

ENVY

Issue 26: Summer 2023

Open Door

magazine



*Perspex
Man*

ENVY

AUTHORS

AUDIENCE

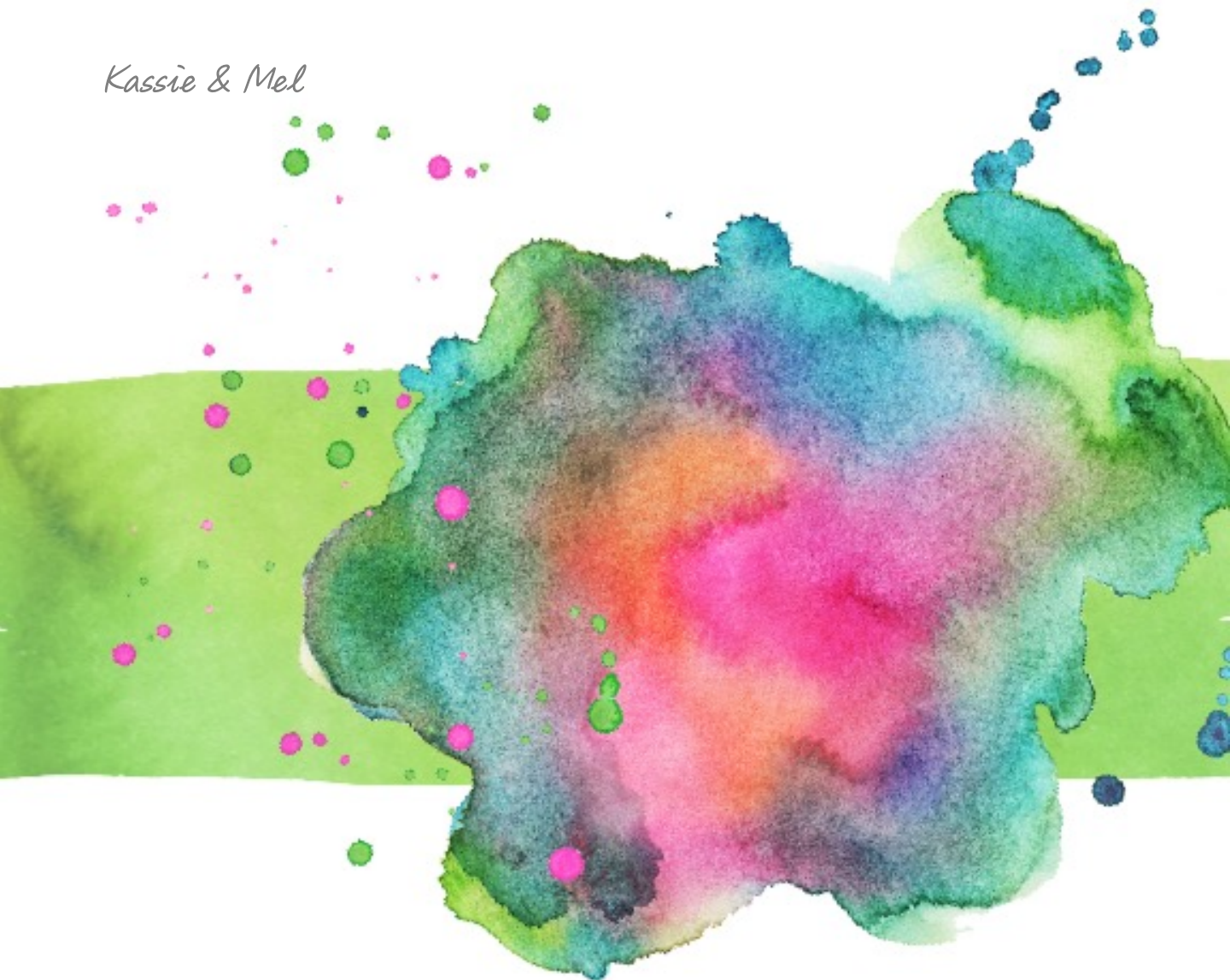
PARTICIPATION

**STONE
COLD SOUP**

Welcome to our SUMMER ISSUE! Where our writers and poets delve deep into the intricate world of ENVY. The words explore the myriad facets of the powerful emotion that has the ability to both ignite and consume us. Whether you seek solace in the green-eyed monster or strive to rise above its clutches, the issue will unveil the captivating stories, though-provoking poems, and inspiring anecdotes that shed light on the complexities of envy. This marks the official ISSUE TWENTY-SIX. And as always, remember... "YOUR WORDS MATTER!"

Thank you for continuing to share our magazine with your friends and family and allowing our audience to keep growing. We are so incredibly thankful for each and every one of you!

Kassie & Mel



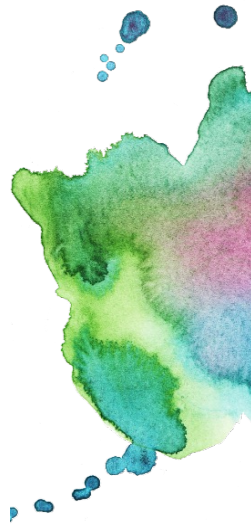
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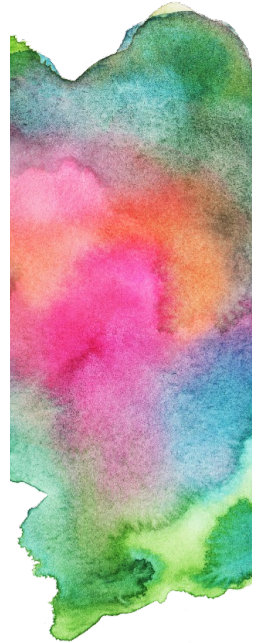
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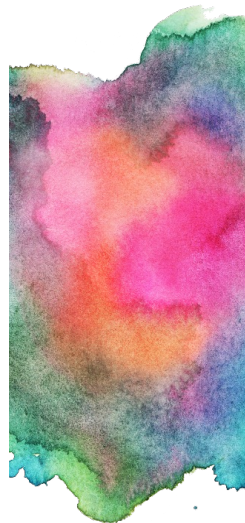
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POETRY ORCHESTRA THE SONGS OF THE AMERICAN PROPHETS

POETRY ORCHESTRA / THE SONGS OF THE AMERICAN PROPHETS

KASSIE J RUNYAN / AARON FISCHER / DAVID DEPHY / RONALD R. BREMNER /
PATRICIA CARRAGON / JOSHUA CORWIN / THELMA T. REYNA / JUDY TUREK /
STEPHEN FRECH / MARYAM S. ALIKHANI / LUCAS HIRSCH / WAYNE MILLER / BILLY
LAMONT / ALEXIS RHONE FANCHER / GLORIA MONAGHAN

In a time when it seems everything has been said and done in the global art community all around the world, how can we find new artistic ways of expression, of understanding, of acceptance? And even farther new new-romantic, new new-idealistic and the mystical sounds and verses, and any art form all around us or inside us? How about the narrative and discursive forms?

We all have questions, and we all have answers, we speak clearly, so, why we don't hear each-other or our selves? And how can we represent the world we live in? Which is one of mixings and hybridizations, through new verbal and musical means capable of accounting for the new structures that govern us, our perceptions?

We understand these are dangerous questions somehow, but we have some good news as well – we know where the center of our magnetic curiosity is.

The Songs of the American Prophets is the concept work of David Dephy, the visioner and poetic conductor of Poetry Orchestra. The sound forms and the musical side of the work was created by him and the sound artists Saphileaum, who is responsible for shaping, mixing, engineering, and creating the new sound style of the concept spoken word narrative.

The album unites 12 tracks and 15 American and internationally well-known poets under the conception of spiritual conflict, war, loneliness, madness, secrets, fears, and hope.

How can we name our time if we use the word “post”? Post-truth era? Post-mythos era, post-war and post-peace era? Post-literature, post-music, and post-visual arts or fine arts era? Post-everything era? And here is the next question: What does this American Prophets’ album or even the word “post”- mean, exactly? And what they have in common? Is something new and unimaginable coming in our world? The world which is still full of terror, envy, and selfishness? Or maybe it means the message, the premonition and longing for the amazing future and at once rupture and continuity, erasure of the past and heritage, the end of an era and the beginning of a new one? A spiritual one? A cosmic one?

The purpose of this work is therefore to seek the new forms of the sound expressions and storytelling, when the narrator has the perfect tools to represent contemporary society, differently and idealistically which is characterized by globalization, suppression of geographical and meta geographical borders, labyrinth of thoughts and blending of languages.

The Songs of the American Prophets is a journey through the mysteries of our own existence and somehow the artistic justification of our existence. We believe this work has an answer to those questions. Just listen.

POETRY ORCHESTRA / THE SONGS OF THE AMERICAN PROPHETS

1 - THE NEW MOON WRITTEN BY DAVID DEPHY PERFORMED BY KASSIE J RUNYAN / AARON FISCHER / DAVID DEPHY

2 - SILENCE ON BAY SHORE WRITTEN BY DAVID DEPHY PERFORMED BY RONALD R. BREMNER / DAVID DEPHY

3 - LIPSTICK WRITTEN BY PATRICIA CARRAGON PERFORMED BY PATRICIA CARRAGON

4 - IF YOU KNOW WRITTEN BY DAVID DEPHY PERFORMED BY JOSHUA CORWIN / THELMA T. REYNA / DAVID DEPHY / JUDY TUREK

5 - SPEED FORTH THE DARKNESS WRITTEN BY STEPHEN FRECH PERFORMED BY STEPHEN FRECH / DAVID DEPHY

6 - THE MOROCCAN CURTAIN WRITTEN BY MARYAM S. ALIKHANI PERFORMED BY MARYAM S ALIKHANI / DAVID DEPHY

7 - #22 WRITTEN BY LUCAS HIRSCH PERFORMED BY LUCAS HIRSCH / DAVID DEPHY

8 - IDEALISTS WRITTEN BY DAVID DEPHY PERFORMED BY MARYAM S. ALIKHANI / DAVID DEPHY

9 - THE HUMANIST WRITTEN BY WAYNE MILLER PERFORMED BY WAYNE MILLER / DAVID DEPHY

10 - IF A STORY OF HEAVEN WRITTEN BY DAVID DEPHY PERFORMED BY BILLY LAMONT / ALEXIS RHONE FANCHER / DAVID DEPHY

11 - MICHIGAN WRITTEN BY GLORIA MONAGHAN PERFORMED BY GLORIA MONAGHAN / DAVID DEPHY

12 - DON'T LISTEN TO THAT NOISE WRITTEN BY DAVID DEPHY PERFORMED BY DAVID DEPHY

MUSIC / SOUND ENGINEERING / SOUND EFFECTS / MIXING BY **SAPHILEAUM**

THE COVER ART BY **SAPHILEAUM**

THE COVER ART AND THE CONCEPT OF **POETRY ORCHESTRA** IS CREATED BY **DAVID DEPHY**

POETRY ORCHESTRA / THE SONGS OF THE AMERICAN PROPHETS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liEm3m1KpEk>

The image features a vibrant watercolor background with a color gradient from light green at the top to deep purple and blue at the bottom. The word "Envy" is written in a black, elegant cursive font, centered in the middle of the composition. Scattered throughout the watercolor wash are numerous small, colorful dots in shades of pink, green, and blue, adding a decorative and textured feel to the overall design.

Envy

**JUST TELL ME THE TRUTH, WHAT'S
BOTHERING YOU?
Duane Anderson
Nebraska, United States**

Are you in awe of stars,
the constellations at night,
the moon and the planets,
the blue skies,
and white clouds,
the sun shining down,
the world of beauty around us,
or is it something else?

Maybe it is my big smile,
my good looks,
my sense of humor,
my brain, fully loaded,
my choice in clothes,
all of the awards I have attained?
I could go on and on and on,
or have you now had enough?

MOTIVE

**Brandi Begin
United States**

<https://www.instagram.com/BBeginPoetry/>

I thought I knew you;
I think I was wrong.
Suspicious lingered
Far too long.

I thought I knew you;
Forecast was clear.
Your presence has drawn
Black storm clouds near.

I thought I knew safety,
Replaced not by jealousy.
Started second guessing
Your actions relentlessly.

I thought I knew
Which way to turn.
Took a closer look;
Our bridge has been burned.

I thought I knew your role.
Now, I'm not positive.
Reached the end of my rope;
Used all I could give.
Cannot help but wonder
What's really your motive?

SNARK ATTACK

Laura Ferries

<https://www.instagram.com/lauraferrieswriter/>

Just under the water
Just under the surface
Sometimes it's latent
Waiting there in its lair,

Ring the alarm
Before it causes you harm,
It's a snark attack!
A sudden stab in the back.

A compliment with a curse
Sometimes it's worse
Pursed lips posed terse
Mouthing sugar-glazed acidic words

Salt and vinegar
Smiling but sinister
No warning, no sign
Words designed to malign

Shark-toothed smile
That swims in denial
A flash of a fang; a fin
To sink under your skin

Random jellyfish stings
Always waiting in the wings
When you're happy and glowing
You'll find there's always somebody
glowering

And that's just the shame
The unfair deflection of pain
A callous campaign
That perpetuates the chain

Cut through the comment-
Keep your cool and calm
Tried and tested method
- that's how you disarm.

THE TOY CHEST

Mark Hudson

When I was in nursery school,
I went over to a friend's house. My
dad dropped me off.

At one point, I said, "What
should we do?"

He said, "We could play
with my toys."

At that point, he opened
what I would refer to as a mile
long treasure chest full of toys.
Way more toys than I had.

Then my dad came to pick
me up. And I looked at him
differently. That was the first time
I remember envy. I envied the
kid's toys!

And my parents had wealthy
friends. They would have parties
with delicious food, and nice art
on the wall.

I got home, and told my mother,
"When I grow up, I want to be rich."

My mother said, "Well, they
might have all the money in the
world, but what kids need is love."

My mom was right!



*Nessa
and Annie*

BY HEDLEY GRIFFIN

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

'Envy is the desire to own what another has by right which can never be yours.'

When she exited the purple tunnel, Nessa arrived in a Highland castle upon a hill. She was the owner of the castle, left to her by her family when her father and mother died. They were part of the MacKenzie clan going back hundreds of years. As the family's heiress she believed she had been given an absolute right to own the castle, but in reality, nobody owns anything. We are all only caretakers for the time allotted to us while we are here upon this Earth, but she did not think in this way at all.

As the older of two sisters, she was responsible for, and charged with, maintaining the estate. In the event of Nessa's death, the estate would be left to her younger sister, Annie, who had been adopted as a baby when her mother had died giving birth. Nessa did not fully accept her as a sister, but she had been left a small income from the estate, so she was well cared for. Being younger, Annie was constantly a victim of Nessa's bullying and she kept her badly clothed. As an adopted member of the family Nessa felt Annie did not possess the same rights as she did as a blood descendant of the MacKenzie clan.

Annie was kept in the kitchen where she was made to work with Delores, the cook, and her husband, Ewan, who was gardener and general handyman, as well as chauffeur when it was necessary. Delores was in charge of the kitchen and woe betide anyone who challenged her authority or interfered with her work. She was very capable. Her meals were outstanding and well known in the district.

Annie was never allowed to meet anyone and was made to do menial jobs such as cleaning the stove and emptying the ashes from the fires every day. She was kept busy but she liked to work and this was her responsibility. It gave her some sense of purpose, which was important for her, and as a lover of nature, she would also enjoy working in the garden. She was so happy in her work she would often sing with a voice that was so perfect it held the sound of angels with blessings from heaven. There was joy in every note. All of nature would stop to listen to such beautiful harmony. Even the clouds passing overhead would pause, the rain would be silent and the birds would stop to listen, as did the heather.

Nessa was very envious of Annie's voice, although she had a good voice herself, but not as sweet as Annie's. Nessa would have taken Annie's gift for herself, but it is not possible to take a gift bestowed on one person and steal it for oneself. How could she live another person's life? Even as a kelpie, it is not possible. What was meant, for good reason, to belong to one individual could not possibly have any purpose to be purloined and usurped by another, but Nessa could not see this. She was filled with envy and resentment. She wanted Annie's voice, whilst ignoring her own gifts which, of course, every person has.

Despite Nessa's bullying Annie was always trying to please her older sister who she cared for and wanted her to be happy. She was a generous soul and was always seeing the best in people, but this made her vulnerable. Delores understood this very well and felt quite protective towards her.

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

For Nessa's birthday one year, Annie bought her a little gift. They were seated in the garden as Nessa unwrapped the present with greedy excitement, but she was quickly disappointed to discover it was a vase with an uneven rim.

"That is ugly," she declared ungraciously and threw the paper wrapping on the ground. "Its rim is uneven."

"No, I don't think so," replied Annie, picking up the paper. "It is meant to be imperfect because a pot with uneven edges is more beautiful than a perfectly smooth one. It reminds us that nothing in life is perfect."

"Nonsense!"

Nessa directed her face towards the sun, her nose twitched, tasting the air with the arrogance of pride. She was not impressed with Annie's wise words. It just showed Nessa up for being so pragmatic and narrow minded.

She would always find a reason to scold Annie and made her life quite wretched at times. Nessa lacked self-esteem and this was the basis of her envy. She had decided long ago to hide Annie away and to dominate her. If Nessa could not have Annie's gift, then she would not allow her to enjoy her life either. This was her attitude. Nessa would often hold parties in the castle but Annie was always kept hidden away in the kitchen, away from others' view. So, nobody really knew Annie or that she even existed, apart from Delores and Ewan. Nessa had joined the local operatic society and choir and often displayed her talents as a singer, and particularly inviting these friends and fellow choristers to her evening parties. Of course, her voice was not anything like Annie's and this was why she was deliberately hidden away. Nessa liked people to be envious of her and liked to flaunt what she had, not just her singing but also her castle home and position in society. At one such party, Jane, one of her operatic friends, had been showing off her new engagement ring.

"That is an amazing ring," said Nessa who was glued by the capture of its radiant beauty.

"I have always liked rubies," said Jane, and Gerald was so extravagant to buy me this as an engagement ring. Quite unnecessary, but I love him more for it."

"Oh Jane, you are so lucky," said Nessa, that evening.

Nessa was remembering this episode when she started planning her next shopping trip with Annie, using her to carry the bags.

"Come on, my girl. Let us go shopping. I need to get some things. We've got an old friend, Angus, coming to see us this week and I have arranged for him to stay for dinner that evening. He does not know you and I would ask you to stay in the kitchen so I can entertain him alone when he comes. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Nessa. Who is this Angus?"

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

“He is an old friend I grew up with. You don't know him.”

“No, I don't know this person, so I will be quite happy with Delores and Ewan in the kitchen.”

“That is settled then, good. Can you please call Ewan? He can get the car out and take us shopping.”

Annie always enjoyed a trip to the shops. It was her rare day out and an opportunity to see other people as well as admire things to buy. She was excited about the trip. Nessa was always happy to go out as well because she could show off her Rolls Royce car, believing everyone would be envious to own such a beautiful model.

“We are going shopping,” Annie told Delores.

“Oh, that's great. You haven't been out for ages. What are you going to buy?”

“Oh, I don't know yet. I would like a new dress and some other clothes, but we shall see what Nessa says.”

“Why does Nessa always have to have the last word on what you buy? You should decide for yourself and choose what **you** want,” said Delores. “I don't like the way she bosses you around and dominates your life the way she does.”

“Oh, that doesn't matter. Nessa has some good qualities as well.”

“I should co-co. I don't believe a word of it.”

“I am happy the way I am. I have you and Ewan to look after me, as well.”

“Of course, you are very special to us,” said Delores. “Come on, Ewan. You're needed. Get in 'ere. They're going shopping.”

Ewan was happy to oblige and exchange the hard work in the garden for a restful day in the car. He stood ready to open the front passenger door for Nessa as soon as she appeared, not that he was required to perform this formality but he knew how to impress Nessa.

“Thank you, my man,” said Nessa. Annie gave Ewan a smiling wink and sat in the back seat, out the way. As they drove off Delores called to them.

“Don't be late. I am expecting you back for tea at four.”

Ewan parked the car at an appropriate space, settled down and prepared for a long wait while Nessa and Annie went to explore the shops in the town.

“We won't bother with lunch. We haven't got time and we can get back for a tea before four, as Delores suggested,” said Nessa. Ewan was already aware that lunch was a dim memory from yesterday, and two sisters could not go shopping and think of food at the

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

same time. Annie had not taken any notice of what Nessa had said, in any case, only focusing on her exciting escapade.

Nessa decided to equip Annie with the first purchase of clothes so that she could have the rest of the day for her own indulgences. So, they went to the nearest clothing supermarket and kitted Annie out with the basic requirements to cover her essential needs, ignoring all sense of decorum. She had to be dressed in the most basic fashion, not to draw any attention away from her older sister.

"Well, that is done. We can concentrate on my essentials now," said Nessa, gleefully enjoying the prospect of gold panning in the high street shops.

"Yes, thank you, Nessa. I have all I need now," said Annie.

"That's good, because I want to go in here."

Nessa led them into a small local dress shop. The shop owner recognized Nessa as a frequent customer and displayed a range of dresses for her.

"I know your taste madam and what suits you best. Allow me."

"No, no, I can't wear that. I look terrible in pink. Yuk!"

"Would madam like this one for formal wear?"

The shop owner presented Nessa with the most expensive dress in the shop and displayed it to avoid her looking at anything else, knowing her exquisite taste in kitsch and excessive garishness.

"Oh, yes. I like that. What do you think, Annie?"

"Mm, not sure."

"I am sure all your friends would like it. I am sure they would be most envious." The shop owner, knowing Nessa well enough, knew exactly how to appeal to her inadequate sense of self-esteem by promising all and sundry would admire her.

After trying on the dress and parading in front of the full-length mirror in the shop Nessa announced, "Sold, wonderful. I'll have it." Sometime later, after selecting and trying on a few other items, including some silk lingerie, Nessa was happy with her choices and handed the lady her card. She turned to Annie. "Good, that's done. I have only one more thing I would like to look at."

Before leaving the shop Nessa loaded the bags of clothing onto Annie, who was always obliging in wanting to please and help, no matter the cost, but she was weak in allowing herself to be used in this way. Deep down she knew this but brushed the thought aside. The next stop was a petite jewelry shop. A small, thin man of beyond retirement age smiled from behind the jewelry counter as his next customer entered the shop.

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

"I am looking for a ring, something one would wear if one was engaged to be married?" said Nessa, rather pompously.

"You mean an engagement ring?"

"Yes, something like that, but with a ruby in the middle?"

"Yes, certainly, madam."

He reached into a draw and laid out a selection of rings on a purple cloth, supported on a red velvet display, with slightly trembling fingers and black dirt hiding under his nails.

"We have these, but I think this one would suit madam's taste superbly," said the 'Uriah Heep' most 'umbly in his obsequiousness, reaching under the counter again and taking out a ring box. He opened it to reveal a splendid ruby surrounded with diamonds.

"Oh, that is beautiful," said Nessa. "How much is it?"

The shop owner exposed the price tag hanging underneath the ring. He said nothing and just displayed the tag under Nessa's nose, perhaps a little too weak to utter the price he was hoping for. Annie peered closer to read the price.

"Wow, that is expensive. Can we afford that?" whispered Annie.

"No, perhaps **we** can't, but **I** can," said Nessa, confidently.

"I am sure that would complement madam's social status," said the sycophant. "The ruby is of the finest quality and would be appreciated by anyone of good taste."

Again, the magic words were used well and his advertising skills paid handsomely.

Slipping the ring on her finger of the left hand she admired the lavish jewels.

"Yes, I think I will take this one. It fits perfectly. Will a cheque do?"

At least Nessa did not waste time and knew exactly what she was looking for.

"Yes, of course, madam." He knew his customer well by reputation and that she could be trusted.

As they left the shop with Nessa's ring Annie visualized the shop keeper rubbing his hands together most 'umbly. So, all was well, as they went back to the car. Nessa was pleased with the success of her shopping adventure that morning, but felt a little uneasy about all the money she had spent. She was a shopaholic. She had the habit of overspending to raise her excitement levels which would always be tempered with the depression afterwards of having relished an extravagant indulgence. She tapped on the side door window to

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

awaken Ewan who, with the long boredom of car-minding, had drifted off to the land of Nod.

"Come on, wake up. Time to go."

"Successful shopping trip?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed. A perfect day," said Nessa.

When they got back home Annie went and told Delores about the expensive ring Nessa had bought.

"I hope she can afford it, Delores, because I wouldn't be able to."

"No, you bet. I wonder why she bought it? It must be for a reason."

"I wonder too," said Annie. "You can bet there is a reason. There's always a reason for everything she does."

"Yeah, you can say that again," said Delores.

The next day Nessa gave Annie a brown woolen dress to wash.

"I want this cleaned until it is pure white. I am to wear it when my old friend, Angus, arrives this week from the village. He is very well thought of as a gentleman of some means and I don't want his visit spoiled by meeting you, so stay below in the kitchen where you belong, you scruff-bag!"

Angus was an old family friend whom Nessa had grown up with and she still held some romantic dreams of winning his affection. She had always kept Annie apart from him in case her youthful loveliness and beautiful singing voice could detract him from her intentions. Angus had been away for many years but had just returned to look after the family estate. He had never met Annie and was unaware of her history.

Annie spent the whole day washing the dress, but with every effort it still turned out brown. In the evening Nessa scolded Annie yet again.

"The dress I gave you is still brown. You haven't cleaned it."

"I have. I spent the whole day working on this and it is clean, but it will not change its colour to white."

"Then you will spend all day tomorrow washing it until it is clean and white as I asked."

The next day Annie took the dress to the castle moat and sat at the edge and started scrubbing the dress as she had done previously, her eyes streaming with tears. Suddenly a koi carp fish surfaced nearby and spoke with her.

