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THE
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JOURNAL OF CREATIVE ARTS

In Loving Memory of Felino A. Soriano

THE PARAGON
JOURNAL

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COMPLICATIONS WHILE DREAMING IN DENVER

BY BARRY YEOMAN

Confined to a hospital bed
a mile high and 1200 miles from home,
drowsy from a dose of opioids after surgery,
I dozed to a strange rhythm.

A salty aroma of sea foam and sand
washed me in soft pillows of water,
and gently rolled me ashore in the dark.

A dirge played
as I lay paralyzed, stretched out flat on my back,
trying hard to collect my bearings,
there, at the edge of the surf.

A chameleon
slowly crawled from my mouth, hung,
then dropped from my chin down to my chest,
reminding me that black is not considered a color
on the spectrum
because it does not emit a visible wavelength.

Meanwhile my septum began erupting,
my heart glowing with magma from within.

Two ink-black hummingbirds,
one with a spool in his beak, the other threading a needle,
sewed up my mouth for good measure
as I mumbled about my fear of mummies.

Swarms of honey bees,
the last on earth, flowed from my ears
dripping liquid gold from their tiny legs. I watched them
buzzing away, though rendered speechless and somewhat
intoxicated by the fragments of seaweed, conch shells
and exotic flowers scattered all around me.

An electric organ and bass guitar
synthesizing in the dark, quieted to a whistling wind
as low gray storm clouds, outlined by a buried moon,
floated just above my brow.

I wondered, because I was unable to move,

if this was a funeral for who I used to be,
and what dreams await those of us owned now
by the sky?

The future, I speculated, would be long and deep.

Finally, the moon emerged from behind the clouds
revealing the silhouettes of soothsayers
who were inspecting some masterpiece
high in a turret above the stone walls
of a fortress beyond the beach.

Above them,
a call to prayer, broadcast from a dark angel, hovering
inside the clouds. On the wet shore, a Hindu holy man
appeared, clad only in a white turban-like loincloth
resembling a baggy diaper (his face smeared with ash
from the banks of the Ganges at the holy city of Varanasi).

He began directing an imam, a rabbi and a priest
who slowly gathered around me, dabbing the sweat
from my forehead with multicolored cloths made of hemp.

A Buddhist monk who had set himself aflame
finally tipped over from his fiery lotus position
on a small dune overlooking the scene on the shore.

Above the advancing clouds
vultures circled in anticipation of gorging on fresh carrion
and a tribe of stray goats arrived
to chew up the leftover darkness.

I dreamed that I woke in the dream, felt an awful rumbling
in the belly, sickened by the contents of my stomach.

Several embalmers paraded their tools of the trade,
while slobbering Coptic chants.

My body developed a tremor,
a chemical odor filled my brain.
Blood trickled from my ears and nose,
weird fables entered the dream, until finally
I woke in mountain time.

A nurse on the night shift checking my B.P.





MEETING JIMMY DOOLITTLE

BY ALITA PIRKOPF

I think of the man I met who had flown,
“thirty seconds” over Tokyo,
and who sat longer than that,
through an entire dinner, with a group—
that included me—
a favor for my mother.

I sat, caught up in World War II,
no longer the child
whose mother screamed
and dropped her iron in response
to an end-of-the-war radio report.
I didn’t understand.

I sat spellbound by the slipping away,
inaccessible past—silent as the general,
who was deaf and sat across from me,
his wife bravely carrying on,
recalling, for me, a vacation in Maine,
when Jimmy’s plane cranberry-bogged down.

I thought of how he had taken off that other time,
changing history, and still wonder what he thought
about—the order, and disorder, the tidying up later
into respective views of history, the dustpans,
the cloths we use to clean, or cover, truth,
to carry off agony.

DEAD HOUR TALK

BY EVA-MARIE KUNG

Restless, wrestling with sheets
I felt something upon my back
Like silver ghosts of spiders
Fleeing gently on my spine.
I spun around in the cotton web
To see you gazing through the lace
Of moonlight shadows and foggy night.
Caught between slumber and surprise
I expected to see some impish grin
Puerile laugh or wandering hands
But what I faced was quietly strange;
Your figure immobile, a sphinx in the dark
Unwavering and still.
Staring.
Were you dead or asleep?
Your eyes wide awake?
From the two fires, I saw black embers
Glinting the reflections of my fear
And so you spoke, extending your hand
And from those stormy seas came the flames
"I adore you". The words fired clear.
Pressed against my heart
They embedded me there
Powerful and stern, genuine and odd
Your image faded, the opium had hit
And within the tomb of those sheets
I lost track of time.
Lost within the confines of addled minds
Travelling black holes, confused and amazed
As suddenly your face twirled back into dark.
Drugged and afraid, I tried to hold on
As I was transported across dimensions
Until finally I was caught
Falling in dead hour galaxies
By your arms holding me, comfortingly
Back into an embrace of deep morning sleep.



THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

BY CHARLES BRICE

Thales gazes at the heavens,
falls into a cesspool—
now that's Arête!

At home in theoretical molasses
Parmenides doesn't count past one.

His student, Zeno, shoots himself
in the foot with an arrow.
He can't move.

Heraclitus doesn't remember which toe
he dipped into the river.

After a mega flatus burst, Pythagoras
convinces his followers that the souls
of their ancestors are housed in beans.

Having over-examined his life,
Socrates gulps down hemlock.

Aristotle is golden, but so boring
as to be mean.

While cognitively impaired, St. Anselm
declares that God is that which no greater than
can be conceived.

A little insecure about his beliefs,
Thomas Aquinas invents five proofs
for the existence of God.

Descartes likes thinking so much he thinks
he's the only one who does it.

What's new about noumena, says Kant,
is that, even though you can't access it,
it runs everything.

If Bishop Berkeley falls out of a tree, smirks
David Hume, no one should care unless
they stumble over his body in a forest.

In love with a woman who loathed him,
all Kierkegaard humps is his back.

Nietzsche's little cosmic joke: God died
of boredom from reading Hegel.

After the Fascists bomb his apartment,
and the Communists do the same,
Sartre decides that hell is other people.

Heidegger arranges for a Rabbi to attend
his funeral. Proximally and for the most part,
something that's too little and way too late.

Using set theory Bertie Russell teaches Zeno
how to move after 2000 years and argues
that we should not irradiate ourselves to death.

And now there's you, my dear—your kind
and intelligent eyes, the eternal river
of your smile, your radiant soul—
all I need to keep moving in the moonless
night of this bloody life.

THE ROAD OF A LIFETIME

BY HOLDIAY V. HONEYCUTT

He said we're young til you're young only
but I'm not very young at all
I've lived a thousand little lifetimes
without the wisdom to show
I've traveled through my nightmares
and traipsed though my dreams
I've walked a million miles
through tangled forests, day and night
I've rowed my boat through waters
rough and stormy, salty seas
My hands, rough and calloused
My face weathered, my hair windswept
I'm weary and I'm tired
Invisible troubles line my eyes
I've aged a hundred birthdays
on my journey through the realms
I fight to stay above the fray
while I wade through murky waters
He said we're young til you're young only
but I haven't been young for a lifetime



THE TROUBLE WITH MEMORY

BY ROBERT CROOKE

The Mill Brook neighborhood south of 25A is more developed than he remembers and seems smaller as a result. Yet, as he comes down Carole's street and nears her house, her parents' house, present evidence fades with the expanding past into seamless fiction.

"Painting is my interest, but not my talent," Jill told him. "My talent is sales, marketing, knowledge of the product—discovering, buying and selling art."

John found this intriguing and accompanied her on several interviews she'd arranged for herself at museums and galleries across Long Island. And by mid-summer she had accepted a position at a Metoac gallery that represented interesting new artists. Her favorite was a local painter named James Coppola, whose scenes of Metoac, Quaker's Meadow and Mill Brook hinted at forgotten moments—a half-finished glass of lemonade on the railing of a rain-dampened porch, a smudged tennis ball on a clay court in brown-gold shadows of dusk, a back door open to an empty meadow at dawn.

During this time, John got to know Jill's parents, David and Nan Bernstein, who were pleasant and generous and could see how happy their daughter was. Her father raised only one serious question with John.

