

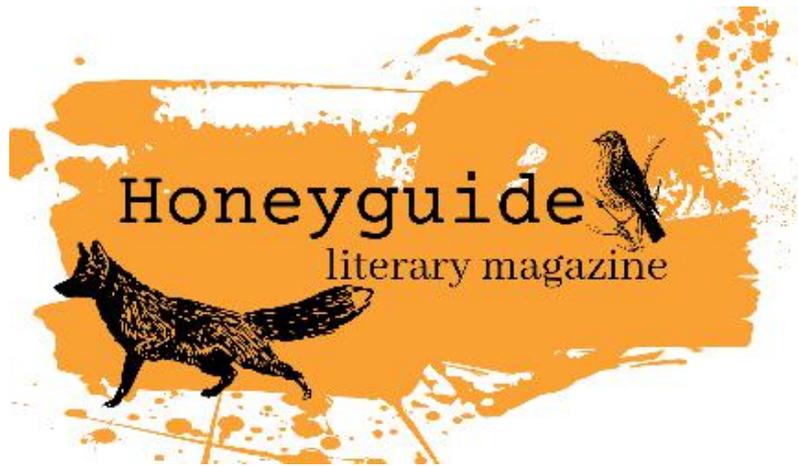
HONEYGUIDE

literary magazine



October 2021

Issue 3



EDITORIAL TEAM

<i>Editor in Chief</i>	Amanda Marrero
<i>Creative Nonfiction Editor</i>	Alexandra Cunningham
<i>Fiction Editor</i>	Margaret McNellis
<i>Blog Editor</i>	Joelle Wilson
<i>Art Director</i>	Jessica Winston
<i>Poetry Consultant</i>	Randel McCraw Helms

EDITOR'S NOTE

Firstly, thank you for all the well-wishes, support, and shares over this past year. I'm still astounded that we are publishing an anniversary issue. Our team loves this work, and we are so honored to see talented writers and artists interested in this magazine. It is more than we dreamed would happen, and I cannot thank you all enough for everything.

Our anniversary issue is much like the first, with many pieces responding to the virus that continues to spread through our world. Some are about pets who had fallen ill, and in caring for them, people realized what kinds of healing they needed to move forward in life. We saw the raw fear and risk of loss in these pieces, but amid real fear, there is true honesty. These pieces broke and mended us, and we were drawn to examine ourselves and face the fears we harbor.

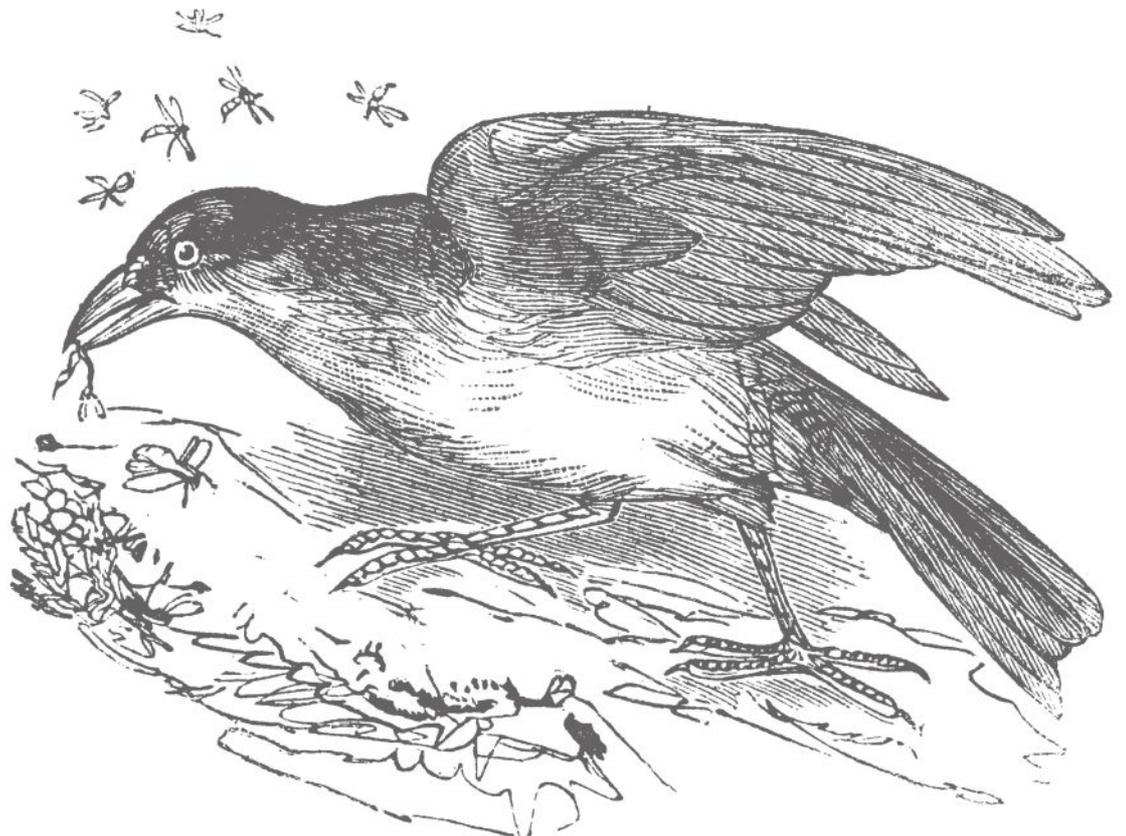
Our natural inclination as creators is to preserve our loved ones in our chosen art form, but where is the line between sharing the memories of someone we miss and preserving the legacy they've ingrained in us? These pieces answer that question. They are fierce reflections on the relationships that made the speakers into their better selves. We saw people and animals fight for each other, change for each other, and seek to improve themselves for each other. These speakers are unapologetic, humble, and strong. In the end, they all find the healing they seek by unabashedly believing the best is yet to come.

Between the accounts of sickness and loss, there are pieces that challenged us to shake off old perceptions of how animals interact with and change us. They take on unexpected roles in both their nature and relationships with people. Wild animals form strong connections with humans, creatures that exist in imagination and dreams affect the living, and animals demand justice for the ways humans have failed them. We were convicted and humbled by these pieces. Who are we to say what animals can and cannot be when we are still learning how to listen to them?

We are grateful to these artists, writers, and poets for the work and reflection they've done to better understand the living beings who share this world with us. These people have provided a glimpse into what we can do as humans to better care for and honor animals.

Happy reading,

Amanda Marrero and the Honeyguide Team



CONTENTS

Animal Rescue Article

- John Darling
50 "Humane Society of Ventura County"

Animal Advice Article

- Claudia Flisi
53 "Dead Dog Barking"

Featured Writer

- Nonfiction* Emily McArdle
25 "Survival of the Friendliest"

Featured Artist

- Mixed Media* Oormila Vijayakrishnan Prahlad
31 "Nefelibata"

Contest Winner

- Fiction* Maggie Nerz Iribarne
70 "The Harbinger"

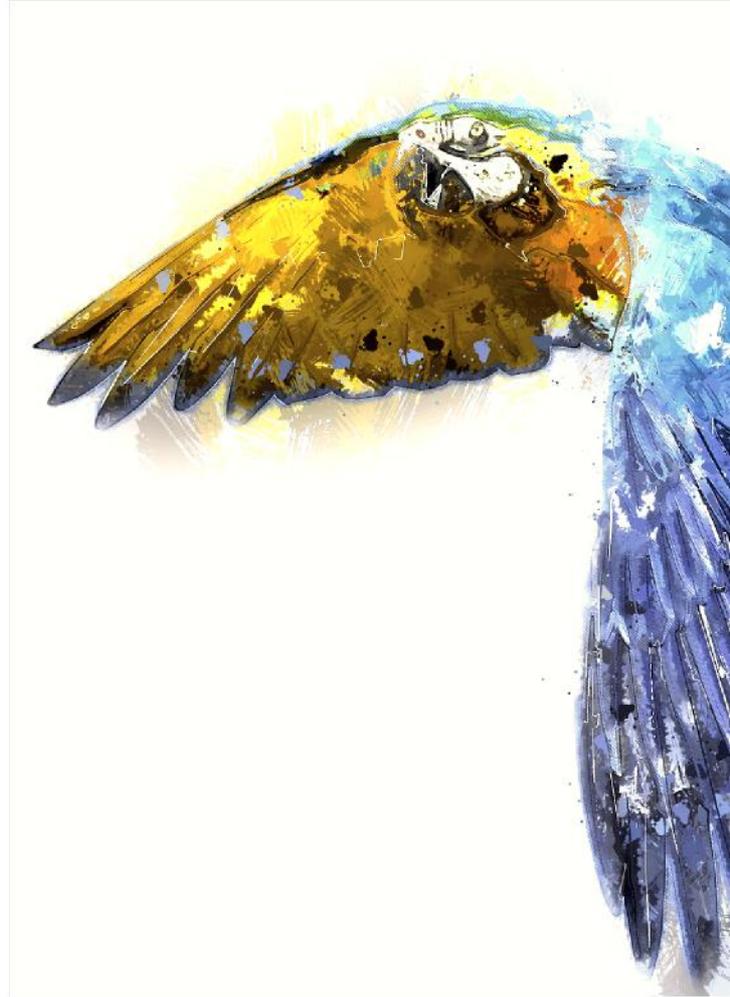
Contributors

- Poetry* Karla Linn Merrifield
3 "Avian Rainbow through Binoculars"
4 "Adaptability": Lessons from Costa Rica"
4 "*Platidon inexpectatus* in Six Mile Cypress Slough"
- Fiction* Matias Travieso-Diaz
5 "Carmen"
- Nonfiction* Mia Innocenti
12 "Saturated With Butterflies"
- Fiction* Mary Grace van der Kroef
15 "Fireflies of Red and Blue"
- Poetry* Rachel Davies
18 "I'll speak for Pongo Pygmaeus"
- Poetry* Juanita Smart
19 "Sestina for the Dog Struck and Killed Along I-80"
20 "Porcupine Points of View"
- Poetry* Betsy Packard
21 "Drives"
- Fiction* John Darling
22 "Buddy's Blanket"
- Photography* Sherry Shahan
24 "Boy Shepherd"
- Nonfiction* Gargi Mehra
36 "A Friend for Onesie"
- Fiction* Marissa James
39 "Meredith and the Mastodon"
- Poetry* Roy Duffield
44 "The Truth is Pigeons"
45 "Myxomatosis"
45 "Okanagan haiku –or– Frog, reincarnated"
- Poetry* Michael Jerome Cunningham
46 "Earthworm"
- Fiction* Arthur Mitchell
47 "Finding Eden"
- Poetry* James B. Nicola
52 "Terrier on your Lap"
52 "Lucky Stroll, a True Tale"
- Fiction* Marcie Roman
57 "Still Life, circa 1989"
- Poetry* Rebecca Ruth Gould
63 "How Cats Give Birth"
- Photography* Lindsey Morrison Grant
64 "Bren & Metie"
- Poetry* Mari Carmen Marin
65 "Mi Chiquitilla"
- Nonfiction* Kate Mayer Mangan
66 "Roosters and Roses"
- Poetry* Randel McCraw Helms
74 "Rosie"
75 "Carlo, Emily Dickinson's Dog"
- Nonfiction* Cortnie Duran
76 "Where Are You Going?"
- Poetry* Kiersta Recktenwald
83 "Rare Bear"
83 "In Great Waters"
- Fiction* Anastasia Jill
84 "The Identity of Swans"

Avian Rainbow through Binoculars

Karla Linn Merrifield

Scarlet macaw colors this world
 as does emerald toucan, orange-
 chinned parrot, and yellow-crowned
 euphonius sipping a fuchsia bromeliad.
 You traipse over shallow root systems
 for a glimpse of violet-saberwing hummingbirds.
 You zip by in a Zodiac on choppy
 Pacific seas for blue-footed boobies.
 But to find the gold at rainbow's end,
 you'll have to fly with me through
 the Costa Rican rainforest
 of my moist imagination where
 I may show you this recently identified
 species. Rare? No. Extinct? Yes.
 At the end of the rainbow flies the indigo
 ghost bird of the clouds of Monteverde.



*Karla Linn Merrifield has had 900+ poems appear in dozens of journals and anthologies, with 14 books to her credit. Following her 2018 *Psyche's Scroll (Poetry Box Select)* is the newly released full-length book *Athabaskan Fractal: Poems of the Far North* from Cirque Press. She is currently at work on a poetry collection, *My Body the Guitar*, inspired by famous guitarists and their guitars; the book is slated to be published in December 2021 by Before Your Quiet Eyes Publications Holograph Series (Rochester, NY).*

“Adaptability”: Lessons from Costa Rica

The red-eyed tree frog has adapted,
 climbing cecropias on padded toes.
 Colleen has adapted
 to walking with two fused ankles.
 The spectacled caiman has adapted,
 gorging on feral hoglets.
 Laury, sans Ruth, has adapted
 to swallow a widow’s life.
 The resplendent quetzal has adapted
 to breeding in remnant forests.
 Child-bride Boodley has adapted
 to loving her old husband’s last neurons.
 But, honestly, most have forgotten
 we are only animals; most won’t adapt.



Plastidon inexpectatus in Six Mile Cypress Slough

The skink emerges slowly, red nose,
 red throat, but like five-lined thunder
 on a log, squatting low, throbbing
 lizard of a poem, five-lined,
 red, red, read of the spawn, this thunder.



Carmen

Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Le'amour est enfant de Bohême / Il n'a jamais, jamais connu de loi
Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime / Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!*

*(Love is a Gypsy child / It has never known any law
If you don't love me, I love you / If I love you, beware!
Georges Bizet, Carmen: Habanera*

*Cats know how to obtain food without labor,
shelter without confinement, and love without penalties.
W. L. George*

1

Every morning, after gulping my bitter tea (since I was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer, I'm not allowed coffee or sugar anymore) I would put on jeans and my old parka and get out of the apartment for a walk in the woods on my creaking legs to take in the morning air. The footpath meandered along the banks of a lazy rivulet and, in good weather, I enjoyed the scent of pine and the violet glow of bluebells in bloom. It was the highlight of my day.

On one such morning in early June, my stroll took an unexpected turn. I was walking next to a pile of moss-covered rocks when I heard a feeble sound, like a cry, coming from behind the pile. There I found a very small kitten with striped white and gray silky fur, shaking with cold or hunger. As I bent down to inspect it, it looked up with bright blue eyes brimming with mischievous intelligence and stared fixedly at me, as if beckoning that I approach it.

I no longer kept pets since Foster, my golden retriever, died of old age two years before; all I have left of Foster are fond memories and a large snapshot that I keep on my desk. (Actually, I kept four goldfish in a large aquarium left behind when my daughter moved to Brazil, but these hardly counted as pets.) Perhaps out of missing a companion, I was immediately captivated by the kitty. There was no way I was going to leave such a helpless

creature to be devoured by a predator. I took a handkerchief out of my back pocket and picked up the kitten gingerly, taking care not to squeeze too hard while avoiding its small sharp teeth.

I returned to the apartment with the foundling, intending to take it right away to the town pound. But I had to feed it first, for it was clearly starving. I lay it on the kitchen floor, drew a saucer and filled it with cream, and placed it in front of its nose. The kitten lunged at the cream and began slurping it avidly. In less than a minute it had licked the saucer clean and was looking intently at me, demanding more. When I failed to move, it meowed with surprisingly great force.

I had to smile at the brazenness. "One moment, Your Majesty," I chuckled and went back to the refrigerator for more.

The cat cadged three saucers of cream, yawned, curled up into a ball, and dropped into a contented sleep. I went to my office and placed a call to the vet who had cared for Foster during his last illness.

"Dr. Strickland, this is Chet Ellison. I have a funny situation here. This morning I picked up a stray kitten, probably a few weeks old. I plan to take it to the animal shelter, but I'd like to know if there is anything I need to do before going there."

“Are its eyes open already?”

“Yes.”

“Does it seem healthy?”

“I don’t know... it’s so little...”

“Do you want to bring it over so I can take a look at it?”

I was about to decline politely, then I remembered how nice Dr. Strickland had been with Foster during its final years. He deserved one more fee from me.

“Alright. When will be a good time?”

“I’m booked the rest of the day, but I can see you tomorrow, early. Say seven-thirty?”

I’m an early riser. “Sure. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

2

The kitten hardly moved from the kitchen all day, except to imbibe more cream. I didn’t have a litter box, but placed an old blanket on the kitchen floor and hoped for the best.

As I was getting ready for bed, I went to the kitchen to take a last look at the kitten. Maybe I should place it outside overnight, I wondered; but the poor animal must have had enough trauma already, being abandoned like that in its early infancy. I began retreating and, to my surprise, the kitten got up, gave a big stretch, and took off after me.

I returned to the kitchen, picked up the sacrificial blanket, and led the visitor to my bedroom. I spread the blanket at the foot of the bed and turned to the kitten, which was watching me with an expectant look.

“This is all for today, Your Majesty,” I said, adding with mock humility: “Will these modest quarters be satisfactory?” The kitten yawned.

I changed into my nightclothes and promptly fell asleep. Sometime later, I was awakened by a sudden commotion. Not fully alert, I turned the lamp by night table on and instantly became awake. The kitten had managed to jump into my bed and was trying to dig a hole in the sheets in the space between my legs to bury itself there.

“Shoo, cat! Shoo!!!” I admonished, half angry, half bemused. My bed is not high off the floor, yet it must have required quite an effort for the kitten to get on it. It sat

there, staring at me calmly, while I tried to scream it into jumping down. It wouldn’t budge.

I finally picked the cat up gently and laid it on the blanket. “This is where you belong.” I remonstrated with the animal, shaking my head in disapproval. I went back to bed and turned the light off.

3

The kitten did not resist when I picked it up and placed it on the now-familiar blanket as I drove to the vet in town. Dr. Strickland was alone at the clinic at that early hour. He took the little bundle of fur that had fallen asleep along the way and led us to his office. He weighed the kitten, took its temperature, and rubbed gently along the body looking for hidden tumors or deformities. He turned to me, approvingly:

“Congratulations, Mr. Ellison. You have a healthy seven-week-old female kitty, pound and a half, alert, showing no obvious deformities. I would need to run blood tests to get a better fix on her condition. You should have no health problems with her between now and when you take her to the shelter.”

I was about to thank Dr. Strickland and say my farewells when he added: “She was abandoned recently and shows no signs of malnutrition. But, unless you are planning on taking her to the shelter right away, you should get her kitten food ... and a litter box.”

“Out of curiosity, how often should kitties like this be fed?”

“Two or three times a day. They need food that is high in protein, no carbohydrates; a mixture of kibbles and wet food works best. The pet store should carry several brands that will be adequate. They will also have a variety of other items that you may want to consider purchasing.”

I stopped next at the pet store, bringing the kitty along. A young clerk intercepted us as we went through the door and sidled up to the kitty. “Hello, precious! What’s your name?” she asked, caressing the cat’s belly as the kitten’s large eyes twinkled in approval.

I was taken aback by the question, for I

had no plans to name a kitty that was about to be dropped at an animal shelter. "I haven't picked a name yet," I confessed. "What's yours?"

The clerk answered: "Carmen."

"That's a very nice name" I replied. "Well, this kitty is almost as pretty as you, so let's call her Carmen."

"Oh," the clerk said, blushing a deep pink. "If you do that, you'll have to bring her to the store for treats on her birthday."

"Will do" I responded. "In the meantime, I need to get some supplies for Carmen."

"I'll be glad to help you."

Half an hour later, I left the store with far more merchandise than I had been planning. Included in the loot were packages of Meow Mix, cans of Fancy Feast, a litter box, a bag of litter, a scratching pad, toys of different sizes, a pet bowl, and an orange, catnip-filled teaser toy, which became an immediate favorite. The cost of the items was over sixty dollars, and I felt silly at the extravagance. Perhaps I was unconsciously flirting with the lovely clerk, who could have been my granddaughter; in any case, Carmen (the cat) and I were to be parted, but these would be nice gifts for other animals.

4

Upon returning to the apartment, I placed a call to the animal shelter to confirm their opening hours. The lady who answered the phone provided the information and then asked: "What animal will you be bringing?"

"A kitten, seven weeks old."

"I'm sorry, sir. We don't accept cats less than three months old."

"Why?"

"It is against State law. Also, such young animals require more care than we are able to provide."

I frowned. I would have to keep this little bandit for a month and a half. No wonder Dr. Strickland had suggested I stock up on items for the care of young cats. Maybe he foresaw what was going to happen.

Strangely, I was not as upset at this turn of events as I should have been. Perhaps, some company would be good for a change. Goldfish are nice but hard to relate to.

5

It took no time for Carmen and me to develop a daily routine. Even though she had a bed in the kitchen that used to belong to Foster, she slept in the bedroom under my bed. She would sometimes jump on my chest and, if that did not work, would lick my ears and my face, and bite me softly to wake me up. One way or another, she would manage to draw my attention until I grumpily got out of bed and went to the kitchen to get her breakfast ready. While I was doing this, she would proceed to the litter box and relieve herself. (One thing I quickly learned is that cat pee has a terrible smell; the litter box had to be kept fresh at all times else she would find a different place to do her deed.)

After breakfast, it was playtime. I would hang the orange toy from a fishing rod, cast it just out of her reach, and circle it while she lunged at it until I would let her catch it and try to get at the catnip filling. But our favorite play was tug of war: I had come up with a heavy knotted rope that I would drag the length and width of the room growling, as Carmen hung from the rope with her paws, biting into the fibers from time to time with ferocity.

Other times Carmen played by herself. She would stalk, chase, and attack an invisible prey; when there was a toy lying on the carpet the hunt would be completed as she took turns at shaking and biting it. She would race up and down the furniture and around the floor as if possessed. She would attack the scratching post and sharpen her nails on it, although sometimes the sofa was the object of her attentions. Sometimes she would chase after odd things, like paper bags or empty boxes. Anything was a potential target.

I would go to my studio to write short articles for the community newspaper and Carmen would follow me and jump on my desk while I typed on my ancient Underwood. She would watch with rapt attention at the up and down motion of the keys; she quickly learned that the "s" key got stuck in the upright position, and

would thrust a paw at it every time this happened. It was both charming and annoying.

