A photograph of a dense forest with many trees, featuring a prominent, gnarled tree trunk in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

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## **The Gravity of It All**

Deborah Morris

“Hi, Gaynelle. Hi, Janice,” I say, rushing past the front desk and a couple of seated patients, not exactly late, but pushing it, with no time to settle in. Then in a rear office, I throw my purse in a drawer and hurry back to the front desk to look over Gaynelle’s shoulder at the schedule for the morning. It’s going to be busy, most of the fifteen-minute time slots are filled—with easy stuff, like college physicals, medication refills, and a few add-ins for colds and sore throats.

Four days a week I work at the Life Center, a drug and alcohol rehab unit, providing medical care to patients and sometimes to staff. It’s pretty laid back, sometimes challenging, and always interesting, I’m not officially employed by the Life Center but by Dr. Armstrong who’s under contract to provide that care.

Wednesday is Dr. Armstrong’s golf day—and as Janice and Gaynelle have whispered to me, a day when he spends time with his mistress. As soon as he hired me as his physician assistant, he realized that the office could be open on Wednesdays. I enjoy the midweek break from routine and the brisk pace of bread-and-butter primary care.

In minutes, stethoscope hanging around my neck, I'm moving from room to room, asking questions, doing exams, ordering tests, and providing prescriptions and instructions to the patients. With three exam rooms occupied, each of us takes turns doing our tasks and caring for patients. There's a smooth rhythm. Short and garrulous Gaynelle checks people in and out, and Janice, tall and good-natured, takes vital signs and assigns rooms, drawing blood or doing the tests I ask for—a dance with three women moving between the patients who come and go. I love this work.

There are bins on the doors with manila folders, patient records. I've just sent the truck driver in Room 1 to be discharged with his signed physical form and am waiting on results of a strep test in Room 2, so I pluck the folder from the Room 3 door. Sarah Johnson, thirty-seven years old, has been seen here once before for an employment physical. The space for "Chief Complaint" on her form has the words "personal problem" written in Janice's neat script.

Not a lot of information there, but some patients don't want to talk to the nurse, embarrassed about a symptom, or shamed by a mental health issue. At the urgent care where I worked until a few months ago, most of the "personal problems" related to concerns about sexually transmitted infections, though in one memorable case the patient was having chest pain from a serious heart attack. You just don't know.

I knock, then open the door to the small exam room and enter. Ms. Johnson is sitting on the chair, head bent down but raising it slowly to look at me with blood shot eyes surrounded by puffy lids. "Hi. I'm Debbie Waldes, Dr. Armstrong's physician assistant," I say as I turn to wash my hands at the sink. My hands dried, I reach to shake her hand—warm, damp, and limp with nails bitten bloody—then sit on the rolling stool. "What brings you in today?"

Nothing. I wait. It's best to let people say what they need to say in their own time.

I watch a tear trail down her cheek and hand her a tissue from the box on the counter. I lean forward a little, tilt my head a bit. Her hair is tangled and greasy and she's wearing jeans and a man's shirt, not too clean.

The tears are coming freely now, so I hand her the tissue box. She wipes, blows her nose, looks up at me and says, almost too quietly to hear, "Uh, my husband died."

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” comes automatically but she puts up her hand, and I stop.

“He was a mean drunk, and he used to hit me, hurt me,” she says, getting louder and making eye contact. “He hasn’t, hadn’t worked in months, but would get pissed off when I came home from my job or from shopping, accuse me of seeing other men, bitch about the mess, even though he was there all day and never washed a dish or emptied an ashtray.” Her voice trails off, though the tears have stopped.

She stares at the floor, and I make an encouraging noise. “Humm.”

“You know, his mother and brother thought he was perfect, would tell me I was lucky to have him, but they didn’t know. I couldn’t tell them. I never told anyone. I wanted to leave, but I knew he’d find me, hurt me, maybe kill me.” She pauses. The air is charged like a summer storm right before a lightning strike.

I wait but have to ask, “What happened?”

I watch her bring a finger to her mouth but, with an effort return it to her lap. The harsh fluorescent light flickers slightly. I can hear the wall clock ticking. But then she leans forward, and words start rushing out again.

“A couple of weeks ago I got home and went into the trailer and he was passed out on the sofa, well I thought he was passed out and there were a couple of liquor bottles and a pill bottle on the floor and I was so relieved. I mean if he was asleep he wouldn’t get mad, but when I got closer I noticed the vomit and saw how pale he looked and realized that he wasn’t breathing....” She is looking at me now rather than at the floor. I watch her calloused hands twisting together.

Neither of us speaks for a minute or two.

“I didn’t know what to do,” she resumes. “His ma thought he was a good Christian man, didn’t even know that he drank.” She looks at me as if I hold the answers.

Finally, I say, “That must have been so hard for you. What did you do?”

“Well, I thought I should call 911, but he was cold dead. And I just didn’t want anyone to know how he was, how things were. And I was afraid someone would think I’d killed him. God knows I’d wished

him dead.” She pauses. “I dragged him out back and wrapped him in a tarp and dug a hole by the woods and buried him.”

People have surprised me before, and over the past few years I’ve learned to maintain a straight face, to save my reactions for after I’ve left the room. I don’t gasp. My mouth stays closed, but inside my eyes bug and I want to shout, “You did what?”

I take a deep breath and lean in again as she stays quiet. “What can I do to help?”

The tears are back, and with a shaky voice she says, “I don’t know, I don’t know. His brother has come around the trailer a couple of times looking for him and this morning he was mad, shouting at me. I told his ma that he got a travel roofing job and was in Ohio, but he hasn’t called, and they know something isn’t right. So, after he left, I took the pistol and drove back into the woods by the river…”

“Are you thinking about hurting yourself, killing yourself?”

No answer, but the look she gives me says, *What do you think?* loud and clear.

“Where’s the gun now?”

“I threw it off the bridge. I’m too much of a coward to shoot myself,” she says, looking at the floor.

“Are you still thinking about hurting yourself, or anyone else?”

“I just don’t know; I don’t know. Not anyone else, but I don’t know what to do, what’s gonna happen.” The tears flow again, and she holds tightly to the wad of Kleenex in her fist.

I almost jump when there’s a tap on the door. “Excuse me a sec,” I say and step out of the room, where I find Janice, who leans in and whispers, “Is everything okay? They’re getting restless,” glancing to the other doors, one cracked open and a woman peering into the hallway from the other.

“Not exactly; this will take a while. Do what you can to keep ’em occupied. And please keep an eye on this one, maybe bring her something to drink.” Janice looks worried, but I smile a little and then turn back into the room.

“Will you be okay for a few minutes?” I ask. “I need to call Dr. Armstrong. I have some ideas to help, but I’d like you to stay here.”

“Okay,” she replies with a snuffle.

“I’ll be back,” and I leave the room, avoiding the eyes of the patient’s mother staring out of the room across the hall as I walk briskly to the office and close the door. I pick up the phone and page the doctor, then put my head down on my clasped fists, elbows on the desk calendar, thinking furiously, and hoping that I’m not interrupting... um...his golf game.

In a couple of minutes that seems like an eternity, the phone rings, and I pick up. “Hello?”

“What’s going on,” he asks, sounding curious rather than annoyed, which makes me relax a little. I’ve called most of my supervising docs by their first names, but haven’t gotten there yet with Howard Armstrong, an older man who always wears a tie and jacket and exudes authority.

“Thanks for calling back so fast, Doc. I’ve got a situation here. Do you know any criminal attorneys?”

“Debbie,” he says, sounding amused. “What have you done?”

That makes me laugh. Feigning outrage, I say, “It wasn’t me!” I explain in as few words as possible and tell him my plan to get Mrs. Johnson admitted to the psychiatric unit and her need for legal advice. He agrees and gives me a couple of names. I make a call to arrange for admission, call emergency services to arrange transport, leave a message for a lawyer to call me back, and then return to Room 3, entering to find Mrs. Johnson sipping from a can of Pepsi and looking calmer.

“We’re going to get you admitted to the hospital for a little while to keep you safe,” I say, and she sits up straighter, looking confused.

“Why?”

“Well, you told me you’re thinking about suicide, and I think the hospital is the best place for you to be now, but you’ll also be away from your home and your husband’s family for a bit, which might be helpful.”

She nods and relaxes back into the chair. I go on to ask her permission to speak to a lawyer about her situation and arrange for a consultation. I can see her shoulders soften and her face lighten as she realizes there are options.

Suddenly, she looks concerned again. “How do I get to the hospital?”

“An ambulance is on the way. Best for you not to drive right now.”

Again, she nods in understanding but then tenses up again. “But my truck, what about my truck?”

“Why don’t you leave your keys with us? Can you ask a friend to come get it? If not, I’ll make sure it doesn’t get towed.”

“Oh, sure, my friend Joyce’ll help with that,” and I agree to call her friend and explain that I have to go see another patient.

Leaving the room, I beckon Janice to go stay with her as I grab the chart for the next patient.

“Hi, I’m so sorry for the wait. That strep test looks positive, and she’s going to need antibiotics. Any allergies?”

I know from my work at The Life Center that psychiatric facilities are sparing with information about patients, so I don’t inquire, but I find myself often thinking about Sarah Johnson and wondering how she is. The Life Center has a subscription to the local newspaper, so I start reading it every day. Finally, I see a small front-page article, “Local woman charged with unlawfully concealing a death.” She had entered a guilty plea and was sentenced to six months, suspended, with two years of probation.

It seems like a good outcome, and I’m relieved that she hasn’t been charged with something worse.

Then one quiet Wednesday, months later, I’m at the office talking to Gaynelle at the front desk when a nicely dressed woman wearing makeup comes through the glass doors, walks right up to me and reaches out her arms to hug me. I’m startled, but just as she says, “I’m Sarah, Sarah Johnson,” I recognize her and hug back.

“You saved my life,” she murmurs.

“You saved your own life,” I whisper, and we stay locked together for a few moments longer.



**Tattoo** / Grey Brown

I

We gathered our ribbons,  
blue for depression,  
(perfect, don't you think?),

blinking red for ADHD,  
bright green flashing for OCD.  
We planned our awareness campaign

for February, the shortest month.  
We would have a parade,  
the narcissist leading the way.

But we needed a t-shirt.  
We considered Schizophrenia Survivor  
but it did not have the right ring,

or rather, it would not stop ringing.  
We discussed Bipolar Warriors  
Some Days and on the back,

Other Days Not So Much.  
We tossed around  
We Can Beat Depression

in giant letters and in letters  
too small to read  
Assisted by Suicide.

II

I want a shirt that admits

none of us ever really survive,  
but we get by,

a shirt that lists daily warriors  
compensating, those spinning  
and flapping and stinging,

those troubled in mind,  
mumbling, stumbling,  
the haunted artists,

compulsive composers,  
poets and playwrights,  
those who see in pictures,

shy scientists still misunderstood,  
those quiet wizards in IT,  
the boy who stays alone

by the playground fence,  
all the uninvited.  
I want a shirt so graphic

the ink covers the inside-out  
as well. I will keep listing  
and printing and will not end

at a mere shirt's tail.  
I will keep witnessing,  
writing up and down

my legs, have someone  
scrawl across my back.  
I will shave my head

for new space until I stand,  
a full body tattoo,  
testifying.



**Psychiatric ER** / Grey Brown

To say suicide,  
 or to say more softly  
 suicidal ideation,  
 is to say farewell  
 to the brightly lit waiting room,  
 as the rest remain—  
 the broken shoulder,  
 the child with fever,  
 the man awkwardly asleep,  
 the woman who approaches  
 the front desk again,  
 her voice steadily rising.