"May I be blunt with you?" Dr. Bernstein asked one evening when they had a few minutes alone.

"Of course," John replied.

"Do you love my daughter?" he boldly asked.

John thought only a moment and smiled. "I do, sir."

Dr. Bernstein stared hard at John and did not smile. "Then, you'll protect her?"

"I will, sir."

And from that moment the Bernsteins embraced him without reserve.

It was Dr. Bernstein who told John that the English Department at the new Mill Brook campus of Long Island University was hiring instructors. He even arranged for John to meet the department head, a woman named Ella Menozzi, for an informal chat about literature and his plan to write novels. From that productive meeting came the offer of a teaching position for the fall semester.

"Her family is from Assisi," Dr. Bernstein explained when John had a chance to thank him for his crucial introduction. "I've known them for years."

"She told me you'd been very close with her grandparents," John acknowledged.

"They saved my life, really, during World War Two."

"How do you mean?" John pressed.

"They hid me with several other Jewish boys in a Catholic monastery, and in their she home, when the Germans occupied northern Italy in 1943."

"Jill told me your family was from Vienna," John replied.

"That's correct." Dr. Bernstein smiled warmly. "But, you see, in early 1938 things were not good in Vienna. My father brought me to Switzerland and sent me on into Italy where things were still relatively safe. The people he sent me with took me to Milan at first, and then to Assisi, where a small community of European Jewish refugees was forming with the tacit support of local priests. This Italian sojourn had begun as a temporary thing, until my parents

could join me or send for me.” He paused. “Sadly, I never saw either of them again.”
John was stunned to be taken so openly into Dr. Bernstein’s confidence, accepted so readily into a family not his own.

Richard recognizes the white lantern post with its street number and turns in at the driveway. Through stands of trees, beyond the gazebo, he glimpses the big, white colonial.

Carole greets him at the doorway, and he follows her inside to an informal supper waiting on her kitchen counter. A familiar comfort settles him.

“I’m glad you called,” he says with a glance toward the patio and pool beyond the slider doors.

Carole’s brief smile is self-conscious. “You’re surprised to find me living in my parents’ house.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I came home after my divorce.” She waits for him to sit at the counter before taking an adjoining stool. “My mother had just died. My dad was experiencing the first stages of Alzheimer’s, which forced him to retire early. I stayed and cared for him. After *he* died, six years later, I decided there was no reason to move out.”

“It’s a very nice home,” he says. “I always liked it.”

“Really.” Her voice is faint. “I wasn’t aware it had made *any* impression on you.”

He glances at his dinner plate. “It did,” he assures her.

She nods in silence.

“I remember long talks with your father,” Richard says. “And his generosity.”

“He was a generous man,” Carole confirms. “People had been generous to *him* when generosity was dangerous.”

“You mean the family that protected him in Assisi,” he says.

“Even as his mind faded in dementia, the memory of that family lingered.” She pauses. “Often, he would speak in Italian.”

“Oh,” Richard whispers.

“As if it were 1943.” She thinks a moment. “He spoke about you too.”

“*Me?*”

“*Dov’è Richard? Dobbiamo proteggere lui.*”

Richard thinks of a promise he made to her father.

She slides a house key along the counter. “Before I forget.”

“It isn’t necessary.” He considers telling her about Irene’s missing painting. Instead, he attempts humor. “It’s not as if anyone’s worried you’ll steal something.”

She neither laughs nor takes insult. “I’m happy to be free of it.”

He picks up the key and drops it in his shirt pocket. “Okay.”

“What is that?” She points directly behind him.

“Oh!” He reaches for the folded pages sticking out of his hip pocket. “I mentioned working on new scenes for my novel.”

“Yes.”

“What they really are is a self-contained story ... within the larger story.” He unfolds the pages and places them on the counter.

“Interesting.” She leans forward to get a closer look at the first page. “Sorry,” she says, abruptly sitting back. “I’m being nosy.”

“No,” he tells her. “Go ahead.”

She leans forward again and places a hand on the pages. “*This* is what you’re afraid might hurt people?”

“Yes,” he acknowledges. “Which is why I read it to Irene today.”

Carole is more curious now.

“And why *you* should read it.”

She stares at him. “My life must seem very silly to you,” she proposes. “After all the plans and schemes of youth, a failed marriage, decades of working in the same local museum ... I’m still sitting here in my parents’ kitchen.”

He smiles warmly. “Nothing about your life seems silly.”

They begin their supper in a shared silence that feels comfortable and appropriate to Richard. Minutes pass.

“Why *were* you so upset this morning?” he finally asks.

“Irene told me how close the end is,” Carole explains.

He thinks about this. “But you seemed angry.”

“*Angry?*”

“Even hostile.”

“I was upset, Richard.”

“About Irene’s condition.”

“That’s right.”

“Nothing else?”

Carole puts her fork down and presses her napkin against her lips. “She’s concerned about you.”

Richard is skeptical of anyone’s concern.

“Actually, both of us,” Carole adds. “She’s known about us essentially forever. And she wanted me to tell you it’s all right.”

“She said that?”

“Yes.” Carole takes a deep breath. “So, now, I’ve done what she asked.”

Richard pushes his nearly empty plate away and thinks about his morning conversation with Irene.

“I assume she planned to raise it with you.” Carole points to the manuscript pages on the counter. “But you saved her the trouble by confessing it yourself ... if these pages are what I’m guessing they are.”

He recalls Irene’s approval of his story about their past, and her apparent willingness to speak more freely—to go beyond fiction. “I think you’re right.”

Carole stands to clear their dinner plates. “I have strawberries and cream for dessert.”

“Maybe later,” he suggests.

With a plate in each hand she looks at him.

“Why don’t you leave that?” he says.

“Leave what ... the dishes?”

“Yes.”

“What are we talking about?”

He stares silently at her until she places the dinnerware on the edge of her sink, wipes her hands with a nearby dish towel, and steps toward him. They kiss freely, as if unburdening themselves of a secret held too long.

Without speaking they climb the stairs to her bedroom.

Carole pulls the coverlet down exposing a brilliant white sheet. Richard waits on the other side of her bed. She stands straight again and they stare at each other. Daylight from her windows fades over the whiteness that separates them.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks him.

He thinks of saying it is too late now to start lying about the past. Instead, he simply

says, “we can’t.”

She is relieved. “Apart from anything else, it would be *so* ... unethical.”

“I should go,” he says with embarrassment. “Before I’m too tired to drive.”

“Please, Richard.” She extends her hand across the bed. “Just a while longer.”

He takes her hand.

She pulls him gently onto her bed. They lie on their backs, side by side, staring up into the fading daylight as a welcome calmness settles over them.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he says at last. “This house is so full of memories that make the past seem like the present.”

“I know,” she agrees. “That’s the trouble with memory.”

He closes his eyes and feels himself drift in the rhythm of their quiet breathing. At some point, she half rises, and he assumes she is getting up to let him sleep. But she is leaning toward him. Briefly, she kisses his cheek. “Go to sleep,” she says, before laying herself against him. Half-asleep already, he turns slightly to cradle her in his arms.

Finally, she bolts up and starts undressing in the semi-dark. He watches her at first, then, steps out of bed to remove his own clothing. They collapse together again, their aging and vaguely silly nakedness hidden by their embrace. An ancient passion rises. She pulls him on top of her, moving her legs wide. He enters her easily. She clings to him. It seems to please her that he isn’t able to wait.

When he is still she wraps her legs around his waist locking him in place. Once or twice shudders involuntarily. He makes an effort to break free, to move down the front of her body, but she holds him tightly.

“It’s okay,” she whispers.

He closes his eyes and settles on her. Now, she relaxes her legs. Their bodies are soaked in sweat and their breathing begins its slow, unified descent.

When he opens his eyes again he is on his back. The faintest morning light gives her bedroom windows a phosphorescent glow. And it takes him a moment to realize—with honest relief—that he is fully clothed. With a start, he turns and finds her side of the bed is empty. The small clock on her nightstand says 6:30.

He smells brewing coffee as his vision sharpens. There is a book beside the clock: *The Jews of Italy*. He thinks again of Carole’s father, feels his presence in this quiet house.