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

“Why are you crying, my child?”

Annie shot back in amazement. She had never heard a fish speak before, and the voice seemed so gentle and wise.

“Who are you?”

“I am the spirit of your dead mother disguised by this fish, and I want to help you.”

Annie explained what had happened and how unreasonable Nessa was being.

“Then speak with your cook, Delores. Ask her and she will help you.”

Suddenly Nessa appeared and saw Annie talking with the fish.

“What are you doing here? Get on with the washing. I expect that to be clean by tonight.”

Annie took the dress into the kitchen and spoke to Delores about it as the fish had suggested. Meanwhile, Nessa found the fish and killed it. Watching Annie with the carp she could not bear to see her so happy. That wicked envy within her resented Annie enjoying any pleasure.

Annie was crying again when she explained everything to Delores.

“Don’t worry, darling. I’ll soon sort that out for you.”

“Delores, you are a diamond,” sobbed Annie.

“Oi, give over. Give it a rest,” replied Delores with her strong East End of London accent.

“But you are, Delores. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Do me a favour,” said Delores, smiling warmly and giving Annie’s arm a gentle squeeze.

Delores did not have a classical education, but she contained a natural wisdom of someone who truly cared. All nature purred with the warmth of her generous voice. She took the dress away and soaked it in bleach for a few hours.

“Oi you, Tadpole,” said Delores. She was addressing her husband, Ewan. “’ave you got any sparrow’s grass in the garden?”

“Do you mean asparagus?” asked Ewan, who knew exactly what she meant. “Yes, do you want some for lunch?”

“Yes, please, darling. That would be lovely.”

Delores smiled a wink to Annie which cheered her up enormously. Annie was never one to hold a grudge and was always very open and direct.

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

Delores showed her the dress when it was dry. The result was amazing to Annie. She did not know about the effects of bleach and was so relieved. The dress was pure white as Nessa had demanded.

Pleased to present Nessa with the white dress, as she had asked, Annie also found a bunch of white lily-of-the-valley flowers to go with the dress to give her as well. Nessa was in the drawing room, lying on a chaise longue, in a scheme dream, planning her evening with Angus when Annie came to present her with the white dress. Nessa scarcely looked at the dress when Annie showed it to her. She was staring at the flowers.

“Where did you get these flowers from?” asked Nessa rudely.

“I found them in the wood and thought you might like them.”

“They are bad luck. You would bring me an evil omen like this? Go away!”

Annie was so upset with Nessa's response to her that she ran away into the grounds of the castle, hid in the garden and cried bitterly. In her torment she sung a sad lament that was so distressing to hear that all creatures were disturbed by her despondency. Her song became louder as she wept and sobbed for all the hurt and bad treatment she had received from Nessa over the years. The song was heard over seven hills. The fairies and the goblins, the local wee folk, got to hear this and were greatly grieved. They came to see Annie and explained how Nessa had killed the fish. She was distraught with the horror of it all. Where her tears fell violets sprang up there in the garden. Some months later Annie found the bones of the fish and planted them in the garden. It was there that a few years later, with the help of the fairies, a beautiful apple tree grew from the magic of that spot.

Throughout the day Annie continued to cry and to sing her lament, confused and deeply hurt with all that had happened.

“How could she be so cruel?”

The ravens and the golden eagle heard the song as well and they came to see the cause of such sorrow, concerned by the melancholy of it all. Even the wolves came, and howled in sympathy as they listened to the story Annie sang.

“Be aware. Uncertain is the temper of the wolf,” said one of the fairies, and Annie stopped singing. She stayed out in the garden, crying and wondering what her future should be. The fairies and the other creatures, the wolves, stayed nearby in a supporting vigil. Avery, the leader of the fairies, drew near to her with concern.

“Annie, be aware that your sister is envious of you and your singing talents. You know this?”

“Yes, I do, my small friend.”

“Envy is one thing, but if she also becomes jealous, she could seek to do you harm. Do you realise this as well?”

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

“No, I hadn't realised this, no. I shall remain guarded.”

Meanwhile, indoors during the evening, Nessa was putting on her white dress just as she heard Angus arriving at the front door, as expected. Nessa embraced him, welcoming him into the castle, and showed him into the dining room where they were to enjoy a dinner together that evening.

“You look lovely in white,” he said, admiring the dress Annie and the cook had prepared for her. “You know I always go for ladies dressed in white.”

Of course, Nessa knew this as she had been told before by Angus and taken note.

“Oh, do you? How opportune!” she declared with a smile and a glint in her eye.

“But then you always were a good-looking lady,” said Angus.

They both sat down to dinner prepared by Delores. It was a glorious meal and Delores was, indeed, well skilled in her expertise.

“I heard you have a younger sister, Nessa?” Angus inquired. “I'm surprised I have not met her.”

“No, she prefers to work in the kitchen with the cook, a little simple-minded. She is happy there, and not very sociable.”

“That is a shame. I thought I heard her singing in the garden when I arrived this evening, or so I was told by your cook. She has quite a special voice.”

“Yes, that is one blessing she has, but she is not the only one here with a good voice.”

“She sounded very sad?” asked Angus. “What makes her so sad, then? Perhaps she was singing about the sadness of beauty because it is transient?”

“Oh, she has her moods. She can be very tiresome at times. Why do you ask? Am I not enough company for you?”

“Indeed, you are, but I like a good voice when I hear it.”

“Even from a scullery maid?”

“No matter who. Why should that matter when one is gifted as she obviously is? It should not matter how she lives. Are you a little envious, Nessa?”

“No, of course not. Why should I be?”

“Indeed, why should you? But are you sure? You cannot live another person's life. That is their life, as yours is yours.”

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

"I am quite happy with my life. Why should I not be?"

Angus was a good psychologist by nature and a bit of a philosopher. He also liked to tease Nessa as well as charm her.

"What is envy? Is it not the desire to achieve or acquire something which is beyond our ability? Is it not better to know one's limits and aspire to endeavour within one's potential and not try to be something else? So, is it not then most important to learn about one's potential before anything else?"

"Yes, how true." But was Nessa just playing along and not really fully understanding Angus's philosophy. She was more focused on her flirtations with him than anything mentally stimulating.

"Then you are not an envious person?" asked Angus.

"Good gracious, no."

Nessa was not going to admit to something that was quite obvious to others. The evening was well spent as they laughed and teased each other, while the wine flowed in abundance accompanied with such good food. Then it was time for Angus to leave.

"I want to say, thank you for such a splendid evening, and your cook is a remarkable woman.

"Yes, Delores is a gem."

"Oi, I 'eard that. Do us a favour!" came a voice from the kitchen. "I don't want to start getting big 'eaded now, do I."

"She is well appreciated," Nessa whispered quietly, "and you have been a great guest, a refreshing change. Thank you for coming."

"And thank you for a splendid evening, Nessa," added Angus, as he gave her a kiss on the cheek and left. "And thank Delores for me, would you?"

In the morning Nessa wore her extravagant ring and invited all her friends round for coffee to admire it.

"Angus proposed, did he?"

Nessa said nothing but she acquiesced by her silence, deliberately so, to create the illusion. She was getting the attention she craved as all the friends crowded around to admire the ring. The special effect was thoroughly successful, but it was a strange quirk of her nature that Nessa was never completely satisfied. The excitement of the moment could never last or be repeated. She would then become depressed and resentful. After her friends had gone, she would revert to her old cheerless self again.

NESSA AND ANNIE – HEDLEY GRIFFIN – UNITED KINGDOM

The next morning Nessa appeared in the garden looking for Annie, who was singing quietly to herself still tormented by all that had happened.

“Ah, there you are. What are you doing here when there is work to be done in the house?”

Nessa's eyes glowed and her teeth gritted with anger, inspired by her envy, not just for Annie's beautiful singing, but also her contentment in simple things and with nature. She was so incensed that she went up to her and slapped her across the face.

“Get back into the house and stop that awful noise,” she screamed and Annie raced off bruised and hurt.

The five wolves and the eagle had stayed in the garden to be near Annie. They were shocked and angered by Nessa's behaviour and, in an instant, they charged at her. She tried to run away but tripped and lost her footing, and her slipper came off. The eagle swooped down and picked it up, flying off towards the village. The wolves then brought her to the ground, ripping her throat and she was dead within a minute.

Meanwhile, the eagle flew across the village looking for Angus who was resting on a sun lounger in his back garden. The eagle dropped the slipper into his lap. Angus immediately recognized the coat of arms logo on the slipper and realised something was wrong. He raced up to the castle and ran inside, rushing from room to room, looking for Nessa. He suddenly stopped when he heard the voice of Annie in the garden still lamenting in song all that had happened. What was this beautiful voice he heard? What was going on? Angus ran out into the garden, following the sound of the voice, and found Annie kneeling next to Nessa's body.

“What on Earth has happened?” he asked, his voice shaking, as he bent down to examine Nessa.

Annie stopped singing and wiped away her tears. “She has been attacked by wolves.”

Angus was shocked to hear this and to see Nessa's body on the ground. He looked to see if anything could be done, but no, she was dead. Delores joined them and they decided to call the police and the local doctor to confirm what had happened. Later, they then called the people in the village to do what was necessary. A little far off the wolves watched with the fairies, but they were unseen, although Delores, who was really very sensitive, knew they were there and she gave a little bow to them, unnoticed by Angus and Annie.

“Angus, although this is a difficult moment, may I introduce you to Annie?” said Delores. “She is Nessa's sister and she will be taking over the castle from now on. However, a new rose cannot replace an old one in the same ground, so we might have to make some changes here.”

Delores took the engagement ring off Nessa's finger and gave it to Annie.

“Here, girl. You should have this. It would be more fitting.”

"Indeed, it would," said Angus, admiring Annie's hand.

Delores was delighted to introduce Annie to Angus but also a little relieved that she would replace Nessa, who had never been kind to anyone. Not the appropriate time but Angus noted Annie's beauty, in spite of her poor attire. He was also so intrigued by her singing. He certainly wanted to see more of her, which he did until, in time, they became inseparable. Nessa was never going to be his true love as she had intended, but Annie's voice and other qualities convinced him utterly who he wanted to spend his life with.

She would sing for him for the rest of their days together, delighting all creatures and fairies, who always appreciated natural beauty and the sounds of heaven; and so, did Delores. Their kisses became invisible butterflies that fluttered around their heads while she sang sweet songs of love and he whispered delightful memories cherished.

The fairies and the goblins were so delighted by what they witnessed that they all danced in a circle, in the Scottish manner, of course, and sang with joy to wondrous music, from harps of gold with silver strings, that has not been heard in the Hills of Scotland since.

Chapter 6, *Nessa and Annie*, in Hedley Griffin's book "*Serventa, Shadow of the Light*", is a story defining envy, as each of the different chapters exemplify the flaws within Man.

<https://ancientpublishing.co.uk/>

<https://www.dangerspot.co.uk/>

THE RED ROSE

Najma Naseer Bhatti

Sindh Pakistan

Between the books,
A token of one's love, so someone's necklace,
Or may be in the bun of beautiful lady,
Or in the garden giving it attractive glance,
I always saw the red rose,
But first time it caught my devotion
During morning walk,
When I saw it between the bushes near a stream,
Then regularly I used to see it,
I wanted to save it from every evil eye,
Just like my important asset,
To him before that I can save it,
It happened in the sight of a tyrant,
And my desire remained unfaithful.

ENVY NOT

Lakshman Bulusu

Envy not the arboreous woods
And nature's first light gives way to gems

Envy not the envious bride
And love's first way gets you into wanderlust

Envy not the glorious winter
And every icicle opens a lens to see beauty in bareness

Envy not the victorious team
And every success lands you in a chairlift

Envy not the chivalrous man
And his passion gifts you flowery dreams of a beautiful mind

Envy not the uproarious band
And the group applause comes as a tribute of their hearts

Envy not the meritorious lad
And his talent opens doors to prove yours in its making

ON BEING HENRY

Karuna Mistry

United Kingdom

<https://karunacreations.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.instagram.com/karunamistrypoetry/>

i.

Henry's trouble with envy
Is that it often leads to a frenzy

It starts from an innocent
Attachment of self-interest

That writhes and festers in his head
Until it jumps out of his breath

Uncontrollably

Acting on his jealousy

Unthinkably

Behaving rather selfishly

Unfeelingly

Deriding his circle of company

ii.

The trouble with Henry
Is that he often feels envy

Despite his wanting to be free
Henry can never kill his envy

He can only tame it as a snake
A snake with a serious toothache

Controlling

His mind and senses patiently

Thinking

Wisely before speaking calmly

Feeling

Gratitude and self-worthy

iii.

If Henry ever feels overwhelming envy
He seeks help from an expert like Jenny
She's a doctorate and an achieved yogi
Worth every penny to counter envy

LOST ONE

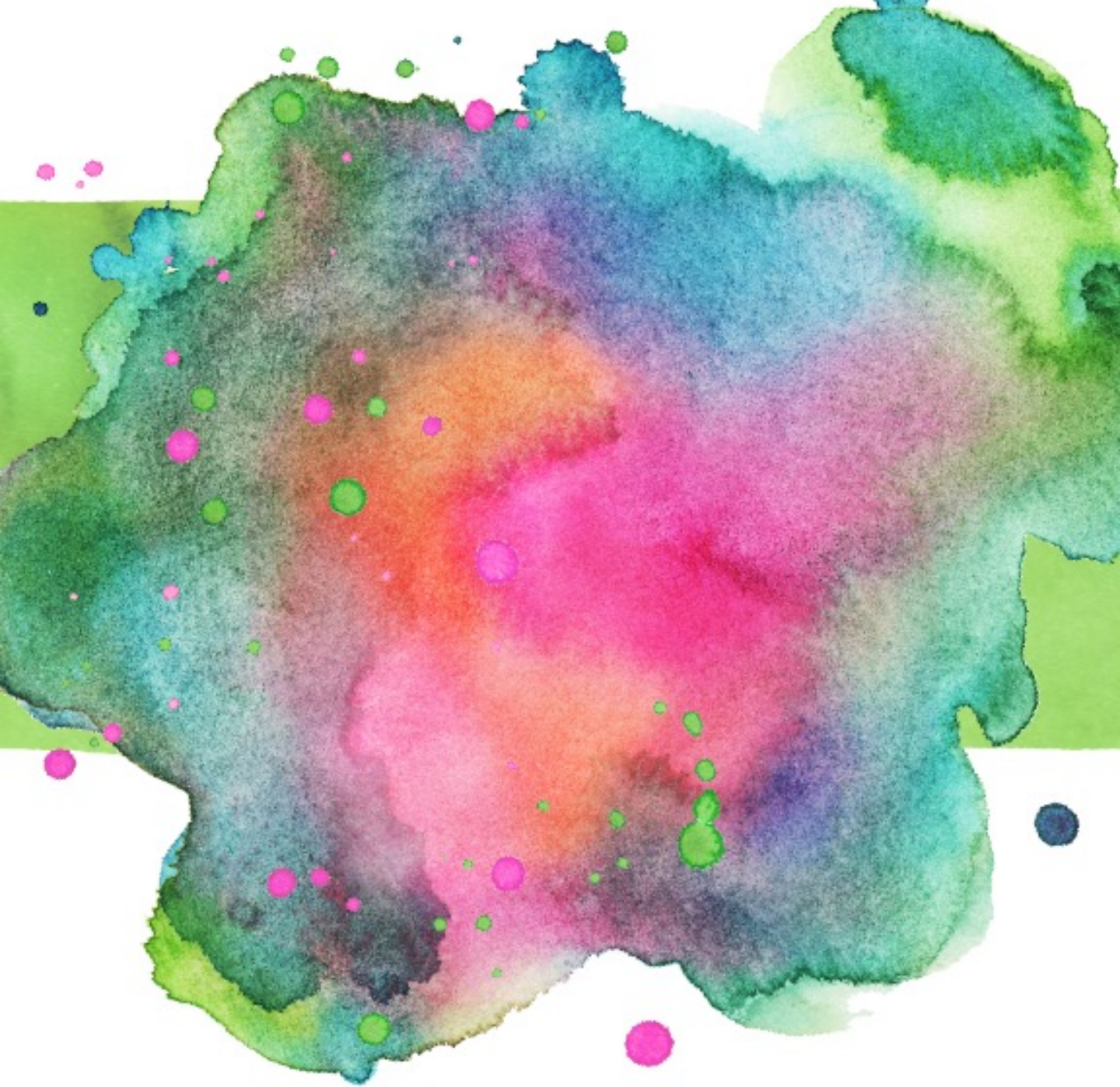
Julie A. Dickson

New Hampshire, United States

Again	dry tears tomorrow
wet wishbone	wanton feather
luck charm lacking	wretched
severed womb	archaic angst
no dream catcher	this lost one
lyre's dirge	empty eyes mourn
worn out	<i>Love's Labor Lost</i>
no use for blues	dripping envy
hold on they say	another hope
another day	hold on to perhaps

A Collector

BY MARK KEANE



A COLLECTOR – MARK KEANE – SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

I lived in Scotland, and trips to Ireland to see my widowed mother were infrequent. Somehow, Joe Hynes always knew when I was back. We had shared six years in the same class at secondary school, and had hung around with the same people at university. Hardly a friend but more than an acquaintance, not that Hynes cared about such distinctions.

As usual, he came calling on my third day home. I recognized his three sharp knocks, and pictured his hulking mass and supercilious grin before I opened the door.

“The returned scholar,” he greeted me, and lumbered into the front room, bunching the rug under his clumsy boots.

He took off his greasy anorak, and slumped onto the couch, spilling cushions on the floor, and twisting the needlepoint covers on the arm rest. He placed a brown folder on the coffee table.

“I’ll have tea, thanks. Milk and two sugars.” Hynes never waited to be asked. “Do you have any chocolate biscuits?”

I went into the kitchen to make the tea. My mother arranged biscuits on a plate and returned with me to the front room.

“You’re looking well,” said Hynes, big grin on his beefy face.

“And how’s everything with you, Joe?” she asked.

“Can’t complain. If I did, who’d listen?”

He crunched the biscuits, slurped the tea, and discussed the deaths of various local people with my mother.

“You’ll remember Micky Moynihan,” he said to me. “Cast in his eye. You’d see him out walking his dog, a Jack Russell. Always drank in The Stroll Inn. They found him hanging in his pantry. What do you make of that?”

I muttered something non-committal. Hynes took no notice.

“Huge turnout at the funeral. A who’s who of boozers from The Stroll Inn.”

“The things you come out with, Joe.” My mother shook her head and smiled.

“That’s grand tea.” Hynes held his cup aloft. “As I always say, the world can go to hell so long as I have a cup of tea.”

A COLLECTOR – MARK KEANE – SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

Once my mother left the room, Hynes ran through his menu of topics. First up, politics; conservative and reactionary, he criticized the policies of foreign governments and bemoaned the denigration of patriotism. Then, his *love life*, as he called it; women he watched from afar, and desired. He moved on to his medication, and listed different drugs and dosages. Finally, he updated me on the misfortunes of people we had known at university.

“You know,” he said, “I should have studied English or Languages. I’m more artistic than practical. But I’m good at numbers.”

Good at everything, in fact, if he put his mind to it. His main failing, as he saw it, was that he spread himself too thin.

Hynes had never worked a day in his life. After graduating with a degree in electrical engineering, he was offered a job in a communications company twenty miles away. On his first day, he suffered a severe panic attack. The prospect of the commute, answering to a boss and the nine-to-five grind was too much for him. He applied for disability, convinced the medical assessors, and got by on a weekly cheque from the government.

Returning to his *love life*, he mentioned a young librarian he had his eye on.

“If that doesn’t work out,” he said, “I’ll try the older ones, the bored housewives in The Central Hotel. Get them well jarred so they’re on for anything.” Hynes didn’t drink, careful not to mix alcohol with his medication. “There’s better riding with older mares.”

I nodded and said nothing.

He reached for the folder. “Let me show you the latest thing I’ve written.” He took out a sheaf of loose pages. “Here, have a read of that.”

Hynes sat back on the couch, and waited for my praise. I skimmed the pages, picking out words and phrases. It was the usual self-pitying depiction of an unappreciated genius. Boring, stilted dialogue, bland aphorisms and risible descriptions of failed approaches to women.

“What do you think?”

“Very good,” I said. “Well written.”

That wasn’t enough for Hynes. “What do you like about it?”

“The tone. I like the tone.”

A COLLECTOR – MARK KEANE – SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

"How does it compare with my last story?"

"Which one was that?"

"Eva," he said as though the title was known to a wide readership. "You know, the girl who's too provincial to emigrate with the brilliant mathematician. My take on Joyce's *Eveline*."

"Ah, yes," I replied. "I like both of them."

"Right so, I'll send that off to the agents and a couple of literary magazines."

As far as I knew, his stories weren't accepted by any journal or magazine. Some of his essays appeared on pseudo-political websites. Thankfully, he never forced these on me. He turned his hand to cartoons, rough pencil drawings that showed skill but little humour. On one of his visits, he handed me a drawing of a bird on crutches with the heading: *Lame Duck*.

"Hang on to that," he said. "It might be worth millions someday."

He started writing plays, and had a one-act piece performed by an amateur group. I attended the *premiere*. A two-hander with no set or props. The main protagonist was a corrupt politician who bestowed his wisdom on a politics student, representing his idealistic younger self. The play was ham-fisted and turgid, poor plagiarism of second-rate material. Whatever my opinion, having it staged meant recognition. I expected Hynes would be pleased, even big-headed.

"It must be gratifying to have others learn your words, and perform your work," I said.

"I suppose so," he responded flatly. "But they don't get what it means, and the lead keeps forgetting his lines."

"I thought he was good." Though irked by Hynes' lack of gratitude, I was impressed by his unwillingness to accept this small success.

"I have another play in the works," he said. "I'll show it to you when you're back again."

A year passed before my next trip home. I kept myself busy with repairs around the house, and errands for my mother. On the third day, I waited for Hynes' knock. Sure enough, late in the afternoon his *rap-tap-tap* sounded on the front door.

Sitting on the couch, tea and biscuits untouched, he seemed somewhat subdued.

"Are you a collector?" he asked.

A COLLECTOR – MARK KEANE – SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

That caught me off guard, as Hynes didn't ask questions. He only ever spoke about himself, and had never shown any interest in what I did, my life or work. In return, I didn't tell him about my short stories, or the many rejections, or the paltry list of publications in obscure magazines.

"I collected stamps and football cards when I was a kid," he continued. "Now, I'm onto something bigger." He reached into his folder. No sheaf of pages this time, but a fistful of shiny squares. "Memorial cards."

I recognized the laminated cards, distributed at funerals or sent to well-wishers, with a photograph of the deceased, dates of birth and death, and an inspirational message.

"You can collect anything but a proper collection shouldn't be aimless." He examined one of the cards, turning it over to look at the back. "That's always been my problem, a scattergun approach. Too many things on the go. With collectibles you need to be focused. What's more, you have to be imaginative."

Normally, I would have laughed to myself, hearing Hynes refer to *imagination*. But this was a different Hynes, more measured.

"If you're aimless in your collecting," he explained, "you'll get nowhere. Memorial cards have no apparent monetary value. They're a keepsake, part of the bereavement industry. You couldn't call them artistic, but they do have elements of creativity. Poetry of a sort, photography, and the overall design."

Hynes handed me a card. *In Loving memory of Paddy Marshall*, who looked surprised in a stiff collar and tightly knotted tie. Dead at seventy-six, and commemorated in a verse about memories and heaven and how God wanted Paddy to join him in everlasting peace.

"They're going out of fashion," Hynes said. "What with cremation, funerals aren't what they used to be. Fewer people observe the old traditions. Memorial cards are becoming relics, and will soon be part of the collectors' market." He took a sip of tea. "I'm getting in on the ground floor, ahead of the rush."

Hynes told me he started his collection from family members, then went door to door, asking neighbours if they had any to spare. Applying his characteristic doggedness, he wouldn't accept no for an answer, riffled through dressers and stood over grannies as they searched the pages of prayer books for forgotten cards. He widened his search, telephoned and texted, and got onto the internet. It had become a full-time occupation.

A COLLECTOR – MARK KEANE – SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

"I've got the bug now. The thrill of the chase. Stopped all my meds, no need for any of that."

"That's good to hear." I handed back the card.

"Not just collecting, I've started writing about them. A proper study, the first systemization of memorial cards. There are only so many stories and plays, and they've all been written. What's the point of rehashing the same old spiel? I've latched onto something different. I'll be the pre-eminent expert in the field. People are already contacting me for my opinion. Right now, I'm busy organising my collection, getting ready for an exhibition."

"I don't know what to say." I stumbled over my words. "It sounds interesting."

"Have to leave you now." He stood up. "I've got an urgent appointment. Meeting a woman, curator at the museum, to discuss the exhibition."

He banged the door on his way out.

On my next two trips home, Hynes didn't call. The first time, I felt relief. The second time, it bothered me but I was preoccupied, seeing to my mother's needs. She had begun to show signs of decline, uncertain in her movements and vague in her manner.

On the evening before I left, we sat together in the front room.

"Strange that Joe Hynes hasn't come around," I remarked.

"He was here some time ago," she said, "looking for funeral cards." She couldn't remember when. "He had me going through every drawer."

"Hynes is a bloody nuisance."

"He hasn't had it easy." My mother dabbed her nose with a handkerchief. "Joe makes the best of things."

Six months later, I returned to bury her.

Standing at the graveside, I shook hands with people I didn't know, and accepted their expressions of sympathy.

"I'm sorry for your trouble."

"Thank you," I said, again and again.

A COLLECTOR – MARK KEANE – SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

"I knew your mother well," one stooped old man with a walking stick told me. "She was a shrewd judge of character."