Playing one-on-one with her was a temptation and a risk. She would quietly let me rub her tummy and tickle behind her ears and, all of a sudden, would bite my hand or scratch my arm with a kick of her back legs. Some of her bites drew blood and were painful; to discourage such attacks I carried around a spray bottle and squirted water on her face, to her utmost indignation.

In short, Carmen kept me entertained and on constant alert, since her surprise attacks on my person would usually occur when I was doing something that drew her attention, such as vacuuming the floor, making the bed, or dusting. She was a mischievous little devil but would purr when I rubbed her belly and would cuddle by my side when I read in bed or sat on my recliner doing the crossword puzzle.

Somehow the twelve-week milestone was reached and I found myself placing a call to Dr. Strickland to ask about shots. "But Chet, aren't you planning on turning the cat over to the animal shelter?" he asked with unconcealed mirth.

"Maybe, but not at the moment. How about those shots?"

"Bring her on Monday, anytime."

"How about neutering her?"

"She's too young. Neutering is not done until the cat is three months old. Anyway, shouldn't you let the shelter worry about that?"

I had no response.

6

I considered Carmen on parole pending an ultimate decision on whether to keep her. The need for such a decision was precipitated by the events of Black Tuesday. That day, I left to go grocery shopping and run other errands and did not get back to the apartment until mid-afternoon. A vision of carnage greeted me when I returned: Carmen had managed to topple the aquarium, spilled its contents, eaten two of the goldfish, and left the corpses of the other two on the carpet. She was still licking her chops contentedly.

After screaming at the cat a couple of times I paused to consider the situation. She had been with me for three months and was more than ready for disposition. Yet I kept procrastinating. "She's very bad, but at least she is entertaining," I told myself. As if reading my mind, Carmen lifted her head and stared at me inquisitively with her big eyes, which now had changed to their final emerald hue. "So, what are you going to do about it?" she seemed to be asking.

I punted.

7

Two months later, the oncologist gave me more bad news: I had to go to the hospital for a series of radiation treatments for my worsening cancer. Since the length of my stay would be uncertain, I would need to make provisions for Carmen's care while I was away.

First, I tried my few still-living friends and relatives. None were able or willing to take custody of a willful kitty for an indefinite time. I considered a "pet hotel" but the ones in the city, and even those within driving distance, were too expensive and their high costs did not guarantee decent care for her. Finally, I looked into giving her up at the animal shelter. A brief tour of the shelter convinced me that Carmen would not do well in the overcrowded, understaffed environment of the shelter. The facility was dismal, reeking of bodily fluids, disinfectant, and despair. I was greeted by a chorus of mournful exhortations for help from animals of all sorts and conditions. I judged that leaving Carmen there would be an act of cruelty.

That left me with only one other, slightly less cruel option: releasing Carmen back into the woods and pray for the best. Carmen was a pretty strong and resourceful animal and was ferocious, as her liquidation of the goldfish proved, but she was used to a sheltered life and might not be able to protect herself from the perils that lurked in the wild. It was a grim choice, but I didn't know what else to do.

The morning I was to leave for the hospital, I fed Carmen a very big helping of cat food, played get my rope with her,

tickled her under the ears, and picked her up off the carpet, and took off for the woods. I was crying profusely; Carmen immediately noticed my distress and became unwieldy in my arms, trying to get herself to the ground.

I carried her to the same rock pile where I had found her months before and lowered her gently. The moment she landed, Carmen meowed piteously. Had she realized she was being abandoned again? Did the sight of the pile of rocks bring back long-buried memories of fear and loss?

I couldn't stand it. For a moment I thought of picking her back up, returning home, and forsaking treatment. But then I considered that if I did so the next few months would be hell for both of us and swallowed an anguished cry. I turned my back on her and began leaving as fast as I could. Alas, Carmen began trailing me, and soon caught up with my receding steps, and began brushing against my leg.

I didn't know what to do. I tried to remember how fickle this cat was in her affections but I choked remembering the good times we had shared and my resolve wavered again. I dropped to my knees and ran my hands over her fur while uttering low nonsense words to reassure her. Then I got up and pushed her away. Carmen yowled, as I gave her a gentle kick. She tried to follow me for a few steps and, perhaps coming to terms with the situation, began walking away slowly.

I was still in shock when I arrived at the hospital. Noticing my distress, they gave me tranquilizers and put me to sleep.

8

I was in the hospital for three weeks. When I left, around Thanksgiving, I was a wreck. I had lost ten more pounds and was suffering from extreme fatigue. I was exhibiting incontinence, diarrhea, and other physical afflictions. On the positive side, the doctors assured me that the treatment had been effective in arresting – at least for the time being – the progress of cancer.

The moment I returned home, I started thinking incessantly about Carmen. How was she faring? Did she still remember me?

Would I ever see her again?

I had been able to cope with loneliness after Foster died, but Carmen's disappearance left a tear in my soul that grew larger with each passing day. How could the absence of a kitten have such an effect on an old man, who had raised a family and seen it move out of his life with relatively little suffering? Had the recent nearness of death made me yearn for love and companionship? Were my growing weakness and the physical pain that accompanied my fragile convalescence make me need companionship?

Whatever the reason, I no longer felt self-sufficient and capable of facing the world's adversities alone, without blinking an eye. Dammit, I missed that cat, I needed her!

The third day after my return, I took to the woods in hope of finding her. An hour later, bone-tired and disappointed, I returned home. Not a trace of Carmen.

I repeated my excursion several consecutive days, without success. After a week, I gave up and tried to resign myself to live with the loss. I wasn't successful.

9

Days went by. Recovery was slow and uneven. Fearing a relapse, I kept my activities to a minimum. I slept, ate, read, watched TV. Nothing interested me; I passed the time in a gray fog, disinterested. Whenever I remembered Carmen, it was with a pang of regret that I tried to quell by thinking of something else.

I tried to remember how fickle this cat was in her affections but I choked remembering the good times we had shared and my resolve wavered again.

I dropped the magazine I had been reading, rose to my feet quick as lightning, threw on a parka, and, still in my slippers, ran outside, calling out: “Carmen! Carmen! Come here, baby!”

There was no answer to my cries, which grew increasingly louder and more desperate as they echoed in the silent woods.

10

I had a pet door installed on the entrance of my apartment in case Carmen found her way back to me. It was too cold and icy outside to go out looking for the miscreant anymore. I waited and fretted.

One night in darkest February I was awakened by the sound of scurrying outside the bedroom. Half asleep, I went out to investigate. Carmen was crouched in the kitchen, a half-devoured field mouse hanging from her mouth. She was much thinner, dirty, and wild-looking. She dropped the cadaver on the floor and presented it to me as a peace offering.

I was trembling with emotion, but managed to keep hold of myself and said in an ironic voice: “Oh, thank you, thank you, Carmen, but I already ate.” Then, moving slowly to the pantry not to startle the animal, I found an old can of Fancy Feast, opened it, dropped its contents in a plate, and placed the food before her. She looked at the proffered meal thoughtfully and proceeded to devour it, daintily licking her whiskers at the end.

She stayed with me all night and left through the cat portal early in the morning. She was returning to the wild.

A new routine then developed between us. It was clear that Carmen had achieved total independence and preferred a life in the woods, fending for herself, over being a human’s pet. Nonetheless, she remembered the bond that united us and was somehow aware of my infirmity and my need for her. She was willing to meet me halfway, a considerable sacrifice for a feral cat: she would visit, but not stay; she would play, but not linger. We were still friends, but on her own terms.

I, for my part, was content to accept the new arrangement. I needed to treat Carmen as an equal, and realized that it had been selfish of me to expect constant love and devotion from a creature endowed with free will. Being the friend of a wild animal is a great boon that must be cherished; I was now happy to get whatever time she was willing to give me and enjoy the company and the memory of old times. For, at this point in my life, fulfillment is achieved by enjoying what we can of the present and harking back to the joyful memories of the past for further satisfaction.

Since that night, Carmen comes to me every once in a while, lets me pet her, and plays with me a little. I’m sure to keep vittles and toys available for her enjoyment when she is around.

I never know when she will return. I hope she does, soon, but don’t count on it.

Maybe tomorrow she’ll visit me again.

Matias is a Cuban-American engineer and attorney, retired after half a century of professional practice. Following retirement, he has taken up creative writing and authored many short stories of various lengths and genres. Over two dozen of his stories have appeared or are scheduled to appear in paying magazines.

Saturated With Butterflies

Mia Innocenti

Oh,” I hear the receptionist breathe as I walk through the door.

The waiting room that I know all too well is harshly lit and frigid compared to the black heat outside. A woman with a single latex glove on her left hand hunches over a chair and peers at me from beneath her eyelids. They disinfect at night, I think to myself. Covid, right. I press the top of my mask to fit the mold of my nose with my free hand.

“Hi, how are you?” I ask the receptionist as I approach the plastic border between us. Her hair is brown and drapes like limp spaghetti over her forehead. She folds her neck to the side and stares at me blankly.

“Emergency,” she states rather than questions, taking note of the bright pink sticker clinging to my button down. “Name and number?”

“Mia Inn—”

“Animal’s name.”

“Dexter,” I say, looking down at the bag held tight to my side. “He just started throwing up and it was red, no, pink. But—”

“It’s okay,” the receptionist says without looking up from her screen. “What’s your phone number?”

“No, it was also orange,” I blurt. “I don’t know what that means, but the surgeon said to bring him in if anything like this happened, so I didn’t know what to do.”

I shift my focus from Dexter’s carrier to the woman disinfecting one chair after the next and back to the receptionist. She meets my eyes with her own, nods once, and taps on her keyboard.

“All right,” she says after what feels like an hour.

“Dexter. Cat. Three years.”

“Three in September, yes,” I say so softly it comes out silent.

“Take a seat, I’ll have someone come get him shortly.”

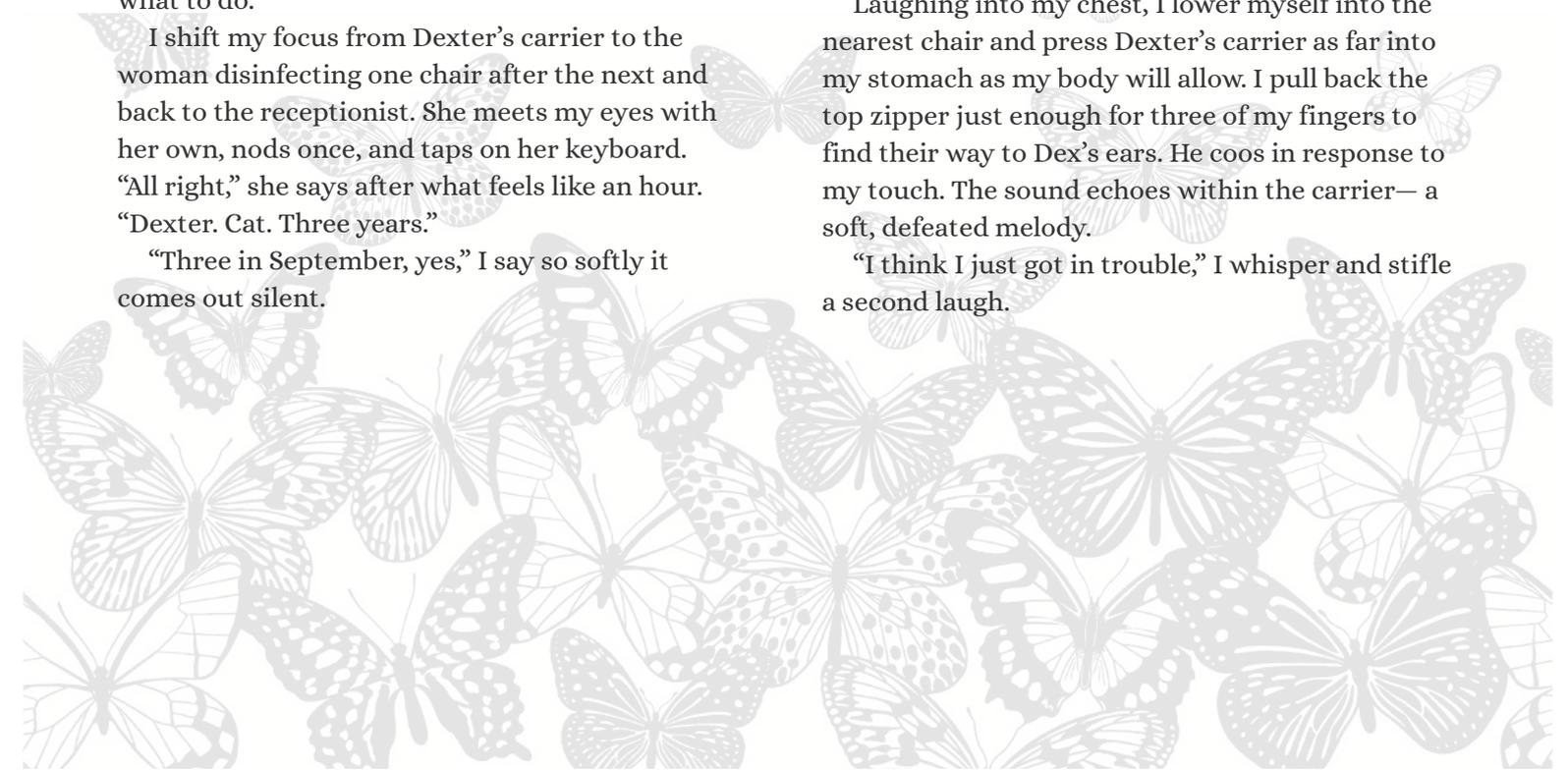
I turn to face the open, empty room. Usually, there’s not a single seat uninhabited. That’s why they have us wait outside. I always thought there was something so pathetic about a cluster of pet owners cluttered on the curb, in the muggy makeshift seating area that doubles as a sauna, pacing the sidewalk. I figured as pet owners, we could never hit a bottom lower than rock, but this waiting room— this cold, ghostly waiting room— is it. Isolation while signing a DNR for your cat is fiercely combatted when you’re surrounded by trembling knees, panting dogs, and that one man who I’m positive hangs out here just for fun. In all honesty, I’m not sure if it’s more peaceful now without all of the chaos, or if it’s scarier.

The chairs to my left have been wiped down and carefully inspected by the woman with the latex glove, while the chairs to my right remain saturated with who-knows-what. I tiptoe past the first row, then the second, and third, all the while fixating my focus on the woman. She seems unbothered by my presence or maybe just unaware, but by the time I hit the fourth row of chairs, the woman clicks her tongue behind me.

“Just sit,” she says firmly but not harshly.

Laughing into my chest, I lower myself into the nearest chair and press Dexter’s carrier as far into my stomach as my body will allow. I pull back the top zipper just enough for three of my fingers to find their way to Dex’s ears. He coos in response to my touch. The sound echoes within the carrier— a soft, defeated melody.

“I think I just got in trouble,” I whisper and stifle a second laugh.



My chin is tucked firmly against my chest, and I feel a bubble form in my throat so quickly it may pop. My vision blurs slightly behind my too-big glasses and I watch a single drop hit the lens, then another, and one more.

“Dexter?” I hear a woman’s voice ask from the front of the waiting room. As if there’s anyone else here. I raise my hand like I’m back in primary school and half-stand, half-squat out of my seat by the time the woman in the blue scrubs and messy bun makes her way over to us.

“I’m the nurse,” the woman says in a tone far too bubbly for four in the morning and holds out her hand, gesturing for the carrier.

Reluctantly, I pass Dexter over to her and notice the red marks indented into the skin of my forearm.

“I hear we’re having some tummy issues?” the nurse asks.

Tummy issues? I repeat in my head. Is that what we call this? They’re not taking this seriously. They’re not taking me seriously. He vomited blood, I saw it. It was there.

“I mean,” I trip over my words and feel dryness plant its footing in my mouth. “He threw up some blood, I think.”

The nurse nods and hoists Dexter’s carrier over her shoulder. I think I hear him meow, but I don’t know for sure. Something tells me to worry, but the look in the nurse’s eyes reassures me that I shouldn’t.

“Their tummies can get a little funky after surgery,” she says to me before turning away. “No need to worry, we’ll be back in a bit.”

In the same moment, the nurse and Dexter disappear behind the giant, green double doors, a girl— no more than thirty— emerges from the bathroom. We lock eyes and she raises her eyebrows at me twice, pulls her mask down, and mouths, “pets,” with a roll of her eyes. She plops herself into a seat a few rows ahead of me with her nose pointed toward the television broadcasting commercial after commercial. The girl’s hair is bright red and curls out in every possible way from her pink scrunchie. She’s wearing an oversized flannel, black leggings, and navy-blue Converse. Her mask is red, but a darker red than her hair, and rests delicately on her pale face. She looks like a Disney

princess— if Disney princesses could wear modern clothing.

I look down at my clothing, becoming increasingly self-aware of my clownish appearance. The pants I’ve worn the past three nights in a row are my favorite to sleep in: purple and white marbled together saturated with sparkling blue butterflies. Not small ones, but large, glittering butterflies. On top, my father’s oversized white button down shirt to cover the decaying tank top I sleep in religiously. I can’t see my face, but I can feel the tilt in my glasses where my father told me a screw was loose and the heat of my breath continues to fog my vision. To complete the look, my baby pink Crocs with smiling sunshine and smiling ice cream Jibbitz™. I look *ridiculous*.



“Counselor, looks like your client’s taking the fifth.”

A month ago, I cried into Dex’s ears promising him decades of sunny days and a backyard so big that we’d both get lost in it. I vowed to gift him my firstborn if he agreed to years of expressing annoyance with its babbling nonsense. Together, we would run for hours chasing the bugs that decorate our flowerbeds and cuddle by our great, big, open window as I read. We would have a full and happy life, and none of it would get cut short, ever. In return, he nuzzled closer, scratched my chest, and took off in zooming haste. I had laughed because he was getting better, we were getting better.

But now, it’s a month later and I’m back in the waiting room. Alone— in my butterfly pants and pink Crocs, and it all feels wrong again. I read somewhere that cats often adopt the behaviors of their owners, and I

think that explains a lot about our mutual anxious attachment styles. The thought of losing him is frightening, to say the least, but I often wonder what it says about me that I thought I was dying along with him when I signed the DNR last month.

The modern Disney princess knocks me out of my thoughts as she walks past my chair, puppy in hand. They have been granted their freedom— she shows me this while kissing her small dog on the head one, two, three times and smiles at me with only her eyes. She is brighter now, lighter, and prettier. She stuns me in an instant and I pull my butterfly decorated legs to my chest.

Pets, I mouth behind my mask.

Within half an hour, the peppy nurse returns with Dex's carrier in her arms. With just part of her body escaping the doorway, I can already hear Dex's meows for his home. For the bed that is mine, but not really mine, as I sleep at the edge of it almost every night as Dex stretches from toe to tail sideways across the mattress. For the kitchen counters that he naps on as I cook and feed him scraps of turkey meat, shrimp, and chickpeas (his favorite). For the neck, I call my own but is truly his pillow. He meows again to let me know he's ready to go home. I am too.

"Tummy problems?" I ask as the nurse shuffles the too-heavy carrier off to me.

She nods, her eyes a little more tired now. Dexter didn't make this visit easy, that much I can tell.

"He was a little dehydrated," the nurse says, still in her upbeat tone. "Just give him some extra water and make sure he rests."

She smiles and I do too.



"I've learned the hard way not to trust these things."

"Thank you," I say. "Thank you so much."

"Go get some sleep," she says and turns back toward the double doors.

When we get home, Dexter leaps out of his carrier with ease. The cone hovering around his head like one of Saturn's rings hits into the corner of the wall and pushes him back. I laugh, take off my shoes, and sit with my back against the front door. Dex weaves in and out of the collection of shoes, grocery bags, and broken-down boxes that have mushroomed over the last month. He sniffs a sneaker, a Chewy box, rolls around on top of plastic Amazon packaging. When he smells like home again, he races to the bed and lays down next to the toy dog he's had for three years. Dexter meows in my direction and blinks twice, slowly. I blink back and push myself off of the floor.

Floating over to the kitchen, I wash my hands in the sink without turning on the light and slouch over to the open spot at the edge of the bed I abandoned in a haste just an hour or so ago. Dexter turns over to expose his shaved belly unaware, or just unbothered, by the horror of his firm, orange-sized bladder. For a moment, we both lay in silence, flat on our backs. I tilt my head as Dexter's paws begin making imprints on my shins. He moves his way to my knee, a balancing act of sorts, and pauses to sniff one of my glittering butterflies. Dex paws at it and, for a moment, waits for it to move before taking a final three steps up my body making a final stop around my belly. He kneads my skin and settles in, curls into the shape of the moon, and coos gently. "I love you too, buddy," I say as we both close our eyes.

Mia Innocenti is an MFA candidate in the nonfiction program at Sarah Lawrence College. A nanny by day and freelance writer by night, she spends her free time rereading her comfort books with her cat, Dexter, on her lap.

Fireflies of Red and Blue

Mary Grace van der Kroef

He brushed the dust of earth from hands stained with toil's tales. The cloud that sprang from this friction formed a story itself. Dancing in the wind's caress.

He bore a face creased by life. A surface burnt with valleys fair, shielded by perpetual squint. One could read between those lines...

Possessing a silhouette that struck ripping sky with darkest shadow. He swam in rivers of orange and pink at this his brink of days.

Twilight's coming haze.

Only she saw his glory. Tale a twitch in gleeful thoughts only a canine understands. Knowing well her master's commands.

"Home."

She knew the love behind this word. Smelled the reds and blues of it as his hands disappeared into pockets filled with uncertainty.

She gave her own love, spoken with leaps and bounds about his legs as the journey began.

Time won, as time always does.

The path paved in endless footsteps, unforgiving, rain rejecting. Yet her happy yips at his heels were fireflies to his heart.

Not alone.

Together they marked the passage of dusk. Under the outstretched arms of nature's sentinels. Her yips receded into rhythmic panting. It kept the night alive.

Silence surrounded master. There was no fear, only question. It hung in the darkness like buzzing insect wings just behind an ear. Flick it away, to find only emptiness.

As the ranks of sentinels broke before her, eagerness lit her feet. She ran with exuberant bounces and prances towards the porch to sit on

wooden planks. Tail thumping. A drum of joy.

