shows, and music, escaping the hours and the uncertainty through art. When it comes down to it, the humanities are what have been getting me through this, as well as the humans (and cats) I love. This pandemic has shown us all the importance of community, of people coming together, or people com-

ing together to stay apart, in order to save lives and keep the hospitals from becoming overburdened. The value of neighbors checking in on one another, and phone calls, and coffee dates over Skype. The stories we tell, and the things we create.

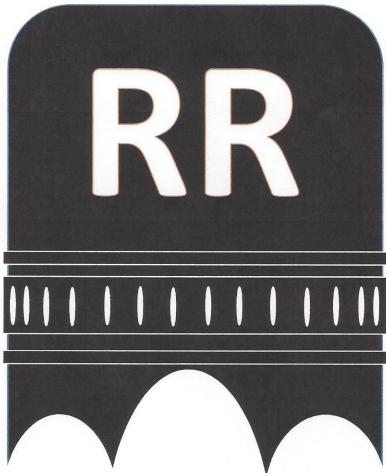
This volume of *Rubbertop* serves as documentation of these unique times. Of people sharing their stories and experiences as they navigate this pandemic, and try to make some sense of it.

We'll make it through this, together, as a community of artists, of readers, of people.

See you on the other side,

Jason Jurkowski  
Editor-in-Chief







CREATIVE  
NONFICTION:  
QUARANTINED

Joseph Brown

## Yeast is the Least of my Worries

Yeast is the least of my worries.

Humanity, which has since the time of the Ancient Egyptians, has been brewing beer, now bemoans on Twitter the lack of access to dried active yeast. A microorganism that lives on every fruit in their fridge and which can be cultured from the flour. While having one of the most potent informational resources in the existence of man, the complaints about access to the global trade network take precedence to watch a little old grandmother from Kentucky talk about how she makes her sourdough.

Technology has freed us from many shackles but not from the want of ignorance. The dependencies it creates on a massive network of trade become apparent in times of crisis. Masks, needed in Italy, are made in America, with paper pulp from Canada. When allies beg for scraps during an emergency, nobody leaves with anything. A sad game theoretic prisoner's dilemma of greed winning out over humanity, due to the worship of a flag over human life.

Looking at the end of this crisis, who knows what will be gained. What is there to learn from the acts of inhumanity. The irrational and amoral biological, mechanical machine which just churns. The virus cannot be blamed, it has no compulsion to know it is harming a host, only the pure natural requirement to reproduce. It at least is understandable on a moral level, as there is nothing to understand. Humans, however, take actions contrary to their own stated preferences.

They put religiosity above the most sacred. They pray en masse for redemption as death joins them. As they hand each other the collection bowl, scared only to their simoniacs, they pass on the plague.

Yet, Cesar is not without blame as well, those who measure the vast machine of the economy above those who are gears. Woe, for you, has been given the title of the essential, for you are a doom of lack of PPE. When you demand your wages be raised in the healthy times, "it was a job anyone may do." Now, as you request it when that truth is made clear of usefulness, from behind sheltered walls, they decry you as if profitters. The hypocrites are made bare as the emperor.

Keep your lists humanity of the heroes in these times, so we might raise the statues on high to those in masks and gloves.

Keep your lists humanity of the villain who we will see justice in the times to

come.

Keep your lists humanity of the dead, and do not let the light of their lives go extinguished in vein.

The accounts of this period will be balanced. The victory feast will be of bread, wine, beer, and that which is fermented on the yeast grown in urgency.

Breanna Coe

# Candles

I don't believe in placebos or panaceas, but when candlelight flickers on my walls, I pretend it's warm. The only other light in my room pools in from the hallway. My room smells like poached peaches and though I have music playing, it feels still and silent. Like I can see through the distractions I'm creating; like I'm not just waiting for everything to get back to normal.

It's hard to believe solutions can exist within a state of mind. That thinking you're better makes it so. But the third week within my childhood home has convinced me to try. The time spent inside makes me feel lethargic and apathetic, until I can convince myself I'm not. When I drink coffee in the morning, I tell myself it's a remedy. When I light a candle, I tell myself the scent will put my mind at ease. I tell myself that the crisp air outside will give me liveliness, and that the blue light of the sky will make me feel awake. I remind myself that I'm at low risk for becoming ill, while trying not to think about all those I love with a significantly higher chance.

There's apprehension in the air. The atmosphere of my town has changed completely. I see it when people change sides of the street to avoid others. I see it when my friends video chat me despite living down the street. I see it when my dad cuts himself trying to cook dinner, and my mom's business gets placed on hold. I see it when my parents spend hundreds of dollars each grocery trip, and how more often than not, we're left with much less than ordered while charged much more. I see it when I look online for items to quell the ambient nervousness. Stuff I never believed worked: candles, incense, melatonin, oils, charms. When I set my angel figurines on my desk and my catholic charm bracelet on my wrist. When I turn to my keepsakes to cure a problem I can't hope to fix. Something in my mind tells me these aren't really solutions, but I'm willing to try anything at this point. It's not the virus I'm trying to cure, but the monotony of quarantine, and the anxiety that accompanies it.

I have it easy. My heart goes out to the nurses and doctors. The people who can't work from home. The people who have afflicted loved ones. The COVID-19 pandemic started weeks ago, and I just want things to get back to normal. This whole situation started so fast and escalated so quickly, that I'm still playing catch up. I talk to my professors through my computer and try and tell myself I'm getting the same quality of education. I'm grateful to be at my childhood

home with my family, while wishing I could continue my normal life in Orange County. I miss stupid things, like buying books and getting coffee. Conversations with strangers, going out to restaurants, not being so fatigued.

But for now, I'm going to keep lighting candles. I'm going to look out my window with a cup of warm coffee in my hands. I'm going to fiddle with the bracelet on my wrist and be grateful for all the small things in my life that convince me everything is going to be okay.

Mitzi Dorton

# I Broke my Mom out of the Nursing Home During the Coronavirus Pandemic

When the nursing home in Washington state was on the news, I told my son if I started hearing of coronavirus cases in the area, I would go and get mom and bring her home. He agreed but stated how hard it might be to care for her. There had been a flu outbreak at the nursing home where mom was recently, but it wasn't Covid19. Nurses, aides, and all staff were wearing gloves and masks, as well as my mother's roommate, who seemed to have something bronchial going on. About that time, I picked my mom up for an outing, a carefree drive to the park, which always seemed to serve a purpose for both of us in having more private conversations and relaxation. Mother became herself and I could see her visibly chill with the steady sound of the engine. Although her vision was going, I would point out the changes in the trees, sights in nature she might have missed, and she would smile. On this last trip out when I picked her up, I noticed a used mask and gloves had been tossed in the circular drive at the entryway, and I made a mental note of the lack of care by the staff for visitors and patients. I had been generally happy with the nursing home, although there had been bumbling occurrences. That sighting in the parking area didn't loom larger in my mind until an elderly man in the next town was diagnosed with Covid19. It was an emotional response from the heart, but after discussing it to some small extent with my son and the options with elder services and home nurses, I walked in and said, "Because of the coronavirus, I want to remove my mother and bring her home with me today."

The news was not well-received. The director of admissions froze in step, frowned, and told me to wait. Meanwhile, the receptionist announced that only immediate family were allowed inside and told me she needed to take my temperature. The grandfather clock in the foyer ticking reminded me it would only be a matter of time before we weren't allowed in either. Then, if mom got sick and died, I would never see her again. I had read in the news that staff were now required to take temperatures, and I thought it was the same thermometer they used on patients, so I came prepared, "No, I brought my own. I'm not going to



use the nursing home thermometer, no way,” I said, and whisked out the one I had bought at the drug store the day before. 98.6, it displayed. Thank goodness, I usually have allergies this time of year, and it could have been a bit more. The receptionist wasn’t happy with me and tried to explain that it was freshly purchased and cleaned. While waiting for the director, I noted a few more visitors like submissive children filed in and dutifully allowed the receptionist to take their temperatures with a red light on their foreheads. I felt a bit ashamed about my behavior, and that I honestly did not know it wasn’t a shared oral thermometer.

The director’s efforts heralded the social worker, who marched up like a pawing bull and told me she believed mom would be better cared for in assisted living. She explained my mother’s conditions and the amount of supervision she needed. Then she told me I could not remove her without certain protocol, and certainly not on an hour’s notice, saying I must have an interview with the doctors, and they would not be in until several days later. I stood firm. “That’s my mom, and I love her. I understood it was my right to take her.” She stood firmer. “We don’t believe you will be able to care for her at home. It will require around the clock assistance.” Just then, the director tapped the social worker on the shoulder, interrupted and said she located the nurse practitioner, and I could have a meeting with her now.

We sat at a long conference table. Another staff member joined the nurse practitioner. Both were fierce in their staunchness that mom would be safer there. I was asked for a plan. Thank God I had talked to the woman at elder services. I pulled from the agencies the lady had given me, plus I threw out her name. I had no plan, just my heart guiding me that I wanted my mother to live out her full life, even if she was ninety-five, and I would arrange for services, such as a nurse who made home visits and the local adult sitting services. I knew I wasn’t going to be doing this right away, because I didn’t want community in, possibly harboring Covid19. Mom would give her own life for me, I thought.

They weren’t convinced I should. “Don’t you think your mother’s dementia has gotten worse since she first came in?” I replied that it was still noted as mild in her records, and I had just seen one event with sundowning, and she was having that before she came in on rare occasion.

“Do you have everything in? Provisions?” “Yes,” I replied. “That’s why I am here today. “I wanted to be sure I had everything in place first.” It had been a whirlwind, the news that I still hadn’t fully processed. I had stuffed a mountain of groceries into my cupboards and pantry. I tried not to be too greedy about the

toilet paper at the grocery store, and took about four packages plus four boxes of Kleenex. My car was full of gas, I had my prescriptions, my new bank checks, plus treats and food for the dog. I didn't know how the request at the nursing home would go, so I hadn't invested a lot in the foods that mom liked.

"We believe with people coming in through the home nurses, and other local agencies, she would be more prone to catching the coronavirus than she would here." They spouted out a list of things they could do for her, and while I was sure they could, I thought of the fact that someone perhaps inadvertently switched her original wheelchair, and the brakes didn't work as well on the one she had been given. I recalled the times she had missed appointments, and they had to be rescheduled. I remembered instances where they didn't have her ready, one when a young aide with a skull tattoo on her wrist ran in last minute to dress her, and ended up throwing mom's little green wool coat on the closet floor since she found another jacket for mom to wear. The times the aides didn't ask what I needed when I came to their desk and continued engaging in fun conversation among themselves until I interrupted. These were minor things, but then it came to me what I should say to prove my point, "That all sounds very nice, and I have been generally happy here and appreciative of the things you do for my mom, but the other day when I took her out, I noticed a mask and gloves thrown out in the parking lot by the front door." They looked at one another.

The nurse practitioner said, "Well, we can't hold your mother. It is your right to take her. We just wanted to be assured there was a plan in place. Come back in 3-4 hours and we will see about letting you take her. Perhaps you have things you need to do."

I rushed around to try and extend my planning for anything I had forgotten. Would they decide to let me take her tonight? Would I honestly be able to care for my mom? She did require a lot more than I felt I could do and still manage a life outside of home, and I had witnessed the one episode of her dementia within the past year. Mostly, she was as sweet as a Sunday school teacher, but since she had turned ninety, she could be willful out of the blue at times.

I had not asked my landlord if I could bring her, and she wasn't on my lease. It would be like going into hiding, but I couldn't risk her safety to people like the one with the skull tattoo on her wrist, or the merry aides who only cared about their own conversations.

The coronavirus was changing my life. I wouldn't be able to use the agencies who provided assistance and respite until it was over, and how long would that be? I would be locked in a different world than yesterday. What if my mom or I

had already been exposed? Incubation could be up to two weeks. What if I needed to go out to get more groceries, and I brought the virus back to her?

I was very careful. I read and tried to follow everything, but the advice seemed ever-changing. Stumbling happened too, like the time I wore winter gloves to use on the ATM buttons thinking that would safeguard me. Subsequently, my dog found the gloves in the car, and I had to tug and wrestle them out of her mouth. Wet dog saliva on wool, and perhaps coronavirus germs now in my hands.

When I returned to the nursing home, the receptionist with the thermometer whispered she thought they were going to let me take my mom, and she smiled. Yes! Upon asking for a cart to pack her things, a friendly nurse brought me her prescriptions in cardboard bubble packets. While I had asked for paperwork for my mom to secure treatment at my own doctor's office for new patients and filled one out, I hadn't even thought of her meds. I was grateful. The floor nurse informed me that she had also added my mom's sleep medicine and her Lactaid to the other medications that were in there. I thanked her profusely and took the plastic bag with a knot tied at the top, not feeling particularly protective of it, out of stress and being the country mouse I sometimes am. Flustered, I made two loads, and I still can't remember if I left the meds in the room and took them with the second load, ... or if I took them to the car with the first.

The aide with the skull tattoo darted in and asked me if I'd like some help packing as I wheeled out the first cart. I said, sure, and proceeded out into the hallway. Perhaps the pills were on the cart then. I had been ripping things out of drawers, pulling pictures off the walls. I just wanted to get mom out as quickly as possible before the people in charge changed their mind. All the while, my mother was stammering, "Wh-what are you doing?" I was afraid she might refuse to leave, not understanding.

Instead Mom seemed pleased as I finally wheeled her out. I thought of her words the last time I visited her, "Now, I'm going to die here." (She said that every new place I took her for the past five years). "Take these blankets and keep them. I don't need them," she pointed to her closet. "Oh mom, don't say that. You never know where else you are going with a gypsy daughter like me." She had laughed.

As it turned out, my mother's original wheelchair was somehow lost. The one she was using had a number on the back of it, and it belonged to the nursing home. Although in the last week, I had mentioned it to three people there, no one had taken it on as a project to find it. I couldn't remove this one, and no one seemed to be able to tell me where hers was. I did have a very old-fashioned one that was lightweight and I could manage to push and lift when I travelled with

her, but it had no self-brakes for her in the front. I went to the car to retrieve it, wanting to be on the road before someone decided otherwise, wheelchair or not.

The social worker was now relaxed and helpful, and she congregated with two of the friendlier older aides and they all seemed to be cheering me on now, grinning and waving goodbyes to mom. One commented though with a haunted look in her eyes, "We don't even have one case in this town yet." "Yes, but it's all over the surrounding towns!" the aide I knew as the coffee lady admonished, reaching over and patting my mom on the shoulder.

When we got home, and I began to sort through her other meds the nurse had given me, I realized the sleep medicine and the Lactaid were the very things that were not even there in the bag, and of course, Mom was up all night. As the old wheelchair had no brakes, I had to get up with her and wait as she went to the bathroom each time. She commanded me along with her to the toilet every fifteen minutes throughout the night. While I reminded her to use only two tissues, she said okay, then took five or six. She used a whole box of tissues by morning.

The next day I called the nursing home to ask about the meds. They stated everything they had they gave to me. I explained that my mother was up all night, and that the nurse had told me she put her sleeping pills in the bag. The director of nursing stated she was too upset about all that was going on, and there was nothing more she could tell me. They didn't have them. They had looked several times.

I called the doctor's office where I submitted the new patient package, and they stated my mom would not be able to be seen right away. They were very tied up getting ready for novel ways of seeing patients, the receptionist said, and she commented, "Covid19 is everywhere now." Mom had a limited number of pills and no sleep medicine. I told the receptionist she only had four left. "I'm sorry for your mother-in-law, she said, but we have to follow protocol, and the nurse will call you."

"She's my mother," I corrected before I hung up.

The manager of the building lives over top of me. She is a young thing who plays loud music and has harbored boyfriends and other guests for periods of time herself. No meds, a faulty wheelchair and a talkative patient on the loose in society with a manager upstairs and the landlord unaware. I could have asked him. He lives in another state, but what if he had said no? My mother would be left to catch Covid19 at the nursing home. I couldn't accept his negative answer.

As a writer, I had published two recent short stories based upon my mom and

her life, so I had been hanging out in revisiting her younger self and feeling especially attached because of it. The noises my mom made, the spitting of blueberries and the hawking sounds I heard when she ate jarred me into reality from my recent writing projects, where I hung out with her in the 1950s and 60s. She was the parent who allowed all of the neighborhood children in her house. I can still visualize her peeking into the fort she let us make under the dining room table, helping us spread blankets to cover it. I remember Mom directing us to go up in the hot dust-ridden attic and search through her cedar-smelling trunk for dress-up clothes. I can still see her in a bubble cut hair-do, wearing stretch pants with elastics at the foot, delivering the cherry Kool-aide she helped us make to the piano bench she allowed neighborhood friends and me to drag on to the front porch for our dress up tea party. I also remember her strict side, admonishment in public places or church to keep still and make no noise whatsoever. Telling mom be quiet now when the manager was home didn't work, as she would forget and call out for a glass of water or another blanket instead of showing me, but no one said anything yet or complained.

Today the wheelchair my son ordered for her with front brakes arrived, along with a dozen boxes of tissues. He also emailed me and told me to spray down the cardboard packages with Lysol just in case. I did, and I wiped down the wheelchair with Clorox and carried both the big and small box to the dumpster wearing rubber gloves. My son shut down his restaurant business and is holed up on lockdown with his wife, their two young children, and his niece from Alabama, who had to leave the university, because of the pandemic. I had told him no amount of money was worth losing family.

Because I'm the family genealogist, I know about the flu of 1918, and my son has heard the stories about my great grandmother who lost seven siblings, and my grandfather who lost several as well. We never heard the stories from them or their descendants. It is recorded though on the old death and cemetery records. My son is determined to protect his family, but he may not be able to cover the rent for his business now.

With the new wheelchair, thank God, my mom is going to the bathroom independently after five days of getting me up with her every time she went at short intervals and calling out for help. Our walls are thin here. She still has her verbal routines, hollering "Bathroom!" to announce her departure and jar me a bit from the next room where I sleep. "Need water!" she calls even though it is on the table beside of her. Before she goes to bed she always tells me as I cover her, "I only need two blankets!" Later she calls out, "I'm cold! Need a blanket."

I do have to get up for that and try to put a quilt over her. “No, not that one; it’s heavy,” she says. It’s not really heavy, just thicker than the two soft thinner ones. I explain again, “I don’t have another lightweight blanket. These are the only two, and you don’t want to catch cold,” before she points to and accepts her furry robe as an additional coverlet. Her white arms are thin with blue veins netting through the surface reaching out to help. She closes her eyes, the ancient face of the woman who spread fresh line-dried sheets over me as a child. Needless to say, I am sleep deprived, but at least not moving on command every quarter of the hour.

My son gave me an app for doing a doctor visit online using the phone. I hope it works because she has four blood pressure and six blood thinner pills left, and I will have no choice but to use some old expired bottles of blood pressure and blood thinner, of the same brand and dosage that she used to take five years ago, until she can see a doctor. These pills are of a limited number as well. I’m not going to risk taking her at 95 years old to the emergency room or a quick access clinic with the coronavirus going around. I received an email that the new doctor’s office is also doing phone visits and even house calls in an advertisement, but I don’t know how long it will take them to set it up or call me back. As yet, I haven’t heard a thing.

Would I have broken her out if I had thought all of this through? Had I realized just because I ploughed through three grocery stores and purchased umpteen cans and frozen bags of veggies and soups, bought masks and gloves, boxed foods, toilet paper, sanitizers, secured my own prescriptions and ordered new bank checks in a matter of days didn’t mean everything would fall into place for her?

When I went to the dog park with mom sitting in the car nearby watching, a dog owner standing six feet away in another fenced section called out to me for medical advice. She was having difficulty contacting her doctor’s office and getting a prescription. I shared our situation and my own experience. She said she lived in the same town of the nursing home where my mother had stayed, and they weren’t allowing anyone in now. If my mother had become sick with Covid19, I would have never seen her again, and she would die without family.

I tell myself we are born of the survivors of the Spanish flu, and I am born of fighters. Mom fought to live to 95, surviving two breast cancer surgeries under only local anesthesia in her nineties. My mother’s husband, my dad, fought in the Battle of the Bulge and survived. When my college roommate, a fashion designer who lives in the epicenter of the coronavirus in New York City, heard

I had concern about my landlord, the thin walls, and mom living with me, she said, “I think you are worrying too much. Your mother is bone china.” The advice resonated, and I knew I made the right choice.

Lisa Gschwandtner

## Degrees of Social Distance

My friend in the Bay Area is a CPA who believes the world is largely run by idiots. She has a spreadsheet of all the items in her earthquake kit, including the dates when various items will expire and need to be rotated out. I tell her hospitals are looking for N95 masks. I live in Los Angeles and I have a box of N95 masks in my earthquake kit. An emergency preparedness website recommended them for fires. Suddenly we're all hearing about N95 masks.

"I'm thinking of donating mine," I say. "But it's only 10 masks."

"We have extras, too." She means her husband.

"It's still not that many," I say.

"But if we all do it."

My friend in south San Francisco digs holes on the beach. Eight months ago he graduated with a Ph.D in creative writing. His job interviews are now Zoom meetings. He's given up on a tenured position and is looking to teach high school English. He writes, looks for jobs, calls unemployment. He walks to the beach alone, carrying a shovel. The other day a child and her father stopped six feet away to watch him work in the sand. My friend climbed out of the hole. The child said, "I like your hole. Can I get in?"

My friend in Harlem was feeling sick a few weeks ago but continued to work right up until the day he was fired from his job as a laundry attendant in a hotel. "I felt bad going to work sick," he says. "But I needed the money." He's convalescing on his couch in his 350 square-foot apartment. His symptoms are mild. He's been dating someone, a guy who lives nearby. The guy is younger and still going out. "I don't think he's taking this seriously," my friend says.

My friends in Arkansas are staying inside with their two young sons. They moved to Bentonville from Brooklyn in January. "Thank God we did," my friend says. "I would be a wreck in New York right now. I'm just glad my mother's not here to see all this." Her mother died a year ago and for awhile needed a respirator to breathe. One of the sons has a cough. She texts me: *A kid in his daycare is getting tested for COVID-19. I'm terrified.* On a video call I can see her other son doesn't want to go to bed. He sprawls on the floor.



“I’m dead!” he chirps.

She looks at him. “Don’t say that.”

I have a three hour conversation with my friend in Maryland. She’s painting window muntins and occasionally pausing to answer questions from one of her college-age kids, her husband, or her mother. They’re mobilizing to move to another house in April. “It’s coming too soon,” she says of the move. “The house we’re in now is actually bigger.” She tells me to call her if I or anyone I know gets symptoms of coronavirus. “My friend is a nurse and she told me how to tell if you need to go to the hospital.”

“How can you tell?”

“You need to get a pulse oximeter,” she says. I recognize the phrase, pulse ox, from medical dramas. “It measures the oxygen level in your blood. We all measured ours.”

“How were they?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I don’t know what a normal reading is.”

Four days later she texts me they decided not to move. Instead they’re renting out their future house a second time. *Another year of space is good. It’s oddly kind of what I wished for. Minus the pandemic portion.*

I didn’t know how to use the chat function on Zoom until my family logged onto a group meeting to celebrate my nephew’s ninth birthday. His cousin, Sophia will be five in April. Sophia is wearing her unicorn headband and bends over to show us her bum. I see my nephew typing.

“What are you typing?” I ask.

“I’m chatting,” he says.

I find the chat thread. He’s typed, to EVERYONE: *I’m scared of caronavirus [sic]. I don’t want to scare Sophia.*

I call my neighbor, who is in her 80s, to see if she needs groceries. I got her number from my landlord, who’s friends with the neighbor. The neighbor and I have never met in person. The neighbor reports she made an illicit visit to Vons. She knows she’s not supposed to leave the house, but she went during “senior hours,” so technically it’s okay. Today she pulled a muscle in her back planting her victory garden.

“Later I’m going to make cabbage rolls,” she says. “Like the old country.”

“Which old country?”

“Poland,” she says. “You mix ground beef, pork, and onions with rice and cheese and wrap it in a cabbage leaf.”

“Sounds light. I have onions if you need them.” She does, so I bring them over. She comes out of the house wearing her bathrobe, apologizing about it. She walks and winces. I have no symptoms but we all know people can be asymptomatic for weeks and pass the virus along. We keep six feet apart. Her glasses glint in the sun.

“So that’s what you look like!” she says.

I unroll my yoga mat in my living room. My yoga teacher, Kat, is in Hawaii. She flew there to be married the week before shelter-in-place orders were issued for Los Angeles. Her family lives in Hawaii. On Zoom I see she’s set up in someone’s living room, maybe her parents. “I love seeing your smiling faces,” she says. “There’s much to be grateful for.”

My father posts a video to LinkedIn. He’s in the woods or a park in Virginia, and he’s found an empty amphitheater. My father was born in 1942, in Thalgau, Austria (today’s population: 5,931). He remembers American soldiers giving him and his friends cheese and gum. They’d never seen orange cheese before. He sold the soldiers worms and told them about the best places to fish.