I stayed on for a week to deal with the bureaucracy that accompanies death. One morning, leafing through the newspaper over breakfast, I noticed an announcement; *Launch of new book by local writer—A History of Memorial Cards.*

I went along, expecting a low-key affair, and was surprised by the crowd that had gathered. A waitress offered me a glass of wine. I picked up the book from one of the displays. A weighty tome, over four hundred pages. Nicely put together, text interspersed with black and white images of memorial cards, maps, letters and photographs of priests and cemeteries. Judging from the number of people at the launch, Hynes had tapped into a public appetite for nostalgia and death.

I read the biography of the author on the fly-leaf: *Joseph Hynes is the epitome of the Renaissance Man. Qualified as an engineer, he is the author of numerous short stories and plays, and is an accomplished essayist and cartoonist.*

It was easy to spot Hynes, standing taller than everyone else. I caught his eye, and he beckoned me over. As I made my way across the room, I took in the transformation—Joe Hynes in a tweed jacket, linen shirt, hair combed back and fashionably stubbled chin.

"The returned scholar." He shook my hand, and introduced me to the young woman beside him. "Clare, this is an old schoolmate."

She afforded me an indifferent smile, before turning to Hynes, hand placed lightly on his arm. "Joseph, I have to see about the press coverage."

"Clare's my agent," he said. "She's very efficient."

I drank some wine, and Hynes smiled at greetings and compliments from passers-by.

"I was sorry to hear about your mother. My condolences." He spoke with a formal politeness I would never have associated with him.

"Good turn-out here," I said, dismayed at how banal it sounded.

"I suppose so." He scanned the room. "If you're looking for ideas for a memorial card, you've come to the right place."

A line of people had formed, each with a copy of Hynes' book.

A COLLECTOR – MARK KEANE – SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

"Duty calls, time to do some book signing. I better get it over with." He patted my shoulder. "It was good to see you."

He pushed his way through the crowd. I stood aside as more people joined the line. Hynes sat at a table, stacked with copies of his book. His agent poured a glass of water, and handed him a pen.

I watched him as he looked up to acknowledge the first in the queue of his admirers.

Mark Keane has taught for many years in universities in North America and the UK. Recent short story fiction has appeared in Shooter, Black Moon Magazine, untethered, Liennek Journal, Granfalloon, Samjoko, upstreet, Liquid Imagination, Into the Void, Night Picnic, Firewords, Dog and Vile Short Fiction, the Dark Lane and What Monsters Do for Love anthologies, and Bards and Sages Best Indie Speculative Fiction. He lives in Edinburgh (Scotland).

<https://twitter.com/MakSionnach>

THE ENVY OF EVERYTHING

Tina Wayland

Canada

<http://tinawaylandcopywriter.com/fr/published-fiction.php>

The night you were born
was three nights and four days long.
There was a construction crane outside the hospital window
and the workman kept time for me,
climbing up and down his ladder,
the light shifting,
better than the second hand of the clock
that kept spinning around the same numbers,
telling me nothing.

The night you were born
there was a lot of beeping and a lot of paperwork
people in gowns coming in and out of the room,
checking this and adjusting that.
Your dad read the paper in one corner,
cover to cover,
and I looked out the window,
read the fine print on the machines,
filled my time with something
I can't even remember now.

The night you were born
the sunshine came in through the dirty window
and made it impossible to sleep, as if I could even sleep,
time just rolling and rolling, meaningless,
no longer even sure of the date.
Tuesday? Wednesday now?
The little man climbing back up his ladder,
the crane swinging,
pointing at me for a moment
before moving away.

The night you were born
there was suddenly a frown
an exit out the room
a return with the head nurse, smiling now.
Me envying her calmness.
Nothing to worry about but
we called the doctor, OK?
Nothing to worry about but
we'll be moving to another room, OK?
We'll try this a different way.
Nothing to worry about.

THE ENVY OF EVERYTHING cont....

The night you were born
it was the third night,
I think the third night,
sometime before the fourth day.
Outside it was dark but inside the room was too bright, cold
the poke in my arm a dent without any feeling.
Ready now.
The doctor, sighing,
a roll of his eyes above the mask.
Always a stubborn one, he called you.
Little did he know.
Little did I.

The night you were born
you were not born you were unfolded,
unraveled, pulled out and unfurled
into your individual parts.
How it must have felt to stretch arms and legs out,
enraged, every single thing around you new and strange.
Wiped clean and weighed and checked over.
Wrapped tight in a bundle,
safe again.

The night you were born
I couldn't hold you for hours,
my arms not folded or raveled but frozen.
Awaiting a great unthawing.
Shivering, teeth chattering.
Returning to life.

The night you were born
I didn't know what day it was.
Only that it was a different day,
another night.
No other one ever the same again.

The night you were born
is almost thirteen years long now,
your limbs about as big as mine,
counting the days in school grades
and shoe sizes
counting the nights in story times
and hours of sleep.

The night you were born.
You were
the envy of everything.



Unloved

BY PETER J. DELLOLIO

UNLOVED – PETER J. DELLOLIO – NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

all this shit about it I don't give a shit no more when my man used to get all dressed up for me take me out we just do it back there behind the bar 'cause I was only 15 he didn't want no trouble from it like if I got with a baby and all that and I never had no real fun my daddy made us work in the cotton mill and my hands were always sore I couldn't hardly hear no more from them damn machines like I said I said it already I said it to those police who found him sitting dead on that dock just like I always felt he was going be some kind of trouble to the house just a mouth to feed and a body to clothe and not too smart neither we should have done away with it that night when I squeezed him out and if we lived someplace else that would have been the way too many folks knew I was with a child they could go tell the police and it was just as well he died like he did outside the house so he was beat up yeah I slapped him around some here and there I don't know what's this all about something they said in his brain bled itself to death I wasn't home that night and my man was drunk all right but like I said I just was not there and in the morning the boy was gone so all this shit about it like I said I don't give a shit never wanted that boy anyway and now what's done is done not like he was gonna be no scientist or lawyer or nothing like that the boy was lucky he could count to two an like I says to them social services people it was too much to bear 'cause how was I suppose to give my man all the bedroom time he needed and deserved huh? how I's supposed to take care him and be looking after that child when he almost twelve and got not even the sense of a dog not enough regard for reason come damnation or salvation that boy just had no way out of his sorry head an' I deserves more than a life of caring for a thing ain't hardly human ain't hardly even able to say his name why God make such creatures I just don't know it just can't fathom why the good Lord made that boy just don't know just can't see

* * * *

“Money's no good here tonight, boys. I know it's your job but it must have been Hell taking that poor child's dead body away from the dock, beaten to a pulp and all. So you fellas drink up and don't you worry none about it tonight, you hear?”

“That's a good heart on you, all right, but let us buy you a few rounds back, won't ya?”

“No no no! That's all there is to it now!”

“Can't thank you enough. Much obliged.”

“That's right, can't thank you enough. Still don't believe that crazy slut finally let that no good son of a bitch boy friend of hers beat that helpless boy like that, leaving him at the edge of death, and no one no where no how to put a stop to it.”

“Shit! We couldn't of saved him if that hospital were just halfway down the road. Been driving an EMS ambulance most of the last twenty years and I never seen anything like this before. How that boy managed to walk two miles to the dock with that much bleeding going on inside his head is just a plain miracle, not that it did him no good, I mean as far as miracles go.”

“Yeah, I know it. Me too, I mean I been doing this almost as long as you, never saw a head injury case that bad on a child no more than twelve. Like to know where those goddamn social services people were at all this goddamn time. No reason on earth why that boy shoulda been left in that girl’s custody. She never wanted him. Never made no secret of it, neither. Damn system. Just a bunch of offices and forms. Nothing really helps nobody ‘cept when they help one another get promotions.”

“Yeah, I hear that all right. Poor kid coulda been adopted long time ago.”

“Hey...! There’s no one to go to the poor kid’s funeral! Goddamnit!”

“We’ll go! I’ll tell you that for sure! Goddamnit! We’ll go all right! We’ll go!”

* * * *

Sppppppppppeshul Claass

Ainngleshh 2

My Storeri

Me anz zasun gots a waize taibee wit itsutter. Ma heads aghentz whazever gits whaarrrmm. Gits me taibee likesime wit zasun. Weeze bein like weeze wun thang like lkan go whitever it go like me anz zasun onsa laik ore onsa baks uv dem birz heds. Dems perti soo perti wit dat sun onsa theres winges too likes da waize da morn nin shoostu sphidar weps. Gold morn nin sphidar weps lite.

* * * *

OPERATOR: 911 What is your emergency?

CALLER: (garbled) ...on the dock. Think he’s dead.

OPERATOR: Where, sir? You’re cutting off. Where are you?

CALLER: Damn it! Over by the bridge, where the dock ends! There’s a—

OPERATOR: Route 333?

CALLER: —young boy here...Yeah, Route 333! He’s sittin’ here all frozen like, seems to be dead. Sittin’ on the dock with his head leanin’ ‘gainst the dock pole.

OPERATOR: Is he breathing? Any sign of a pulse?

CALLER: (exasperated) Well I guess if he’s all stiff and frozen in this one position then he must be pretty much dead! I checked his wrist and there ain’t no pulse neither.

UNLOVED – PETER J. DELLOLIO – NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

OPERATOR: So you're over by the dock just under Route 333 with a male child who seems to be dead? Is that right?

CALLER: Yes miss, that is so! That is truly so! Now if you don't mind maybe we can git somebody over t'here so's this poor boy's body can be taken care of proper!

OPERATOR: And there are no vital signs, you say? He appears to be deceased, you say?

CALLER: Yes miss, that is so! I was in the army and I seen my share of combat and I can tell you for sure that this poor boy is stone cold dead!

OPERATOR: Do you know his age or his name or where he lives?

CALLER: Well I can tell you he looks kinda familiar to me but that's about all. I think he's that god-forsaken boy that's not too right in his mind. Lives with that witch of a girl had him so young she weren't more 'an a child herself. Don't know their proper names. She and her man always in trouble always be about abusin' that poor boy. Nobody wanna have much to do wit 'em both 'cept hopin' the authorities might take the boy away some day 'an give him a proper home. Too late fer that now.

OPERATOR: Does the body have any bruises or swelling? Does the boy appear to have been beaten or hit anywhere? I may have to dispatch this as a homicide.

CALLER: (garbled) ...on the head. There's a pretty big gash there. Dried blood all over his neck, shoulders, and his chest, too. He's pretty stiff now and I ain't no medical authority but I can tell from my time in the service that he's probably been dead—

OPERATOR: What, sir? You're cutting off again.

CALLER: —a few hours. I said blood, dried blood! There's lots of dried blood on the head.

OPERATOR: From a blow to the head do you think?

CALLER: I seen enough combat wounds to think so, yes miss, that is so! Looks for sure to me to be a blow to the head. With somethin' sharp, too, cause I can see way into his bone, I can see the space in between the split skull bone.

OPERATOR: All right now sir I'm going to dispatch this call as a possible homicide of a male minor child, already in rigor mortis, dead approximately two hours, presenting a severe head wound, and the body found by you at the dock just under Route 333. Is that right?

CALLER: That is 100% correct Miss. I can't think of anything else. That is 100% correct.

OPERATOR: May I ask you to remain at the scene until the ambulance arrives? It would be helpful.

UNLOVED – PETER J. DELLOLIO – NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

CALLER: Yes, Miss. I certainly will. I wouldn't think of leaving now. I'm a decent man. Be right here for when them EMS fellas show up.

* * * *

His legs ached and he was still bleeding.

It was not sweat. He could not walk anymore, and he sat on the edge of the dock. The blood dripped down across his face and his lips got the metal rust taste of it. His eyes opened and he was still dizzy. He closed them right away. The ocean smelled good. The little waves pounded upon the dock pilings and his body felt their rhythm. He had to rest here. He leaned his head against the railing. The boats looked peaceful. In between the parallel railing bars these four or five sailboats looked like white bar rests on a sheet of music. He kept his eyes closed and enjoyed the womb-like warmth of the sun sunken into the barnacle-laden wood of the dock. He thought of how he tried to make his head join the sun when he was only three or four. On late summer afternoons he would lean his head against something warmed by the sun and with his eyes closed he thought his mind and the sun were doing great things together. They were making forests grow. They were shining on the wrenches of the steelworkers making tall building in cities he had seen only in books. He was shining on the surface of the lake. Snow outside the window could not undo the warmth of his blankets. His shadows stayed up at night telling magical tales of the wonderful things he and the sun had done that day.

The next day they found him sitting in the same position with his head against the dock. Legs crossed and hands folded upon his abdomen, he evoked the classic southern image of a barefoot young boy idling away a summer afternoon fishing, minus the pole, crumpled straw hat, and awkwardly carved wooden pipe.

He bled to death.

* * * *

CUT!

"Wait, the levels were off. Sorry. Could you read it again, just before the end, from 'He was shining'...?"

"You mean from '...on the surface of the lake'...? From there?"

"Yeah that's right. Wait...I have to take this call."

"More Front Office trouble, huh?"

"Shut up! Give me that phone....Hello? Hello?"

"Bet it's about the budget for the 911 call. They used ten cameras."

"Ten?!"

UNLOVED – PETER J. DELLOLIO – NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

"But we agreed on using all the angles for a more dynamic effect, right? I saw the rushes today. It looks great! And don't forget, like right now we're saving a bundle. Remember, he's doing a voice-over narration, no sets, no production, just him reading it like it was a story being told."

"That was a good idea he had. Cuts out a whole budget day of production work and shooting costs."

"All right. All right. Call you tonight. We'll look at the rushes from today. You'll see. Bye."

"Am I reading this again?"

"Fine. Fine. Just from where I said... that 'shining' part, OK?"

"Got it."

"OK."

ACTION!

...he was shining on the surface of the lake...

Born 1956 New York City. Went to Nazareth High School and New York University. Graduated 1978: B.A. Cinema Studies; B.F.A. Film Production. Wrote and directed various short films, including James Joyce's short story *Counterparts* which he adapted into a screenplay. *Counterparts* was screened at national and international film festivals. A freelance writer, Peter has published many 250-1000 word articles on the arts, film, dance, sculpture, architecture, and culture, as well as fiction, poetry, one-act plays, and critical essays on art, film, and photography. Poetry collection "A Box Of Crazy Toys" published 2018 by Xenos Books/Chelsea Editions. He is working on a critical study of Alfred Hitchcock, *Hitchcock's Cinematic World: Shocks of Perception and the Collapse of the Rational*. Chapter excerpts have appeared in *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, *Kinema*, *Flickhead*, and *North Dakota Quarterly* since 2006.

His poetry and fiction have appeared in various literary magazines, including *Antenna*, *Aero-Sun Times*, *Bogus Review*, *Pen-Dec Press*, *Both Sides Now*, *Cross Cultural Communications/Bridging The Waters Volume II*, and *The Mascara Literary Review*. *Dramatika Press* published a volume of his one-act plays in 1983. One of these, *The Seeker*, appeared in an issue of *Collages & Bricolages*. Peter was a contributing editor for *NYArts Magazine*, writing art and film reviews. He authored monographs on several new artists as well. He was co-publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *Artscape2000*, a prestigious, award-winning art review e-zine. He has also taught poetry and art for *LEAP*. He is an artist himself: artpal.com/fish56tail. His paintings and 3D works offer abstract images of famous people in all walks of life who have died tragically at a young age. He lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

ESCHEWING SIMPLICITY

James T. Stemmie
West Virginia, United States

Jesus visited my dreams last night
and how did you know it was Jesus?
good question to live with

it was primitive knowing
before and beyond words

alas it could have been any prophet
or even an angel
primitive knowing
is subject to interpretation
trying many sets of words to wrap it in

and all I could do is stress over
how to capture the moment eschewing
the simplicity of sitting at his feet

the lesson I took
is how hard to cross over and stay

normal is fraught
our psyche spread over two worlds
one foot there and one foot here
in the muggle world

PECKING ORDER

Laurinda Lind
New York, United States

The poet's eyes went
scalded bitter as he fired
forth and after wary while
he waited stoic as a scar
when we circled pecking,
saying. He's still fighting
death, is how he lives. I
was one cormorant but

should have known better
though at last he took his
eyes and nouns away and
we fell backward into night.
He survives himself over
and over. The only voice
that goes as loud as death
is the one that crows alone.

*Originally appeared in
Deep Water Literary Journal*

ENVY OF SOUL

Kathy Jo Bryant

Such an ugly word it is
Makes you bristle, and then fizz
A wish to be another with strong desire
"I want what they have," that burns like hot fire!

Many a life is sacrificed
On a cruel altar, sliced and diced
A Frankenstein with envy so green
No telling of the terror, and greed that's seen

Away with envy, and just be content
Live a life of peace, be whole, unbent
The cause you know not, then seek it out
Help others in love, and don't sow doubt!

SHORT ORDER COOK

Jane Fitzgerald

Florida, United States

<https://www.facebook.com/JanesPoetry/>

<https://www.amazon.com/stores/Jane-H.-Fitzgerald/author/B01MSW2FLO>

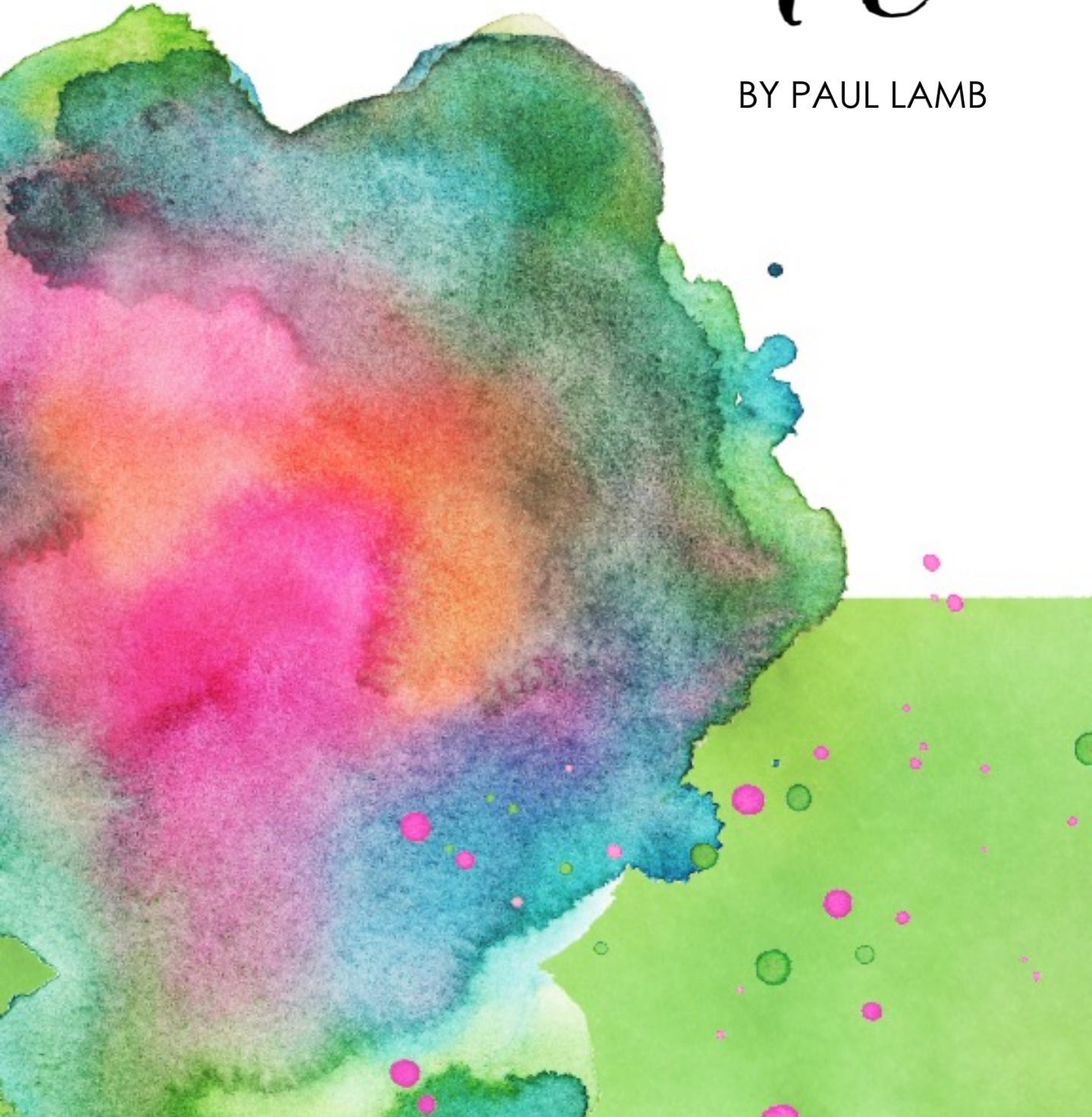
He is just a short order cook
in a drab dreary cafeteria
Paid little, working long hours
The glowing griddle his domain
Fresh ingredients his passion
I am mesmerized watching
this handsome young man with
delicate hands and copper skin
gracefully cut, slice and chop
red, green, yellow, orange,
white and purple vegetables
Complimenting them with a
finely blended bright salsa sauce
Served on golden sautéed tortillas
He smoothly handles many orders
Creating colorful culinary masterpieces
He's a visionary whose entrees
are akin to prismatic paintings on canvas
The famous artists of the world would envy
the radiant hues and presentations
displayed by the unknown short order cook

First published in Isele Magazine 12/2022

Envy

2 AG

BY PAUL LAMB



2AG – PAUL LAMB – KANSAS CITY, UNITED STATES

For a woman of a certain age, and of a certain sedentary disposition, the suggestion that she run a 5K was not merely ridiculous; it was rude!

Fine that her silly husband dressed himself in his skimpy gym clothes and trotted around with other barely dressed people, acting half his age then coming home sweaty and boasting, with another ugly tee shirt and sometimes an even uglier medal around his neck. A *finisher* medal. She'd quickly latched onto that. He got it merely because he crossed a finish line. He didn't have to distinguish himself. You could *walk* the whole distance and they gave you a medal for it! How can someone boast about that?

Got him out of the way for a couple of hours and, sure, he was moving again and getting some fitness, even doing his training runs, and she supposed that was worthwhile. But he was still silly. A man of his age! He should be pattering around the garden, rustling the pages of a newspaper, scoffing at young people. Not joining them for a track meet.

So when he suggested that she should join him one time, put on her sneakers and some loose clothes, then huddle with the herd at a starting line, well, she had no words. That was his thing, his hobby, his particular embarrassment. She'd wanted no part of it and certainly wasn't going to "run" a 5K with him. To even suggest it!

Was she being insufferable? Maybe. But she was stationary. She wasn't made of the stuff suited for sports. If he was silly, she'd be embarrassing. People would point at her and laugh. The red in her face wouldn't be from exertion, that was certain. Worse, she'd confirm that she was a middle-aged woman, past her prime, and she'd no longer be able to ignore it. Then she might as well start looking for a retirement home, settle into a big, soft chair and just watch mindless television for her remaining years.

"It's called The Bourbon Run," he'd blathered, as though he had not an ounce of compassion in his heart nor an ounce of sense in his head. "Sponsored by one of the liquor companies. Maybe they'll be giving away samples."

Drunk with delight, he chattered away. Just down the way in Martin City, he said. Neighborhood streets. Flat course. Free shirt. And then maybe brunch. It could be fun.

She swatted his balding pate with her newspaper. Bothersome old fool.

But when it was time for him to register for the race, he asked one last time if she wanted to join him, and something unexpected happened. She said, "If it will make you stop asking me, then yes!"

And that was how she found herself standing in a gray drizzle, in a strip mall parking lot before a liquor store, huddled and shivering with the fifty-or-so others who were foolish enough to sign up for The Bourbon Run, waiting for it to start.

The time for complaining, she supposed, was over. Mostly. She was here and she would do this thing and then she would never, ever do such a crazy thing again.

"I can't keep up with you."

"You'll do fine."

Neither had illusions. His running was more trotting, and he admitted it. But even his trotting was more than she could manage. He'd leave her behind after the first block. And maybe it was better that way. Let him have his fun – was it fun if it looked like agony? – and that way he'd not see her plodding pace, her shame, *her* particular embarrassment.

Then she heard him say "Here we go," and the pack started moving. Serious runners, casual runners, youngsters, moms with strollers, even a few people their age. All moving around her.

"What kind of parent would bring children to a bourbon run?"

She tried trotting beside him, tried matching his pace, but it was impossible. So he turned around. He trotted backward and threw his goofy grin at her. Then he trotted in circles around her as she moved so slowly forward.

And all about the herd was surging past. Even the moms pushing baby-laden strollers were passing her and she knew that it wouldn't be long before she was dead last in the line. Not just back of the pack but *last* of the pack. If she thought she could, she would have just turned around and retreated to their car, where she wouldn't be wet and wouldn't be cold and wouldn't be seen.

The sky was bleak and gray, the drizzle set on intermittent. Errant wind snatched at her cap, the cap he'd assured her she'd want to wear.

"Go ahead," she made herself say. "Run your race. Don't hang back here with me."

"You're sure?"

"More than anything!"

And so he did, trotting ahead with the rest of the herd, which she could see was already stringing itself out. Some of them far up the road, others not yet so far, but all of them moving, all of them well ahead of her.

This, she thought, was the biggest mistake of her life. A police car, with its lights flashing, was parked crossways in the middle of the intersection at the first turn of the course. The officer was holding back traffic and waving to the runners. But it was really *she* who was holding back the traffic. Throwing a delay into their Saturday-morning errands as she walked – walked! – through the intersection, the last of the racers they had to wait for but still interminably slow. She'd hate it if someone did this to her. She'd pity the person!