HOME

She waited for him. Alert and ready to bound again to his heels once the dancing beams from the kitchen window revealed his weathered boots.

She never stopped waiting.

As the sun rose behind the house and spilled the rawness of a new morning over the quiet, she still sat there. Tired. Cold. Now it was her questions hanging behind a head of golden retriever fur.

HOME?

A wind carried dust from the drive in to her nostrils. Sneezing, she could still smell him.

Come home!

Reluctant hinges cried along with her empty heart.

"Come, girl."

A man places a pan of water beside her. It rippling with the movement of being laid to rest. She looked at it. Her snout cast a blotch on the shimmering liquid.

A human presence knelt beside her, but it wasn't him. She turned away. A gentle hand stroked her shoulder, then her back. The human gave love, but it looked like yellow and purple haze at the corner of vision. Not His blues and reds.

"Did you dream of him again, girl? I am so sorry. He isn't coming home this time."

Her heart wept. She knew he wasn't coming. She remembered. But her dream was the sweetest pain. Her whine echoed in her own brain.

Come home.

She stocked the porch that day. The wooden plants creaking under her gentle, padded paws. She set a pace that would have covered miles, then let it fall to a slow plod. A lick of water tasted like tears



mixed with ice.

Not home.

The human who poured out yellow and purple let her be. He was young but seemed to understand the need for time. As the day waned, he sat behind the screened porch door, a silent, constant shadow. A loyal presence, but one she didn't want.

Twilight.

It slipped up on them in a silent wave of coolness. The smell of chilling grasses and moistening air flowed past her into the house. She shut them out. Head now lay on weathered boards, paw over snout.

Her eyes opened, only to close again, as her heart slowed in rest. Its steady thump whispering a faint red.

I love you. Come home.

But he wouldn't come, even though she smelled him in the wind. He was gone.

Then she saw them, dancing under the edge of branches, dressed in rustling green. A blink, a wink, a flicker. Blues and reds swirling where yellows should have been. There, behind the scents of damp evening, it was him!

She jumped, she yipped, she flew in to the tinny specks dancing above the tall grasses. They should have run away and stilled their light. But they didn't.

HOME

Nose to the tapestry of night, she knew him as red landed on silken snout.

"I love you."

The blue danced around her as she had danced around him. The red kissed her fur.

"Go home."

She tasted the love smiling from the surrounding blinks. Her tongue lapping air in her passion.

Then...

One by one the lights blinked yellow. Red fizzled out. Blue ebbed in the shadows. Yellow sang.

She stopped. Her dance shocked to silent watching. They still spoke of love. It looked yellow, dipped at the corners with a purple haze.

"Go home."

His smell lingered in the land. He had tilled it, shaped it, used it. It had upheld him, fed him, nurtured his self-worth. It wouldn't forget him, neither would she.

She nipped at the yellows and purple

haze. Testing their taste.

"Girl?"

The other called from the porch.

"Girl, HOME!"

She came to him. Raced to him. Jumped paws to his chest.

"Down girl, down!"

His eyes leaked purple and yellow in heavy drops as he knelt, arms around her. Her puppy-like kisses lapped up his love.

"What's gotten into you?"

He held her, but she knew his own heart was breaking. She could hear it straining. Or was it growing?

"What would he say if he knew I was smitten with his girl?"

She had tasted nothing like his yellow and purple. His face was lined with a shaggy shadow. Neck and arms bore the metallic scent of inks. Her heart hammered at the taste of titanium as her kisses reached his threaded ears.

"Slow down, sweetheart. I'm not leaving."

HOME.

He cupped her muzzle in his hand. Large, strong, gentle. He was a true home.

Mary Grace van der Kroef is a writer, poet, and artist from Ontario, Canada. She loves the simple things in life, like a good cup of coffee accompanied by good friends. Please follow her at www.marygracewriting.ca

Twitter: @MGWriting

Instagram: @marygracewriting

Facebook: @marygracewriting

Website: www.marygracewriting.ca

I'll speak for Pongo Pygmaeus

Rachel Davies

and if you ask about his name I'll say names are your invention, he has no name; I'll tell you Orang Utan means Old Man of the Forest but you stole his forest so now he is Old Man of Nowhere, exiled in his own home; and if you ask about his favourite colours I'll say the green of the mighty fig, how he carried its seeds to new places to rebuild his home before you ripped up his home with your metal predators, replaced it with your figless trees; or the many reds of his brothers' coats because he had no need to hide before you came; and if you ask about him being the most intelligent of the great apes second only to Man I'll ask you if you could make a tree nest with bunk beds or stun a catfish with a stick; and if you ask about tools I'll say his tools are to find food while yours are for destruction; and if you ask me why he forces himself upon a female in heat I'll remind you how you stole his sister, shaved her, chained her to a stake so you could rape her for Ringgit; and if you ask about his goals for the next five years I'll have just one word

Rachel Davies is widely published in journals and anthologies and has been a prize-winner in several poetry competitions. Her debut pamphlet, Every Day I Promise Myself, was published by 4Word Press in December 2020. She is co-ordinator of the Poetry Society Stanza for East Manchester and Tameside. She has an MA in Creative Writing and a PhD in contemporary poetry, both from Manchester Metropolitan University.

Sestina for the Dog Struck and Killed Along Interstate 80

Juanita Smart

Where can an animal rescue volunteer bury her heart today?
 I tip the shovel – hesitate, before I scoop the dog
 demolished on I-80 overnight. Light pontoons along the highway’s
 shoulder; I clench my eyes the way years before my hands
 clenched the shoulders of my dog, Shiloh, sodium pentothal jetting
 along its highway of tubing, demolishing his heart.
 In morning rush, who mourns a dead dog’s wrecked heart?
 Silence craters Moxie; scarves of dust drape her body today.
 Dog tags spangle, daylight jets –
 Hours before, frantic owners called, seeking help to find their missing dog.
 Spooked from her car at 1AM, Moxie fled familiar hands,
 headlights drilling night bewitched the dog, starburst Moxie on the highway.
 Backdrafts stampede highway;
 dog ear flaps, unfolds like half a paper heart
 insides spill out, a mess of tangled hands.
 Flies buzz broth of aftermath today.
 Shovel levers morning light. Dogged,
 I heave the weight of emptiness, taste fumes from diesel jets.

Dog bones clack like bamboo chimes, surge of jetting
 traffic howls along the highway.
 I palm the flyer that identifies the dog.
 Moxie’s photo guts my heart:
 chocolate Lab adrift in dreams, haloed in window light weeks before today;
 I scoop her from the photo in make-believe hands.

I bag remains, cinch the plastic twist-tie with sweaty hands;
 contrails criss-cross blue sky where fliers jet
 above my haul today.
 Pick-up truck transports Moxie for cremation south of highway.
 I pack Moxie’s ashes in the flatbed of my heart.
 Back home, I hug every dog.

Shiloh was the dog
 whose shoulders I clenched in empty hands
 as sodium pentothal demolished his heart.
 Every dog jets
 love; every loss starbursts highways
 of our hearts; every lost dog starbursts us every day.

Dog Star ahhhwoooooos – jets light from here to heaven,
 Moxie hands highway her song.
 Light struck dog, dig up my heart – day, after day, after day.



Porcupine Points of View

I peek from sapling's pantry, my face a smudge of ash,
 watch your dogs scenting me, point their snouts
 like loaded pistols in the air, cocked and ready to fire.
 You call them, whistle, shout, leash up.
 I munch on stalks and stems, dream my porcupine body's
 a fiber optic fountain, streaming strands of silk.
 Quiver of quills thrums; strawberry heart
 jams time inside pineapple of my body.
 Human, you prickle; goosebumps pill your skin,
 shooping dogs ahead, you shy away from me,
 think avoiding touch will spare you injury;
 but your words pierce and jab –
 misname my coat of many commas, a jacket flaunting pins and nails.
 Can humans speak language other than cliché? Let's talk
 what porcupines inspire--suture needles copy quills,
 glide through flesh as slick as sun-tipped dragonflies, stitching open wounds.
 Listen, don't let me dagger you with thoughts that penetrate
 too deep. You and your slap-stick dogs shrink across the fields.
 I shrug, shimmy down, my feet four purses clutching
 copper coins; I fluff my cape of frosted wands, disappear—.



Juanita's poetry and non-fiction prose have appeared in small, local literary publications such as The Watershed Journal, The Bridge Literary Arts Journal, Tobeco, and the Pennsylvania Wilds website. She finds her best ideas for writing while rambling through nearby, wild Pennsylvania game lands "off leash" with her collaborator dogs Gabe, Katey, Wilson, and Liberty.

Drives

Betsy Packard

Three basic drives define the behavior of canines – wild and domestic.

I. Prey Drive

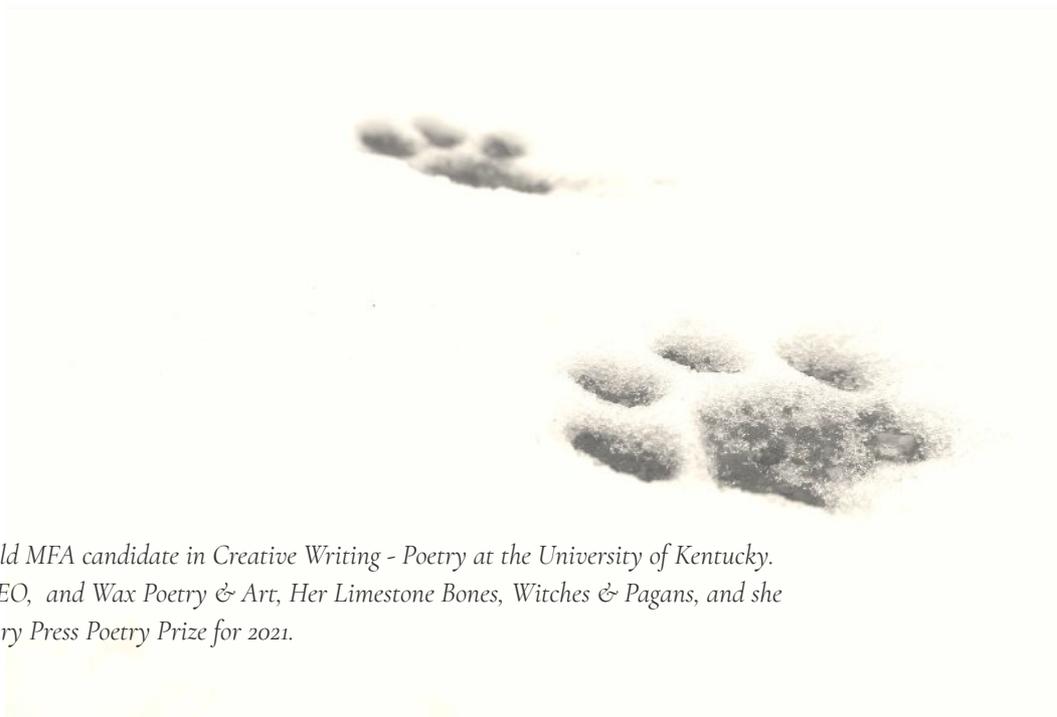
My malamute stashed kibble and extra-large Milk Bones.
I'd find her caches in flowerpots, beneath couch cushions
and under my bed pillows.

II. Defense Drive

Flight or fight, avoid or approach,
passive- aggressive:
One man pushed me into shutdown;
let's not talk about the other man.

III. Pack Drive

To hunt prey wolves cooperate.
They form football teams, join street gangs,
and frequent singles' bars. Fitting in matters.
Behavioral expectations assure order.



Betsy Packard is a 68 year old MFA candidate in Creative Writing - Poetry at the University of Kentucky. Her work has appeared in LEO, and Wax Poetry & Art, Her Limestone Bones, Witches & Pagans, and she was awarded the King Library Press Poetry Prize for 2021.

Buddy's Blanket

John Darling

Hey, Buddy, I wanted to let you know that I am going to let another little animal use your blanket. I know, I know, I told you just before you left for the Rainbow Bridge that no other animal would ever use it, but then I didn't plan on having another little animal in my life. It just sort of happened.

And remember, I told you that it was Tinker's blanket before it was yours. She was a small Chihuahua like you. I showed you her pictures and wished that the two of you could have met in life so you could play together. Well, after she went off to the Rainbow Bridge, I told her too that I would never have another little animal in my life, then I met you.

As soon as I saw your little 6-pound body inside that big Humane Society of Ventura County's kennel, I suppose I knew that I couldn't keep my pledge to Tinker, who also lived in one of their kennels until I took her home.

You were afraid of me when I first stepped inside your kennel with a plan on taking you for a walk. You wouldn't let me touch you and I knew this was due to the neglect you suffered at the hands of your former owners. I also knew that HSVC had taken great care of you in the year you lived with them and that you were very popular with all the staff and visitors. Still, I was a new human to you, so you were afraid I'd be like those others who treated you badly. It took a few visits, and lots of doggy treats, but eventually, you'd walk with me and sit on my lap under a tree to get out of the hot Ojai sun.

After this breakthrough, you'd start your cute yelping every time you saw me enter VCHS yard. People would comment about how much you

seemed to love me and wondered when I would adopt you, even though some knew of my vow to Tinker. After a few months, and one false start, I brought you home to stay while knowing that at 13 years old with a variety of illnesses you may not be with me much longer. That didn't matter. I wanted to spend your remaining days loved and happy while curled up safe and warm in Tinker's blanket which was now yours.

During your time with me, I took you everywhere, even to places where dogs were not allowed because no one would turn you away. Your cute little face, small body, and loving attitude made everyone love you. I called you my Little Shadow, which made people laugh as they petted or hugged you.

On the last night, when I put you to bed with your blanket around you, I knew you'd be gone by sunrise and that you would know that you were loved. That helped ease my grief, but even now, over two years later, I cry for you because I loved you so much.

Then Kitty Cat came to me.

I haven't named her, as such, since I don't think she really belongs to me. I have never had a cat, so I don't know if anyone can own a cat. Usually, I think, it is the cat that owns the human.

But I don't know.

She started hanging out in the backyard about a year and a half past. She'd come to hunt and eat the lizards in my garden, which I didn't like because lizards are a goodness. So, I started putting out food for her to see if



Photo by John Darling

she'd stop her predatory ways. It didn't work, but I still put food out in case she didn't catch her dinner.

Often, I'd call to her, but she'd just run off or keep eating until I approached her before running away. Then, about a month ago, she came over to me when I called her. She, like you, was afraid at first, so I just let her rub against my legs, like cats do, until she let me pet her. Now, she knows that I would never hurt her and that I care about her well-being, so she will sit on my lap and sleep when she drops by.

I began to worry about what she did and where she went at night since she can't be an indoor cat due to your mommy's allergies, so I put a box, with a towel in it, out for her hoping she'd sleep in it at night but each day when I got up, I'd look for her and she was not there. That is when I thought I'd put your blanket in the box. I guess there must be some magic in that blanket, because now I find her in the box every day.

I like to think that Kitty Cat feels the love that you and Tinker left in that old piece of cloth when you left me and that she knows that the love is real.

When, and if, Kitty Cat goes away someday, I will still keep your blanket with me just in case I find another little animal needs to share the love left in it by all my small, happy, little friends.

Since May of 1976, John Darling has written and has published numerous stories, poems, and articles. His lone play, Stage Directions, has been produced in the United States, Canada, and most recently at the Soho Theater in London, England. He is a multi-genre author whose publications have mostly been short works of fiction and non-fiction, and he has had some poetry published as well.

His author website can be viewed here: <http://johndarlingauthor.com/>

His writing blog can be viewed here: <https://johndarling.substack.com/welcome>

Photo by Sherry Shahan



Featured Writer

Survival of the Friendliest

Emily McArdle

When I was a child, we found Belle on the side of a dirt road during a camping trip in Florida. I don't know if I remember us stopping there in the middle of nowhere or if the story was told to me enough times that I created the memory. Nevertheless, Belle was on the side of the road, an abandoned black Labrador puppy eating a dried-up frog, her bones so pronounced it looked like they were sharp enough to pop out of her skin entirely. My dad had no desire for a dog, but he let us take the puppy with us to our primitive campsite a mile or so further down the dusty road. He said she was so close to death and the road so infrequently used that leaving her was a death sentence.

We didn't have any dogs, so Belle was passed around on our laps around the campfire and we fed her homemade beef jerky and marshmallows. She ate greedily and gave bountiful kisses in return. I imagine she had the worst diarrhea, as well, but no one mentions that detail.

Like the archaic wolves of our prehistory, this beast joined our campfire and shared in our food.

Dogs were domesticated somewhere around 20,000 years ago, and while humans may like all the credit, it is likely wolves started their own domestication. Wolves may have followed the migrations of early man and ate the carcasses left behind. As the wolves grew bolder, the women, who spent more time behind cooking in camp, probably fed the friendlier subdominant wolves – those with naturally higher stress tolerance -- until a sort of camaraderie began to form. Given an edge on survival, those friendlier wolves were more likely to successfully breed and pass on their traits to their offspring – offspring that would learn

to accept food from the women.

I can imagine a prehistoric husband grumbling at his wife over the campfire that if she keeps feeding the wolf, it will just come back with more wolves. And the prehistoric wife smiling and hoping he's right because long before the dog became man's best friend, the wolf was woman's confidant.

I was a young adult when I met the first dog I desperately wanted to save: a stray at Polk County Animal Services. The facility was like most country shelters in the south; it was overrun with homeless dogs in terrible living conditions. I volunteered to go with my coworker, Lisa, to pull dogs from Polk to bring back to our better-funded shelter in Tampa, and it was there I met a massive black and tan German shepherd.

I've always had an affinity for herding dogs – the shepherds, the collies. It's the eyes, I think, the eyes that are expressive enough to move sheep with just a look. A good herding dog doesn't need to bite; they need just the gaze.

"I look for dogs that are friendly, healthy-looking, and it's a bonus if they have a clean kennel, they could be potty trained," Lisa had told me before we went in. As soon as we walked into the building, the German shepherd lunged at the kennel door, rattling the chain link, shit squished between his massive paws. He pulled at my heart with his chocolate brown eyes, even if he was barking at me. Lisa frowned at the mange behind his ears and the hand I pressed flat against the chain link to try to coax him over.

"The board would never approve that one," she tried to say gently. I was crushed.

She told me what they always told me – we must move dogs quickly to save more dogs. This dog was too old/sick/aggressive/big, and, while I knew that, I was haunted by his eyes as he watched me walk away – walk away like everyone else before me.

Humans have highly visible sclerae – the whites of the eyes – which is a unique trait in the animal kingdom even among other primates. This would have been a competitive disadvantage to our ancestors as the white contrasts sharply with the rest of their faces and anywhere they were trying to camouflage. The whites also made it easy to see where the hunter was looking, reducing the element of surprise.

Dogs also have highly visible sclerae. The cooperative eye hypothesis proposes that dogs and humans developed this trait concurrently, promoting cooperation between the two species, particularly when hunting together.

I'll reiterate this in another way: the partnership between dogs and humans was so remarkable our evolutionary track diverted and converged together.

I imagine there were some prehistoric dog nay-sayers that complained about wasted resources and dog hair in the caves, but evolution ultimately proved them wrong. Humans and their wolf/dog counterparts rose to the top of the food chain and changed the landscape of the world.

Another time I went to Polk County Animal Services, there was a stunning blue border collie in a run with her flea-infested puppies. The whole unairconditioned building smelt like microwaved dog shit and it made me gag when we walked in, but I was happy to be there. Happy to help. When my eyes met the mother collie's, her lips pulled back into a submissive grin. Like her fur, her eyes were a brilliant ice blue. She was too timid to come up to me, tucking her tail between her legs and cowering in the corner, but her puppies were friendly and just about

old enough to be adopted out. Puppies were the only animals the shelter ever made a profit on, and so puppies (and donations) made it possible for the rescue of all other animals. Every adult dog, adult cat, and even kittens cost the shelter more than the adoption fee they brought in. We were taking the puppies, Lisa decided.

“And the mother?” I asked.

“She is limping, and she isn't friendly,” Lisa said. Animal welfare is a cold occupation, fraught with impossible decisions.

I named her Echo. She would be a repeat failure.

You often can't tell a dog's true nature when they are starving and scared. Their personality comes out later after they are healthy and comfortable.

After you have time to love them.

Belle was a runner. She could jump a six-foot fence on a sprint and not slow down for miles. She had bloodhound in her and she would stick her nose to the ground and run, oblivious to cars. The neighbors all knew Belle; she was friendly and harmless. They seemed accustomed to us driving around the neighborhood in my mom's Jeep Cherokee while we hung out the windows calling our dog's name. She would never come to us, not really. We would trick her by throwing a tennis ball at her when she came into view, and she would retrieve the ball as if the response was involuntary. She also loved car rides, so as soon as her attention was on us by way of playing ball, we opened the door, and she would run and jump into the Jeep. Such was the ritual of recovery.

We preferred to catch her ourselves, my siblings and my mother, and me. If my dad knew about her escape, or, worse, if he had to pursue her himself, he would chain her to our clothesline and kick her chest until she was too hurt and tired to yelp any longer. When he was finished and returned to his shed, one of us, the children, would sneak out to pet her and bring her cookies or water. Her tail thumped weakly in the dirt, her eyelashes fluttering in anticipation of

another strike, but she always forgave – my father’s action and our inaction. When we snuck away, she would watch us with pleading eyes, but we couldn’t untether her. My father left her baking in the sun for hours until he thought she suffered enough or just when he happened to remember he left her tied to the pole. This was the ritual of punishment.

She would always run again, longing for that taste of freedom, and I found it hard to blame her.

Echo would never be mine, but as a condition for her getting a chance in Tampa, I fostered her. I took her to various veterinary specialists to determine if she needed to have her leg amputated. She did.

Her surgery was a week away when I went into the director’s office. The modular building was set back from the main Tampa shelter with the director’s office just to the left of the entryway. At her desk outside the director’s door was Lisa, and she smiled when I came in. I almost started crying immediately.

Echo was increasingly aggressive. She had snapped at me, and, the night before, attacked my father’s great dane and it was only by luck that Echo wasn’t dead or hurt. This wasn’t the first altercation, just the most severe.

“You did the right thing telling me,” the director said. “These things always come out eventually.”