“Here is the stage,” he says in the video. “And I really feel compelled to maybe give a little speech. So ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining me in the woods. I want to talk about the coronavirus crisis, and that’s the reason you’re *not* here, because we need to be practicing social distancing. So, we are sales leaders and we need to lead with courage. We need to extend the horizon line, and we need to show people that good times are ahead. So Q2 is going to be down. Q3 is going to be flat. But Q4 is going to be the recovery. And it is going to be a steep curve and you better prepare your recovery plan. And that’s my message from the theater in the woods!”

In January, for my birthday, I paid a well known astrologist to map my astrological chart at various points in my life. I gave her my date of birth, the place I was born, and the exact time I was born. We met at her home studio in Glendale. She pointed to a spot on one of the charts.

“This is the planet Uranus,” she said. “Uranus takes 84 years to go around a chart. Starting in March, guess what this planet starts to speak to? It’s like a direct telephone line to *Mars*. Mars is the masculine in your life. This is an ab-

solute window for interesting, unusual, exciting relationships. That's why you have the energy to separate, clarify, assert right now. There is something about Uranus that's like ... it's exciting for a minute. And then it helps you see things very clearly."

Sheena Holt

## On Quarantine

I stopped washing my hair.

It's not that I had given up, or that I didn't see a point in carrying on with basic hygiene. I still washed my body, and brushed my teeth twice a day. I no longer shaved, though that has less to do with self-care, and more to do with a political statement I was never brave enough to make when people actually saw my skin.

My hair was something different.

Perpetually soaked in oil I can only ever hope to assuage for a few hours, I was skeptical of doing something that in my mind, would only make this problem much worse. But when a friend told me about a wellness trend with a silly name, "no poo," that was theoretically supposed to stop your scalp from overcompensating its oil and sebum production, thus actually slowing the rate at which your hair becomes sticky and shiny, I was interested. The only problem was that it takes weeks for your hair to adjust, subjecting you to weeks of itchy, unkept hair.

Quarantine was clearly the perfect time to try this out.

I liked to think that I'd come out of it looking, or feeling a bit better. Cutting down my waste from harmful hair products. Cutting down my water usage by needing to wash my hair less often. Being more mindful with the yoga I've started practicing, and the perpetual thoughts of global interconnectedness that had followed me around the past few weeks, reminding me that as bad as being stuck in my house felt sometimes, I still had my health, my family, and a world hopefully made more loving and empathetic by this shared experience.

I expected myself to fall into a deep sadness during quarantine. Never one to feel better alone, the thought of spending weeks, possibly months, away from school in Atlanta, back home with my parents in rural Montana, quite honestly scared the hell out of me. I felt guilty for this fear, aware of the enormous loss and sacrifice that so many people, more closely touched by COVID-19 than myself, have experienced in the past few and coming weeks.

Yet still, even in the face of monumental tragedy, we naturally have our own petty concerns, and ways we try to assert control over our lives. This is reassuring to me — that even when it seems like the entire world has turned on its head, I can still think of how much I miss sitting in a coffee shop while reading a book that wasn't even that good, or be sad that I don't get to see my first spring in this new city that's become home. The small things, the selfish things: these are

what remind us of our individual humanity, and sometimes our lack of heroism, which make us real even when events seem so very much like a dream.

Instead of becoming completely listless, I decided to do something I would never attempt when people could see me: look like a complete trainwreck. This felt like a small way to assert control over my life in a situation that so easily controlled all of us, silly as that might seem. I liked the caky feeling of my heavy hair, reminding me that in my house no one was judging me. I could reset. I liked bushy hair under my armpits, knowing I would be mortified if anyone at school saw me like that. And to my surprise, I liked that while I could still communicate with friends and family outside of my nuclear unit (Times like these really prove that technology is indeed a blessing for our generation, not a curse), I had time to figure out what spending so many more hours alone really means to me.

I could see who I am when you strip away all the distractions and facades, all the way down to shampoo.

Maria Sing-yi Hwang

## Empty Air

Loneliness became a strange badge that I shamefully wore. In Fourth grade, we had grandparent's day. Every student in class was joined by at least one grandparent. But I sat at my childhood desk alone. My stiff cotton shirt chaffed on my skin and my permed hair was pulled into a high ponytail, in classic 90s fashion. All paired with hot, endless tears, streaming down my face. I cried so hard it disturbed the other students and their invited guests. My cheeks burned, bright pink from the constant wiping of my shirt sleeves. I cried so incessantly, so that I could ensure that everyone in the room would pity me that day so that their grandparents day would be tinged with a bitter taste, and the children, with their elder counterparts would all whisper, "Can they take her somewhere else?"

I had nothing to grasp at then. I have nothing to grasp at now. No teal polyester, no concoction of medicinal smells, no plates of Peking duck carried in your four wheel market scooter. Then you were oceans away, sleeping in Taiwan, unaware that your American granddaughter longed for you. Now, you are much farther away.

January 25, 2020 was Lunar New Year, an unusually early New Year for a holiday that normally falls in February. I was neither festive nor celebratory. The weekend felt dull and busy, time moved slowly and Sunday was only a countdown to the work week.

A hemisphere away, you laid in a hospital bed. The doctors assured you that you could go home soon, but something in your breath, the way it moved up and down your chest, the way your heart beat dully, heavily told you to go home, to lie and leave peacefully. You pulled at the electrodes on your chest, but the nurse simply guided you back, gently but firmly. She re-attached the self-adhesive to your thin, gravity worn skin and you submitted.

During those last moments, I doubt you thought of me. You remembered your two sons and three daughters, my mama who you coaxed to move to the U.S., with a temperamental man, twelve years her senior. You remembered your favorite granddaughter, Chu-Chun, who often sat with you on her days off and ate gratuitous lunch-time portions with you. You likely thought of your soon to come great grandson, who lied beneath the curvature of your grandson's wife. Perhaps you thought of your bed, which lay comfortably in dim lighting between concrete walls that bounced Buddhist chanting on CD, words that sang

and sought for peace and good fortune.

When your daughter, my mama, called me, she was already on her way to the airport, her bags were hurriedly packed and she bought the first ticket back to Taiwan. After she landed, 25 hours later, she called again. “Maria, the flights have no one on them. Everyone is afraid that they will catch the virus.” Her tone was light, but realistic. She was always afraid to say something too sentimental to her most sensitive child: the only one who openly cried and laughed loudly.

I insisted to my mama that I wanted to fly to Taiwan immediately. She, practical as usual, told me to wait until the funeral date could be set, in alignment with the Lunar calendar. Eventually, Ma told me that I could come to Taiwan to attend the funeral, scheduled for February 13, 2020. My flight was scheduled to have layovers in Toronto, Canada and then Shang-hai, China. However, my mama began to call everyday. Her voice shifted from grief stricken to panicked. She called and asked me to bring a gallon of Purell and 50 face masks, enough for everyone to wear to the funeral and perhaps enough for the family to wear for a couple of weeks. They all assumed that this would only last a couple of weeks. All the stores and pharmacies were completely sold out in Taiwan, something that was especially strange in Taiwan, since face masks were commonly worn in the air polluted cities and during cold and flu season. I ordered two gallons of Purell online, something that I had no idea would be impossible to do in a month or so. Then I began my search for the face masks. I checked Amazon: nothing. I checked Target, Walmart, and CVS online, and searched every google-able retailer I could. Nothing was in stock and nothing would be in stock for weeks, much too late for my ah-gong’s funeral. I took my search off the internet and began to look on foot. Within a few days, I searched every pharmacy within a mile of my home and work. I called the pharmacies that were too far to walk to. I went to one pharmacy who told me that they were going to get a shipment that night and to arrive right when they opened. I set my alarm for 5:00 a.m. in the next morning. But when I arrived at their door before sunrise, they told me that the face masks had never arrived and had been rerouted to China. My eyes began to well-up with disappointment and I forced that lone CVS employee to watch me cry. Panic began to crawl through me, rising up my arms and lying heavily on my neck. Ah-gong was gone. You were gone. An unknown virus was creeping into Taiwan and the only thing my grief-stricken family wanted to face masks and hand sanitizer. I couldn’t even find a single face mask.

My mama called frequently, repeating to me, to bring facemasks, to pack as little as possible so that I could fit more face masks into my luggage. Her request

grew from 50 to 500 face masks. Her calls were repetitive, again calling out for face masks with the same redundancy as the Buddhist chanting that echoed through your house. But rather than peace, her pleas only resounded with fear. I reached out to everyone I knew who had even a tangential connection to medical personnel. I went to my nurse's station at my office building and begged for face masks. She informed me that I could only have one. I sobbed thick, heavy tears that clung to my face. I cried out that my ah-gong had died and that I needed these masks to protect my family. I offered her money, and the trim of my collared shirt began to soak with my loud and salty pleas. She told me not to tell anyone, when she eventually handed me five masks.

A deep sense of fear and failure began to set in as I worried that death could be following my whole family and what would happen if this new virus caught a hold of my ah-ma, or my ah-ee, or anyone else that carried my warm, waving memories of Taiwan.

A toast to Ah-gong from your atheist granddaughter:

Ah-gong, we now hold these cups of whiskey in our hands and in your honor. You were the foundation for my mama, and so you are the foundation for me. We always think of you. Now, from across the earth, I know that your spirit is leaving us and ascending into the heavens. I hope that you can see and hear me. We will always think of you and send our sadness into heaven for you.

These words fell out of my mouth in clumsy Taiwanese, fragmented with gasps for air and hot, endless tears.

I wanted to be there for your funeral. I wanted to kneel and pray for your safe passage to the afterlife, but the coronavirus stole that from us. Five days before my departure, all flights going through Shang-hai were cancelled. Alternative flights were to be cancelled as well. On the day of your funeral, I went to work and sat in my office with my door closed and thought persistently about when I would be able to go to Taiwan, about how I would no longer be able to walk through the market with you or laugh when vendors asked you who I was, and you would explain that I was your American granddaughter. The memory of your old noisy wicker chair remains still in my mind, the shuffle of your house slippers, and the scent of you: a cocktail of Bengay and Eastern medicinal ointments.

Do you remember, when I was going back to America to start school again. You had been suffering from diabetes for years and that disease was stealing your eyes. You called me: "Maria, come here." You stood in front of me and held my hands in yours, the most physical contact we had ever had. Your affec-



tion, like most Taiwanese people, never came in the form of touch. You held my hands and said, “Maria, come I will go blind soon. I want to look at you so I can remember your face. Let me look at you.” I put my thick hands in yours. You studied my face, letting your failing eyes gaze into your dark-skinned granddaughter. And I studied you in return, with your mouth slightly agape and your sagging cheeks. A last few strands of white hair still poked from your otherwise bald head. You never went blind as you predicted. The next time I board that long flight to Taiwan, I’ll spend the flight crying quietly, alarming the passengers nearby, knowing that the air will be empty when I land.

Lucky Issar

## Covid 19: Among Other Things

Tim Müller is at once drawn to picking non-existing battles. He sees things that most people not only ignore, they never notice them. A single careless word, gesture by others can put him off to an extent that he considers cutting such people from his life forever, and this includes people he has known all his life. Recently, when he visited his widowed father and his father wanted him to join for a walk, he got red in his face and saw a fifteen-minute walk with his 84-year-old father as an incursion on his time. Even being Tim's father and having known him well, Hans-Georg Müller could not have fathomed what he had triggered in his 46-year-old pensioner son. Had he shown more enthusiasm and stressed his wish a little more, he would have known. But since Tim did not explode and went for a walk, the old man carried on with his usual fatherly chatter with his only son. Two days later when he left his father's house, he did not visit him again for two years.

Modern psychology has names for Tim-like people and their conditions and so does popular culture. Rarely does one notice the violence involved in naming mental conditions. Having known Tim personally for years, I have seen that more than anybody else he harms himself on a daily basis. Small things invoke visceral reactions in him. He gets annoyed when he sees burkha-clad women with too many children walking and speaking in foreign tongues in his neighborhood. The sight of young brown boys in a cafe makes him leave the cafe. A busy waitress who would come a few seconds later than usual is a reason for him not to enter that cafe again. And he still seethes remembering when, at age 8, he set fire to their dog's tail and his mother slapped him.

Occasionally, when he goes to the city centre, he cringes at the sight of Syrian refugees with mobiles phones, Japanese tourists with their digital cameras, packed Indian restaurants, rich Arab tourists, and inter-racial couples, not only in his city and country but also in other countries surrounding his. Oblivious to his own tourist-status in cities like Paris and London, he resents the presence of non-white foreigners. If someone calls him a 'racist,' he suffers for weeks. Since what he resents is so spectacularly on display in his city, he suffers everyday. The thought of Muslims taking over his country makes him sweat at night. If in a garden restaurant, he sees one black couple amidst hundred pale guests he is assailed by a range of unpleasant thoughts. But even when he is surrounded by

Europeans, he is offended by people who are loud, by men who are younger and more handsome and seemingly happier-looking than him.

It is not easy when the mind is constantly haunted by fears.

On hearing a honking police car, he is sure of a terrorist attack or a theft or a criminal incident, involving refugees. When he sees a rat, he looks if there is a Vietnamese restaurant nearby. The moment Corona virus breakout happened, he was horrified at the Wuhan people. Much before the virus invaded his city, it already penetrated his thoughts. Online he would warn his friends--whom he calls his cousins; whom he met on ancestry.com -- about the "Wuhan" virus. Ironically, he feels far more closer to these distant fourth or fifth cousins than his own parents and his only sister. Simply put, within moments, to him, a lifelong friend may seem like an enemy, and an absolute stranger a life-long friend.

Now when Corona has already impacted his city and the lockdown has been announced, he too has as abruptly changed. Suddenly, his old list of undesirable "others" is replaced by a list of the new unexpected others. Now, it is the Chinese-looking people, everyone above seventy, the coughing and sneezing people, and the group of chatty teenagers that he avoids like the plague. Since he reads about the virus the whole day, he feels enraged on seeing negligent people.

Before the outbreak, he would go to the supermarket and the farmer's market once a week, to the bakery thrice a week, but now he goes to these places whenever he can. On the one hand he observes all the precautions and wants others to do the same, but on the other he does not see the danger of his own responses to the lockdown. Now for the first time in his life, not only does he wake up at 6 am, he stands in front of the supermarket five minutes before it opens. He buys everything in excess except for the toilet paper; he does not want to be one of those toilet-paper hoarders. No matter how well he plans or how much he buys, he cannot help going out multiple times during the day. He can buy everything in the supermarket but he goes to the crowded farmer's market to buy local eggs and apples, and to the bakery to buy fresh bread. Earlier, only a few times a month would he eat cake with his evening tea, but now he buys croissants everyday. He goes to his usual bakery, stands in the queue, and tells people to maintain distance if someone comes too close to him. Earlier, he used to go out once a day, but now he goes out three times: First time, to buy the groceries early in the morning to avoid the crowds; second time for a walk for he feels claustrophobic in his three-room, high-ceiling flat, and third time just before making dinner, when he suddenly realizes that he needs green paprika or olives for his pizza. In addition to fearing a soon-to-be-imposed curfew, a search for

a particular variety of butter, of potatoes, of fish, of bread makes him leave his apartment several times a day.

Now every evening when he watches the news, he curses the irresponsible young who are giving the virus to the old, his government for not being strict enough like the right-wing Austrian government, Trump for buying all the masks, and Denmark for closing its border. At night, when alone in his bed, other fears surface from nowhere and grip him; he feels that now when Europe is facing this crisis, China might take advantage of this situation and go on war with western countries. He feels so stunned by this particular thought that his bowels convulse and a thin stream of shit soils his underwear (which he notices the next day). Now, when his muscles relax he still can't sleep. So he turns on his mobile phone, and watches porn. Since the lockdown he masturbates twice before sleeping and once again before the day dawns. After a night of tossing and turning in his bed, he gets up early in the morning and goes to the farmer's market as if he wants to trade the virus for a handful of bavarian potatoes.

# Ann Kathryn Kelly

## See

It snuck up on us, most of us. We see this now.

Outside of a handful of specialists—epidemiologists, scientists, one whistleblowing doctor on the front lines in China who is no longer with us—we ignored the rumbles, the shifting ground, the building pressure, that has blown the top off this volcano.

Did it really just start two months ago? It feels, already, so much longer. We heard about it, in passing. But it was half a world away.

Concerning, then? Not really. It won't come here. A few weeks later? Alright, maybe. A few days ago? Yes, probably.

Today?

Sealed borders, emptying streets. Flatten the curve. Shelter in place. Designated grocery shopping hours in parts of the United States for the elderly—7:00 to 8:00 a.m., every Wednesday. To shield them, keep them safe, from the rest of us.

We see it now, we are living it, we fear we'll cross—are already crossing—an unfathomable line into a world we believed existed only in dystopian books and movies. One shaped by fear, questions, unknowns, mathematical equations, survival of the fittest.

Society wonders when life will return to *normal*. Yet, our new normal is informed, changed, by biology and the blind lessons it metes; in the swelling number of infected around the globe.

Meanwhile, liquor distilleries in parts of the United States shift, overnight, from producing booze to cranking out hand sanitizer. Offered free, to those most in need, who at this point is all of us.

Meanwhile, a pedestrian on a street in Beijing looks skyward on a spring afternoon; observes, with wonder, a peek of blue sky as smog over China parts. Space agencies rush to commit the record drop in air pollution to the history books, an eyebrow-popping 25-percent decline in nitrogen dioxide emissions, when compared with the same four-week period of one year ago. The upside to lockdown. The proof that climate change—climate hurt—is real.

Fish, for the first time in a long time, are spotted in canals in Venice, Italy, one morning in March 2020. They'd always been there, of course they had, but few saw them in the congested, polluted waterways.

While her inhabitants scatter behind closed doors, some willingly, some not,

Mother Earth draws in a deep breath. Exhales.

We turn our undivided attention from ourselves outward, in a way that feels strange to a global society conditioned—reared—to lead with, *What about me?*

In this moment when self-isolation is a choice in some areas, a government mandate in others, we rediscover that social media can unite us when we don't use it to divide us. We embrace ways to reach across digitally, safely, to keep connection alive. A revelation sinks in. We are in this, every person, country, city, village, together. We are responsible for the elderly, the immunocompromised, the vulnerable, the poor, for each other.

Meanwhile, Venice's fish shimmer and dart through empty canals. Skies clear. Italian citizens, in a country on lockdown, sing opera from balconies, their arias lifting through the air to settle onto those around them, on other quarantined balconies. It reaches through YouTube, to ears around the world. Their songs, the definition of the human spirit's capacity to hope and hold on to each other in whatever way allowable.

Mother Earth pulls in another long breath. Spins on her axis, hoping humanity will internalize the lessons this time. Will see, will act, will reprioritize. Will resist the pull to return to the old ways, the easy ways, the devastating ways, when given the green light to pick their lives back up again.

Catherine Lieuwen

# Coronavirus: What Our Dreams Are Trying to Tell Us

In the first dream I had, I tested positive for Coronavirus. Delirious, I woke up and fell to my knees, praying. I recall saying “No, no, no...” over and over again.

Subsequent nights included dreams in which I was repeatedly trying to call my doctor but getting a “wrong number” or “out of business” message, people in HAZMAT suits chasing me, and suffocation dreams.

I have no doubt that, as COVID-10 becomes the new zeitgeist of our time, my dreams and nightmares are a byproduct of streaming too many virus movies, watching too much news and doing too many web searches starting with “Coronavirus and \_\_\_\_\_”.

Last night was the most horrific nightmare by far.

In my dream, I had to take an emergency flight out of LAX to see an old boyfriend. We had recently reconnected over social media because of the pandemic and we both agreed that we still loved each other and wanted to be together.

As some sort of small shred of compassion still left in the apocalyptic pandemic world, the government was issuing each citizen a one-way, “final flight” to meet up with a loved one.

We were told that it was the last chance we had to see each other again, as global tourism was shutting down – for good. Once we got to our destination, we could never travel again.

When I got inside the airport, I was shocked by what I saw:

The airport was packed as frantic travelers pushed and shoved and trampled each other to get to their last allotted flight before the borders would be sealed. The world was just hours away from a full and permanent lockdown.

All tourists had gloves and masks. Many had strange, makeshift protective gear – from snorkeling masks to duct-tape-and-plastic-bag body suits, almost looking like body bags. All employees had gas masks and major protective gear from head to toe.

Horrified, I tried to turn around to leave but was abruptly stopped by two security agents in biohazard gear and was strictly told that there was “no turning back.”

I watched the glass doors to the outside seal shut with a sickening, vacuum-like

swoop.

As they pushed me with rifles toward the TSA line, I fished in my purse for my passport and government papers, which included more personal information than I had ever given anyone.

I had some kind of special passport – something I applied for that let me travel one last time to soon be with – and quite possible soon dies with – the one I loved.

The passports were given out by a lottery system and my number was recently chosen by the government.

Airport employees were yelling over megaphones. The National Guard was in place inside and outside the building. Police and police dogs were everywhere.

The TSA was stretched to its breaking point like ropes on a breaking bridge over a deadly river.

As I put my bags down on the security belt, I was told to strip down to my bra and underwear. Before I would protest, a security officer gave me a towel and two women in PPE lead me to a decontamination shower where they handed me a white paper gown and told me to take off my bra and underwear.

(This is quite possibly a memory of a real-life trauma I experienced in my college sorority when I was, along with the other new pledges, awoken in the night, led to shower, told to strip, take off all jewelry and nail polish, and given white sheets to cover us until we were taken to an undisclosed location for a clandestine ceremony – about a topic so secret that if we told a soul, our lips would “wither and return to dust.” Perhaps another piece on this true story later.)

In the airport bathroom, I stepped into a narrow, Plexiglas decontamination chamber and held out my arms as a cold, chlorine-smelling mist sprayed over my shivering body.

I put on the paper gown and was then escorted by a woman to more TSA checkpoints – a kind of X-Ray scanner like the TSA has now that can see through your clothes, but instead of scanning for the typical terrorist weapons like knives, bombs and guns, this one was scanning for bioweapons.

Even though I had nothing on but a paper gown, I kept beeping. I had to go through the scanner machine several times.

I finally made it through the scanner after a long line and was given a green hospital bracelet. I was then told that my belongings, clothes and luggage would be returned

to me once I was in my seat on the plane. All I had was my gown, plastic coverings on my feet, and my plane ticket.



On my way to my gate, I was looking around, so horrified and bewildered at what I was seeing that I lost my footing going up the escalator and I tripped. I fell and cut my palm open on one of the metal, jagged stairs. As I struggled to rise at the top of the escalator, a policewoman, a high-ranking male police officer and some kind of high-security airport agent surrounded me and lifted me to my feet.

The gash on my palm was bright red and bleeding. A woman in a hazmat suit took out a scanner that resembles those forehead temperature scanners we've become all too accustomed to lately.

"I don't have a fever!" I said, "They took my temperature when I got here."

"We're not scanning for fever, Ma'am," the high-security police officer said, "We're scanning your blood for bioterrorism."

"What?"

The woman scanned the cut on my palm. As we waited for the results on the scanner, the police officer said, "Ma'am, you understand that if you test positive, you will be 100% guilty of international terrorism."

I started gasping for air. I wasn't sure if it was from the shock of what I had just heard or if I was suddenly experiencing a telltale symptom of the virus. As one of the officers readied his gun and another slapped a handcuff on my wrist, I woke up.

I was in sweats, sitting up and panting.

As is often the case when waking up from a vivid nightmare, I was still groggy and was trying to convince myself that the reality I was now back in did not contain elements of my staggeringly frightening dream. But there were some elements. And I was scared.

I felt my forehead – cool to the touch. I turned on the light, got up, splashed cold water on my face, then found a clean towel instead of the used one in the bathroom. I wiped off my face and the sweat from the dream, washed my hands vigorously with bright orange liquid antibacterial soap, then used the clean towel to turn off the water and turn the doorknob.

I gulped some clean water from the glass on my nightstand and got back in bed. I didn't go back to sleep after that. I didn't dare.

In an April 5th, 2020 article in USA Today by Alia A. Dastagir entitled "Coronavirus interrupted our lives. Now It's infiltrating our dreams", Dastagir writes:

"Experts say dreams are a way for people to understand themselves. Their main function is to process emotions, which for many people have been more intense during a pandemic. People's waking lives are fraught – fear, uncertainty,

and helplessness pervade the day. Those same emotions make respite at night elusive.”

She quotes psychologist Ian Wallace, who says, ‘In our lives... we’re only consciously aware of about 2% of what’s going on around us and the other 98%. Most of that is emotional, and we use our dreams as a way of understanding those emotions...In a situation like this pandemic, where emotions are heightened, people’s awareness of their dreams are also heightened and these dreams might seem more vivid and more scary.’

Perhaps in our waking lives, we can use our dreams as insights into our inner selves as well as the hearts and minds of those dear to us. Coronavirus dreams are certainly scary, but if we can use them as an opportunity rather than something to fear, we can connect with ourselves and others in such a way that could lead to a more compassionate, healed, post-pandemic society.

I plan to document my dreams here and elsewhere, hoping that this will be the case.

Rebecca LoBraico

## Invisible

“We shouldn’t have any sex until this is over,” my husband, a robust, passionate Italian, declared a month ago, erasing any doubt that the corona virus had turned the world upside town. He is also a physician.

“No kissing?”

“No kissing.”