After a stop at her bathroom—to use the toilet, wash his hands, throw cold water at his aging face—he descends the stairs.

He finds Carole reading his story at the kitchen counter.

“Good morning,” she says, looking up from the pages. “You really *were* tired.”

“I was,” he agrees. “How did you sleep?”

“Not very well,” she admits. “I had a fitful night in my parents’ bedroom.”

He frowns. “Sorry.”

“Did you want to use the shower?” she asks.

“Thank you, I might,” he replies. “After a cup of your coffee. It smells great.”

“Almost ready.”

“What do you think of that?” He points to the pages on the counter.

“It’s good.” She says it with an inconclusive smile. “I’m only half-finished.”

“Right.” He glances at the coffee machine as it makes a series of sucking sounds signaling the last stage of its brewing cycle.

She follows his lead and looks that way too.

“I’m meeting Henry this morning,” he tells her. “We’re driving to Greenport on an errand for Wendy. And we’ll try to visit the Sargents in Bridgehampton.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe talk sense with them about *The Prospect*.”

“Good luck.” Her voice falls.

He can’t tell if she is wishing him success with these people or beginning a process of saying goodbye again.

“I have an early staff meeting,” she says. “The museum is closed to the public on Mondays, but we’re doing our annual inventory assessment.” She pauses, as if gathering herself against an unattractive responsibility. “It’s ready.” Warily, she slides off her stool and walks to the coffee maker.

He watches as she pours two cups and carries them back to the counter.

“I drink mine black,” she announces. “But I have cream.”

“Black is fine.” He takes a cup from her and sips carefully.

“It’s a Tuscan blend I brought home from my trip last week.”

“Speaking of Italy, I noticed the book on your nightstand.”

She smiles. “I’ve become interested in the Jewish cultural history of Europe—especially Italy.”

“Because of your father,” he says rhetorically.

She replies with a nod. “I’m learning about artwork confiscated from Italian Jews, by the NAZIs and Italian fascists, and smuggled out of the country or sold to Italian dealers. And valuable art hidden and left behind by deported Italian Jews. Art with a Jewish provenance is still being found today behind walls and ceilings in Italian churches, public buildings and private homes.”

“And displayed *openly* in galleries and museums, I understand.”

Another grave nod reminds him of her father.

“When are you meeting Henry?” she asks.

“Not until 9:30. He’s picking me up at the Manor.”

She glances at the half-read manuscript pages. “I’d like to finish this.”

“Of course.” He sips a little more and heads back upstairs.

When he returns to her kitchen 30 minutes later Carole has moved to a small table, from where she gazes through slider doors at her quiet yard.

She hears him approach and looks in his direction. “I finished.” She points to the pages neatly stacked on the counter where he has stopped to place his empty cup.

“So what did you think?” he presses.

It takes her a moment. “Is that really how you remember things?”

“It’s fiction,” he reminds her. “Based on memory.”

“I’m sure my memory isn’t any better than yours,” she replies.

“My hope was that it might seem truthful.”

“Your characters do strike me as real human beings,” she concedes. “As people I can imagine knowing ... like Dr. Bernstein ... your version of my father.” She pauses. “I finally understand why you were so concerned about his opinion—that day you told me you were going back to Irene.”

“I was ashamed to face him myself,” he says.

Carole looks out on her yard again. “I gave him your apology,” she recalls. “He said you were a good boy, but would probably lead a lonely life.”

Richard laughs at himself.

“The part I’m struggling with,” Carole says as she turns to look at him, “is what’s left unsaid

and faces him from the opposite side of her counter. "I can't do this, you know. *We* shouldn't be doing this."

"You're feeling guilty," he says.

"Of course; aren't *you*?"

"I probably should." He frowns and firmly shakes his head. "But no."

"I needed a friend to hold *me* close too," she admits. "But it was a mistake." She stares at him fiercely. "My god, Irene is dying a few miles from here. I'm supposed to be her good friend. You're her ex-husband, her only husband, whom she's always loved. And we spend the night together?"

"We didn't do anything," he reminds her.

"Betrayal comes in many forms," she says coldly.

"So does honesty," he snaps. "Didn't she give you her *blessing* for Christ sake?"

"What do you want from me, Richard?" Her expression is frozen. "What have you *ever* wanted?"

He is unable to answer so direct a question.

"I'm sorry." She comes around to his side of the counter and briefly stares at him before grabbing his arm. "Don't forget your pages." He takes them as she hustles him through the front hallway to her door. "Please," she implores, opening the door to make herself clear. "I have my meeting."

He steps out but lingers on her stoop. "I'll try to call you later," he suggests.

"I wish you wouldn't," she counters. "We're both busy. And we need to get a grip."

"I'm sorry you consider last night a mistake," he says.

"It's my fault," she replies. "I'm the one who suggested you stay." She appears almost ready to cry. "It was wrong. All wrong."

When her front door closes he stares at its silent density and contemplates the ironic reason for their distress: That in the face of her death Irene has blessed them. And, though it feels obscene to him, he embraces their obvious attraction with an open heart. He imagines following Carole back inside to urge that she do the same, to remind her that only the dead are virtuous, that the living have no choice but to live and seek forgiveness. But he knows this would sound unethical to her. Decency would compel her to resist. And she would be right.

So, instead, he turns from her door and walks to his vehicle in bleak silence.

RAZZMATAZZ

BY CHARLES BRICE

I

In the photo I carry you in that cool
backpack we used to tote on hikes,
shopping trips, everywhere.

I'm grinning through my beret and pipe.
You've got a smile that could destroy
suffering and sorrow in a nano-second.

Mom took the picture at Hartwood Acres
where we'd go on weekend treks.
I thought this moment with you and her
was the reason I was born.

II

How we used to razzmatazz! You'd sit
so close to me on the couch I thought
you were climbing inside my body.

Soon we'd start to poke and prod each other.
"Ouch!" You'd cry. "Hey, that hurt!" I'd yell.
I'd get you on the floor. "Say 'forgiveness

Holy Father Papal Emissary,'" I'd demand.
You'd spit out those words and we'd laugh
until we couldn't breathe.

Mom would yell from the kitchen, "Stop it!
Someone's gonna get hurt." We'd smile and
pinch and poke all over again.

This is the way of fathers and sons,
the fun in rough play,

the mom always disapproves.

Will the do-gooders and wusses who criticize
Roethke's, "My Papa's Waltz,"
think this, too, is a poem about abuse?
Fuck 'em. They need a good razzmatazz.

A FRIEND COMMENTS ON MY POEMS

BY KENNETH POBO

He says: There's gay Ken,
writing about his love life
and how he's misunderstood.
There's gardening Ken,
dashing delighted among dahlias.
Then there's Villa Park Ken,
writing about a town he left
decades ago. And satirical Ken,
mocking whatever he likes
like chipped paint mocking a wall.

I tell my friend: I am large,
I contain multitudes. Sure,
Whitman said it first,
but I steal for the fun of it.

All those subjects, HA,
I have many more—
some are about you,
my friend. They crawl out
of a box and I catch them,
melt them into syllables.
That rattle.
Maybe strike.



HA



ALTZIGOTH'S DIARY ENTRY ON THE MODERNIZATION OF HELL

(DEMON SUPERINTENDENT 2ND CLASS, RED SECTOR 12, 7TH CIRCLE OF HELL)

ENTRY #1,658,195,002,714:

BY VALERI PAXTON-STEELE

Hell finally achieved the declamatory “and justice for all” that God handed down from on high. Now, we were to pursue dealing out *actual* justice for those deemed hideous enough to be sentenced to our everlasting torment. The modernization ruling came down in a sudden form. We demons were tasked to see that the punishments were now to be meted out in a most divine manner. Unfortunately, we demons had very little to do anymore. Just sort of a new “push-the-button” job was all that this new technology allowed us to do. God had decided that we were costing Him too much in time and money. Our twenty cents an hour was cut down to a penny a day. As it had been, the low pay was an incentive, and we demons were very angry about it, and we loved to take it out on our guests. Now, we were no longer having any fun prodding people with burning pokers, or offering them glasses of water while they burned buried in hot sands up to their necks. Almost all of us are out of a job. The few of us that remain are still angry, but this time it's all about the drastic cut in pay and all-around lack of good fun in the course of our duties. Sure, the whiff of brimstone is still in the air, and once in a while we can sneer and gruffle and growl, but there is really no job satisfaction whatsoever anymore.