You leave through a separate door,  
 a door you have never seen.  
 The policeman who waits  
 is merely protocol.  
 He shows you to a room,  
 hands you a gown  
 and waits outside.  
 The room is tight,  
 smaller than a dressing room  
 with a single chair as though  
 one might sit there.  
 Someone taps on the door

reminding you to remove  
all jewelry as well.

The policeman takes your wallet,  
your clothes, your phone,  
and leads you down  
a hall without windows  
even farther away  
from the other patients  
who now lie on gurneys  
with blankets and pillows,  
fruit juice, an IV drip.

The elevator sinks  
to the floor beneath the floor.  
The unit is small,  
nurses and staff watch you  
from behind glass.  
One takes your belongings  
to an everyday locker  
and keeps the key.

She leaves you in a room  
a fleshy shade of pink,  
the corners rounded,  
the furniture smooth  
and solid, easy to clean,  
too awkward to move,  
too heavy to heave.

The door to each patient room  
must remain open, so you watch  
as the mother comforts her son,  
as the homeless man is released,  
as a nurse changes wet bed sheets.

This is not the place,  
this is the place between  
and the rules have changed.  
It will be days before a single bed  
will open someplace across the state,  
second rate with low wage workers,  
some place with a snip of nature in its name,  
holly and hills, trees, evergreens.



## **Reconciliation**

Claudia Michel

I long to return to the desert. I dream of wandering on a sandy path between the saguaros and the prickly pear cacti—circling around a palo verde or a mesquite tree. A kangaroo rat will scurry into a hole beneath the spiny trunk of a cholla. The sky will be deep blue and the mountain in the distance a dark vermillion in the slanted morning light. A gilded flicker will squawk, and mourning doves will be burbling in the background. I will lean my head back to feel the warmth of the sun on my face as I breathe in the familiar scent of smoky sage and heat on dirt; it will smell like home.

I call myself a native of the desert although I am only of the first generation in my family to have been born there. As a child in the American Southwest, I would awaken every morning to the view of a red sandstone mountain in the distance shaped like a resting camel. The developers of our neighborhood had successfully pushed the arid landscape back so far that the desert had almost disappeared, but that mountain let me know where I was. There were other signs that we were in the Sonoran Desert: the

occasional horned lizard splayed out on the driveway, a scorpion in the closet, or black widow spiders in the storeroom. Sometimes we'd see vultures gliding overhead in the heat of the day, and we'd lie down on the cement carport, hoping they would think we were dead and circle down to land on us.

Our lawns were green from the irrigation pipes that flooded them once a week, spewing out murky green water and the occasional crawdad. The water came from the canals that snaked through the city, remnants of the ancient waterways created by the original natives of the desert, the Hohokam. The water was meant for crops and drinking water in an otherwise uninhabitable environment, not for decorating twentieth century homes with alien grass.

My grandparents lived smack dab in the middle of the desert in the settlement of Cactus—now Paradise Valley, Arizona, where my grandpa was the postmaster. On Sundays, we'd make the long drive from Phoenix on the two-lane road to their small cinderblock house, surrounded by creosote bushes, cholla, and saguaro. My grandma had glass objects that she'd partially embed in the sand, and they'd turn purple from the sun's magic on the iron and manganese content. I'd climb the small, rocky mountain next to their house, pretending it was my mansion, with dirt-floored rooms, sandstone sofas, and exceptional views. Rattlesnakes would lie coiled in crevices and hawks would glide overhead.

I didn't love everything about the desert in those years, though. The incessant sun would burn my pale, freckled skin, causing painful blisters and sleepless nights. The only respite from the heat was a "swamp cooler" that blew warm air throughout the house but was better than nothing. We weren't allowed to freely run the water through the cooler because of the high cost of that precious element. We couldn't afford a permanent backyard pool, but we had a small "doughboy" above-ground pool where I could immerse my entire body for relief. My best friend and I would lie for hours in the water, creating synchronized swimming routines with just our arms and legs. I would catch rides with those who drove out to the surrounding reservoirs or rivers, where I'd sit in the middle of a black innertube and glide down the currents under the relentless sun, surrounded by red rock cliffs.

And there was another kind of heat in those days. After those few glorious years as a carefree young child, I began to feel my spirit burning from the doomsday message of the fundamentalist

religious sect into which I was born. Decades earlier, my grandmother had attended a revival tent meeting in Indiana and converted to Seventh Day Adventism when her children were young, and my mother brought that religion with her to her marriage. I may have been only a first-generation desert dweller, but I was a strong third-generation Christian fundamentalist. The teachings of the church centered on a belief that we were not to be of this world; our true home was somewhere else. We were strangers to the earth and should not become attached. And it was all going to end soon, anyway. To a young adult, like the one I was becoming and who was looking forward to a future, this belief was devastating. My parents tried their best, but it was beyond their capability to shield me from a pervasive fearful message. I became unconnected to the desert terrain that I had loved so much.

In my early twenties, I had the courage to leave that suffocating spiritual heat and find respite in the Pacific Northwest. Within its evergreen forests, mountains, and rivers, I found people who loved and tended to the earth and believed in taking care of it for future generations. I found sustenance in this new home and came to understand that I did have a future, and I could love the world and all it has to offer.

After these many decades away, I wonder what is calling me back to the desert. Maybe I forfeited my right to call it home after turning my back on it so long ago. But like an abandoned lover sometimes will, the desert returns in longings and dreams. I become giddy at the sight of a saguaro. When I hear a dove, I am transported. I burn sage in my morning meditation, and the fragrance calms and connects me to something deep and satisfying.

I feel called to reconcile the destructive message of a religion with the love of the earth that I have come to know. I revel in the realization that I can once again love the prickly pear and horned lizards as much as I can the coastal forests and eagles of my present home.

In the early days of my life, my roots grew deep and strong in the desert, nurtured by the constant love of my family. That oldest taproot still lies deep in the ground at the foot of a big red mountain, underneath that ancient saguaro. My secondary roots are strong and deep, and I now claim both of these places as my home on this beloved earth.



**Swifts** / Angela Patten

*The race is not to the swift...*

The swift, most aerial of birds, known in Irish  
as a wind fork, sleeps on the wing,  
even mates in flight and never stops  
flying from the time it leaves the nest  
until it makes a nest of its own.

Body shaped like a fat cigar,  
long wings crossed over tail feathers,  
it plies the evening sky for food,  
chattering loudly as it dips  
and whirls above our heads.

Swifts used hollow trees for cozy nests  
and roosts until the old forests  
were cut down to make masts  
for sailing ships, for captains' houses,  
for who knows what ephemeral human ends.

For a while swifts built their nests  
of woven twigs in narrow chimneys  
that protected them from harm.  
But now that chimneys have fallen  
out of favor, they have joined  
the ranks of the homeless under bridges  
and in doorways throughout  
our injudicious world.

Yet in a Gothic cathedral in Somerset,

high in the belfry of the Northwest tower,  
heavenly wisdom ordained creation  
of handmade wooden boxes that invite  
the birds to rest and take up residence,

to lay their eggs and raise their young,  
joining the pigeons that canoodle  
constantly atop the gabled niches  
and the haloed statues of the saints.

I like to think of gusts of swifts  
flying out on a summer evening  
over the green to the Bishop's Palace  
with its flowing wells and springs,  
along the swan-thronged moat,  
then returning like pilgrims to rest  
among the wingéd effigies of angels,  
their so clearly kindred spirits.



## The Pram

Rebecca Klassen

The spring wind shoves her in bursts up the big hill of her hometown where she'd sledged as a child, drank vodka in her teens, and journeys to the summit every Boxing Day with Jay. Now alone and her calves aching, she reaches the end of the track and the green space two thirds of the way up: a merciful mezzanine. It's still on an incline but much flatter, lined by birches and benches. Parents often bring their children here to toss a ball and have picnics on the grassy expanse, but the blustery weather means that it's empty this morning. Her thighs throb as she sits on the metal-cool bench, her hair knotted by the heavy-handed air. Yoga twice a week doesn't make the difference it once did. That's your thirties, she guesses, and though time running out is what's brought her here to think, she lets the sound of the leaves on the breeze shush her thoughts. She needs to catch her breath first.

Her legs are still pulsing when she hears the pram wheels labouring up the track, the father's arms like rods as he pushes the contraption, taking deep strides. The pram is a garish red against the grey day. Though it sounds tired, it's compact and modern with a sleek, black frame, which she imagines that with

a twist and click could morph into a pushchair. Between the father and the pram is a tiny boy perched on the back axle, the bobble of his hat jiggling as he's jounced over gravel. His tongue pokes out at what must be his infant sibling inside the pram, though the baby is hidden from view. The boy jumps free when they reach the grass, not noticing her on the bench, his toddler legs windmilling and his delighted scream bouncing with each of his steps. The father calls after Connor, a name she's sure he'll have said at least fifty times already today, but Connor keeps running in happy circles.

The father stops about ten yards from her on the grass. She watches him reach under the pram and pull out a diamond-shaped kite, chequered in traffic-light-green and amber. It ripples aggressively in his hand, fighting to be released, and as he tries to untangle the tassels, she takes in his dark circles, worn expression, and that he's panting from the trek up the hill. He catches her eye and pauses at the sight of a stranger. Then he nods, gives a faint smile, and jogs over to Connor, leaving the pram near her, the young woman in a respectable coat.

She's always found the hill a good place to think. Looking down on her old school, the high street, and the church she got baptised and married in keeps everything small and contained, like viewing it in a pop-up book, shrinking the enormous. It doesn't help her to make any decisions, but she's always serene when she treads back down the only well-worn track. She's used to that, like following her sister to the same schools and mixing in the same social groups, following in her mother's footsteps into floristry, following Jay to the altar. She doesn't resent any of it. Far from it. She's happy and she loves her town, her family, her job. And it all happened to her. She didn't have to engineer any of it. Even Jay. They were organic: a series of subconscious instincts. There hadn't even been a proposal, just nodding along when family had asked when the wedding was, and her sister had suggested the following summer. She'd preferred that. A proposal would've meant second-guessing herself. Decisions were stones in her pockets. It was better that her mother and sister had planned the bulk of the wedding. She'd loved the Victorian hotel, the white roses, the carvery, and the chocolate fountain. That had all been a couple of years ago now, so naturally, everyone is asking about the next step.

As she watches Connor, his father and the pram, she can't ignore what's brought her here anymore. Jay said it's completely up to her, that he's happy with whatever she wants. None if you like. Or ten of the little buggers. It's your body; you get to decide. He'd patted her arm, passed the tea he'd made her with a self-satisfied smile, his words so kind yet heartbreaking, like he'd only just met her, that he didn't know he'd just put a boulder on her shoulders. Perhaps he believed he was a feminist, empowering her somehow by making the choice of whether to come off birth control solely hers. If she did stop taking the pill, the what ifs were too numerous and varied, too life-altering. Whatever happened would stem from her. No one asks to be born.

She remembers television footage she'd once seen inside a birthing unit in the Philippines, gowned women lined up on large beds in various stages of labour, knees pulled up, all of them quiet, their faces furrowed with focus. The narrator said that almost four thousand babies were born every day on the collection of islands: approximately three babies a minute. Most of her school friends had children or were planning to. Having children, when she thought about it panoramically, wasn't a big deal. They were everywhere, part of the everyday. But when she zoomed in on tragedies that had touched families she knew: pregnancy and birth complications, postnatal depression, cot deaths, genetic conditions, choking hazards, teen suicide; why would she want to risk potentially inviting that into their marriage? When she spoke to Jay about it, he'd said it would be fine if she decided they'd have children, but his fines were often filled with hope rather than certainty.

The kite is steady in the air now. Connor's father squats beside him, both holding the spool while Connor babbles, his shrill voice harmonising with the wind's pitch. She imagines herself flying a kite with her own little Connor. It doesn't exhilarate her, but it doesn't leave her cold. Either of those feelings would be better, making her choice obvious, but instead, she experiences something in between, an open-mindedness, like agreeing to watch a film she knows nothing about—two hours that could be great or terrible. Except her child wouldn't be over in a hundred and twenty minutes, and she couldn't just view it from her seat before reviewing it on Rotten Tomatoes.