I took Echo into the exam room that last time. She wasn’t adoptable. Her amputation was going to cost thousands of dollars and finding the perfect home for her would be unlikely. My father wanted to adopt Echo, but the great dane would eventually kill her – or he would. I knew well the human capacity for violence against an animal. It was kinder to end this while she was still safe and loved. I knew all this, but hard choices are rarely softened by logic.

The lead tech put a blanket over the front of the small kennels attached to the exam room wall, so the cats didn’t have to watch. She turned on calming classical music but

Echo still shivered in fear. Another tech held her so she couldn’t bite, and I spoke softly to her, stroking between her eyes to her nose and rubbing her ears, as the lead tech injected the innocent-looking substance into Echo’s vein. The room was so cold, as sterile as a room that smelt like urine could be.

I told Echo she was a good dog as she drifted away and when her ashes came back from the crematorium, I spread them over Belle’s grave.

You often can't tell a dog's true nature when they are starving and scared. Their personality comes out later after they are healthy and comfortable. After you have time to love them.

Belle spent a decade living with us and it would take my father five years to recover from his grief over her death. When she got sick and lethargic my mom took her to the vet, but the diagnosis was inconclusive. My parents didn’t have a great deal of money, and any further tests or treatments were simply out of their reach. The vet knelt down to my level and told me to feed Belle raw liver -- to boost her red blood cell counts, I assume now, but he didn’t offer any explanation at the time.

In pediatrics, the doctor sometimes offers treatments just to give the parents something to do while they wait for the condition to resolve – or not – and there is a great deal of overlap between veterinary medicine and pediatrics. Looking back, the vet probably told me to feed her liver as an effort to give me something to do, but I wish he had offered feeding bologna or hotdogs instead. The memory is so much more traumatic than it had to be.

I spent hours with that mushy, puke smelling meat in my hands, blood dripping through my fingers onto the linoleum floor and onto her dirty faded blue bed, cramped

and crouched under my brother's desk while I begged and pleaded for her to eat it; to get better. But she died anyway, alone, while I was at school. And I felt like it was all my fault.

I thought, if I had just gotten her to eat the liver, maybe she would have lived.

A prehistoric dilemma that has confounded scientists is how archaic humans edged out Neanderthals. Shortly (evolutionarily speaking) after archaic homo sapiens migrated from Africa to Europe, Neanderthals vanished, dying out, even though the stronger, more capable Neanderthals should have outcompeted homo sapiens.

The answer may be four-legged: the domestication of dogs. That technology, if you will, gave early humans the competitive advantage to survive and populate to the point they pushed out Neanderthals. Early dogs and humans cooperatively hunted together, the dogs wearing out large game so humans, waiting in ambush, could then kill the exhausted prey. This was a far more successful and far safer way to hunt, and homo sapiens won the evolutionary race with a feast.

Would we be where we are or look the way we do now without dogs?

There was another dog at the shelter, a hound/collie mix with gently pricked ears and eyes that could melt your soul. He spent almost a year with the shelter before he was adopted by the local police department after they performed a series of tests to determine his fitness. We were all so proud of Jethro. It was quite the story of how this overlooked mutt would become a police officer. The marketing team wrote up the "Happy Tail" in the newsletter and distributed it. The newsletter was barely cooled before Jethro was returned. He had flunked out of training in only a week. Despite the fact Jethro was being trained as a drug-sniffing dog, he was euthanized after a volunteer told the director police did bite work with all their dogs. A dog that is

trained to bite is a liability. This news never made it into the newsletter.

I kept a photo album on my social media of all the dogs and cats that the shelter euthanized for behavioral or health reasons. I didn't keep the album as a moral protest-- I understood why it had to happen. I understood that to help the many, sometimes a few had to die. But I also understood, even at that point when I was barely twenty, that there was danger in becoming unmoved by death. Good intentions can be twisted by ego and the pursuit to make operations more profitable.

Jethro was the last picture I added to my album. I was sick with compassion fatigue, and I left animal welfare.

As many people treat their dogs with anthropomorphic coddling as people who treat their dogs with casual cruelty. Sometimes a person does both, to the same dog, two sides of the same coin as love and hate itself, as my father did to Belle. If you spend any time working in an animal shelter, you will see the darkness that lives inside of people, their capacity for abuse, yes, but also their willing, cool dismissal of the thousands of dogs that are dropped off and forgotten. Yet, the business of selling products to dog owners is a billion-dollar industry. Humans have always been weird about dogs – one way or another.

We don't deserve dogs. People like to say that. I do too.

As I write this, Scarlett, my dachshund-chihuahua-pitbull-collie super mutt, sits on her back legs, her front paws pulled back into her body as she fancily begs next to my desk. Her eyes are wide and beady as if they could pop out at any sneeze. Her tail thumps against the wood floors with a steady thwack, her ears perked up hopefully, her lips pulled into her underbite so her little teeth poke out like a vampire. I push my chair back from the desk with a mock reluctant sigh and tap my lap. She jumps up, wiggling her whole body in excitement, sneaking kisses against my cheek as I squirm to dodge her efforts, and I share a piece of my granola bar with her. Food from my fire. She is far from a wolf, and I am far

from a hunter-gatherer, but that bond
between us is as evident as the white of our
eyes.

Sherry Shahan lives in a laid-back beach town in California where she grows carrot tops in ice cube trays for pesto. Her photography has appeared in Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Backpacker, Country Living, Aromatic Poetica, december, Urban Arts and is forthcoming from Pigeon Review. She earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and taught a creative writing course for UCLA Extension for ten years. www.SherryShahan.com. This photo is of her grandson. He is now 24 years old.

Emily is a writer based in Jonesborough, TN, where she lives with her husband, four children, and her service dog, Ghost. She has been published at The Raven's Perch and has an upcoming publication with Entropy Magazine. She is an MFA in Writing candidate at the Vermont College of Fine Art.



" In azalea heaven"

Featured Artist

Nefelibata

Oormila Vijaykrishnan Prahlad

Nefelibata (Portuguese) - "Cloud Walker"; One who lives in the clouds of their own imagination or dreams, one who does not obey conventions.

I have been painting and writing poetry since I was a child. I believe that inspiration is all around you, in the little things you come across daily. My work is a documentation of these simple, everyday experiences.

I have been a wandering entity all my life. Born to parents of South Asian heritage, I was raised in the Middle East. During Desert Storm, I was a war refugee. I taught English at international schools in India before relocating to Singapore with my family. I now call Australia home.

I am deeply inspired by the landscape of New South Wales, and my work over the past several years has been inspired by locales in and around Sydney. Before the pandemic, I used to paint en plein air on the South Coast, where I enjoyed creating art by the sea.

I live in a leafy suburb of Sydney where the mornings are filled with the calls of birds. On the balcony of my old apartment, I had regular visitors - seven cockatoos, a couple of mynahs, and a flock of chatty lorikeets. Over time, I was able to identify the cockatoos by their individual features. These birds became the subjects of my paintings.

Four years ago, we moved into our own place, and I converted the sunroom into an art studio. It overlooks a garden with camellia bushes. Here I made two friends - a pair of magpies with very distinctive personalities. I named the shy male *Maniyan* (gemstone in Sanskrit) and the assertive female *Mandaakini* (celestial river). I photographed and sketched the birds, and made several artist books, and altered books filled with paintings of these magpies - over 100 small artworks in different mediums.

These five paintings are part of an ongoing series titled Nefelibata, that I started at the beginning of 2020. I had just returned from a vacation in India with several bags of cloth leftover from my mum's sewing projects. My culture celebrates color

and I love anything that is bright and motley. I started using beautiful Indian prints and motifs in my artworks. In a symbolic sense, the magpies in my paintings are me - Australian, with a proud Indian background.

"Red summer" has prints cut out of blouses that I wore for many years. One of my magpies loves the pink azalea bush at the back of the garden. The flower printed scraps from my mum's tunic looked a lot like the pretty blooms, and I have used them in "In azalea heaven". The birds like to shelter beneath the camellia bushes when it rains. I have used blue silk scraps in "Rain on the horizon", and paisley prints, brown leaf motifs, and green printed bits, to convey an impression of rock formations and lichen, in "The secret in the crags", and "Foraging in the feather moss".

When I paint, I jump in with a rough idea of what I want the finished artwork to look like. Then I let it develop organically as I go. Often there are happy surprises. My favorite mediums are acrylics and gouache, and I work mostly on canvas textured paper unless I am preparing for an exhibition, in which case I work on stretched canvas. I collect all kinds of odds and ends - I have many boxes stashed in my studio filled with gift wrapping papers, denim, printed fabrics, lace, beads, feathers, and even bark, dried leaves, and flowers. Now, for birthdays, I get assorted junk from friends!

I try to create something every single day, however small. Art is my source of fulfillment. I believe it can bring great joy and healing - I volunteered for many years as a leisure therapist at a hospital, and a home for residents with dementia, helping the elderly create art.

I am very fortunate to have a supportive partner, who, like my wonderful parents did when I was young, nurtures and encourages my dreams. For that, I give infinite thanks.

"The secret in the crags"



Ormila Vijayakrishnan Prahlad is an Indian-Australian artist, poet, and pianist, who serves as a chief editor for Authora Australis. She holds a Masters in English and is a member of The North Shore Poetry Project. Her recent artworks have been showcased in The International Zine Project, 3 AM Magazine, Parentheses, and Oyster River Pages, and on the covers of The Amsterdam Quarterly, Pithead Chapel, The Rat's Ass Review, Ang(st) the Body Zine, and elsewhere. She received four Best of the Net nominations in 2021. She lives and works in Sydney on the land of the Ku-ring-gai People of the Eora Nation.

"Rain on the horizon"



"Foraging in the feather moss"



A Friend for Onesie

Gargi Mehra

*I*t's a guttural sound, one that grates upon the ears of most morning walkers and cuts through serene mornings. But the raucous caw of the Indian crow, which may be loved by few, is certainly much adored by my niece Uma, all of twenty and a budding veterinarian. She even tutored me on the exact species name – *Corvus splendens* – so that it remains imprinted in my memory. All God's creatures are special to her, in particular those winged, hollow-boned beings that serenade the night sky. It surprises me still, that of all the creatures she dotes on most, and who worship her back, are a pair of house crows.

Two years ago, Uma staggered home from a long day filled with professorial admonitions and petty disputes, only to spot a crow promenading the windowsill, gawking at her. She sighed – the twin challenges of building new friendships at college while learning new concepts had exhausted her. The tiredness pressed upon her shoulders, but the bird's presence mystified her. What did the black fiend have in mind? Why was it strutting about on the ledge bearing all the confidence of an uninvited guest?

She stepped towards the window, and, to her surprise, the crow held its ground, not drawing back as she expected it to. Uma uncovered a vessel filled with fragrant rice meant for her lunch and sprinkled a few grains upon the sill. The bird pecked at it. Uma offered her more.

From the bird's slight build Uma deduced it was a female. The next day, the crow flew in along with her partner, a stouter fellow flaunting a longer beak. Uma named the female Onesie, and the spouse earned the title, by association, of 'Onesie's friend'. Once, when I visited Uma, she lavished praise on the behaviours of adult crows – how they always paired and mated for life. I could learn loyalty from them, she said.

Did I really need to learn that lesson?

My spouse of fifteen years harbours no complaints, but I let it slide in the spirit of aunt-niece relations.

Uma and her new feathered friends soon built a routine. Every afternoon, Onesie would fly in and perch herself on a branch of the trees opposite. After a few minutes, she'd fly nearer, and claim a spot on the ledge. Eventually, she would reach her final destination – the windowsill. Uma would scatter morsels of different food items each time – bread, roti, rice.

Onesie's confidence and comfort levels soared, to the point where she learned to squat on the edge and stare around the house, marveling at the world before her.

I met Uma for the first time in Belfast, the city of her birth, a year after her first birthday. She sat plump in her mother's lap and blinked at me all the way through the car ride home from the airport.

Every morning, she would scamper down from the bed, and crawl down the carpet all the way to the living room, while hollering to us in her own gibberish language.

We'd plonk her down on the low chair facing the window so that the world outside unraveled before her. Often, we'd spot a pigeon cutting through the blue skies. My sister would point it out to her, and enunciate the word '*pakshi*', which meant 'bird' in Uma's mother-tongue, Marathi.

Nary a week later, it was Uma's turn to point at the window. '*Babji!*' she cried out.

My sister and I exchanged glances. What was the little one trying to say? Her mysterious babbles confused us, and we dismissed it as her usual baby-speak.

The next time she directed our attention to the window, we followed her gaze and found a goggle-eyed pigeon gawking at us. Then it dawned on my sister that her daughter had only been trying to pronounce the word she

had been taught – *pakshi*. *Babji* was the closest she got to saying it right.

Almost two decades later, when I stayed at their house in Mumbai and met Onesie for the first time, it dawned on me that of course a pair of crows had flown their way into Uma's heart and built a nest there.

The name Onesie caught on because the bird favoured standing upon one leg. Uma assumed the other limb had met with injury, but subsequently discovered it was just one of the crow's quirks. Onesie embraced it as one would a favourite yoga pose and adopted it whenever the fancy struck her. She gradually grew out of the habit, but by then the name had stuck.



Crows are known to possess intelligence and the human ability to remember and recognize faces. Soon they grew to identify Uma and her voice. Onesie relaxed in Uma's company because Uma believed, it calmed her.

Onesie's friend showed his nerves. He made himself at home in the presence of Uma and her mother, but Uma's father gave him the jitters.

The first time when Uma presented Onesie to me, I posed questions she'd heard before. How did Uma recognize Onesie? How did she know it was Onesie at the window and not just any random crow swooping in to win her affections? How did she gauge the difference between Onesie and her partner?

The answer – their minute differences serve to tell them apart. The females are slighter than males, for all birds. Onesie looks smaller, her beak a little shorter, but her partner boasts a long beak and more girth. His wings portray a certain symmetry that

Onsie does not possess.

Then there's the vast chasm between their personalities. Onesie struts around on the sill and flies into the house, believing it her own, in an almost snobbish way. If Uma offers her food that's not to her liking, she refuses it. She has grown accustomed to fancy foods – biscuits bore her.

Onsie and her partner showed each other affection by preening each other, cleaning feathers, picking out flies and dirt. Uma believed they would like to preen humans too, but they can't, so they just keep her company. Sometimes they even flew into the house and settled down beside her, seemingly chaperoning her during the online classes and staring at the pictures.

Around the end of last year, Onesie became a mother.

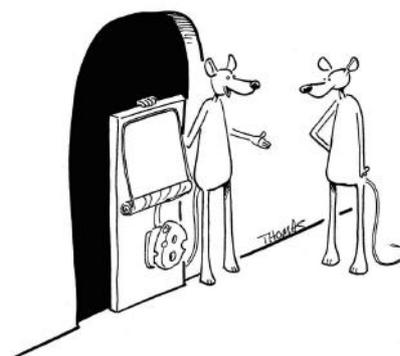
Uma discovered that Onesie had laid an egg in her nest. She glimpsed the baby when it hatched, so she would lay out extra food for the little one. Onesie would gratefully accept the morsels Uma offered and feed them to the hatchling. A sense of contentment stole through Uma, for having aided in the care of an infant.

Uma named the baby Rio. It took a few months, but Rio grew quite podgy and fat. He joined Onesie in sitting on the branch only on occasion, and rarely did the family trio make an appearance together.

When they're old, they "fly the nest." Uma tutored me, though I knew it already, that this gave birth to the phrase "empty nest syndrome."

When he grew into an adult, Rio flew away and became another bird in the ecosystem to fend for itself.

They parted from Rio. Both Uma and Onesie hoped he would live the good life.





Onesie and her partner staked their claim over Uma – they didn't permit other crows to befriend her and encroach into their territory. If any crow besides Onesie crept up near the window and perched on the sill, Onesie shooed them away – it was her house, and trespassers would be cawed out or pecked at. The other friendly crows had wised up, too. They flew in and surreptitiously swooped into Onesie's spot only in her absence. Uma named one of them Arlo – she found him a rather serious guy.

Every morning at sunrise, Onesie and her partner fly to the window and hover outside, waiting for someone to unlatch it. Onesie caws away, but Uma lives in her world of dreams for a long time. The friendly crow bides her time on the sill until Uma wakes up and says hi to her.

Do crows turn grey with age? Evidence suggests not, but I like to think that Uma and Onesie would both grow old and wizened together. The short lifespan of the Indian house crow renders impossible this rosy picture of the future. Even so, Uma is glad to have made a friend, albeit one that caws instead of murmurs her assent.

Meredith and the Mastodon

Marissa James

The forecast as Meredith's plane touched down warned of a cold snap of Pleistocene proportions. Naturally, Meredith hadn't packed for such eventualities in mid-August.

She withstood the unexpected chill and the watery welcome-smiles of three puffy-eyed aunts who took her luggage and didn't ask how she was. They didn't ask much at all, either out of discomfort or some idea that it was the most considerate thing to do.

When she'd got the call a few days before, the news struck meteoric devastation across the landscape of her life. Her mom wasn't just sick anymore, but gone. A single word that numbed deeper than permafrost.

On the drive home, her eyes glazed across the landmarks of her childhood. The fields outside of town where mom took her to pick strawberries every summer were now warped and bowed into volcanic hill scapes. The foundation of the old secondhand shop they visited every weekend had sunk into a viscous, bubbling mud pit. The strip mall was entirely gone, its shops scraped from the earth as though a flood had gouged out that area and, yet, nothing around it.

She wasn't too surprised. The memories of these happy times had sunk into a primeval layer of memory long ago.

The house lay in the throes of another time, the yard gone wild, the roof rampant with foliage.

Meredith hadn't had a chance to come home once college graduation threw her straight into a breathless routine of cashiering at a science museum and interning in the field every summer, of paying down loans and trying to keep her ancient clunker on the right side of drivable.

A year, then a couple, then a handful. She'd get back home as soon as she could afford to, in both financial and scheduling terms. She promised it to herself, to her mom, despite subsurface hesitations.

She must be tired after the long flight. When the aunts said this almost in chorus, she agreed and shuffled toward the stairs. Not tired enough to sleep, but too weary for any more cried-out conversation.

She glanced toward the kitchen door that opened out to the backyard but didn't dare approach it. If the front yard was any indication, the back would be impenetrable.

Instead, she clicked on the light to find her room exactly as it used to be in childhood. Back then, a strategic arrangement of plush pets completed the daily process of making the bed: a stuffed tiger with popsicle-stick saber-teeth glued on his face. A miniature giant sloth. A woolly rhino. A none-too-terrifying terror bird.

Meredith pulled one furry lump from the pile. A mammoth named Mastodon. Mom called him that no matter how many times Meredith reminded her that mammoths were the ones with the tall heads and big curvy tusks and the thick fur, not mastodons. Mom felt Mastodon was a more impressive-sounding name for such a creature and couldn't be persuaded otherwise, despite what Meredith's favorite books and websites on the subject said.

The name started as a joke, and could have stayed that way if Meredith grew out of the subject the way she grew out of boy bands and cartoons and video games. Her passion for prehistory withstood the test of time, though, like those Pleistocene

creatures had withstood so many millennia.

Mom's teasing sharpened to skepticism as the years passed. When college was imminent, Meredith applied to every program she could afford. When she got accepted on the other side of the country, it felt like an escape from mom's doubts, a way into the place she belonged.

Meredith found Mastodon jammed in her luggage just before she left; mom's idea of an attempted peace offering. She shoved him under the bed, determined that, since she'd got this far on her own, she could keep going.

Meredith winced as she imagined mom finding the plush creature after returning from the airport to send her off. Just her, alone in the house for the first time in almost two decades, with that shaggy, overstuffed symbol of rejection in her hands.

The years'-old guilt gave her a headache as she scooped plushies aside and lay down. Or maybe that was the brontotheres plodding outside.

Tiny three-toed horses appeared the next morning, tore up the yard, and overgrazed the hydrangeas that had survived under the rule of mom's brown thumb. Meredith's aunts salvaged the blooms that hadn't been too obviously gnawed on in order to make floral arrangements.

When it came to the formalities of the service, she allowed her aunts and the pastor to sweep her along and gave her opinion only when required. Yes, there should be music at the service. No vocalist, though. Most of her answers boiled down to those two basic syllables: yes, no. She'd never imagined it to be so simple. Had never imagined making such arrangements at all. A shiver rooted in her core as she surveyed the empty, silent church, but not from the unseasonable cold that permeated the space.

Back at home a cousin hunted through the kitchen to make dinner, oblivious to the tennis-ball-sized arthropod exoskeletons behind a box of pasta, or the greenish half-algae half-fungal enigma growing around the produce drawer of the fridge. Mom hadn't changed the type of pasta she bought, the way she forgot to eat the veggies in that drawer, in all the years since Meredith

moved out.

Meredith swept the exoskeletons into the trash with a hand, but no one seemed to notice.

Even after the acceptance letter from the university arrived, the reticence didn't leave mom's tone or the crease in her brow. Did Meredith really mean to move halfway across the country to pursue a degree in a subject she couldn't afford, to get a job that wouldn't pay well enough to cover the loans she'd have to take? Didn't she realize that she could put her mind to so many better things?

Meredith wandered to the kitchen door, hesitated, then stepped out onto the back porch and surveyed the impenetrable wilderness of the yard. She'd put off coming home for so many years to avoid a rehash of the same old questions and criticisms and not-so-gentle nudges toward a more stable life. She'd eased the mutual friction of their slow, steady continental drift, at least somewhat, by living on the other side of the continent. The irony nagged at her as she gazed into the grove of ancient sequoias that had no business towering over mom's backyard.

As a kid, she used to dig in the flat, treeless yard and imagine the rocks she uncovered were fossilized eggs or tantalizing shards of bone. Mom oohed and aahed over these finds when Meredith presented them to her, sometimes with poorly suppressed amusement.

Deep among those trees, wolves howled in a strange timbre that, she presumed, meant they were dire. A guttural rumble answered from further away. She shuddered, blamed the cold, and went back inside.

Newscasters prattled about the Ice Age temperatures that morning; it helped her block out the import of her actions as she pulled on dark stockings and a gray dress. She didn't own a black dress because neither work nor field digs gave cause to dress up. She'd never imagined she'd need one for this purpose.

The weatherman warned of black ice and mastodons on the road. In both cases, use caution and drive slow.