In isolation my anxieties have since given way to a quiet desperation, not permitted to touch, to hug, to kiss. For my Italian family this is a foreign concept. We are people who stand in each other’s personal space without qualms, we touch each other’s arms and hands telling a story, we give long hugs.

I venture to the supermarket, armored with a surgical mask. It’s annoying: it makes my face sweat, the top edge gets too close to my eyes. I’m embarrassed to have these thoughts; I think about the doctors and nurses on the front lines who, if they are “lucky” enough to have PPE, do not have the luxury of complaining how uncomfortable they feel.

Everyone in the market is wearing a mask, or a scarf, as if we are about to perform surgery or rob a bank. We glance at each other, our eyes like daggers, daring anyone to step too close. Where we were once friendly, making small talk while sniffing melons, we are now fearful. We have become aliens with muffled voices and invisible smiles. I try to converse with the deli man. I thank him for working. I say, “You can’t see it but I’m smiling at you under here.” I can’t tell if he smiles back.

My girlfriends invite me to virtual happy hours. My children set up video chats. Seeing them in front of me, through an alcohol induced haze, I should feel happy. I am lucky. I am grateful. I am lonely. I am sad.

As I go to sleep at night, I tuck myself in with bedtime images of my children when they were small. A hug, two kisses and an “I love you, sleep tight!” for each. My youngest always lavished me with a “squeezy hug,” in which he would summon his deepest strength to squeeze love into me with all his might.

I miss that love. I crave that touch. I need that strength.

Susan Mack

## My Privilege is Showing

“Damn it, I’m going to have to clean my own house.”

This thought, fortunately, didn’t make it out of my mouth as I handed my housecleaner four weeks of salary and asked her to stay home until the coronavirus passed us. I looked at what feels like miles of bookshelves that won’t be dusted, seven rooms and a stairway that have to be vacuumed, and four different toilets that will need to be scrubbed, I knew I would miss her.

I really hate cleaning.

And I really love my housecleaner.

She’s worked for us for fifteen years. I have a deal with my husband that if we get so financially strapped that we think about replacing her, I will give up haircuts and find a higher-paying job.

She isn’t my only employee that I regret having to steer clear of. I also stopped seeing my personal trainer, my massage therapist and my hairdresser. My kids had to give up in-person training, tutors, scout meetings, soccer and lessons at the horse barn.

As I started to tally all of this, I wondered, when did I get so damn privileged? What happened to the girl who had to live for two months on \$50 in her senior year of college? The girl who moved between house-sitting gigs for more than a year in Seattle to avoid paying rent? Or the girl who would rip apart her clothes and remake them instead of buying new ones?

My parents taught me to be frugal.

I’ve only ever seen Dad splurge on three things: his stamp collection, travel (even that’s mostly budget), and education. He loves a deal. He took over the grocery shopping when he retired and carefully goes through the sale ads for four different grocery stores. He knows how many pieces of bread there are in his house at all times, and will ration the strawberries he carefully picks out.

Mom is equally frugal. When I was a teenager, we went to the mall one day and saw henley t-shirts on sale for \$8. I wanted to buy one. “We could make that instead,” she said and proceeded to spend a week turning \$3 worth of material and repurposed buttons into a t-shirt. Whenever I bring this up - half in awe, half teasing - she admits that she was cursing herself the entire time. She did realize that a week of her time was worth more than that \$5 - but she did not want to admit defeat.

I benefited from this frugality. It meant that I got out of college debt free. After college, I could live very cheaply if it meant that I had my independence and didn't rack up debt.

Somewhere between my early 20's and now, IPOs and corporate buyouts happened. Income went up. Investments grew. Financial stability happened. Children came. My willingness to spend money to improve my life enjoyment went up. My husband tells me I don't need to apologize for this. I try to listen.

But I think I'd be lying if I said there was no guilt mixed with the empathy that makes me want to pay my housecleaner and trainer when they're not seeing me for a couple months; that has me worried about the homeless woman I see wearing only a sheet by I-35; that drives me to shop for food and make sandwiches so my church can keep giving bagged lunches for their homeless outreach; or that has me planning to double tip when restaurants and stores re-open. I know what it means to need that money, and it will be hard to come by during social distancing.

I realize that my problems are luxuries.

Perhaps the biggest luxury of our financial freedom is that it gives me room to appreciate other privileges.

I'm most thankful that everyone living in my house likes being around each other.

When my youngest child comes to me teary-eyed to complain that the older one's online workout is distracting her from her online science class, I'm thankful that this is the extent of their complaints about each other. I can help them work it out.

This is a far better complaint than my brothers and I would have had if we'd been quarantined as kids. Whenever we got bored enough, fights would happen, property would get destroyed, and someone would probably end up with bruises. We probably would have spent all of quarantine with my mother's approach of dealing with it, "Go to your rooms!"

I don't have to manage my kids' disagreements often. For the most part, we all spend our days doing our own things. The kids are in online school for a few hours a day. Otherwise, my oldest is writing stories, drawing, learning the ukelele and embroidering shoes and jackets. My youngest is chatting with friends online, galloping around the backyard, and watching science videos. My husband is working up in his office. My 24-year-old niece is still going to work at the Children's hospital, but in her off hours, she plays with my kids, calls friends or goes to the grocery store to pick up food for the refugee home where she

usually volunteers.

We come together for every meal now, play D&D and board games, solve murder mysteries, toast marshmallows over a campfire in the firepit, go on walks and bike rides. We see my husband more because he isn't travelling for work. I notice that my kid who's had panic attacks about homework is sleeping better and smiling more. I turn my weekly produce basket into fancy salads and dinners.

When we're on a walk and I see my neighbor on her porch, I go stand in the street and greet her. She vents about being home with her family, too. It feels magical to just get to share emotions. Our usual smiles at seeing each other feel a step bigger.

When I post a funny social media statement that my washing machine is broken, but it doesn't matter because no-one outside my family knows whether I'm wearing pants and if someone else can recognize that I'm smelly, they're standing too close, ten friends offer to do my laundry for me.

These are the privileges I'm most thankful for in this moment. In what feels like the end of the world as we know it - we bond together to do our best to make sure everyone feels as close to fine as possible. That seems like the biggest privilege of all.

Michael McQuillan

# Empathy Against the Arrogance of Power

The bedroom door shuts me in, not out. Here I'll write for as long as I want on my cellphone. It was hard to compose or revise once the pandemic made family togetherness an all-day affair and limited laptop use to what my wife's job requires. Sharon and I have decades of service in high schools with her social work and my teaching history till June when I retired.

Crafting essays or nursing a manuscript took much of my days from then on. Conversing with Katy, our daughter home from college, and romping outside with our rescue dog brought further pleasure on weekdays until Sharon returned and we "caught up" over afternoon coffee.

On Wednesdays I helped cook for and serve 300 CHIPS Soup Kitchen guests, earning joyous exhaustion. Attending lectures at St. Joseph's College, the Brooklyn Historical Society and Fraunces Tavern Museum replaced evening lesson planning, and I published a few book reviews. The crisis shattered a fulfilling routine though I'm fortunate as the world walks its life or death line.

Envelope, napkin and legal pad scribblings surround me on the bed's edge. An open window brings enticing fresh air. Seeing friends outside on the sidewalk would inspire but for that I camp out in the living room.

I view brick walls back here but I'm grateful to be alive. Sharon's uncle has died from a previous illness; injuries that a car collision inflicted killed our 89 year old soup kitchen coordinator.

Objects piled beneath the window point out I'm old: high school yearbooks, Katy's framed childhood portrait, the first piece our son Sam published in Penn State's campus newspaper, an autographed picture from George McGovern for serving in his 1980 South Dakota Senate campaign, my hockey scrapbook of ticket stubs, programs and player cards. A lifetime's artifacts lend comfort as I warm up to write.

Sharon and I in Prospect Park muse that a silver lining lies in the pandemic's having launched in spring. Early buds renew trees and spirits. We greet sparrows skittering across sidewalks. We marvel at squirrels' agility; they in a flash attach themselves to tree trunks and surge five stories high!

Facemask breath fogs my glasses, blending magnolia and dogwood hues as if by a French impressionist. "Perhaps Monet was nearsighted, maybe that was his

secret,” my beloved observes.

Greeting joggers, talkers, cellphone scanners, dog walkers, bench sitters, bikers and tai chi practitioners builds community, a band-aid for loneliness and isolation. After brief but warm exchanges Sharon and I head home, mindful that people with nowhere to go can't “shelter in place.”

3,283,000 people lost jobs last week, the *New York Times* told us, in what Washington insiders call “the greatest country in the history of the world.” Homeless populations already immense as I've seen in Seattle and Detroit, Baltimore and New York, will become catastrophic.

“Coronavirus Update” emails warn of food emergencies while candidates for public office selfishly seek funds that could send ventilators and protective equipment to hospitals. The “urgent deadline in Kentucky,” “chance to flip a seat in Maine” and “need to build momentum in South Carolina” do not move me. The system's greed enrages.

May empathy replace the arrogance of power.

*Business Insider* credits 11 prominent Americans including Bill Gates with unheeded pandemic warnings. Why didn't they pool resources for full-page newspaper ads? Clamor at the White House gates? Cry out from the galleries during House and Senate sessions?

They've left us grasping at straws, infatuated with Governor Andrew Cuomo, whose able role is what we have a right to expect.

Rhetoric abounds. Congressmen Max Rose and Greg Meeks on MSNBC hail doctors and nurses facing the virus with handkerchiefs and bandanas as “front line soldiers in our war against an invisible enemy” but do not aid them. God bless those heroes and heroines, but it otherwise seems we're alone.

Young parents' letter in our brick building's lobby offers elders help with grocery, mail or laundry chores. A teenage son and his mother across the street shout a similar offer that I by reflex decline. I've since reconsidered.

My dad taught me to solve my own problems in childhood; as a teen I was eager to prove my potential. I felt proud at 14 as a political club's youngest voting member, at 17 the youngest of 43 on a college freshman dorm floor, at 23 a legislative aide in Washington.

At 67 I carry on as if young but realize I've been in denial. I took precautions as the pandemic began but my weak immune system that lets colds linger till a potential bronchitis concerns me.

This afternoon I felt sweaty but not from fever. I coughed but it wasn't the virus. “You're bad at asking for help,” Katy noted, provoking anxiety



I bow to her wisdom as the mirror shows snow-colored hair.

Traci Musick

# Somewhere in the Gallery of Important Things

It is quite the ordeal.

The neck gaiter, the gloves, the hand sanitizer, and the can of disinfectant. All of these weapons as I head to the battlefield. I am armed and ready.

What will I confront on this mission? Will I come out victor or victim?

It now takes a concerted effort just to head to the grocery store. Small routines, simple tasks are no longer so simple. All that folks once took for granted is set on a new course in the eyes of a pandemic. Somewhere in the gallery of important things, lessons lie waiting to be learned. To be picked up, examined, and re-configured. During the powerful trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic, lives are changing. Time is evolving. We sit indoors through stay-at-home orders. We are lumps of clay waiting to be molded and shaped into what? What new landscape will arise after the sea surge crashes all around?

This is history in the making.

And I wonder, what emerges from this storm of infectious meditation?

I park at a distance from the grocery store's entrance. Pull on my gloves. Adjust the tube of cloth over my nose and behind my ears. I am wrapped snugly in ways only I think will protect me best in this moment of time. I step forth from the comfort zone of my vehicle and march forward with a firm heart and determined mindset.

With choreographed precision, the store doors open like magic. What am I entering? Could this automatic mouth suck me in and devour me whole? Is this death's portal waiting to suffocate its next victim? Like the fear that rises from gut to throat upon the closing snap of a roller coaster safety bar, I wonder what kind of ride this will be?

In swift motion, I wipe down the handlebar of the shopping cart. Is the virus, this invisible enemy, there—lying in wait? Or does it sit upon the can of corn I grab? What about the bag of chips? Am I shaking hands with this unwelcome visitor? Or caressing it on this grab-and-go mission? Its stance is a dangerous dance, a dalliance with a strong-armed partner. I didn't ask for this chance tango. All I want is to replenish food supplies for this stay-at-home liaison.

More than 1,800 people die in a single day declare this morning's headlines.

And I think, how long will the storm linger? I hear it's not the size but the surge that lets a person know when she is in touch with that which is real. This storm surge stands at the door of my subconscious and knocks its formidable questions.

As I consider this morning's uniform, I think I resemble a kid wrapped up for play in the snow. Winter gloves and neck warmer display a sense of seasonal bitterness, but it's the bitter bite that I fear. This stands as no play time. It's not a winter's discontent but a spring of action. I arm myself to fight off this invisible intruder who has entered the doorsteps of everyone's life. Now, we must move in this world with serious, set intention. These are planned, calculated steps outside the safe domains of home.

We had it so good. But did we appreciate it?

Is that the lesson to learn? Did we not love enough?

We only are given so many mornings to get up and move about the world shining love and compassion to all living creatures. Did we fail? Is that why the storm clouds gather here? Bringing us to our knees. Beckoning upon our backs. Bending us. Breaking us over.

I confront other shoppers during today's mission. I don't want to pass them. To breathe in their air. What if this shopping soldier is the enemy in plain sight? Or that one? Notice how I duck and swerve as I approach each passer-by. Don't breathe. Be sure to exhale after passing. Make sure my neck warmer is tucked in place over my nose.

I move purposely and with swiftness through the store. Timing is of the essence. Don't dawdle. Is it lingering in the air? Just above my head? I remind myself "head down." Keep moving. Keep pushing forward. Stay focused. Intent.

"How are you today, ma'am?" the employee stocking the shelves asks.

I can't resist. Can't ignore. I don't have it within me to not respond. Be polite. Be kind. Childhood teachings force my hand. But this evil enemy isn't so kind. He loves to strangle, to choke. To take away polite breathings.

"I'm fine. Thank you. And you?"

"Oh, I'm just working away. Guess I should be glad to have a job now. Right?" Stack, stack. Stack the cans. He moves methodically on his own mission.

Don't make eye contact. Keep pushing the cart through the aisle. Maybe he won't say much more.

"Yeah. We all should be grateful," I reply over my shoulder as my gloved hand reaches for chili beans. And I mean it.

How many am I allowed? Oh, right. Limit three per item. I nod my head up-and-

down in agreement. That's new store policy. That's what the sign states hanging at eye level. Here, I pause and consider. It is a symbol of greater meaning. Panic buyers dictate a new course of action. Now I shake my head in exasperation. We all get punished for this hoarding.

But then I think of the four bags of rice setting in my pantry. As I snatch three from the shelf with a soldier's hungry appetite for victory, my eyes dart around to see if I have a clear line out of this aisle. Then, I steer away from Mr. Conversation. I justify my ways because this provision is difficult to come by these days. When I see it, I grab it.

What behaviors get justified in the midst of a pandemic? What should we learn from this experience?

This ride is one we all wish to be over. We are mounting the rising wave. Haven't even hit the pinnacle. And when we do? Then what happens? 1,800 lives yesterday. All gone in a single day. That is the total I read in the morning headlines. This is the chatter of news reporters.

I mull over this number as I turn into the next aisle. More shoppers. Crowding the lane. Where is their six-foot distance? Why are they so close? Have a list. Grab and go. It's a simple notion, but one that's difficult for most to abide. What is it about human nature that rejects rules and compliance? Why do we linger and move in slow motion? Why can't we rationalize that which stands before us? 1,800 human lives in the course of a 24-hour period. Mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, someone's loved one, creations of life. Sunrise to sunset. It is a dawn and an end that makes a soul weary with worry.

I weave around the obstacle course. Holding my breath each time I pass another. What is this virus that attacks the lungs and beats the body harder than flu, harder than any wave pounding upon the shoreline? What is the gasping for air, the headaches, and the body tremors? Are we not in this world to spend our breaths, to share our aches, and tremor in wonder? Who made this illness that attacks indiscriminately? Who opened the door and let it waltz right in? Now, it rubs against the earth, wearing and washing, washing and wearing us out of our bones.

I say a quiet word of thanks as I approach the cashier to pay for my purchases. No one's in line. I have it to myself. Empty the cart. Watch each item roll along the conveyor. Scan and bag. That's the motion of this ride.

We, too, roll along the conveyor. Not understanding the magnitude of the price that we receive with life. Being born isn't enough. There is a greater price to pay. Count our blessings. Breathe it all in. Shine it all out. Every step, every choice

depletes the fuel tank that is filled with love. A resource we are to offer and share to one another.

Didn't we do enough? Are we taking more than giving? Are our supply tanks on empty? These troublesome questions pummel with each breath.

"That will be \$54.37, ma'am," says the lady standing on the other side of the Plexiglass. It's a new protective installation. For her to avoid my breath. And I to avoid hers. We create our barriers—whether real or imagined. We attempt to prevent dis-ease.

As I reach for my debit card, I hesitate. Is this a hand grenade? Do I carry the enemy in my purse? Is a personal detonating mechanism waiting to discharge within my hand's grasp? I whisper another word of thanks for gloved hands as I finish the transaction. This dis-ease makes me question every step.

"Thank ya, hon. Hope you have a nice day," she says as I place the bags into my cart.

"I just want you to know, I really appreciate your work, your service at this difficult time," I reply in a muffled voice through my neck gaiter. And I really mean it.

As I roll towards the exit doors, I wonder, how much will this trip truly cost me? What price will I pay?

Somewhere in the gallery of important things, I think we haven't appreciated enough. We haven't lived and loved fully. We haven't noticed the finer details. We have allowed dis-ease to dictate our minds and behaviors. Who's acting responsibly? Who's living recklessly?

The questions continue firing their rounds on this battlefield.

Like, what's essential to life? And do we value it? What's a good leader? Is it one that does best for himself? Or one that does what's necessary for others? Somewhere in the swell of this sea, I know we should all be learning about loving the world and all that is in it. We have failed to accomplish this our mission. Our reason for journeying here. And now there is a price to pay.

When I step outdoors, I breathe in the fresh air. I know we are in touch with something that is real. Lessons from the universe urge us to walk away from this storm with a new vision, a new perspective. Some say that "words don't teach; experience teaches." So, I wonder: will we see with new, enlightened eyes? Or will we continue making our way through a haze of fogged lenses?

I hop in my car and sanitize my hands.

Once home, I will disinfect the bags, wipe down each grocery item, wash my hands with a surgeon's thoroughness, strip off my battlefield uniform, hop in the

shower, and then shelter in place. This is quite the ordeal.

And yet, I think...

This dis-ease is a universal immersion.

With our cups steeped into a boundless ocean, will we finally see ourselves as part of it and the infinite sky?

Maybe through this christening, each living soul will be cleansed and refreshed.

For when the sea's swelling swing ceases, might we then see this passage of time's storm like winds move over the water...

Redeeming.

Revitalizing.

Refilling with humbling hopefulness.

Vicky Oliver

## Isolation's Silver Linings

Since Saturday, March 14, 2020, I have been holed up in my apartment, voluntarily self-isolating. My husband has been sequestered in the apartment, as well, but continues to leave each day to go running in Central Park. I think he's being reckless, since without his forays, I am fairly certain we would both survive this plague known as coronavirus. My husband, who for the sake of privacy, I will name X, begs to differ, feeling like his sanity is on the line if he can't go outside and get some fresh air.

"But it's not fresh," I say. "It's carrying coronavirus."

"It doesn't travel through the air," he says.

"They don't know very much about this," I insist. "Mark my words: in addition to being carried by droplets, it's going to turn out that it's airborne." Or how else could it be so contagious? As of this writing, New York City has 63,000 cases—it's the epicenter of the crisis. And getting worse each day.

I write from my home office, which is 7 feet by 9 feet versus the haven where I ordinarily write, which is a small one-bedroom apartment in the East 50's. My computer has shrunk too—from a giant desktop down to a Mini-Me-sized laptop. My desk is smaller, and one of the windows in this room has never opened. Good, I think. It will keep out the poisoned air. My routine has been upended. Instead of leaving the apartment to walk 24 blocks to my writing apartment, I am hunkered down next to the kitchen, not wanting to close the door to my home office because that's insanely rude but also resentful of each and every interruption. I have let my maid go, at least temporarily—since my co-op mandates no outsiders in the building. And I have vowed—and so far, stuck to—my promise of deep cleaning one room a day in our apartment. This takes me a full hour, and I know that if I don't do it first thing in the morning, I won't do it at all, so that's when I tackle it—between the hour of 9 a.m. and 10 a.m.

Overnight I have become an expert on the difference between Lysol Disinfecting Wipes and the benefits of Mr. Clean. I have asked my sister-in-law to bring in Lysol Disinfectant Spray from New Jersey as it is unavailable at every online retailer from eBay to Walmart. The product transfer will occur on 64th Street where my husband will meet his sister. She is coming in by car and determined not to leave it. On 64th Street between Second Avenue and Third, she will drive up, roll down the window, and give him one cloth mask for me, one Lysol Disin-

fectant Spray for me, and six rolls of Bounty paper towels for him.

I feel like I have won the lottery.

President Trump compares this pandemic to war, and like a war, there are acute shortages. It took me three weeks to find Purell, which I actually keep under lock and key along with my jewelry and silver. The delivery of Neutrogena soap arrived, but it did not contain the brandy-colored glycerin soap I ordered, but some white hand soaps stamped with the name “Neutrogena,” so who knows? Bounty and other name-brand paper-towels have disappeared from the grocery store aisles in Manhattan, and so my husband ended up ordering six reams of industrial, one-ply paper towels that you might find at La Guardia airport. The paper towels have no perforations, so I just tear them off from the roll.

“You don’t know what you’re ordering,” X says, grimly staring at the paper towels.

There is a third-world feeling to all of this—a pandemic that has spiraled out of control, gray-market products when you can get them at all, and beneath it all a free-floating anxiety and distrust in our government officials. President Trump recently received a 60% approval rating for how he’s handling the crisis, and I tend to agree that he is dealing with it as well as can be expected, but it’s terrifying to me that each governor is empowered to give his own directives. This is a national crisis, folks, not something that can be muddled through, state by state.

The only exercise I have gotten since March 14th is in my arms, which are developing new muscles from the amount of oomph I’ve put into my daily cleaning ritual. On the plus side, there is not a dust mite to be found in the apartment. However, I feel deep guilt, even shame, that I am setting women back fifty years. For I have never cleaned this hard—cleaned as if my very life depended on it. I washed the kitchen floor today four times. My husband has dubbed me “Hygiene maid.”

Instructions to the handyman, if any, are shouted through the back door. “Thanks for bringing my package upstairs. Just leave it at the door. I’ll get it later.” This, followed by anxious listening at the door to make sure he has left the floor via the back elevator, which is less than six feet away from the door.

The number of virtual cocktail parties and teas has proliferated. Instructions are straightforward. You make your own drink and then raise it to toast people at the other end of the laptop camera. I attended a few of these virtual parties, which I admit is better than living in complete isolation, but there is something pathetic about attending an online cocktail hour, only to realize that I have to dart into my kitchen to make my own whiskey sour.



When I was fifteen years old, I was best friends with the daughter of John Lilly, the scientist. To maintain her privacy, I will call her Y. Her father studied dolphins, and in connection with that he built isolation tanks. Y's parents were getting a divorce, and fighting over custody of her, and so that summer, I visited her at her father's place in Malibu, California. John was gung-ho about the benefits of spending time in an isolation tank, and he asked me if I wanted to try it. He told me he had spent the night before sleeping in the isolation tank and that he felt more refreshed than ever. The tank was an immense wooden box filled with "heavy water," as he called it, water infused with Epsom salts, that would assure you would float. I agreed to be a human dolphin. His daughter walked me to the room with the isolation tanks, and told me to take off every article of my clothing. Then she opened the door at the top of the tank, and I climbed down into it from a metal ladder off to the side. We agreed that she would come "rescue me" in 45 minutes. As I lay there wet, tepid, and naked, my thoughts seemed to fall away and I remember feeling a sense of driftlessness in the most uplifting sense. All of the pettiness of my life receded—which boy I had a crush on and did he like me back, had it been a good idea to switch from an all-girls private school in Manhattan to a co-ed school, which colleges I had set my sights on, and I thought about—absolutely nothing. When my friend Y returned, she "knocked" on the door of the isolation tank and opened it. She handed me a bath towel. Wrapping myself in the towel, I spotted a third person in the room. "Who are you?" I said, not realizing that I was staring at myself in a mirror.

In some ways, being isolated from everyone but my husband is similar. I try not to obsess about the number of cases of coronavirus here in New York City, how many people are overflowing into our hospitals, whether the curve is flat enough yet, and whether my husband and I will both survive this. I also try not to worry too much about how much weight I have gained, how splintered and crappy my fingernails look, whether I smell (or is it my clothing?) of all the detergents and disinfectants I have been using throughout the apartment, and whether my red hair will turn completely gray before hair salons are allowed to reopen. Instead I endeavor to view this enforced solitude as an opportunity for serious writing. Like my emergence from Lilly's isolation tank, I am not sure I recognize myself in the bathroom mirror each day and try hard not to stare. Worse, I feel like a shrew—screaming at my husband to remember to wash his hands, re-cook the food he has ordered from delivery, and please, for the love of God, wear a mask when he goes outside for exercise. I feel like the character Goldie Hawn played in the movie, *Overboard*—trapped in a new life that isn't mine.