Her hair whips her eyes as she squints against a harsh gust, which is why she's not totally sure whether the pram just moved. It looked like it did. Just a couple of inches towards the track it had come up, away from her. If Jay were here, he'd get up, call over to the father. *Mate, I think your pram just rolled in that wind. Might wanna check the brake.* They'd chat for a minute, small talk about how cute the baby was, but she's reluctant to interfere in case the father feels judged and snaps at her. Jay's extroversion isn't there to hide behind.

The pram definitely moves this time, the hood acting as a sail to shift it a few inches. She considers that the pram might be empty, simply a vehicle for ferrying Connor and the kite, and Connor's earlier tongue poking might've just been for general fun. Maybe they had shopping to do, and on the cushioned bed are packets of microwave rice, tins of beans, bananas, and biscuits. Then a bit of crochet blanket flaps above the parapet, raised by a miniature peach fist. The fingers flex open before lowering out of sight.

Connor yelps as the kite dives and hits the ground. Her nephew had made the same noise when they'd been baking cookies in her kitchen, and he'd knocked the bag of flour onto the floor. While she'd tried to clean it up, Eddie had rolled in it, thrown handfuls of it, and spilled his drink in it, forming a gloopy paste. She'd let him hug her with gungy hands and taken photos on her phone of his ghostly face. When Eddie had got a temperature later that afternoon and thrown up on her, she'd cooled him down and cradled him until her sister had arrived. She already knows she's capable of patience and to nurture, to find joy in a child.

Jay looked after Eddie once when she and her sister had gone to a bridesmaid dress fitting. He'd got his old matchbox cars out the loft and set up a rug with a car track printed on it for Eddie. They'd been playing with it all when she and her sister had left, Eddie telling Jay why blue cars were best, Jay nodding. When they'd returned, the mat and cars had been put away. Jay was microwaving a snack for Eddie, who was watching television with a thin line of crusty scab across the bridge of his nose. Eddie had got excited and tossed one of the little metal cars into the air. It had come down and smacked his face. Her sister had rolled her eyes.

"Sorry, Jay, I should've warned you he's a thrower. Least it wasn't at your tv."

“It didn't half bleed. You frightened the life out of me, little mate.” He examined the wound, Eddie snatching the heated waffle from Jay's hand with glee. “Will he be okay,” Jay asked her sister.

“Of course! Don't be soft.” She'd patted Jay's shoulder, assured him Eddie's memory of it would fade with the scab.

Jay nodded. “I just wish I'd managed to stop it happening.”

After her sister left with Eddie, she'd found the car mat stuffed behind the sofa, a tiny smear of Eddie's blood on the grey carpark. She went upstairs to talk to Jay, but when she heard him sobbing in the shower, she came back down and put the car mat in the wheelie bin. She'd never known him to cry.

Connor and his father launch the kite back into the air on the same gust that starts the pram rolling. The wheels squeak as it builds momentum and dips towards the track. She's up from the bench, running to stop it, praying she'll reach it before it careers off the track and smacks into a tree, tipping and launching its passenger. Then she imagines reaching it, stopping it safely, the father turning and spotting her clutching the pram, thinking she's trying to make off with it, then she's explaining, and he's not buying her excuses, yelling at her and threatening to call the police while little Connor screams, and the kite blows away.

Her boots thump the gravel. Arms outstretched, she grabs the pram handle, skidding on the stones before she and the pram stop. “Oh my God,” she puffs, looking inside. The little one is sucking its bottom lip, looking at her, its woolly cap slunk behind its head. It's not obvious whether it's a boy or a girl, the cap orange, the blanket white and yellow. Even though the baby is unbothered by its impromptu ride, she says, “Don't worry, I've got you. Let's get you back to your daddy.”

The father sees her when she's pushing the pram up the track back to the grass. Instead of bolting towards her, he watches her return the pram to its original spot and crouch down to figure out the brake, pulling it tight. When she stands, he pulls the kite into a dive and reels it in before taking Connor's hand and coming over. She considers returning to the bench, but the baby watches her curiously, so she stays put.

“Shit, sorry,” the father says to her. She’s surprised he’s sworn in front of a helpful stranger, Connor, and the baby. Moreover, she’s unsure why he’s apologised to her. “Thought I had the brake on.” Connor pulls at the kite in his father’s hand and whines, but his father doesn’t relinquish it. “Connor is pretty full on. I get distracted.” He looks at Connor, who thumps his father’s thigh. “It’s hard to give the second one the same kind of attention.” It’s only now that he peers inside the pram to check on the baby, who is still fixated on her face. “Their mum is so much better at this than me. I just wanted to give her some peace this morning.”

She says to the father, “I’m sure you’re better at this than you think.” She’s not sure whether she believes that, but it’s important to her that he believes it.

The father doesn’t reply, still looking inside the pram again.

“He’s okay in there, isn’t he?”

She wonders why he’s asking her. “Looks okay to me.”

Connor thumps his father’s thigh again. “Kite, Daddy!”

“Take care,” she says, and gives the trio a small wave before crossing the grass to the track. She kicks up little waves of gravel, watching the wind swirl the dust. Then she stops and looks out over her town again, the church spire, the curve of her street, the football pitch of her school where she’d first kissed Jay. Sweet Jay, who always means so well, who she’s always leant on, who she always intends to lean on. Who perhaps should learn to lean on her. She takes her phone out of her pocket and continues down the track as she calls him.



**Fall** / Paul Jones

The snake said, "Follow me." And so I did.  
 I gave up my limbs, both legs and both arms.  
 I dropped down on my belly so I could  
 join others fallen, so I could taste the dust,

that endless banquet of the finest dust.  
 And when the rain came, I slid in the mud.  
 And when the sun shone again, I was warm.  
 I loved the tall weeds, their seed-heavy heads

that bobbed in the light breeze. There I hid.  
 There the ground-hived bees shared their summer swarm.  
 Their music was something I understood,  
 something like the stars, like rain, like the dust.

Miraculous and mundane. Life close to dust,  
 close to roots, ravines, and rocks, was good.  
 Every hour was full of surprise and charm.  
 Then the snake said, "Climb this tree." And I did.



**Summer Ars Poetica** / Carlene Gadapee

When milfoil becomes mille-feuille, becomes male finch,  
 my mind wanders and wonders what are words? Invasive,  
 layered, fragile, crisp? Natural, beautiful, preening feathers  
 in the bath, a shimmering image of purple sunlight ripples.  
 A flutter—they are gone, taken flight, little words, little birds.

I glance up, the leaves shift the light, and phrases swoop and  
 cluster around the feeders, dropping seed fragments that might  
 take root, grow straight, reach into sheets of rain and wind.  
 Will they blossom? Will they flake into petals or crumbs, will  
 they cling and mat the surface, driving out all other thoughts?  
 Will they fly?



### **Snowflakes Shall Be Your Butterflies**

David W. Berner

The window is thick with condensation. Fog hovers over the treeless valley and the loch; the view is murky through the waves of the old glass pane, like a filter on a camera lens, turning the edges of everything a hazy shade of silver. There's little daylight remaining. Still, up here the light stays long, and the moon is already out, waxing. Whistling wind sneaks through the small space between the old oak door and the jamb; the fire snaps in the stone hearth, wood smoke mixes with the earthy smell of the room.

Before the wooden desk that looks out to the immeasurable land, I take the typewriter, compact and light of weight, from its torn leather case with the faulty zipper and rest it on the sun-washed planks. I've carried it in my backpack for many miles. It's an Olivetti, maybe 1963, portable, gray, scratched and worn where the carriage return has repeatedly nicked the frame. Keys work. Ribbon's good. I light two candles, set them on the windowsill. From my journal, I tear a page and roll it around the platen. There's no plan to chase down some untold tale. No notion of Kerouac or Rilke, Chatwin or Theroux. No, this is for him, and for those who travel and arrive here to rest.

I've come to the bothy from Kylestrome, walking from the main road and the weathered pier. There's a beaten old sign there for Loch Glendhu. I took the stone bridge and moved along the loch side to the access road. It was more than a two-hour hike, nearly seven kilometers from Kylesku Hotel. I needed a good bed after many days dodging the spitting rain, walking these stony highlands, sleeping in my tent on rugged and barren land and the hard floors of these shelters. Many of the trails here are marked only by cairns stacked by fellow travelers who have wound their way from Loch Fleodach Coire. A full day had passed along that trail, and I saw no one. Here at the bothy, there is no sign of a recent stay, although the last visitor has left kindling and a bit of chopped firewood. I have draped my wet jacket over a chair near the flame and hung my food bag from a hook on the ceiling. A few nights before, field mice chewed through granola bars I'd left in an open pocket of my backpack. Over the fire, I've made coffee in an old tin kettle that has been left in the bothy for all to use.

The Olivetti was my father's typewriter. Thousands of words had emanated from it over its life, his life. Letters to my mother. Letters to me, ones he would type and slip into envelopes to carry in his backpack for days until he'd discovered a village with a post office. But most of what came from the keys of this machine was his poetry. Verse he'd published in few local newspapers and obscure journals. He made no money from any of it, was never paid any great fee. Most times he gave his words away like the urban street poet who sets up his typewriter on the sidewalk. Poets never get rich, he would often say, that's why they're poets. He romanticized the idea of a poet's life. He revered Yeats and especially Burns. And he loved the walking poets, as he called them, like the impoverished poet William Henry Davies who wandered on foot through Britain and wrote about children playing under snowflakes in winter and among butterflies in summer, thriving in the cold and the warmth of their days. And there was Wordsworth, who famously hiked the Lake District searching for the most perfect words for man's link to nature, his loneliness, his solitude, and for how to open your heart so it "dances with the daffodils." My father often reminded me of that Wordsworth line.

There are many of my father's poems that readers have never seen, stuffed away inside a leather binder. I carry it with me. I've come to read them all in time. Every word. Over and over. Each ragged

page, words on much that he had found beyond understanding, glimmers of what it was he was searching for. Yet there are poems that evoke only mystery, ones that seem to come from another cavern in his mind. I am here in the middle of this primeval land, the land he loved, the land he couldn't imagine not returning to, the land he wrote about, and the land where he'd discovered a touch of heaven if there is such a thing. Others have found the muse, if you want to call it that, in Paris, Tangiers, on the streets of Dublin, along the California seacoast, or under the desert's Joshua tree at dusk. But it seems clear that for my father there was nothing like the majesty of this land. He believed it fueled him, as Sandburg once said, to write the "phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away."

From the binder, I take one of poems and place the paper on the desk, securing it to the wood with tacks I've brought with me. I smooth out the paper's corners and with the hammer end of the axe left here for chopping firewood, I tap in the tacks, sit forward in the chair, and read the words in a whisper.

Protect me, these walls  
that hold the breath of  
all seeking shelter,  
missing home, finding solace.

For their air is my air,  
as the land is, too,  
belonging to the world,  
surrendering to angels.

Loch Glendhu, May 2010

The type is clean, although the letter O in the words "solace" and "world" are smudged a bit from the errant ink of the ribbon. I have no knowledge of the typewriter ever being properly cleaned, although the ribbon certainly must have been replaced many times in its life. The poem looks good in this place. Proper and right. I'll stay here tonight, and in the morning, I'll leave behind his typewriter, knowing that those who travel here will respect its presence, keep it safe, and on my return in many days, I will discover what others have had to say about my father's words.

I slide the typewriter closer and begin.

For those who travel here,

On this desk, you will find one of my father's poems written here in this bothy many years ago. He loved all

that this land represented and was eternally grateful to all those he met along the trails here and those who

shared this bothy on many rainy, windy nights.