She sat in the front pew, focused on the

tissue crumpled between her fingers and forced her thoughts as flat as glacial ice to allow the people, the music, the eulogy, to sweep her along.

The kind words spoken in her mom's honor were true, of course, though only one part of the person she remembered. For every good memory, a complication raised itself, scratching and snuffling, to life.

How could she remember their strawberry field outings and secondhand shop weekends with warmth and joy and sorrow when, right on the heels of these, were the doubts and disagreements, the challenges and pinch-eyed looks that warned mom would always know what was best for her. No matter what she chose to do, mom had a better idea of what her life should be.

She couldn't be a perfect daughter and a happy, fulfilled person at the same time, so she'd chosen the life she could live with.

The cold pew creaked with every shift of her weight. It seemed the least she could have done to take Mastodon, that stupid plush toy, with her to college. It might not have repaired the divide between them, but at least might have slowed the inevitable drift. Maybe the distance would have remained small enough to be bridged by a holiday visit or a stopover after the summer dig season.

Everyone seemed relieved when the hugging and eye-dabbing and condolences transitioned into luncheon. Such unified grief worked up an appetite. Still, platefuls of leftovers remained and her cousins packed these, along with the flowers—so much white in failed contrast to her non-black dress—into the car and brought them home.

When her cousins moved to unpack it all, Meredith stopped them. She had a purpose for the cold cuts and deviled eggs, the pasta and potato salads.

She pulled an armload of food and flowers out of the car, spilling sandwiches on the gravel path as she fought the rusty latch of the back gate. A pack of hyaenadons swarmed the spill when she got through, then dragged their prize under the car to consume it.

Meredith kicked through tall weeds and wove her way among the sequoias, searching

for any indication of her childhood excavations.

She settled at the base of a likely tree then set about arranging flowers among the roots and ferns, expanding outward as she worked. Something rustled in the bushes. She began to unwrap and set out the plates.

Tiny pigs, followed by giant rats, emerged from the undergrowth to accept her offerings. A glyptodon lumbered out to investigate both pasta salad and the plate that contained it.

Meredith was wiping at her face before she realized the flow of tears. The icy floodgates she'd shored up cracked and broke apart under the strain of emotion.

She wept for the past. The distant, stony sediment that couldn't be changed now. Memories lay fossilized and fixed in their strata for the posterity of time. She dug her fingers into the earth and cold dirt jammed under her nails.

There was no way to resurrect the past and say she wished mom could be happy, or proud, or at least not so worried about her choices. No way to pack that stuffed toy back in her luggage and accept the olive branch it symbolized. No way to say that none of those things mattered, because she loved her mom and knew how much mom loved her, and if anything existed in the divide that lay between them, it was simply their two different ideas of what love looked like.

A shaggy, elephantine form approached from the trees. Its trunk waved in the air as though to smell the flowers, then narrowed in on a stack of saran-wrapped plates at her side. It prodded at the deviled eggs, trying to pick one up through the plastic. Meredith dried her tears with her skirt and unwrapped the plate. The trunk delicately and absurdly lifted one of the egg halves away and into the mouth of the mastodon.

Deviled eggs had no place in the diet of such a beast, but Meredith handed them, one at a time, to the dexterous trunk. Every egg consumed became more ridiculous than the last until she smiled, then laughed, through the tears cooling on her cheeks.

Other creatures appeared: aurochs and enormously-antlered deer, camelids and cave bears, and she hurried to unwrap the rest of the plates for her company. Creatures

she'd once unearthed in this yard, in her imagination, while mom looked on from the porch, calling encouragement across the distance between them.

When the food came to an end, she feared the creatures would wander off, fade back into the memory of the earth. Instead, they stretched out or curled up under the trees. The mastodon rested its trunk on her shoulder.

Meredith closed her eyes and relaxed into the whistling breath of the mastodon at her ear.

Mammoths were the ones with tall heads and curving tusks, but Mastodon was a better name.

As a fine art professional, Marissa James has wielded katanas and handled Lady Gaga's shoes. As a veterinary assistant, she has cared for hairless cats, hedgehogs, and, one time, a coyote. As a writer, her short fiction has been published in nearly a dozen magazines and anthologies including Daily Science Fiction, Mysterion, and Dream of Shadows.

The Truth is Pigeons

Roy Duffield

the truth is:

pigeons

that perch feet

hard, cocky

& unabashedly filthy

feeling

nothing

atop the sharp wires——

the vertical lines that——

at regular intervals

spaced tight——

mark the seconds in-

undating time——

the very wires——

that were designed to——

keep them out

Roy Duffield volunteers as an editor over at Anti-Heroine Chic, a journal that puts those on the outside inside. You can read more of his animal-inspired words in The Journal of Wild Culture, Into the Void, The Nashville Review, creatures, The Mamba, Heliosparrow, Tigershark, Silver Stork, The Living Senryu Anthology, White Enso, The Crank, Eternal Haunted Summer, Quadrant, and of course the world's oldest, most prestigious publication: his Instagram (@drinking_traveller).

Okanagan haiku –or– Frog, reincarnated

maple leaves fall gentl—Boom!
on the trembling fence
a possum

Myxomatosis

hazy day—
the blind rabbit
knows his way



Earthworm

Michael Jerome Cuningham

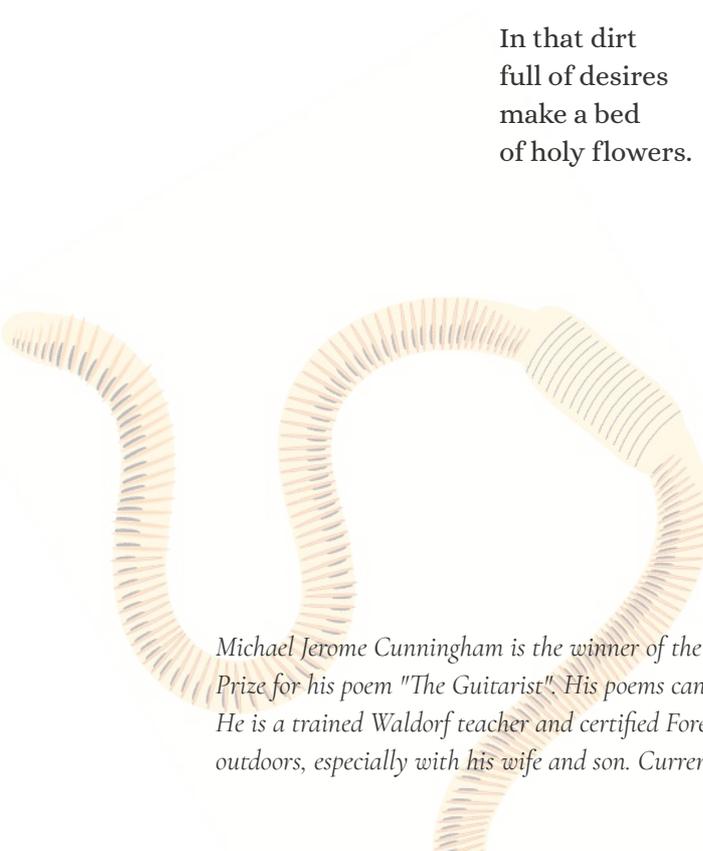
You are a blind thing
finding darkness
deep penetrating.
Coming to surface
in the garden
then submerging
like a gray submarine.

When earth opens for you
tell me: what songs are sung?

Kneeling among
the red tomatoes.
To me, you are love.
In this garden
we are both lovers.
Both blind things
both plunging
each digging
dark lusting.

When the earth opens for me
what hymns will you sing?

In that dirt
full of desires
make a bed
of holy flowers.



Michael Jerome Cuningham is the winner of the Performance Poets Association 2021 Poetry Prize for his poem "The Guitarist". His poems can also be found on the Indolent Books website. He is a trained Waldorf teacher and certified Forest Therapy Guide. He loves spending time outdoors, especially with his wife and son. Currently he works as a school librarian.

Finding Eden

Arthur Mitchell

Poised at the entrance to Home, their fortress, Hydron made sure no infiltrator crossed the portal. Sharing with outsiders in a brutal world of hungry hordes is not an option. Hydron's family is resourceful, and from necessity, to remain unmatched in its rapacious assault and defense of resources.

To thrive in temperate zones their urgency. Among many dangerous critters, and with few equals, their footprint loomed large, and all creatures learned to be wary. Inhabiting vast tracts of many temperate ecosystems. They occupied a place at the top of the food chain; But now one enemy - water, which his family learned to control and protect against for millennia, now, again threatened.

Hydron called their engineers together communicating the seriousness of the situation. "We must redesign Home, now in danger, more than ever. We must move near the apex of this hill, our entrance above the rising water."

A quarter mile distant, on another variegated rise, William and Louis, with binoculars, observed Home. "Most of the soldiers are now inside," said Louis, "excepting that squad of guards near the entrance."

"Good! We can ill afford an assault on our diminishing stores. Although another storm, they'll be lost anyway."

Home, a fairly recent chambered redoubt since the devastating, but victorious last war. As of late, a new awareness ran like a current through the compound.

Hydron, part of a very special inner circle to protect both food stores, and entrances. He'd been warned of the approaching menace. Then too, concern for his mate, Queenie, and for her protection. However, the effects of climate change ruled them, long before the brightest of men recently warned that their world was changing.

Before dawn, with rain imminent, William and Louis, good scouts, but against better judgment, with packs of incendiary explosives, approached the enemy at Home. Mother Nature had other plans, and thundershowers punished them to the bone, and for now, thwarting their own plans of mayhem.

Before Home could begin construction, rivers of water rose to Home's main entrance. But, fortunately, they received warnings of low- pressure predictions of rain, and evacuation proceeded, before suffering death and destruction, they marched in mass to flee those wasted tracts, toward their waiting, lightweight, but speedy crafts, assembled together, most, practically unused for the journey before them.

Pushed by the wind that carried them across the dreaded deeps, at the mercy of the roiling waters from the farthest shore they sailed, like ancestors before, clutching their sailing crafts beneath the bruised sky. As fate decreed, bound together against the odds, the instinct to survive, driving them. Every movement, a search to find a place to land and save their starving bodies. Many would be lost on the journey. But the vast majority of the compound has survived.

Finally, the winds abated, the sun came through darkened skies. Weary bodies filed off to make their way through the landscape, much like the one that they'd fled, and settled, and had known as Home for generations.

Their new world abundant with towering trees and sweet fruit, wild fauna. Hydron organized searches for the new land's rich fruit stores, and captured or preyed on native animals, and began cultivated rich gardens. Farming and husbandry demanded breeding many for future use as edibles during long periods of cold, would be

protected in sheltered redoubts.

Alas, peace did not last. New enemies appeared. Workers in the fields rushed to New Home, with alarming information that chemical warfare had taken many lives since morning, attacking any who dared resist.

Hydron assembled soldiers and workers. “We need to fortify against this force.”

With brilliant engineering and dedication to reinforce against a new enemy, the compound, now practically impervious to enemies.

Hydron’s ancestors carried on long after his death, and after generations of adapting and surviving within the environment, it began a new phase of change, not as giving, so they simply moved on to more fertile fields existing across their world.

Eventually, however, in spite of great cities built and thriving communities, centers, and crossroads, their world began shrinking and life in every direction, not as generous.

They were unprepared. With all their stripped land dead and dying from long droughts, continuing wars, and conflagrations of fire sweeping over their homes, and laid waste to years of development. Then came the floods, and with their natural world devastated time and again, they had little to buffer the fury of the inundations across the barren, water-clogged landscape.

Now their great arks saved many thousands, delivering them to a new paradise. So there began the process of discovery and the taking of the bounty before them within the long struggle to reorganize. What Hydron and the first colonies had slowly built, by the virtues of adaptation and sustainability, and especially the wondrous diversity began to erode, and after Hydron’s time, began breaking down, as their demands grew disproportionate to their numbers.

Although, occasional leaders among them began to resist, continuously stripping away everything before it; the links to the past instilled, and hard to break. The endless expansion of the prime and accessible land’s gifts continued unabated; colonies expanded, desire for prime turf insatiable.

A caste system came to dominate the order. Certain members of the now thriving cities were granted access by this caste to receive fruits of worker’s labor; this alliance grew powerful, and workers paid fealty for access to basic needs.

Creating new redoubts in flood plains over the decades repeatedly devastated communities, the dominate caste, now fully entrenched, diversity non-operable. Inevitably, with crops ravaged and food stores contaminated, sickness and ill health followed, and revolts among the workers grew in intensity, only to be put down by armies the caste had recruited.

In time, assassinations followed by ever larger rioting, and with the release of vast chemical stores by adversarial parties, it was the beginning of the end for the once mighty civilization which slowly crumbled from the inside. When toxic, red clouds covered the sun, and all members of the society, disoriented, neither productive nor constructive.



However, bands of their warriors who had foreseen the calamity, escaped deep underground, and a new, bold leader, Actus spoke for the new colony. “We must adapt to survive. Let us spread into many colonies on these vast plains, of one blood, one mind, and when the air clears, we’ll divide into many redoubts, yet remain united in purpose.”

In due time, it slowly cleared, they were into light, and co-operation deemed the only solution to turn aside the catastrophic methods, and adapt to the changing world made green and fruitful, in harmony, fraternity, peace, a way of life and a guide into a new and hopeful future.

Another highly intelligent species, however, took note that, with each rise of water, more and more creatures migrated elsewhere. Many predicted that these enormous losses were a precursor for a greater tragedy.

Despite Man's intelligence, and rapacity toward most life forms, he could adapt as he had for millennia. Yet no matter where man found refuge, he would never out live this world of the Hymenopteran - the Ant.

Arthur has a recently completed novel – 'A Grotto in the Sea.' Poems set to music by various composers- Lyrics to the third movement for voice -chamber symphony: Under a Winter Sky, music by the late Michael Moore; Garden of Eden lyrics for Rainforest on album Sax by the Sea; Nature Writing; Winterwolf Press; Lagan Online; Classical Poets Society. Remembered Arts Journal: Corvus Review; Ephemeral Elegies; Pushcart Nomination. He lives in Portland, OR, USA.

Humane Society of Ventura County

John Darling

For nearly 90 years, the Humane Society of Ventura County (HSVC) has been rescuing animals from abusive situations, neglect, and natural disasters. Unlike many such agencies, HSVC has the resources to take in all species. I volunteered at the shelter for over 5 years while performing a variety of duties which included walking dogs, helping out with the yard work, showing animals to visitors, and working at offsite adoption events.

During my years with HSVC, I saw them rescue every type of animal, from a Tarantula to a Brahma Bull. There were usually a few snakes slithering around in their terrariums as well.

The shelter got its start in 1932 when a small group of animal lovers founded the HSVC. For 50 years, they struggled with too little space and money to care for all the animals that needed their love and dedication.

At first, volunteers fostered animals around Casitas Springs, CA but by the 1970s they were able to establish an adoption center in Santa Paula, CA, then a benefactor bought and donated nearly 4 ½ acres of property in Ojai, CA to HSVC. The organization moved to the new location in 1982 and is still there today.

Along with caring for animals, the shelter now offers to the public a low-cost clinic with full veterinarian services, a lost and found service, microchipping, and a pet food bank for those in need. They also have a fully stocked shelter store that carries food, clothing, accessories, and more for domestic animals.

When you first enter the office, you are greeted by Oliver, the shelter's 34-year-old Cockatoo who has been on the job for 29

years after his owner surrendered him. He will whistle, wish you Happy Birthday, and act silly for the kids. Ollie is a star in his own right!

Since HSVC has badged and sworn Humane Officers, they can remove animals from abusive or neglectful owners. Prosecution of these offenders often follows, but the main purpose of confiscating animals is to give them the humane life they deserve.

In 2017, when the Thomas Fire raged through the Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, it was the biggest fire in the state's history. Ultimately, it scorched 281,893 acres with much of the land burned being in the hills above Ventura, including thousands of acres around Ojai. People were forced to flee their homes, taking their animals with them. Hundreds of these animals were taken in by HSVC until their owners were able to return to their homes if the buildings survived the fire.

Several of the HSVC staff members could not get to their own homes due to roads closed by fire or firefighters and their equipment. They stayed at the shelter caring



for the animals that were flooding the facility. Many courageous citizens braved the fires to bring in much-needed supplies, so the animals stayed safe, fed, and cared for until the crisis abated. If it had not been for HSVC, there is no telling how many animals would have perished in the flames.

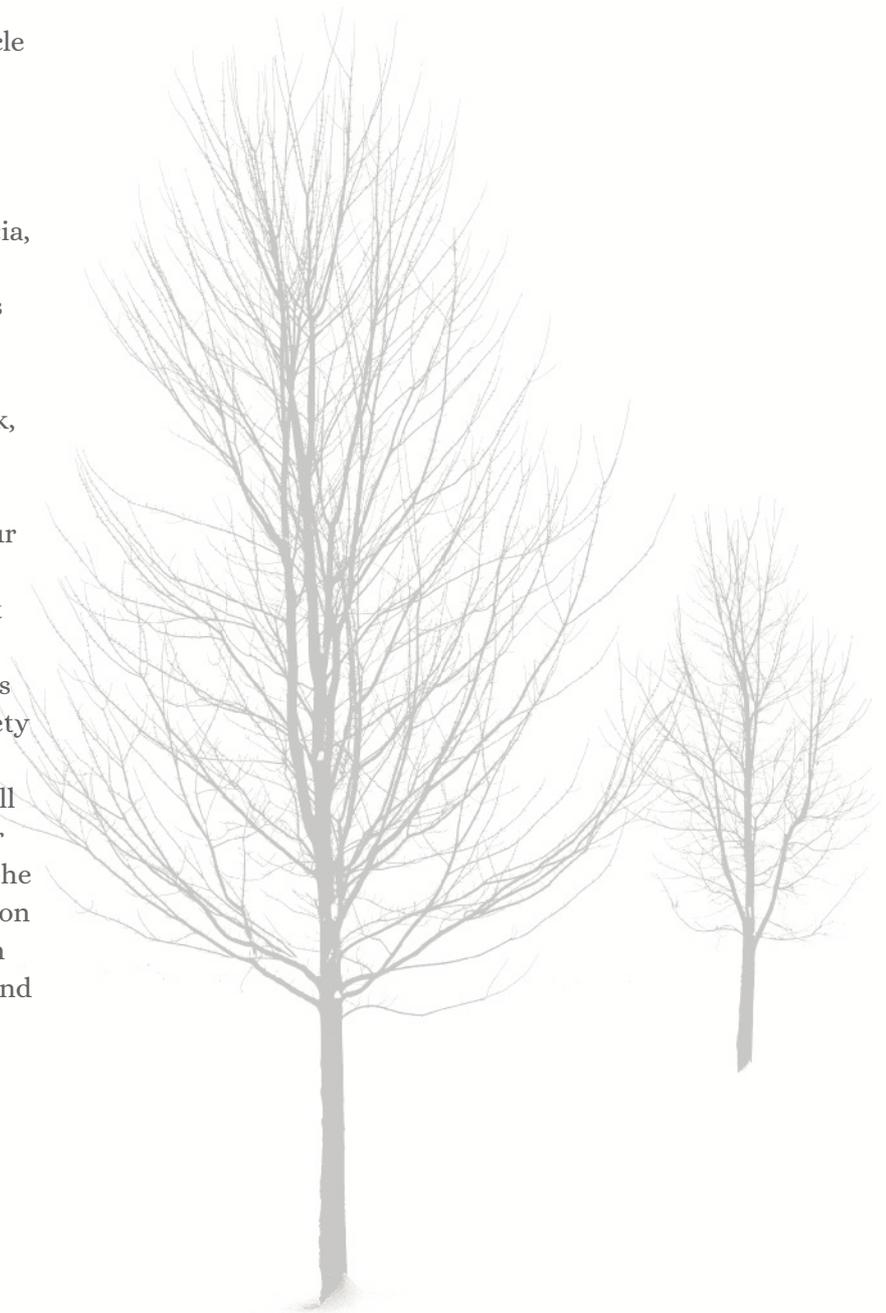
Tommy the horse was one lucky animal found and taken in by HSVC. He was wandering around upper Ojai, caked in mud, and burned. He was so dejected that he would not lift his head. After HSVC staff groomed him, gave him all the food he needed, provided him with medical care while safely housed in the HSVC's corrals, his spirit soon returned to him. He became a staff and volunteer favorite, and then a celebrity when he was featured in an article published by the Ventura County Star newspaper. It was this article that helped him find a forever home.

Anne Scioscia, the wife of the former California Angels Manager, Tommy Scioscia, read the article and decided to adopt him even though he was an estimated 25 years old and needed medical treatment for the rest of his days. She took Tommy to her horse farm, called Peck Farm, in Moorpark, CA where he will live in comfort until he dies.

Mrs. Scioscia stated, "I love him. He's our horse. He's everybody's horse. He's the Thomas Fire's horse. He's the phoenix that came out of the Thomas Fire."

Tommy is just another fantastic success story brought about by the Humane Society of Ventura County!

Despite the COVID pandemic, HSVC still rescues animals and still puts them up for adoption. Though they remain closed to the public, you can view their adoptable pets on their website (<https://www.hsvc.org>), then call to set up an appointment for a meet and greet session with your pet of choice.



Terrier on your Lap

James B. Nicola

You don't need a cat
with a dog like that.

Lucky Stroll, a True Tale

2003

One day while listening to the war I took the cocker spaniel for a long walk with my Walkman® and headset, which plugged snug into it with a long wire, so he could not hear what I heard (or so I thought) and certainly not understand, were he to overhear a bit. And Lucky was his name. When the news turned bloody terrible he trotted to a BUSH and then, as if on cue, simply peed. That merry movement made the GORE a little less unbearable to a soul as sensitive and sore as mine, so sore in need. How could a cocker spaniel know, I laughed, and dutifully stooped and scraffled him. When news more dire than deaths came on the radio, I sat, and Lucky went and pooped on that same bush (smart? or just rude, I thought), jumped on my lap, and chewed (it's true!) right through my Walkman® wire.

James B. Nicola is the author of six collections of poetry, the latest being Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense. His decades of working in the theater culminated in the nonfiction book Playing the Audience: The Practical Guide to Live Performance, which won a Choice award.