The pack thinned as they all found their paces. Ahead of her, the last racer she could see any longer just disappeared around a turn. Good thing she had been watching, for the tiny orange cone in the middle of the street was apparently the only other sign she had of where

2AG – PAUL LAMB – KANSAS CITY, UNITED STATES

to go. And when she made the turn, she peered into the gray mist to find the pack again, to see what her next turn would be.

Soon enough she'd lost even that guidance and she had to watch for cones or orange tape or bleeding, drizzle-soaked cardboard signs telling her where to turn. She weaved through residential streets. A few beleaguered spectators in front yards, under umbrellas, cheered to her, and she mustered a smile and a wave to hide her embarrassment, stepping in a puddle one time when she looked up to return a wave. Why was she doing this to herself?

But then the way straightened on the main commercial street and far ahead – did she still have that far to go? – she saw the last of the pack, so she guessed that by some good fortune or lucky coincidence she was still on the course. She could see them far ahead, and if they didn't turn around, they wouldn't see her far behind. And she'd have to stay on the course because she was truly lost now and didn't know any other way back to the gritty parking lot in front of the seedy liquor store that was to blame for this insanity.

Her socks were soaked, her shoes filthy. And she was sweating under the windbreaker that she didn't want to take off so the drizzle didn't soak her further. She was supposed to keep her race bib visible, but she wasn't going to open her jacket now. Why do people do this to themselves? Why did she do it to herself?

She came to the end of the long stretch and guessed the course turned. An overturned cone sat on the sidewalk, but as she looked up and down the cross street she could see no runners or walkers in either direction. She had a vague sense that the liquor store was somewhere off to the left, and with nothing more to go on than that, she pointed her feet to the left. The drizzle on her face collected into drops that fell from her nose.

This was a grim, industrial stretch past faceless warehouses with fenced, weedy parking lots. No tidy yards here with intrepid spectators. No dutiful policeman to steer her steps. She could be going completely the wrong way, and she had no idea at all. Left alone. Abandoned on the course.

Surely even her silly, trotting husband had crossed the finish line by this time. He'd had the pack to guide him. He done this kind of foolishness before and knew what he was doing. She had no experience and no idea what she was doing.

She called him.

"I'm lost," she snarled. "I hate this. I can't tell you how much I hate this."

"Did you turn at the gas station?"

"I didn't see any stupid gas station."

"Okay, I'll run back over the course and find you. We'll walk it in together."

"I hate this."

“You may have mentioned that.”

“That’s because I do!”

When he reached her, not all that far from the finish line, the first thing he noticed was that her cap was gone. The second thing he noticed was the scowl on her face.

“This is the stupidest sport on the planet, you know!”

He walked beside her, not in the street any longer but on the cracked and crumbling sidewalk. A car hissed past them on the wet pavement, on the course prematurely, but then who was going to stop it? She might have gotten run down for her trouble. That certainly wouldn’t happen if she’d just stayed in her chair before the television at home.

“I am never, ever going to do this kind of foolishness again. Do you hear me?”

He knew enough not to respond. There was no response, really. She was in a state.

“We’re very close to the finish line, actually,” he finally dared.

“Good. I’m ready to be done with this!”

They walked up the small hill to the last turn before an easy descent into the parking lot and the finish line.

“I really don’t know why people think this is fun.”

And he was polite. He didn’t argue or contradict. He didn’t try to make a case. He simply suffered her insufferableness.

More steps in the chilly silence, and then, “This is stupid. It’s a stupid thing to do.”

But not far ahead of them was the finish line. Most of the other runners appeared to have left, but a few race officials still lingered, obligated, she guessed, to wait for the very last person to stagger in. Grumbling, no doubt, that some poky old lady was making them stand around longer in the drizzle.

“Want to run it in?”

She turned to him, half in surprise and half in contempt. Did he really think that trotting the last twenty feet of this nonsense would somehow salvage it?

But she stepped up her stride, and, with what her husband praised as a decent running pace, took herself over the first and absolutely last finish line of her life.

She didn’t feel the relief that floods runners when they’re done. No satisfaction. No elation. No achievement. She felt nothing. She wanted go home and take a hot shower and put on dry clothes and never speak of this.

2AG – PAUL LAMB – KANSAS CITY, UNITED STATES

They sheltered from the spitting wind beside a tall sign, and she looked with disgust at the brown banana and dried out granola bar that were the prizes for her mighty achievement. No, not a drop of bourbon at all.

But then...

One of the race officials hurried over.

“Congratulations! You finished second in your age group.” And he threw a medal around her neck. A silly little medal on a slim satin ribbon, and as she clutched it in her disbelieving hand, it transformed into the most beautiful jewel she had ever seen!

Her husband watched as her eyes pinched into a calculating squint and her lips curled into a wicked smile. He realized then that he hadn't even begun to know what insufferableness is.

Paul Lamb lives near Kansas City but escapes to his Ozark cabin whenever he gets the chance. His debut novel, *One-Match Fire*, was published by Blue Cedar Press in 2022. His short stories have appeared in dozens of literary journals. He rarely strays far from his laptop. You can find him at paullambwriter.com.

WISHFUL THINKING

Martina Robles Gallegos
California, United States

Posts on social media of joyful family gatherings and exciting outings crush the crying soul.

Watching mothers walking and merrily holding hands with their daughters punch an already bleeding heart.

Recalling when the same experiences were part of our lives brings too much pain.

Looking at empty seats during holiday meals is devastating.

Going through the day without listening to childlike laughter is deadly sad.

Turning on the TV just to have background noise is really just a waste of time and energy because there's no one to share a laugh with when characters make dumb jokes.

And there's nobody around to share inside jokes with either, so they go to waste, too.

Too much alternate reality going on around in the middle of the worst and most challenging chaos, too difficult to take.

Can't wait till eyes close shut quickly at night and open wide and fast in the morning or not even at all.

Yet again, can't stop wondering if there is going to be another day of living or just another one of dying. Uphill battles are never ending.

It's a damned if you do, damned if you don't roller coaster every day. It's exhausting.

Is it wishful thinking to expect a little normalcy from life, or is it envy of those who still have what others have lost?

The words and feelings in the brain don't leave when they're supposed to or come out all wrong, just to piss people off.

The brain embraces the eloquence others display in their flawless performances and admires their unstilted delivery.

Is it a capricious attempt to imitate or is it envy to aspire to use them as role models instead?

There's honesty and desire not to be evasive but to be upfront and face whatever consequences such honesty may bring because sometimes taking chances is the only way to learn to lose one's fears of criticism and making mistakes.

People say to write about things you know, and what some people know are simple but tragic events explained in simple ways.

There's no shame in keeping things simple and simply keeping things the way they are meant to be. Life is convoluted enough already. Envy nothing that belongs to others but strive for peace of mind and the right to keep the things that make you unique.

**WHEN I STOOD IN EMILY
DICKINSON'S BEDROOM...**
yours truly, the happy recluse
Ohio, United States

You who
 breathe in my Address
eyeing my white writing dress—
beat-beat of your heart is Loud
but I may make your skin a Shroud
for stepping sole in my bedroom &
gazing out my Glass—
I could harden your heart to Tomb,
& can do it fast.
Lots of folks fall in love with me
now that I'm safely dead—
what makes you think I would have let
you backslide in my bed?
Writing poetry was my
 Luminous Innerwear—
no suitor in some bodysuit
 could possibly compare.

Leave
it to me
to feel...doubt...
moments after you:
 Walk Out!

ENVY OF BLACK LOVE
Maid Čorbić

Bosnia and Herzegovina

<https://www.instagram.com/zaglavlje.official/>
<https://www.facebook.com/xcelendge>
<https://www.facebook.com/globechampion>

As if it happened yesterday
love is as black as a starfish
but he still lives with a moustache
because he has to fight
with all the forces around him

but I didn't know that I am blessed
until i met you suddenly in street
and realized that it was all I needed
I just hug you when it's the hardest
and I tell myself that everything will be fine

my love will make sense
only if I show you my emotions
love is strange and almost unusual
because always makes me cry
just when I don't want it

envy and jealousy because of someone else
makes me keep asking myself
Am I normal in all this?
or I'm just living in a world of madness

envy in my head works for me
and still one hundred per hour because I understand
that you are the woman of my life
and to keep to I have to
from all evil and adversity

because having you is everything
and when I lost you
it was too late for regrets
because of envy, oh yes!



Audience

Participation

BY LIZ LYDIC

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION – LIZ LYDIC – CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

Josh pulled over at Long View High School's main entrance to check the note from Ms. Jensen. *Follow the signs along the long driveway (be careful, a little bumpy!), and you'll see a large parking lot. Across from that is our humble theatre. You'll have a ticket and clipboard waiting for you at Will Call. We are SO happy to have you join us!!!!* Carla Jensen, LVHS Drama Teacher. Josh put the car into drive. The parking lot was mostly empty, save for two SUV's and a Prius. There was movement near the building marked **Music & Drama**, where some adults were setting up a concession stand. Josh was early, which meant there was time to walk the campus.

He'd first heard of *Broken Eastern Egg* when it came to Salt Lake City on tour a few years ago, but hadn't seen it. The plot was a satire riff on *The Great Gatsby*. Josh had been told by many of his theatre friends that he was 'born' to play the show's villain, The Buke, a mustache-twirling, vaudevillian version of Tom Buchanan. His preference would have been an introduction to the show other than from Long View High School, but he was dedicated to the Utah Drama Academic Society, affectionately referred to as U-DAS, from which he'd been a product of decades ago. Now he served as a coveted, long-standing judge. For high school seniors to move through the U-DAS adjudication cycle guaranteed ease as a college theatre program freshman.

The matinee of *Egg* was the production's closing performance, and an unrelenting sun raged on this November afternoon. A handful of kids played basketball on a sizzling gray court. Around the corner, on a pristine track, a panting blonde girl ran drills at the direction of a coach or dad. Inside the theatre ten minutes later, in a reserved middle center seat labeled 'Judge', Josh was overwhelmed by the closeness of the packed house. He asked a slouching student usher for assistance in moving to an aisle seat. The girl mumbled her response quietly. "I can't do anything to help you with that," she said, her eyes void of opinion as they locked on his. At the parent-staffed box office, smiling, Josh said he needed to speak with Ms. Jensen. Moving seemed to throw her off; she stated twice that *really*, the best place for Josh was *center*, just a few rows back from the stage. Explaining that he could not note-take without a free armrest helped Josh get resituated on the aisle of his row.

Broken Easter Egg's start time came and went, the delay due to a cycled shuffling of cast family members, staff and LVHS Board members. Ms. Jensen personally attempted to relocate audience members so they could remain grouped together. Bodies packed tighter, voices rose, and the air stiffened. Women, a sea of shiny faces and heeled mules and flowing light-colored tunics, used show programs to fan themselves. Josh struggled not to stare at the crowd. He busied himself with reading the cast bios in the program. His concentration was null, though. The audience noise was increasing. Words like 'weather,' 'Netflix,' 'attorney,' 'Junior,' 'Thanksgiving,' 'Belize,' and 'specialized' popped out and landed on Josh. Laughter was deep or sharp, sudden and aggressive.

Ms. Jensen as she entered again, counting seats as she stood at the foot of the stage. The front row was set on the same plane as the apron, and Josh, two rows back, sensed thrill in the proximity. A fast-walking dad in cargo shorts and an 'Old Guys Rule' t-shirt brushed Josh's leg. "Hey, man, I'm glad you made it!" he said to someone in a row or two above

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION – LIZ LYDIC – CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

Josh. The dad's voice was booming. "No, this is Morgan's sixth show," he was saying. "...his last." The other man's response was audible but the words indistinct. Morgan's dad went on, the information coming in pieces. "...lot of options, but he...Carnegie Mellon." Josh's head popped up. Ms. Jensen was asking for attention, the crowd hushed, and the dad returned to his seat. The color of a nearby grandma's scarf gave way to the image of an acceptance letter from Carnegie Mellon University. A single slip of paper with Josh's name and address on the upper left recalled an existence at a moderate apartment. The college's red, green and purple commanding seal. 'Dear Mr. Noland....' How his parents could tell him 'no' to anything after that - no to additional time with his private vocal coach, no to an acting workshop in the city, and unfortunately, no, but Carnegie Mellon was simply too expensive - after being desired by the school so strongly that he was addressed as *Mr.*, was unimaginable.

During Ms. Jensen's curtain speech, Josh read Morgan Holmes' bio in the program.

Morgan Holmes is a senior at LVHS, where he has performed in over 12 productions. When he's not acting, he enjoys golf, making short films with his friends, and snowboarding. Morgan is thrilled to be bringing to life The Buke, and for the chance to be in this incredible production. He would like to thank his mom and dad for always believing in him, the amazing cast and crew for being on this journey together, and of course, to the one and only Ms. Jensen for her vision and guidance. Morgan hopes you all enjoy the show, and don't forget to 'Close your bespeckled eyes when you see a green light, you beautiful little fools.'

Josh joined the round of applause as the lights dimmed, and welcomed a familiar stir. That moment at the beginning, always, *always*, beckoned him to believe in everything, to trust the endless possibilities that could unfold in two hours, his only job to sit and trust.

For the first few scenes, Josh made general notes, and eased into the tone of the play. A wispy kid played narrator Nikolini Bellini Fettucini Carroway, and Josh wrote *Generous leader* next to the student's name. The quirky, sketch-comedy design of *Broken Eastern Egg* was effective, and Josh noted that the kids committed to it with energy and focus. *Nice balance*, Josh scribbled for the student actress playing Bellis Perennis Buchanan - Daisy from the original story - his shorthand for an actor's ability to play realism and comedy equally. He actually laughed aloud, genuinely, when the actress addressed the crowd to cry "I was thrown over a telephone right after I saw beautiful shirts!" The appearance of *The Buke* seemed intentionally delayed: the characters spoke of him for several scenes where Josh felt the character should have been present. After a few beats, he recognized the building of tension, that the stakes were set by the character's attitude toward *The Buke* before the audience saw him. The payoff was huge.

Morgan Holmes was thin, but what he lacked in hulk he made up for in height. More than that though, and Josh took note of this, Morgan owned his body. Seemingly free from typical 18-year old self-consciousness, or overinflated confidence, Holmes stood, walked and delivered lines like a professional adult actor, grounded firmly on the stage naturally, and used perfect volume. Josh put the CarePoint Health work pen in his pocket,

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION – LIZ LYDIC – CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

mesmerized. In his peripheral vision, Josh saw that throughout the audience, bodies were still, chins jutted toward the stage.

The entire cast was deftly handling a large party scene that required various conversations to pop out in rapid succession on top of music, staging, and the ensemble's background dialogue. *How are there so many?* Josh thought. These kids didn't need a personal summons from Ms. Jensen, or their parents, or an exchange of course credit to participate in theatre. Glancing discreetly at the crowd, Josh conjured an assumption: there were students here, watching with seeming actual delight, and even thrill. It wasn't clear if they were part of an entire movement of support for LVHS for drama, or if they had enthusiasm solely for the *Egg* production, which was a clever choice for this age group. The entire concept was unfamiliar to Josh, who, twenty-five years ago, knew not much beyond the series of Neil Simon and Agatha Christie plays he performed on the stage of a dank multi-purpose room shared with the girls volleyball team.

The first act concluded with a Gilbert and Sullivan style musical number, and then a final moment of dramatic tension between Nikolini, Bellis and protagonist Gatz B. Though the beat was utterly devastating, full of intention and authenticity in several unspoken seconds, the act close received only polite clapping, and Josh concluded that no one but Morgan had full command of the audience.

It was still warm outside, and Josh filled his lungs with fresh air. In the theatre courtyard, people unwrapped cheap packets of candy and chips and ate ravenously. Soda cans snapped open, followed by frantic gulping, intermission habits that baffled and disgusted Josh. He wanted to avoid overhearing any comments about the show or the performers, but couldn't ignore the hope that he'd catch something about Morgan. Without his clipboard, Josh didn't draw any curious looks, and he walked to the boys bathroom in a slight slouch.

After fifteen minutes, the crowd reassembled with surprising urgency, and a crackle of energy flurried through the theatre. "I can't wait!" Josh heard a student across the aisle say to her friend. This comment seemed to ripple. "Is this it?" asked a female voice from a few rows above. "Oh my god, he is so hilarious. I can't believe his talent," a fast-talking woman was responding. Josh dipped his head toward the program in his lap and pushed his tongue roughly up on the roof of his mouth. He breathed out so that a static sound echoed in his head, and finally, he heard and felt only himself.

Soon, the lights dimmed to start of Act 2, and a few stifled giggles floated in the darkness. Josh shifted in his seat and coughed to cover for his jumpiness. The lights went up and revealed an elaborate yacht set piece. With blue trim and working lights, this alone garnered a round of applause, which then boomed as each male cast member began appearing one by one, clad only in speedos and skipper hats. The hip-hop style song they performed, 'The Boujee Fool,' described how Gatz B inherited his money from a virtual stranger. All the actors had superb voices and were committed to the performance, but it was Morgan Holmes' rap solo that sent the audience into euphoria. He was totally believable in an unbelievable scenario, managing to avoid generic trappings. *Rap = actor*

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION – LIZ LYDIC – CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

playing his character telling the story thru rap, not just actor rapping for crowd and friends, Josh scribbled. The second act continued with soap opera-like vignettes parodying the story's complicated romantic tanglements. In the residue of the yacht scene, the ensemble was louder, faster, funnier. The audience followed suit, and the push and pull that Josh had experienced so seldomly as an actor was now something he was fully in, on the other side.

Without a sliver of slowed pace, the play shifted to a luncheon scene set on a hot day. During the cast's repeating absurd exchanges about the weather, Josh wondered if the air conditioning in the theatre had been turned down. Audience members were again fanning themselves with their programs. A moment later, the cast was playing their scene at a fully set table in complete silence. Josh squinted his eyes as if that could help him verify if the script called for the exceptionally long period of quiet, or for real food to be eaten, both such bold directing choices. He could hear the tearing of bread and the scraping of a loaded fork along an actor's teeth. Josh didn't dare move to write a note, so he looped one in his head, though it was unlikely he would later - or ever - forget this moment. *Absolute control. Superb creation of tension.* The silence was broken by The Buke, and Josh felt with Morgan the responsibility of choosing the precise moment to begin the beat. His volume was low, at first. Bellis, Gatz B, Nikolini, and the minor players exchanged confused looks as The Buke repeated like a chant "Let's go to town" until it was audible to all. Morgan stood, suddenly. Plates clattered, a knife fell to the ground, and the actors reacted in character. Josh gasped inaudibly at the pleasure of bearing witness to this moment, the fearlessness to ruin the table set-up and create unscripted noise.

"I said, let's go to town!" The Buke was now shouting, having received no response from the other characters. Clown-like movements accompanying his suggestion offered only a tiny ripple of laughter from the audience, who knew that Morgan was knee-deep in a moment of The Buke's mania. *Earned anger, Josh wrote. Justified. Believable though big.* The madman routine ended with a line from Gatz B, permitting the audience to release held breaths and laugh with renewed camaraderie. Josh was suddenly pulled from the pleasure of the performance, just a fraction, but the twinge was there. It probably had been there all along, and was just coming to the surface. He didn't want it to be real or true, this envy, but once he understood that underneath all of this - these scribbled words in the program, his smile, the almost-erotic gratification of stellar theatre - was his own nasty selfishness, he could not return to the relaxed comfort he had found.

Morgan still had The Buke in an underlying rage, though he attempted to control it in the driving scene that followed. The Buke was bragging about his sixth sense, an ability to see things others couldn't. Not getting the responses he desired from the other characters, The Buke was suddenly up and out of the pantomimed car, pacing the stage as he dove into a diatribe of his keen vision. Then, he stopped abruptly, and the other actors froze. A wedge of silence was followed by a question, too quiet for the audience to hear because The Buke's was facing upstage, his back to the audience. Josh's shock drove him to a frantic desire to know if this defiance of blocking rules was Ms. Jensen's or Morgan Holmes' doing: that brave, wrong move. The actors shook their heads 'no' at whatever The Buke was asking.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION – LIZ LYDIC – CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

When the question “How stupid do you think I am?” was finally heard, it was stamped with Holmes' sincerity, and in drawing out the ‘s’ ever so slightly, he managed to evoke a nuance of disappointment that lasted long enough to silence the room, before serving as a launching pad to repose the question again and again, on loop to the other actors, to the car set, to the air, into anything that occupied his universe. Particles of Morgan's spit suspended in air, lit by a soft wash as he turned slightly stage right to ask again “How stupid do you think I am?” Flicking back his jacket, lewdly exposing a pocket watch, he strode to center stage and looked at the audience. There was a twitch under his eyes before they widened, and then his lips turned down. His body paused and Josh recognized that it was not The Buke that slowed, but Morgan. As Josh leaned forward, unable to believe that Holmes had dropped a line, Morgan scanned the row until their eyes met. He walked toward Josh, and over the heads of the audience between them, Morgan's upper lip rose and exposed his teeth, pristine in color, and other than one stunning oversized incisor, magnificent in structure.

“How stupid do you think I am?” he asked Josh, and Josh knew in that second that Morgan had sought him out specifically the moment before, and that even though he had changed seats, Morgan still found him. “How stupid do you think I am?” Morgan repeated, this time cocking his head on the last word. Josh swallowed and breathed in, his mouth glued shut. Holmes moved a centimeter closer, his knees now directly in front of a grandma in the front row, who pulled her purse to her bosom and smiled over at her husband with delight. “How stupid do you think I am?” Morgan's eyes squinted. Josh's upper body jerked slightly to the right, as if stricken, and he resisted the urge to reach for his pen. Morgan breathed in slowly, and looked to the ceiling. He brought his head back down, and a new absurd smile toward Josh sent a ripple of laughter through the crowd.

“How stupid do you think I am?” Morgan did a little dance, and perched his right hand over his head, pretending to scratch it, like an ape. Josh opened his mouth, desperate to end all of this by a response, to give The Buke or Morgan Holmes whatever he wanted. But, the audience was now roaring at Holmes' vaudevillian moves: slipping on an invisible banana peel, miming brushing his teeth with a comb extracted from a breast pocket. Josh laughed too, certain that his participation could return his anonymity.

The audience was now applauding, and Josh released a breath, until The Buke was back, in front of him again. “How stupid do you think I am?” This time the question was lost in the scatter of residual laughter, but Josh's stomach reacted with a plunge. Morgan stood like a statue until the crowd quieted. Josh bit the inside of his left cheek, and his nostrils flared and ached.

His stance, he hoped, said *enough*. He watched Morgan's chest rise and fall, their breaths in sync. Morgan's mouth slid from a sneer into a straight line. And then, Josh was sure, Morgan's eyes began to glisten. There was a tingle behind Josh's nose, and he stifled a rising pull in the back of his throat. The tears came anyway, suspended at his lower eyelids, matching Morgan's. The two men stayed that way for another beat, the silence between them telling of familiarity and understanding, until Morgan suddenly swept his jacket flap back and opened his mouth and bellowed at Josh “How *stupid* do you think I am?” There

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION – LIZ LYDIC – CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

was nothing light about Morgan or The Buke then, only the red flash of his heating face, a spray of wetness dissolving into the bright lights, and his eyes, seemingly a shade darker now, black pools of fury. Josh sat up in a jolt, jaw clenched, his own head dizzy as if he had suddenly been cut from a dangling rope, and was hurling downwards fast. He gripped his chair, concerned he was on the brink of passing out. The mom next to him flinched and whispered to her seatmate.

The Buke then sucked in a long breath through his nose, tilted his chin to stage right and looked back at Josh. "Pretty stupid, eh? Well," and here Morgan, who had returned to a normal volume, raised an eyebrow and took a perfect dramatic pause, "I have a second sight." Before returning to the rest of the cast, Morgan stamped the line with a closed-mouth smile at Josh. The audience whooped and clapped furiously, some looking back at Josh, shaking heads, a few even pointing. A dad across the aisle leaned over to Josh, and said - not in a whisper - "He got you good, man." The neighboring audience members who heard this laughed, and Josh raised his eyebrows politely to say "Oh well," before pointedly turning back to the stage.

For the remainder of the production, Josh clapped and laughed and feigned focus by picking up the cues of the audience, but his mind looped on Morgan's eyes as he'd hollered, and the turn on his heel after that final outburst, when he had finally given up on Josh. After the curtain call, Josh gathered his items quickly, and left the clipboard on his seat. He squeezed through clueless clumps of families who were chatting in aisles. "Excuse me," he muttered, and flashed a polite smile as he was recognized by audience members, some of whom moved out of the way as if he were dangerous; one who laughed "So, how stupid is he?" and slapped Josh on the shoulder.

At the pre-twilight hour, the lingering warmth in the air was evident by bike-riders and walkers, all beaming and haphazard. Josh sped past houses with mailboxes enclosed in brick, boastful lawns, and imposing brass address numbers. A stop sign appeared out of nowhere, and Josh's car lurched to break at the last second, sending his messenger bag from the passenger seat to the floor. "Fuck!" he yelled, and reached down to retrieve it. A dad in the crosswalk who was guiding a son tentatively pedaling a bike, met Josh's eye. With one hand on the kid's seat, the dad used the other to gesture to the sign, then point back to the son, and mouth to Josh "Come on!"