If you might, type a reflection, note, or thought on his typewriter to leave it for all to see.

May it help bring you and your heart whatever it is you are seeking.

Forever,

The son of James Douglas Abercrombie, poet.

I tack the letter to the wall.

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It's been raining for two days now. Rain is expected again tomorrow, although there's the chance for a break. I'm prepared. It is Scotland, after all, and I've been here before. Water drips from the sleeves of my raincoat and from its hood into my eyes. My socks are dry, but my boots are damp. Mud and peat stick to the soles.

It's been three weeks since I first arrived at Glendhu bothy and now, after a long hike, I'm returning. It's taken more energy this time to walk this land. I'm slower, older. But I knew what faced me. More than twenty years ago, my father encouraged me to come here to see what he saw, feel what he felt. My marriage had failed, and I had come to escape, to reset a life. "You should go," he told me. "Your soul needs it." I believe my father knew a great deal about what the soul might need.

In my backpack I find the pitta bread I'd wrapped in plastic. My father taught me how pitta stays fresh for long periods, necessary on these journeys. I tear off a bite. I've left the ruins of Ardvreck Castle where I'd rested and move along this rocky trail with the hills surrounding me. It will be a couple of hours to Loch na Gainmhich Waterfall, or the Wailing Widow, as it's called. Legend says a grieving mother threw herself over the edge after her son, while hunting deer in the mist, plummeted into the gorge to his death.

A poem my father wrote about the falls is in the binder I carry. He must have stood before it, below or above, listening to something in the wind.

After more than an hour, the rain is lighter, only a spitting drizzle. Across the hills to the south, I see blue sky mix with canopies of gray. The weather to the north appears more ominous, dark along the horizon, fog. But the system is moving out, and the better weather is coming. I smile, watching a buzzard soar high and low and land on a rock cropping some fifty meters ahead. The birds of the highlands are common in my father's poetry. The osprey, the goshawk, the falcon. He found a kind of freedom in their flight, it seems, a chance to ascend, to fly away from heartache, pain, and burdens toward something heavenly.

My legs ache. I consider making my way to the old road and the easier route. It's flat and less rocky. I've been told that once I arrive at the falls, there will be a climb on unsure ground to reach the top. I want to save any energy I might have left. But with the drizzle subsiding and a bit more of the sun breaking through, I choose to remain on the trail. Father would have never taken the road. Roads take you where others want you to go, he once told me. Roads are other people's journeys.

There's a risk of getting my boots more heavily soaked if I hop over the wobbling stones that lie in the loch's rushing water as it moves to the waterfall's edge. Still, I trudge forward over the boggy ground, careful not to slide and slip on the rocks. The sound is fierce as the water cascades over the cliff to the narrow canyon more than 200 meters below, striking the protruding rocks, giant medieval steps. The power of it is all around me. I am still and silent as I think of the widow. I think of her sorrow. I think of her son. In the distance and across the loch to the green-gray glen, the craggy hills rise, soundless cries of mourning mix with awe and reverence. For a moment, I am overcome; a once unknown awareness surfaces, a contentment of spirit difficult to explain. My hands tremble. A tear blurs my vision.

The rain has stopped, and the weather's shift brings a gusty wind. With some fourteen kilometers remaining before I arrive at Glendhu bothy, I follow the rough track from the small parking space to the path that, in time, will take me past the modest lodges and the hotel, an anticipated two-hour hike from Kylesku Bridge along Loch Gleann Dubh. I hope to arrive before dark.

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Someone is at the window. The late-day shadows don't permit me to note the details of a face, yet I'm certain it is a woman, her hair red, unruly. She is at the desk. There are two other buildings here at the head of the loch: the byre where ponies were once kept, and a trackers' cottage. But the bothy is the center of this settlement, and the woman has taken to it. I see woodsmoke from the chimney. As I move closer, she senses me somehow and glances up, smiles, and gives a shy wave. I now see her face. She is not young but not old. She watches me for a time as I walk, and she appears to stand. Her image disappears for a moment and the door opens.

"Are you lookin' to stay?" she asks, her shoulder leaning against the door jamb. "It's only me here for the night and there's plenty of room." The accent is Scottish, pitched on the higher notes of a scale.

"I am, if you don't mind," I say.

"Aye. That's what these dwellings are for. Have you been?"

"Yes. Many days ago."

"Well then you know there's a fire." She steps aside and waves her hand at the door. "And I carry a knife with me, so don't be gettin' any ideas." She laughs and watches me enter.

"Never crossed my mind." I smile and drop my rucksack to the wooden floor, remove my waterlogged boots and place them near the fire. "It's still here," I say, seeing the typewriter. I am not surprised. There are notes—written with pen or pencil, others typed—affixed to the wall with the tacks I'd left behind. Two have been secured with hikers' blister tape, others wedged into crevices in the wall. And there's paper rolled into the Olivetti. Words typed.

"It was here when you were here before, days ago?" she asks.

I nod and begin to silently read some of the notes travelers have left.

Thank you, Mr. Abercrombie. Your words have given me determination to carry on.

Only this wonderful land of open space and forever sky could produce such words. Travel well, fellow hikers.

There's also a short poem.

The thinnest place  
brings the boldest awakening,  
and I am buoyed to follow  
my quickening heart.

And then there in the typewriter, another note.

I miss you, Dad. But I will always have your words.

I step back, catch an absent breath, and read it again. “Did you write this?” I ask.

“I did. It was my father’s typewriter.” She runs her fingers along the keys. “I’m dumbfounded that it’s here. Do you know anything about this? And this note? I’m at a loss. From his son?”

“I wrote the note. I’m his son. The typewriter is my father’s. I carried it here.”

“How could that be?” The woman looks again at the machine, at the scratch on the body near the carriage return lever, the wear on the space bar where the black color has been smudged away.

“There’s been a mistake, I’m sure. There are other Olivetti typewriters in the world,” I continue, hoping to explain.

“No, I’m certain.” She runs her hand along the platen and turns the machine over. “See here, the initials—J.A.—scratched into the body. He did that with a knife.”

“How did you know this?”

“I know this typewriter.”

“And do you know this?” I ask, pointing to the poem that I’d left behind. “It’s his. And so . . .” I remove the binder of poems from my backpack and hold it before her, “so are all of these.”

The young woman sits in the old chair at the desk and opens the binder. In silence, she reads one poem and then another and another. Out the window, shadows have taken over the hills, and the loch has turned the color of steel. She turns from the poems for a moment and watches a bird, a single grouse, hopping in the grass and among the scattered stones just outside the window.

“There must be some explanation,” she whispers to herself, her eyes returning to the poems. “Are you?” She pauses. “Are you my brother?”

Something heavy rises in me now. Unexpected. There is a loss of something immeasurable, something unanswerable, something I could never know, yet all of it is before me like a germinating seed coming alive in the light, revealing the first sign of a flower's life, a sapling. I sit on the floor, finding it hard to continue standing, and press my back against the wall.

The woman tells me her father was American. That he came to Scotland often to revive his inner life, she says. He'd met her mother along the trail on the West Highland Way not far outside Milngavie where she lived. She had been a young teacher at the local academy and spent many of her off days walking the open moorlands and the steep mountains. Many times, alone. It was her solace from the world, the woman explains. Over a period of a couple of years when he'd come for long stretches, she says, he and her mother would sometimes travel together. They'd stay in bothies like the Glendhu. She was beautiful, she says of her mother. Even in her final days, she was a beautiful woman.

Like her daughter. Red hair. Mournful eyes.

When her mother told him the news, he vowed to be there for her always, for both of them, the woman says. Her mother knew he had a life in America and would not abandon it. It was a given. And so, for many years, when he'd come back to this land, he would walk for many days and afterward stay with them, cook meals of lamb and carrots, read books to them at night. He helped build a garden, bought them a dog, and in time, brought her, a growing young girl, to these trails, sharing the majesty of them. And poems, she says, he wrote poems. On the night before he'd leave for America, he'd place one on her pillow and promise to return. Over and over, he did this. And always, she says, always, he came back.

He never spoke of his life in America, nothing in any detail, she continues. When she was old enough to understand, she'd ask, but he'd dismiss her questions as if that was never anything she needed to worry about, as if he wanted only to be in their world and their world alone when he was here. Her mother must have known more, she says, but she never talked about any of it. In time, it all became so very normal, those parallel lives. Normal for him, she says, and normal for her and her mother.

The woman pauses in her telling and again runs her hand across the typewriter's keys.

“And the typewriter? He’d bring it with him when he’d come to visit?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“He did,” she says. “It amazes me how he never questioned carrying it with him.” She lifts the machine by the roller with one hand to observe its weight. “It’s light.” For a moment, the woman turns to the window. “It’s his. I know it is.” Her eyes meet mine. “Have we not lived the same life thousands of miles apart?”

I stand and sigh. My face flushed. “I’m not sure what to say. What am I supposed to do with all of this?”

The woman touches my hand. “Maisie,” she says. “He used to call me his Little Pearl.”

I hold my hand over my mouth and then slowly take it away. “James,” I say.

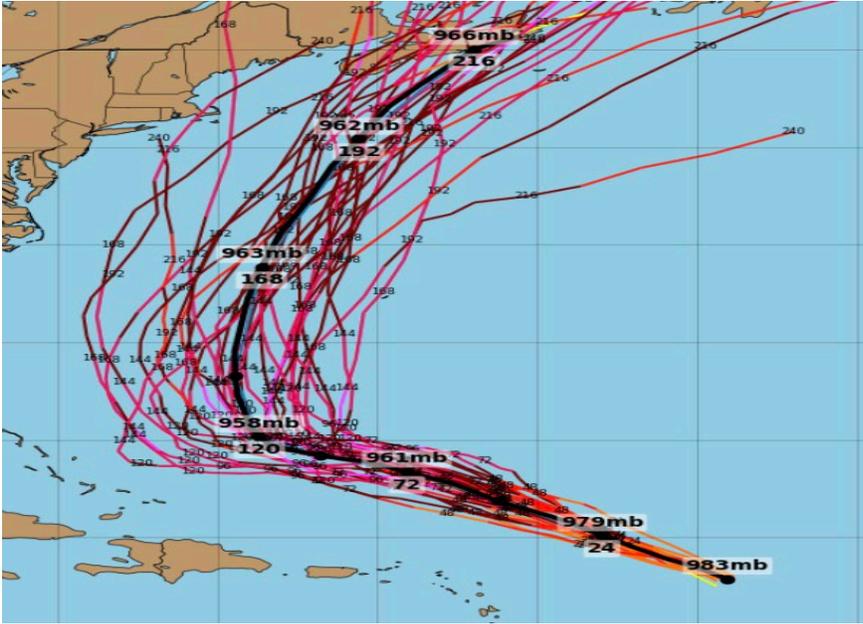
“I know,” she says. “I know.”