Animal Advice Article

Dead Dog Barking

Claudia Flisi

People measure time with little mechanical devices. I don't measure it at all. My time is completely mine for this moment that I am living, and I live minute by minute.

My human mom picked September 11 as my day to die. She said that the pain of losing me might blur into the cosmic agony of that date. But she was crying so hard the entire week that one circle on the calendar wouldn't have made a difference.

She had decided the day before when I was in the veterinarian's office getting another series of shots and that didn't seem to be working. My belly hurt, my legs moved stiffly and my throat was sore and scratchy. I didn't have the energy to raise my head to the one veterinarian assisting me and the others assisting her. I barely flinched when they gave me the sequence that had become almost routine – antibiotics, anti-inflammatory drugs, painkillers, cortisone.

I was losing weight by the hour, it seemed. I didn't want to eat because of constant nausea. Nausea made me thirsty, but I couldn't keep water down either. Since eating has been one of my favorite things in life – in addition to ear rubs from my mom and fast runs in the doggy park – I was beginning to feel anxious about what other pleasures might be denied me in the future.

The vet shook her head sadly. "This isn't helping. There is nothing more we can do. If you don't want Giada to suffer," she said, looking at my mom, not at me, "we can give her the shot right now while we have all the equipment on hand."

"No, no," mom said with a quivering voice. "I want my girl to die at home. Please give her enough painkillers so she will have one more peaceful night with me. Then you can come tomorrow afternoon."

Thank goodness for that postponement.

What had brought me to the brink of death? Well, I am a dog of "a certain age." My hearing has worsened in recent years and I have cataracts. I am stiff in the morning and can't jump up and down easily. Nevertheless, I loved my food, my toys, my walks, and, of course, my family. Old age didn't seem so bad . . . until the end of summer.

I didn't want to walk my usual, daily five kilometers because I felt tired all the time. My appetite was gone, I was drinking a lot of water and was continuously licking my lips from constant thirst.

Mom realized something was seriously wrong the day I got out of bed and threw up everything I had eaten the day before and did not want to move after that. She waited until the evening to offer me some food, a mix of kibble and tuna, but I snubbed it. She then tried peanut butter, every dog's ALL-TIME FAVORITE FOOD, but I still wasn't hungry.

When my humans took me to the clinic again, the sonogram showed my stomach lining was thick, irregular, inflamed, and covered in dark spots that also appeared in my pancreas and the liver -- all organs where you don't want suspicious spots. The vets and my humans looked worried. I picked up their vibes and began to get nervous, too.

They wondered if the inflammation was from a stomach irritation and wanted to know what I had eaten recently. Well, not much. Then they gave me an IV, an anti-inflammatory for my stomach, and a painkiller. The vets told my humans to give me small amount of water and food tonight and only boiled chicken tomorrow.

Something worked because I walked out of the office when my humans had carried me in before. By the time I arrived home, though, I was exhausted and flopped down on the rug. I wanted water, but couldn't walk the few steps to my dish.

Throughout the night I was restless – my belly was still bloated and painful. We went to see the vets again in the next morning, and they saw right away how difficult walking was for me. My spine curved to the (right or left) and my movements were sluggish.

They did a blood test, thinking the inflammation was probably the result of a tumor and wanted me to come in for an IV drip twice a day for the next five days to keep me hydrated. To make things easier, they stuck a plastic catheter in my front right paw so they wouldn't have to jab me anew every time I came into the office. I hated it and tried to pull away the tape used to hold the device in place.

The back-and-forth to the clinic twice a day was taxing. Mom carried me up and down the stairs to the garage and lifted me in and out of the car. Her arms jabbed my swollen belly every time. When we arrived, I received more shots that burned my muscles.

During one of these longer visits, the vets talked to Mom during my IV drip. I heard them use words like “euthanasia” and “cremation.” Mom said she didn't want my “ashes” because she wanted to preserve the “DNA” in my hair. “Ashes are dead, but DNA is alive,” she said.

This talk of “ashes” was unnerving. I didn't feel at all good, but I was still me -- alive, though, not as lively. Why was Mom making an association between the living me and inert ashes? No, no, no, that would never do. I felt too weak to protest but did not like the direction of their conversation at all.

The vets did another sonogram on the morning of the fifth day. The results showed a marked improvement in my peritonitis – less inflammation and fewer suspicious spots. My stomach lining was still abnormally thick and my pancreas was irregular, but altogether, they pronounced

my innards to be in better shape than the previous week. They removed my plastic catheter, and I was so energized, I wolfed down my chicken burger after we got home.

For the next two days, I was what mom called, “Giada lite.” I slowly ate the food she gave me and rarely finished the entire meal. I found some pleasure in one of my favorite activities, sniffing out garbage in the grass. It was fun to hunt for bits of food, even if I didn't intend to eat it.

The crisis came three days after my last IV. Walking was painful that afternoon. Still, I ate boiled chicken and potatoes in the evening and went to bed feeling okay. At 3:30 am, I woke up and knew something wasn't right. My belly hurt again, and I was uncomfortable on both my bed and the floor. I padded through the house trying to find a place to rest. I returned to mom's bed. She felt me shaking from pain and tried to cover me, thinking that the warmth of the blanket might buffer me from the icy needles lacerating my stomach.

The next morning, she saw that I had thrown up everything from the day before on a rug. Off to the clinic again. The first thing the vets did was a blood test to check my kidneys. Older dogs often experience kidney failure, they explained, but my kidney functionality was fine. All three of the women at the clinic were stymied. They agreed on what the problem might be but not what it was. I went home with the same pill regime as before.

The next day was Sunday and it was raining. There's a human song that went, “rainy days and Sundays always get me down,” and that's the way I felt. I could barely walk. I didn't want to eat. I curled up in pain and wheezed like a nonagenarian human rasping away in a rocking chair. Mom brought me to the clinic again. The one on duty this Sunday was the head veterinarian, the leader-of-the-pack. She also couldn't figure out why I didn't want to eat or why I was so listless. “Her stomach is inflamed, but there is no rupture of an organ,” she told mom.

I followed her with my eyes as she spoke. When she opened a can of chicken shreds,

I snapped to attention. She offered me a few bits and I scarfed them down. She gave the rest of the can to mom with the instructions to feed me a spoonful or so every hour. If I could eat without throwing up, then I had more quality time ahead. “If not,” said the vet, “it’s time for time’s up.”

I slept well that night but woke feeling listless. The chicken that had caught my attention the day before no longer seemed meaningful, so I didn’t want to eat, go outside, or move around. All I wanted to do was curl up in a dark dry quiet place and lie still.

At around 4:30 pm, the pain returned and I began to shake. Mom brought me in for more pain killer.

It was Tuesday, September 10. I had an uninterrupted sleep; it’s wonderful what a strong painkiller can do to facilitate sweet dreams. I woke feeling rested, but not good. I curled up in the study and didn’t move the entire day, except once when I got up to drink some water and threw it up.

Mom kept shaking her head when she looked at me. Her eyes were wet. She said this was “my sign” for what she should do. She brought me to the vet that evening. I heard their conversation. The words “cremation” and “euthanasia” came up again. I did not like the sound of those words, or the morose way mom used them. The vet offered to give me the shot then and there. Mom refused and said she should come to the house the following afternoon.

Everyone looked glum. At that point, they didn’t see me anymore. They saw Suffering Dog, but not me.

I was unsure how to change their minds. I still wasn’t hungry, but I had to show mom that my time hadn’t come. When we returned home, I jumped up onto the sofa in the living room. I haven’t had the energy to do that in weeks. After my humans finished dinner, I asked mom to come into the bedroom and lie down with me on the bed. We snuggled together, her arm wrapped gently around my body. She was still sad because she was sure that the next day was going to be my journey across the Rainbow Bridge. But I had other ideas.

I slept peacefully that night. The morning

of September 11, I raised my head and looked straight at mom. “You think I am ready to throw in the towel,” I thought, “drop by the wayside, kick the bucket, all those human expressions for expiration date? Not yet!”

Then to show her, I ate the bits of chicken and ham she offered me with my pills wrapped inside. The bribery was blatant, but delicious. I kept my head up as we went for a walk. I raised and lowered my muzzle to follow interesting scents of garbage as we strode through the leaves, pounced on a stinky bit of discarded cheese, and barked at a couple of dogs. I did one small solid bowel movement. Coming back from our short excursion, I propelled myself up the curb and the first step of the building unassisted.

I raised my head and looked straight at mom. “You think I am ready to throw in the towel,” I thought, “drop by the wayside, kick the bucket, all those human expressions for expiration date? Not yet!”

Then mom offered me bits of a turkey burger, watching apprehensively. Would I eat? I consumed everything in the dish and looked up, wanting more.

Now fed, exercised, and feeling smug, I curled up on the little rug in mom’s study, head down and ears up. I wanted mom to see me as my normal, relaxed self so she would cancel today’s appointment with the Grim Reaper.

And she did! She called the vet at 2 pm and explained that I was moving around and eating a little. It wasn’t enough to declare me fully recovered, but more than enough to postpone that appointment. To show mom that she had made the right decision, I walked outside with her an hour later, all the way down the block. She had to carry me for a bit at first, but I made the trip back entirely on my own. I reminded myself to keep my head up when we walked.

We had to come up with a “new normal” for me. September 11 was a “good” day for me, but my diet, exercise, and sleep patterns

had to be reorganized. I wasn't ever going to walk or eat as much as I did before, and my sleep might be interrupted from now on. I was always going to be something less than what I was. I was still "Giada lite."

I regained some of my strength over the next few days, enough that I could pull gently on my leash. Most of my appetite returned. Sometimes, I felt like going out on the balcony and barking at the world. Mom said that was okay. She checked in with the vets by phone, and they advised me to take things easy, just the way I wanted.

A week later, we went on a walk and encountered a woman who knew I had been

sick. She commented on how well I looked, how lively. She petted me and then turned to mom. "Giada is living on borrowed time," she said. "Take advantage of it."

I don't know what she meant by "borrowed time." Borrowed from whom? Borrowed from what? As far as I know, my time is what it is; not an instant more or less.

Mom pets me a lot these days. Dad ruffles my fur and calls me *Miracolo a Milano* after a famous Italian film from 1951. I don't watch movies and I don't know what a miracle is, but I do love the petting and ruffling. I lick their hands, stare in their eyes, and live the minute. What else is there?



Photo by Claudia Flisi

Claudia Flisi is a dual national, Italian and American, living in Milan, Italy. Her work has appeared for decades in the International New York Times, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Newsweek, Variety, MS., and dozens of other publications worldwide. She has visited more than 100 countries, fallen off horses on six continents, and trained dogs in three languages. She is also the author of a children's book about dogs, Crystal and Jade. For more about her and some of her recent clips, check her out at www.paroleanima.com, or Google her name.

Still Life, circa 1989

Marcie Roman

Brandi and I sprawl on the couches in my living room and toss a paper towel roll back and forth. The game's a good diversion from what we had been doing. Something I imagine lots of rising college sophomores are doing over summer break. We'd been lying around doing nothing.

I'd already completed my one mandatory chore after my mother dropped off two grocery bags, yelled "Get the freezer stuff put away," and raced off to an aerobics class. I think she'd hoped the screen door would punctuate her command, but it had whinnied shut, more comma than exclamation point.

Nevertheless, I'd done as told. Or tried to.

The walls of our freezer are layered with about six inches of frost, so I'd had to wrestle the vegetable bags to get them to fit. My mom buys them family-sized, even though it's just the two of us. She eats vegetables with every meal, including breakfast, and you can't walk through our kitchen without getting a whiff of cruciferous steam. I've gotten used to the smell. Over time, it seems, you can get used to anything.

She'd bought some boxes of mac and cheese for me after I told her my body wouldn't be able to safely transition back to college food without ingesting a few pre-packaged meals each week. I'd placed the boxes on the one shelf I can reach without a chair, next to the dented can of baked beans that neither my mom nor I can get ourselves to throw away. Same with the razor in the bathroom medicine cabinet, its blades flecked with rust as if last used by a bearded Tin Man.

"Good for the abs," I say, as I hurl the super-sized towel roll—also from the grocery bag—toward Brandi's open hands.

She sends it back with a spin. "Biceps too!"

Brandi and I had challenged ourselves to be more active this summer, but so far we've only succeeded in walking the five blocks to the community pool where we slather on oil and aim to transform our skin into the gorgeous tones of women from the Caribbean. Our thighs make the sound of ripped tape whenever we change sides. We don't swim because someone told Pam's mother who told Pam who told Brandi that chlorine is highly toxic.

Brandi wants to have kids someday, so she worries about her ovaries. I have zero interest in kids, but I don't want to get sick. The same reason that my mother gorges on vegetables and goes to the gym every day. Sometimes twice. Also, I have that kind of brownish-blond hair that can turn green.

How Brandi can still want kids after spending all these days at the pool is beyond me. There's always some kid crying from a skinned knee or screaming that the pavement burns. The extra-bratty ones bang our chairs with inflatable donuts, and splash us when they jump in with Munchkin-sized donuts strapped to each arm. It's because of these kids that the pool needs to be heavily chlorinated. The other day a kid actually yelled, "Mommy, I made PEEEEEE-PEEEEE," and she didn't even lecture him on how a community pool is not some oversized toilet.

Every now and then, Brandi and I borrow my mom's car to get a frozen yogurt at the mall, but we can suck on ice cubes dipped in sugar for free. My job in high school—the one I thought I was going back to, as a cashier at Super Foods—went to the manager's sister-in-law, who'd gotten bored with being a stay-at-home.

Brandi had gotten sick of the grease layer that came with franchise jobs and had been counting on me to get her in at Super Foods. She's still angling for Bakery even though I've told her the only way the old ladies who run it will leave is when they've keeled into their batter. Brandi's parents, both police officers, are always lecturing on "the value of hard work," which is why we use my place for lounging. Plus, she only has the one couch, and it's usually taken over by whichever parent isn't on shift.

The roll of towels soaring overhead looks a bit like a wingless albino goose. This makes me think of the actual goose (non-albino, wings attached) that's been hanging out in the tiny park that we pass on the way to the pool.

"I wonder if it's injured," I say.

Brandi examines the towel roll. "Nope, still flight-worthy."

She tosses it lightly this time, and I have to stretch to catch it. (I forgot to mention that we decided the carpet was hot lava.)

"I'm talking about the goose. The one in the park."

The goose doesn't seem injured, just rooted. It picks at the grass and eyes passersby, who mostly ignore it as if the goose is just your average panhandler pigeon. If you ask me, the goose is more regal than a pigeon. If I were still taking art classes, I might have even set up an easel to paint it. I assume the goose got separated from its flock (or whatever groups of geese are called—I can only pull up enough from tenth-grade biology to remember that isn't it). Each time we pass, I scan the skies, hoping to spot a formation for the goose to thumb a ride with. I want to tape a sign on its back, Canada or Bust.

Brandi and I drift into a comfortable silence, each lost in our thoughts. Being quietly prone always gets me thinking. Sometimes at night, when my mind won't stop racing, I get up to use the bathroom even if I don't have to go. Or switch beds. As if, by doing so, my crazy thoughts might wonder where I've disappeared to and seek a different brain to use for their relay race.

My room has a pair of twin beds because my parents had planned to have another kid and—given our two-bedroom house—figured it was best to get me used to the idea of a roommate sooner than later. But then the other kid didn't

happen and that awful summer I turned thirteen, I pushed the beds together and asked my mom for queen-size sheets.

"There's nothing wrong with your sheets. Don't be frivolous," she said.

It had been a hard year, so I didn't mouth off, but the bedsheets—arched rainbows against a puffy-clouded blue sky—must have been a frivolous purchase when she'd gotten them. Surely it would have been cheaper, and more practical, to purchase a neutral solid that didn't call attention to itself. I'd tried washing them more often hoping they'd wear out, but the sheets must be two-parts poly and one-part steel, or it's all that flame retardant that gets added, because they're as sturdy as they were when I'd gotten them for my ninth birthday.

Thankfully, I'd saved enough from Super Foods to buy new sheets for college. Navy blue ones from the deep discount shelf that I figured would match whatever my roommate brought. The first time I washed them, the color leached, and they became the dusky version of my sheets at home. It actually made me sentimental. Until I remembered all the clutter I'd also left behind: the school papers and messy drawers and the single Ked that I refuse to get rid of because I'm still convinced the other one will turn up. Plus there's the mess of thoughts to pick up too, like the incomplete Rubik's Cube that forever taunts from my desk.

The biggest thought I've been having this summer is about my mom. How maybe, when I'm away at school, she'll meet someone, or even re-marry. Not that there've been any indicators, but I get that it's no fun to sleep alone. When I was younger, I used to pretend there was someone sleeping in the second bed, otherwise, I'd worry that some stranger would climb into it during the night (crazy, I know). So, I created Flora, a sweet, protective, talking Panda Bear, and shaped her form out of pillows. That was all I needed to drift off: a pillow mound and Flora's imaginary "Sleep tight."

One night, I woke up and saw an actual figure in the bed. The cough told me it was my dad. His limbs spilled from the mattress like an overstuffed sandwich. In the morning, he was gone. I'm still not sure I didn't imagine it.

"Silly goose." Brandi calls on her next toss.

"Goosebumps," I say and send the roll her way.

"Wild-goose chase."

"Mother Goose."

Brandi tells me that's a disqualification since it isn't an actual idiom. "Your goose is cooked," she adds and wins the bonus round.

I wonder what the goose will do for food when it runs out of grass. The area bordering the park is all concrete and asphalt. Would a goose know to worry? How do you help something that doesn't know it needs to be helped?

My mom had been on my father for almost a year to go to the doctor and get his cough listened to.

"It's just the flu," he said.

"I'm overworked," he said.

"I'm fine."

And perhaps he was fine, but fine in the way of damp tissue paper, or baby hairs, or the cells in his lungs—those rebels, those mutants—that when banded together become the opposite of fine. A mass.

It's why I'm never going to have kids. What if I die? I mean, of course, I'm going to die someday. But what if it happens when the kid is young? Not worth it. I'd rather get a cat. I'm really a dog person, but a cat seems more resourceful. If I die, the cat would find

a mouse hole or claw its way into the kitchen cabinets. Probably even figure out the can opener. A dog would wait at the door, the pain of missing its master greater than hunger or thirst.

What's the goose doing for water? The temperature has been in the mid-eighties and the humidity makes it feel ten degrees hotter.

I sit up and clutch the towel roll to my chest like a teddy bear.

Brandi sits up too.

"What is it, Jill?"

"We have to do something for the goose. It needs water and food. It needs its flock. They aren't supposed to be alone."

I don't know this to be a fact, just that I'd never seen geese outside of their formation except for an occasional straggler flapping to catch up, like a kid picking up speed after stopping to tie a shoe.

"I think a group of geese is called a gaggle."

(Brandi had done better in Bio.)

She picks up a second roll—our back-up in case the first one got lava-ed (or worse,



fell so far out of reach that we'd have to stand).

"I get that you want to help, Jill, but I don't think there's anything we can do." She mimics my hold, a sympathy hug communicated the way I've heard messages are sent by trees, no touching required. (Come to think of it, the towels were likely harvested from a century old oak.)

"Maybe the goose has a reason for hanging around. Like it could be following some goose version of the trashcan rule."

We'd learned that rule from Brandi's dad when he came to our second-grade classroom to talk about safety. If you ever got separated from a parent, you should find the nearest trashcan and stay put since that makes it easier to be found. At the State Fair, I'm always spotting some kid gripping a trashcan in one hand and something fried on a stick in the other.

"That's your best answer? Leave well enough alone? I know how that turns out."

I lie down and press the towels to my forehead. A kid in my dorm told me that pressure on the forehead can help generate ideas. He might have been messing with me, but it did help me come up with a last-minute essay topic for American Lit.

What comes to me is my dad's voice telling me that maybe what I need is a change in perspective.

Dad was never the type to play active games like tag or hide-and-go-seek. That just wasn't his style. But he always let me help him with the Word Search books he'd pick up at the gas station when he stopped for cigarettes. If I got stuck on a word, he taught me that the trick was to look at it from a different angle. I'd turn the book upside down, or sideways, but what worked best was when I climbed up on the tabletop and stared down at it. (I doubt I would've been able to keep this up if my involvement lasted past puberty.) Then I'd yell "Bingo" and crouch so he could trail my finger with his blue Bic pen.

Now, I try to imagine myself floating above the goose's grassy patch, then up higher until I spot the community pool, still higher and I can see the football field with Wilfred the Bear glaring from the turf, and, just past that, Quarry Lake where cookie-cutter houses circle the development's namesake.

Bingo!

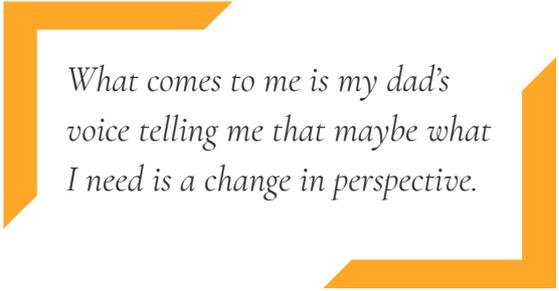
The man-made Quarry Lake was a popular hangout for us in high school, back when the

homes were just skeletal playhouses that seemed set there for our amusement. I was sure I'd seen ducks in the water, so there must be geese too.

A plan hatches. When my mom gets home, Brandi and I will borrow the car. We'll get the goose into the back seat (that part's a little vague, but perhaps can be achieved with a choreographed flapping of arms and some type of vegetative lure, to be determined). Then we'll drive the goose to what is surely the equivalent of a gosling trashcan. True, our goose might not find its original gaggle, but at least it will have the bare necessities. At least it won't be alone.

The indentation from my grip vanishes from the roll as Brandi accepts my plan the way a good friend does by nodding and "Mhmm-ing." When I hear the back door whinny open, I order Brandi to "Pass," and with a roll under each arm charge into the kitchen.

My mom stands in front of the open freezer. A circle of sweat marks the back of her shirt (she doesn't like to shower at the gym). I tell her I need to borrow the car. When she asks why, I'm honest but casual, as if mentioning a trip to the library.



What comes to me is my dad's voice telling me that maybe what I need is a change in perspective.

She turns to look at me.

"Did you try calling the police?"

I assume she's goosing me on. (Missed that one!)

"I doubt the goose is threatening anything but the grass."