Since I live and write in two apartments, I receive coronavirus updates from both of them. The apartment where I ordinarily write is in a complex of five buildings. One of them has reported a person who tested positive for covid19. However, eleven of the building's staff have called in sick, which strikes me as a protest or walk-out of some kind. My husband calls it a "sick out," and says some companies are experiencing this, too. The building is hiring others right now to fill in for the eleven on "sick out." This has quashed my desire to go over there until this plague passes. Today, sadly, my other apartment has also reported that one of its residents has tested positive for covid19. *Please, dear God, let the person be on the other elevator bank*, I think. For the first time, my husband agrees to wear plastic gloves when he takes the elevator today. Under his macho exterior, he is starting to get spooked by coronavirus too.

In between all of the distractions—the nonstop coronavirus reports, good friends and family texting see if I am okay, the torrent of news briefings, and the wail of hourly sirens that haven't cried this hard since the aftermath of 9/11, I am, in fact, managing to get a lot of writing done. This is kind of a miracle. In the past few weeks, I have researched and written fifty pages of a new novel and had two of my essays published. That is roughly four times as productive as I am ordinarily. I am aware that something inside me has shifted. Ordinarily, I write, and everything else—my social life plus charitable obligations—is a welcome distraction. But under this quasi-quarantine, writing has become my distraction from all the bad news. This has brought joy back to the writing process. I know that the novel I am writing now will endure 50,000 revisions—as the first one did. But I believe it's essential to find joy in the writing, and I have felt it of late. I have felt it.

Of course, writing like a demon each day is not a given. I have to work at it.

The only thing that can distract me, I tell myself each day, is distraction. And there is plenty of it. Distraction in the form of TV. I love him, but Cuomo. The daily briefings. All the videos about how to wash your hands. Yes, I understand now. I need to wash my hands. I need to be vigilant. Eleven times a day is not enough. Wash for more than 20 seconds each time. Okay, I am doing that. And trying not to have my hands crack off in the process.

My husband, who ordinarily is a lot less social than me, is actually having a much harder time with this quasi shelter-in-place directive than I am. We have not received the official shelter-in-place mandate in New York, but essentially that is what we are doing. He stops in my home office every so often to tease me,

claiming that my life as a writer is not as impacted as his is.

“Hey, did those Q-tips ever come?” I ask.

“No. And the cotton swabs never came either,” he says glumly.

“What is a cotton swab?” I ask.

“A Q-tip.”

On the positive side, he has input all the new cases in New York City on a graph, and he says the rate of growing cases has actually started to flatten, although government officials won't tell you it is. Maybe they see the rapidly spiking number of deaths as ammunition in the fight for more hospital beds, more ventilators, and more masks. I wish the politicians weren't running the show, and the scientists were. If the scientists were running it, we would get the truth.

At 6 p.m. sharp each night, someone near my apartment building opens his window and starts blaring the French national anthem. Other windows open, and there is a whole opera going on outside. I think I have heard the Italian national anthem as well, but not the American national anthem.

There is a lot of speculation among my friends about what life will look like “on the other side.” They mostly feel that online is where everything will be—all learning, all parties, all meetings. I pray they are wrong, and that instead there will be an uptick of in-person gatherings, shopping at malls, black-tie events, theater get-togethers, and cocktail parties, for we are social creatures who crave love, understanding, forgiveness, and empathy—none of which is easy to give and receive online.

In addition to my writing, I try to find joy in each day's little victories. The Lysol Disinfecting Wipes finally arrived. Hurrah! President Trump is keeping Americans inside until April 30—he thinks the crisis will be over by June. Hurrah! Five friends checked in on me today. Hurrah! Because I couldn't sleep tonight, I finally finished the first draft of this essay. Hurrah!

Along with the numerous deliveries of products that are not precisely what we ordered, one pleasant surprise arrives—a carton of coffee ice-cream that we never ordered either. Serendipitously, coffee is my favorite ice-cream flavor, and I can't help feeling that the universe has given me a small gift to help tide me through. In addition to developing a language where dolphins and humans could communicate with each other, John Lilly worked on a theory of coincidence. This carton of ice-cream, I think, is one of those coincidences. I received that New Yorker's coffee ice-cream, and somewhere else in the city, someone received the brandy-colored Neutrogena soap I ordered and maybe even the Bounty paper towels—as if we New Yorkers are Secret Santas for each other

during this crisis. During this cruelest month, we could all use a little Christmas.

Because my husband and I don't have kids, nothing has interrupted my sleeping patterns for long, and on an ordinary night, I sleep for nine hours, pretty much straight through. But this panic has disrupted my circadian rhythms, and each night is a little different from the one before. Sometimes I oversleep and wake up at 10 a.m. when I used to get up at 7 a.m. religiously.

Other times, I can't get to sleep at all, and end up staying up quite late to write. To me, this period feels like a mourning, or maybe it feels more like a break-up. When I was single, it used to take me months to get over breaking up with someone, particularly if the guy dumped me first. Each day afterward, I would think about the guy, wondering what I had done wrong of course, but also hoping he would come back. This feels like that. Each day, I am mourning the life that I had—that we New Yorkers all had—with its many freedoms and its fun. And I am hoping it come back. As in the weeks after a break-up, each day is a little easier to tolerate than the day before. I am becoming acclimated to the different spaces in my apartment. And sometimes what gets me through is the same sort of reasoning I used when getting over a break-up: *just take it one day at a time.*

Maybe tonight at 6 p.m. when the French national anthem plays, I will open my window and have my Alexa robot belt out the American national anthem. Or not. Either way, tomorrow will be better. And maybe if I am incredibly lucky, the Q-tips will arrive, too.

Luisa Kay Reyes

## The Wisdom of Liliuokalani

When we moved to the small village of Hartville, in Northeast Ohio to live with my grandfather, we were presented with a dilemma. My grandfather had a baby grand piano in his house, so I had access to a piano to practice on. But all of the piano teachers in the area were so filled up with students, that they didn't have room for a single one more. Thankfully, after a while, my grandfather came to the rescue. He was a retired mathematics professor from the University of Akron, but in his retirement years had returned to one of his original life interests and was working as the devoted organist at one of the local Methodist Churches. Consequently, when he asked the elderly Mrs. Schaeffer to take me on as a piano student, she readily agreed.

She was a wonderful teacher and the two of us clicked immediately as piano teacher and piano student. With Mrs. Schaeffer expressing her desire, after my first lesson, to send me to her alma mater - Oberlin.

Being young and impressionable, I had no idea that Oberlin was none other than one of the top music conservatories in the world. And when we moved back to Alabama, I continued studying the piano, but the closest I would ever come to studying at Oberlin was taking some private lessons through their community music school.

Nonetheless, as a young girl I found myself enchanted by the stories Mrs. Schaeffer would tell me about how the adopted daughter of the Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani went to Oberlin. Notably proud of that fact, Mrs. Schaeffer mentioned it frequently as I learned how to play "Aloha Oe" out of the "Let Us Have Music for Piano" book that complemented the Presser book we used during my lessons. Leaving me entranced as a young girl by the notion of such an accomplished composer Queen.

Later, as my curiosity about this tropical musical regent led me to learn more about her life, I found to my horror that the descendants of some New England missionaries became prominent businessmen on the Hawaiian islands. And when smallpox that was brought over by Chinese laborers struck the islands affected the native Hawaiian population, Queen Liliuokalani naturally demanded that the ports be closed and those affected be quarantined. Being the dutiful and conscientious queen that she was, she was appropriately looking out for her people. But the businessmen felt affronted. After all, with the ports closed, their

businesses were suffering. And their resentments helped fuel the movement to force her later abdication.

*“How could anyone possibly be so cruel?”* was my first thought when I learned the story. Surely those businessmen were unnaturally greedy and such disregard for the lives of others was an isolated event in world history.

Today’s quarantine due to the COVID-19 virus has taught me otherwise.

As my mother and I learn to live comfortably while staying at home and remain socially distant via reading books, practicing the piano, taking spoken Latin lessons through video conferencing, and watching movies in the evening; we remain astonished at the number of people who express more concern for the economy’s future anticipated suffering rather than for the present actual suffering of those who come down with a frighteningly lethal airborne virus. Oftentimes, through no fault of their own.

“The old should be willing to die, so their grandchildren can have a better life”, they state nonchalantly with a willingness to maintain businesses open and the wheels of commerce running as if nothing were awry. Thereby revealing to me how little times have changed since the days of those greedy businessmen on the Hawaiian islands. For those same people who prize the economy above all else, seem to blissfully ignore the fact that those very same grandparents are often responsible for the upbringing and well being of their grandchildren. With meth and other illicit drugs have wreaked havoc upon the parents of the young so often nowadays. And to toss those said grandparents to the curb is to create a generation of orphans which will result in a drain on both society and their precious economy.

Yet, as the governor and other local political leaders even in my conservative state of Alabama are having to yield to practicality as the numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases keep rising and the confirmed deaths start to manifest themselves, public officials are ordering beaches to be closed, lockdowns to be put into place, quarantines be put in order, and the cancellations of all public activities. Reminding me of the wisdom of Queen Liliuokalani in ordering quarantines while looking out for her people. And how in a nation that proudly boasts of government “of the people, by the people, and for the people”, it is true. The lives of all people are more important than an economy that can later rebound. Especially, with the combined help of both the young and the old.

Jennifer Shneiderman

# Housekeeping in the Time of COVID-19

My sideburns are white and there is a skunk stripe down the middle of my head. I haven't seen my real hair color since 1987, so this is new to me. So is deep cleaning my house every day, all by myself, and disinfecting my groceries.

Before the coronavirus crisis, a housekeeper cleaned our house twice a week. Now, Maribel has been relegated to working only outside, sweeping the porch and wiping down the patio furniture. We feel obligated to keep her employed and pay her every week as long as we can. Maribel doesn't speak English and doesn't drive, so her options are few.

Inside of the house, there are strange sights and smells. The ubiquitous assault of disinfectant and a pile of towels and cloth napkins in the laundry room. I'm using them to dry my hands so I don't use too many paper towels. Paper towels, and most paper goods, are hard to come by.

There is a bed tray outside of my 18-year-old son's door. He returned from college abruptly when the school closed his Boston dorm. He arrived with a cold and then developed a low grade fever. We immediately put him in a 14-day quarantine. Luckily, his room has an ensuite bathroom. He isn't allowed to leave his room and he's discouraged from coughing when he opens the door. He eats off paper plates. He drinks coffee now. Coffee with milk. Today I ran out of paper cups that are designed for hot beverages. I will have to check out my options. I can't remember if people are hoarding Styrofoam. I have barely laid eyes on him. We talk in brief spurts on the phone. It's strained and awkward. Finally we manage to do a movie night, logging into Netflix at the same time and talking on the phone. We watched Aladin and did a sing-along during the "A Whole New World" song. It felt like he was little again and, for a moment, we had that deep mother-son closeness.

My husband is a doctor, working night shift in two emergency rooms. One of his colleagues is hospitalized. We are anxiously awaiting news of his status.

I rarely see my husband and I compulsively clean the door handles and alarm keypads when he enters and exits the house. He brings home groceries, leaves his shoes outside, and disappears into our home office. I follow Youtube video instructions about disinfecting the packaging and washing produce. It is exhausting, physically and emotionally. How do I know if I've removed all of the

virus from a pasta box? Hasn't anyone invented a type of blacklight so you can scan items entering your household? I'm running out of Lysol and I'm not sure where to buy it. I've heard wipes are now impossible to find.

The home office, now my husband's sanctuary of sorts, has a fold-out couch, a desktop computer and an outdated flatscreen TV. He has his own box of plastic flatware and a snake of red Solo cups lounging on the filing cabinet. All thoughts of the environment have gone out the window. Sometimes we go out on the porch and sit on opposite sides. We stare at our garden in silence. We are too tired to talk.

I made a list of items to pack in a carry-on suitcase with wheels. If one of us gets very ill, there would be Tylenol, washcloths, Gatorade, water, cough drops, and an inhaler, all ready to roll down the hallway to the infected. I hope I have everything. I post questions to the afflicted on Facebook to see what I should keep on hand for what is being referred to as "supportive home care." No one answers.

The wave of COVID-19 patients has yet to hit LA, but it is coming. For now, my husband sits with the hospital staff in heavy silence. Soon, they will have to make terrible decisions.

I spend my day doing laundry, separating potentially contaminated laundry from regular laundry. I deliver the folded clothes and towels in reusable shopping bags to the entryways of the sequestered. I knock on their doors and quickly step away. The virus is airborne.

I have heard that the lines to get into the grocery stores are long and shoppers are standing too close to one another. I go online and see that Bristol Farms, a high end market in West Hollywood, closes at midnight. There is a big cluster of infected people in West Hollywood. But, I was sure I could safely pick up a few items if I got there at 11:30 pm. Few cars are on the streets and the parking lot is silent. The glass doors of the market are closed. Employees are cleaning the store. I wave frantically and a young African American man looks up and rolls his eyes. I wave again, and nervously wait for him to approach. He opens the doors a few inches and firmly says they are closed. I told him I looked online and that they were supposed to be open until midnight.

He glared at me and yelled, "Lady, we haven't had a break all day! Our rights are being violated! We're closed!" He slammed the door. I stood helplessly for a moment as he stalked away. The rest of the employees ignore me. I feel weak, my heart is racing and my mouth dry.

I go across the street to Ralph's Grocery and grab a cart. It has a damaged wheel. This particular Ralph's has very narrow aisles. I immediately face off with



another shopper headed in my direction, an expressionless Hispanic woman who is staring at the empty, ravaged shelves. She doesn't slow down. She looks like she's in shock. I do a U turn with my cart, the damaged wheel popping with every step. I quickly find couscous and cereal. There are no paper products of any kind. A crowd of shoppers surround an employee in a black uniform. His Ralph's name tag says his name is Jorge. He is holding up his hands defensively. He doesn't know when the next shipment of toilet paper will arrive. They should check back first thing in the morning.

I find an open checkout stand and nervously pull money out of my purse. The cash, grocery bag, receipts and change are now all possible sources of contagion. I will consider how to disinfect everything when I get home.

Back in my kitchen, I inspect my nails. They are soft and discolored. My iPhone is having trouble recognizing my thumbprint. I don't know how to work with harsh chemicals. I watch Youtube videos about the proper way to clean fruit with a water and vinegar solution but it's unclear if that will kill the virus. I learn how to sterilize sponges with bleach and water. I inhale too much of the bleach and my eyes and lungs are irritated for several hours.

A few days later, I venture to the Third Street Farmers Market. It's a famous Hollywood market, popular with tourists with a rich history of celebrity sightings. None of the clerks or butchers have gloves. The fishmonger had one glove. He handed me the paper package and I accept with mixed feelings. I'm grateful he had product for me to buy, but I'm not sure if the disinfectant I'm planning to use will bleed thru the butcher paper wrapping. When I pay with my credit card, I had to push accept on the screen. Another source of potential contagion.

I go to a vegetable stall. A little girl is stroking the produce, touching everything like it's her favorite toy. I decide to just cook the hell out of everything I buy. I choose some leeks, wrap them in a plastic baggie and put them in my bag. Now the leeks, the plastic bag and the shopping bag are potentially contaminated. I keep going. The second produce stall has half the items it had last time I was there. I quickly choose some small Yukon and red potatoes, green beans and a tiny head of lettuce. Same payment process. Everything potentially contaminated.

I hit the poultry stand. They had gotten in a good shipment. The vendors are friendly. They aren't wearing gloves. While they are prepping my chicken thighs, I run over to the little French grocery. No flour, no eggs, no toothpaste, no paper products. I run back and pick up the chicken and pay with my credit card. I drag the bags to my car and throw them in the trunk. As I drive home, I see people

waiting in a line for Trader Jo's that snakes down Fairfax Ave. People are driving with a nervous aggression. When I arrive at home, I remove the bags from the car. My car interior, trunk lid and car door handles are now all potential sources of the virus. I punch our alarm code and push the door open. More virus. I put the bags down. Everything will have to be cleaned prior to being put in the refrigerator or pantry. I wash my hands aggressively and for a moment I'm Joan Crawford. My contaminated credit card is in my back pocket. I will have to clean the card with alcohol and wash the pants. Will alcohol ruin the magnetic strip on the credit card? My head hurts.

I try to order groceries online. No delivery dates available on Amazon Fresh. I try about 30 times. I finally just order toilet paper from an Amazon seller. A few days later, my order is canceled.

In an effort to plan for the worst, we have an online appointment with our estate planning attorney. I hope we can update our will on time.

I try to get some work done. My husband and I do property management for a few apartment buildings we own in Los Angeles. The Housing Department says the tenants have a year to pay back their unpaid rent. Nothing is mentioned about mortgage protection for landlords.

A few weeks ago, my husband and I were enjoying our empty nest life. We went to concerts and had dinner with family and friends. We were working hard, but we also looked forward to travel and cultural activities. I had hair and nail appointments, went to the grocery store for fresh food at least three times a week as all was plentiful. Now it feels like we are in a fight for our lives. Some people say they're just being asked to hang out at home and watch TV. From my experience, it isn't as easy as that.

I'm lonely. I'm frightened. I cry every day. My lower back is killing me. I've had a persistent cough for a month. It might be the virus. Or it's stress related. I wait a week for test results. I'm negative. For now.

Sarah Sorensen

# The Happiness Report

**March 4, 2020**

It is my birthday and I am on my morning commute to work. That's when I see the Trumpeter Swan standing in the center highway lane, disoriented. It is completely at odds with downtown Detroit and cars are slamming the brakes, veering, trying not to destroy it. The swan preens its long wing feathers, at a loss for what is happening. It is hard to tell if something is injured when it still looks so vain. I turned forty today, marveling at my face in the mirror, still fair enough to please me.

At work, no one knows it is my birthday. No one knows about the beautiful, perhaps mangled swan. I sit in a tall chair and peer over a counter, armed with my computer filled with knowledge, my access to worlds. I am an academic reference librarian in-training, but I won't mention the "in-training" unless I slip and somebody catches on that I am a lost learner tapping my fingers over keys in a state of unforgivable ignorance.

I stare at young college faces with my false, if motherly confidence.

"I can help you with that."

No one likes timidity, unless they see it as an opportunity to take you for a ride.

**Monday, March 16, 2020 2:30pm**

"No one has told me what to do," I say.

I do not even want to breathe in the stale air inside of the library, do not want to let anything into my lungs at all.

"But will the library close?"

The student fumbles with her backpack. She is telling me that she needs to know because she has to tell her ride what time to pick her up.

"Nobody has told me."

I sit pin-straight at my desk and push my roll-chair as far away as I can, straightening my arms and fingers to their full length to type on the keyboard. I look like a tormented pianist composing his final work.

"This is the database that you'll want to use," I say, turning my screen to face her.

It is an answer to a different question, but it is an answer nonetheless.

The large glass doors swing open and the cops walk in; they are two men with

crew cuts and muscled torsos who seem very certain. I look at them like a little ghost that they don't notice.

At exactly 3pm the loudspeaker announces that our university library is closing immediately.

"We are closing due to the CoronaVirus."

It sounds like we have all just acquired it. I grab my jacket that I keep balled-up under my reference desk and immediately walk out. I say nothing to anyone.

I go home.

At home, everything is normal. My cat and dog have not changed in any way. I am ashamed to admit that I am happy. Being home with so many things closed, "socially distanced" from the world, something unexpected happens inside of me. I relax. I do not have to go anywhere at all. I have the perfect excuse to see no one. I am safe, cloistered, perfectly alone. I live in a town where I have no friends. I am free. If we all just stay home, everything will be fine!

*[We are asking you to practice social distancing.]*

*[If you have been exposed, you should quarantine for 14 days.]*

### **March 17, 2020**

I spook around on social media from my best yellow chair. My friends must all be so happy to be home, healthy, and free! I am eager to see them glowing, gathered around their family tables with board games and fresh baked cookies. But the friends, I am gathering, are not happy.

"What if I run out of toilet paper?" they ask.

"My family is driving me crazy," they complain.

"I am bored," they announce.

I do not understand. Now, I have time to sleep when I am tired. I clean whatever needs cleaning. I create the order of my days.

I have, I have been told, a propensity toward anxiety, an unavoidable tendency toward avoidant tendencies. These are things the world has told me.

I check in on my folks by telephone. They are safely home. I peep through Facebook again, a green "active now" dot shows me that my ex must be fine. I close the screens. I am content.

I have a tattoo. Well, I have many. But the one I want to talk about is a quote from Emily Bronte. I think that I can share it with you because the public domain has set it free. My arm says simply, "...the universe would turn to a mighty stranger." It's a fragment from *Wuthering Heights*. In *Wuthering Heights*, Cath-

erine laments that a universe intact, but without Heathcliff is a stranger. However, with Heathcliff, the rest of the universe could cease. She didn't need it. I selected the tattoo several years ago, once I realized what true love felt like. I wanted a permanent mark. Things end because it is right for them to end. I am never sorry that they began.

I am okay. I will hide as long as needed.

*[If you know how to sew, we are asking you for masks]*

### **March 23, 2020**

I am not "essential." I have been asked to stay home. My home is the place that I have made of it, filled with soft things. I do not want to be "essential," when absent is so much better. Things will be arranged and I will work from home, like the luckiest lucky. I will be spared.

My New Year's resolution was to forgive everyone this year and to not let any bitterness sit in my heart. I have learned to forgive everyone now. All of them, the worst of them. I practice breathing deeply to calm myself, but also to make sure that I still can, that I am not secretly ill.

Forgiveness is not an open door. It is the sound of closing yourself safely on the other side. If I am cautious the hurtful things will not reach me. Maybe solitary is the only thing my body relaxes into, the only state I understand.

It is not so bad in here, not really. Hold my breath and count how long, keep holding.

*[There will not be enough ventilators.]*

### **March 25, 2020.**

I phone my parents, sobbing.

"Are you okay," my father asks.

My mother hops on the line.

"What's wrong?"

I heave an undignified sob.

"I am afraid."

They sigh with relief that I am not dying. I sigh with relief that they are not dying. I will check for the green dot soon, but not right now. I am too frightened.

*[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]*

### **March 26, 2020.**

I am dreaming of a creek. I bring my dog and look into the water. There is my

ex's dog, swimming. There is my ex standing on the shore.

Somehow I end up lying down in the dirt parking lot, clinging to her desperately. I hold her so tightly that I cannot be sure if she is holding me at all. I look into her left eye and the cornea is peeling away. I rigidly push away from her, feeling the anchor of panic sinking me. I will call an ambulance.

She tells me not to, but I get mad.

“YOU ARE GOING TO THE HOSPITAL.”

She looks at me deeply. She looks at me like she never once did when we were real, together.

“You really do love me,” she says. “I know that now.”

It is the nicest moment that we never really had, even as I am stricken with terror.

I wake knowing that I never want to go back to proving myself every single second. Never want to beg for attention. It is not an open door. Let the universe turn all it likes because I'll take strangeness over cruelty.

I confirm the green dot. All is well.

*[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]*

### **March 28, 2020**

Birds wake me up and I feel joyful. This is Spring and the Earth is still happening.

A million tiny cans of sparkling water arrive at my doorstep, ordered by my mother. Maybe I should not touch the cardboard box? I remove the brightly colored cans and place 3 in the refrigerator. I take out the box and the dog comes with me to the dumpster. She steps on a rubber glove in the grass and I cringe.

I open the mailbox with an empty doggy poo bag over my hand to protect me from germs.

The puddles in the dips of grass reflect the trees, long and thin as negative strips. They show black-branched silhouettes.

This could be my life for quite some time, and I cling to it. I do not want to die in this shiftless apartment complex, but I do not want to go back to a pushed-away kind of love.

I have promised my dog that I will nurture her every single day of her life. She was 8 years old and living in a small metal cage in Animal Control when I brought her home. “Surrendered.” Her people had “surrendered her.” As though there was ever a fight that she won.

I will not fucking die.

*[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]*

*[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]*

*[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]*

*[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]*

*[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]*

### **March 31, 2020**

An email informs me that two people in my apartment complex have been diagnosed. I scoop the litter box in silence. I walk the dog. I practice breathing. It seems wise to do as many chores now as possible. I do not know what will happen.

Emily Uduwana

## Braving the Apocalypse

My husband came home from the grocery store, soaking wet and shaking all over. I grabbed our grocery bags from his white-knuckled hands and guided him to the sofa. My mind flashed to all the dangers of the outside world: muggers, acid rain, gunshots. I wondered if the virus was encouraging violent crime, whether people had begun rioting for access to testing, housing, food. I couldn't say I blamed them.

It was a moment before my husband could speak, and I ran my warm hands down the gooseflesh of his arms as he worked up to it. The story came in faltering starts, but I got the gist.

There were no poisoned storms or criminals lurking in the dark. People weren't rioting. In fact, my husband hadn't seen a single human being as he walked home from the store.

His attacker was a skunk. Emboldened by the abandoned streets, it had risen on its hind legs, bared its teeth, and charged. My husband was traumatized.

On another night, I would have checked him all over for scratches and tooth marks. I'd have pulled up Google, searched for information on rabies. His clothes would have gone straight to the washing machine.