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Later that night, orange flames in the fireplace, I roll into my sleeping bag against the far wall of the small main room. Maisie is asleep in hers by the fire. There are other rooms, but neither of us wants to be alone. I stare at the ceiling. Candlelight flickers against the timbers. There are two ways to face the unexpected, I believe. Either you are numbed by it, paralyzed, and you run from understanding so you can protect yourself, or you try to recognize the humanity in it and acknowledge the unpredicted, the unforeseen. I am somewhere in the middle, in a kind of purgatory, stunned and angry, shaken but aching to forgive. I now realize how much I might never know about my father, and I find myself considering my own flaws, my failed marriage, my default toward mistrust. Tonight, though, I will rest. I will sleep. I will dream. Tomorrow, I’ll ask more questions—if Maisie is willing to answer. Tomorrow, I’ll find a way out of purgatory. And, as my father might have done, I’ll write a poem, something simple, something true. Type it on the Olivetti and leave it for others to read. Or give it to Maisie and promise to stay in touch, to someday visit her home, if she’ll agree. We could walk the slow trail to the next bothy together, the one in Glencoul. I hear there is quite a story there. It had been an old schoolhouse attached to a small home, so remote a place that it was easier to hire a teacher to live there in a separate room and teach the

family's two young boys by day. When they became teenagers, the boys were shipped off to France to fight in the Great War. They never returned. There's a journal that sits on the fireplace mantel, written by the father who lived there until his death. In it, he mourns the loss of his sons. Maybe I'll go there next. Maybe I'll leave tomorrow. Maybe Maisie has already been. Maybe she knows of the old journal, of the grief revealed. Maybe we could go together, not wait for some future day. We could read the father's story together, share his sorrow, for we now understand a father's sorrow, the kind that's found in the shadows of what one has done, in regret, in the love and loss we push back into the deepest corners. Together we could read again all of Father's poems, the ones in the binder, and search between the lines, see his words more clearly, rediscover his secret heart, solve his mysteries. Perhaps then, we might leave the binder behind in this bothy, all his poems on the desk at the window next to the Olivetti for the all the many travelers to read, like the journal at Glencoul, like the father who lost his sons so many years ago, words documenting a man's life, his joys, his grief. Father's words by the light of the fire, by candlelight, at the window, sharing them with all the wanderers one by one.

Yes, in the morning I'll ask Maisie what she thinks, what she might wish to do, what would be best, what might give her peace, what would be right. At first light, we'll decide. We'll decide then, together.



### **The Spaghetti Model** / Michael Colonnese

The path of the approaching  
 hurricane isn't clear. Instead,  
 there's a tangle of lines  
 curving all over the map,  
 a cone of uncertainty  
 that makes caution feel ridiculous.  
 Nevertheless, my local supermarket  
 is already out of bread, bottled water,  
 milk, and flashlight batteries.  
 And if there's an inhabitable decision  
 lurking out there somewhere  
 of like an opportunistic weatherman wearing  
 a yellow slicker and rubber boots  
 and secretly hoping he'll get his chance  
 to document the damage,  
 I can't seem to find it.  
 It isn't drizzling yet,  
 and the wind hasn't gusted,  
 but we've repeatedly been forewarned  
 to locate a room without  
 an exterior window,  
 and a generalized fear  
 is continually being promoted  
 as the most prudent response  
 to life organized in accordance  
 with the spaghetti model  
 of disaster management.

In the novel *A Less Perfect Union*, excerpted below, Ocracoke Island native and surfer Connor McKenzie returns home for summer after graduating Salutatorian from San Diego State University. There he finds romance with Emmy Matthews, the daughter of an influential but traditional North Carolina state senator. When summer ends and she returns to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he and his two surfing buddies travel to Costa Rica for the winter surfing season. While there, he learns that Emmy's father and the governor have died in a suspicious small plane crash—and that Emmy's father has left Emmy evidence of a right-wing conspiracy to take over the state government and election process, as well as evidence and that he and the governor have been in danger from a shadowy oligarch and from some of the most powerful men in state government. Pursued by agents hired by these men, Emmy flees to join Connor and his friends in Costa Rica to find safety. When they track her there, in a chase that crosses three continents, Connor must use his wits to outsmart them, keep Emmy safe, and somehow bring the conspiracy to light.



**A Less Perfect Union** / Chapter 16 / Wilson, North Carolina

Graham Sturgis

At eight o'clock in the evening, Jedidiah Jefferson sits in a brown leather armchair in the den of his Carolina cottage home situated within his hunting preserve outside Wilson, North Carolina. He's alone. He has no wife. She died twenty years ago, drowned in a hotel swimming pool in Myrtle Beach, after drinking too much with her years-younger lover.

He knows this place even with his eyes shut. The walls are paneled in heart pine, sap-filled and dense, harvested from ancient long-leaf pine forests. The floors are red oak milled from beams salvaged from an abandoned tobacco barn. Each plank bears black dapples scattered across its plane, dark relics of iron nails pulled at millwork for their most recent use. Centered on an exterior wall between two floor-to-ceiling windows cloaked in simple forest green drapes stands a large brick fireplace. The locally made brick is gray mortared. A black iron cooking hook swivels from one side over the grated hearth. Above the pine mantle are mounted three Confederate swords from the War Between the States, referred to as the War of Northern Aggression, or after the Cause was lost as the Late Unpleasantness.

A glass case on the opposite side of the room displays multiple trophies and awards won by Jefferson's flagship restaurant, Sizzlin' Pig BBQ, and an eight-by-ten framed black-and-white team photograph of the Randolph High School Ramblers football squad, AA Champions of Region IV his senior year. Other trophies, souvenirs of the hunt, hang from an opposite wall and stare blankly. Only their necks and heads are visible, as if the bodies of each animal somehow had become trapped behind the wall in a separate realm, unable to break through. In full display are a black bear, a large whitetail buck, and his best trophy, a bull elk. There is room on the wall for more.

Jefferson holds a whiskey glass one-third full of Kentucky's finest, an amber liquor redolent of twelve years' rest in a smokey oak barrel. It warms in his right hand, which rests in his lap. Thin wisps from a near-forgotten cigar climb from the ashtray on the walnut end table by his left hand.

He's not thinking about any of these things.

Headlights swing in an arc across the gravel driveway that loops in front of the house, tires crunching as the vehicle approaches. A polished black Porsche Cayenne stops at the head of the boxwood-lined walkway leading to the porch. The driver-side door swings open. Footsteps grind in the gravel as the occupant exits and walks to the cottage.

Vance Buxton has arrived.

Buxton is thirty-eight years old, average height, slight-but-fit build, blue-gray eyes, ruddy complexion. He wears black-rimmed glasses, black t-shirt, and fitted blue jeans over laced boots. His medium-length

light brown hair is cut short on the sides and combed straight back on the top. A sparse beard appears to be trimmed to mimic a four-day growth, the smart-but-scruffy look. That Buxton is ridiculously wealthy for his thirty-eight years on earth is a fact attributable to his combined talents of high-tech development and sharp business acumen, another expression for ruthlessness. In spite of his wealth, he's been successful at maintaining a low public profile and is almost a recluse.

Buxton is the puppet master behind American Way Alliance, both founder and funder. He is a lifelong disciple of far-right causes, partly because of his political and social leanings but primarily because his companies benefit from them. Global conflicts, threats, and chaos generate lucrative government contracts for cybersecurity tech, defensive and offensive, as well as other profitable ventures. He favors a return to "Made in the USA," a designation that provides opportunities for profit, influence, preferential treatment from federal and state governments, subsidies and expedited permits for making things like computer chips and lithium batteries here rather than abroad under the guise of supply-chain safety.

Jedidiah Jefferson is on his way to the door before the knock sounds. He peeks through glass sidelights that frame both sides of the wood-paneled door, then pulls the door inward.

"Hello, Vance. Glad you made it." He tips his head and smiles at the corners of his mouth. "Come in. Looks like rain's on the way."

"Jedidiah," Buxton nods back, acknowledging the greeting. He walks through the door and follows his host down a short, dimly lit entrance hall to the den.

"Can I get you something?" offers Jefferson as he leads the way.

"Bourbon and water would be nice."

Jefferson steps over to the hunt-board that rests beneath the mounted trophies and pours two fingers of bourbon, one finger of water, into a cut crystal whiskey glass.

Buxton takes a seat in the armchair that Jefferson previously occupied, but Jefferson says nothing and passes him the glass wrapped with a cocktail napkin. Buxton takes it in his hand, raises it to his lips, and

takes a deep swallow, crumpling the napkin and dropping it onto the small walnut table. “Don’t need this.”

“That’s twelve-year-old Pappy Van Winkle, seventeen hundred dollars a bottle. Go easy on it. It’ll go easy on you,” says Jefferson, his irritation apparent.

Buxton sets his glass on the table, no napkin, no coaster.

“After we pull this off, you can buy it by the case....” Buxton takes another swallow, almost draining the glass. “What’s happening with our bill for our mine permit and production facilities?”

“My staff’s put it together, at my direction, of course. At the right time, it’ll be introduced by John Roy Calvin, who at my suggestion’s been appointed to fill Sam Matthews’s vacant senate seat.” Jefferson rolls his palm open and looks down at it. “He might need a little something, say a small show of appreciation, for his participation in our effort. Worth it though. He’s somebody we can count on. Understands how things work when you want something done. I’m informed he has a blind trust we can use to provide him a very attractive investment opportunity in the holding companies for the lithium mine and battery plant.”

“Fine. What about the bill? Asks Buxton, swirling the remnant of bourbon in his glass. Does it include the tax breaks and environmental exceptions? When can I see it?”

“You can see it now. I brought home a hard copy,” says Jefferson.

Jefferson stands and walks back into the entrance hallway, where he retrieves a thin, soft leather attaché case from a walnut secretary table. He returns to the den, opens the buckle and flap, and tugs out a sheaf of documents, which he extends to Buxton. “This is the most recent draft. I expect there’ll be some small changes before it’s filed, but nothing substantive. To put a gloss on it, lipstick on a pig, we’re calling it the Green Energy Resources Development Act. The preamble states the legislative purpose is to develop and utilize North Carolina’s natural resource of lithium by creating a special district for location of a mine and lithium processing facility, and it will help us get land by eminent domain from any landowners who are reluctant to sell. The mining’s to be conducted in tandem with the production plant to make batteries for electric vehicles, ostensibly fostering state interests of utilizing resources for clean

energy, securing a domestic lithium battery supply chain, and creating of thousands of jobs.” He tips his head and smiles. “And, of course, a pot load of money for us.”

Buxton takes the bill in hand, pulls tortoise shell reading glasses from his shirt pocket, and settles back into his chair. A few minutes later, he lowers the papers and looks up. “Just lovely. Very smart. So, the special district will be used to get favorable tax status and bypass the usual regulations for mining, like an airport district or a port. Right? Yes, very smart. Hard to oppose a bill that provides use of domestic resources to make American batteries for electric vehicles and create lots of jobs. Of course, there’ll be the usual problems of noise, water consumption, and toxic mine tailings that the radical left environmentalists will scream about, but it’ll be very difficult for a court to override the laudable legitimate state interests the bill claims to serve. And what wonderful foresight that we’ve been buying up land in the Piedmont, parcels where the lithium deposits are richest and easiest to access.”

Jefferson reaches to retrieve the bill from Buxton. “We’ll still have to overcome some federal regulatory hurdles about the mining. Goddamn bureaucracies.... That’ll take time, another election cycle to straighten out. We’ll need a friendly administration in Washington to grease the skids. That’s why changing the way presidential electors are chosen’s so important. We may have the votes in both the state house and the senate, but it’ll be close. That has to happen first, before the mining and battery bill gets introduced. Most of the support in the General Assembly for changing the election law is a reaction to the same old perception of election fraud from that presidential election. Same with the party’s voting base. We can use that.”

“Of course,” Buxton says. “The American Way Alliance will keep up its efforts, media and money, to provide support for the change. We’re working on it in other states, but that will be helped if North Carolina leads the way, makes it easier for others to follow. They’ll never know it’s about money, not philosophy. Lemmings to the sea, all of ‘em. But what about finding Sam Matthews’s kid, the one who could hurt us? I’m worried what her father might have heard at the fundraiser and could have told her. Any progress on that?”