With a cauliflower bag cooling the top of her head, she turns and sticks her face back into the freezer.

"They can probably get you over to someone in animal control who knows about this kind of thing."

I hadn't thought to try to find an expert. I know from experience that experts don't always have the answers. Although I guess the doctors were expert enough to let us know that nothing could be done. They gave my dad two months.

Bingo.

"Brandi," I yell. "What's the non-emergency number for the police?"

She shouts it out.

The buttons on the kitchen phone sing a tune as I dial. The woman who answers hears me out and, to her credit, doesn't tell me I'm wasting her time. She gives me a different number to call. This time I sit on hold.

My mother removes the bag from her head and pours some of it into a pot of boiling water. She walks back to the fridge and takes out a bag of lettuce, shakes some into a bowl. (Aha, goose lure!) She puts away the half-empty bag of cauliflower. Tucks the lettuce into the crisper. Wipes the counter with a rag. Sorts through the day's mail. I feel as if I'm an audience member and can imagine her going through this same routine when I'm not there, night after night, week after week, month after lonely month.

Brandi comes into the kitchen and I gladly switch to an image from high school with Brandi and me making a ruckus and my mom laughing and telling us to get out of her hair.

"Hello."

The voice on the phone startles me. I rush to explain the situation.

"Sounds like a gander with a nesting mate nearby," the woman says pleasantly. She tells me that a gander will stay in the area to defend a hidden nest until the rest of his family is ready to travel. "Did you know geese mate for life? Some grieve and stay widowed when a mate dies, but this gander sounds content. I'd say he's just holding up his end of the bargain."

"Thank you," I say and hang up before the woman can continue her nature show.

"What'd they say?" Brandi asks.

"You were right. We should just let it be."

My mom notices the towels in my arms and gives me a look that says, Is that where they belong?

As I make my way across the room, I tap the towels on the familiar items—my mom's chair, my chair, toaster, bulletin board, the plastic hook for keys—each time muttering "Duck." When I reach my mom, I tap her back, just a fleeting touch, and whisper "Goose," then I place the towels in the cabinet under the sink, so she can find them when needed.

Marcie Roman's short stories have appeared in CALYX, upstreet, Split Lip, Black Fox, and The Gravity of the Thing, among others. Her novel, Journey to the Parallels, won the 2020 Kraken Book Prize for Middle Grade fiction and is forthcoming from Fitzroy Books. She has an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and can be found online at marcieroman.com.



How Cats Give Birth

Rebecca Ruth Gould

As soon as they reach the ripe old age of six
 months, they've matured into women of childbearing age,
 expectant mothers,
 whose bodies shelter multitudes.
 Kittens crawl out of the cat's vagina:
 aliens limping for the first time on earth.
 The mother miraculously knows what to do.
 She rips open the amniotic sac,
 presses her babies to her breast,
 sits them on top of her as they suckle.
 Mother to daughter.
 Chest to chest.
 The smell is as unmistakable as my beloved whose sheets I refuse to remove.
 (May his scent forever haunt these empty rooms.)
 As the milk flows,
 she shelters her kittens within the warmth of her tits.
 Although her blind babies cannot see,
 their fur nestles against the one
 place on earth they can call home.
 Like them, I know the one soul on earth
 whose body is my abode
 whose eyes lit my world
 like a scorching fire
 until even I—childless—could see
 the millennial wisdom of cats
 giving birth
 to posterity.

Self-identifying as a neurodiverse, two-spirit, elder storyteller deeply rooted in the roar and lore that's become Portlandia of The Left Coast, Lindsey Morrison Grant attributes success and survival (if not salvation) to superb supports, mindfulness practice, and daily creative expression in words, sounds, and images.

Self-identifying as a neurodiverse, two-spirit, elder storyteller deeply rooted in the roar and lore that's become Portlandia of The Left Coast, Lindsey Morrison Grant attributes success and survival (if not salvation) to superb supports, mindfulness practice, and daily creative expression in words, sounds, and images.



Photo by Lindsey Morrison Grant

*Mari-Carmen Marín was born in Málaga, Spain, but moved to Houston, TX, in 2003, where she has found her second home. She is a professor of English at Lone Star College—Tomball, and enjoys dancing, drawing, reading, and writing poetry in her spare time. Writing poetry is her comfy chair in front of a fireplace on a stormy winter day. Her poetry book, *Swimming, Not Drowning*, has been published by Legacy Book Press in 2021.*

Mi Chiquitilla

Mari-Carmen Marín

For Chiqui (April 16, 2005 – June 13 2021)

You found me when I was trying to find
a place to call home—a new city and country,
Spain still claiming my heart.

I heard your meowing, a thread of sound that pulled
my eyes to the opposite side of the street to see a fluffy
yellow ball of hair with a broken tail—its lower half
hanging
down.

Your little body moved towards me, and without a pause
in your chatter—you were always a talker, a cotorrilla—
you walked
around my feet
until I bent over, looked for other cats whom you
might belong. Seeing none, I picked you up, decided
to make you my kitty cat—or rather, wasn't it you
who decided to make me your mami?

You taught me that that trying to contain your energy
was wanting to trap a storm in a bottle, that you were
no piece of clay I could mold into a cat I could display.

You ran like a race car over kitchen counters, nightstands, couches;
you climbed the curtains—your rock walls—until they fell; you hid
behind books in shelves when children or strangers were in the house;

Old age made you mellow, fearless, wiser, and you let Jackson as a toddler
play rough, pushing you down to kiss your forehead, holding you up like
Simba being presented to the Pride Landers, his stuffed animals.

You decided when you needed
the warmth of our laps, our patient
ears, our help to add food or water
to your bowls and open the backyard
door. You decided until you were sixteenth,
when cancer invaded your organs, decided for you.

An early morning of June, you told us you were leaving
us. Your body was still, your slow breathing the very thin
thread connecting you to this life. Your silence spoke
pain and fatigue. It was my turn to talk: to tell you
how much I loved you; how my heart had expanded

to include you, mi Chiquitilla. You knew.
You shook your ears.

Roosters and Roses

Kate Mayer Mangan



*A*pril of 2020, and I was struggling to keep trudging. It was piercing, as I was trying to keep going not only for myself, but for my boys. Quarantined from school, they looked to me to sort out overwhelming problems too big for any one of us to fix. Australia was burning, the creatures were going extinct, a virus raged. My list of scrawny tasks felt more meaningless than ever. What was the point of wiping surfaces or forcing children to learn fractions while the world crumbled? I couldn't say.

Then, a rooster appeared in the yard across the street. This was somewhat surprising, as our neighbors do not keep chickens. They do occasionally bring home live roosters—to kill— but we had never seen any of the birds before. The condemned roosters would crow for an hour or two, hidden from sight, then fall silent. I assumed that, like his predecessors, this fellow would be dead before sunset.

I don't know if I stopped to look at him because I was sick of the news or tired of

scrolling or just bored. Whatever it was, my whole family—husband, two boys, me, and the dog—dropped our tasks and gathered at the window to watch this splashy orange fellow peck at the frosty earth. He was gorgeous: shiny copper feathers, bold red head, and on his chest a pattern of green and black like dragon scales. Regal. When he wasn't eating, he'd stand with his head back, face raised to the sun, chest puffed out, often on one foot, as though proclaiming, Here I am, look at me.



At some point during the morning, he escaped from the neighbors' killing yard and set up shop under our bird feeder. The boys pressed their faces against the window and giggled while they watched him. He feasted on the birdseed that the cardinals, finches, and blue jays dropped. I found myself grinning every time I passed the window and saw him guarding his territory against squirrels and mourning doves.

"Tell us about him, Mom!" the kids begged. I didn't know anything about roosters, never having paid them notice, so we looked him online. We discovered that he was a Rhode Island Red, an impressive beast. They can survive the cold down to 20 below, they fiercely protect their flocks, and their feathers are so sensitive that they can detect changes in air current and vibration. Perhaps that was how this bird knew we were trying to sneak up on him before he could see us. He was also very fast. Nobody was catching this guy.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a mantra: "Breathing in, I notice that my in-breath has become deep. Breathing out, I notice that my out-breath has become slow. Deep. Slow." Deep, slow noticing may be the foyer to hope, where we stand just before we begin to defeat despondence. My mother knew this. Pausing to notice this bird, I remembered that, when a hard rain or a hail was predicted, she cut rosebuds from the garden. She would fill pretty vases—often old sake bottles in rich blues and greens—with water and place the cut stems in them. She would turn the vase, looking at the bud from all sides, then gently ran

her fingers along the petals to get to know their seams and edges. Slowly and tenderly, she would slide her fingernail under one of the petals to see if it was ready to open. If it wasn't, she would stop. Maybe try later. But if there was any give, she would gently loosen the petals to coax open the blossom. "It's a little nudge for the flower," she said, "to help it bloom sooner."

By dinner, the boys had named the rooster. They tested out "Dominic," but it didn't stick. The bird fanned his tail feathers, tucked his chin, and charged a large crow who dared try for a fallen seed. After the crow flapped away, the rooster was no longer Dominic. He became Reggie.

"Don't get too attached," my husband warned when he learned of the name. "That bird is going to end up as somebody's dinner. An owl, a fox, heck, a big raccoon, will get him. Or the neighbors will hunt him down."

Although I nodded, I pictured my mother's smile when her rosebuds bloomed, and I wondered whether attachment might be exactly what we needed. The boys seemed to think so. They rolled their eyes at their father and ignored his warning. Maybe they understood something I had forgotten—that loving, even if it risks pain, also means beauty, laughter, hope. (Or maybe they didn't fully understand the probability that their new friend would get eaten.) We adults were still tightly guarded, condemning ourselves to the duller, more insidious pain of not engaging.



It took my husband and me until the next morning to admit how fond we'd become of Reggie. He woke us, vigorously announcing his presence outside our bedroom window. And we laughed. A fingernail had slipped under the tight petals around our hearts and nudged us open. We started to plan his rescue. We couldn't keep him because we'd be reported to the police for violating noise ordinances. Plus, the dog salivated whenever

he saw Reggie.

I began reaching out to dozens of humane societies and animal sanctuaries. All were kind, apologetic, and far past their capacities for roosters. There are legions of unwanted roosters, many casualties of the backyard chicken movement. People buy baby chicks before they can tell the sex. Then, when they realize they've bought boys who will never lay, they abandon the birds. Few people want a rooster.

I felt like a failed telemarketer. Rejected again and again. Nobody would or could take Reggie. Maybe my husband was right; maybe we shouldn't have named him. Then finally, just before despair set in, I found Angel Eyes Farm. It was run by Debbie Bowers, who started rescuing animals after her son died of leukemia. She said she did it as a way to not to go crazy when she lost her child. Another mother curing despair by saving lovely things.

Debbie said she would take Reggie if we could catch him ourselves, but she seemed to doubt that we'd manage. Semi-wild roosters are wily, so our only chance was to wait until dark when he slept. And we needed to get him on the first try. If we missed, he'd wise up and become virtually impossible to catch.

At dusk, Reggie hopped up on the windowsill behind the lilacs and settled in. When the night was deep and he was sleeping soundly, we made our move. We pulled out our camping headlamps, poked holes in a Home Depot moving box, and plotted the exact angles of our ambush. My husband crept up from one side, and I waited with the box. The red light from his headlamp bobbed closer to Reggie as he slept on. I held my breath. I anticipated squawking and flapping, a mess of feathers, and spurs and blood. But my husband simply wrapped his arms gently around Reggie, who gobbled a bit, and slid as easily into his box as my mother's stems slid into their vases.

Once we had taped up the box, I peeked through a hole, and he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. He was so pretty. I wanted to stroke his feathers, but I didn't. More than I wanted to touch him, I wanted him to feel safe. Saved. Neither my husband nor I

mentioned returning Reggie to our neighbors' yard. We smiled at each other and wished Reggie a good sleep.

The next morning was sunny and cool when we drove Reggie to the farm. A huge Gampr dog announced our arrival. As we waited for Debbie, we watched the residents of Angel Eyes: a white peacock stretched, dozens of ducks waddled about, a pig ambled across the yard. The kids laughed and pointed. Somewhere, out of sight, a rooster crowed.

Debbie emerged, smiling. She had peaceful eyes and strong arms. I recognized in her a ferocity threaded through with tenderness that was familiar. My mother had been like that: her eyes misted easily but, beneath, were steady and resolute. With a catch in my throat, I breathed in the crisp spring air and straightened my back, glad we'd named Reggie and glad we'd brought him here.

Debbie opened her arms to take Reggie. The boys said good-bye through a gap in the box. "See ya, buddy," they whispered, holding my hands. I hoped for a climactic release scene, perhaps with Reggie running across the dirt to join his new friends, but this was still the real world. Reggie had to go into quarantine to avoid infecting the rest of the flock. Better quarantine than the guillotine.

The relief was short-lived. Driving home, less than a mile from Angel Eyes, we passed a big sheet of plywood with hand-painted white letters that read: FOR SALE FRESH LOCAL CHICKEN MEAT. I sighed.

For a moment, I couldn't decide if this one rooster's life was irrelevant and trivial in the face of a global pandemic, millions of chickens slaughtered every day, and the hottest year on record, or if it was essential precisely because of those facts. One soul saved against so much suffering and death, one soul that brought joy and beauty, one soul that I cared about. I decided that's essential even, or maybe especially, now. Before Reggie pranced into our yard, just a few days earlier, I had been caught in a pervasive lie: that only huge problems are worth tackling and that only huge differences worth making. That nothing

small matters. But if that is true, then rescuing a single rooster or a single rose doesn't matter at all. And I know it does, because I did not feel despondent even after seeing the sign. I felt engaged, connected, awake. Reggie had reminded me that the size of the dent we make in a problem does not determine what matters. What matters, what safeguards and sparks vibrancy, is noticing, then protecting, little patches of beauty, grace, and laughter.

Driving home, the sun filtering through the still winter-bare branches, I thought of my mother's fingertip sliding beneath a butter-yellow petal, of my husband's arms looping around Reggie, of Debbie staying sane with her rescue animals, and I smiled. By rescuing Reggie, I remembered what my mother had taught me long ago. Rain and hail and catastrophe will destroy so much, and you will never be able to save everything. But you can protect a few roses

or a rooster, and that is the antidote to despondence. That day, and when I remember the lessons of Reggie and my mother's roses, the trudging goes a little easier, maybe even giving way to gliding.

Kate Mayer Mangan lives in Western Pennsylvania with her husband, two boys, and rescue mutt, and she works as a lawyer. To date, her writing has appeared mainly in legal documents, though she has written about well-being in The Huffington Post, Lawyerist, Women Lawyers' Journal, and elsewhere. This is her first creative non-fiction work.





Contest Winner

The Harbinger

Maggie Nerz Iribarne

Usually in the dream, the black cat sat in front of her, its golden eyes steady and serene, never blinking. The cat seemed to say, “Wake up! Look at me!” Sometimes the cat ran around the furniture in Diedre’s trailer, knocking over chairs, jumping on the bed and couch, even switching on the faucets. *Wake up! Wake up!* Sometimes, like tonight, Diedre did wake up. The cat did not seem to want her to sleep.

Diedre got up from the bed to go through her ritual of fear-filled motions: peep out the metal blinds, listen for arguing or screaming or howling, convince herself of impending danger, check and recheck the door lock. This time, she pushed a chair up against the door, tilted, and wedged it under the knob. She walked along the length of her trailer, felt the windows, making sure they were secure. Wide awake and agitated, Diedre reached for her latest romance novel, *Love by Candlelight*. She turned back the covers, slipped into bed, and read.

She awoke to bright light from the window and bedside lamp, the glowing

memory of her recurring black cat dream. But she had no time to think about cats. She needed to get up, make her instant coffee, have her first cigarette, and get moving. She had a bus to catch, houses to clean.

At the bus stop, she took a long drag on her cigarette and pulled her sweater around her bony body. Her tongue ran along her one front tooth, explored the hole where her other front tooth had been, her battle wound, her shame.

The bus finally lumbered up, screeched to a halt, its doors opening with that sucking sound. Diedre flashed her pass to the driver who greeted her with his cemented-on scowl.

There were five old ladies on Diedre's weekly cleaning roster-today's-Mrs. Sommers.

Diedre entered through the back door and collected her supplies stored in a closet. She polished and scrubbed and wiped, surface by surface. She made her way to the master bedroom where she found the curtains closed and the light soft and dreamy. Exhausted, Diedre wished she could lay back on the divan and take a snooze. But the smell of urine and mothballs took over her nostrils and compelled her to clean.

Mrs. Sommers, alone in her double bed, the bed she'd shared with her late husband for fifty years, turned and muttered, rolling over and opening her tissue paper lids, her marbly eyeballs turned to observe Diedre.

"Who are you?" Mrs. Sommers croaked.

"Diedre, the cleaning lady," Diedre said, stopping to smile.

"Hmmp. I always cleaned my own house," Mrs. Sommers said.

"I'm happy to do it for you," Diedre said as she sprayed her dust rag with lemon polish and began moving it in circles on the wooden dresser.

"Sure you are-for pay! You'll get old too someday, like me. You'll die before me," Mrs. Sommers said, pulling her sheet up to her chin and going back to sleep.

A nagging chill nipped at Diedre the rest of her time cleaning Mrs. Sommers' stuffy, too- warm house.

The evenings were long. On a clear, warm night, Diedre passed the time by taking a stroll around Greymore Estates. She hoped she'd tire herself out enough to sleep. Maybe tonight would be the night, Diedre wondered, the cat would leave her alone. Maybe tonight would be the night the constant, nagging fear of an intruder, the one particular intruder she feared most, would subside. Maybe tonight would be the night she'd sleep deeply for twelve hours. She could only hope.

Mr. Slots was sitting as usual outside his trailer, his stained tee shirt spread across his belly. He strummed his guitar, smiled, and nodded at Diedre as she passed.

"I'll play one for you. What's your favorite, hon?" he asked.

Diedre smiled stiffly. She really just wanted to walk but she stopped, just to be pleasant.

"Oh, I don't know. Fleetwood Mac? Landslide?"

"I can play that for you," he said with such kindness that Diedre felt herself choke up.

He picked out the tune.

*Well, I've been afraid of changin'
'Cause I've built my life around you
But time makes you bolder
Even children get older
And I'm getting older too*

His voice sounded so much younger than the way his body looked. It filled her with sorrow.

Diedre thanked him and walked away, the deep bruise of loneliness throbbing inside her, as though she had just pressed her finger against it.

The following week, Mrs. Sommers died.

Diedre cleaned the house for the final time. She moved from room to room, every creak and shift in the old house settling in her own stiff bones. The edgy feeling intensified when she walked into Mrs. Sommer's room and saw the bedspread pulled tight as a drum, the medicine

bottles and heading pads swept away. In the corner of her eye, she imagined a dark movement –the black cat of her dreams? *No*. She finished her work quickly, left the sympathy card for the daughter in the paycheck place, and quietly closed the door behind her.

On the bus, she thought about how she couldn't manage with one less house to clean. She had to find someone else to fill Mrs. Sommers' spot. It didn't matter that she saved every dime, had no debt, never bought herself any treats. She feared poverty, she feared being in her trailer all day on a weekday. She dreaded being alone with her paranoid thoughts, memories, the little black cat sneaking around the attic of her mind.

When she arrived home, she took out her key and went to insert it into the trailer's lock. The door just pushed open.

She shrieked, dropped the keys.

Her son, Jude, was seated on the couch.

"Still a scaredy cat, Deidre," he laughed, looking at the television. His jaw set in that way she knew so well.

"I just. I'm just. I'm so happy to see you." She wondered if he had taken his meds. He switched off the TV.

"Right. You don't have cable in this place?"

She hugged her son. She hadn't seen him in five years. She had missed him, sort of.

"I'm going to hang here for a while," he announced, yawning. Diedre offered him the small sofa in the middle room, a sick feeling rising in her throat.

Soon, her trailer no longer smelled of lemon but like old food and dirty laundry. Diedre forced down the greasy pancakes Jude made for breakfast. Afterwards, hardened splatters of batter remained on the stovetop. He used up all the milk and butter and didn't replace it. The night he made burgers out on the grill, Diedre told him she had become a vegetarian.

"When did you get into that?" he asked, mouth full of mushed meat.

"Oh, I never really liked it," she said.

"Huh, well you gave me a lot of meat when I was a kid," he said.

"Yes, I guess it was easy."

“And you still smoke,” he said, smirking.

“That’s true. It doesn’t make much sense,” she laughed nervously.

A flashback of their last fight shot across her memory. She turned from him and touched her face, still sensing the long-ago impact of his fist.

He stood up and said he was meeting up with some friends.

Friends? Diedre thought. What friends?

In bed, she awaited the sounds of footsteps on gravel, the door squeaking open, the shaking of the trailer with his pounding steps, water running in the bathroom. When she finally drifted to a shallow sleep, the black cat stared its soothing stare. Its golden eyes told Diedre to double lock the door, keep the phone close to the bed.

Diedre obeyed.

Jude did not return that night or the night after. Diedre's nerves were bundled tight, but in her dream, the black cat stayed vigilant.

“Don’t let the man back inside. Change the lock,” the black cat purred.

Diedre did as she was told, but knew that when it came to Jude, locks were pointless.

A few weeks later, she returned home from her newest cleaning gig, and there he was. Jude sat outside the open door, in her favorite folding chair, chewing on a black piece of licorice. She remembered how he always liked that. She smiled weakly.

“You change the locks?”

“Yes.” She felt her body trembling.

“Dumb,” he shook his head. “Typical.”

The familiar waves of loneliness and fear swelled up inside her, an eclipse covering the dim light in her soul. But she felt something else, too. The black cat’s comforting eyes appeared in her mind. Diedre could almost hear the cat whisper in her ear.

No more. No more. Her voice came out rough, choppy.

“You need to leave me. Alone. For good,” she said.

He stood, put his face in hers, spat. She

never knew why her son did the things he did. He had always been a mystery.

Afraid to move, she allowed the saliva glob to run down her cheek.

Jude swore and kicked the side of the trailer. Diedre could hear a lamp fall from a side table inside. She believed he would kick her next. She knew this was it, the day of her dying had come. He would kick her dead.

She put her fists in front of her face and closed her eyes, forced her body rigid. She would not run. She would stay put.