At home forty minutes later, Josh went straight to his computer, skipping dinner despite a rumble that branched upwards from his stomach to the back of his head, drilling into his agitation. He clicked through the pre-ambling questions of his adjudicator's report: School Name, Production Title, Performance Run Time. He provided politically-correct and encouraging feedback on the set, lights, and directing. For the section requiring recognition of outstanding performances, he copied from the program the names of the students who had played Nikolini, Bellis, Gatz B, and a few other ensemble members. When the prompt for a narrative on acting was generated, Josh wrote without stopping until night fell in its entirety, and until the weather dropped to a temperature he recognized as that of a season change.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION – LIZ LYDIC – CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES

While overall the ensemble of 'Broken Eastern Egg' is strong, there are places that require extra attention in order to elevate this production to excellence. One particular performance that stood out was that of Morgan Holmes. Mr. Holmes, tasked with the role of creating a multi-complex character (The Buke) who, on the surface, appears to only provide conflict for the main players, actually serves as the symbol of the changing times in which the play is set, and can allow the audience to experience peril in the friction between progress and greed. For many a young man, the role would be an opportunity to create a layered, rich world. However, in the LVHS production, it is debatable as to whether Mr. Holmes truly understands the inner struggles of The Buke on a deep level. Actors are tasked with creating backstory and desires for the character in order to elevate the individual into someone the audience truly cares for. While physical and language skills are key components to the success of a comic character, an authentic performance includes nuanced intents and motivations filled in by the actor. Unfortunately, Mr. Holmes failed to do this consistently through the performance, leaving the audience with a one-dimensional portrayal of The Buke, and ultimately, weakening an otherwise effective production.

I encourage the director to work with students to ensure that there is genuine effort to separate the student from the actor, so that whenever onstage, there is less concern about issues related to popularity or 'getting laughs', and to ensure that the acting is the precedence. This script offers the opportunity for actors to not only break a fourth wall, but also dabble in mugging to the audience. Most actors handled this delicately and stayed grounded in their character's intentions, but, unfortunately, Mr. Holmes tended to ignore the proverbially line toeing and stood out in his efforts to gain audience approval. A more mature actor would hold a thorough and evident understanding of the privilege he has in performing this role.

While there are some fine and deserving moments in this production, I am unable to recommend it as a final candidate for this year's Utah Drama Academic Society Award or for showcase in the Festival.

Liz Lydic is a mom, writer, and local government employee in the Los Angeles area. She also does theatre stuff.

lizlydic.com

THE GREEN WITHIN MYSELF

Savannah K. Martinez

Texas, United States

<https://www.instagram.com/crierpsycho/>

The longing brought me to my knees,
The humbling pang to the heart,
Those rhythmic palpitations reminding me of how it means to be
Human
-Fragile and most vulnerable,
Under my own scope.

All it takes is one shot; one kill
Under that sickening green;
The color of emerald fields, paradise driven
And yet the very same shade I know I'll never see in full.

For how could I? Living a lie to the unseeing eyes was one thing,
But to my own mind-
That judging hall of mirrors
There came a sort of breathtaking simplicity, in the way
My smiling confidence gave hope to others,
The glory that comes with being an unbending queen-
Yet the longer the light casts, the more sallow the soul becomes.

Oh how I long to toss aside this messiah's robes and don the sandals of truth,
Allowing myself rest upon that dewy bed of fiction,
The very place my wandering thoughts call home.
In my time of necessity I painted this ongoing charade,
The visage of a young woman
Proud and bearing the weight of other's needs,
Far beyond the capacity of which her own ecosystem could fit.

But in all things beautiful comes the eventual tainting of man's turbulent emotions,
Spoiling the fruit of good intentions,
Leaving the garden to ponder;
How could this happen-
The separation of two polarized selves?

My shades: a hunter's green and child's blue
Forever lost in an eternal war, threatening to implode my senses;
Splinters in my actions eventually leak through,
Causing myself to falter

THE GREEN WITHIN MYSELF cont....

How is it so easy, yet so unbearably hard to fit within my own skin?
The petrified youth still clutching her bear,
Begging for the hand of the young woman with the flaming red hair,
 Wrapping herself in the shroud of searing green,
 I know I must find a way to let go, or lest it be too late
But growth must come in time, and dedication with the passing of seasons

So for now, let my spirit rest with the frowning sun,
Her glaring heat causing the viridescent grass to burn, all the brighter
 To better see the unsavory thing within myself,
 That envy's green.

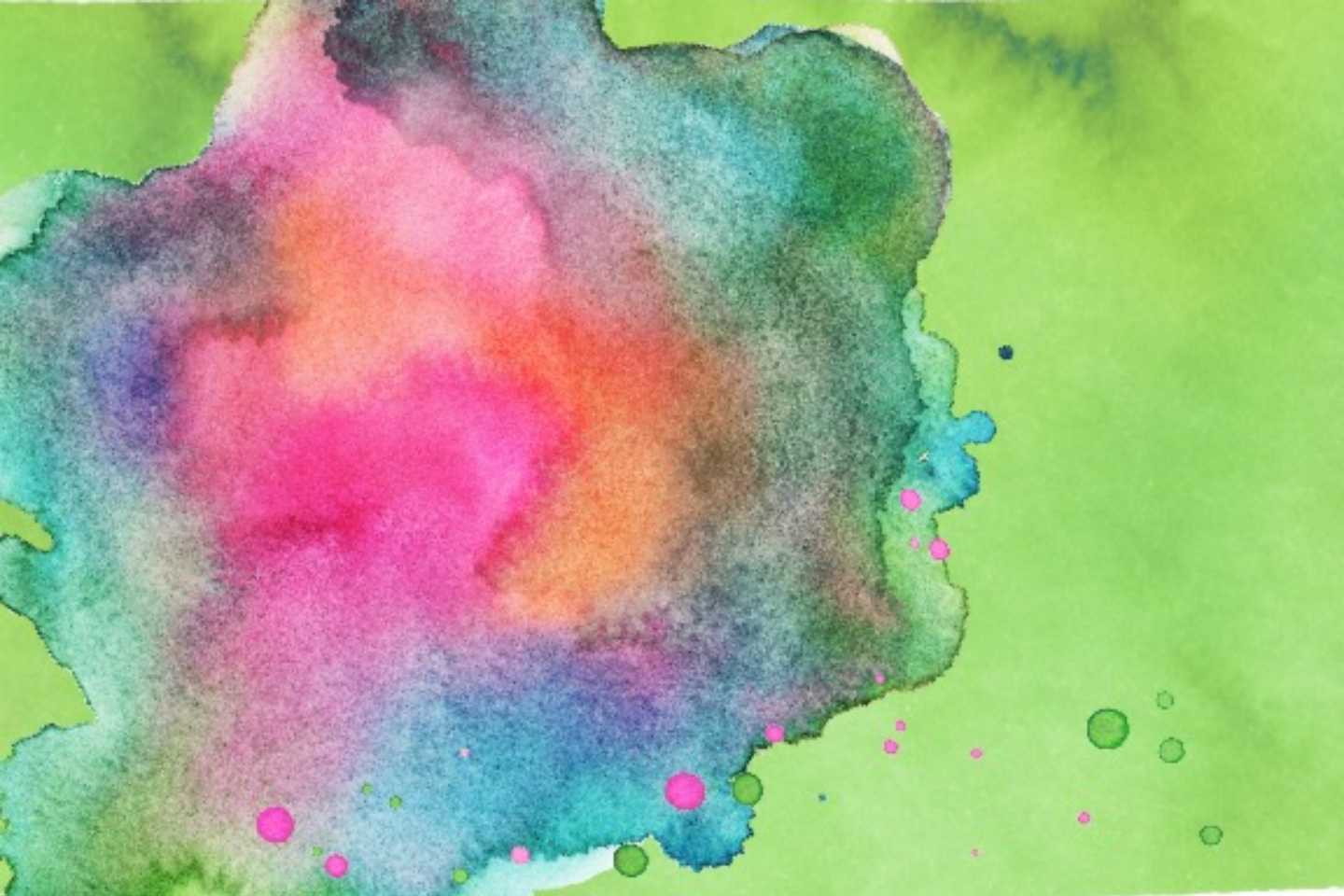
UNMATCHED

Christina E. Petrides

Jeju Island, South Korea

<https://www.christinaepetrides.com/>

She sits mute, aching to be clever.
 A ball lodges behind her belly button,
 a fist-sized lump of longing to explode witticisms.
She admires those who send one salvo after another flying,
 lobs and volleys returned with gusto,
 a game of verbal tennis over the dinner table.
She can listen and laugh, an appreciative spectator.
 But as with wielding a physical racket,
it would be pure chance were her own serve to connect,
 less likelihood of its crossing the net at any speed
 to land in-bounds, and none at all
 of its initiating even the shortest series of returns.
Well, we can't all be the Williams sisters of one-liners.



Envy

BY SYLVIA CLARE



ENVY – SYLVIA CLARE – ISLE OF WIGHT, UNITED KINGDOM

I saw you watching the girls in the pretty dresses, the girls who were loved by their mothers, the girls who were given treats after school. I saw you watching the girls who were popular with the boys, who believed themselves to be top of the heap. I saw your mother collect you from school, always somehow angry with you. I knew you weren't really loved, not like we were. I saw how you wore secondhand clothes most of the time because they didn't look right on you, they looked like they had belonged to someone else, not yours. They just didn't suit you. I saw your nearly black, long straight hair, until your mother made you cut it all off. That made you look more like a pixie. You were very unusual looking, tall, skinny, beautiful, though it was heavily disguised.

One day when we were both alone in the cloakroom, I plucked up the courage to talk to you. You were nice. I decided you could be my secret friend. You seemed to like that idea too, it gave us both one up on the classroom controller, the queen bee, the girl who must be obeyed, and who decreed who was in and who was out.

I offered to walk home with you from school, but only after we got far enough away, so no one would see me talking to you. You really were the school class outcast, the avoided one. Perhaps your loneliness and desperation showed, and people shied away, used you to make themselves feel better. I wasn't like that, not really, but if I stepped out of line, I would get it too, the being sent to Coventry I mean. You read an awful lot of books though and watched us all.

Your mother eventually allowed you to walk home alone, after you asked her to. I would see you shudder when you had to go and meet her after school. She never smiled at you, just the other mothers, being all friendly with them. But once you were given a little more freedom, we would meet just past the library, when almost everyone had walked a different way. We both lived on the outskirts of the village, a long walk up a long road, until we went left and right into our own estates. Those modern Wates build estates built around all the villages to house so many more people, but destroying farmland, extending communities beyond a community can hold together.

I don't know if you were envious, wanting their accolades, or just watching to see how you might emulate them. But slowly I got to know you, on those long uphill walks. Then we made plans to see each other at weekends. You came to my house and fed my rabbits with spinach my mother was growing.

I didn't come to your house very often. Your mum wasn't very nice. My mum made us cakes to eat at the bottom of the garden where we sat and watched the trains passing. They would whistle past us, going into the village station just down the line. You made up such amazing stories of all the people on the trains who would be looking out at us. You had already read the railway children, ahead of me in reading at school. At school where I had to pretend I wasn't friends with you in case she got wind of it. She who was our master, the one to be obeyed. The one who got the pick of the boys and who had decided I was her best friends. I didn't get a say in it. There I could see your loneliness, but somehow you didn't seem to be upset about it. You were just watching us all the time, and it made me sad that I

ENVY – SYLVIA CLARE – ISLE OF WIGHT, UNITED KINGDOM

couldn't just call you over and let you join in. After all you had such long legs, great for French skipping which was our current craze. Then you did. You made your own elastic chain and when ours broke you suggested we could play with yours – with you. So we did. And suddenly you were ok, still on the outer edges, but ok after all. We still kept our weekends secret though, do you remember that?

I often think of you, of how I envied your ability to watch people and find a way to fit in, even if it took you forever, well nearly a whole term after you first came to our school. I guess it was such good training for you though. We lost touch fifty years ago, but I see your name on bestseller lists, honoured for your close observation skills, your detailed descriptions of how people behave and interact. I still envy you your life.

I am a memoirist and poet, and a mindfulness teacher for the Thich Nhat Hanh Plum Village organisation. I currently live on the beautiful Isle of Wight UK with my husband, also a writer and musician. I love my writing as a refuge from my complex trauma with PTSD and ADHD challenges in life. I have written memoirs about all these topics, to help and support others who experience similar traumas, especially No Visible Injuries. Life is good in spite of the challenges and I am profoundly grateful for all I have in my life.

NO HORIZON

John Grey

Rhode Island, United States

It's Rhode Island, not the mid-west.
There are no roads to nowhere.
No highway heads for the horizon.
No guy called Frank who owns
the gas station at the edge of town
waving me on my way,
telling me make sure
I give his best regards to my sister Rosaline.
I have no sister Rosaline.
And Frank doesn't know me from Adam.
Besides, his name's not Frank.

Can't even get lost.
Ten minutes on a lonely wooded road
and suddenly I'm at a familiar crossroads
with a restaurant on my right
where I ordered chili just last summer.
And when it all becomes too much,
I can't just leave,
crunch that accelerator underfoot
and head for the hills and freedom.
Everywhere I go
I'm a block or two
from someone who knows me.

Midwesterners,
I envy you your wheat-fields,
your silos, scattered farm-houses,
and the roads that run between them,
flat and straight, like runways.
I'm at the gas station, filling up,
not to go some place
but just so I can stay where I am.
I pay by credit card.
Frank doesn't even enter into it.
Besides, this Frank's a girl
manning the booth in the freezing cold.
And the streets around here
are all one way,
which is just the same as no way.

I WILL NEVER BE CAGED

Linda M. Crate

Pennsylvania, United States

i used to envy
songbirds,
but i do not any longer;

they can be caged
or killed so easily—

their pretty wings
both a charm and a curse
drawing danger to them
like a cloak of darkness
thrust over their lives,

and i'd rather live my own way;

so i will embrace who i am and all
my strange magic because i may not
be pretty like a songbird but i am
pretty like me and i will never be caged.

DAMP AND SMALL

F. Kate Langan
Canada

<https://fkatelanganauthor.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/fkatelangan>

There is a glint-eyed pony
at the kitchen counter.
Shorter than I, one metre tall,
and yet he makes me feel so small,
as though I do not belong
where he does. Perhaps it is
a measure of his rudeness
accepted where mine is not.
A rudeness grown from certainty
of his right to be there,
in his place, breathing the air
of this cookie scented world.
So where is my certainty?
I am human after all.
Burned up in the fires of envy
toward a small, damp pony
who I love.

ENVY

Pankhuri Sinha

India <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ac0HubyLuU>

'Wow, you look so gorgeous
Am J, J, Jealous!
Such an honest, frank
And pretty common expression!
An elevated form of compliment!

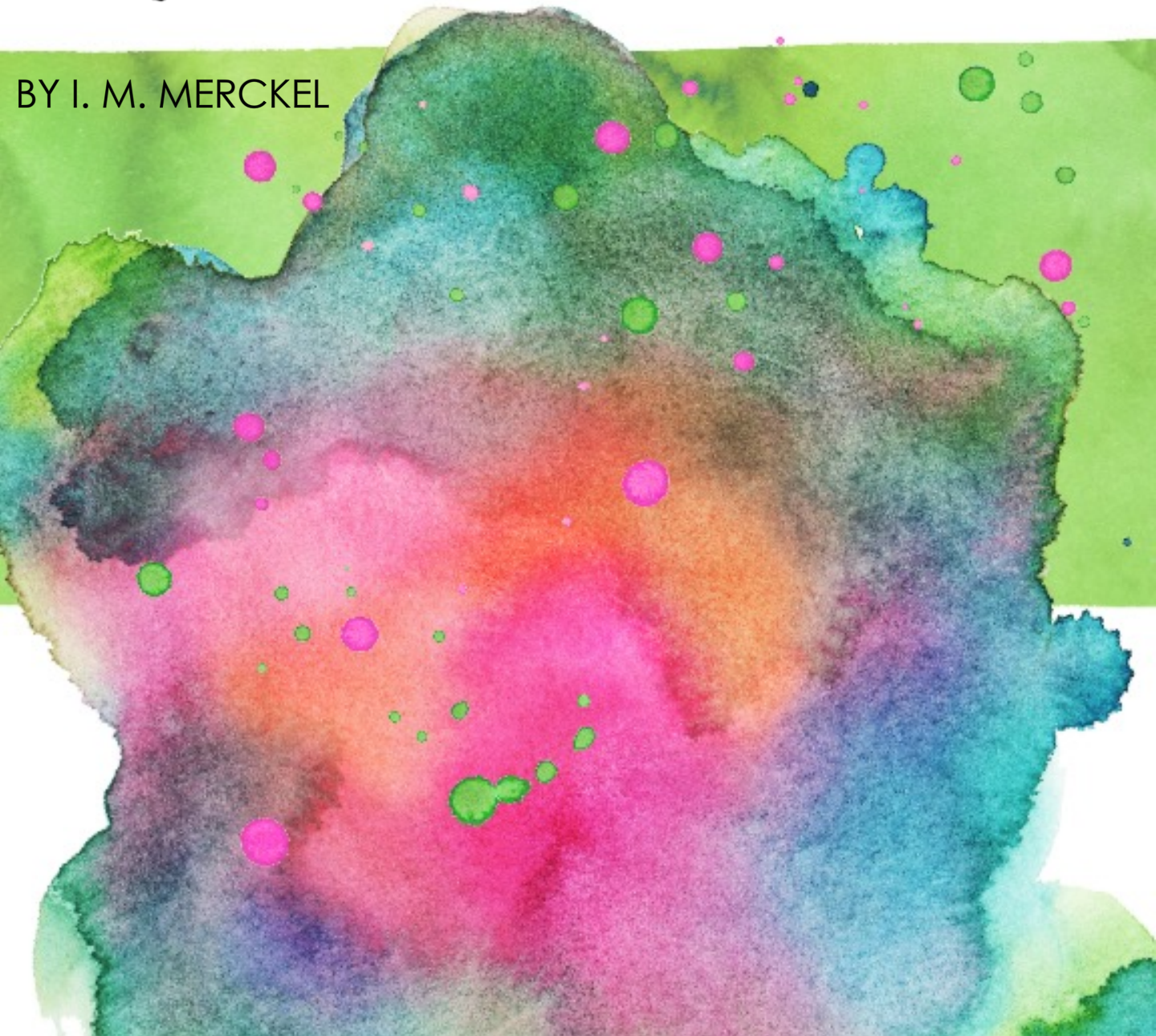
When does it turn lethal?
Into real resentment?
Wanting to harm? Hurt?
Is envy a natural human emotion ?
Are there good and bad
People? Or is it just their
Circumstances? What then
Is the basic human nature?
Are envious actions, deliberate or unconscious?

Philosophical dissections aside
Envy is real, a negative emotion
Not healthy competitive, but
Corrosive , destructive !
People intrude, get in
Simply because the structure was grand!

How does one safeguard
Against envy?

The Quest of Nicholas Marsh

BY I. M. MERCKEL



THE QUEST OF NICHOLAS MARSH – I. M. MERCKEL – TEXAS, UNITED STATES

The papers were signed; the check delivered. Nicholas sighed, relieved his journey was about to end. All the sacrifice and risk, worry and angst, years of long hours and sleepless nights, had been worth it. The vow he'd made, the goal he'd sought, that had fueled his drive in his most difficult days and secured for him what he'd earned, not been given, was at hand. No doubter could diminish his accomplishments. That unease caused from last night's harrowing dream over a payment problem gone awry was just that — a dream.

A knock at the door. The title officer held the check, requesting Nicholas and the closer step outside. Nicholas started to shake. Sweat broke out. He gasped for breath. "It was a dream," he mumbled.

"Mr. Marsh, are you all right?"

"What is it?"

"Do you need to sit down, sir?"

"What is it?" his voice louder, trembling.

"Sir...."

"WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?"

"It's about the check, sir. There's an issue."

Nicholas collapsed. The closer screamed. An ambulance was called. He would not be revived.

xxx

Nicholas Marsh looked down a long hallway that disappeared into a soft mellow haze. He didn't recall his arrival. It was as if he'd awakened from a slumber and found himself transported to a place never seen. Yet, the final words of the title officer were imprinted in his mind, resounding over and over, echoing, echoing, echoing.

Have I passed on? Nicholas had read stories about those pronounced dead, who had visited the afterlife yet somehow returned. But he'd encountered no loving light, no presence of deceased relatives to greet him. Instead he faced a corridor disappearing into that cloudy mist with barely discernible arrows on the floor pointing in the direction he inherently knew he was to follow. *Is this a test? Am I being judged.*

The quick assessment of new situations was his forte; a sixth sense he'd relied upon time and again. His favored response was to act expeditiously when confronted with the unknown rather than to delay, for to him fleet action trumped procrastination. Those giants of industry, successful politicians, and heroes he'd studied all assessed quickly and acted. They forced solutions, not awaited outcomes. Thus he commenced proceeding down the path following the direction of the arrows. *Why be brought here if only danger awaits?*

THE QUEST OF NICHOLAS MARSH – I. M. MERCKEL – TEXAS, UNITED STATES

Progressing down the hallway he noticed the absence of landmarks; nothing to his travel by. No time, no distance, no direction. He was lost to the fullest extent; a visitor in a foreign world. The light remained diffused, a consistent glow with no shadings, so he could not determine if he was heading towards or away from its source. There was no scent, not even a sound from his own tread. No heat or cold. It was as if his senses had been exhumed. *I am the star of my own silent film*, a thought that amused him for its irony. *I always wanted to be cast in the major role. I just never imagined it to be like this.*

Yet he sensed he was being observed; that he was the lead in a carnival sideshow providing entertainment to whomever or whatever had placed him on this stage. He therefore maintained a steady pace, not fast enough to suggest hurrying from what he feared, nor too slow to suggest confusion. Balance was the key. *Those whose qualities I wanted never seemed overwhelmed, lost, or out of control.*

Onward through the brume he strode. Then, a sharp curve to his left and he found the passageway blocked by three distinct yet colorless doors. Each was emblazoned with bright red lettering, the first color he'd seen. Upon the left one was written "Return," on the middle, "Remain," and on the right, "Relocate."

So this is what it comes down to for the "non-living." He preferred that term for it sounded less final than "Dead," although even a dunce would recognize a synonym wouldn't change his circumstance.

He'd adopted Pascal's Wager Theory for the afterlife, that the belief in a Deity was a bet. If one existed then the believer would win the pot, a result not available for the denier. But if there was no such Supreme Being then one was dead anyway, so wouldn't care. Thus, while he shunned casinos or gambling, he'd pledged his stake on the hereafter by refusing to dismiss the concept of a Higher Power. It was a calculation he was now glad he'd made.

Nicholas did reject the complexities of what awaited the sinner as portrayed in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and other similar allegories of Purgatory. Their depictions were too harsh, their punishment too grave. He'd concluded that reading about them in his high school literature class was enough Hell. However he'd never encountered anyone suggesting that a soul would become an entrant in a "You Bet Your Afterlife" game show and be given three options. He now understood the upside to procrastination. *What to do?*

The left door sounded most appealing, for a return to the familiar would restore him to the life he'd come from, or so he surmised. After all, he wasn't here because he wanted to be. Maybe there was more living to do. Grasping that handle his applied pressure produced no result. It would not turn.

The folly of this initial selection became obvious when he attempted a sigh but none issued. If he couldn't breathe, how could he return? Considering his mysterious yet non-threatening surroundings, wishing to avoid the chance that the literature he hated accurately described Hades, he selected the middle door for his second choice, it being preferable to remain in this confusing but seemingly benign situation than to face a harsher alternative. That door was locked as well.

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In life, Nicholas' inner resolve forged from many struggles asserted itself and he oftentimes triumphed by the strength of his sheer will. His mantra was "powerlessness is a state of mind, not a condition." Now faced with defeat he reapplied his will with more zeal. Ignoring the untouched door, he returned to his first two selections with greater force, but achieved the same result. Thus he understood he'd been given no control over the choices and would have to face the remaining option. Accepting the situation, but always seeking for an out, he placed his salvation in the frenetic hope of a "fox-hole prayer" imploring the Power who created those doors relent and reset them. To test his entreaty, he slowly reached to his right wishing the door would be locked. It opened easily.

"Noooooo," was the sound that reverberated in his head in the silent passageway.

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Nicholas found himself standing at a wooden bench facing three elevated thrones which, although lacking the ostentatiousness of high office, emitted power and control by their size and condition. They were stout, solid and massive. No doubt they seated those who controlled. He felt like a medieval peasant first viewing a mammoth cathedral, recognizing his own insignificance. The scene played out in the center of an oasis of clarity amidst the swirling fog-like backdrop which limited his further view. He harbored no doubt of the importance of what awaited

From his right out of the mist came three tall glowing apparitions with shimmering faces and limbs draped in what seemed to be luminous vestments. The elongated figures glided to the cathedrals, each selecting their own, their essence dimming as if settling in. The middle figure then brightened and Nicholas sensed more than heard sounds in a slow, deep, oscillating tone, similar to a soundtrack played at slightly slower speed.

"Mr. Marsh, you question our decision you relocate from Eden."

Nicholas, startled by the address, quickly responded having concluded that hesitancy reflected weakness. He had to assert confidence though he had little. "With all respect, I do," surprised that he now had the ability to communicate, at least transmit his thoughts, in the same manner as the Official who'd questioned him.

"Prior to one's advent their life is reviewed. Our admission standards are quite specific. Some object to our findings, claiming unusual factors, and request a reassessment."

"I don't recall requesting anything."

"Not in the traditional sense, but your response at the doorways communicated your disagreement."

"I guess it did."

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“Past behavior provides insight to the soul and it is the soul that we judge. We recognize your path was unique, as are most. We're confident in our approach. There are very few incidents where our process caused us to err, but to insure fairness we've granted you the opportunity to point out our mistake.”

Nicholas' confidence rose. *This hearing is a blessing, a good thing.* His earthly skills had been sharpened by a lifetime of affronts, uphill battles, and challenges overcome. He considered himself a survivor, scarred but victorious, a modern Dow Quixote without the mental fantasies. He had overcome the odds time and again and was now provided the opportunity to joust, albeit on what was a higher plane.

“Thank you,” he said respectfully, believing tribute vital in combat with a more elevated foe. “While you have reviewed my history, I ask Your indulgence in allowing me to present my story as completely as possible. May I have the time to do so?”