“No,” says Jefferson, frowning. “She could be a problem. And we’re not certain, but we suspect Matthews may have said something to our attorney general, Amelia Russell, about having information that could incriminate us, possibly papers or a recording. Who knows?” He picks up his cigar from the ashtray. It’s gone out, so he relights it and takes a few puffs until the end glows. Then he settles back in his chair and looks at Buxton. “Amelia was very cool to me when I ran into her at the funeral, as if she was onto it. She must not have any proof, though, or she’d be doing more than acting unfriendly. Matthews and his daughter—Emmy’s her name—were very close. He had supper with her a couple of days before he was killed, and he may have given her whatever he had if he had something, probably told her what he knew, too. Now it looks like she’s left school and just disappeared. One day she was there, the next she was gone. The GPS tagged on her car showed her headed west on I-40. No reason for her to go that way. If she found the GPS, that could be a red herring. Truth is, we don’t know where the hell she is.”

“Where’s she from?” Buxton asks. “Wasn’t it New Bern or somewhere like that? Has anyone gone there to look, ask questions? Our guys are supposed to be professionals.” Buxton raises his voice in frustration. “We can’t afford to have it all blow up in our faces because a fuckin’ girl outsmarted us.”

“New Bern. Right,” Jefferson says. “She doesn’t have family there anymore now her dad’s dead, but we can check it out. I’ll get word to the surveillance team. They’re former military, now part of the Freedmen militia group. She can’t stay gone forever. What do you want to do when we find her?”

For long seconds, nothing is said. Silence hangs in the room, patient yet expectant. Buxton watches a moth circle the lamp that rests beside him on the walnut side table. Without expression, he lifts his hand and pinches the moth between thumb and forefinger. “Just give me the information, all the details. I have people for that. Now, how about a refill of that fine whiskey.”



### **A Way To Be** / Allan Lake

Our brief moment is a  
 chance to thank Ma Natura,  
 chat with two cockatoo cousins,  
 jump naked into a pool at the base  
 of a waterfall, reread that absurd story,  
 listen to Aguas De Marco sung by Elis +  
 Jobim himself, eat fruit mince tart or three,  
 walk into the wilderness or around the block,  
 talk to a stranger or just sit together silently,  
 plant a fig tree, plant a kiss, go shopping  
 for a child's gift, enjoy a perfect coffee  
 made by a foreign barista who knows  
 how you like it, get into cool sheets  
 with books that hold you tightly,  
 feel the sun, feel the rain, take  
 a cool shower, visit the past,  
 discover why a wind gust  
 blows the answer into  
 the open hand you  
 used to cover  
 your eyes.



### **Spirit of the Spurtle**

Susan Bailey Lesser

For a moment, I forgot what I was looking for. I was overwhelmed by the contents of the open drawer beside the stovetop, all those supposedly necessary items nestled together. There were spatulas with metal blades for flipping grilled cheese sandwiches and spatulas with red plastic ends for mixing oatmeal muffins made from my mother's hand-written recipe. There were long-handled spoons and slotted spoons and a whisk that looked like a failed attempt at inventing a mousetrap. Pasta spoons and soup ladles snuggled up next to a flat sort of perforated paddle that will surely be required whenever I need it for an as yet unknown recipe. Every cooking kitchen has, or should have, one of these usefully congested drawers.

I imagine, however, there is a novice entrepreneur out there somewhere, probably male, maybe already living in a salary-swallowing Manhattan high-rise, who has no idea what any of these odd-shaped tools might be used for because he gets his meals through the ingenuity of Door-Dash, or as take-out Pad Thai from the restaurant on the corner. He does not need to peel, or flip, or stir, or chop anything.

It was just last weekend when this fellow went back home to Woonsocket, Rhode Island. His parents have the requisite kitchen drawer. Our young entrepreneur opened it by mistake when he was looking for a charge cord for his iPhone20ProExcelente. That drawer rattled and thumped as the utensils were jostled about, a familiar sound from his childhood. Our guy's eyes lit up as he pulled out the spatula with the worn wooden handle his mother had used to serve homemade birthday cakes covered with chocolate icing and, on his tenth birthday, lit up with candles that flashed like holiday sparklers.

Next came the potato masher with the chipped handle. He remembered then a blue dinner plate with a little mountain of mashed potatoes and a pat of butter melting in the crater at the top. At that moment, with the drawer still open, Entrepreneur Guy realized how he would make the move to full-fledged Rich Guy. Kitchen drawers, already fitted with mysterious utensils recalling homemade childhood edibles, would be a home decorating hit, more fashionable even than geese with blue neck ribbons and overblown Tuscan kitchens. He even thought he might throw in a couple of marbles and three Uno cards to ensure authenticity. He would explain, "No need to use the drawer's contents; this is a one-of-a-kind art installation for your home." He would market the drawers under the name "The Olden Days."

But I was telling you about forgetting what I was looking for. I did find it. It is called a spurtle, S-P-U-R-T-L-E, and it's a wooden dowel-like tool about as big around as my thumb and maybe ten inches long. It has been carefully sanded until it is smooth all over, no splinters whatsoever. This design allows the sides of a porridge pot to be scraped down, and the sticky clumps stirred into the long-simmering mass of rolled oats, eliminating any aggravating lumpiness.

I acquired my spurtle some years ago, during a trip to Scotland, where the use of the implement has been dated back to the 15th century. It has a wee bit—you see now how I'm slipping into the Scottish

vernacular—of unnecessary ridging at the end you hold on to, no doubt an embellishment designed to attract the tourist trade. It's a utensil whose usefulness to me is questionable. Mind you, I usually just toss a bowl of water and quick oat flakes into the microwave and hope it doesn't boil over again. But now that I have found my spurtle at the back of the kitchen drawer, I may be stirring up a stovetop pot of porridge while I sip my first cup of coffee for the day and listen for the school bus to go by.

Even if I never make that porridge, I'm happy to see my spurtle because I fancy that I come from a long line of women brandishing their spurtles with practiced expertise. I envision a succession of mornings in the highlands and lowlands of Scotland, in Northern Ireland, and eventually in Northern Canada. I see a parade of women, my foremothers, standing over pots on peat-fired or wood-burning stoves, stirring up a morning porridge of oats or barley or, heaven help us, the dreaded millet. I see aprons with large pockets and berry-stained bib fronts covering the skirts and blouses they wear while they scrape the sides of the iron pot as the aroma of breakfast porridge welcomes members of the long line of my ancestors into another day.

I also fancy the spurtle to be a most suitable instrument for verbal emphasis. "No, George," as George's mother might say—for there are lots of Georges in my family. "You cannot stay home from school today because you can only find one sock. You should be thankful to have one sock. Some little boys have none at all," And with that, she pulls the spurtle from the thickening concoction and whacks the side of the pot to make her point.

Although my acquaintance with reality tells me it is not possible, I also like to imagine that all the women of my lineage who preceded me were happy, if not out-and-out joyful, with their morning spurtle workout. Of course, they weren't. The time from 1845 to 1852 commonly marks the years of the Irish Potato Famine, also known as the Great Hunger. It occurred in both Scotland and Ireland, countries that relied largely on a single breed of potato as the daily staple for the poor. Such reliance became a problem when late blight fungus struck, killing off the supply of potatoes and putting huge stress on other, already more expensive staples such as oats, wheat, and barley. So, there must have been times when a pot of porridge was all there was to feed the family for the entire day, times when the pot contained not enough

porridge, or even none at all, and the spurtle was left waiting in the empty iron pot. The Great Hunger was a time when millions died and millions emigrated. My ancestors were among those who left behind the life they knew and set out to invent new lives in distant Canada. And maybe, early on, one of my forefathers, while felling trees in virgin forests for logs to build a barn, picked up a small branch and shaped and polished it into a spurtle, suitable for stirring a pot of porridge in a newfound home.

My own spurtle now resides at the very front of my everyday kitchen drawer, reminding me of my place in the long line of spurtle wielders, and that a bowl of well-stirred, lump-free porridge, perhaps with a wee bit of brown sugar mixed in, is a fine way to begin the day.

I also like to think that as the Kitchen Drawer Art Installation Guy searches, in flea markets and yard sales for worthy objets d'art, he will come upon a spurtle, perhaps an early Canadian spurtle. It will be worn down a wee bit on the porridge end and darkened from the years of porridge preparation on a hot stove. Nevertheless, he will recognize its age and inherent usefulness and assign it a place at the very front of the latest Olden Days Drawer, edition number 35,261 and counting.



**My Brother's Lips** / Robin Greene

So much grief, it could fill an ocean, a prairie,  
command the sun to set. Last year when  
my brother died, I visited South Florida

for his funeral service, and among the coconut  
palms and strip malls, I found Schwartz's  
Memorial Garden, walked from my rented

car, alone into the chapel, and saw him,  
lying there—though at first, I didn't recognize  
him. "Gary," I whispered as though his sleep

could be disturbed and my voice might wake  
him. On the gurney, draped in white satin,  
I saw his cheeks sunken to their bones,

his five o'clock shadow, despite the makeup  
masking his stubble, the hundred pounds  
he'd become, lighter than a small ship's anchor.

I kissed his stone lips, touched his folded hands,  
sweaty-cold from partial embalming and asked  
him why—why he'd ruined his life, gambled

our parents' savings, why he hated me, after  
he himself had made so many bad mistakes.  
"Gary," I reminded him, then myself,

"there's such a thing as forgiveness."  
And again, I kissed his lips as a lover  
might and walked from the room.



## Then and Now

Joanne Conrad

It was December 1973, and Sally and I were nearing the conclusion of several weeks of adventurous travel from Mexico City and Acapulco as we drove down the western coast along the Pacific Ocean. It was our senior year of college and, after receiving the dean's approval to conduct an independent study relevant to our major, anthropology, we'd left our campus in upstate New York to spend our winter semester in central Mexico, driving the entire distance to get there.

Along a rough coastal road south—after crossing a wobbly log bridge over a small river, encountering a roadblock with the armed police—or were they banditos?—and then the overnight invasion of very large crabs from their sand holes on a beach—we came upon Puerto Escondido.

By first impressions, it was a haven for draft dodgers and hippies, mostly Americans with long hair and few clothes, who were enchanted by the counterculture ambience, the weather, and the pounding surf.

We didn't stay long and ventured a bit further south to a small village called Puerto Angel. It was there we pitched a tent for the night and met up with three friends we'd met in Mexico City. Here, we all

celebrated the last day of the year, made a campfire on the beach, and heated up a can of black beans to toast in the New Year. The next day Sally and I wandered around the small half-moon sandy bay to an outcropping of rocks with dozens of tide pools filled with shelled creatures. I collected a few small and unusual shells and today keep them in a small bubble-glass container in a special cabinet.

The year turned; it was now 1974 and time to start our drive east to our first independent study destination, the Valley of Oaxaca. We had only a few weeks to complete our ethnographic studies, as we were expected in Cuernavaca by mid-January. There we would meet the National University of Mexico professor, Dr. Jaime Litvak King, with whom we'd connected during the planning phase of our trip. We'd be assisting him with archeological mapping of a pre-Columbian site that had only partially been excavated.

It wasn't lost on us that we were two twenty-one-year-old women in a pale-yellow sedan, cruising some of the back, unpaved roads of southern Mexico. Young and initially naïve about our youthful gringo looks—blue eyes and blonde hair—it didn't take long to recognize that from the male Latino or gringo perspective, we were women to watch, ogle, and on occasion, offend. That said, the Latina and indigenous women we encountered were always friendly, open, warm, and immediately simpatico.

Although we had a genuine study plan and there was long-distance professorial oversight back in New York by snail-mail, we had no pre-planned daily itinerary, accommodations, or agreed-upon and arranged local connections. Much of our success depended on making connections with the people we met along the way and trusting our instincts to follow potentially meaningful paths that opened before us. Paper maps were our guide. We used occasional pay phones in cities to call our parents—and there was no 911, no instant email for moral support or guidance. We were out of communication from the world, save for a watch, a compass, and the stars—that is, if we even knew how to use them or speak Spanish well enough to ask for help.