Instead, I laughed. For the first time in three weeks, a tickle in my throat didn't trigger anxiety and a fever-check. I let it rise into my mouth, exhaled it in a deep, unladylike snort.

My husband's head jerked up.

He stared at me for a few seconds, his eyes wide and still shiny with fear. And then the corner of his mouth tugged upward, and he laughed too. We giggled together on the couch, foreheads pressed together like little kids at a sleepover. We laughed until we were both breathless, laughed until the tightness in our chests eased just a little.

We were still isolated in our little apartment. Grocery bags still needed sanitizing. In a few minutes, I'd put away their contents and realize that we still had no toilet paper, baby wipes, or bread.

But it felt so good to laugh. It felt so good to be connected to the outside world, even by the most tenuous of threads.

If silvery fish had emerged in the canals of Venice and penguins roamed the zoos of Florida, skunks now claimed our streets.



Ray Van Horn, Jr.

## What Would Stan Lee Say About COVID-19?

The reality is here. No more jokes involving beers you jazz up with lime wedges. No more taking a sneeze or cough for granted, even if that's presented nervous laughter covering an at-large paranoia. It hasn't fully rooted yet, but the seeds of the blame game have been planted. You just know once the deaths slow down, the world re-opens and the aggrieved are allowed to mourn properly, the headlines will shift from a tone of desperation to the promulgation of a scapegoat hunt. The media, then society by attrition, will deign itself as one, unified global tribunal. To think the sickness, dubbed by politicians and their constituency alike as a silent assassin, could germinate into something to possibly further taint who we are as human beings. Evil is already winning big and doing so cloaked, for crying out loud. Where's a cape-flapping superhero with disease-busting extrasensory perception when you need one?

It's a Sunday and I'm reading some old *Black Panther* comics from my collection. Given the governor's orders of essential traveling only in order to help reduce the spread of Coronavirus, I've had time to reorganize, purge, shred and compartmentalize within the confines of my relatively-sequestered life. I'm not here as much as I probably should be, but I'm still more productive at home than I've ever been. It being Palm Sunday where service is being held in the church parking lot from cars with rolled-up windows, I'm grateful for the chance to drop out from *all of it* with King T'Challa for a spell. When he's mashing a villain in the face with a royal-sized Panther foot, I'm actually saying "Right on," under my breath.

I've seen 5K races I was entered into canceled, though I was handed my shirts and swag for non-held events. I call them souvenirs from the Coronacolyse. Holding a shamrock-shaped completion medal--unearned--felt so surreal I jumped on the opportunity a couple weeks ago to trail run seven miles in atonement. That's nearly four miles of extra credit. For the other canceled race, I did a recreation of the proposed course in town with a longtime friend and her running group. Another St. Patty's-themed run we

defiantly simulated, then capped with lunch and pints at a local Irish pub called O'Lordan's. We'd started at 10:30 a.m., but it felt more like 3:30 before dawn. If you go running outdoors right now, you can feel the Corona-disdain closing in around you.

The following Monday, O'Lordan's was closed in a statewide ban on bars, restaurants and other commercial venues promoting social gatherings. Instead of throwing out the Celtic salutation to your good health, "Slainte," we've since had to use mandated lingo such as "social distancing," "self-quarantine" and "six feet apart." I'm thinking of the stout hug I got from my friend at O'Lordan's, since it's the last one I got from anyone other than my wife and son, isolated inside our townhouse. I think deep down, we put extra oomph into our embrace, subconsciously knowing it would have to last us a lot longer.

My job makes the approved list of essential industries exempt from the mandatory stay-at-home order from the governor. He has his detractors, yet most applaud his aggressive, preventive forward thinking and I'm one of them. We've had numerous deaths in our state of Maryland already and thousands among the infected. Our hearts shatter with news of each passing. We consider the mass fatalities inside a regional nursing home an atrocity for which we want revenge, not merely justice. The elderly once being a calculated demographic their juniors used as an excuse to downplay now shows no favoritism. COVID-19, American style, targets whatever nasal passage and susceptible immunity system unknowingly welcomes it.

At work, we're down to a skeleton crew of five, with the rest of our staff working from home. Our business is actually *flourishing* in the midst of a pandemic. Only the grocery stores and Wal Marts are fiscally outperforming us.

I think upon that irony every morning I get up to pump dumbbells and grind out core crunches in the basement before work. It's cold and lonely down there, like the streets, malls and shopping centers have become. I miss my gym friends, my workout partner especially. She can't grind me up through pistol squats on the TRX bands and I can't return the favor by pushing her through an extra few reps on bench. Last week she said we should face time each other from home and bark our way through our self-contained workouts. Of course, she's on the front line in the medical field and right now, she's far busier than I am. So I hammer curl and fly rep solo with my lit-up replica Bates Motel sign to keep me company while my family sleeps. I smile when the "NO" section of the "NO VACANCY" section of the Bates Motel sign winks at me on repeat. Like *that* would ever happen, though a pandemic is the least of your worries if you're hap-

less enough to book a room there.

We're in broken off sections of a small office that's usually bustling with chatter and laughter by the daily patrols from dozens of realtors and clients. Usually we can't keep people away whenever one of my comrades brings her puppies in. Right now, the constant hum of the copier/printer machine serves as our primary pulse. That, and the omnipresent riot of the metal band, Tool, from the boss' office. There's also the constant *spritz-hiss* of disinfectant spray. We sanitize and wipe down every single room a client comes in and out of. I joke that I've long been stoned off of Lysol since the Coronavirus broke out.

We speak when necessary and business keeps on flowing. The phones still ring. Some people are still combative on the other end. Even more so, for obvious reasons. I have fruit shakes for lunch more than I ever did, and I all but inhale quinoa, rice cauliflower and roasted veggie flatbreads. If anything, the state of affairs has done more for my core than even Wednesday morning classes at the gym.

Our office is adjunct to a real estate brokerage, currently empty save for two ladies running the on-site administration. We share a common area kitchen, normally a place where people mingle, eat, grab coffee and catch each other up on their lives. Often it's here where procedural questions are raised to our team in the title company, but most frequently, it's an open market for leftovers, treats and company-paid lunches. All set to an Alexa chirping out the same 10 corporate-paid songs you'd get on mainstream FM.

Nowadays, the kitchen is darkened, and the few who are working bring just enough food to fill themselves. Nothing is left out for consumption on the counters. Yet the Alexa plays on. It's downright creepy. Camila Cabello muses in the key of hip-pop about Havana to an empty audience, except for me, when I hit the Keurig for a green tea or a hazelnut coffee. I've really come to *hate* that song. For the younger generation before the virus, a party-down number to grind one out to. For me, COVID-19's unofficial overture of doom. Alexa, play me *anything* else, for the love of God...

We've faced panic from our customers with each official declaration of public conduct as the strain tightens its stranglehold and people we used to shake hands with, clap on the shoulder or outright squeeze in comradely hugs represent the potential infected. Elbow bumps, as artificial and stupid as air kisses, and likewise deemed detrimental. We might as well teach everyone the foot section of the Kid 'n Play at this point.

How do we get business done when trade legality and enforcement is depen-

dent upon live ink in front of a live witness, but every opening exchange begins with a frantic "Can we do it electronically?" We're seeing more notaries and settlement officers temporarily folding up their tents in fear of contracting this virulence. These face-to-face transactions go on by the thousands every day under normal circumstances. One can hardly blame them, but the slimming options with a hovering, increased demand is a miniscule comparable to the manufacturers of face masks, hand sanitizers and toilet paper. The worse this gets, we're truly concerned about the notary shelf going empty.

COVID-19 rings like a horror movie or a comic book comic to life, where dark matter has upended society, survival of the fittest, doubt and mistrust as pervading as the offending plague itself. Yeah, people are still out there, and though there's seldom talk of traffic delays right now, the interpretation of "essential travel" broadens with each day we're encouraged to stay indoors. It was only last week when a group of people were arrested here for having a bonfire party in their back yard. People will do as they will. Some will drape cloth over their faces and stand at the taped six foot apart markers to go get milk. Others will slap their open car windows in time to a blaring electro throb like they're at a Marshmello rave, just to satisfy a cheeseburger craving at McDonald's. For me, picking up our prepaid lunches at the distanced and locked lobby of Zoe's Kitchen says it all. Compliant, yes. Necessary, without question. Still, utterly soulless.

As I delve into my old comic books this weekend while trying to keep my restless, long-cooped 12-year-old amused, I think about how Black Panther was once considered a minor character for Marvel. We veteran comic dweebs saw him incrementally back in the 1970s and Eighties, and we loved him. We wanted more of him. As a muscular and agile sovereign of a technologically-advanced African society, we loved Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's brass for creating a superhero of color in times when that just didn't happen. Funny enough, Wakanda was secluded from the rest of the world, long before there ever such as thing as Coronavirus. Also funny, T'Challa and his sister, Shuri, between them have superior prowess in technology and biochemistry to have this wiped this mess out before taking its first victim in China. Of course, that's if life was a comic book.

Only in recent years have we seen Black Panther's escalation to a contemporary pop culture icon, his runaway success shimmering like an avatar of hope and equality. Given recent sociological regressions and an opened door to prejudicial revisionism in the United States, Black Panther's comeuppance has become stymied. The same fate of all the superhero characters who've been stalled inside their spandex, *Coronavirus* being the culprit. Shipment of comic books,

much less their production, has ceased for the interim. It's as if the Red Skull and The Joker crossed publishing lines to effectively engineer the mother of all lethal, abiding capers.

COVID-19 has become the ultimate nemesis no superhero could've prevented. The time for heroism comes not in the funny books, but in the hospitals, from first responders, even with the average do-gooder donating food to a needy neighbor. Sorrow prevails right now and we could *use* a butt-kicking display of good triumphing over evil, much less a hearty laugh followed by a long, tight hug you'd never forget. My cousin had to resort to sneaking to the outside window of my aunt's hospital room in order to see her. Her own mother. Those who are losing loved ones to the Coronavirus currently have no benefit of a funeral to say farewell, out of fear of spreading infection.

On the flipside, we're witnessing our country coming together, even pushed afar from six feet or more. Bipartisanship is slowly becoming a taboo word, even if that represents more of a truce than an amendment. People aren't afraid to say they love each other right now, because you never know if and when you might see that other person again. The fear factor behind COVID-19 has fostered a rare, widespread empathy, and if that becomes contagious, then *Excelsior*, keep that element alive. We'd have no need of superhero escapism then.

Cristina Tomàs White

## Parental Estrangement in the Midst of a Pandemic

Being home almost all day, every day forces you to face the pesky truths you would have more easily avoided under normal non-pandemic circumstances. The sink is full of dirty dishes? Wash them when you get back from work, if it's not 10 pm and you're not exhausted. Recycling bin is full? Just take it out when you're not in a hurry. Getting creative with your outfits because you haven't done laundry in over a week? Don't worry, chances are you'll be free to do so this weekend.

But the coronavirus lockdown - 21 days and counting - has turned the usual course of action on its head. Wash those dishes now, you have a minute and you're not going anywhere. Take the bin out to the corner, what else do you have to do during your break? Except for with laundry, maybe. I have a hard time believing I'm the only one out there who's been wearing the same clothes for two to three days straight, relishing in the freedom of not being seen.

It's not only chores, though. The same goes for burdensome thoughts. In my case they're compounded with the unavoidable and constant reminders of death and (physical, emotional, social, economic) destruction that come with being a journalist in Spain these days. The news can't leave anyone's mind at ease.

How many more confirmed Covid-19 cases and fatalities will we have to report on today? Or press conferences that never start on time, go on for hours and leave you feeling like there is no good happening anywhere, while politicians skillfully avoid answering key questions?

Oh, and there's been yet another spat between authorities who point the finger at one another for any possible failing. And there are also the medical professionals who lack the equipment they need safely save others or the people out of work that still have to pay their rents and/or monthly freelancer fees.

Please go film a few shots (without a mask or gloves because you don't have any) of the now-empty metro station at what used to be rush hour, but don't let the on-edge security guard who loses his temper get to you.

I've taped a hand drawn sign up on the wall next to my workspace: Breathe and don't answer back. We're all on edge these days. Some battles don't need to be fought.

But there's yet another thought that's been in the back of my head lately, slow-

ly eating at me. What if something happened to my father? He lives barely 20 minutes away, but I haven't really spoken to him or seen him in over three years.

My sister says he's doing ok, that he started to take things seriously when Spain's death toll surpassed China's. I think I want him to know that I hope he's ok too, but I haven't reached out. I don't know how to tell that to him. And yes, the irony of being someone who spends her days communicating for a living but is incapable of getting that one message across isn't lost on me.

The thing is, there's no How to reach out to your estranged alcoholic parent during a pandemic guide or a I don't know how to or necessarily want to talk to you but don't want you to die or despair due to the ongoing public health crisis handbook either.

He's not a monster - I want to believe that very few people actually are - but we've had a tricky relationship ever since I was a teenager. The chronic unhappiness of his that I'll never truly understand made embarrassingly cheap red wine his poison of choice. He downs it every day by the bottle, sometimes sloppily mixing it with anti-depressants.

And when I was younger I didn't know that there's never any reasoning with an irrational drunk. There were oh-so many fights he wouldn't be able to recall a day later, causing even more upset because he wasn't able to understand or empathize with why I was hurt.

The financial crisis hit a few years after I began to notice his drinking and like many others he eventually lost the job too. It made him miserable, but losing it only made things even worse. He never found another job after that, and while he luckily didn't have any serious economic problems, his sense of purpose took too hard of a blow.

I believe memory is kind in many ways because there are many painful details of things said and done that my mind has erased almost completely. I do remember some things, though, like how isolating it was to have to pretend like everything was fine.

What happened at home was a secret - perhaps one that others intuited but was purportedly private nonetheless - because nobody knew what to do about it or wanted to do anything at all. It's always easier to ignore something like that than to confront it. He seems so nice, after all, how could it possibly be true? He's your father; even if it is true you have to forgive him because he's your father. He can't actually be that bad.

With over a decade of growth behind me, sometimes I want to scream at everyone who dismissed or shrugged off my pain, even if they meant well. Just be-

cause you've only seen one side to him doesn't mean he doesn't have any others! The kind and considerate and caring person you see now and then is the same broken man who shouts at his wife and children at night! And yes, I have suggested he get help, but I can't force him to do something he doesn't want to do! If only it were that simple.

I remember the summers I'd go back home from university because I had nowhere else to go, and how I'd spend them wishing they'd be over so I could get away from him. There were times when I couldn't avoid him even if I wanted to because he'd come to my room to argue. He'd remember something I'd said days or hours earlier that had bothered him and he'd have to let me know.

I'd often get mad and resentful, but sooner or later guilt would sink in. I was still financially dependent on him and felt like a hypocrite for not being able to shun him completely. He was also family, like everyone always said, so I had to forgive him.

He wasn't constantly mean, though. His drunkenness would ebb and flow like an everchanging tide taking his cruel words and anger with it. Just like Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, my mom would always say, for the longest time clinging onto the hope that his transformations would one day stop.

He actually could be the kindest person in the morning, sometimes even spending hours in the kitchen making you your favorite midday meal, and then pick a fight with you over nothing in the evening. Or he could also be nice for a few days in a row, drinking quietly in front of the television on his own, but then sooner or later he'd find a way of inflicting his pain on others.

The last time I ever saw him I was over at my parent's house - back when my mom still lived there too - because I had been working nearby. I was supposed meet up with a friend who lived in the area a few hours later and decided to wait at their place until it was time to see her. And things had been relatively good that day with him after all, why not spend a few more hours at my parent's house?

I genuinely can't remember what it was he started saying to me. I answered something back and got up to leave. As I turned back I could see him flipping me off, too drunk to realize he wasn't even doing it discretely.

I started laughing. It was comical, really, the ridiculousness of it. I made the same rude hand gesture back at him, thinking just how childish the situation was: an intoxicated parent, shouting at their child over something insignificant, decides to give them the middle finger, which she then gives back.

He didn't find it funny. He got up and chased me to the other end of the apart-



ment, shouting at me as my mom and my sister, who had just arrived, pulled him off me.

He's tried to reach out a few times since then, but hasn't owned up to his actions and pretends like nothing ever happened or says he doesn't understand why I don't want to talk to him. He hasn't apologized for all those years of hurt. I know he's still drinking.

I think I love him, still, even though I try not to think of him too much. I know he's hurting and alone, and that does make me sad for him. I know he's not a monster. I don't want anything bad to happen to him, but I simply don't know how to have a healthy relationship with him. I know some people are able to work past this with their alcoholic loved ones, but we're not there yet.

That said, I'm very fortunate overall. I can't turn off the news and make myself numb to the world's sorrows, but I still have a job. My self-employed partner's earnings have taken a dive because he can't work these days, but we'll get through this. My friends and family are sad, worried, bored, cooped up, and lonely, but they're all healthy. They'll get through this. And so, I constantly remind myself, breathe.

Pamela Willits

# Tolerance in the Time of the Coronavirus

As I finish filling my gas tank, I notice the billboard above the seasonal corner ice cream stand. A photo of a man holding a woman, her head turned sideways is buried in his chest, reveals someone coping with some unseen tragedy. *Begin Your Grief Journey* is written across the top of the billboard and I realize it's a funeral home ad. With the current pandemic, I think of those about to embark on their own personal journeys, unsure if friends and relatives will succumb to the virus.

As I pull out of the gas station, a vehicle with New York plates catches my eye. What's odd isn't the out-of-state plate in mid-winter, but the kayak balanced on its roof. I reach Whole Foods just as President Trump's latest press conference is winding down. Reporters are eager to know why Jeff Bezos has been calling the White House. I imagine Bezos is eager to help in distributing goods. I prefer to think his intentions are more humanitarian than profit driven.

As I cross the parking lot I notice two more cars with kayaks and begin to wonder if Amazon delivers to America's back woods and beaches. I wonder if this is just another modern day scourge set upon humanity – much like the recent bushfires in Australia - or if there is something bigger at play here. Will we begin to see an exodus headed for isolated terrains? Once our focus was on school shootings. Now, despite government warnings not to do so, we are focused on stock piling food, and the most precious commodity of all - toilet paper. Inside Whole Foods, I find aisle after aisle of empty shelves. Peanut butter, canned soup and flour had flown off the shelves during the weekend run on food. Today is Monday, March 16.

Next stop - Giant Eagle. Entering the store, the lingering plume of raw bleach burns my lungs and sinuses. I'm wearing a mask and disposable gloves. My primitive contagion outfit turns more than a few heads as concerns over contracting this virus has yet to register with most. As I finish my shopping and head to the check out, I spot a young woman wearing a mask. It gives me an odd sense of comfort. I suddenly don't feel so alone as I move through what feels like a post-apocalyptic scene. Once in the parking lot, I load my handful of groceries into my car. Turning, I notice the masked woman loading two grocery carts

worth of items into her pickup truck. Safe inside my car, I turn on the radio. *Another One Bites the Dust*, the 80's song by Queen, blares.

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As a writer, many things I hear send me to Google Search – the British rock band's song now being one of them. It turns out that *Another One Bites the Dust* was one of many rock songs that Christian evangelists alleged contained subliminal messages, claiming that when played in reverse the chorus could be heard as "It's fun to smoke marijuana." Reading the lyrics I realize the song wasn't about drugs, or despite its title, even death. It's about a guy down on his luck, who's ready to do whatever it takes to get back up.

Weird Al Yankovic (and yes, that's the name he was know by in the 80's) recorded a parody entitled, *Another One Rides the Bus*. His rendition lamented the unpleasanties encountered on a crowded city bus. I could attest to its veracity, as I once rode an RTA bus to work in downtown Cleveland. As social distancing was becoming our new way of life, the magnitude of distancing ourselves made me consider those who don't own cars. Would the buses continue to run? Would riders have to sit every other seat and leave empty rows between themselves?

A Wikipedia entry claimed that *Another One Bites the Dust* had been used in the UK to train medical professionals how to provide the correct number of chest compressions while performing CPR. Apparently the song's bass line has 103 beats per minute, and 100–120 chest compressions per minute was the recommended CPR procedure according to the British Heart Foundation. As fate would have it, the Bee Gees had recorded *Stayin' Alive* during the same era. It also played out at 103 beats per minute, making it a hit in British CPR training classes.

A scan of the web for pandemic updates revealed a Twitter fight over what to call this contagion, as politicians were getting hammered for naming it after the Chinese city where the coronavirus first emerged. Meanwhile, the media insisted that these labels were dangerously divisive, potentially leading to geographic divides and hostility between peoples. Having lived through the Hong Kong flu as a young child, this level of bickering was lost on me. Britannica.com noted that strain of flu had been called the Hong Kong flu pandemic of 1968. So when did sighting the source of an outbreak become politically incorrect? Knowing the source might lead to finding the root cause and in turn, help lead to a cure.

In 1985, Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez published the novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The term cholera as used in the Spanish language can also denote passion, thus making the title a pun: cholera as disease, and chol-

era as passion. The book's theme revolves around love as a plague with its end results at times being as deadly as cholera. Would the plague of today's hatred between political parties become more lethal than the virus itself?

Like a novel that sets out to examine the flaws of the human condition, the evolving coronavirus story will become a record of our resolve, fortitude and tolerance. What and how much of the coming narrative will be viewed with suspicion, much like the alleged subliminal messaging in Queen's hit song, remains to be seen. It's as if the world has been kicked by a giant sized Monty Python boot and the real coronavirus test will come in the form of our ability to maintain a sense of humor and our mental health during this time of social distancing.

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I leave my office and head to Marc's grocery store, my last vestige of hope of finding food items wiped clean by weekend shoppers. I do better here than Whole Foods. Returning to my car, I turn on the radio. There's concern that Pope Francis may have been exposed to the virus. I have visions of him walking the empty streets of Rome, stopping at St. Marcello where the Sunday before he had prayed before a crucifix reportedly used in a procession during the 1522 plague outbreak in Rome. Pulling out, I pass a personalized license plate that reads *Jesus Loves Us*. We'll see, I think, we'll see.





# FICTION

Abdullah Aljumah

## Wet to his Knees

Lovely mellow background music reverberated softly in a lounge situated in Juffair district of Manama, Bahrain. The lounge guests were conversing behind a swirling, dirty cloud of smoke as the stagnant stench of cigars filled the atmosphere. A sharp smell of strong liquor wafted in the air, like black plumes billowing from the windows of a burning house. A hint of sickness tainted the fragrance of the rather luxurious lounge.

On the far right, near the emergency exit, Sammy sat hunched forward, sipping his favorite whiskey and resting his right hand against the rough paintwork that coated the trim of the bar counter. The door hinges squealed as if they issued a warning but the humming noise and giggle of the lounge patrons silenced their plea. A short, dark-haired woman, in a rather white, formal blouse, and high heels, walked in. A whiff of irresistible perfume caught Sammy's nose as she treaded past him. She sat at the corner table and meticulously placed her black, leather purse in front of her. Her short, black, silky skirt slid from between her knees and her hidden angelic beauty revealed. Sammy's eyes sailed towards her. Staring in her direction, he meditated, with the intuition of an adventurer and with complete readiness to drown. Once caught, he had no refuge to seek, other than the shores of her brown eyes; they were his last chance to escape. Their eyes met and they smiled at each other. It was a smile that had accentuated his precarious thoughts on infidelity.

Sammy was a happily married man with two daughters. He cherished his daughters dearly and adored his beautiful wife. He loved each one of them and happily enjoyed his life. The life he had shared with them had been wonderful. They had made him feel good and smile every day. Sammy and his wife would hug, kiss and exchange pleasantries all the time. They were the kind of couple, who at every moment during their lovemaking, expressed their feeling of enjoyment — almost on a daily basis. For them, the joy of lovemaking was a sine qua non of their necessary existence.

As ten years of marriage went by, they slowly started missing the train of intimate romance. Their lovemaking weaned and the growing absence of their intimate moments annoyed him. On several nights, he would stiffly express his dissatisfaction to his wife, whose pretext often were the unending, tiring chores of their growing household as well as her late nightly working hours.



"Do not neglect someone you love. He might think you don't want him next to you and he departs," he'd often complain about how their lovemaking became rare and intolerable, nursing a grudge that settled in his heart. Many a night, his seminal fluid would ejaculate invisibly, feeling painful in his crotch. At times, his tears fell silently, and were painful, especially those which fell out of intense sexual desires and a deep longing.

"Happiness, caress and touch are all a person needs," Sally often told him.

"Happiness is not only to find someone who loves you, but also who understands your needs," he'd protest.

Silence had grown between them and they drifted apart. Despite the apparent sound of silence, his heart was filled with words, loud enough to hurt him. Their once mutual intimate fondness slowly became a must-do, prearranged, or otherwise scheduled encounter, which only lasted a few minutes, and partially satisfied her partner's concupiscent needs. Sammy's intimacy and interest in his wife dwindled along with his religion. For him, her neglect ended every story that was pretty yesterday. Bar hopping across the country became a significant weekly agenda of his life.

"You can't be going to the bar almost every week," his wife complained as she observed the change in his behavior.

"I don't," he said.

"You do. I wonder what else you could be doing out there." Sally expressed innocent, but frustrating doubts.