“Here time is plentiful,” said the middle apparition. “Take what you need.”

And so, Nicholas began.

“You are aware I was an only child. My parents couldn't afford more, and probably decided after me not to have another. I possessed what others found physically unappealing. I grew to five feet four inches tall, nearly as wide, with facial features suggesting amphibian ancestry. I was christened Harry, in honor of a deceased relative. Not a problem except when added to my surname, 'Sleese.' I was Harry Sleese.

“Schoolmates jeered me. I was constantly targeted with slights and insults. My parents tried to console me, feeding me slogans like 'sticks and stones,' and fables about ugly ducklings turning into swans. Nice stories but providing no solace in my daily battles.

“Yet, whenever You close a door, a window opens. I discovered I possessed intelligence, insight, perception — qualities I applied to my defense. Yet, such traits are best applied if detractors look beyond the physical. Few did.”

The Presences remained silent so Nicholas continued.

“I responded to insults with sophisticated retorts. I was the Winston Churchill of the quip, the John F. Kennedy of rhetoric, responding with eloquence and depth far exceeding what issued from my attackers. The problem was my life wasn't a debating competition before impartial Judges, but arguing with my jailers. Who changes positions when there's no need to do so? While I believed my tormentors 'knew not what they were doing,' to borrow a scriptural phrase, there was no recognition that their conduct inflicted hurt. Theirs was collective action without self-assessment, conscience. My role was to provide their amusement. We played by the rules they enforced.”

The Essence on the right brightened. “We know it is common for humans to harm others? We consider the harm caused as a factor in our admittance standards.”

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“Yes, but the evidence of the harm can vary. Physical harm is obvious. You notice bruises. Emotional harm is often hidden, festering below the surface. Thus the victim may respond without showing the cause that generated it. That action is witnessed, and the injured is held responsible while the real perpetrator may not be. I lacked bruises. ”

“Provide us examples you believe important.”

“The Swensons were the wealthiest family in our town. They lived in a mansion atop a hill overlooking the rest of us. Brian, my classmate, was their only child. While not close, during our junior year he invited me to his home. What a golden moment for me. I'd finally been noticed by a member of the top echelon of our community. But when his parents met me I was asked to leave for Brian had ‘other appointments.’ I knew that meant that while I was happy to be seen with him, they were not happy he be seen with me. When I later asked for an explanation all I was told was ‘there are some things I wouldn't understand.’ I was humiliated by that dismissal. We never spoke at length again.

“For my senior prom, I had no date. What girl would be interested in me? Other partner-less classmates attended as a group. My request to join them was denied. I was the only one of my class who didn't attend.

“As a joke my name was nominated for Class President. I finished last in the election but first in the sarcastic remarks of condolences I received.”

The Augur on Nicholas' left glowed. “We find no one free from another's rudeness. Why the special importance here?”

“Those acts provided the motivation in my life.”

“In what way?”

“I stopped waiting for my detractors to change and decided to take control. I envied so much of what they had: the camaraderie, the collectiveness, the friendship, the ability to look down on others. Since I knew my prospects of being voluntarily accepted were slight, I decided to change the tables and make them covet my achievements”

“How?”

“By becoming famous. Success couldn't alter my appearance, but it could change how people looked at me.”

The Judges went silent. Nicholas went on.

“Fame breeds jealousy — envy for what someone else has. One seeks the opportunity to associate with the successful . They would want that, but it would be too late. An opportunity was lost when they selected me to be their victim. What creates the most envy? Not looks, not intelligence, not personality. Wealth . Wealth means power, something we all want. A poor person may die from poverty, but no wealthy person dies from too much money.

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“To do this I needed to find a monument that would signal my status; a symbol proclaiming my achievements. In our community nothing conveyed success like the Swenson mansion. If I could acquire it, it would advertise my success whenever they looked towards that hill. The tables would be turned. They would now envy what I had accomplished, replacing my envy of what they were given. ”

Nicholas paused, allowing his words to settle.

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The changing brightness amongst the Judges divulged they were conferring. Then they assumed that uniform glow and Nicholas continued.

“I sought commercial victories, not diplomas, so additional schooling was not required. I needed a new image. My name became Nicholas Marsh. It radiated professionalism, breeding, and sophistication — perhaps British aristocracy in my ancestry. No one would do business with a Harry Slease.

“Next, a calling. Most openings for someone like me were subordinate placements, offering too low a trajectory and required too much time to succeed. But one industry beckoned — debt collection. With no face-to-face meetings, looks were irrelevant — you were a voice, not a face. If you secured collections, ignored sad stories, you did well, for compensation was based on the revenues recovered. And since turnover was high one could proceed up the ladder quickly.”

“Weren't you planning to profit from the disadvantaged?” asked the Spirit on the right.

“My job was collecting debts, not social work. I didn't create their situation. They were offered the opportunity to solve their problem. I didn't lie to them, offering elaborate remedies doomed to fail. You owe money, you pay it. Work out a schedule and follow it. Others created unworkable schemes appealing to fantasies, not realities. Not me. Besides, creating elaborate arrangements took time, and I wanted to direct my time towards fulfilling my vow.”

Silence.

“I became manager of my section; then my district. My income, while ample, still remained insufficient for my goal. Then, my idea. In the collection business the debtor owes, and the creditor seeks payment, so the debtor controls the unpaid funds. I used that concept differently. Once a customer pays for services or products the merchant has the money the customer seeks be returned. If that process is made difficult the customers must factor in their time and aggravation in pursuing the claim. I developed algorithms determining what the smallest settlement should be. I created scripts for my employees to follow which tried the patience of claimants. No lying, just dragging out the process. My system worked like magic. I created the Merchant Payment Retention industry. My call centers handled the entire process. Then, my best achievement. I moved those centers overseas. Dealing with a representative half-way round the world increased communication problems and added to

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the claimant's frustration. Today many companies use my services. I became a wealthy man.

"Then, the news. The Swensons had suffered reverses. Brian put the mansion up for sale. and accepted my offer. My moment had arrived. Yet, as the day of closing approached I became fearful things might go astray. The evening before closing I had a nightmare, a premonition, about last minute payment problems. .It's silly to presume dreams are harbingers of reality, but at the closing that's what happened. Thus I'm here."

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Nicholas stood quietly as the three Apparitions conferred, their auras brightening and dimming in random sequence like flashing Christmas lights. A quick decision he thought would be favorable, so his concern mounted as the deliberation dragged on, a continuing light show upon which his fate hung. Then he thought of an additional argument. *Why hadn't I thought of this before? My intellect let me down. Was it now too late?*

The glowing eventually normalized. Had Nicholas been breathing he would have held his breath as the verdict awaited.

The middle Spirit spoke.

"Mr. Marsh, the context of your presentation we often hear. Yet, there are differences. No doubt your early life was difficult, fostering your covetousness which led to your commitment to rise above. That suggests strength of character. Your achievements are undeniable. That shows dedication. But in your pursuit you undoubtedly hurt others. Your motivation was revenge, your weapon the creation of envy in your attackers. In doing so many innocents were hurt, and apparently continue to be by your means. Are you a lost soul so blinded that you didn't sense the collateral damage you caused? Or, are you a committed sinner intentionally hurting others to fight your enemies? You present a close case. We normally don't keep them. Is there anything else you wish to offer as to why we should alter our decision?"

Nicholas grasped the proffered opportunity; confident his new argument would provide victory.

"I do. Having just arrived I'm familiar with current attitudes of mankind. Things aren't going well for you. Scientific discoveries, fiction packaged as fact, scandal among your leaders and followers, efforts to change the history of your accomplishments, all cause many to turn away, seek alternatives, treat your existence as legend. Each day more conclude you don't exist. Eternal judgment has become old fashioned.

"I've dealt with problems that overwhelmed others. I've out-thought and out-worked my opponents. Look at my results. If permitted to stay I pledge my soul to Your cause, to work on new ways to present Your message. I don't suggest You can't run Your realm. You are most powerful. But perhaps I could help re-package Your message — remarket it. Your presence comes from ancient texts. Together we could create a more modern epistle, reformulate its

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presentation, update its teachings. We could emphasize the warmer understanding of envy. Instead of it meaning 'evil jealousy' of what others have it can mean 'appreciation' of the benefits You offer. For example, "I envy the peace and tranquility of Eden.' It's warmer, friendlier, more inviting. I've developed projects before. I'm ready to try again."

The lights resumed deliberation. Nicholas had given his all. If past results meant anything he felt he had won the day.

The flashing became uniform, brighter than before.

"You're very persuasive, Mr. Marsh," said the middle Glow. "Confident too. We believe our initial decision remains correct, but you offer a different emphasis to support your argument, one we might have overlooked. Changing the self-will of others is difficult even for us. We aren't so entrenched as to ignore innovation. We've decided to grant your wish. You may stay. If you turn around you may now join your fellows."

"Thank you God," Nicolas mumbled.

The scene behind him slowly formed. At first he saw indistinct images that gradually became brighter — clearer. Then he felt heat and saw flames. FLAMES. The scene before him was engulfed in fire, slow-moving apparitions in its midst.

Nicholas turned to the Judges. "What is this? Why did you send me ... there?"

"We didn't," said the main Spirit. He pointed upward. "You were assigned here by Them. We decided to send you back. There are only two places to go and we thought, despite some unresolved questions, you didn't meet our standards. But your presentation, your offer, your confidence in your talents persuaded us to look at you differently. We can use someone with your abilities."

"But what's here isn't what you described."

"We described nothing."

"You said this was Eden. Eden housed Adam and Eve in Paradise. You mislead me."

"Not true. Eden is a word. Paradise is what you choose to make it. We believe this to be Paradise."

"You tricked me."

"No trick. We reassign at times. And They do as well. Neither of us can exist without the other, so we cooperate, deal in good faith. Souls are our business. Selection is our job. We thought you'd fit better up there. You don't need to be a saint, although They may think so. We concluded your actions, although at times harsh, were compelled by others. We aren't devils. We're opportunists. Like you. We seek the committed sinner, the ones who habitually demonstrate they belong here.. Except for the most heinous we aren't interested in those

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who seek justice for their worldly treatment, even if their course isn't as moral as Those above would like. But you convinced us to make an exception."

"But, but, but... I thought I was being relocated ... to you."

"You thought wrong. But don't despair. You'll receive a prominent position, superior to most arrivals. Some won't be strangers. Many of your classmates, if not here now, will be joining you and located on levels far beneath you. Your elevated assignment will signal your success. You'll be envied. Your lifelong quest will be complete."

"I made a mistake."

"Not your first. If you now believe requesting this hearing was a mistake then it's the third recent one you've made. Your second mistake was to confuse where you were headed."

"What was my first mistake?"

A scene formed in front of Nicholas. His earthly body lay lifeless on the ground. The title company officer was talking with a policeman.

"I told him there was a problem with his check. He collapsed."

"What was the problem?"

"The check was for too much money. I needed to know what to do with the excess."

"Your intellect failed you Mr. Marsh. You died because of too much money. Creating envy sometimes engulfs its creator. Now you're here."

Nicholas changed tactics, again seeking an escape. Once more his fate hung in the balance. He softly responded with as much contriteness as he could manage. "Since I'm here due to my mistakes, for how long must I remain?"

"There are no exceptions to one's stay here. It is as it has always been. For eternity."

I. M. Merckel is a retired attorney, living in San Antonio, Texas. He has three sons, two of whom are published authors. During his career he wrote legal documents and briefs. He is now writing short story fiction and memoir pieces of which eight have been published. His work, the Locked Door, was short-listed in the 2021 Hammond House Survival International competition. His pen name is in honor of his father whose nickname for him was Merckel.

ACCEPTANCE REJECTED

Carl "Papa" Palmer
Virginia, United States

<https://www.facebook.com/carlpapa.palmer.1>

his letter saying he is happy
to inform me my poem is
accepted for publication in
his anthology was like getting
three sevens on the slot machine

not my first time ever in a poetry
magazine but still I get that thrill
each and every time want to shout
tell the world my glory anxious to
read you my acceptance letter

excited to share my good news
only to incur your insincere kudos
no hug no smile no joy in your eyes
happiness on your face in your voice
as you promptly change the subject

is not getting put in a poetry journal
the ultimate goal God's golden grail
why we writers of verse will always
adore saying *yes I have* when asked
has your work appeared in books?

I will continue to write to submit get
accepted get published but what I will
not do is share my successes with you.

ARCHIBALD'S TAIL

Michael Ball
United States

<https://michaelball.com/opera/MBpoe.htm>

<https://www.facebook.com/harrumph>

Archie's burlap lunch bag was
country art, with the full
squirrel tail hanging out.

Rural kids all rode yellow buses.
Every single child was bored
waiting for morning pickup.
Archie resolved his tedium
...with his sling shot. He laid in wait,
sometimes returning with stuff for stew.

Slingshot and steel-ball ammo
would rest hidden in the bushes
beside the school-bus shelter
until he and his books returned.

Most days, Archie secreted his ammo
and sling shot in his locker, but not
one particular day. That magnificent
tail must have inspired the change.

He did not often get a prime rodent or
even find a clear shot at one. Killing
squirrels takes a head shot. Wounded
ones are messy and won't just die.

That squirrel was stupid, joining him
waiting for the bus. A single ¼-inch
steel ball slew the brown critter.
Most of it went bloody-head first
into the bag...all but the grand tail.

Archie had to let us all see the tail.
Girls went ew. Boys had cold envy.
Our teacher, Mrs. Pettit, confiscated it.
This was not her first squirrel moment.

EMERALD GLASSES

Ellen Urowitz

Toronto, Canada

emerald glasses
walking down the red carpet
generic at home

OUR THINGS

Gary Shulman, MS. Ed.

Virginia, United States

<https://www.poetryislifepublishing.com/reflectionfromasoul>

Looking around at my various treasures
My home so replete and so full
Of objects of glorious measures
My brain starts to ponder and mull
When eons have enveloped my days on earth
And soon from this life I'll depart
Will these things in my life bring joy and mirth
Or just break a loved one's heart?
For those we love and hold so dear
Loved us, not our charms nor our jewels
They loved our laughter, our quirks our quips and hugs
And perhaps when we acted like fools
But assuming they'd want what we worshipped and loved
Displayed proudly on walls or on shelves
May very well be a burden to them
And only treasures to ourselves
It's always a gift to leave a piece of yourself
When the corporal body departs
Things that were precious and special to you
May not be what they need in their hearts
Give freely while alive of your treasures galore
To those who love them too
Donate to help those more vulnerable
To charities earnest and true
For the greatest gift you can leave behind
Is neither tangible nor gilded in gold
But the memories of love you engendered
In the minds of the young and the old



Karma 101

BY MARK CROCE

KARMA 101 – MARK CROCE – OHIO, UNITED STATES

Finally leaving his parents' suburban Philadelphia house at age thirty-four, Jerry wasn't about to choose just any apartment. He wanted his new home—his “bachelor pad”—to be special. Many he viewed seemed fine at first, with their high ceilings, white walls, and waxy hardwood floors that moaned softly beneath him, but the longer he lingered in these, the more he sensed that something was missing. What that something was, he couldn't quite define. He would know it when he found it.

About to toss apartment 101 atop the rejection pile and head to a bar for a burger and beer to console himself, he noticed the man from the agency, Ivan, sneaking glances out the window.

Jerry saw only the back yard of the gray house next door, a fenced-in plot of grass devoid of landscaping or outdoor furniture. He was turning away, disappointed that yet another decent but bland apartment had failed to distinguish itself, when he noticed the large, red beach towel draped over the neighbors' fence. So that was it, eh? Ivan—an Eastern European immigrant in his fifties who twisted the wedding ring on his right hand—was looking for sunbathers next door, most likely students at nearby University of Pennsylvania.

Jerry would have confessed to some difficulty with the ladies at that point in his life, and the promise of young, attractive, single neighbors was just the type of sign he couldn't resist. He turned to Ivan, who now had beads of sweat on his forehead.

“So...girls next door?” Jerry asked, moving his hands in the traditional hourglass gesture.

“Oh, many, many girls, yes,” Ivan said, smiling broadly now, as if relieved to have his indiscretion out in the open.

“Great,” Jerry said. “I'll take it.”

Jerry rose to birdsong on the first Saturday in his new home, and after some stretching and light weightlifting enjoyed a brisk jog along the Schuylkill River. Crew teams rowed beside him, slicing politely into a gentle current as the rising sun fanned a golden greeting across the water's sleepy surface. He ran more than he ever had, nodding at other joggers, smiling and waving at the dog walkers and the elderly shuffling around with their canes. The city was alive with him, breathing, heart pulsing.

Back at the apartment, he opted for a tepid shower to keep his energy high. Then he toasted a sesame bagel, ground some Costa Rican coffee beans, and played Miles Davis on low volume. He watered his new Ficus and ferns while the coffee brewed in his French press, walking around barefoot in a towel amid the glorious absence of his mother's complaints.

While tending to a fern near the window, he thought of the neighbors and angled the mini blinds just enough to see out without being noticed. He wouldn't want to give them the wrong impression; he was only curious, not a pervert or voyeur. He fully intended to meet these young ladies: greeting them as he returned from work, helping them carry out their trash, talking about the weather. Eventually he'd be invited to socialize with them—to

“party.” It felt good to use party as a verb, the way kids had when he'd been in school, and he was repeating it like a mantra when the neighbors' door, as if in response to his chant, creaked open.

When no one readily filled the empty doorway, his mind began filling it for him. He saw the girls of his college days: wealthy suburban beauties who had straddled the fence between confidence and arrogance like gymnasts on a balance beam and who had always remained thin, firm, and completely inaccessible to him. Things would be different now. Older, wiser, and bursting with the cash he'd saved while living with his parents, he would surely impress them. He'd offer rides in his Mustang convertible, pay their entrance to the best dance clubs, buy them alcohol. They would be competing for his attention now, perhaps offering more and more for the chance to be the one chosen as his girlfriend.

He was staring into the doorway's black opening, his hand unconsciously stroking the bulge in his damp towel, when she emerged. She reminded him of his androgynous junior high gym teacher—plus an extra fifty pounds—and that brought him right out of his trance. Next, a row of mentally challenged people (or whatever they were currently calling them) wobbled through the doorway in a single file line, each carrying one item—rake, broom, shovel, trash bag, etc.

Jerry cringed and slapped the blinds shut. It wasn't that he had anything against such people. Hell, he'd even known some people with Down syndrome over the years. They had been mostly functional, though, living with their families and requiring no more special attention than a ten-year-old or a rather senile grandfather. These people seemed worse, and seeing them all crammed into such a tiny yard reminded him of chickens. He enjoyed a batch of hot wings as much as the next guy, but the sight of hyper fowl clucking around a congested, shit-stained coop would do nothing for his appetite.

What sounded like a rooster's call caused him to reopen the blinds. Unintelligible stammering was followed by groaning and punctuated with a shriek—and all that was just the caregiver. He turned up the stereo but it was no use. Could he deal with this? He imagined coming home from work and trying to unwind to the clamor. And what about entertaining guests? Romancing the ladies with soft music, candlelight...and screaming? No way.

He hesitated while dialing the agency, considering that he was being shallow. He conceded that point, but when he thought of his one-year lease, it seemed an overly extreme sentence. He did a quick inventory out the window and noticed that indeed, as Ivan had claimed, there were many, many girls.

“Sneaky son of a bitch,” he said, and closed the blinds for the last time. He would leave them hanging there when he moved out a week later.

Because Jerry had signed a one-year lease, his security deposit—one extra month's rent—would only be refunded if he found someone else to rent the apartment by the end of the month. Jerry knew just the person. Randall Tomlinson, the new guy at the bank, a young kid who'd transferred from New Orleans to fill the Vice President position for which Jerry had lobbied. Passed over again, he was still steaming when Tomlinson started to make his

presence felt, initiating policy changes that altered the way Jerry had been doing his job just fine for years. It was pure crap, and Jerry couldn't see why the senior staff bought it.

"The world's changing, ladies and gentlemen, and we need to change with it," was how Tomlinson had opened his first staff meeting, enticing the women with his political correctness, openness to new suggestions, and garish pink shirt. Jerry had worked there for eight years, and now some kid was micromanaging him? Asking for expenditure records and progress reports and checking his watch when Jerry returned from lunch?

Tomlinson was staying with a former fraternity brother while looking for an apartment, something nearby that would allow him to take his time looking for just the right house. He had mentioned University City, where of course Jerry recommended apartment 101. He didn't know Jerry had briefly moved in, so Jerry simply told him that it was a great unit, but "a little more than I can handle," which in a way was true. This worked two ways, by stroking Tomlinson's ego and getting Jerry in his good graces. He had to give himself credit, he thought one night while drinking beers alone in the bar next to the bank, he'd really turned a negative situation into something memorable. He was Vice Presidential material, no doubt about it.

On the Monday morning after he'd moved into apartment 101, Tomlinson called Jerry into his office. Assuming he'd made the disturbing discovery over the weekend, Jerry took a deep breath before entering the office and squeezed a bottle cap in his hand to avoid smiling.

"It's perfect, Jerry, just what I was looking for. And it only took me ten minutes to get to work today. Brilliant. So how is your own search going?"

Not brilliant, Jerry thought. Why did he use that word so much? Did he spend a semester in England or something?

"Still looking, but I'm not in a hurry."

"Really? I would be if I were staying with newlyweds. Sounds rough."

Jerry squeezed the bottle cap, but not to avoid smiling. Who the hell had told Tomlinson about that? He mumbled some vague assent and slunk back to his desk, where he struggled to focus on his work.

Unwilling to return to his parents, he'd placed his furniture into storage and begun crashing at his friend Dave's, where his evenings were filled with the sounds of barely restrained passion in the next room.

Tomlinson's impending surprise was his sole comfort. It was only a matter of time before he found out the apartment wasn't so "brilliant," and Jerry's only regret was that he wouldn't be there to witness the discovery in person.

His anticipation swelled all week, and on Friday morning Tomlinson invited him to his

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apartment for a thank you dinner. Jerry accepted, and as soon as he was out of sight began pumping his fist in the air. He might actually witness the unveiling in person! Brilliant!

Jerry arrived slightly early with a bottle of wine and a fern as a housewarming gift.

“Hi, you must be Jerry,” said the woman who opened the door.

“Uh, yes.”

“Come in,” she said, stepping aside. “I’m Lorraine. Skip is busy in the kitchen.”

Skip? Was that an old family nickname?

“Lovely fern,” she said.

“Oh, yeah...just a little housewarming gift.”

“How nice. Here, let me take that. You sit and make yourself comfortable and I’ll let him know you’re here.”

“Thank you,” Jerry said, watching her set the plant on a table near the window. “So, are you his sister or something?”

She let out a short laugh, then composed herself.

“Heavens, no,” she said, and left the room.

Jerry stood before the sofa and continued staring at the air she had filled. Her face, her voice, southern accent, laugh, body, body language, name, presence...it was all wonderful. She was wonderful. She was both innocent and provocative at the same time, like a virgin belle crafted by Tennessee Williams. The day just kept getting better.

Who was she, though? And what did that “heavens, no” mean? Was she relieved that she and “Skip” weren’t siblings, because she didn’t like him? Or was she implying that they were sleeping together? Jerry settled on the first theory, which would allow him to pursue her for himself. Then again, he could pursue her anyway. To hell with Skip. (He couldn’t wait to unleash that name at the bank.)

It was very quiet as he approached the kitchen with the wine, and he soon learned why. He watched from the hallway as Tomlinson and Lorraine kissed. And kissed. And kissed. Good Lord, had they forgotten he was waiting in the next room?

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, summoning the neighbors to begin their show and drain the color from Tomlinson’s overworked lips. That quelled his anger and he began to relax, so much so that the bottle slipped from his limp hand and shattered on the metal moulding strip, sending wine flowing across the kitchen.

“Jerry!” Tomlinson called, stepping deftly around the clear puddle with outstretched arms. He hugged Jerry, kissed him on the cheek, and slapped his back before bringing his arm to rest over Jerry’s shoulders.

“Damn, I’m sorry about that,” Jerry said, thinking that all the kissing had gone to Tomlinson’s head.

“Shocking sight, eh?” Tomlinson said. “I know. I’m surprised, too, and I owe it all to you.”

Then he grabbed two towels and tossed one at Jerry.

“Good thing you brought white instead of red,” he said.

Jerry kept apologizing about the spill, though he was equally embarrassed about watching them.

“Wow, twice in one week, Skip,” Lorraine said. “What’s with you and wine?”

“You broke another bottle?” Jerry asked.

“Not me,” he said. “My neighbor. That’s how we met.”

Jerry turned to Lorraine. “You?” he said, and despite having just seen her tongue in his boss’ mouth, he thrilled at the thought of having something in common with her; a means of bonding.

“No, it wasn’t me either,” she said. “It was Roger.”

“Roger?” Jerry said, confused.

“One of the folks next door,” Tomlinson explained. “I came home from the grocery store my first night here—had to stock up a little, you know—and he walked over to help me carry my bags in, and boom! Wine all over the driveway.”

“Your kid?” Jerry asked Lorraine. “You live in those new condos next door?”

“No. Actually, I run a group home for the developmentally disabled. It’s the grey house on the other side.”

“Yeah, she’s got about twenty residents over there,” Tomlinson joined in. “She has the patience of a saint, which should help her deal with me.”

With that he stood briefly and kissed Lorraine on the cheek. Jerry kept his head down and continued picking up pieces of glass, careful not to cut his fingers and further embarrass himself.

During dinner, Tomlinson and Lorraine explained their whirlwind week.

“She was so apologetic about the wine, and kept offering to make it up to me. I told her it was no big deal, but if it would make her feel better, I had missed lunch and wouldn’t say no to dinner.”

“I felt just awful,” she said. We try not to let the residents wander off, but it’s so crowded in there.”