Then, nothing. When she opened her eyes she saw only his back moving away from her, down the dirt road out of Greymore Estates. Diedre held onto the back of her folding chair and swayed.

That night, the black cat came close, licked Diedre’s face, a pleasant wetness. It snuggled under her chin. The black cat with yellow eyes purred and rubbed.

Finally, Deidre slept deeply, the whole night through.

Maggie Nerz Iribarne practices writing in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. This year, she won a finalist prize in Zizzle’s Literary Flash Fiction Contest. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

Rosie

Randel McCraw Helms

(2002-2019)

*“A dog lives fifteen years, if you’re lucky”
–Mary Oliver*

Rosie, you stayed with us as long as you could
(Your duties were so many,
And so seriously attended),
More than sixteen years.
I can scarcely believe the luck.
You taught us the meaning of dauntless,
As you presided at the slow dying of my mother.
You watched, large-eyed, her last breaths.
You kissed her more lovingly than ever I could.
You welcomed a new grand-child,
And played with her, gently,
Teaching benevolence by example.
You loved all rabbits,
Especially when they ran.
You tolerated the waggish cats,
And with lordly dignity.
You made me walk with you,
Every day.
Twice.
You hid from us the pain
Of your cancer

For much too long,
And went to your sleep with a calmer
Grace than I shall manage, I know,
With my human inadequacies.

Dear Rosie,
All I can say is
I have grieved more, and longer,
For you than for my own mother,
And I am not ashamed.



Carlo, Emily Dickinson's Dog

(1849-1866)



Hills were her companions—
And Sundown—she said—and me—
A presence in her pages—
Watching carefully—

She called me Shaggy Ally
On the blackest upstairs day—
I snapped at flies and worked—she said—
To keep the King at bay—

Called back—I promised—
Tried to make her understand—
I'd be the first to greet her
In the other Land—

Randel McCraw Helms is retired from Arizona State University's English Department. His recent poems have appeared in such places as "Dappled Things," "Blood & Bourbon," and "Silkworm."



Where are You Going?

Cortnie Duran



I strip off your striped cardigan. It's begun to hang from washings and weight loss and always I am struck by the new angles of your vertebrae. Your thinning white-yellow hair exposes evermore old man spots upon your baby pink skin.

We've come in from our morning walk. We take them slowly now, and perhaps because of that, I've taken up your life-long passion of bird watching. I've come to marvel too at these so efficient, so delicate creatures. Their da Vinci bones propel them over oceans. Their apocryphal songs...sonnets... psalms...I smile to think, might be instruction for transcendence.

When I am not counting magpies in the trees above (*One for sorrow, two for joy...*), I am recording. Not with my iPhone, but with my eyes. I need to remember the awkward rhythm of your gait. I want to imprint your ceaseless curiosity as you examine the elm's ancient root structures. They splay all around us like the hands of grey giants clawing at the earth.

On some, more magical, mornings flocks of geese (we call them ducks though we

know better) descend over our heads to land in unison on the pond outside our place. We can feel the wind of their wings. We breathe it in to bring inside and save for future strength.

When we climb the stairs - you can make two or three and I carry you up the rest- I hug you close and kiss that spot right between your brown, bluing eyes. That groove sculpted by the God of dogs for just these kisses. *It's okay... It's okay. Two or three is great, Good Boy! My good, good boy...* Your short, arthritic legs keep pumping for a moment against me. You are proud- have always been - and I know you feel defeated. Back inside, my eyes adjust from the midsummer sun to our poorly lit apartment where you head straight to the narrow kitchen. Three pieces of bacon. Two for you, one for me. No thought of moderation now.

It is the eleventh month of your "twelve-months at best" prognosis.

Oh, we've survived so many things. In both our second and sixth year, seeds became wedged between your toes. Tiny blades of grass grew up and around the tendons and nerves of your paws before your incessant licking alerted me. Intricate surgeries followed. I held my breath in those waiting rooms- my heart in strange stasis. Those rooms with their potted pothos and complimentary coffee became high, narrow ledges with open windows I could only duck back into at the words, " He did fine. He's in recovery." Then began the four socks each walk routine. You learned to fetch them from the basket yourself!

"It turns out he has a lot of extra organs."

"What do you mean?"

"Your dog is one in a million"

"Well, I know that, but what do you mean?"

"Your dog has a uterus and ovaries."

Intersex. One in a million in humans and in dogs and a dangerous hysterectomy revealed cancer in an ovary. Three years of medicines, blood tests, and my constant, anxious scrutiny of your behavior until you were "cleared", my little miracle.

But this now.

Heart failure.

Nothing to be done beyond medicine that, at twelve and a half, might keep you here (with luck) through our thirteenth year.

So, I lay you on your turquoise, orthopedic bed up here in our apartment. With only one door and two east-facing windows, bright paint and strategically placed floor lamps, desk lamps, hanging lamps, and string lights do little to improve the cavernous feel of the place. No matter. It was the park, the pond, and the surrounding foothills that brought us here. Here on our walks with the birds, cattails, and daffodils plus the occasional, furtive meeting with a doe or fox we can pretend for long moments we live much further than five miles away from the city.

I click on the antique radio because the music calms us both. "Classical Naps" are what you do after morning walks. Here Baby. Here's your Baby. The many times mended, stuffed dog you showed me when we met. So excited, you ran in circles around my charm with Goofy gripped in baby teeth. I prop your chin on Goofy now. A pillowed, sweet reminder of our meeting, our youth, our thousand quiet triumphs. I have to work, little love. Relax now. But up and around you wander for a while with confusion in your eyes until I pick you up and rock you on my lap. You're such a good boy...good boy... good boy. Then I lay you down again because I must do everything but love you against my will.

I take a seat at my thrift-store desk where I can watch you breathe. A Rossini overture wafts around our heads. Instead of opening my laptop to spreadsheets and unread emails, I decide to just remember. When you could still tolerate and even enjoy the car, I took you with me everywhere. Upon each return from grocery stores or other states I'd declare, "Everywhere we go, Irving, we always make it!" And you'd jump around the front seat mirroring my glee whether it was real or feigned for you.

Where are you going now, Irving?

I have become adept at pushing away the reality of your looming absence. The mere imagining is too much. Too large. Unfathomable. I can intentionally, and in order to function, forget that you are dying

feel and hear the click of denial in my psyche like the last number in a combination lock landing in its groove, only this sound is dull and wet. The relief is short-lived, of course. You need meds every six hours and a potty every two and sometimes you stand motionless with your head down - unresponsive to my voice, uninterested in toys or treats. You reanimate only when I pick you up and then you lick my face like we've been apart for days. You pace at night like me in waiting rooms. I've learned that this is because you know you are vulnerable. I say in semi-jest that you're my only child, but you are a pack animal. Your instinct tells you not to lie down. That you're too weak to fight off an attack. So, I bring you up to bed with me and hum our 80's tune. I rub your scarred, skinny belly. I scratch that place on your ears that makes you sigh. We repeat this several times each night until weariness wins and you fall asleep beside me.

I have scheduled your euthanization twice and I have postponed it twice. You still jump around like a puppy when I return from wherever else I've had to be. Your sitter reports on the consistency of your stool and the relative fervor of your play. You still eat most of your homemade meals, after all. But your pace afraid to rest and you have stopped running altogether. Now you sometimes stumble. Even on the first step.

Lately, when I hold you and we dance to that 80's tune I thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you, Irving. Thank you for saving my life. In our first three years together, there were so many times I chose wine or vodka over the care of you. I'd lose my grip, and then my jobs, and then our homes. My angel-sisters swooped down to take us in and eventually only you when I had gone too far - had torched my bridges to the ground. They'd bathe and feed you. Offer you the safety that I couldn't while I pieced myself together enough to pick you up again.

Then, with you on a leash, I had a withdrawal seizure while panhandling that day. I was being medically detoxed in a hospital when they told me you were lost.

My sisters found you in the pound and some months thereafter finally, finally in my fourth attempt at rehab I stopped. It wasn't a

magical rehab where all the planets aligned. It was what they call surrender in concert with my stubborn desire for more joy - a sensation I could only vaguely recall. But mostly it was you, Irv. For seven months I took the Sunday bus to visit you at Aunt Lexi's. On the way to you, I'd feel my chest pulling forward as if my heart could beat the bus. We'd "play toys" and I'd take pictures and walk with you for miles until my curfew grew close. Then I'd bus back to my single bottom bunk to journal about trauma and learn to tell the truth. I scotch taped pictures of you, all over the beige-painted, cinder block walls. It wasn't any of the twelve steps, guilt, shame, or even the toughest love my sisters had to give that kept me out of that abyss. It was those Sunday visits and the realization that my deepest desire was to be good for you and to you. I know now that my near-photographic memory of the wing-wind tousling the hair on your head while we stood at the edge of the pond- the orange morning sun rising behind us to turn the water pink - will sustain me in no way. I've always known that embraces cannot be stored for future use and still I try. I cannot know that I will continue talking aloud to you for months after you're gone or that I will never pack away your leash or yellow raincoat, and pullover sweaters. I do not anticipate the nighttime scream-cries whose ferocity will shock me as I clutch your Goofy-Baby to my chest so hard my arms will hurt the following mornings. And on the day after you stop eating bacon or anything else I will give you sips of water with a syringe, and make and keep the third appointment.

It's the most humane way.

His suffering will stop.

It'll be just like he fell asleep.

He'll always be with you.

The whispering Doctor will come to our maddeningly dim apartment and inject you with one and then another medicine that will, in a matter of seconds, cause your heart to fail. And when those same Sisters gently take your body from my lap your white, wispy hair (Schnauzers have hair, not fur, I learned when you were new) will brush against my skin on your way away from me and I will be immediately halved. I cannot know now that

there will be, for the rest of my life, a heavy aching empty on the inside of my arms.

For now though, on this night three weeks before I'll let you go, I actually try to cuddle you back to youth but that is our secret. My will comes within a breath of working, doesn't it Irving. And you chase and chase those bunnies in your dreams, and I chase and chase those dreams in my sleep. And I breathe in the air that you exhale through your pale and freckled nose to save inside for future strength.

*I am a Case Manager in Denver CO. I work with chronically homeless Women and Trans Individuals.
I have published several short stories and a few poems in literary journals, though nothing for well over a decade.*



Rare Bear

Kiersta Recktenwald

Clearly apparent
 as the fastness of the air
 arriving in a bumptuous
 bungling way
 there climbs a bear
 lighting in the lair
 of awareness –
 astute and all ahair,
 ursinely growling – quite benignly –
 who bears no grudges.

cf. Jane Mayhall's "City Sparrow"

In Great Waters

Center of its universe, the fish
 moves in slow decisions made for it
 by ancient ritual and timeless ways.
 Sunlight captures the sea, but not these eyes.
 Moonbeams sleep above his wanderings,
 while wastes – desert wastes – stay beyond his ken.
 He moves with the grace of heaven's highest
 and faces death without a squandered thought.

cf. Marianne Moore's "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish"

Kiersta recktenwald was born in New England, grew up in Saudi Arabia, China, and Japan, has attended college at Colby College and the University of Maine. Her main interests are philosophy, psychology, and spirituality, and she writes mostly poetry and aphorisms.



The Identity of Swans

Anastasia Jill

Winnie hung back as her granddaughters ran about the park, the younger dashing between bush and shrub. The elder granddaughter stayed idle at the lakeside, and Winnie called for her, “Hurry now, Melanie. We haven’t got all day.”

Even in her mind, it still felt foreign to refer to Melanie as such — a granddaughter, a next of kin, a relation. The adoption had been finalized months ago, but she still didn’t seem like family. It didn’t help matters that she’d been suspended from school for the third time.

The little girl, Trinity, stepped back to grab her grandma’s hand, the cold perspiration of a juice box slipping into the older palm. Winnie tried to smile, but Trinity saw through the act. She was receptive for a small child. “Grandma,” Trinity said. “What’s wrong?”

Winnie looked somewhere over her head, into

the horizon, where the clouds lingered like a flirtatious mailman. “Nothing,” she said. “Just feeling a little off today.”

Trinity’s cold little hand fell from her wrinkled one, the girl dangling the fingers at her side. Her own lips turned downward, red stains from a snack clinging to her skin like little dimples. Trinity looked from her grandmother to her new sister, who scowled at the lake.

“Are you sure?” Trinity asked.

Winnie nodded once. That was enough.

Trinity galloped back down the sidewalk, towards the pond sitting like an alcove to the larger lake. The older girl’s sneakers scraped along the sidewalk as they continued to walk, sighing as if she were long-suffering.

After a while, she said, “I’m sorry I ruined your day.” Sarcasm stamped her voice, a scowl

permanently across her brow.

Winnie held herself high, vowing to not get worked up. "You're not sorry. And you didn't ruin my day. I wouldn't let that happen. Be happy I even picked you up at all."

"I didn't ask you to do that."

"Your mothers don't need to be pulled away from work again because of your delinquency."

Winnie's oldest daughter and her wife had their first child through artificial insemination. A few years later, they decided to adopt. Winnie thought they'd meant a baby, a giggly toddler orphaned by a war, not a troubled twelve-year-old who had spent part of her life in the system, the other part in and out of juvenile hall for petty theft. The girl came with no shortage of problems, both social and behavioral, and while the women had been forthcoming with love to the point of passivity, their suspicions were constantly heightened.

But their eyes couldn't be everywhere, and it wasn't the first time Melanie had been in trouble, but it was the first time she'd gotten involved with drugs. The principal had followed her nose to the third floor girl's bathroom where Melanie was found lighting up a joint the wrong way. Winnie had been the only one off of work, the emergency contact for events such as these. She lamented kids these days but then realized it wasn't society, it was this one girl.

She felt bad for Melanie, in a surprising way. She really was a good girl, or at least could be when the occasion was right. But the pity expired where her bad attitude began. When Winnie was her age in the orphanage back in upstate Connecticut, she wouldn't have fathomed behaving in such a way if she'd been blessed enough to be adopted. At the very least, the group home mother would have given her a good shaking if she placed a single toe out of line.

Winnie looked to Melanie, with her fuzzy brown hair, legs working in lazy strides to avoid standing in animal dung. Her shoulders hung low, like the goo of a cracked egg as it slipped onto the floor. Contempt replaced any compassionate feelings.

"You think you're the only person who hid their problems behind drugs? I hate to break it to you, but we all have our cross to bear." Winnie said, trying to maintain her composure.

Melanie kicked at a rock that skidded forward. Once in front of it, she kicked the pebble again. "I don't need you to tell me that."

"What you need is some discipline. Some manners. A little bit of common sense in that thick head of yours. You're not special, girlie. Your mothers might tolerate this behavior, but I certainly won't."

Melanie rolled her eyes, and Winnie scolded her to behave.

"You called me thick," Melanie said.

"No, I said you have a thick head."

"Doesn't matter. I know what you meant."

At some point, she lost track of her younger granddaughter, but spotted her along the trail, by the Chinese pagoda, trying to coax a large bird towards her hand. Winnie had warned Trinity multiple times to be wary of them - the ducks were pushy, the geese were aggressive, and the swans could break your arm with one little bite. Trinity was getting too smart for folk warnings. The last caution came with back-talk, "Swans don't have teeth." It didn't take a mental giant to figure where that fact came from. In six years of life, Trinity never talked back until Melanie came into the home.

Melanie questioned the authority it took generations of women to build. She didn't belong, as much as everyone wanted her to. The Littlefield women were a high-class people, or so Winnie liked to think. They had no business taking in an insolent child who wouldn't be able to acclimate to their standards.

The tension settled big as a house between the two as they caught up to Trinity, who was happily talking to the birds. They paid her no mind, because she had no bread to offer. Melanie joined her sister, extending a hand further out towards the water. One of the birds - big and white - leaned forward before snapping down.

Melanie screamed out like a cat whose tail had been stepped on. Winnie couldn't help but chuckle. Trinity's brows furrowed as she said, "Melanie, you said they wouldn't bite."

Ironically, Winnie couldn't bite her own tongue. "Listening to Melanie will get you in all kinds of trouble."

A lining of yellow light lapped at the girl's face, hiding a resentful glare. Her hands turned white gripping the wooden railing, which Winnie hoped peppered her hands with sharp splinters. Melanie spat, "Just because you're a bitter old crow doesn't mean you have to take it out on me."

If Winnie wasn't furious, she'd be impressed by the girl's pluck. But it came to pass that

indignation superseded admiration. She took Melanie by the arm, pulling her to the side and pinching the fat limb between her wrought iron nails. "Listen here, you little cuss. I have had it up to here with your attitude. What trouble you get yourself into on your own time is none of my concern, but I won't have you speak to me like that in public."

Trinity looked on as the tongue lashing continued. Winnie surprised both of them; it wasn't like a Littlefield - particularly Winnie - to lose her temper. Melanie wasn't a Littlefield. In name she was, but not in practice. She proved this point by wrenching her arm away and shoving Winnie, falling onto the bench with her hands in her pocket. "I hate you," Melanie said.

Winnie said, "The feeling's mutual, you little shit!" Taking Trinity by the hand, pulling the young girl down the sidewalk, away from the sour teen.

Once a safe distance away, Winnie turned back to Trinity, shaking and near tears. The older woman scooped the girl into her arms and pressed her to her neck, shushing her. "It's alright, my dear," Winnie said. "Don't cry."

Trinity blubbered into her shoulder, coating the jacket of her pantsuit with snot and pink-tinted spit. She was heavy in Winnie's arms, clearly not a little girl anymore, but scrawny enough to be carried and cuddled. Winnie led her away from the lake, back to the small pond with a bridge and a statue.

"Look," Winnie said, carrying her to the lip of the lake. A family of swans occupied the small hole, making flaps and waves with their little feet in the water. The swans were various sizes, from regal feathered to cotton ball-shaped, all of them white except for one hovering in the back. Her body was stark black, aside from the orange beak that reached right into the water as if to claim what was rightfully hers. A tadpole, perhaps, or a nice, fresh drink. Winnie stood there with her granddaughter on her shoulder, watching them swim to and fro.

"Why did we leave Melanie?" Trinity eventually asked.

Winnie shrugged. "We flew the coup, so to speak."

Trinity wiped her own nose and eyes. "What does that mean?"

"She wanted to get away from us." Winnie stopped and corrected herself. "She wanted to get away from me. So we're giving her some

space."

Trinity sniffled, a deep, imperfect sound. "Grandma?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"How come you don't like Melanie?"

Winnie chastised herself for being so transparent and tried lying her way through an explanation. The younger girl wasn't stupid, or at the very least, was perceptive. "Are you mad at her about something?" Trinity asked.

"Yes," Winnie responded.

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Winnie no longer looked at the black swan, or the pond's ornaments, or even the child draped across her shoulder. She looked into the water's face and found herself staring into her own. Crow's feet grabbed her eyes, a frown pinched her face shut like a book, and for a moment she resembled the girl who used to stare at herself in the mirror at the orphanage for hours on end, trying to find a hint of parentage in the freckles and plump cheeks. The woman who ran the home would come up behind her and mockingly ask, "What do you see in that mirror, young lady?" And each time, Winnie would respond, "A future." A future of her own spawn that would never know their roots.

Winnie Littlefield cut her family off at the roots. Then came Melanie, who re-planted the seed at the bottom of a murky, polluted lake.

More time passed, people came and left with their dogs and screaming infants, rolling strollers and carts and skates without so much as noticing the tower of woman and child in their way.

"Grandma," Trinity said. "I want to go to the playground."

She let the girl go and followed her footsteps to the granite top slides. Winnie left her on her own - the girl was big enough to navigate the small area by herself - and went off reluctantly to find Melanie. She was no longer on the bench, but the branch of a nearby tree hanging auspiciously high off the ground. She didn't turn to face Winnie when approached, and when neither of them spoke Winnie leaned against the tree's base and said, "Are you done embarrassing me now?"

Melanie scoffed. "If you came here to apologize, that's a crappy way to start."

"Who said I came here to apologize. And watch your mouth. Trinity is very impressionable

and I don't want her picking up your foul language."

"After everything, I'm shocked anyone lets me around her at all."

Winnie knew that kind of talk well - Melanie feared she was disposable, and not as loved as the bright-eyed and well behaved younger girl. "Family sticks together, whether they want to or not," Winnie said.

"So we're family?"

"On paper, that is true."

"Bullshit."

Winnie's head snapped. "I beg your pardon?"

"You don't like me." Melanie sighed. "I know you don't."

Winnie crossed her arms, a trademark smirk crossing her lips. "Shows what you know about family. Families aren't meant to like each other. They tolerate each other."

"Yeah, thanks for rubbing it in my face that I don't know about family."

It took Winnie a moment to inhale and exhale, speaking up before she lost the nerve to do so. "I'm not saying it to be mean. It's a matter of fact. At your age, I was in a similar position." She looked Melanie up and down. "Sort of. I wouldn't act like such a scullion, but the point remains. I didn't have a family either. I was all alone. You should be grateful you didn't rot away until you aged out like I did."

This caught Melanie's attention. "Seems like you did alright for yourself"

"I'm aware." Winnie patted down a coil of her hair. "But it took years to get to that point."

Melanie connected the pieces. "So you're mad at me because you never got adopted? Alright, that makes sense. Like I said, a bitter old crow."

This time, Winnie laughed, and told the girl she was right. "Perhaps my frustration was misplaced, but to be fair, you did get caught smoking pot in the bathroom. That reflects poorly on all of us. Like it or not, that's how it is now."

"Do you like it?"

Again, Winnie had no answer. Some steps were too wet to take, even in a moment such as this. Instead, Winnie looked out across the lake, following Melanie's line of vision to the pond, which was still visible from their perspectives. The dancing statue of a woman was evident just beyond the bridge, the fountain shrouded in grey clay spitting water onto the glassy top. Bits of sunlight licked its edges, the comb-like bodies

of baby swans slipping and sliding over mud, towards their mother, the black swan. They knew her, despite being different. They knew her, even though pastures of white.

So, young lady," Winnie asked. "Tell me, what do you see when you look out here?"

Anastasia Jill (she/they) is a queer writer living in the Southeast United States. She has been nominated for Best American Short Stories, Best of the Net, and several other honors. Her work has been featured with Poets.org, Pithead Chapel, Contemporary Verse 2, Minola Review, Broken Pencil, and more.