"You might think I am a lecherous conventioneer, but..."

"Most of the male patrons at the bar are, aren't they?" She sarcastically interrupted him.

"But I don't cheat!" He yelled back.

Sometimes he thought about starting over, about creating something better, but occasionally, he felt growing up meant growing apart. On several nights, he had often thought about cheating to satisfy his insatiable, unfulfilled lust, but his moral ethics stopped him. He often drove the extra miles with a strong will and an intention to commit it, but no matter how powerfully strong his desire was, there was always someone who made him weak. He'd think otherwise. It was not humiliation or fear, but it was her place in his heart. "Ten years of faithful marriage. And my kids, oh my kids!" He'd often sigh in pain.

That night at the lounge was totally different. It changed the course of his destiny. Fate surprised him sometimes with an unfathomable event, but on that particular night, it made a change he'd exasperatedly thought he really needed.

As he secretly exchanged lascivious looks with the dark haired-woman, his inner curiosity aroused. He stood up and staggered towards her.

"Hey, I am Sammy. You are?" He offered to shake hands.

"Belinda," she said, extending her slender hand, smiling. Her tiny, round mouth and thin lips exposed her pair of shiny, white teeth.

He offered her a drink.

"No, no, thank you. I gotta go," she said.

"Oh come on. It's only the beginning of the night."

She laughed and asked about where he was from, which he happily answered.

"Can I see you again?" He asked.

"Sure. Tomorrow at ten o'clock."

Her beauty was not only something he saw and observed, it was something he could've possessed — at least for a short, temporary time. To the sirens of his clear conscience, she was a sickening but voluptuous lady of pleasure. Nevertheless, at that moment, he had a deep thought, full of unscrupulous morals, with dangerous consequences.

When he left the lounge at half past two in the morning, he had a strong will to do it the next day or night. He had the devil and his minions by his side. He had worked out a plan, a sinful design — a deceitful excuse to stay the night. He called his wife. So drunk was he, he couldn't have driven himself back home — a two-hour drive — in his current condition. He staggered his way to the nearest hotel around. He booked a room, crawled into bed and passed out, naked.

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*Belinda, a short dark-haired lass, in a crimson lingerie, resembling a rose, treaded impudently into Sammy's dark hotel room. There she found a perked up, invisible worm, all alone. She perched on it and disappeared into the darkness. She entered his life as a light, infiltrating through a bedroom window. He wanted to keep her. He shut the door and closed the window curtains. He turned around, but couldn't find her. When all reasons for her to stay were exhausted, he wanted to leave, carrying his pains of guilt on his shoulders, head down, and he dragged his feet. On the path to their farewell, a dream of two died out, but an eternal pain remained with him forever. The feeling of guilt sat on his chest and confused the inner complexity of his thoughts. He found himself in a strange, gray city, whose streets were crooked, with scarce air and pale gardens. Its dwellers were either homeless or migrated, and he was still hoping, waiting for them. What he had done couldn't be undone. He could make amends in subtle ways, but confession to his wife was out of the question. Memories of the incident*

*were silent sounds echoing in his ears and a dark-colored wound that remained with him forever. Suddenly, his past righteous religiousness came back to him. He envisioned purgatory, an angel with a hot rod waiting for him.*

He screamed!

At 12:00 p.m. the phone on the nightstand, beside his bed, started ringing. It was the hotel receptionist, calling to remind him of checkout time. The ringing had interrupted his lewd, wicked dream. He found himself wet to his knees and he jumped out of his bed in shame, feeling guilty for betraying his wife in a wet dream.

He jolted to the bathroom and took a religiously-prescribed, cleansing bath. He scrubbed every inch of his body with a bar of soap in a swirly motion several times. He thought he scrubbed himself once, but he washed thrice as his faith called for. He washed the filth that settled upon him during the night. He put on his clothes and drove as fast as he could, heading back to his country. He missed his wife and kids. He missed home.

When Sammy arrived, he quickly searched for his wife. Upon seeing him, Sally's round, white face glittered, her dark-brown eyes shone with delight. She possessed a beauty he had never seen before. He kissed her forehead, eyes and cheeks. He scratched his forehead with the fingers of his right hand — his thoughts were completely isolated in a merging stream of guilt and happiness. He knelt down and kissed her hands.

Thomas Dukes

## The Men in the Glass

The bombing had occurred eight months ago, but I still lived in a kind of after-shock, and I suspect Peter did as well. Except for a few scars from flying glass, most bound to fade, we showed few physical signs of our ordeal. By text, we agreed we needed to see each other again, for we had made no contact since we returned from Europe on the same day, landing in a typically cloudy Akron that cared not a whit what we had been through.

We met at Bernardo's, an Akron institution. The Italian restaurant was famous for taking only cash and checks, no credit cards, though an ATM is in an alley nearby. I carried extra cash in case Peter had forgotten, and it turned out he did the same thing, which gave us a good laugh with which to begin our lunch after we ordered.

"I'm all right," he said, and I recognized the slightly forced energy. "I don't have nightmares anymore." Peter looked older than his thirty-five years, and his once blonde hair was now at least half gray.

"Good. I never had nightmares, but sometimes during the day, I'm pulled up short—

—by something that's not even there," he finished.

We looked around the restaurant, classically Italian-American, as if we might see something new or dangerous. I saw only the candles shoved into wine bottles in the center of the tables, the familiar walls to my left covered in signed black-and-white pictures of long-dead local and second-rate national celebrities, and bowling trophies on a shelf behind the bar from the days when bowling was the football of Akron's rubber workers. The wall to my right was lined with mirrors. The second dining room had no such treasures, though it did have the same red-checked tablecloths, made of oilcloth and thus indestructible.

"I saw a therapist twice," he said, taking a long sip of iced tea the server had us brought us with an almost missionary zeal. "I didn't go back. That's not what this experience was about."

"I never went, for the same reason."

We'd arrived at eleven-thirty and a few minutes later, the place was beginning to fill up with the typical lunch crowd of banking executives, local politicians, a few artsy types, and some people, like us, simply here to have a friendly lunch. Our booth was at the back, near the kitchen, and soon the table to my left and

the booth behind Peter were filled with people in suits.

We chatted amiably for a few minutes, and then our food came, a pizza slice and a salad for each of us, the latter a mound almost buried in cheese, and our desultory conversation largely ceased as we began to eat.

The past, never far away, returned, for we were also having lunch with ghosts.

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Once we left the station in Paris that morning, the train ran smoothly, and I was in danger of taking a nap in spite of my breakfast coffee. I didn't want to; I wanted to look at the French countryside as it sped past. I could, of course, have gone to the dining car for coffee or tea, but I didn't want to have caffeine jitters.

Peter and I were off to spend a week with his mother in Florence, where she had settled with her fourth or fifth husband—Peter believed he might have missed one—and his mother promised that we could come and go as we liked. Peter believed this as she had never cared, apparently, what her three children did.

“That wasn't so bad for my brother and me,” he said, folding his paper, “as we soon learned to take care of ourselves as the husbands and lovers came and went. But Michelle—that was no way to treat a daughter. No wonder she has had so many problems.”

Peter spoke of his sister as if she were still alive, though I knew her ashes had been surreptitiously and probably illegally scattered in the Cuyahoga National Forest back home. Peter had never accepted her death, and I as his friend saw no reason to press the point.

Another reason we had gone to France was that Peter wanted to get out of town after breaking up with his lover, Zane, who had left him for an older man with a great apartment in Chicago. I had never thought much of the lover, and, I suspected, neither had Peter's other friends and possibly Peter himself. Still, it hurts to be dumped regardless of age or experience.. Given Peter's good looks, I believed the wound was all the greater because the Chicago man was said to be older and not particularly attractive.

I looked around and noticed that most of the people in the car were men. This autumn day was clear, and the last thing I remember was seeing the men's reflections in the glass of the train car windows, apparently happy or at least content, even if the faces were in repose.

I felt before I heard the blast. Everything underneath seemed to give way, and momentarily, I had the sensation of being split in two. I looked Peter's way at once only to see him looking at me; he was as puzzled as I. Then came the most hideous sound imaginable, the sound of metal twisting and screaming and peo-

ple screaming as if the world were at an end. The screech of brakes, the screech of *something*, somewhere, came closer as our car derailed and, for an instant, reached into the sky before crashing into a field. As the car fell on its side, I fell onto Peter, driving him into the window. Throughout all this, shards of glass pierced me, and I thought wildly of St. Sebastian and martyrdom. The train car then turned upside down, and before losing consciousness, I saw a piece of metal heading toward me: This is the end.

But it was not the end. I regained consciousness a few hours later, lost it again, then regained it. Late that night, really very early the next morning, around two a.m., medical people, acting with the soul of kindness, removed many pieces of glass from my face and neck, even the backs of my hands. Gentle as they were, I felt as if someone were extracting shark's teeth, and the pain was something I had never felt before or since. When they wheeled me to the ward, I saw Peter being pushed out of another bay; it would turn out that we had almost identical injuries. Miraculously, the glass had missed our eyes, and neither of us was concussed.

In the ward, our beds were side by side. Though it must have been fin the morning, I could not sleep. I turned to Peter who lay awake also, flat on his back, looking at the ceiling.

"Hello," I said.

"I am told they lost our luggage," he said. "I asked a policeman about it while I waited for an ambulance. With all that was going on, they lost our luggage. My best pants were in this suitcase. My best."

He tried to smile. I reached to touch his arm with my left hand, and we both started to cry.

Days later, after we'd left the hospital, we learned the bomb had been planted by some fringe terrorist group no other terrorists wanted anything to do with. They'd meant to derail the whole train and kill everyone, but by mistake, had planted the bomb in the car ahead of ours. Only a few cars had flown the tracks, and only about a dozen of us in the rest of the train had injuries. If the monsters planted the bomb in our car, we would have all died as did the people in that other car.

A week or so later, we flew to Florence from Paris, courtesy of the French government, then after ten days of recuperation and being fussed over by his mother, who seemed very nice, we flew from Florence to home.

Peter and I didn't have much to say to each other through it all.

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“Zach wanted to come back,” he said. “The Chicago guy kept biting Zane’s lip when they started to make love and wanted to do other such things. I guess he was a Dean at Purdue and commuted the three hours or so because he didn’t want anyone on campus to know of his preferences.” Peter said all this as if reporting the six o’clock news.

“Did you take Zane in?”

“No. And it was awful. All I could tell him was ‘After what I’ve been through, you are unworthy.’ I never talk like that, but I did then.”

“I can’t date,” I said. “I go through the motions at work—God, I’m sick of teaching—then go home and watch television until bedtime. I go to the gym but trying to cruise or pick someone up seems meaningless. I wanted a long-term relationship—oh, hell, we both know I want to get married—but now men are so beside the point. The problem is that I don’t know what the point is, other than surviving.”

From the next table, a rough voice with a Great Lakes accent rose above the din of the lunch crowd. “Lot of faggots in here with their faggot nonsense.”

I turned to my right, to the mirrors, and saw reflected a man in tie and dress shirt curling his lip; I thought he was about rise and spit on us both.

“Yeah,” his lunch mate, also in a suit, added. “Lot of fags. I wish they’d go away.”

The tables near us and even a couple of booths further away got very silent. The servers were going about their work, but one rolled her eyes as she went by.

Our server came to our table. “I’m so sorry,” she said, laying down the check. “That never happens here.”

“Shall we leave these charming people to themselves?” My voice, too, carried above the luncheon din coming from the other dining room.

I assumed Peter would get up, and as we passed the men’s table, we would either sail by without comment or give them withering stares and a few choice words.

But Peter did not budge. He stared straight ahead, through me, as if he had his eye on something else. I watched our untouched water glasses sweat, saw the leftover dressing start to congeal in the bottom of our tan salad bowls, and after a bit, looked at him again. Once more, he seemed some place far away, or to be seeing someplace far away, but didn’t move.

No one nearby spoke, and I could tell people were waiting for the other shoe to drop. Finally, Peter stood, ramrod straight, and walked deliberately to the front, passing the other men’s table without comment. They did not look at him or me. I had left the tip behind and took the check to the front counter.

I was waiting for my receipt when I heard another stir from the back of the

restaurant. I wondered if the two men had started a fight—I knew Peter was behind me, so it couldn't have been with him—until I heard Peter say,

“Thank you for all the entertainment you have provided us.”

I assumed he was talking to the two men who must have come up, and I wondered if he were trying to get us both killed with his sarcasm. On the other hand, after the bombing, part me wanted to do nothing more than fight back

I turned around to see the comedian Jay Leno standing there, shaking hands as he made his way forward through the crowd.

“Thank you,” I said as he passed, shorter than I had imagined, but he gave me his well-known smile and moved on.

Outside, Peter and I saw him posing with fans while someone took their picture. The day was unseasonably warm, and as we walked to our cars, I couldn't wait to get into mine and turn on the air conditioning, suddenly aware that I was covered in sweat.

Peter held out his hand, I thought to shake mine, and I returned the gesture.

Instead, he kissed it. I sensed rather than saw the other men coming out of the restaurant. I smiled at Peter as he released my hand and straightened up.

“Next time,” he said, “lunch is on me.”



Nazli Karabiyikoglu

## The Beaten Beatrice

*She does look like her mother.* I was leaving the mansion when I heard the people whispering under the staircase. Every piece of clothing I was wearing became heavier by the second. My cape strangled me, I had to gasp for air. Taste and smell of the bed I'd been on for hours lingered with me. My mother wouldn't run, she would wait for lunch time. Maybe a silk scarf around and up her neck, to hide some of her face, that was all. Eggs, hard boiled and plentiful - I'll take mine soft in the center - she stays in bed, dries off the night's sweat, and asks for the papers. Butter, bread, then up. Dress up, make up, and dive into the rains of perfumes.

Maybe it was solely our looks that resembled. The gentlemen must have had enough of boys, they asked for me. Or maybe, my mother's services didn't quite cut it the other night. Us "women of service" had to entice and feel ashamed at the same time. Quiet. *No need for cream, thank you. No, don't bother, I can pour my own glass, thank you* - aware of our temporary presence. *You know, doll, you'll be gone in the morning, but I will always be here, waiting at the beautiful gates of this mansion, for others.* Were these words meant to hurt me?

*Come on now, you're not dead-weight. Look, you're beautiful. Maybe you can sing to them? Or play the piano a little? No? You don't have to if you don't want to. Okay, don't sulk. We didn't let your hair grow this long for nothing; they will caress you. In the rooms downstairs, the sheets will be moist, but you slept near the sea before. I personally threw you into the waters of Bosphorus, from the decks of houses that people enviously stared at, you know. Oh, the way you floated... You held on to my legs and climbed back up. Come on now, just like you did before. In the morning, we will get up. Although back then, you were chubbier and had rashes in the summer. We can send someone to go fetch some powder. I'm telling you all this for the day when we'll be the same age. You were never my chains. You*

*never held me back. Can't lie, I was scared at first, but you brought me even more men. They would be appalled with admiration and put their ears on my belly to hear you. They all tried to name you, too. The most silenced smile was their answer. Your smile is peace itself, child. That's what they said to me. One night, out of nowhere, I found your name!*

*I jumped into the sea with my clothes on and swam to the deck across. Peo-*

*ple shouting behind me, their worry warmed me in the cold strait. Where they could no longer see me, I listened to the rhythm of my pounding heart. Behind the neighboring deck, I heard a melody, and saw a faded light. I climbed ashore, and tiptoed carefully in the muddy slope until I reached freshly cut grass. The light was the work of a man behind a slider window, he had lit many candles inside and was singing your name. He saw me watching him. I felt embarrassed, not because my gown clung to me, not because of my huge belly, but because I had stolen the melody. I couldn't stand the eye contact, and ran back to the sea. I swam across the city, all its shores. I washed my mouth, four keepers of the Bosphorus blessed my ablution, I was pure, I named you. You were pure, I gave birth to you where their fountains poured into the sea.*

I always found the hardest part to be fluffing up our breasts. I had to find elegant solutions to display the two seeds that kept blossoming up to my neck when I felt excited, or beaten, or ambitious. I imagined my statue to resemble a sudden, crazed wind. I covered half of it with sheets, and left the other half for the sun and the moon to shine on. I tried to hear what people would say in front of it, watching the beams fall onto me, the holy me. My head tilted aside, just like I imagined. Standing still, mouth half-open, waiting for the poems to fill me, and for me to spill about the tastes I liked, literature I read, I stared at my looker, consistently passionate, with as much love as with the ones before.

“Back to the old mansion again?!” shouted my mother, a question not needing an answer.

I walked the coastline, my feet chewed on some dead leaves, I counted the benches on my path. “If only our grandfather didn't leave us,” my mother used to say. “If only he didn't leave his room...” Maybe a carriage would appear and take me away... Or at least I hoped so. Because the sea gave me angst, a constant cramp, reminding me about the nights before I was born, about the fish that poured out of the womb I held on to, before I was breathing on my own.

Horses appeared, beautiful, malnourished, but beautiful. I sat on the coarse velvet seat in the carriage they pulled. “To Kurtuluş!”

*We could have been rich. Think about it! You wouldn't have to take those furry slippers, ever. You could have all the sweet soup in the world. With extra rose water too! Don't sulk now, I know Zabel gossips, too much and maybe about us too. But she makes the best sweet soup. Doesn't she? And I saw where she pinched you, and how you bruised. Don't worry, she can no longer mess with you. Yes, I talked to her. Maybe she didn't understand what I said, but she got me. I know she thinks we're temporary, in the absence of the lady. But don't*

*mind her. We're going to ask her to bake all sorts of pastries, don't you worry. Of course she's going to bake! I'll make sure she does. You know, maybe I was younger than you were when they handed out those paintings, but I remember their vivid colors as if it was yesterday. No dust, no nothing. Mimosas, jumping at my eye. A bright yellow dress, pouring down to the bottom, exiting the frame in my mind. Elegant hands, stretching out. Some weren't even fully dry yet. He would be pissed when he touched a wet spot by mistake. "Damn you, Hamit," he would say. "Damn you!" I saw that woman, you know, my dear child. The woman of hope. Her light, which I stood behind. I opened the caps of his paints. Sometimes they would come in buckets, and they had to be crushed with madder. I would volunteer, right away. Colors would fill under my nails. Prints of my hands, feet, would be all over. "You're my daughter," he would say as I cleaned the room. "You're all tiny, but a fire burns within you." We kept it a secret, the times we spent in the house up the hill. Inside it, we hid his paintings, covered them with large sheets. He would carry linseed oil from the town, without wasting a drop. A piece of hard candy for me. Always. Trak! Truk! Crunchy bits in my teeth... They took it all away though. All those paintings, spread around, who knows who has them now... Your grandfather, he was devastated. He didn't even notice the kitten I snuck in when it slithered around his legs. He walked away, from its orange marmalade fur. I took the little fluff ball, held it in my arms as they carried the last painting. That one, that last one had to be yours. Because you love tortoises, don't you, my dear?*

I wouldn't feel this bad, if I resembled you, like they said, even just a bit. If I had a black hijab, it would hide me well, and maybe I wouldn't hear all this whispering, under staircases, silk wouldn't let evil in. You raised me with the warmest colors, on which filth looked the most blatant cotton candy pinks, brightest reds, and pale blues of the mild summer afternoons. That starry night we watched the mansion where you found me my name, you turned to me and repeated it, over and over again. Candle lights died and those long windows stood up gray, and still, so still. The name you gave me was a melody, one that never found its place in a piece. Did you know then that I was never going to be complete? Because I did know, at one specific time in my life, I didn't want to grow up under those staircases, without a grandfather and without paintings; it was after a long day, the sun setting. I never liked the sweet soup, or the gossip ... How people talked about the *stolen* works, the way you locked your eyes at nowhere and listened... It turned out, the hardest part was breastfeeding with soft nipples. Pinch, pinch, pinch! I wouldn't feel this much pain if I resembled you. If I were a wife, to all

men, like you.

The chariot stopped. I leaped out and walked to the warehouse that led to that narrow tunnel to go to the room no one ever found. My hands searched the match box in the dark, where I always keep it. I lit the gas lamp on the ground and sat next to it. I watched the rock like shells of my friends move around.

*You must have learned by now centuries pass, but his command stays the same. Rub your femininity onto his front teeth, lift your lips, show your own teeth, neigh if you have to. Neigh! Owned, like items, fur, diamond, leather. See how I laughed, how I swirled my skirts around my thighs? The way they stared? I'm curvy, you have to be round to make hills to travel on the silk you wear. You saw how I bared his smell. You will bare it too, while keeping a straight face. Imagine you're at the sea, in me. You're trying to leave my body. Fish come and go, with open mouths, just small bites, stranger bastards. But they will bite. You, you will not give any of your flesh. Do not call it your flesh. And if they start to be unbearable, tell them your name.*

*Beatrice.*

I did resemble my mother after all. Good riddance! Who knows what would happen if no one followed a painting and found that room? Every year, would we pick the best flowers to leave at our grandfather's grave, and caress his tombstone with our hands, our father whose will was "you shall have all my paintings." Would we forget that he got himself stabbed to death with a dagger from the 16th century while he tried to hide the nudes he painted? *Tortoises' shell is tough, very tough, they don't bleed, my mother used to say. Take good care of the stories I told you, my dear Beatrice. They will be the best company. While you were in me, while you left me, and while you were out, in the sea, I let all those fish touch you so that I could be like you are now, but then I climbed those same stairs, and called in all those men, so that I could keep you in this mansion.*

They were so many. Moving around, stepping on one another. My tortoises. This was the morning after the dinner my mother presented me to her guests, in return for a thousand gold, so that she could keep her new palace. I was visiting my friends, breathing in the precious air around them. Yellow lines, alternative to blood tears, ran up to my toes from my own veins, from me. No water, no food, down there.

Our grandfather couldn't leave us any paintings. To stay in the new palace, and to stay in through the whisperings under staircases in the mornings, I locked my hands on my hips and went under. One more time. *If I could unpack this legacy, I could manage to stop reliving past nights, and wake up to days of content, I*

said to myself. I grabbed the silver gas lamp. I poked the tortoises, pushed them aside. At the bottom of a mossy log my name was buried. Bam! Kraf! Kpoink! I made sure they all knew my name.

John Mason

## The Father and the Son

“Yes, Eloise. Of course,” Father McElhenney said, only half-listening to the doddering old woman who’d been talking at him since evening mass ended, nearly an hour ago. All the more vexing was that he had no idea what he’d just agreed to. He tried to listen, but he just kept drifting in and out.

Mrs. Bowlan, though, didn’t seem to mind his shifting attention, if she even noticed it at all. Her only real intent seemed to be to hear herself speak, and she was nothing if not verbose. And to compound the frustration, there was nothing he could do. She was one of the most senior parishioners of St. Paul’s of the Cross. What’s more her tithing was large and frequent, and as such, “she’s paid for the right to talk your ear off.” Or, at least, that’s what he’d been told upon his arrival six months prior.

“And another thing,” Eloise continued, oblivious to the Father’s vacant expression as he reordered and faced the bibles in the final row of pews. “You should’ve seen what they were wearing at the Girls’ Choir Car Wash this past Saturday.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“Interesting is one word for it.” She sneered, shifting her large mauve purse and crossing her arms underneath her ample bosom. Father McElhenney stared, her nattering rattling around his brain and exasperating him, as all he wanted was for this day to be at its end so he could rest.

He wondered, suddenly, what she had looked like as a younger woman. She certainly hadn’t aged well. Neither time nor gravity had proved friendly, but there were still hints of beauty hiding beneath the wrinkles. He imagined her in her twenties: body taut, yet still curvaceous.

And she had this look that read like a tawdry magazine of everything impure thing he’d ever thought. Every step she took closer, the more the pages turned and the more lurid she became. He didn’t know whether to be intoxicated or repulsed. Much to his utter confusion, however, he was both.

“Father?” He felt a tugging at his wrist and the image of the vixen Eloise Bowlan faded from sight, leaving only the real thing in all her effusive glory.

“Yes, yes, my dear.” Father McElhenney took her by the arm and led her out of the row and toward the archway. “Forgive an old man a lapse of concentration. The day has slipped away faster than usual and I find myself quite overtaken with lethargy.”

“It’s just so inappropriate.” Eloise went on, as if the Father hadn’t spoken at all. “Why, when Keri Rooker went to clean the rim of Phil Harrison’s car, you know the one, that fancy little number that looks like a box.”

“I can’t say that I recall it, no.” Father McElhenney was doing his best not shove the nosy woman out and slam the door after. He could feel the slow throb beginning, right behind his left eye. He’d been getting awful headaches of late. He’d had one so bad a few days back that it woke him in the middle of the night, and he retched all over the bedside table. The acrid smell of vomit still hung in the air of his room, though the mess had been cleaned immediately after.

“Well, at any rate, when she bent over, I swear, you could see right up her—”

“Mrs. Bowlan!” Father McElhenney interrupted, not interested, in any way, in what she could or could not see when Keri Rooker bent over. “You have my word, I will speak with Sister Mary Tildon and make sure the Girls’ Choir is more properly clothed at the next car wash.”