We manage the accursed in an assembly line of sorts. Push a button, open their cages. Push a button, the conveyor-belt starts up. Onward they file, to be swept up a minute later into one of the newfangled justice cubes. Push a button, open the doors. Push another button, shut the doors, adjust the timer. Wait the entire shift (eleven hours and fifty-seven minutes) twiddling our thumbs. Nothing like the good old days.

George was a pedophile during life. A child molester. He had abused his son Johnny for years while the kid was growing up. Then he started in on the little neighborhood girls. It said so on his chart. Georgie-boy was one of my favorites to torture, but all that's over now. The 7th Circle still exists here, of course. But no more boiling people in blood. I guess the heating bills were outrageous. Plus you add in the price of coal, paying off the demons needed to stoke the furnaces, the blood we had to keep in stock... the Great Bean Counter upstairs said to Satan “Hey, you're getting the cubes. I'm trying to keep the costs down! Don't you know *there's a recession on?*”

when he was just five years old. He was such a *little* boy! Some days I'm Deborah, that nine year old *girl!* I re-live one whole day in their life. A day I'm always *abusing them*. I feel what they felt. I think what they thought! I can't stand it anymore! Oh, God, I was a monster!" Good enough for him, then, I say. Justice is served.

The sinners always get that one solid minute of free time in their cages to reflect on what they've done before they start the process all over again. Maybe they are supposed to repent? I don't know. This one minute really just gives us a chance to change over and let the next shift come on duty. Then the whole thing starts all over again. It sounds like it may be more effective than the old system. More *torturous*, I guess. There was a whole lot more action way back when. We really used to have a jolly time pricking people with pitchforks and stinging them with our scorpie-tails. I understand that working a job isn't really supposed to be "happy-fun-time," but I sure do miss the old days.



CURSED

BY LYNNE PICKETT

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us.” I squeeze past Mrs. Pride’s bosoms, escaping out through a pocket of air under her arm as she raises her hand to shake Pastor John’s sweaty palm.

The Lord’s Prayer is now seared into my brain, like a flaking, burnt marshmallow twirling around on a stick at a 4-H campfire. Reciting the Prayer was my first test since I graduated into junior-level Sunday School.

The whole time, I tried to look away from him, but it was hopeless. My eyes could see nothing but his face and his greasy brown hair, with its spindly, waving pieces rejecting the rows of its mowed-down flatness. He was rocking back and forth in his chair: His eyes, his mouth, stretched out like Silly Putty mocking each word I recited. Miss Valerie was oblivious, bobbing her ponytail up and down like she was a show pony trotting in a parade, encouragement to keep me going.

“*Deliver us from, deliver us from...*” I paused, stammered, my hand tightening into a fist. I wanted to run at him, knock him off his chair, and punch him right in the nose. “*Evil. Deliver us from evil.*”

Dear Jesus, the sweat formed rings around my ankles. I never thought I would finish. It took me three times to get it right. I put my head down, walking faster and faster, trying to avoid being noticed as I weaved around the church lawn with its puffy clover weeds tickling my calves. My new cross pin tipped around on the collar of my dress, the metal catching the sun and nearly blinding me. I clenched at the quarter in my hand. The pastor announced I had earned my cross pin right before today’s last hymn. My grandmother nodded at me and slipped a quarter into my hand. “The power and the glory” from the Lord’s Prayer escaped from my mouth right in the middle of singing “This Little Light of Mine.”

I turned around to see a clump of people still edged around the church doorway. *Hallelujah* vibrated through my body. I was free from the congratulations, the pressed, sweaty faces lunging toward my cheek; the damp, mothball-tinged, spongy arms swarming in for a hug—their onion grass vapors escaping from cracked lips, trying to swallow me up with, “You’re getting to be such a big girl.”

I willed my legs to move faster and faster, like they were the wheels of the lead car in the stock races. I dripped entirely with sweat now, the hem of my dress wrapping and clinging to my thighs like they were slathered with Elmer’s glue. I pulled at the blue-and-white striped cotton, trying to free it from my legs, my skin stinging and wounded like the wings of a fly trying to release itself from an insect strip. My dry, fiery breath filled my rib cage, creating a stabbing pain like an assault of Boy Scout pocket knives sprouting in my ribs. I sang away the pain, “This Little Light of Mine” over and over, as I continued to run faster toward the frozen flavored ice that would fill the gummy gaps around my front teeth until they ached.

It’s only June, but I’m pretty certain this is going to be my best summer yet. I’ve got a formula for it: Best summer equals the total number of Popsicle sticks you have at the end, plus how many times you get to go swimming, to a parade, a picnic (there has to be watermelon and strawberry-rhubarb pie), and catch fireflies—extra points if there’s a heat lightning storm.

My white patent heels leaped and pounded onto the steps of the general store. I pushed

the door open, willing my bony arms to have super powers. The springs in the door hinges batted against the wire stand, rattling and shifting the Sunday papers. The door ricocheted, knocking me off-balance. I practically fell into the headline of one of the “rag papers” (that’s what Grandma calls them). The front page had a picture of a young girl holding a baby with large blocks of black print: “Twelve-year-old girl, already grandmother!” I peered closer: *What? That girl’s my age.*

Hurump, with a trombone-sliding snort. I jump and turn to see a man wearing a red-and-black checked cap. He starts coughing hard like he’s gonna lose a lung. The cash register rings shut, the man swipes at the change and grabs a paper bag with a jug of milk and a loaf of Wonder Bread poking out. He lights up a cigarette that singes the polka-dot edges of the bread’s plastic bag. The plastic ends curl up like ribbon on the edge of scissors.

I roll my eyes up toward the ceiling, trying to avoid his eyes, and then run as fast as I can toward the Popsicle freezer in the back. I move around rows of canned food, crouching until I hear the door close. Against the back wall, the top glass of the freezer is white from ice and impossible to see through. I slide the top open, my hand and forearm mercifully covered in frosty ice as my fingers hovers above root-beer, grape, orange cream, and chocolate Popsicles. I close my eyes and pick. An orange cream Popsicle sits in my hand. *Hmm...* should I stick my other hand in the freezer and get it cold and frosty? Maybe I really want grape.

Give us our daily bread. Do Popsicles count? I look down at the cross pin. Maybe that will be in another lesson. I’m going with the orange cream. The floorboards pop up and down as I walk toward the front. I can see the dirt ground below between the strips of floor. I bet it’s nice and cool down there, perfect for eating Popsicles—then I remember I’m in my Sunday clothes.

I plunk down my quarter on the wooden counter. It makes a nice full sound, catching the attention of the lady with the tight hair flip and cat-eye glasses. She turns and grimaces. She always grimaces; she’s got a permanent condition of meanness.

I watch her cram the orange Creamsicle into a tiny paper bag. Why does she even bother? I’m just going to throw it into the garbage can near the front door. I always do. She then turns her back to me and goes back to what she’s usually doing—staring out the window. I rip the wrapper off the Popsicle as my eyes dart over to the rag paper. I move closer: “Experts say something in the water. Sixteen-year old already a great-grandmother.” Water? Isn’t there water in Popsicles?

“Dear God...” I don’t know what to pray. I swing open the door and jump off the top step, as high as I can. “Protect me from bad water, amen.” There is no way I’m not eating this Popsicle. I land next to the edge of the road, the dust covering the white tips of my shoes.

I shake my shoes as I lick at the orange covering of the Popsicle. The sun sits right over me, baking my skin along with the outside of the Popsicle. I kick stray stones down the road, watching the tips of my dusty shoes form black streaks, as the milky-white insides of the Popsicle drip down my fingers and land on my knee. I reach to wipe it off. My foot twists; I come close to stepping on a large oozing tar bubble along the pavement.