We gassed-up with Pemex petrol and proceeded on one of the two routes over the mountains, through remote villages as we traveled into the Valley of Oaxaca. The drive was breathtaking—seventy miles of very poor dirt and gravel road. It took us over three or four mountain ranges dotted with many small villages. As we drove into the clouds, gaining altitude, the air became cooler. It was welcomed relief to

leave behind the stifling humid heat from the lower altitudes. Occasionally, a native-looking bare-chested man would step out from the tropical trees and bushes, wielding a large machete and whacking back the jungle growth along the road. The sight was always unnerving.

As we crested the mountains at a small outpost called San Juan Pacifico, we stopped at the aluminum-roofed shack that we hoped served food. There we saw the ubiquitous large metal box with a lifting lid that served as a refrigerator—and were found at every primitive roadside stand across the country. Inside were dozens of green glass bottles of Coca-Colas, orange Fantas, green Seven-Ups and even Yoli, the lemon-lime soft drink of our choice, and only found in the Mexican state of Guerrero. And yes, there was food available, so we purchased two hot bowls of vegetable soup, with warm corn tortillas, which only cost a few pesos, but we hoped would fill our stomachs until we got to the city.

It was dusk by the time we arrived in the valley and drove around looking for the place we'd read about in our *Mexico on Five Dollars a Day* guidebook. We had the name of a woman who worked at the museum in Oaxaca and decided to visit her the next day. Most likely, she'd have lots of information and might be able to suggest a place to stay for an extended time.

The señora at the museum was diminutive and lovely. And she expected us, having learned about our trip from the professor of archeology, who we'd meet up with in a few weeks. She welcomed us to the city and to Mexico. We spent time with her that first afternoon and explained that we were looking for opportunities to study local cultures. We told her that we were particularly interested in weaving and that we'd heard about a nearby village of weavers.

Upon hearing this, she expressed her support for our interest and told us that while many of the village weavers used synthetic chemical dyes, there were a few villagers remaining who continued the old practice of sourcing and using natural dyes. She also knew who those people were. And even more positive, the señora suggested that we might stay at a place called La Pension Suiza, a small pension run by an elderly Swiss woman who'd lived in Oaxaca for many years. We drove to the place that very afternoon.

The gates of the pension were painted white and opened into a courtyard with a surrounding two-story building of faded red bricks and white doors, behind which were a half-dozen rooms. Like so many

Mexican home spaces, the place was filled with pots overflowing colorful flowers and deep pink bougainvillea vines crawling up the walls.

The proprietor—a small woman with shocking blonde-white long braided hair pinned-up on her head—came out to meet us. Quite brisk in voice and demeanor, she took long strides as she walked briskly along a path to show us the only available double room she had. We told her yes, we would take the room, and we'd like to rent it for a couple of weeks.

We met one more time with the señora from the museum who assured us that it would be fine to travel by ourselves out to the village of Teotitlan del Valle, about a thirty-minute drive. The two weavers who still used natural dyeing techniques were among the first studio homes we would see as we made our way into town. Outside their homes, there were small signs with their names on them—Alberto Vazquez or Porfirio Santiago.

As we drove into Teotitlan, the roughly paved two-lane highway from downtown Oaxaca City turned into a narrow dusty sandy-colored road, lined with rocky debris, and interspersed with grassy plots bordered with tall cactuses to delineate boundaries. There were homes scattered along the way, some made of mudbricks and tiled roofs, and others made in a more primitive style, with slats of wood and dry thatch roofs.

Everything we encountered was a photo opportunity, so Sally frequently got out of the car, opened the trunk, and hauled out her large Nikon camera. I wondered how many rolls of film we'd already used, when we'd run out, where we could buy more. Here we were, only a few weeks into our semester in Mexico, and almost out of film. In retrospect, I now understand that the photo documentation of our travels validated the depth and range of our experiences in the most effective and lasting way.

One of the first open doors we saw was marked by a plaque with the name Alberto Vasquez, hand painted on it. Through the doorway, we saw strong rays of sunlight hit a straw mat on the dirt floor, and there—arms outstretched on the doorstep—sat an infant in a white t-shirt and a diaper.

“Hola? Hola?” I called out. The baby looked up and smiled. A young woman with shiny long dark braided hair, wearing a blue dress and colorful apron, appeared from around a mud wall. She paused and broke into a warm smile. “Hola,” I said again, this time not as a question but as a greeting. “Perdoneme,

señora, soy Juanita y ella es mi amiga Sally. Es esta la casa de Alberto Vasques? Y donde esta la casa de Porfirio Santiago?”

“Si, si,” the señora, said. “Ello esta aqui,” she said, pointing to the house next door.

“Me llamo Gloria. Momentito.” She disappeared around the corner, calling, “Ven, ven. Aqui es Alberto.”

Gloria motioned us out the door and to the next open door up the way. We stepped into a large open-air space with a dirt and gravel floor where we saw a cluster of very large, galvanized steel cauldrons balanced over a wood fire, and baskets of spun and dyed wool hanging on a line to dry. And here was the weaver, Alberto, with his wife, in the process of dyeing the wool—a key element of what we had come to study.

With great excitement I used my best Spanish to tell them that we were students visiting the village and hoped to learn about their natural dyeing techniques. Alberto spoke a bit of broken English and conveyed to us that he’d be happy to show us his work. He invited us to return, which we did daily for a couple of weeks.

Each night Sally and I would discuss our day, what we’d learned, and we’d write in our journals. The pages in our English-Spanish dictionaries began to curl and fray. We had to make use of anthropological research methods to observe this weaving culture with relevant questions and observations, and we needed the correct words to do so.

Even though the art of weaving had started thousands of years ago, the practice of using wool had started in recent centuries when the Spaniards brought sheep to the New World. The indigenous Zapotec people in the valley adapted to using spun wool, and the art was eventually passed down from generation to generation.

Some villagers kept sheep and prepared the wool from shearing—cleaning the wool, carding it, and spinning it to make the undyed skeins. Other sources were available in markets where the wool was purchased undyed but ready to be carded, spun, and dyed for use.

On the first day we spent with Alberto, he knew just where to begin with his informal sharing of the processes and methods that were used to create colorful woven tapestries. Alberto described the foraging

he did to collect natural items for his dyes, motioning to the nearby mountains, and a desert area far away, waving a pointed finger into the distance. He'd go out for days to collect the cochineal insects from a certain cactus for reds, the marigold flowers for yellows, the pirru bark for browns, and the leaves of the indigo plant for blues. He showed us how he brewed each of these sourced natural finds in his cauldrons to then dip and dry the wool for his weaving. His wife, Soledad, was at his side, assisting.



We quickly discerned that it was Alberto who measured out the dye powders in his own formulas to create various dye vats of a color to create differences in color tones, and it was Soledad who dipped the yarns in the cauldrons and wrung out the skeins to dry.

Early on, we learned that Gloria was Porfirio Santiago's wife. We'd met her in her kitchen, where she was making tortillas while her little son watched. She kneeled on a grass mat on the dirt floor, kneading the moistened masa and rolling it out on her stone metate. By hand, she'd lift a rolled ball of masa and shape it into a disk that she'd then place it on a hot comal—a large round and concave clay griddle—over an open fire on the ground.

It only took a few days for us to feel welcome in their world, absorbing their warmth and smiles. They became friends and delighted in sharing their lifestyle, dyeing, and weaving methods. The results of their labor were beautiful and colorful woven tapestries and rugs that they sold to a growing clientele of admirers from around the world.

After a week and a few days, and a visit to Monte Alban, a nearby archeological site, we felt we had ample material to document our ethnographic study of the weaving history, methods, and techniques of the village. Mid-January was looming, and it was time to move north for our second plan of study, the mapping of the pre-Columbian site, Xochicalco, existing from 650-900 CE, just south of Mexico City.

For almost two more months, Sally and I learned archeological mapping techniques at the partially excavated site. As with our study of weavers and weaving in Oaxaca, our plans unfolded organically from a combination of serendipity and good fortune. When it was time to return to our college campus in early March, I vowed to return to Mexico in the near future.

I didn't know then that after graduation a career would unfold and occupy my time for the next almost five decades. Yet there came a moment when I had an opportunity to return to the weaving village, exactly fifty years after that college semester so long ago. I seized it.

Much had changed in Teotitlan del Valle, but some of what I witnessed in 1974 remained. The road into the village was now cobblestone, and tuk-tuk taxis transported villagers and visitors around the town. The gutters were clear of debris and sewage, and much-needed environmental progress had been made—paper bags had replaced plastic ones and so the roadsides were no longer littered with them clinging to the cactus thorns—a country-wide eyesore from yesteryear.

Now, a village market of farmers—with their variety of produce, meats, chickens, bread bolillos, baskets, flowers, and more—flourished in the center of town. The villagers dressed in the same traditional clothing we'd seen in 1974—the women in dresses, embroidered aprons, and dusty leather flats. Women still braided their long dark hair and pinned it up in a circle on their heads, often balancing handwoven baskets or heavy pots. And outside the market, on the sidewalk, they still sat on grass mats, their shoulders covered with wool blankets.

The men arrived in their same faded traditional attire, wearing straw hats, greeting buyers with their beautiful smiles—teeth often missing—as they mingled with their market neighbors and helped their spouses sell their goods—as the sweet fragrance of lilies, burning copal, and cacao beans roasting over open fires floated through the air.

I'd come to Teotitlan with my old photos and was glad to find a few of the villagers I'd known so many years ago. I connected with Gloria, although Alberto had long passed away. As we sat at her kitchen table, I saw that her dark hair had turned silver, her face was creased from daily sun, and her hands, worn from so much work, were gnarled. But it was a joy to hug her, share pictures and memories. And as a gesture of her kindness before I left, she gifted me with a colorful wool serape, woven from her own loom.

I soon left Teotitlan, traveling at dawn in a taxi, down the main street as a neon sun lifted over the arid mountains in the distance. My young adult journey, begun fifty years ago, felt complete, and as I sat back, bumping along the cobblestones, I realized that I'd come full circle.



**Waiting for a Thaw** / Kenneth Pobo

We're iced in. A walk  
to the mailbox is risky.  
When you're old, falling

is never a distant thought.  
A huge icicle hangs right  
over our doorway. It could

shatter, a busted chandelier,  
when we open the front door.  
Icy bits clot on each

evergreen branch. At least  
we have enough food and drink.  
We could get to chores

we put off. The bathroom  
floor needs cleaning.  
The over-crowded counter

needs less clutter. Ice makes  
the world sparkle. I relax  
in the shine, though

I won't be going out,  
not yet, the ice has teeth  
and they bite hard.

“My Place Shifts in the World,” is the first chapter in a memoir and guidebook, *Something Profound Happened*, in which author Renée Takacs, an intuitive reader, animal communicator, and energy worker, shares her most profound spiritual experiences, many of which began in childhood. Covering spiritual topics such as communicating with loved ones in spirit, telepathically communicating with animals, remote healing, dream interpretation, synchronicities, understanding non-physical entities, and pre-birth awareness, Takacs offers readers an understanding of the work she does as well as suggesting ways in which they can develop their intuition and spiritual abilities.



### **My Place Shifts in the World**

Renée Takacs

I'm seven years old, waking up from a bad dream. My little body is sweaty beneath pink flowered pajamas, and all I can think of is wanting to crawl into my parents' bed. My heart is thumping, my mouth is dry, and my eyes peer into my inky black room.

I summon the courage to place my bare feet on the wooden floor, scrambling away from the space below my bed, where scary, imagined things live. Leaving my bedroom, I make my way down the

shadowy hallway, arms extended to help me navigate as I sway back and forth, touching the walls for balance.

I pause at the opening to the living room, infused with milky white moonlight, and notice a woman standing there, in the room. This isn't mom. Who is this? Believing that it's only my sleepy eyes, I squeeze my eyelids closed and opened several times, hoping she'll just disappear; instead, she slowly turns her head and looks directly at me. For a moment I stand frozen, goosebumps rising.