“Not for long,” Tomlinson added, winking at Jerry.

“Oh?” Jerry said. “Why is that?”

Lorraine looked to Tomlinson, who said, “Go ahead, dear.” Dear? thought Jerry. Isn’t it a little soon for that?

“Well,” she began, pushing some risotto around her plate, “we got to talking, and before I knew it the home had a loan for a new facility.”

“Really? That’s great,” Jerry said, though he detected foul play. Clearly, Tomlinson had made promises he couldn’t keep in order to seduce this lovely, innocent woman. Jerry felt bad for her, and he was determined to open her eyes. Plan A hadn’t worked, but there was still an opportunity to ruin Tomlinson’s evening. And maybe, he thought, just maybe, he could still get the girl. “So,” he said, turning to his boss, “you pre-approved a loan over dinner?”

Tomlinson stopped grinning. Jerry could see he’d struck a blow.

“No, of course not,” Tomlinson said, waving away Jerry’s comment with a gentle backhand. “Lorraine came to the bank on Monday—you were still out to lunch, I believe—and we ran some numbers and filled out the paperwork. They can afford it with current interest rates so low, and guess what? Remember how the bank took that hit in the press last year after foreclosing on that women’s shelter?”

Of course Jerry remembered. In an attempt to make an impression on the higher-ups, he’d made himself available to the press for comment and had been quoted—clearly out of context—in a way that sounded so insensitive that the woman he’d been dating for two months dumped him. And over the phone at that.

“Anyway,” Tomlinson continued, “in exchange for a reduced fixed rate and the waving of additional loan fees, the new center will include the bank’s name in the signage. A real public relations coup. Brilliant, eh?”

Jerry nodded, drank some wine. It was white flag time.

“You two really seem to be hitting it off,” he offered, trying to suppress his bitterness.

They looked at each other, grinning, and eventually broke into laughter.

“What?” Jerry said. “What’s so funny?”

KARMA 101 – MARK CROCE – OHIO, UNITED STATES

“Go ahead and show him,” Tomlinson told her. “He’s hopeless.”

Lorraine extended her left arm, revealing a sparkling new diamond on her finger.

“Oh my God,” Jerry said. “But you just met.”

“I know,” Tomlinson said. “It’s amazing. But we talked so much, and we’re totally on the same page.”

“But you’re in finance, and she’s in social services,” Jerry pointed out.

“Hey, I do what I’m naturally good at. I can’t help it if I was born with a head for numbers and business. It doesn’t mean I don’t care about helping people.”

Jerry turned to Lorraine next.

“Don’t you think you’re moving a little fast?” he asked her.

“Oh, don’t worry, we aren’t setting a date yet. We’ll give ourselves plenty of time to get to know each other better, but we figured why not start out committed?”

Tomlinson refilled their wine glasses and leaned toward Jerry.

“You’re acting awfully parental,” he said. “What gives?”

“You’re right,” Jerry said, pulling his mouth into a smile and raising his glass for a toast. “Congratulations. Here’s to being committed.”

Jerry learned that Tomlinson’s brother had Down syndrome, Lorraine had grown up near Baton Rouge, and that while they were going over paperwork at the bank Lorraine had diagnosed Tomlinson’s dyslexia, something nobody else had identified in his twenty-five years. Their plan was to marry and live in the home next door after the new facility was constructed a few blocks away.

Jerry drank so much that he could barely walk to the bathroom, and Tomlinson suggested he spend the night. He almost agreed, too, until he witnessed Tomlinson and Lorraine discover that their mothers were both members of M.A.D.D., or Mothers Against Drunk Driving. He vomited and called a cab.

He spilled into bed as Dave’s guest room spun around him, cursing his boss, his job, himself, and fate in general. The thought of returning to work on Monday made his nausea resurface. He considered—since he was crashing at Dave’s and not paying full rent—that he should just quit and focus on a job search. He was congratulating himself about this idea when he heard a knocking at the door.

He dragged himself up and crossed the room, only to realize that it was Dave's headboard tapping shamelessly against the wall behind him. He crawled back onto the mattress and pulled the pillow over his head. In the muffled darkness, a forgotten piece of the hazy night came back to him: in his drunken stupor, he'd agreed to be best man at Tomlinson's wedding.

"This wouldn't have happened without you, after all," Tomlinson had said.

"Brilliant," Jerry mumbled, pulling the pillow tighter against his head until he passed out.

THE GRAPES OF ENVY

Ken Gosse

<https://pureslush.com/store/anthologies-themed/envy-7-deadly-sins-vol-6/>

Sour grapes, an ancient story,
covers every category.
Seven-seas of allegory—
rivered roads of life's empery
leading down to Hell.

Resentment shows it's many faces,
envy for the noble graces
others show in daily paces.
Your life shows its many traces
where from grace you fell.

Lust for sex and its advances
when you notice someone dances
outside of your own romances.
Envy dictates this enhances
stories that you'll tell.

Gluttonous, in famished mood
you yearn for more than your own food.
What others by hard work accrued,
in envy, you feel you're imbued
to steal what they sell.

Greed calls, "Gather all the gold!"
though it's not yours to have and hold,
to store for life until you're old—
but envy lasts till you're too cold
to drink it from your well.

Slothful, you want naught but rest
when work would put you to the test.
Though others, feathering their nest
to make their life and home the best,
in envy, you excel.

Wrath confirms that you are owed
the fruits which many others sowed
while travelling their hard-paved road.
But envy is both potent goad
and landlord where you dwell.

In pride, you claim you're great and tough,
with fortune, fame, and needful stuff.
No matter how you huff and puff
you don't hear praise—you hear rebuff.
The meek you would expel.

It's not a leisure, this desire,
but seizure of an inner fire.
Hell's furnace burns but can't inspire,
for envy cultivates your ire
until your final knell.

"The Grapes of Envy" was first published in print by Pure Slush in 7 Deadly Sins, Envy Vol. 6, on February 28, 2019.

SHE HAS ONLY A MONTH

**Petrouchka Alexieva
United States**

Kaleidoscope of feelings
Were changing the hues of her face.
She was sipping slowly black tea
On the luxurious terrace.

The taste was bitter,
Killing the smile on her lips.
She felt the wild envy twister
Inside of her soul.

She knew the rules of right and wrong.
She was over achiever, standing strong
On every pick she concurred,
Getting everything she wants.

Everyone was jealous of seeing
Her hands covered with diamonds,
Her perfect body was blinking in gold
Girls were envy of her perfect body.

When she walked to her glamorous car
Or dancing in the midnight bar.
Karma turned the table while counting
Her days. Now, she has only a month.

GLOW

Rachel Loughlin

Virginia, United States

<http://rachelloughlin.com/>

You are waking up
Into the gaze
You feel it already I know
That the boys shift and pause
When you walk into their circle
And the sun hits your hair
In the evening light and
Your eyes flash from magic within
Carrying a power
You don't even have a name for
Not yet
Still learning to spell and subtract
Unaware that you expand and I watch
From my safe space
Invisible as I am and have been
For some time

I was a dark girl while you are golden
The sand poured from the bottle
Before I knew why it was there
Scattered, blown
Gathered up it seems in you

I tell you: you do not owe
Your time and attention to anyone

I do not tell you the truth:

that I wish I could know what it is to
stand in that glow when you haven't
already been burned I wish I could know
what it was to kiss the boy on the
playground slide whisper secret crushes

I am strong.
I am capable wise powerful
in all the ways I had to be
To survive
But I never once glowed
Sun hitting my hair
in a fading light

I wish I could know



Granddaughter

BY DON NOEL

GRANDDAUGHTER – DON NOEL – CONNECTICUT, UNITED STATES

Harry Wilson had the attention of most women at Harmony Acres within days of his arrival. He admitted to 74 years, but his unruly thatch was more black than gray. He was tall, his squared shoulders and ramrod back defying the arthritis that afflicted most others, with an athlete's chest that showed no hint of descent to paunch.

Women outnumber men, in most American retirement communities, by two to one. Setting aside couples, widows outnumber widowers by an even wider margin. For most, of either gender, any romantic notions more demanding than mild flirtation are like visits to Antarctica, Machu Picchu or Easter Island: memories cherished and burnished, but too demanding to be repeated.

Nonetheless, some stimuli prompt imagination. A man who comes to the dining room looking for company, ready to take his chances and make a fourth at any table of three, is rare. Harry's presence was stimulating.

His welcome from most of the men was, understandably, more routine – until the day he was visited by a young blonde bombshell whom he claimed as his granddaughter. At that point, he had everyone's attention.

- The community's men had coffee and conversation on Saturday mornings. Bald pates sprinkled among grey combers, they met in a large parlor with comfortable chairs, the air infused with a hazelnut brew, a gathering known as Men's Joe.

Serious conversations were always preceded by a few remembered-testosterone jokes of varied sophistication. Any ensuing discussion of current events was guarded. Most who could afford retiring here had been leaders of their professions and were correspondingly confident in their convictions, yet reluctant to risk alienating brethren who might hold other views. Harry proved well-read, up on current events, books, films, and theater – but tactful and discreet, overcoming envy by careful understatement, and by drawing other men out.

He also plumbed the depths of the fitness programs. Harmony Acres made good health a fetish; its offerings in the "fitness center" (never called "the gym") ran from gentle chair yoga and *tai chi* to a roomful of daunting machines. Harry tried all the offerings, then joined a dozen men who had stationary bikes, treadmills and ellipticals to themselves every morning at six.

Newcomers, in this congenial community, were routinely welcomed at dinnertime. Because monthly fees included a minimum number of meals, "Won't you join me?" was a no-cost form of hospitality. Harry soon had a two-week backlog of invitations.

"Didn't I see you at dinner with that new Wilson man?" Alice Hutchings asked Dahlia Roberts in the perfumed beauty salon one morning.

"Harry? Yes, I made a threesome with Regina. An interesting man. I thought I saw you with him the day before."

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"You're right. Linda invited him to join us. An old-fashioned chivalrous type: Held chairs to seat both of us." Alice did not mention the way he gently cupped her elbow in the palm of his hand as he guided her to the chair. There had been a time when the brush of a young man's hand whispered hints of intimacy. The years had all but erased such yearnings, but the gesture had offered a fleeting illusion of youth revived.

Dahlia punctured the illusion. "He held our chairs, too."

She didn't mention a hand at her elbow, though, prompting Alice to think she had been perhaps favored. "It's as though he were systematically sizing us all up," she observed hopefully.

"And always urges his hostess to invite others. 'Fill up the table,' he says, 'so I can get to know everyone.' Maybe," she added, "just avoiding commitment?"

Dahlia, who in fact also remembered a hand at her elbow, studied her freshly lacquered nails. "Widowed two and a half years ago, he said."

"A handsome man." Alice gazed into the mirror. Despite the culinary temptations presented by Harmony Acres' acclaimed chefs, she had managed to avoid flab. Nonetheless, she had to admit that her dimples – once considered charming – had been swallowed by the wrinkles of age. "And can apparently afford to travel still," she added.

"So I gathered," Dahlia agreed. "First class, too."

"And makes a point of speaking a bit of the local language. I invited him to join our French afternoons. He might be interested."

Loneliness contributes to both physical and mental ill health among the elderly, a phenomenon understood by geriatricians. Harmony Acres was busier than a Girl Scout troop, a beehive both organized and spontaneous. Two groups gathered in each other's living rooms weekly for wine and cheese and conversation, one in French, one in German. Harry Wilson was invited to both, confessed to passable fluency, and said he might drop in someday soon.

As the gossip sized up the new man, it also prompted introspection. Whatever their flirtations, seductions or yielding might once have been, most of the women dressed well and groomed carefully in hopes of nothing more exhilarating than companionship. An even remote prospect of anything more complicated was unexpected – but hardly unwelcome – titillation.

Business went up at the salon. Many of the singles, and even some of the wives, had their hair done on the mornings they were to dine with Harry. "We finally had dinner with him last night," Phyllis Quimby told Alice. "I told Chuck we should invite him soon, or we wouldn't get acquainted until he'd gotten to know every widow and divorcée in the place."

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He was a listener who deftly led others to talk about themselves. "I never felt grilled," Alice said, "but by the end of dinner he could have written my biography, if he'd taken notes."

Mrs. Quimby's Chuck (Charles on the stylized nametag most residents wore) spoke to Harry as they mounted their machines one morning: "I can't recall any new arrival here who went about meeting people as methodically as you. Do you remember all the names, too?"

"Oh, sure, Chuck. I spent most of my life in sales, y'know; took a mnemonics course."

"Very impressive. You should run for office!"

"No way, brother. I'm a homebody now."

False modesty, Quimby said to his wife. "Homebody hardly describes a man everyone wants to know better."

•

Then one midweek evening in June, Harry appeared in the dining room with the prettiest young woman anyone could remember seeing at Harmony Acres. They chose a table for two.

She was surely still in her twenties. Her shoulder-length blonde hair framed a cherubic face with blue eyes and cupid's-bow lips whose muted red seemed un-lipsticked — perhaps, some men imagined, nibbled to that color. She was, as the women phrased it, "well-endowed". "Stacked" was the word heard at Men's Joe.

She engaged Harry in dinner conversation that was animated but soft enough that even people at adjoining tables couldn't catch the drift. Harry smiled at a few neighbors as they left the dining room, but didn't offer to introduce her. The two were last seen headed down the long, quietly carpeted hallways toward his apartment.

Although retirement communities are much like small towns, they differ in that no one goes to work; there is ample leisure for conversation. No fewer than three women next morning phoned Millie Stevens, in the apartment next to Harry's, to ask if she had noticed the visitor.

"Notice? You could hardly miss her," Millie told all callers. "She arrived in a flame-red little sports car, one of those sexy European models with a kind of growly sound. Harry must have been expecting her, because he was out in a flash showing her where to park and helping put the top up in case of rain."

"How long did she stay after dinner?"

"Oh, I have no idea. I'm abed by 9. They may have watched television for a while; I noticed the flickering light."

"Any idea who she was?"

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"I'd love to know, wouldn't you?"

That almost universal wish was satisfied at week's end: Quimby braced Harry at Men's Joe. "That was a good-looking visitor you had early this week."

"Isn't she a looker, Chuck? My granddaughter."

"She's the one with the red Miata?" Peter Miller, a psychiatrist, had spent most of his adult lifetime admiring small fast cars. "That's a man's car," he added, having also spent his career fathoming the fantasies of a mostly-male clientele. "In our day a young woman wouldn't have piloted a hot little number like that."

"Probably not," Harry allowed. "But she's not a schoolmarm, y'know. She's a trial lawyer down in Manhattan. I gather she's likely to make partner with Carlisle and Gossett."

"One of the city's best," said Herb Warner, who'd lawyered with a competitor. "And I'll bet she gets a jury's attention better than I ever could."

Everyone within earshot murmured agreement.

"A jury's attention, and ours," said Quimby with a grin. "You're a lucky man, Harry. Not all of us get such rapt concentration from our grandkids."

"Easy to explain, Chuck. She's trying to learn Japanese, and I'm coaching her."

"I didn't know you spoke Japanese." A dozen men were by now paying close attention. "I don't think any of us did."

"My late wife Emiko was Japanese. We met over there, when I was a GI."

"You learned the language to woo her?"

"Exactly. *Yorokunde, dekimashita*. Luckily, I did fairly well. *Honto ni jozu zha nai, keredomo warukunai, ne?* To be honest, not exactly fluent, but not too shabby, either."

"I'm impressed. But your ... uh ... granddaughter doesn't look at all Japanese."

"No, you'd never guess, would you?"

In this small town, no Internet was needed for Harry's explanation to go viral. More of his DNA than his wife's got to their daughter, he explained, so she too was a blonde. When she grew up to marry a Swede, Scandinavian genes overwhelmed the Far East's. The girl was named Emily, a variant on her grandmother's Emiko, but never learned the language.

Now she was planning a trip to look up that side of her heritage. Intending to fly in a month or two, she had come to visit her grandfather and get tips about Japan in general, and about finding her grandmother's roots.

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An elaborate story with a fairy-tale feel, it raced around Harmony Acres with a velocity that might rival her Miata's, probably with embellishments. Not everyone found the account plausible, though, even if Harry did speak what sounded like Japanese.

•

A few days later, when the Miata again appeared in Harry's parking area in late afternoon, there was an early rush to the dining room foyer. Pierre, the headwaiter, offered tables, but most people found reason to wait a few minutes. There was perceptible jostling for positions where Harry might have to introduce them as he brought the young lady to dinner.

"Glad to meet you," said Dahlia Roberts, one of the doubters, when they at last arrived. "I understand you're learning Japanese from your ... uh ... grandfather."

"*Hai, so desu. Hajimete wa, amari jozu dewa nai, keredomo ...*" A huge smile. "I'm really a beginner still."

A few others managed to be introduced, and to find the linguistic waters equally impenetrable, before Harry had Pierre escort them to a table for two.

"It could be Hottentot, for all I know," Dahlia said to the Quimbys when they found themselves at table together. "Do you buy the granddaughter story?"

"Well ... " began Phyllis.

"Oh, c'mon," said Chuck. "Are you supposing a man his age has a twenty-something girlfriend?"

"Probably the fond wish of every man in the place," Dahlia said with what she hoped was a sly smile. "Present company excepted, of course."

The speculation was hardly silenced when three neighbors heard the red roadster leave just after dawn the next morning. Word of that went viral, too.

"Really!" Dahlia said to Phyllis when they were together at the salon later that day. "Your sweet husband pooh-poohed my skepticism, but you have to wonder."

"There's *probably* an explanation." Phyllis leaned on the adverb, more inclined to Dahlia's agnosticism than her husband's professed confidence in the granddaughter story. "I'll get Chuck to ask."

That proved unnecessary: Harry took the initiative at the morrow's Men's Joe. "I gather that my granddaughter's dawn departure woke some people up the other morning." He was sorry to have bothered the neighbors, he said – seeming blithely to assume that the throaty muffler was the only stimulus to community chat.

His granddaughter had stayed over, he explained, because she had an early morning flight

GRANDDAUGHTER – DON NOEL – CONNECTICUT, UNITED STATES

to Washington, to explore a government job so hush-hush she couldn't tell even her grandfather. Harmony Acres was fifteen minutes from the airport, and her condo was more than an hour in the opposite direction, so she spent the night on his sofa.

"I'm a sound sleeper myself," he told Chuck. "Didn't even hear her get up and tiptoe around. First that I knew she was on her way was the same thing that woke the neighbors. That little car is on the noisy side, y'know? A smoky voice that millennials are fond of. I'll have to teach her not to gun it around here."

Management had heard about his granddaughter's overnight stay, he confessed. "I guess that's against the rules."

True enough, his colleagues in the Saturday fraternity said. Although Harmony Acres allowed live-in nurses or aides to care for those with post-operative needs or those near the end of life, such arrangements were permissible only in larger units with two bedrooms and baths – and had to be made in advance.

"Not likely to happen often," Harry said. "But I wonder if I should have opted for one of the cottages with a spare bedroom and more privacy. Maybe I should explore moving."

That chat among the men fairly rocketed through the community. Harmony Acres had a dozen free-standing residences, split-levels with enclosed two-car garages where a snappy red convertible might be all but unnoticed, especially if retrofitted with a quieter muffler.

Living in those units meant walking through the weather to come to meals and events in the main building. Several long-term residents, grown older and frailer, had recently moved into apartments in the main complex. It didn't take long for someone to look around and share the word that there were two cottages vacant.

"If he expects his 'granddaughter' to stay over often," Dahlia Roberts told her friends, using both hands to make the air-quotes unmistakable, "I'll bet he opts for privacy."

So it was with some disappointment that she and many watchful others could discern no hint that Harry was exploring a move. Regina Travis managed to cudgel from a friend in marketing that both cottages would soon be leased to newcomers, and that no current resident had inquired.

Meanwhile, the "granddaughter" came back from the nation's capital, no one the wiser about the outcome, and her visits to Harry continued. Over the next several weeks, he made a point of inviting the Quimbys and several other couples to join him at dinners with his Emily.

Her dinner companions regularly compared notes and shared their observations with anyone who asked, which meant almost everyone. She had entertained them with snippets of what must have been Japanese; made careful-lawyer remarks about her life at court; and declined anything but vague talk of Washington appointments. She seemed stubbornly to avoid being drawn into remembrances of growing up in the extended Wilson family – if indeed she had.

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“Wouldn't you think,” Dahlia Roberts grumbled to friends, “that she'd jump at the chance to talk about the family? She's supposed to be going to Japan to meet relatives, but did anyone hear her mention the grandmother Harry claims she was named for?”

Although such skepticism was hardly unique, the small-town gossip diminished over the next month, even as the blonde beauty's visits became if anything more frequent.

•

Then a court reporter for the *Daily Trib* stumbled into two bits of news about her: The attorney general of the United States mentioned her when asked about a U.S. district attorney vacancy; and she asked a judge to delay a trial to accommodate her forthcoming travel.

There it was on page one: “Prominent Upward-Bound Young Lawyer Seeks Roots in Japan.” The accompanying feature story – easily the best-read newspaper story in Harmony Acres that month – ended the speculation.

“Atty. Emily Anderson has been studying Japanese with her grandfather Harry Wilson, a Harmony Acres resident, in preparation for a trip to find her grandmother's family in Kyoto, Japan.”

The article was accompanied by a full-color photo of Harry and his granddaughter in his apartment poring over a page of Japanese hieroglyphs, taken by a *Trib* photographer who had somehow managed to come and go without anyone's noticing.

The women of Harmony Acres – especially the single women, including even skeptics like Dahlia Roberts – were delighted. The beauty shop was suddenly overbooked. Some who had declined to join the foreign-language soirées decided it might be worth a try after all. A few widows audibly considered working out at the fitness center at the crack of dawn – to challenge, they said, any assumption that exercise machines wouldn't appeal to the fairer sex.

The men's reactions were more complex. Those who got to Men's Joe before Harry the following Saturday confessed ambivalence at having the mystery of the blonde bombshell solved.

“For reasons I can't quite explain,” said Chuck Quimby, “I'm feeling some disappointment to know that our friend does indeed have a smashing granddaughter.”

“Of course,” said Peter Miller, the psychiatrist. “A little male fantasy is a welcome diversion from the cruel facts of advancing age. It was fun while it lasted, wasn't it?”

And they agreed: It had been fun.

THE COAT

Judy DeCroce

New York, United States

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/judydecroce/>

She wore the coat proudly.

People seeing her knew she had money,
was in the know,
in fashion.

Snuggling into the soft thick fur
made a little haven of warmth
on the windy street.

As other women walked by, she could see the envy in their eyes.
Perhaps their husband or lover was not as successful as hers.

If only the sound would stop.

Every time she w put the collar up there was that faint sound.
It was almost like a noise that you heard when you weren't listening.
Sort of like clothes settling on a hanger...
a whisper.

But she wouldn't tell anyone.
Not admit that this coat sighed,
as if the animals themselves gave up their spirits
but not their voice

A person needs to train fur, she thought, reapplying her bright red lipstick.

ENVY IS AN APPLE

Colin Butcher

Envy is an apple, shiny and green,
Envy is a heart, dark and mean.
Envy is coveting something not yours
to hold, Envy is the drink, that never grows old.

Envy, Desire call it what you will,
Either way it's a bitter cold pill.
Envy takes from the many and gives to the few
It's secretive and sly as it enralls you.

No matter what you say, no matter what you
try,
no matter that your caught in its lie.
Envy always finds its way back in,
For there is no cure for this deadly whim.

Once bitten, twice shy, that's what they say.
But once you're bitten you're trapped in its sway.
Then it fills you with pain and it spits you out,
Leaves you lying empty, spent, and wrung out.

Envy is a pox splashed upon this Earth,
Envy is a hatred, a chime, a curse.
Envy treats everyone with contempt,
Envy borrows till everything's lent.

YOU BROKE ME

Sarfraz Ahmed

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You broke my heart in two
Took the bigger piece
A release
That shook me
Bled me dry
Hemorrhaged me
Pulled me towards the sky
Towards the heavens above
You broke my heart
Took away all my love.

Too Soon To

Let Go

BY TALLY R. REYNOLDS



TOO SOON TO LET GO – TALLY R. REYNOLDS – UNITED STATES

The quiet is brutal without Jack.

The sounds of the house are all mine and the dog's for what has been a long thirty days into my new normal. No rattling of hangers, no drawers being knocked in their wooden frames, no aroma of brewed coffee to denote that he'd started his day. The conversations—all one sided while I crave a response—are with Annie B, who she sleeps most of the day in her heated dog bed. When stirred, she watches me with sorrowful eyes: she misses him, too. I detest the solitude and my inability to find us any solace.

I buried the vocabulary of cancer care and medicine with Jack: oncology, chemotherapy, radiation, neuropathy, amiodarone, metoprolol, senna, prochlorperazine maleate, and sulindac. When I opened the front door and pushed out hospice and morphine, the new words of the survivor came in. Awful words. I stammered over “his remains” and “Jack's body” when I dealt with the funeral home. I leapt past “He's dead” or “He's died” when speaking to others; those seemed to rhyme with “He's never coming back.” Instead, I use the more spiritual “He's passed on.” Not “I am widowed.” Never “I am a widow.” That harsh noun stomps on “spouse” and “lover.” I still think of myself as Jack's wife.

I cannot move his things. The dried toothbrush on the counter, the razor with a few grey stubbles caught in the blades, contents of drawers and closet, nightstand with his reading glasses, books, and get-well cards, the mini-refrig in the garage with his favorite micro-brews, among so many possessions. I must keep everything in place exactly as it was on the day he died, out of hope that he will return. What would he think to find the house half empty?

What kind of wife am I to remove what is his before I am sure he is gone?