I quickly hopscotch over a series of tar bubbles until I reach the swing hanging from the pine tree in my grandparents’ front yard. I grab the metal chains and drop onto the swing. I run the stick over the edge of my bottom teeth, careful not to have shreds of wood pierce my tongue. I stop to admire the clean stick and then slide it into my knee-high.

I pump my legs on the swing, pushing down on my leg muscles. I sway higher and higher; I’m close to flying right over the branch. I count to three, but chicken out and jump, landing hard onto the runoff ditch near the side of the road, my shoes grazing the edge of the road.

The tar bubbles along the blacktop of the road look like a strange liquid boiling in a

witches' cauldron. I slip off my shoes and socks, carefully wrapping the sock with the stick inside my shoes. I put my ear on the ground near the road and listen for a car—nothing. I grab a twig next to me and pierce the biggest of the bubbles until it explodes into a gooey oil. I stab one after another.

I then lean back my body, half on top of the pebbles in the ditch, the other half resting on the clumps of crab grass and dandelions. I extend my feet and drop them into the tar. It feels like scalding steam escaping from Grandma's teapot. I stare at the pillow clouds in the sky, counting to ten and then lift my feet.

A jolt of pain shoots along my arms and hands; rocks and sticks push into my legs and back. My tar-covered feet slide helplessly across the grass. I have no control of my body; it's as if I'm being thrown against the wall of the spinning wheel of the Cyclone at Nerry's amusement park.

My arms finally land; my body stops moving. I don't understand. My bones are aching, my brain dizzy—I look up at black-framed glasses standing over me. It's *him*.

My hands form fists as I try to pull my body up to a standing position. *Forgive us our trespasses*. Where's my cross pin? I try to speak, but the roar of a large milk tanker drowns the sound of my voice as it rumbles by, followed by the echo of the old steel bridge creaking.

I wait for the silence and then I push my hot breath into his face. "Damn you to Hell."

He stares me down, his eyebrows twisting into two bat wings. He shoves his hands into his pockets. His face turning the shade of grandma's strawberry jam. "Hellfire. Next time, die, for all I care."

"Listen, you, I can take care of myself. Keep your cootie-covered mitts off of me. I'm not stupid; I would have felt the vibration long before that truck got to the bridge."

Does he think he's my savior? Ha, he's the devil in sheep's clothing. "Didn't my grandma tell you we don't want your kind of trash over here? Come to think of it, she used a broom on you."

His head slumps to his chest like he's lost all the bones in his neck. "I didn't mean anything the other day."

I see my cross pin at his feet. I grab it and shake it in his face. "Oh, yeah, asking girls to pull down their shorts doesn't mean anything?"

He looks up a little. "Well, ah, listen, I'm..."

"What?"

I hear my name being called, small at first, then swelling, as if the sound was trying to push itself through the sticky heat. "You better get the you-know-what out of here, 'cause you know Joey has a BB gun, and I'd be happy to have myself or my grandpa point it right at you."

The glass of the front door shakes as it resists opening; grandma's striped black-and-gray hair pops out of the door frame as she yells, "Dinner!" in a roar that means I better get moving. I turn around and swing at him, but he's gone. I look down at my tar-covered feet, there's no walking in the front door with these. I slip around the back, tugging on my knee highs over what looks like black candle wax. My dress is splotted with dirt; I brush it away, hoping no one notices some of the worst spots.

I throw myself down on the wicker bottom of the wooden chair in the dining room. The wicker sinks like I may bust right through it, even though I'm told I'm the size of a flea. The tar is starting to make my feet itch, but there's no washing it off before dinner without someone seeing. A platter of corn on the cob, stacked high and wobbling, is coming my way. My baby Uncle Joey pushes it at me. I never call him Uncle—he's two years younger than me. Joey's head is down deep in a comic book; he doesn't look up once as he passes the platter.

A piece of buttered white bread lands onto my plate as I grab an ear of corn. My aunt

Ginny's put it there. She's looking at her compact mirror, pulling and puffing her blonde flip at the same time she puts the stack of bread slices down on the table. Powder is slipping sideways out of her compact and falling onto the tablecloth. I pick up my piece of bread; there's a pink-beige covering.

I go to reach for another piece of bread, but my grandma pulls back my hand as she brings a pitcher of milk. "You have a piece."

"But it has—" Before I can say anything else, my Uncle Gerald walks in, grabs the compact out of Aunt Ginny's hand, and throws it down and breaks it. She screams and punches him in the stomach. He doubles over.

Grandpa, without any words or emotions, takes Gerald by his greasy curls and drops him into a chair in the corner. Grandpa points to my aunt to sit in the other corner chair.

Aunt Ginny throws her voice across the room like a knife. "By the way, I have a date tonight. Thanks a lot, creep. How am I going to check on my makeup? You just wait. You're gonna be so sorry."

She stands up and moves over to the mirror in the dining room, swirling, in three circles, pink-frosted lipstick on her lips as she pouts into the glass.

My grandpa clears his throat. I can't believe he's let her get up, or even talk.

Gerald's glasses are beginning to fog over from his tears.

Gerald is sobbing. I feel like I'm seeing a unicorn ride into the dining room on a fire-breathing dragon. Gerald crying? It's shocking and unbelievable.

Uncle Gerald stands up from his chair and points at Aunt Ginny as he shakes from top to bottom. "She laughed at me in school today in front of my friends and called me 'Fatso.'"

My aunt turns with the tube of lipstick and points it at him like she has a dart she's prepared to throw. "Well, you are."

Uncle Gerald flies toward Aunt Ginny. She swings at him as his glasses fall on the ground. She looks his way, and in the length of less than a second, she steps on them. Everyone stops breathing as the crack echoes in the dining room.

My aunt grabs her purse and runs out the door as a blue convertible pulls into the driveway. I quickly grab another piece of bread and place mine back on the large plate with the other bread.

My grandma walks back toward the kitchen to get the pot roast as she yells after Aunt Ginny, "Don't slam the screen door." Joey goes back to his comic book as he stuffs large spoonfuls of mashed potatoes into his mouth. Gerald picks up his broken glasses and runs upstairs. I lick the butter off my new bread and then pull pieces of the bread apart and begin to roll them into little balls. I drop three or four into Joey's potatoes; he doesn't notice until he bites into them and looks confused. I burst into laughter. Grandpa gives me a squinty, beady-eyed look. I put my head down and begin to move my fork in circles to look like I'm eating.

Out of the corner of my eye, I look toward the back window of the dining room. I see my supposed "savior" lurking in the back of the vegetable garden near the bin for burning trash. He's bouncing a ball up and down in his hands. Gerald runs through the dining room and out the door toward him. Gerald isn't supposed to hang out with him anymore after what he said to me.

It's hotter than Hades and I want to go swimming. Grandma will say no; there's no one to go with me and I'm supposed to wait an hour after eating. Grandma starts to clear the dishes around me—muttering about hoodlums and bullheadedness. I run upstairs and grab my bathing suit anyway. I have a new lemon-yellow bikini with a ruffled skirt and a padded top. I pull off my dress and roll it into a ball and throw it in the laundry. I slip the bathing suit on and pull open the three-way mirror. The padding on the top is so thick it feels like I've stuffed a box of

tissues in each side, but I look closer to being fifteen than twelve, and I don't look like a skinny little rat, like *he* called me last week at the swimming hole.

I grab my jean shorts and a top to put over the swimsuit. My shorts are ballooning out, like I've shoved a basketball inside them. My leg hurts from being dragged in the yard. I go to rub it and discover the Popsicle stick in my sock. I grab it and shove it into my back pocket. I put my sneakers on and start to run down the stairs when I remember my cross pin. I hid it on the back porch. I need to find the back to it.

The dishes are clattering in the kitchen. I tiptoe toward the back porch, grab the pin, and hold onto the screen door making sure it doesn't slam. I run around to the front of the house, looking for the back. I run my hands around the blades of grass where I found the pin. Do I tell Grandma I lost it? I say the Lord's Prayer quickly.

I give up but then I see something tiny shining on the front porch. It's sitting on the small table with one of Grandma's plants. The pin backing. I put the pin on my shirt. Maybe a bird grabbed it and dropped it. I see Grandma pass by the front window and I run toward the vegetable garden in the back. My stomach spins and then sinks—what if he is still back here? I look around but don't see him. He and Uncle Gerald are probably trying to hatch a plan to get back at Ginny. Ha, good luck.