“Thank you, Father. It’s just the decency of the thing,” she spouted as he gently pushed her over the threshold. “Oh, by the way, will you be at the pancake breakfast before service this Saturday? I was thinking of making my Pecan Surprise for the occasion.”

“I will be there and can’t wait to try them.” He didn’t have it in him to tell her that he was allergic to nuts. There was no knowing what memory that admission would stir up. She was finally out the door and he intended it to stay that way.

“Oh, good. I’ll be there at 7. I know that’s earlier than everyone else, but they said there would be a big crowd. When do you think you’ll be there?” He always felt guilty after dealing with Mrs. Bowlan. She was kindly, in her way, but loneliness had taken root deep inside. Her husband had passed a few years ago, and she was getting to that age when the majority of the people she’d spent her life with were either dead or close to it.

“Not sure yet. There is a lot to prepare for tomorrow.” Father McElhenney knew she was just looking for some human connection. That the church was one of the few constants her life still had, but she was grating to him. Every unnecessary sentence she prattled weighed on him like an anchor caught on his ankle, dragging him to the ocean floor.

“Maybe we could—”

“Mrs. Bowlan.”

“—I really need an extra hand at the mixing bowl. If you—”

“I must insist—”

“—be there around seven. All the ladies are so fond of you, I kn—”

“Eloise!” Father McElhenney snapped, though he immediately regretted the outburst upon seeing her dejected visage. He leaned through the archway, placing a hand on her shoulder in a consoling fashion. “I promise, I will find you in the morning and we’ll take our meal together. And at the next breakfast social, I will arrange to cook with you. But it’s getting late and I have much to do. So, if you would excuse me.”

“Oh, of course, Father. See you bright and early tomorrow.” Eloise chirped, though her exuberant tone couldn’t conceal her forlorn gait as ambled away down the hall in a wake of disappointment.

“Yes, Eloise. Of course.” Father McElhenney softly called after her, wishing he’d handled their parting with more aplomb. He slumped down in one of the chairs beside the door, exhausted. He wasn’t lying when he said there was a lot of work to do. When he was first informed that he was receiving yet another new assignment, it was also revealed that it would be accompanied by a new title: Senior Chaplain of the Evening Order, which was just an elaborate way of saying he had to straighten up and close down the church every night, except Tuesdays, when one of the Deacons filled in.

He wasn’t averse to the work though; he actually found it somewhat calming. The problem was, at that precise moment, he couldn’t really remember what exactly he was supposed to be doing. There was something, he knew, dangling just outside his mind’s reach, but he couldn’t clasp it.

This wasn’t the first incidence, either. He found, with increasing occurrence, that he’d lose time. And not just a few minutes here or there, but hours. Or he’d walk into a room with no idea of why. It was unnerving and Father McElhenney feared what this might portend, though he had an idea. He wanted medical council to confirm his suspicions but didn’t want to risk word of any ailment getting back to the leadership of the Church.

This was his fourteenth reassignment in twenty-five years and he desperately wanted it to be the last. He hadn’t minded all the moving. He looked at it as a new adventure the Lord had lined up, just for him. But, living such a mobile life hadn’t provided him the opportunity to make many lasting connections.

Certainly, there were several within the convents he’d served of whom he was reciprocally fond. And, particularly at his last church, where he led the ordination proceedings, he’d had the chance to mentor quite a few hopefuls on their journey to take the cloth. But here, and now, being so new and under the microscope, any sign of being unwell would send him right out the door with a reduced obligation.



Perhaps in time, once he'd settled in thoroughly, he could discreetly visit a local physician, but for the moment he needed to be careful and work through this himself. No one had picked up on any issue yet. Up to this point, any inconsistency in his ministry was chalked up to him being a "batty old man." The Lord would see him through this trial, he knew, just as he had all the others. Faith was strong in Father McElhenney. It had to be.

Still, sitting there after the long night, the world finally silent, his thoughts began to turn inward and against him. Worry and frustration settled on the old priest, holding him tight. He began falling into a black void of nothing that would steal his precious moments, one by one. Chances were that Father McElhenney would have sat in that chair long into the night, were it not for a sudden knocking at the chamber doors.

The Father steeled himself for another round with Eloise. In all his time, he'd never met someone who talked so much but said so very little. He pushed himself up, the joints in his knees popping, and he felt a groan escape despite his efforts to suppress it.

"Mrs. Bowlan," he began, barely containing his irritation as he heaved the wooden door back open. "I don't have the time right now fo—oh!"

Where Father McElhenney expected to see Eloise, beady eyes staring expectantly up at him; he, instead, found a young man whom he had never seen, though he did look familiar. It was likely he just had one of those faces that could resemble any number of people. This was an issue that Father McElhenney was well accustomed with, as he spent an inordinate amount of time rebuffing those who thought they knew him.

"Not who you were expecting?" The man asked with a wry grin, but there was no mirth in his voice. The old priest was startled, both by the sudden appearance of a stranger and by his countenance. He seemed on edge. The Father pressed his foot behind the door, bracing it with the weight of his body and ensuring it wouldn't open.

"I'm sorry, my son, but we're closed for the night. I'm actually on my way out now, if you wouldn't mind." He began to shove the door closed, but the man pressed against it, keeping a sliver exposed.

"Father, please." The man's voice was strained, as if it was all he could do to utter the phrase. "I need to speak with you. I have a confession."

Father McElhenney yearned to shut the door, his mind re-focusing, pushing through the ever-present fog that threatened to envelop him. The closing duties were nearly complete, and he'd been looking forward to his evening cocoa since

the Liturgy of the Eucharist when mass began.

“I’m sorry, my son. The hour is much too late. You’ll have to return at some other time.” Father McElhenney said, his thoughts fixated a warm drink and the comfy armchair in his bedroom. Perhaps he might take a small repast, as well. It was late and he felt he’d earned a piece of pie.

Or maybe he’d try watching that fish movie again. His nephew on his sisters’ side, Aldus, had sent it to him for his birthday a few weeks back. He’d tried to watch it the very night arrived but found it perplexing. There was a maid who couldn’t talk for some reason, and she had the task of cleaning a fish man’s room. Rather than tidy up, though, the woman kept staring at the fish man and putting her hands on the glass of his tank.

It was infuriating to Father McElhenney. Why was the man a fish? Why couldn’t the woman talk? And why did she keep touching the glass? Didn’t she know she was just making more work for herself? The Father just couldn’t make sense of any of it. He eventually turned it off and tried to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes all he saw were fish and broomsticks leaping upstream together.

“I really need to speak with you.” The man pleaded, forcing his way through. Father McElhenney was ripped from his reverie and knocked off balance as the young man strode past.

“Whatever it is, it will have to wait,” Father McElhenney said sternly, pulling the door wide and extending an arm as an invitation for the man to take his leave. “Father Christiansen will be in at 6 sharp tomorrow morning. He’ll be at the confessional by 7 and would be more than happy t—”

“Don’t you remember me, Father?” The man’s gaunt face twisted, and he looked both furious and, for some reason, afraid.

“I’m sorry, my son, but you must be mistaken.”

“Come on, Father. You know me.”

“I’ve never seen you at any of the services.”

“Think harder.”

“Do you even attend this church?”

“Look close, Father. Real close.” The man stepped forward. His breath was heavy a reeked of whiskey. They were face to face, mere inches away and it took everything Father McElhenney had not to flinch.

“I think you should go, son. Perhaps I could call you a cab?” Slowly, the Father backed away, careful to not turn his back. He’d been in situations like this before. Someone was angry and they blamed God for whatever problem they had. Who better to hold accountable than a priest?

“No, I don’t think I’ll go yet,” the man said, crossing his arms. “You are Father McElhenney, yes? Father Killian McElhenney?”

“How do you know that name?” He fell back, using the bench to prop himself up. No one had used his given name since he was a child. He loathed it. When his family had immigrated from Ireland to Boston when he was still an adolescent, he’d started using his middle name, David. It was even what was printed on his driver’s license.

He thought back, tried to remember anyone he might have told. Twenty-five years and thousands of faces began to swirl around him. It was all a blur: mewling children gave way to petulant adults. Loving couples crumbled and fractured under the weight of innocence and complicity. Everything was tangled. His memories were a swamp and he was sinking.

Confused and unsure, Father McElhenney did the only thing that made sense. He prayed. He recited the Prayer to Saint Christopher, the first he’d learned as a boy growing up in Westport, and the one he always fell back on in time of doubt:

*Grant me, O Lord, a steady hand and watchful eye. That no one shall be hurt as I pass by. You gave life, I pray no act of mine may take away or mar that gift of thine...*

As he recited the words, he felt the familiar sense of calm begin to grow inside him. Clarity’s grip began to tighten within and just like that it all came rushing back. Father McElhenney recalled the good things first. A boy who liked baseball, and he was good at it. He could hit the ball with an accuracy that far outpaced his peers. When he’d round the bases, golden locks would slip out from his cap, precariously obstructing his vision, but he didn’t care. He took the turns with wild abandon, pumping his little legs harder and faster while the outfield rushed to the fence just to watch the ball sail gallingly out of reach.

The boy held a large wooden mallet that was far too cumbersome and fumbled to swing it down. There was a sound, like a gong, and Father McElhenney saw himself give the boy a purple bear. And then he hugged the boy, gently. They were happy.

But then there was the rest. The boy sat curled in a chair, staring at the ground. His mother was crying. His father was stammering. There were parish officials and they had papers everyone needed to sign. Father McElhenney smiled at the boy and handed him the purple bear again. It bounced off the ground.

“Jimmy.” The Father whispered. He looked around and found that he was now sitting at the end of the first pew, directly in front of the alter.

“I go by James now,” the man said. He was sitting in the opposite row, across the

aisle. Though he was a man, grown, there were traces of the precocious boy he'd once been. A stray strand of blonde hair sticking up where it shouldn't.

"James, yes." Father McElhenney shook his head, trying to banish the memories and regain his wits. He didn't like remembering. "You said you had a confession for me?"

"My wife left." The words rolled slowly out, each one hitting the ground like a lead weight and reverberating around the cathedral.

"I'm sorry for that."

"Said she couldn't take it anymore."

"Take what?"

"Me." James stood then, gesturing at himself from head to waist, and it was only then, as Jimmy towered over him, that Father McElhenney fully realized his predicament. "She said I was too much. She couldn't take depression and the mood swings anymore. Said I was a drunk and that I needed help."

"Is that why you're here, then? You want my help?" No, that wasn't the reason. The Father knew.

"Did you forget what you did to me?" James was shouting now, it was garbled, like a voice underwater. He grabbed Father McElhenney and pulled him to his feet, lifting him as easily as a father would his child.

"I cared for you a great deal, Jimmy." Sins don't always wash away. Sometimes there is no amount of prayer that can cleanse a person. They become stained and ruined.

"Don't say that. Don't—don't you say that!" James snapped. Father McElhenney felt the grip loosen and he caught his balance before falling to the ground. James was pacing then, pounding his forehead lightly with his left fist.

"It's true, James, though you'll have to forgive an old man a lapse in memory. You've grown so much and that was quite a long time ago." The Father stood in the young man's path, grabbed him by the arm and force him to still. "You've become a fine man."

"Why?" He was pleading now and on the verge of tears. Father McElhenney wanted to shepherd him to a place of peace. It was his job, he knew. It was his purpose. "Why did you let him get away with it?"

Once again, Father McElhenney caught glimpses of a past long buried: the golden-haired boy was crying. His shirt was ripped, and he was clutching the purple bear. A brother of the cloth was on his knees, confessing. And there was a rage, unquenchable and unyielding. Bloody knuckles. Swollen lips. Broken fingertips.

“Father?” He felt a tugging at his wrist again and Jimmy drifted away like early morning mist before the sunrise. Mrs. Bowlan was standing there, on the other side of the archway, looking apprehensively up. “Father, did you hear me? Are you alright? Should I call someone?”

“I’m so sorry, my dear, I was miles away.” Father McElhenney said, feigning jocularity and trying to rid his mind of the demons that infested it. “Did you need something? I really must finish up so I can get some rest.”

“Oh, yes!” Mrs. Bowlan tittered, happy to gloss over any concern she had for Father McElhenney’s well-being. “Do you really think I could get in the kitchens that early?”

“Yes, Eloise. Of course.”

Ryan McDivitt

# We Don't Have to Wait for the Next Purple Sky

Pastor Douglas Christy was the only preaching man in Arkansaw. Not to be confused with Arkansas, a state of the deep south, Arkansaw was an unincorporated census-designated place in the eastern portion of the town of Waterville, in Pepin County, an hour and a half drive from Downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. As of the twenty ten census, its population was one hundred seventy seven. The date was January first, not only signifying the birth of a new year in human existence, but marking the death of Angela M. Christy, loving wife of Pastor Douglas and mother to their beautiful daughter, Chrysanthemum. Exactly one year ago, Douglas, in the heat of an argument with his wife, left their quaint West St. Paul residence in his rust outlined white Chevy Colorado to blow off some steam.

When he returned, emergency personnel swarmed his single story two-bedroom ranch. He was told by a blank man in a blank manner that Angela has shot herself point-blank with his favorite double-barreled skeet shooting twenty gauge. No matter how passionately he insisted, the men assured him that it was in his best interest not to see the corpse. In the passing weeks, his congregation gave mixed reactions. He appreciated the notions of support but couldn't handle those that constantly brought up the possibility that his Angela was burning in hell. They were always nice about it, but their conviction for the truth of God's punishment outweighed their empathy. Pastor Christy thought a fresh start would soothe his pain and felt all the noise wasn't good for Chrysanthemum. They packed their whole life up in that rust outlined white Chevy Colorado and set their sights on a new horizon.

"Daddy look at the sky. It's so purple," she said. "I love it so much. Can it be like this forever?"

"Well, I don't know about forever Chrissy, but the sky and clouds are always changing, they're pretty in all sorts of different ways," he said.

"What about when it's all grey and icky," Chrissy said. She laid down in the back seat of the truck, tracing the streaks of indigo and violet passing over the treetops. She clutched onto a bouquet of flowers with a purple and white bow.

"Those grey skies make the pretty skies all the better. It's all about balance. They teach you about balance in school, right?" Douglas said. He shifted upward in

his seat taking another swig from his thermos, eyes focused on the winding country rode that stretched before him.

“Kinda, we’re doing fractions rights now,” She said, her gaze darted to storm clouds forming on the purple horizon. “Mimi said if you try hard enough, you can shoot a rainbow out of your tummy and make the angry clouds happy again. That’s what rainbows do, make the mad weather feel better.”

“Who’s Mimi,” Douglas said. He pressed his thumb against the rubber rim of the thermos. The Pastor found it in an abandoned truck deep in the depths of his father’s property. He and his older brothers would roam the woods whenever their Dad was piss drunk and in a foul mood, which was usually his default state. The old man thought time in nature was well spent as it gave the boys some freedom and that men belonged in the wild. The thermos was beat up and didn’t retain heat very well, but the nostalgia made it priceless.

“Mimi is my favorite Youtuber.” She said. “She goes on all sorts of adventures and has a dog named Sir Barksford. He talks funny. She’s friends with all the animals and tries to make everyone smile. It’s all make believe but I really like it.” Her rounded cheeks pressed into the rear passenger window glass; eyes fixed on the fading streaks of purple.

“Well, that sounds positive at least. Where’d you get on Youtube at,” He said, taking another sip from his thermos.

“Chromebook day is Thursday,” she said, “we do online homework and play on cool math games, I gave you a paper about it Daddy,” she said. Chrysanthemum pulled back her head from the window. Her cheeks were red and raw from the cold glass. She rubbed her face in a circular motion. The friction gave way to warmth and comfort.

“Oh, the Chromebooks that’s right,” Douglas said. The Chevy pulled into an M & H gas station and rolled up to the pump, almost overshooting it. A man with greasy coveralls shot them a glance. His nose was scrunched up in a permanent scowl with untrimmed eyebrows and an untrimmed mustache that would put Hulk Hogan to shame. One hand was pumping gas and the other was resting on the brim of his Make America Great Again cap. Pastor Douglas started cranking down his windows as he knew this man and knew the uneasy conversation he was about to have.

“Pastor Christy, how the fuck are ya, oh excuse my language,” he said and he peered back at Chrysanthemum. His nose scrunched farther up his face as the hand that finished pumping gas whipped out a tin of Copenhagen chewing tobacco.

“I’m doing just fine Michael, how are the boys,” Douglas said as he shifted up-right in his seat.

“They’re doin’ jus great. Kenneth just got his first squirrel at the property last weekend. He’s a real deadeye just like his Daddy,” Michael said, shoving the lump of tobacco in the back-right corner of his mouth.

“Isn’t he a little young to be shooting don’t you think,” the Pastor said.

“Well, the earlier you start’em the better.” Michael said, “Don’t you know that? I keep forgetting you’re a city boy. I know you ain’t from around here, but I figure it’s common sense.”

“I grew up shooting at my Dad’s farm up in McGrath, you know near the lake,” the Pastor said, “I could blow a pumpkin ball through a chipmunk’s heart from a quarter mile away at five years old,” Michael listened intently as his scowl shifted to disinterest, “I just haven’t been much for shootin’ recently. I think I’ve had my day.”

“Well, that’s a shame.” Michael said, “I haven’t known a good holy man that don’t believe in our God given second amendment. It was lookin’ a little dark around your neighborhood a couple days ago and I would hate for anything bad to happen to you or your beautiful little girl.” He snorted, air squeezing through his phlegm ridden nostrils.

“That was actually a family friend of ours from St. Paul,” the Pastor Said. “She’s a real nice lady, a doctor actually, helping me around the house.”

“If you say so,” Michael said. He took a couple steps closer. Too close for comfort. “Pastor, you been drinking.”

“Absolutely not,” the Pastor said, clutching his tarnished thermos, “This is just coffee.”

“Maybe an Irish coffee,” he said smirking. “Another thing you’ll learn real quick around here is the smell of vodka on a man’s breath,” He took a couple steps back towards the pump. “But we’re all sinners in the Kingdom of God aren’t we? I’ll see ya next Sunday Pastor.”

The Colorado pulled into its destination. A small unmarked cemetery near Angela Christy’s hometown of Forest Lake. It was unkempt with weeds knee high around the tombstones. Two teenagers with minimum wage salaries were responsible for weed whacking this stretch of Washington county’s cemeteries and their respect for the dead was about as abundant as their paychecks. Chrysanthemum was asleep in the back; her eyes had grown heavy and her consciousness faded when the sky’s brilliant purples blended back into dreary greys.

“We’re here honey, make sure to grab the flowers,” the Pastor said. He reached



for his thermos but hesitated before reaching into his pocket for a pack of spearmint gum. Tears welled up in Chrysanthemum's eyes. She had been having night terrors ever since the accident and mornings were an ordeal at the Christy household. The Pastor fumbled over the console to get to the back seat. He held her against his worn Carhartt jacket.

"Emily Smith told me that Mommy's in hell," she said. She began to shake as her murmurs grew into gasping sobs. Pastor Douglas held her tighter and lightly kissed her forehead. "She said the Bible told her and that the Bible is never wrong."

"Honey, there are many things in the Bible, many that are good and true," The Pastor said, "But the passages can be understood in many ways and every lesson is a little different for each person. Daddy's job is to guide everyone on their path and everyone's path takes them different ways. We should all believe in something; it doesn't even have to be God. I believe in balance, that God would see what we have been through and be fair and kind to us. This, this is hard to explain. I'm sorry Chrissy."

She was quiet, eyes scanning the hazy clouds.

"I believe in the purple sky," she said. "It's always there, smiling at me just like Mommy did. So pretty, and the more I look at it no matter how icky, it will be more and more purple. It will be like that forever Daddy. I know it."

# Brent Taylor

## UFOs

1.

Some time before we'd get the call that Ben saw his face in the sky, that he believed that he had a police escort on his way to school, he sat on Theo's mom's roof, improvising quiet solos on the electric guitar. We had to unplug at midnight. Theo's mother was asleep down the hall, so the patch cord lay lifeless just inside. This was somewhere in the suburbs, somewhere in America. This was the summer after high school, maybe a year before we would visit Ben in Ridgeview.

He was famous then, or soon to be.

And we were all coming along for the ride: Theo playing keys—once he learned them—Lenny on back-up vocals. Then, of course, a roadie was needed, maybe someone to write lyrics.

Those nights, Ben would be strumming the guitar. Lenny, the only one of us who

had gotten into college, would be there too, usually passed out on the bed: the world's

premiere punk rock valedictorian. And Theo, of course, always at the ham radio, the

one that belonged to his father before his father got some waitress pregnant and disappeared when Theo was in ninth grade. There were some others—like Jared Prince who drank two bottles of cough syrup on his seventeenth birthday and woke up in his parents basement, sleeping in the crib he used as a baby—or Jimmy Island, whose older brother sold weed and Lucy, their parent's house under surveillance by the FBI. Many rotated in and out through various days of the week, various hours of the night, but it was always us, and we were always a little bit lost, a little bit insane—and Ben, always the nucleus.

We honestly thought it was Theo who would start hearing voices —reference his

addiction to conspiracy theories, The Smoking Gun bookmarked at the top of his

favorites—that, even though he wouldn't admit it, he was actually searching for extraterrestrial life on that radio, or—perhaps more astronomical still—for his father. He would sit in his room for hours, turning the knob by degrees, while Ben would feel out a muffled riff on the roof just outside.

That summer had something to do with searching, but frequency too—both of which are functions of time. We didn't have jobs, we were out of school, there was never anything to do, yet always this pervasive feeling of waiting. And always, in the distance, the moon an unidentified flying object—and beneath it, a red light flashing from a cell tower in the distance. We didn't talk about it, but it was sending us a message: something about sleeping through every day.

Something about nights spent dreaming.

2.

We sat on the roof of Theo's mom's house, just outside his bedroom window, passing a joint, the red light on the cell phone tower in the distance, flashing messages.

We ignored it.

There are things you just don't talk about, Theo said, much later—he was referring to Ben—but it holds true for a lot.

Theo had taken a break from the radio to join us on the roof. Lenny was already passed out on the bed inside, snoring. Someone, probably Theo, made a joke about him having been the valedictorian.

Ben was trying to teach Theo to open a zippo and light it in one fluid motion.

Practice, Ben told him.

He put the electric guitar—a knock-off Fender Strat—to the side, showed Theo one more time. His face was briefly illuminated, long, handsome, goatee like a smudge of dirt on his chin. Then, it went dark. He handed Theo back the lighter.

Ben taught himself to play with only a book of chords, on an acoustic guitar he found in his parents attic. A year later, he was writing songs. By next spring, though,

we'd come out on the roof, and he'd only be playing a single note over and over again.

For a long minute in the dark, everything went silent, even Lenny's breathing.

Then, Ben laughed—a sharp, mirthless laugh.

Hah!

What? Theo said, failing at the lighter. What's so funny?

Ben said nothing.

That summer, Ben still knew something we didn't. There's another way to look at

it now, the inappropriate laughter, the long silences: signs. Either way, he was tuned

into a frequency we couldn't receive.

I asked what's so fucking funny, Theo said.

He sat straight up.

Ben laughed again.

Theo tossed the lighter at him.

Just because you don't get the joke, Ben said, doesn't mean it's on you.

Man, what the fuck are you talking about?

That's when we heard a loud siren behind us, threading its way in the dark through the hills of white houses, through the safe, American suburbs, locked up tight for the evening. A deafening sound came down around us, closing in: rising, whirring.

An increasing wind. At first, we thought it was terrorists—or the Chinese.

Then, a blinding light shining down from above.

Theo dived through the window. Moments later, he stuck his head out with Lenny, awake now, beside him looking out. Ben just sat there like Buddha, barely looking up, almost like he had been expecting it to happen. And me, I still can't tell you whether it's sadder to have been taken in by the mother-ship or to have been left behind on the ground.

No one quite agrees on what happened that night. Whatever it was, it was not what was reported in the official story. We would go on to college, get decent jobs,

married, mortgages, kids. None of us talk to each other very often anymore. Lenny calls

Theo every year on the day Kurt Cobain died, but we're light years from where we were.

That summer, though, without actually talking about it, we were trying to decide what the worst that could happen was—when something finally happened. That is, when—and if—we ever discovered life out there.

Kevin Richard White

## Stay Until the Movie's Over

Buscemi and Keitel were arguing just as Sam walked in.

"What did I miss?" She said. She took off her coat and put it in the empty seat on the other side of her. Her bag dropped on the ground with a loud smack.

"You've seen this movie before," I said.

She laughed, but I could tell it was forced. It might have been out of awkwardness or sadness; it wasn't because it was funny.

"I was arguing with my roommate," Sam said as she whispered in my ear and rubbed my arm. My heart jumped - her hand felt amazing in the cold theatre.

I didn't need to know the fake reason or the real one. "It's okay. Don't worry about it."

Sam and I had been off and on again for years. It toyed with me; I don't know what it did to her. I've seen her at her most gentle and at her most frenzied. I loved her perpetually wet hair. I loved the tiny clicks of her tongue as she struggled to say words she didn't often use. I'd drive drunk if it meant picking her up from somewhere.