Within seconds, I convince myself to move, and I scurry toward my parents' bedroom. I push their door open with my fingertips. And finding my way to mom's side of the bed, I reach out and gently rock her shoulder.

"Mom, Mom, wake up," I whisper.

"What's wrong?" she mumbles, half asleep, rising from her pillow, propped up on her forearm.

"I had a bad dream, and there's a lady in the living room."

"What? There's no lady in the living room."

"Yes, I saw her."

Semiconscious, she rolls out of bed and staggers to the living room. All the while, Dad remains asleep.

Mom returns, and we cuddle in bed together.

"Honey, there's no lady in the living room. Let's get some sleep. It's okay. You just had a bad dream."

Too tired to explain my two separate concerns—the bad dream and the lady I saw in the living room—I fall asleep in my mother's arms.

The next morning, sometime after breakfast, I'm kid-bored so I'm following Mom around the house as she attends to her chores. Mom and I go into her bedroom to make the bed. Afterwards, she walks over to the closet, reaches up to the high shelf, and pulls down what looks like a book.

"Here, honey, take a look at this."

I plop down on the bed and begin viewing pages of the family photo album with images of people and places, some familiar yet many unfamiliar. I recognize pictures of Mom and Dad looking much younger while other people in black-and-white photos wear old-fashioned clothing. My eyes land on a picture with

a woman whose smiling face is leaning against a horse's head, her hand embracing the other side of the horse's neck. In a moment of immediate recognition, I blurt out, "Mom, this is the woman I saw last night in the living room!"

Mom sits beside me while my finger points to the picture. Mom and I lock eyes.

"That's my mom," she explains. She would've been your Grandma Irene, but she died many years ago, before I got married and had you and your sisters."

She explains, tears welling, how Grandma Irene died in a hospital after having had gall bladder surgery. Grandma Irene was in her forties, and Mom in her twenties.

My mind reels with questions, though I remain silent. Why did I see her? Why didn't Mom see her? Where did she come from? Where did she go? A spark within my heart ignites and awakens a desire. In this moment, the seed of my soul's calling has been planted. I won't fully grow into my vocation as an intuitive healer until my late twenties, but my place in the world has shifted.



**In the End, It Is Pavlos Who Makes Me Cry** / Rebecca King

They arrive every August,  
 during the hottest days of the year,  
 awkward, fledgling flocks of students  
 lugging laptops, laundry baskets,  
 microwaves, mini refrigerators  
 up poorly lit stairwells  
 where cockroaches crouch  
 in corners, waiting.

I pass out comforting words to parents,  
 stickers with QR codes,  
 plastic water bottles with emblazoned  
 yellow lion heads, campus maps, and green  
 pencils that will settle, unsharpened, in the bottom  
 of book bags between crumpled syllabi and snack wrappers.

On the first day of class,  
 they descend like a murder of crows,  
 raucous, cawing questions, doubts.  
 I give directions to classrooms  
 in buildings with two and three names,  
 explain that T means Tuesday—

TR Tuesday and Thursday.

I look for them  
 at Starbucks, Chick-fil-A, soccer games,  
 the caf, and narrow desire-  
 paths between buildings.  
 Watch them land on tight  
 wires of expectations  
 uncertain of their worth.

And it never fails; they  
 lunge  
 dive  
 scream  
 after midterms  
 when a wall of wind hits  
 like a hurricane in October,  
 landing  
 in front of me  
 a migration of possibility.  
 Moving not always forward  
 but always moving.

I learn their names,  
 habits  
 songs  
 flight patterns.

But always, one day in early May  
 they lift without warning.  
 One moment perched among soft  
 pink petals of dogwood trees  
 the next just sky  
 a great expansive blue.

In the end, it is Pavlos who makes me cry.  
 I am walking the emptiness  
 of campus when I see him.  
 Pavlos who comes from a village  
 where the roofs are red  
 the roads are stone  
 the sky and ocean one.

I call his name, and we meet  
 in a weight of silence and sound  
 of someone taking flight.  
 I hug him then, feel the bones  
 of his shoulders carrying  
 the grief of a thousand goodbyes.

## Contributors

**David W. Berner** is the author of several award-winning books of memoir and fiction. His award-winning novella, *American Moon*, is due out from Regal House Books in September 2026. David's short stories, essays, and poetry have been published in numerous journals and online literary sites, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Mocking Owl Roost*, *Beyond Words Magazine*, and the Munster (Ireland) Literature Centre ("SOUTHWORD"). He lives and writes outside Chicago. More about David at [www.davidwberner.com](http://www.davidwberner.com)

**Grey Brown** is the author of three collections of poetry, *What It Takes*, *When They Tell Me* and *Staying In*. She is currently working on a new manuscript. Her poems have been published in *Tar River*, *Greensboro Review*, *Cave Wall*, and *Blue Pitcher* as well as other literary journals. Her poem "Don't Be So Serious" was nominated for a Pushcart in 2024. She holds a Master's in English from New York University and teaches poetry workshops through the Osler Life Long Institute of Duke University.

**Michael Colonnese** is the author of *Sex and Death, I Suppose*, a hard-boiled detective novel with a soft Jungian underbelly, and of two prize-winning poetry collections: *Temporary Agency*, and *Double Feature*. He lives in the mountains of western North Carolina, near Asheville.

With decades of professional corporate communications experience, **Joanne Conrad** now writes creative nonfiction and memoir in retirement, and lives with her bonsai-tree-loving husband and two cats on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Joanne has a degree in anthropology and, when not writing, still loves to travel and explore cultures outside of the U.S.

Poet and English teacher **Carlene M. Gadapee** lives in northern New Hampshire with her husband, several fruit trees, and two beehives. Her chapbook, *What to Keep* (Finishing Line Press, 2025), joins her poems and reviews in many journals including *Allium*, *Smoky Quartz*, *Touchstone*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Vox Populi*, and *MicroLit Almanac*. Her next chapbook, *Relearning the Body*, will also be published by Finishing Line Press in the spring of 2026.

**Robin Greene** is the author of five books and many published shorter works. A former English professor, Greene now teaches yoga and writing in western North Carolina. She is the founder and primary editor of *Ley Lines Literary Review*, and she is cofounder and board member of Long Leaf Press. The third edition of her book *Real Birth, Women Share Their Stories* is forthcoming September 2026.

A manuscript of **Paul Jones'** poems landed on the moon in February 2024. In 2021, Jones entered the NC State Computer Science Hall of Fame. In 2024, Jones' poem "Geode" was plagiarized multiple times by the notorious offender, John Kucera. Jones' books are *Something Wonderful* (2021) and *Something Necessary* (2024). Both are from Redhawk Press. Recent poems in *Rattle*, *Hudson Review*, *Salvation South*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *New Verse Review*, and in *Best American Erotic Poems* (1800-Present).

**Rebecca King** is the Senior Director of Academic Services at Methodist University in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Her work has been published in several journals, including *Ley Lines Literary Review*. Originally from Ellsworth, Maine, Rebecca now resides on a small hay farm in Lillington, North Carolina, with her husband and brother, along with two unapologetically affectionate dogs and two free-roaming horses. She is working to finish a novel, though poetry has a habit of interrupting.

**Rebecca Klassen** is co-editor of *The Phare* and a *Best of the Net 2025* nominee from Gloucester, UK. She has won the London Independent Story Prize and has been short and/or longlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award, Flash 500, Bridport Prize, Alpine Fellowship, Laurie Lee Prize, Henshaw Press Competition, Quiet Man Dave Prize, and the Oxford Flash. Her stories have featured in *Mslaxia*, *Fictive Dream*, *Toronto Journal*, *Shooter*, *Brussels Review*, *Molotov Cocktail*, *Writing Magazine*, *Flash Frontier*, *Flash Flood*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, and have been performed at numerous literature festivals and on BBC Radio.

**Allan Lake** is a migrant poet from Allover, Canada, who now lives in Allover, Australia. Coincidence. He has published poems in twenty-four countries. His latest chapbook of poems, entitled *My Photos of Sicily*, was published by Ginninderra Press. It contains no photos, only poems.

Before **Susan Bailey Lesser** retired, she worked as a Speech-Language Pathologist, treating severe language impairments. She, her husband, and Sophie, The Cat, live in Ithaca New York. Nearby family allows ongoing practice being a grandmother to her five grandchildren. She enjoys writing about how we accept or reject change, and what shapes us.

**Claudia Michel** is a retired nurse-educator, who grew up in Arizona but now lives in the more forgiving climate of the Pacific Northwest. She is following her creative inspiration by weaving with textiles and with words. Writing is a way to discover her relationship to this sacred earth and its diverse people.

**Deborah Morris** is a retired primary care physician and professor who lives in Coats, North Carolina. She started writing about fifteen years ago and has published creative nonfiction and memoir in *Ley Lines Literary Review*, *About Place Journal*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*, *GreenPrints Magazine*, and other publications. Along with writing, she's interested in gardening, cooking, sewing, and textile arts when she is not busy playing with her grandchildren, dogs, and pet pigs.

**Angela Patten's** publications include five poetry collections, *Feeding the Wild Rabbit* (Kelsay Books 2024), *The Oriole & the Ovenbird* (Kelsay Books), *In Praise of Usefulness* (Wind Ridge Books), *Reliquaries and Still Listening* (both from Salmon Poetry, Ireland), and a prose memoir, *High Tea at a Low Table: Stories from an Irish Childhood* (Wind Ridge Books). Born and raised in Dublin, she maintains dual citizenship in Ireland and the United States. She lives in Burlington, Vermont.

**Kenneth Pobo** (he/his) has a new book out, called *It Gets Dark So Soon Now* (Broken Tribe Press) and a new chapbook, called *Dindi* from Yoopsconsin (Bottlecap Press). His work has appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Mudfish*, *Hawaii Review*, and elsewhere.

**Graham Sturgis** resides with his wife, two rescue dogs, and cat in Hickory Nut Gorge in the mountains of North Carolina after forty-four years as a civil trial attorney in Charleston, South Carolina. He's a graduate of Davidson College and the University of South Carolina School of Law. His poetry has been published in the literary journals of Davidson, Queen's College, and the University of South Carolina and displayed at Piccolo Spoleto in Charleston. *A Less Perfect Union* is his first work of fiction.

**Renée D. Takacs** is an Intuitive Reader, Animal Communicator, and Energy Worker with over thirty years of experience. Renée worked in the corporate world before pursuing her education and training in energy work and transformational soul growth. She holds a master's degree in Transpersonal Psychology and presented her research thesis, "The Role of an Intuitive Consultant at the Business Level," at the International Intuition Conference in Denver, Colorado. Additionally, she served for three years on the Association for Research and Enlightenment's psychic panel. Renée now lives in the beautiful mountains of western North Carolina with her beloved, techy husband and their adored cat, Kitty Q.

## Photo Credits

"The Gravity of It All," Debbie Morris

"My Place Shifts in the World," Renée Takacs

"Reconciliation," Claudia Michel

"My Brother's Lips," Robin Greene

"Then and Now," dye pot photo: SB Atkins, 1973

"In the End, It Is Pavlos Who Makes Me Cry," Rebecca King

## Staff

Robin Greene, founder, editor  
Michael Colonnese, assistant editor  
Deborah Morris, assistant editor  
Michael Carney, webmaster, designer

**Note:** For *Ley Lines Literary Review*, Issue 2, I asked our two assistant editors, Michael Colonnese and Deborah Morris, to include their own work and bios so that readers can gain insight to their aesthetics and backgrounds. In keeping with that ask, I also included one of my own poems. I believe that readers and potential contributors should be familiar with the works of their peers in editorial positions. Additionally, I personally thank the many writers who submitted their work and especially thank those writers who trusted us to publish their work here. *–Robin Greene*