I slip into the rows of cornstalks in the back of the garden and take off my top and shorts, rolling them near the bottom of a cornstalk and start running in my bathing suit. It's only five minutes up the side of the road to the swimming hole. I weave in and out of the trees so no one sees me. I get to the opening near the big oak tree. I see the circle of water at the end of the creek.

Bugs are hovering like a blanket over the top of the swimming hole. The water isn't moving; it has a slight green tint, like pea soup. I've never seen the water so still. I've also never swum alone. I slowly put my feet into the muddy bottom. I walk a little, take a deep breath, and throw myself into the water.

Something smacks me on my back, my head, and my shoulder. It's stronger than mosquitoes. I can only doggie-paddle, and my feet can't touch the bottom. I try to see what's behind me—my breath is getting shorter—I start to swim back to where I can touch. I then see my uncle Gerald with *him*, running away. Did they just throw rocks? I want to cry, but I need to concentrate and get back to the shallow end.

At last I stand up in the mud, rubbing at the stings on my head and back. That's it. Aunt Ginny and I are going to get them. I look down at my new bathing suit; it's turned into a dirty mustard color from the water. I feel my vocal chords tighten. I want to scream, but nothing is coming out of my mouth. Leeches. Up and down my legs. I pull and rip at them; blood flies down my thighs and calves.

I run toward my grandparents' house. What do I do? If I show Grandma, I'll be in huge trouble for swimming alone. I weave into the rows of corn, searching for my shorts and shirt. I undo my bathing suit top and slip my T-shirt on; a cold shudder goes along my spine. I touch the back of my T-shirt, another sucker on the top of my back. I try to get it, but it's in a hard spot to pull.

The Popsicle stick. I take it out of the pocket of my shorts and push it against my skin and the sucker. It won't budge. I take a deep breath and push harder until it feels like my skin is about to rip off. A ball of black jelly lands in the dirt behind me. I search the rest of my body, terrified, but I don't find any more.

A shadow passes along the trees. I shudder. A crow lands on a cornstalk near me. I pull off my suit's bottom and put my shorts on. I rub at the blood drying along my legs. As I keep rubbing, I realize it now just looks like a weird, blotchy sunburn. Whistling sounds. I step out

carefully, peering, afraid it's Grandpa heading toward the garden. I see it's not Grandpa—it's Joey in between the trees on the road. He's walking toward the pool hall. He's waving something.

I shouldn't follow Joey; I should go back to the house, but I can't help myself and I run toward him. I have to see what he's waving. I run faster until I'm right next to him: It's a dollar. I snatch the dollar away. I force my wounded legs to move faster toward the pool hall. It feels like a relief to run, to forget—the blood suckers, the rocks. Does God really expect you to just forgive trespasses?

Grandma calls the pool hall “the Devil's Den.” We aren't allowed to go, but somehow we always do. I run to the counter and order a grape soda from the man behind the counter.

I don't care about playing pool, but the pinball machine, and its flashing colored lights around the cartoon drawings of women with big breasts in tiny bathing suits, and the silver ball striking for points lighting up the score board and the bells ringing, I find thrilling.

“Oh, yeah, guess I'll have two, one for my baby Uncle Joey here.”

Joey opens his mouth as he runs in and then just shrugs his shoulder as the change lands on the countertop with the two sodas. Joey grabs the coins and crinkles his nose. “You are crazy if you think I'm letting you play pinball with me.”

I tilt my head and smile. “You know I'll beat you.”

“Ha, you can't beat me.”

“Bet I can.”

I point to the large steel machines. Joey purses his lips but says nothing as I walk over with him. Joey puts a coin in and pulls back the spring, and the ball lands in the gutter. I take my turn, and as I pull back the spring, I rock the table back and forth like I see the older kids do. The lights flash over and over, pinging and pinging until I win.

Joey shrugs his shoulders. “I have two quarters and I'm going to get whatever I want at the store.”

I roll my eyes at him as we walk out the door. I need to go get my bathing suit anyway. It's turning into twilight now; there's pink in the sky. I weave around the trees back to the cornstalks. The light hits the long straw stalks making them look like statues coming to life.

Crows fly toward me diving at my head. I run into the rows searching until I find my suit. I feel woozy and faint. Maybe the suckers made me sick.

“I saw you.”

I scramble to my knees, terrified. It's *him*. “What are you talking about?”

“I saw you without any clothes on.”

“Shut up. You have to be the lowest form of trash.” I grab my swimsuit and move past him.

“You were the one taking your clothes off in the garden.”

“Creep. Peeking at girls, throwing rocks; you are going to burn in Hell.” I shove the bathing suit under my T-shirt.

I feel my body land onto the dirt. He's on top of me, shoving his hands down my shorts, pushing his tongue down my throat. I kick wildly, he pulls his hand out of my shorts and pushes me down again. He starts to try to pull my shorts off. I see blood dripping off his hand—he sees it too. It's a bloodsucker on the palm of his hand. I missed one.

He jumps up and runs, screaming. I can't seem to move. I'm frozen. I want to cry, but I can't. The pink sky is now turning a darker pink—almost a scarlet red. I look down at the cross pin on my shirt. This trespass, I don't forgive. I slowly get up and walk toward my grandparents' house. Blood is running down my legs. Where was that bloodsucker?

I walk into the bathroom to wash away the blood, my wet suit falling onto the linoleum. I follow my leg up to more and more blood. My shorts are becoming wet with blood. I feel my whole body wavering; I fall into a heap on the floor. I realize the blood running down my legs is not only from the bloodsucker.

I just got *the curse*. I mutter a few words.

Now *he's* cursed too.



VERY STILL

On the bathroom tile sits a moth. Very still.
I sit there too, and try not to disturb it.
Why make it take flight?
At rest, it appears so content, complete.

It won't take flight, one sees that now,
but is receding slowly from the inside out.

THE PRICE

A fly drowned in my tea today
I looked up and there he was
wings spread floating around

He smelled the honey
like so many of us do

BY GARY GALSWORTH



PAPPAS FLORIST AND NURSERY (1961-62)

BY JOHN LAUE

COLMA (verb--Spanish) to fill to the brim, to heap up, to overwhelm, to fulfill
*For miles on every side great portals stand
Each with its proper name, its shaded lawns
Its granite memories.
Here are the Fields of Peace, here the Wishing Well.
Black processions bear their burdens in and out
Disgorging corpses, coins, and flowers.*

*And the dark graves
multiply like footsteps.*

While in graduate school at San Francisco State University, I got a job in Colma, the eighteen cemetery city adjacent to San Francisco. The Greek family I worked for owned a plant nursery, flower shop, and mortuary. Most of my work consisted of delivering bouquets and elaborate arrangements called *flower pieces* to cemeteries, mortuaries, and other places for funerals. Sometimes I arrived while ceremonies were still going on; at others I had to search out the proper tombstones among many rows and sections of giant cemeteries to place bouquets in receptacles attached to them.

*Uphill, downhill, turn and circle
In perpetual search.*

*Step gingerly my friend:
This dirt can be soft and wet
sink you into your ancestors' arms.*

I'd never had a death in my family or even of a close friend, but there was something about death I needed to face, a conundrum. It involved my mother who'd gone into Greystone Park, The New Jersey State Hospital for the Insane, when I was eight and never gotten out. I hadn't seen her for many years because my father and I had moved to California after her incarceration. She was dead to me and had been since she left our family. I was afraid of becoming like her and having a life I saw as totally meaningless.

*O I have spread your shadowy fields
With rank manure, Mother Grave.
Now what can I expect?*

*No more or less than all my little ones:
A chilly hole no bigger than your bones
But someday when all critical eyes are gone*

I'll fill your cup with crystal for this song.

The Pappas' were a large Greek family, with the old man, Gus Senior, the patriarch. He'd emigrated from Greece in his teens, established himself in the funeral industry, along with the plant and flower business. The sprawling campus contained an office, many trees and bushes of the nursery in tubs under an overhead net and their flower shop. Two large green-houses filled with rows of Easter Lilies I was sometimes assigned to water completed the complex.