But we hadn't seen each other for a while and it pained me a bit. Life gets in the way and I understand. I just really enjoyed her company. But when I saw *Reservoir Dogs* was playing at the Ballroom, I figured it was a good chance to be around her. It's one of her all time favorites. So I said I was going and it would be awesome if I could see her for a bit. She wouldn't give me a straight answer, but I knew she would come.

On screen, Keitel asked Madsen if he had the french fries to go with his soda. It was a line that always made her laugh. But she didn't this time. I glanced over and she was picking at some dead skin on her fingertips.

"What's up?" I said.

"Huh?"

"I said, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't laugh."

She turned her head but didn't look at me head on. "Was I supposed to?" She had said it like she wasn't addressing me, but the floor instead.

I didn't want to push it. "Never mind."

"What, Garrett?"

“Nothing, Sam. It’s all good.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see she was still gazing at the floor. I heard her take a deep breath, play with her bracelet. It wasn’t good that she was this restless. I could see something building, in both her and me. Another deep breath. Then, she ran a hand through her hair and looked back at the movie, like she had just figured something out. She swallowed hard and tried to smile.

“Are you okay?”

“I need you to know something. Why I haven’t been around.”

“Is everything - ”

“I’m seeing someone.”

On screen, they were on their way out to get the cop out of the trunk. I felt the same, like my fear was coming alive. I sighed and wished I had a drink.

I didn’t know what to say, so I just said, “Oh yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“I wasn’t honest with you earlier today when we talked.”

It wasn’t okay but I said, “It’s okay, Sam.”

“No, it isn’t. I shouldn’t be lying to you.”

“Who is he?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does if you bring it up. If you brought it up, it does matter.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Probably someone I know, too.”

“Garrett, stop.”

“Sam, you should have - ”

“I know, Jesus. Keep it down. I said I was sorry.”

I didn’t say anything else. I watched as they beat up the cop to get him to talk. The punches hit me in the same spot. I searched for words but the pain blocked it out. What I feared had become real and I wasn’t sure if I was too good of a friend or not good enough of a lover. I didn’t feel like watching the movie anymore. I went to put on my coat.

“Where are you going?” She said.

“Getting out of here.”

“Don’t, Garrett. Just sit down.”

“I know how this movie goes. So do you. I’m going home.”

“We can talk about it later if you want, but just stay,” she pleaded with a bit of hurt in her voice.

“I just don’t want to stay.”

“You’ll stay. You love this movie.”

“Keep it up and you’ll see,” I said.

It wasn’t the same Sam as it was a half hour ago. The smile was still there, but it was shallow, like she had been sucking on something sour and flavorless. I know this was bothering her and that she thought she was doing the right thing by mentioning it. I had the thought in the back of my mind, I admit, when she wasn’t getting back to me for a couple of weeks. But I didn’t want to face it. I was afraid of being on the wrong end of it. But now I was.

She put her hand back on my arm and I wanted to shake it off. But I couldn’t. It just felt right. Just like a drink in summertime, it brought me back down to a calm state. I looked down at her and saw she was close to begging. I couldn’t let it go there.

“Okay, okay, forget it,” I whispered. “Just...stay until the movie’s over. We can talk then.”

A few scenes passed and I looked back over at her. I got a better glimpse of her hair - new cherry red highlights. Maybe it was something she had done for the new boyfriend. I grew angry at the thought.

“When did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“The hair.”

“I don’t know.” She fiddled with it, uncomfortable. “A couple days ago.”

“Why?”

“Why, what? It’s my goddamn hair.”

“He must have not liked the natural color.”

“Jesus FUCKING Christ, Garrett, you are a little shit,” Sam said. She tried to stay quiet - a mixture of a whisper and a yell - and it definitely caught the attention of some others in the audience. No one said anything, but I felt eyes on us.

“You never let people get to you before.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I like how you look. It doesn’t make sense to do something like that.”

“Are you done? Are you going to shut up now?”

I needed to. But everything was swirling. Everything felt upended.

“I just...I had to ask.”

“You ask some pretty shitty questions at pretty shitty times. You always did.”

“Sam.”

“Don’t Sam me. You’re getting to be pretty annoying.”

“Forget it.”

She sighed and kicked me. “Forget it? You brought it up.”

“Ok, forget it.”

On screen, Roth shot the hell out of Madsen. It all felt so real. A movie can do that. You’ve seen them so many times that when you see real life, it just isn’t the same. It’s all a disconnect and we’re just blips, scurrying and jumping around.

I heard her sigh as I continued to watch the movie. She reached into her pocket for something; I heard it a few seconds later as a candy wrapper unfurling. I don’t know why, but it bothered me.

“Do you have one for me?” I tried to joke.

She wasn’t in the mood, but tried to smile. She brought the candy to her lips and sucked it back in as a tease. It was a tease that I wasn’t in the mood for. I was close to leaving again, but as I watched her watch the screen and work the candy in her mouth, I did something that I should have done before the other boy did. I couldn’t help it.

I put my hand on her thigh and just decided to wait on it.

Sam looked at my hand but didn’t say anything. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Roth peel himself off the fake blood. I expected her to break loose, too. It stayed and I did as well, as she worked the candy again in her mouth.

Some men have all the luck, but I don’t.

She coughed and shifted in the seat, which was the cue for me to take my hand away.

“Garrett,” she said, breathy and steady, like a starlet. “What are you doing?”

I knew what I was doing. I knew that it was also wrong in many respects. But I had to try.

“Sam,” I said, but couldn’t finish. She wasn’t looking at me anymore. She stared at the screen. No more guns or blood. Just people as confused and anxious as us.

“Garrett, I’m not entirely sure...” She stopped chewing the candy, probably swallowed it. She ran a hand through her hair and sighed. I did as well. We looked back up at the movie.

I broke it up first. “Sam, I...”

But she didn’t listen. She stood up, grabbed her coat and bag, and stormed up the aisle.

I gave it a minute. I didn’t want the others staring at me. I sighed and watched as Roth talked to himself in his living room mirror. He was trying to psych himself up. I figured I was trying to do that, too.

So I grabbed my coat and went up the aisle. My head hurt. I had just wanted her



to stay. It was a good movie.

Out in the lobby, there was nothing there. The popcorn machine chugged along. The squeak of a tile from someone moving out of eyesight. I heard the wind dip and swim down a lonely, dirty street like a whistle that hardly worked. I stepped out onto the sidewalk and put on my gloves. I looked both ways but I didn't see where she went.



# POETRY

Pia Bhatia

68

In the silences between our arguments, you pick at the teeth of my comb  
The goosebumps that form my body now, remind me of what it was like  
When I desired you my every waking moment (and now, here we are)  
Where every love after you becomes about never again,  
That sticky, desperate need, so ugly and there

You once made me bite my lower lip as though there were rubber between both  
Marlborough, Scarborough,  
rosemary every time  
The involuntary yelp versus forced porn star sound  
for the girl who walks home with her shoes in her hand  
padding softly with her bloody rabbit's feet

Chloe Cattaneo

## rahma

I want to recycle the minute you opened your mouth.  
holding a boiled peach with both hands  
the plucked center of pain closed within me.  
we tried to make the city tender in each other,  
like smoke rising from a housefire,  
cherry blossoms fat & helpless underwater.  
we are swimming in something new and ruinous.  
the lights of the kennedy center  
waver in the \$4 lemonade heat.

Jason B. Crawford

## The Moon

the girl asks *what is the use of being the moon*  
*what good is being nocturnal when everything you love is always sleeping*  
i've heard loneliness grows best in the dark  
where all of your friends and friends' friends lay planted in a sickle dirt  
flesh pulling at the night like a graying sun  
while the oil in the air is being hacked out the lungs  
ain't it fun to be the one to die last  
all my friends are at a party without me  
and the wind is crisp with eulogies tonight  
the moon sounds like a thousand feet stomping  
in an electric slide  
and i can hear it  
my grandfather  
my neighbor  
my own blood as it turns confetti  
and waits for me to join the celebration

Bryon Dickon

## Pomegranates (A Prayer)

I focused on the red arils scattered on the kitchen table, and counted five things that *were red: cranberries, hibiscus flowers, fire engines, the floral pattern on my mother's dress, and my least favorite shade of lipstick*. I fold my hands together, a gesture that in my family translates to *I have something to say*, hands that were manicured just that morning. My parents look up from their breakfast of biscuits and honey, and I want to stuff my mouth with lavenders, to color my breath lupine and blue, to stop up the words that want to come out, *that need to come out*.

Say it. Don't say it. Say it again. Things that are blue: *irises, ocean-eyes, the living-room carpet, juniper, the blouse I hide in my closet*. I pray, oh god do I pray, that I can bury their son, plant him in the soil, and they would see that he would flourish. I take three deep breaths: *inhale, exhale*. I plant flowers in my stomach, and they bloom through my esophagus. *One, two, three*. I say it: *I am miscellaneous*. I say it again.

Ryan Eghlimi

## Amid Iranian Protests

*From a Son:*

To this land you enter  
as a screw through a cork  
Do not let crumble  
what you will dance back up  
with a great big pop  
No, no bits shall fall in wine

Till my last breath  
on this glass  
lifts its dense form  
I soak the sun of my father  
into blanching skin  
and co-exist without touch



Zak Hartzell

# Magical

is what i called the drip  
of her watercolor clung  
to its wooden masonry wet  
as she made me  
take it  
back

not magical not cool  
baby not cool  
but real as fuck i  
trust you  
remember  
it.

Daniel Edward Moore

## Hardcore Happiness Myths

If only I'd done a better job  
dodging those ancient bombs of bliss  
that found me thirsting for liquid relief,  
a worldly mix of love on the rocks  
melting the paint off Jesus's tears  
on a steeple inside my chest. If only  
I'd known what happens when  
the body becomes the spirit's slave  
blindfolded & bound in a box of beliefs  
where Elvis found his blue suede shoes  
& danced like a heathen on the Lake of Fire  
before Martin's head hit the balcony rail  
& freedom poured from Mulberry Street,  
not a wooden cross. If only heaven  
had been a body that had nothing to do  
with perfection or place, nothing to do  
with a spirit healing the weirdest & worst  
wounds we bear, like tiny black coffins  
at the end of our names, to help explain  
our addiction to endings, our ignorance  
of how suffering works, exhausted  
by sucking reality's breath, out of everyone,  
always, the same & forever, the gorgeous,  
gritty & gone.

henry 7. reneau, jr.

## watch what they mouth say, but listen what they hands do

i grew up hearing certain accents  
& vocabularies  
& speech patterns  
that were the aural essence of *Home*  
or the audible signal of danger:

a feral howl

of incarceration, or the morgue, that  
makes *Home* a muted whisper of fear, or pain  
that is slow to change, that is now, & maybe,  
then, like a metaphor's promise of  
how it ought to be: trying to reach the next world  
with a spoon;

(*thrust lever lift toss.*)

my life, a soundtrack of false platitudes  
flattering the air of thorns about my ears,  
continually looping a distorted truth,  
a disabled symbolism for freedom,  
like a gimp  
would drag the weight of her body.

the mute icon depressed, a deleted  
allotment of common sense:  
blind, cripple & crazy as  
drowning in silence.

we hear nothing,  
but the clean crack of hearts breaking,  
& the accepted ruin  
of *matters of fact*. Repetition

like a shovel searching out the truth;

*(thrust lever lift toss.)*

a soundtrack now, looping  
funeral dirges of national carrion eagles &  
securitized oil, the façade of propaganda:  
an Oscar worthy suspension of disbelief  
patriotic cheering the murder of bin Laden,  
that goes viral & seals a book deal,  
& movie credits, for Seal Team 6;

*(thrust lever lift toss.)*

/ left in the world //

Benjamin Anthony Rhodes

## Nutshell

It was a beautiful planet  
the last time we came here.  
Red grass lifting off with the breeze,  
invading the air so we had to wear masks  
around our mouths. There wasn't any water.

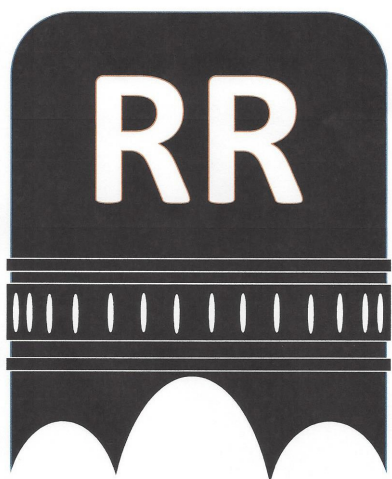
But there were boats – one boat that we saw,  
we assume others cut through sunlight too.  
Red sunlight that set purple, left behind  
a white sky. Stark white that kept us  
awake all night. And I haven't slept  
since I last saw you.

Kelly Talbot

## Postcard from Indianapolis

She smells like sweat,  
tastes like genitalia.  
Afterward, we say it was nice,  
but we lie. It was hollow.  
We decide to be friends.  
Just like you and me.  
Just like the opposite of you and me.  
I wish you luck.  
I wish you happiness.  
Mostly, I just wish.  
That's all I had to say.  
Goodbye.

P.S. Goodbye.  
P.S. Goodbye.  
P.S. Goodbye.



# Contributors

**Abdullah Aljumah** is bilingual and bicultural. He received his master's degree in Linguistics from Eastern Michigan University sponsored by the Fulbright program. Some of his short stories are published in a short story anthology. After returning to his native country, he was inspired to write short stories revolving around Islamic themes which include hypocrisy, religious conflicts, and forced marriages.

**Joseph Alexander Brown** received a B.Sc. (Hons.) with first-class standing in Computer Science with a concentration in software engineering, and an M.Sc. in Computer Science from Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada in 2007 and 2009, respectively. He received a Ph.D. in Computer Science from the University of Guelph in 2014. He previously worked for Magna International Inc. as a Manufacturing Systems Analyst and as a visiting researcher at ITU Copenhagen in their Games Group. He is currently an Assistant Professor and Head of the Artificial Intelligence in Games Development Lab at Innopolis University in Innopolis, Republic of Tatarstan, Russia, and an Adjunct Professor of Computer Science at Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada. He is a Senior Member of the IEEE, a chair of the yearly Procedural Content Generation Jam (ProcJam), the proceedings chair for the IEEE 2013 Conference on Computational Intelligence in Games (CIG), and Vice Chair for the IEEE Committee on Games.

**Breanna Coe** is an art student in California with a passion for writing anything and everything.

**Jason B. Crawford** (He/They) is a black, bi-poly-queer writer born in Washington, D.C., raised in Lansing, Michigan. In addition to being published in online literary magazines, such as *High Shelf Press*, *Wellington Street Review*, *Poached Hare*, *The Amistad*, *Royal Rose*, and *Kissing Dynamite*, he is the Chief Editor for *The Knight's Library*. His chapbook collection, *Summertime Fine*, is a Short List selection for Nightingale & Gale. Jason is also the recurring host poet for Ann Arbor Pride.

**Bryon Dickon** is a graduate of the Master of Arts program in English at The University of Akron. He was the second place winner of the Sam Ella Dukes Me-



morial Poetry Prize (2018) and was a recipient of the Zora M. Ledinko Endowed Memorial Scholarship. His pronouns are he/him/his.

**Mitzi Dorton** worked as a learning specialist for the disabilities center at a community college in the southeast, where she also led a writing lab for dysgraphic/dyslexic students. She received two grants through VEA/NEA and one with Appalshop as an educator. She has studied with both the Peripatetic Writing Workshop and Grubstreet. Mitzi has been published in *Rise, an Anthology of Change!*, *Northern Colorado Writers* (a finalist for the Colorado Book Award), *Cleaning up Glitter* literary journal, *Bloodroot* literary journal, *Good Old Days* magazine, *Annie's*, and other craft magazines for children and adults. She loves scary dolls from the turn of the century, local histories, and little adventures with Marigold, her golden doodle.

**Thomas Dukes** has published a prize-winning poetry collection, *Baptist Confidential*, a memoir, *Sugar Blood Jesus*, and other poems, stories, creative non-fiction, scholarship, and journalism.

**Ryan Eghlimi** is an Iranian-American who has lived in Arizona for the past 20 years. He has a keen interest in ethnic identity, folk lyric, analytical chemistry, and falafel. When an event or person impacts him, he considers it an unmet challenge and scoops out that feeling inside, so he may make sense of it in writing.

**Lisa Gschwandtner's** short fiction has been published in *The Texas Review*, and she received an MFA in fiction writing from St. Mary's College of California, in Moraga. She studied fiction writing with George Garrett as an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia, and later with Robert Bausch. She now lives in Los Angeles.

**Zak Hartzell** is a writer and musician. His writing has been anthologized through *Crack the Spine* and featured in *Noise Organ*. His music has been recognized by *American Songwriter*.

**Sheena Holt** is an undergrad student at Emory studying creative writing, and currently attempting to get her work, which largely focuses on adolescence in the changing American landscape, out into the public eye.

**Maria Sing-yi Hwang** is a native of Akron, Ohio, and a resident of Boston. She identifies as Taiwanese, and uses pronouns she/her.

**Lucky Issar** is a Berlin-based freelance writer. They have contributed essays and short stories for in U.S.-based publications. Currently, they are working on a book-length project that focuses on urban friendships.

**Nazli Karabiyikoglu** is a Turkish author, now full-time resident in Georgia, who recently escaped from the political, cultural, and gender oppression in Turkey. She helped create the #MeToo movement within the Turkish publishing industry, from which she was then excommunicated. With an M.A. in Turkish Language and Literature from Bogazici University, Karabiyikoglu has five published books in Turkish and has recently completed translations of two new books for international publication. Having won six literary awards in her country, she has been nominated for Pushcart Prize in 2019.

**Ann Kathryn Kelly** lives and writes in New Hampshire's Seacoast region. She's a Contributing Editor with *Barren Magazine*, works in the technology sector, and leads writing workshops for a nonprofit that offers therapeutic arts programming to people living with brain injury. Her essays have appeared in *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, *Moxy Magazine*, *Lunate*, *The Coachella Review*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *the tiny journal*, and elsewhere.

**Catherine Lieuwen** is an Emmy-nominated, award-winning writer who writes personal essays and nonfiction.

**Rebecca LoBraico** is a former journalist and stay-at-home mom, currently under lockdown in a two-bedroom apartment with her husband, her golden doodle, and her son who is supposed to be away at college. She spends her days writing, doing strange workouts in the stairwells, watching the news and counting down the minutes to 'happy hour.'

**Susan Mack** is a professional marketing writer, mother, and executive function life coach. She likes to write about the adventures of everyday life, and is working on a longer work about her relationship with anxiety, growing up in a fundamentalist cult, living in the city where the first nuclear reactor was built, and having a brain tumor removed.

**John Mason** has a Master of Arts in Teaching from Lee University and is currently completing a second degree, a Master of Arts in English, at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI). He has taught writing and English at both the secondary and collegiate levels and currently teaches at both UNI and a local community college. He has also worked for the *North American Review* literary magazine, and as a staff writer for the website *We Got This Covered*.

**Ryan McDivitt** is an Air Force Veteran and soon to be Alumni of The University of Akron.

**Michael McQuillan**, former U.S. Senate aide and Peace Corps Volunteer, writes for the *History News Network* and *Harlem World Magazine*.

**Daniel Edward Moore** lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems have been in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Cream City Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Phoebe*, *Mid- American Review*, *December* and others. His poems are forthcoming in *Weber Review*, *Cultural Weekly*, *Tule Review*, *Poetry South*, *Plainsongs*, *The Cape Rock*, *Artifact Nouveau*, *Panoplyzine*, *The American Journal of Poetry* and *Gyroscope Review*. His chapbook, *Boys*, was recently released from Duck Lake Books. His book, *Waxing the Dents*, was a finalist for the Brick Road Poetry Prize and was released in February 2020. His work has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and Best of the Net.

**Traci L. Musick** is a twenty-six year teaching veteran who lives and works in the tristate area of Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky. She earned a B.A. from Marshall University in Huntington, WV, and a M.A. in English and Creative Writing from Southern New Hampshire University. Her writing has appeared in *Fourth and Sycamore*, *Inflammatory Bowel Disease*, *Mock Turtle Zine*, and *Turnpike Magazine*. Currently, she teaches in southern Ohio where she prefers log cabin country living with her best friend, David, and border collie, Holly.

**Vicky Oliver** has written six how-to books to the stressed-out corporate professional, including *Bad Bosses*, *Crazy Coworkers and Other Office Idiots* (Sourcebooks, 2008). Under her pen name, Diana Forbes, she has also published a novel titled *Mistress Suffragette* (Penmore, 2017).

**henry 7. reneau, jr.** writes words of conflagration to awaken the world ablaze,

an inferno of free verse illuminated by his affinity for disobedience, like a discharged bullet that commits a felony every day, a spontaneous combustion that blazes from his heart, phoenix-fluxed red & gold, exploding through change is gonna come to implement the fire next time. He is the author of the poetry collection, *freedomland blues* (Transcendent Zero Press), and the e-chapbook, *physiography of the fittest* (Kind of a Hurricane Press), now available from their respective publishers. Additionally, he has self-published a chapbook entitled *13hirteen Levels of Resistance*, and his collection, *The Book Of Blue(s) : Tryin' To Make A Dollar Outta' Fifteen Cents*, was a finalist for the 2018 Digging Press Chapbook Series. His work has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net.

**Luisa Kay Reyes** has had pieces featured in *The Raven Chronicles*, *The Windmill*, *The Foliate Oak*, *The Eastern Iowa Review*, and other literary magazines. Her essay, "Thank You," is the winner of the April 2017 memoir contest of *The Dead Mule School Of Southern Literature*, and her Christmas poem was a first place winner in the 16th Annual Stark County District Library Poetry Contest. Additionally, her essay, "My Border Crossing," received a Pushcart Prize nomination from the Port Yonder Press, and two of her essays have been nominated for the *Best of the Net* anthology, with one of her essays recently being featured on *The Dirty Spoon* radio hour.

**Benjamin Anthony Rhodes** is a poet with the Northeastern Ohio Master of Fine Arts at Kent State University.

**Jennifer Shneiderman** lives in Los Angeles. She grew up in Delphos, Ohio. She enjoys writing essays and poetry and was recently awarded a Wingless Dreamer flash poetry prize.

**Sarah Sorensen** has been published over forty times in numerous small presses since 2009. Her most recent work was featured in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *5x5*, and *Timber Journal*. She has work forthcoming from Flock and Archipelago. Sarah has her M.A. in English from Central Michigan University and is currently pursuing her Master of Library and Information Sciences at Wayne State University. She would like to work as a public librarian by day and write novels by night.

**Kelly Talbot** has edited books and digital content for Wiley, Macmillan, Oxford, Pearson Education, and other major publishers. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies. He divides his time between Indianapolis, Indiana, and Timisoara, Romania.

**Brent Taylor** lives in Atlanta where he studied fiction at Georgia State University. His work has appeared in *The Alabama Literary Review*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, *The Crab Orchard Review*, *Harpur Palate*, and *Phoebe*.

**Emily Uduwana** is an emerging poet and author based in Southern California, with literary publications in *Straylight Literary Magazine*, *Specter Magazine*, *Miracle Monocle*, and the *Owen Wister Review*. Currently, she is working towards her Ph.D. in American history at the University of California, Riverside.

**Ray Van Horn, Jr.** is a veteran journalist and author. He spent 13 years covering music and film for outlets such as *Blabbermouth*, *AMP*, *Dee Snider's House of Hair*, *Music Dish*, *DVD Review*, *Horror News.net*, *Fangoria Musick*, *Metal Maniacs*, *Impose*, and many others. He has contributed essays to Neil Daniels's music biographies on Iron Maiden and ZZ Top. Ray wrote NHL game analysis for *The Hockey Nut* and other sports articles for *Kid Shtick*. He was a beat reporter and photographer for *The Emmitsburg Dispatch* and *The Northern News*. Ray wrote serialized superhero fiction for *Cyber Age Adventures*, and his fiction has also appeared at Akashic Books and New Noise, plus the anthologies *Axes of Evil* and *Axes of Evil II*. He was the 1999 winner of Quantum Muse's fiction contest. Ray has been featured at numerous poetry open mic events in his native state of Maryland.

**Kevin Richard White's** fiction appears in *Grub Street*, *The Hunger*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *The Helix*, *Hypertext*, *decomp*, and *Ghost Parachute*, among others. He is a Flash Fiction Contributing Editor for *Barren Magazine* and also reads fiction for *Quarterly West* and *The Common*. He lives in Philadelphia.

**Cristina Tomàs White's** reported pieces can be found mainly at CatalanNews.com, though they've also written for *Culture Trip*, *Totally Dublin*, and *Ms. Magazine*, among others.

**Pamela Willits** grew up in Fairview Park, Ohio. While a high school student at FHS, she worked as an editor on the school's annual creative writing magazine entitled *Footprints*. She earned her bachelor's in photography and cinema from The Ohio State University and remained in Columbus, Ohio, for 30+ years, where she worked as a reporter and a magazine writer before entering the nonprofit sector as a grant writer. She also took creative writing courses post-graduate at the Columbus State Community College. In 2011, she returned to the Cleveland area, where she works as a nonprofit consultant and grant writer under the business name, PJ Wordsmith. She returned in part because of her aging parents, who she is now shopping for. In 2019, she became a member of Literary Cleveland.