*All this layered land
Seems rife with vital messages.*

*Are there beginnings here for me
Where meanings intersect
With paths of mute finality?*

The eldest son, Gus, hired me and became my immediate boss. I liked him because he let me take their green panel delivery truck home to Coleridge Street where I lived with two roommates, Charlie and Chuck. (I didn't have a car at that time). He also introduced me to some facets of Greek culture. Through him I developed a taste for feta, the salty cheese that Greeks like so much. Gus primarily worked in the nursery while his sister, Sophie, a dyed-blond, manned the flower shop and made up the arrangements.

*Colma, land of laid and fallow lovers
Some with lusty drops remaining
And a billion tiny rootlets
Reaching blindly for a taste of moisture.*

One of my first missions as a flower man involved a church in Pacifica, a coastal town a few miles south of Colma, an experience I remember with a touch of embarrassment. I arrived in the middle of a service for a ten-year old girl who'd died of leukemia. Thirty or forty mourners in the pews looked on and lamented as I entered, carrying a large flower arrangement called a *saddle piece* designed to go on top of the coffin.

*Blossoms weep from stem-ends
At the funerals of the rich
And even the poor lie carefully tended.*

I looked for the hook that should have been on the open coffin, but failed to find it. When I put the flowers on, they slid off. The incident would have been comical if it weren't in the middle of a service for a dead girl. I grew more and more anxious; each time I began to leave, I had to return, put the piece back on. Some of the mourners even ceased their fretting and stared at me. After several attempts, I finally got it to stay. I'm sure most people there breathed a sigh of relief. I felt quite proud of myself for not quitting and leaving the problem altogether. Like my father I was stubborn and did my duty.

*Bouquets beautify brief funerals,
End their short-lived cycles
In great compost piles*

*Here is momentary grace, a ceremony
While in the next bright scape
Live blossoms dance.*

I had another unusual experience when I arrived at a mortuary on San Francisco's Polk Street with a large, elaborate flower piece on a three-legged stand like a painter's easel. I'd been told I shouldn't just leave it in their special flower room as I usually did; I had to get someone to notice and sign a receipt, because the funeral was due to begin any minute.

*We can't insult the figures in the coffins:
They've been carefully cared for
Rinsed out purged and plundered
Till they're little more than simulacrum
Of living flesh.*

I went up to the first floor to search for a mortician, not realizing I'd arrived in the midst of the staff's lunch hour. I found a woman on a gurney looking very pretty, but obviously dead, the only human presence in the large main room. I had to find someone to sign, so I took an elevator up to the next floor.

When the door slid open, no one was in sight there either. I began to feel desperate, going from the first large room into a hallway, on one side of which were rooms covered with white tile like operating rooms. Finally I spied a lone female embalmer working over a naked female body on a low table. I started through the door toward her.

*The little embalmer
Hums a dirge-like ditty:
Song of all the sharp things,
The coverings, the consummations
The gentle and maniac violences
The self-contained decays,
The local and general injuries,
The breakages and desecrations;
He has seen them all.*

She screamed, **Get out of here!** and ran around the table spreading her white tunic to screen the body from me.

*I need somebody to sign for a flower piece!
She screamed again, **Get out!**
But the funeral's supposed to be right now!
Get out or I'll call the police!*

Realizing that nothing I could say would change her mind, I backed away, took the ele-

vator downstairs. By that time another mortician had arrived. I told him about the piece in the flower room and he signed for it. Relieved that I'd gotten my mission accomplished, I left, still wondering why the woman upstairs had been so hostile.

***Let these grounds be freed of fear
Whose feet on tiptoe never touch the grass.
Let the graves of our minds open up to the sun,
Expose their superstitious fillings.***

Was she herself upset from working on that corpse? I didn't think so, that obviously being her profession. Or had she taken me for a person who obsessively seeks the company of the dead, even to the point of having sex with them, a *necrophiliac*? I had no way of knowing at the time, but that did get me to thinking, what if I were alone with a naked female body? Would I feel sexual toward it? I didn't want that to be true, but also thought, what's the difference? A body's only a body, not a human being.

***The owners of these bodies wouldn't care
If we drew and quartered them,
Pried their tendons from their bones,
Stuck needles in their drying eyes.***

After I returned from my mission I asked Gus what could have been wrong:

I think I freaked a woman out at that mortuary you sent me to today.

What did you do?

I went looking for someone to sign for the piece and she was the only one there, but she just screamed at me.

Where was she?

I went up to the second floor and she was in an all-white room that looked like a hospital.

Don't you know it's illegal for anyone except a licensed embalmer to be in the section where they prepare the bodies?

I didn't know.

I'll have to call them and apologize. Don't ever do that again. We could lose their business because of that!

***The world of the dead is quiet, orderly
Kept by custodians of intricate geometry,
The loudest sound the subtle swish of money.***

The job with the Pappas's got me through a year and a half of grad school. It lasted until I took a leave to be married. I told Gus I was going to return to work after my honeymoon, but somehow never got around to that. My wife and I had some rocky times; she seemed perpetually depressed. We had one child, a girl, then split up. She moved to Southern California with the baby while I did the best I could to keep mind and soul together in San Francisco, but yielded to a severe depression where I questioned everything, even my own sanity.

*Is it this we live for, only this,
A continuity of generations dead?
A civilization founded on our bones?*

*Then what is life but singing for the dead?
We whistle in the dark
And all our art and industry
Amount to nothing but a hill of stones.*

I'd grown obsessed with the town of Colma, which had more than 800 dead for every living person. I felt a strong connection to the cemeteries, some of which were like large, peaceful sculpture gardens. Fueled by LSD, I lost my innocence. To say I *died* would be too strong a word, but I grew to know the mother in me. In spite of all the college I had and my plans to be a *poet-in-residence* at some university, I thought of becoming a simple cemetery worker.

*Silent gardeners move among the roots of tombs.
Shall I apply? Shall I stay here permanently,
Curry the landscape of the dead,
Carry the soil from grave or flowerbed,
Lovingly cut the grass in a geometry of shadows?*

Colma featured angels and other religious symbols aplenty, but what I really loved were the numerous varieties of trees and flowers in an atmosphere of extreme peace. I visited the town many times, and saw Gus too. I grew so inspired that I wrote my impressions as poetry.

*Perhaps we could sing with some assurance
That with or without glib promises of heaven
We all become as children
Under the eyelids of our nights;*

*That we now can reach past far horizons
Letting our sweet and bitter anthems flow
As everywhere with swift, insistent rhythms
Dark precisely balances light.*

Colma had transformed me. Now I understood myself better than I ever thought I would. And as I recovered from a deep meltdown, I realized I'd grown. My time in the funeral industry and subsequent *death* made me thankful that, though vulnerable like my mother, I was alive and relatively free, able to influence the world in positive ways. My life had acquired new meaning and, as a consequence, I'd brought meaning to my mother's cloistered stay.

*Goodbye Colma, dark, bright,
City of sealed monuments, soaring trees,
Assembled angels, firm, unbroken natural laws.*

*Years with you are now rich memories
Of mute fertility where death reverts to nature,
Deep-sunk coffins watered by warm tears.*

*Green city of eternal changes,
Verdant fields, industrious bees,
I leave with you these well-discarded remnants,
Stem-ends of a hundred youthful fears.*

* Poem excerpts are from my book Colma (City of the Dead and Elegy for Skeptics).



THE WINTERTIME OF OUR LIVES

BY JAMES PIATT

Winter temperatures have laid barren the sycamore trees, their yellowed leaves cover the ground like an antique blanket, and float high in the sky in the brisk cold winds. We are in the library, huddling next to the Ben Franklin with its cozy warmth and talking to each other about the lack of rain and the cold mornings. Things are different now, our old Aussie died in May, and our old saltbox house sold in December; both are missed as we muddle our way into the new year without them. The old clock atop the bookcase strikes 7:00 pm and we feel the chill of lost hours, and the fading of old memories in our minds. Dark tipped clouds are tumbling slowly over the mountains to the east, we are hoping for rain this time. December was dry; La Nina seemed to be in full force with rain clouds floating high atop the land on jet streams; the clouds filled with moisture skipped over our area and into Nevada, Colorado, and Arizona. It is the same drought system that kept rain from us for 5 years until last year. We feel the dryness of the atmosphere on our skin, and our hands texture is like sandpaper. The lawns are experiencing the lack of water and the effect of cold mornings; turning into dull ecru splotches. Our old cat Barney is satisfied to stay in the back porch in his warm bed until late morning now; and we do the same. The feelings we sense are odd this year: As our fading hours become paler, the atmosphere seems more sever, the land, harder, dryer and colder, and the time more precarious. Aging is a strange thing, one's sense of ageing does not become apparent slowly, it appears suddenly, like a train, unheard and unseen until it suddenly emerges from a dark tunnel in its full force. For us, now is a time of transformation, a time when hours are lost and memories stick to our souls in a silent embrace. It is a time when we continually test our heartbeats, and make sure we take our pills. Sleep is not quite as easy as it was in the past, and often the hours lay like a lead weight upon our bodies as we twist and turn to find a comfortable position. The future is seldom whispered about as the hours that remain becomes less and less, and years remaining in our lives can be counted on 10 fingers, and 5 toes. The golden years are becoming fainter and the hours more precious to us every day.

CONTRIBUTOR

NOTES

Bob Callan lives in Beverly, Massachusetts with his wife and two young daughters. He enjoys photographing the cities and towns north of Boston, often with his daughters in tow, budding photographers themselves. Bob has an interest in urban landscape photography, and he looks forward to overcoming his fear of street photography.

Helen He is a young doodlebug from Texas who enjoys capturing everyday moments and memories with digital art. When she's not painting in Photoshop, she can be found tinkering around in the robotics workshop, coding Android apps, or designing cakes.

James, a retired professor and octogenarian has published, 3 collections of poetry, "The Silent Pond," (2012), "Ancient Rhythms," (2014), and "Light" (2016), 4 novels, over 1,050 poems, and 35 short stories. His poems have been nominated for pushcart and best of web awards, and many were published in the The 100 Best Poems Anthologies of the past 4 years. His fourth collection of poetry, "Memories and Musings," is scheduled for release in 2018. He earned his BS and MA from California State Polytechnic University, and his doctorate from BYU.

Born in New York City, Eva-Marie Kung is a Swiss-American actress based in London. She completed her Swiss Baccalaureat in Lausanne and then moved to London to attend University College London. During her time at university, she was scouted by her first modelling agency and also started working professionally as an actress. She graduated UCL in Biological Sciences before attending the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Barry Yeoman is a poet from Springfield, Ohio, currently living and writing in London, Ohio. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming in Mission at Tenth, Common Ground Review, Right Hand Pointing, Crack the Spine, Harbinger Asylum, and Broad River Review, among other print and online journals. Some of his online work can be found at <https://www.redfez.net/editArtworks>.

Gary Galsworth grew up in the New York City area. After the Marine Corps he studied painting and filmmaking at the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago. His work has been featured in Abstract: Contemporary Expressions, Pennsylvania English, Temenos, Broad River Review, and others. In addition to writing poetry, he is a professional plumber and a life-long student of Zen Meditation. He's published two books of poems: "Yes Yes", and "Beyond

the Wire". Gary lives in Hoboken, NJ.

Jenny Kate is a born and raised New Yorker. After attending The George Washington University she went on to attend culinary school in NYC, the city she loves more than anything else in the world. Her interest in culture has brought her to many corners of the world to experience new art, architecture and food. On her better days, Jenny Kate enjoys shopping for jewelry, dabbling in the 24 hour news cycle and drinking sparkling wine. Frustrations with her health conditions have inspired her to document her struggles in the form of poetry.

After receiving a masters degree in English Literature from the University of Denver, Alita Pirkopf became increasingly interested in feminist interpretations of literature. Eventually, Alita enrolled in a poetry class at the University of Denver taught by Bin Ramke. Poetry became a long-term focus and obsession.

Kenneth Pobo had a book of ekphrastic poems published in 2017 by Circling Rivers called Lollipop in a Red City. Forthcoming from Clare Songbirds Publishing House is a book of his prose poems called The Atlantis Hit Parade.

Charles Brice is a retired psychoanalyst living in Pittsburgh. He has authored two full length poetry collections: Flashcuts Out of Chaos (WordTech Editions, 2016) and Mnemosyne's Hand (WordTech Editions, 2018).

Lynne T Pickett is a Los Angeles based writer and actress. She graduated from the broadcast journalism program at Syracuse University. Lynne also holds a two year certificate from Broadway's Circle in the Square Theatre, NYC. Lynne's fiction has appeared in Diverse Voices, Foliate Oak, Limestone Journal, Moonshine Review, The Tower, Sandhill Review, The Griffin, The Broken Plate, The Storyteller, BlueStem and forthcoming in the Borfski Press. She has recently been accepted to the summer workshop at One Story.

Valeri Paxton-Steele is a native of Broome County, New York, who writes both short stories and poetry. She authored 'Shadowstyx By Valkyri, Poetry and Prose of Depression,' and 'Underneath, Poetry by Valeri Paxton-Steele.' She has contributed works to 'Silver Lining: Poets Against Violence,' '100 Voices, Vol. 2.,' 'Insert Yourself Here,' and 'The Rock Springs Review Anthology 2017.' Two of her poems were nominated for The Best of The Net Award 2017. She has contributed extensively to The Paragon Journal, as well as to Echo: Journal of Creative Nonfiction and The Martian Chronicle magazine. A disabled mother and grandmother, she lives a quiet life with her fiancée Robert, their clowder of cats and kindle of kittens.

John Laue, teacher/counselor, a former editor of Transfer and Associate Editor of San Francisco Review has won awards for his writing beginning with the Ina Coolbrith Poetry Prize at The University of California, Berkeley. With five published poetry chapbooks, and a book of prose

advice for people diagnosed as mentally ill, he presently coordinates the reading series of The Monterey Bay Poetry Consortium, and edits the online magazine Monterey Poetry Review.

Robert Crooke began his writing career as a sports reporter and columnist for the Long Island Press and for thirteen years served as North American press spokesman for the Reuters news service. His poetry has been published in the West Hills Review, the literary journal of the Walt Whitman Birthplace in Huntington Station, NY. He has lectured about journalism, creative writing and media at the University of Connecticut, the University of Nebraska, New York University and Suffolk County Community College. His last book, *The Chastened Heart*, was featured by the editors of KIRKUS Reviews as among the best independently-published novels of 2014.

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In Loving Memory—Heath Brougher

Felino A. Soriano was, in my opinion, the greatest poet of my generation. Tragically, he left this Earth far too early at age 44 on October 18th due to Esophageal cancer. He left behind a cute-as-can-be 7 year old daughter and a beautiful wife. He also left behind some of the greatest poetry ever written. I was shocked when the lit world barely took notice of this. The lit world had just been shaken to its core and it seemed like no one had been informed of it. Thankfully, Felino was a prolific poet who had an instant access to a unique brilliance and published over 77 books in a 10 year period. What we must do now is make sure his work is never forgotten. Felino Soriano's work more than deserves to be put in the text books with Whitman and Cummings. All of us must strive to make this happen. We CANNOT let such brilliance fall through the cracks and be forgotten. On top of his astounding talent he was also one of the kindest people I have ever met in my life. I remember when I arrived at the "lit world party" 20 years late (almost 5 years ago) with duffel bags full of notebooks that needed typed up and submitted. Felino's *Of/With: a journal of immanent renditions* was one of the first places to publish my work. Felino then took the time to tell me he liked what I was doing and to submit to the next issue as well. He talked with me on FB for almost an hour back before I had any kind of fancy bio or anything like that. This is a quality you will not find in other editors. I remember being amazed that such a genius would want to talk to me for so long. Felino Soriano was as magnanimous as they come and his work MUST be put in its rightful place as it marks a major chapter in American/English literature. I still cry several times a day when thinking about how Felino is no longer with us. We have his work, though. We will always have his work and we must make sure it is remembered. I would like to thank Felino for the brilliance and compassion that he gave us and tell him that we all miss him so very, very much.