TAKE ME TO PARIS IN WINTER

Julie A. Dickson

New Hampshire, United States

When I was in Paris it was stifling,
early summer days, hotter than home
unseasonably warm, they said.

Melting I walked miles past street vendors,
wilting I sat in outdoor cafes with glass of
tepid water. [had to pay extra for ice]

A somewhat cooler place was the Louvre,
cold marble sculptures of horses and men,
blank-faced watching sweat trickle down

my neck , standing before Mona
Lisa, envious of her cool demeanor, mopping
my face in line to buy postcards.

Open windows in small hotel, second floor
emitted warm breeze, lovely view if not
for having to lie atop coverlet at night.

It's never been so warm the end of May,
I constantly heard, feet slick inside sandals;
I loved Musee d'Orsay, Van Gogh,

Monet almost forgetting the heat on my neck.
Take me to Paris in winter, snow-topped
buildings, muffler hiding my tear filled eyes

smiling beneath cold cheeks pink in chill air,
happy frozen fingers, snow crunching under
boots; yes, take me to Paris in winter.

IN HER SIXTIES, MY MOTHER STARTS BIRDWATCHING

Morrow Dowdle

North Carolina, United States

<https://www.instagram.com/morrowdowdle/>

Never one for nature,
preferring landscaping,
pavement and climate control—

yet here she gazes
out the kitchen window.

She knows their names,
how they eat and mate
and raise their young.

She hates the squirrels
who steal the seeds.

And I hate the birds.

Watching her watch them,
I want to burn down
this little village—

feeders hung by hook
or fixed to trees,
seeds in overflow.

I don't know how to compete
with bright wings that flit
and gather with the season.

Sitting at her countertop,
I am a heavy fixture
that keeps opening its lips—

unable to speak,
wanting to be fed,

unsteady fledgling
waiting to inspire something
in whose hands I fall.

THE SKY IS FALLING DOWN

Nayanjyoti Baruah

Assam, India

Look at the sad sky, sad faces of my country,
Innumerable revealing their pleas, destitute kismet.
Take its momentum to be forwarded by the youth,
Dreaming of a new world with a companion.
Now these neighboring countries are seething
To rule, to establish herself as the best.
Music lovers're hearing the sound of surveillance tanks.

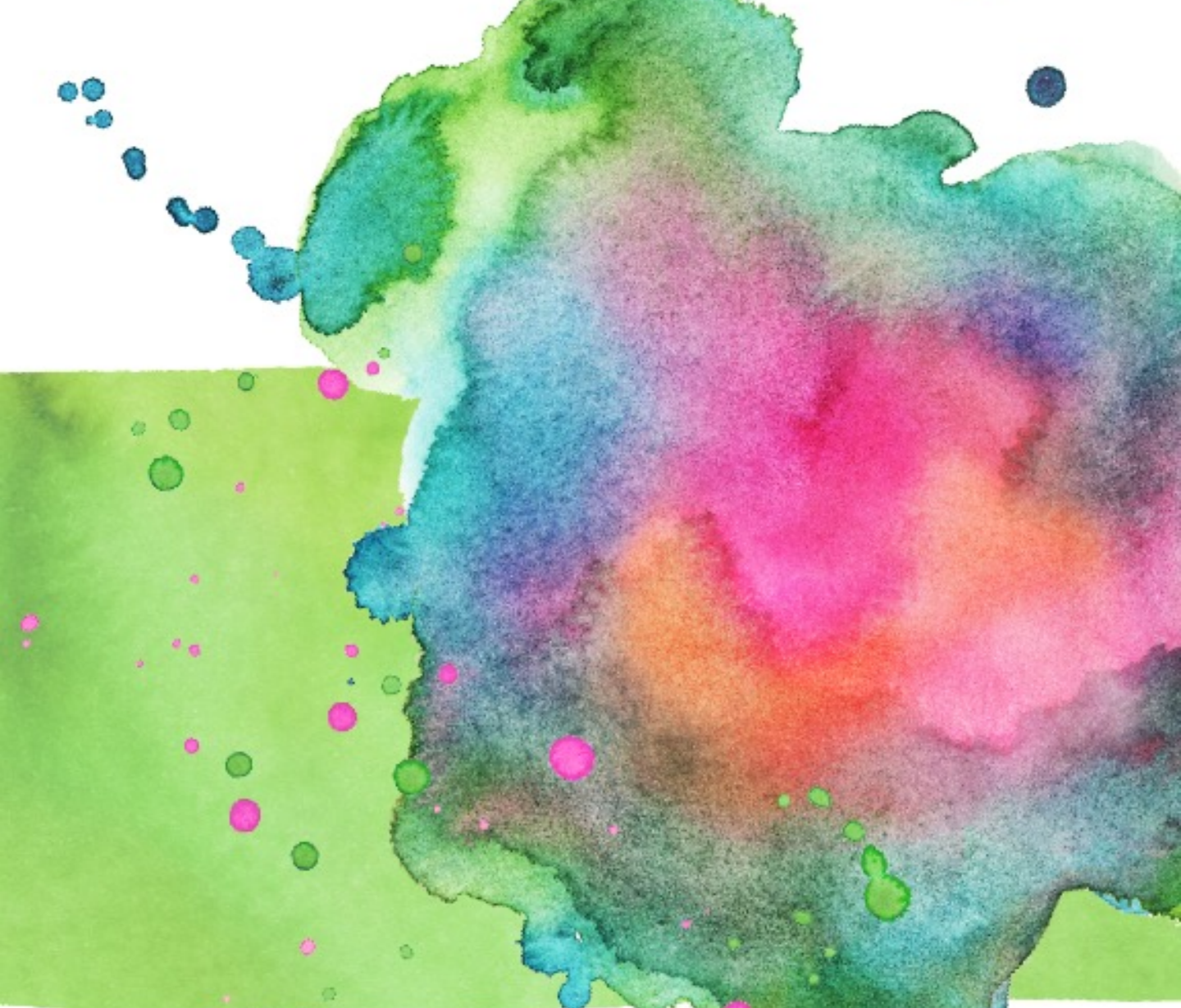
In a dilemma I'm clueless what to choose;
Let's get married, have baby before the sky falls,
Before we disappear, bifurcate and we're ruled.
I'd teach my wife, children use of gun and bomb.

Give shelter to those migrants, O Lord, give them food,
Let the scapegoat citizens live as they're living.

What a soldier cum man am I, who kills people to
Rescue the nation? Is but the territory more important than life?
The war is on. The sky is falling down.
Seeing spoliation of big flats aches my heart.

Wondering who will buy the jacket, food for children?
We know life after war isn't easy. Remember,
The land appetite one day will lead to nothingness.

(If I were president or prime minister or king,
No war'd take place. There be fraternity.
There is nothing to be proud of when a strong rules
Over the weak. It is like a husband beating his wife.)



Perspex

BY ROLY ANDREWS

Man

PERSPEX MAN – ROLY ANDREWS – NELSON, NEW ZEALAND

It took years for Professor Oraina to learn the best technique to graft skin onto perspex.

There were hundreds of false starts and failures, but he persisted. After completing his PhD specialising in Bionics, he embarked upon some serious horizontal certification. First, he studied chemistry. Then, after receiving his Master's, he studied engineering, biomechanics, and ethics. For someone so well educated and qualified, it would be perfectly reasonable to ask, why would anyone want to design a perspex abdomen? What problem would it solve?

Professor Oraina took criticism on the chin. He laughed at what he thought was pathetic intellectual snobbery and ignorance. *What was the academic and social point of the moon landings? Sure, go there once to prove you can, but six times?*

By the time he perfected his skin graft technique, he was in the dying throes of his fifties. He screamed, "Booyah!" once the final test compression mould had dried. Then he trimmed and polished the mould, carefully spraying it with a growth starter and meticulously applied the skin he had harvested from his buttocks. Two weeks later, he stood back, admiring the culmination of his life's work – the skin had taken and was starting to grow.

"I've done it," he said with pride. "I've bloody well done it."

The abdominal mould was flexible, made from inert plastic, which his body would not reject. It was rust-proof, bulletproof and sported a firm six-pack to replace his current keg. The temperature could be regulated through one-way vents located in the nipples. He could easily glue hair on his chest if he wanted, but he was still undecided. The best thing was that the perspex abdomen was completely transparent. That's precisely what he wanted. People could see his bits and bobs, and this thrilled him.

His long-time assistant Felicity Sanders balked when Professor Oraina asked her to cut away his skin and then drill bolt holes into his sternum and ilium bone to secure the perspex abdomen to his body. After bolting it in, the next steps would be to glue it into place and start the skin grafts to ensure a perfect seal. He only wanted to cover the seal and 500mm beyond that – no more.

"I want the world to see how brilliant I am, even if it means showing them what I ate for breakfast."

"There's no way in hell will I do that," Felicity said defiantly.

Professor Oraina fired her on the spot. She didn't get it!

Te Rongopai Heke was a fine replacement. With a career in reconstructive surgery and prosthetics, she had the personality of a refrigerator and the temperament of a pizza oven. Her polarity appealed and seemed apt when attempting to replace one of nature's greatest gifts – skin – with one of man's greatest inventions – a bio-mechanical torso. She got it!

"What's the dream, Oliver?" she asked during her lengthy job interview.

PERSPEX MAN – ROLY ANDREWS – NELSON, NEW ZEALAND

"Let's walk," he answered. "Don't talk; just observe and think."

They walked away from the lab; it was a sizzling January afternoon.

From the main road, they turned right into the path which ran alongside Poor man's Stream. The stream, surrounding trees and shrubs were clogged and strangled with litter. Plastic bottles, plastic packaging, and plastic bags sat in and alongside the stream. They followed the stream down to the Back Beach. They walked along the beach. Plastic ties, plastic holders for cans, lids for coffee cups, plastic this, and plastic that lay scattered amongst the sand, clumped in piles, trapped under the sea of driftwood strewn by the standing pines.

They looped back onto the main road and returned to the lab.

"It's even hotter now," he said; "you want a drink of water?"

Te Rongopai nodded.

Professor Oraina pointed to a side door. "Go out to the courtyard; there's a table and chairs out there. It's a bit of a suntrap, but please, no hat, sunglasses, or talking. I'll bring a drink out in a minute."

He returned a few minutes later, carrying two tumblers full of water and ice on what looked like a tray. After a moment, Te Rongopai noticed it wasn't a plastic tray; it was the perspex abdomen. She smiled and greedily took a tumbler. He sat down gingerly.

Ten minutes later, they were both sweating profusely.

"Feel the table," Professor Oraina instructed unexpectedly.

Te Rongopai obliged, then smiled.

"Now feel the abdomen."

Once again, she reached out and then nodded.

"Do you want to go inside now?"

She nodded again.

Once comfortably seated in the temperature-controlled lab, he asked, "Now tell me, what did you observe this afternoon?"

"I already knew the world was plagued by plastic, but while this is distressing, this is common knowledge. I presume your abdomen is manufactured from recycled plastics."

Professor Oraina smiled and nodded this time.

PERSPEX MAN – ROLY ANDREWS – NELSON, NEW ZEALAND

"When we were outside," she continued, "the glass table was hot, yet your abdomen was cool."

Again, he smiled, thinking, *She might work out*, and then added, "... And?"

She raised her eyebrows. "... And, from these two things, I theorise your goal is altruistic. You want to save humans from ourselves. You want to reduce pollution, but I suspect there is something even deeper going on."

"Go on," he said.

"Now, I might be going out on a massive intellectual limb here, so bear with me, but I think you don't trust humans to resolve global warming. And, from what we observed today, I think you might be right. What chance do we have when we can't even be bothered to dispose of our waste properly? We don't care enough. So, you want to offer a backup plan."

"And?" He asked again.

"... And your perspex abdomen is a prototype. A prototype for a complete exoskeleton. An exoskeleton to protect humans from the ravages of global warming: increased temperatures and high UV rays. I also suspect that the transparent abdomen is somewhat of a marketing ploy: a gimmick to draw attention to your technology. There's a lot to see in the abdomen. I imagine, too, that you focused on the abdomen, as this is probably the largest section of the exoskeleton. Limbs and joints will be much easier to develop – there is already prosthetic technology for this. Saving humanity is no small feat. You will be the envy of the scientific community."

"I also noted the state of your lab. With all due respect, Professor, your setup is not exactly state of the art. I imagine it's been a while since you received a research grant. I'm sure that will soon change."

He smiled. "You are very perceptive. Indeed, Miss Heke, your observations are correct, and your theory is sound. I admire and respect your deductions. However, the perspex abdomen is so much bigger than you can imagine. I believe it can resolve one of man's most evil and insidious qualities. A chance to save humanity from humanity."

She leant forward, elbows on knees, palms on face.

"Okay, go on; you have piqued my interest."

"What do you imagine the biggest impediment to your career will be?"

"Pardon?"

"I'll rephrase... What might stop you from achieving any study, academic or scientific goals you might have?"

PERSPEX MAN – ROLY ANDREWS – NELSON, NEW ZEALAND

“Well, it could be anything. My ineptitude, lack of intellectual prowess or funding, faulty science, faulty research.”

“Yes,” the Professor agreed. “Anything else?”

There was silence.

“Anything?”

Silence again.

“Let’s change gears,” he conceded after a few minutes. “Imagine a world where people could only see the inside of people’s skin. All we could see were muscles, sinew, cartilage, organs, blood and bone. Colour was non-existent. Everyone’s exoskeleton was transparent. We were all the same.”

Te Rongopai beamed, flashing big white teeth. “I get it,” she said, “Yeah, I get it.”

Authors note:

This story was inspired by what was already known but brought to light by a recent study that revealed Māori and Pacific Island science graduates were still marginalised at university through racism, exclusion, and tokenism.

Roly Andrews lives in Nelson, NZ; in his spare time, he enjoys tramping. After many years of practising, he is still trying to learn to play the trombone! A champion for everyone, he has mentored rough sleepers and supported people affected by suicide. He advocates for the rights of people living with disabilities. [Your Site ʻ Roly Andrews - Story Teller — WordPress.com](#)

ENVY

Koyel Mitra
India

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The sun derides the moon
for its soft beams.

The daystar being robust
laughs at the pale moonlight.
Does it envy the charming satellite?
Or it flaunts its fierce brightness?

The moon hides
with an inferiority complex.

It thinks that it has
no power, no originality.
It derives its light
from the sun.

Its light is a reflection
of the fiery ball.

It forgets that
It has a unique beauty.

So, is it the sun
who envies the moon or
the moon who is jealous of the sun?

THE WALKING WOUNDED

Nolo Segundo

I see us everywhere anymore,
at the supermarket or the mall,
moving slowly, often cane-less
(old folks can be vain too) along
a sidewalk like lost zombies, and
of course every time I visit one
of the plethora of doctors I rely
upon to keep my cracking body
and creaking heart working....

Why did I not see old people
when I was young?

They must have been there,
in my world of swiftness and
sex, of sprawling on a beach or
dancing under the boardwalk
or driving fast enough to
challenge death itself---but
when I saw old people---and it
seemed rare back then---it was
like watching a scene from an
old black-and-white movie,
not quite real, even quaint---

I liked old people and I loved
my Nana and Pop-Pop, but only
now in my 8th decade do I know
how much they had to put up with
in living a long life, how time has
a tendency to whittle away your
strength and confidence and grace,
shrinking your bones, drying out
your joints, slowing your brain
and poking holes--oh, so many
holes in your memory....

I am not as fond of old people
now I am one---it is the young
I now see fondly---
but they can't see me....

WITCH'S BREW

Mary Janicke

Texas, USA

She stirred and stirred.
Whirled and whirled.
Seethed and Seethed.
Smiled and Smiled.
Her method subtle.

Planted and tended the garden.
Seeds of envy strewn about.
Tendrils twisted around her victims.

They paused and felt a sharp pang of discontent.

Where did it come from?

Suspicion grew.
Animosity grew.
Rivalry grew.

Then release.
Acceptance.
Peace.
Friendship.

She failed.

FALLEN

Adrienne Stevenson

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Those god-fearing among us fear their god rightly
down on their knees to pray to him nightly
begging excuse for all manner of sin
so many they scarcely know where to begin:

hating their neighbours surely comes first
envying them for the wealth in their purse
hating their colours, their genders, their races
overt maliciousness worn on their faces

claiming a privilege due to their faith
reduced by hypocrisy into a wraith
of all that is good, true, honest and strong
denying all outsiders' rights to belong

to the human race, let alone elite tribes
denying, degrading them, trolling with jibes.
They are no angels – their virtue rings false
– repulse them, revoke them, for the sake of all else.



Stone

Cold Soup

BY DOUGLAS HOSDALE

STONE COLD SOUP – DOUGLAS HOSDALE – SANTA MONICA, USA

Jessie dipped her hand inside her black leather bag, the big one that contained her secret ten thousand Euro stash of cash, and felt nothing. Against all logic, she tried the bag again. Nothing. There was a nervous laugh, and then she frantically looked in all the other bags hanging on the coatrack, but they were empty too. It was ten thousand Euros. It was all the money she had. All the blood rushed from her face and she felt sick.

That fall it was cold and rainy in the North of Portugal and everything started to die early. The green trees were already dotted with orange and yellow leaves, and the locals had to rush to harvest all the strange Piel de Sapo melons before they rotted. The October air was raw and wet and the sun was cold.

Jessie sat down on the futon and twisted a lock of her curly black hair. Her mind raced to possible explanations. She had taken some money out yesterday, and it was all there, but then she had gone to the *Centro Commercial* yesterday with Carolina, and when she came home, she was tired and didn't look in the bag. Who knew she had the money? Carolina, and her boyfriend, Ivan, were the only two that were ever in her apartment, but she never mentioned it to them. But, then again, Ivan did act a little weird. Jessie remembered when she went into her room for a moment to grab some money for her trip to the *Centro Commercial*, she came back and saw Ivan staring out the window. He was looking at the old and abandoned church that was across the street from Jessie's apartment.

"I hate religion," he said. "It makes me happy to see that this church is abandoned. I mean it's only a little church, but still, I'm glad that it's falling down."

"Honestly, I never noticed it before."

"They say it's bad luck to live across the street from a church."

"Ivan, stop! Don't put the bad eye on her." Carolina gave Ivan an angry look.

"What made you come to Portugal?" Ivan asked Jessie, ignoring Carolina.

"To get out of Spain."

"Ha! You Americans are always on the run. When one place gets old there's always a new adventure."

"Yeah, well, my ex-boyfriend fucked me over and stole all my spots."

"Jessie used to make jewelry and sell it in the marketplaces across Spain," Carolina added.

"Until my boyfriend decided to run off with some nineteen-year-old, who looked like a younger version of me, really, she did, but she was as dumb as paint. I couldn't believe it. And then he comes back with her and they stole all my spots, in Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia – all of them. And when you're selling jewelry in the marketplace – any

STONE COLD SOUP – DOUGLAS HOSDALE – SANTA MONICA, USA

marketplace – it's your spot that makes all the difference. It didn't matter that I was the one who came up with all the designs.” Jessie twisted a lock of her curly hair. “Anyway,” she continued, “I don't want to talk about it. I sold everything, and now I'm here, in Fáo, Portugal.” She tried to sound cheerful.

“You must have made a lot of money,” Ivan continued. He was looking around the apartment. “This place is nice.”

“We did alright, until the recession hit.”

“But look at the size of this TV.” A giant 215-centimeter flatscreen hung on the wall in the pre-furnished apartment that Jessie had rented. This was a big deal because hardly anyone in Portugal had a new television. They all seemed to have those thick rounded old TVs from the eighties, and HD was not a common thing. Even bars and restaurants had the old-style televisions.

“It is a nice TV.” Carolina said with a nervous smile.

“I hardly ever watch it.”

“What? A TV like that and you hardly ever watch it?” Ivan said in disbelief.

“Well, I watch some movies,” Jessie said a bit defensively.

“If I had a TV like that, I'd watch all the Formula 1 racing on it. That's an incredible TV. Can I turn it on?”

“Sure.”

“I just want to see how sharp it looks. The Monaco Grand Prix is on today. I should be at home watching it.” Ivan reached for the remote and turned the TV on. Ivan switched to the racing channel. The cars were racing endlessly around the track and occasionally they showed a close up of the driver. Ivan was memorized by brilliance of the image and the sharpness of the picture.

“Ivan likes to pretend he's a Formula One driver.” Carolina laughed.

“Ahh, what the *Hell* do you know?” Ivan was upset. “I could have been a Formula One driver, if I didn't grow up in this racist *fodido pais*.” Ivan flashed his black eyes back at Jessie. “My father is from Angola and my mother is a blonde Portuguese woman, and when people find this out – they don't like me.”

Ivan lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out the window, “I can't even get a job.” Ivan took a drag, “and at the University it was the same. I was one credit away from graduating, but then I quit.”

“Why?” Jessie asked.

STONE COLD SOUP – DOUGLAS HOSDALE – SANTA MONICA, USA

“Because I had a professor who said some stupid shit to me.”

Jessie understood this more than Ivan knew. She had never finished school either. She was enrolled in an art school in Florence and then one day her teacher came in with a t-shirt of Che Guevarra on the front, and it said, “Yankee Imperialists Go Home!” on the back. It didn't matter that she had run away from home at eighteen. It didn't matter that she had never joined the army.

“I'd like to meet your dad someday.”

“My dad's an asshole. You can't meet him because he's in jail. The only thing my dad ever gave me was the love for Blondies. Like Carolina over here.” Ivan reached out and petted Carolina's bleached blonde hair.

“Stop it,” Carolina smiled and pushed his hand away.

Ivan grabbed the remote and went to turn up the sound but when he touched the button the TV short-circuited and the image disappeared.

“What happened?” Ivan tried pressing buttons on the remote but it would not respond and the screen remained black.

“I don't know,” Jessie was concerned. She took the remote from Ivan's hands and tried to turn the TV back on but it did not work.

“I hope I didn't break it. All I did was touch the volume button.”

“For sure, it's going to be okay,” Jessie said, trying to smooth over the situation.

“Only a rich person could say something like that!”

Something was wrong with this Ivan and Jessie wanted him out of the house. The fact that he was playing with the TV when it stopped working, was a bad omen. Jessie believed in omens and believed that the TV picked up on Ivan's negative energy and that was why it shorted out.

That whole incident had shaken Jessie up. She had always thought that people in the small villages were supposed to be friendly. Usually, people weren't so aggressive, like Ivan. But how bad could he be if he was with Carolina? Carolina seemed so nice.

Jessie remembered meeting Carolina for the first time. It was only a couple of months ago now, but everything seemed so different then. One morning, when Jessie was wiping the moisture off her bedroom window, she heard a dog out front playfully barking and she could hear a woman's voice talking back to it. Jessie opened the shutters and saw a young woman with bright blonde hair, dressed in dark tights and dark top, playing with the stray dog that Jessie had affectionately named Toto.

STONE COLD SOUP – DOUGLAS HOSDALE – SANTA MONICA, USA

"*Até logo*. See you later," the jogging girl said and was about to run off.

Jessie stuck her head out the window. "Wait a moment!" Jessie yelled down. "I want to say, hello."

Jessie hurried into the kitchen and quickly poured herself a small glass of Port and drank it. She hadn't eaten yet and the Port tasted good to her and went right to her head. She started to feel happy, this hadn't happened for a while, so she took another shot, then she ran downstairs.

When she was outside, she could see that the young woman was about twenty-eight years old.

"*Bom Dia*, sorry to have to yell, but I just wanted to say hello and to meet you."

"Hello," said the young woman. Jessie noticed that the woman smiled when she said hello. This was a good sign.

"I live up there," Jessie motioned to the window on the second floor, "and I've seen you jog past here and I thought I'd introduce myself. I'm Jessie."

"Hi, I'm Carolina."

Jessie invited Carolina up to her apartment. Carolina was happy to come on up. At first, they shared some tea, but later on, they drank some Port. They talked for a long time and Jessie found out many things. She learned that Carolina's family had lived in Fáo for many generations, and that her grandparents can remember when electricity first came to Fáo, and how her father grew up in a time before television, and how for generations Carolina's family ran a small restaurant, called *O Polvo* (The Octopus), in the village. Jessie knew of this restaurant, it was only a block away but she had never eaten there, it looked too plain. Carolina told Jessie that she didn't want to do what her family did. Carolina wanted to be an actress and was working to improve herself. Now she was eating better, jogging, and even taking yoga.

Carolina let it slip that she was starring in a local play at the community theater. When Carolina told Jessie this, she blushed a bit but Jessie could see that Carolina was proud of this. Jessie promised Carolina that she would see the play. Jessie could see that Carolina was a sensitive soul. It was important for Jessie that her friends be "sensitive", it was a word that she always used when she was describing someone that she liked.

For her part, Jessie shared many things with Carolina. She told her of how she left America at the age of eighteen. She explained that she came from a poor family and how her father ran a small newspaper stand and how as a child she studied art and wanted to be a painter. She told Carolina how she had sold silver jewelry in the open-air markets all over Europe and had made plenty of money, but all that was finished now. It ended when her boyfriend had stolen all the money in their joint bank account. Jessie had some silver jewelry left and sold

STONE COLD SOUP – DOUGLAS HOSDALE – SANTA MONICA, USA

this silver back to the wholesale dealer for a loss, but it gave her some cash. She told Carolina that she was going to pass the winter in Portugal and after that she didn't know what she was going to do.

After they both had a few glasses of Port, Jessie decided to open up her closet. She saw Carolina's eyes light up when Carolina saw all the brightly colored clothes. Jessie had a lot of clothes and a lot of perfume. These two things made her happy. She also liked to dress other women. Her years in Florence gave her a lasting sense of style, but then she always had this gift. She would notice how other women would copy her, if she had a new bag then soon, she would see how the other girls bought the same bag. She was generous at heart and wanted to help Carolina, who dressed in dark lifeless clothes. Jessie was pulling out many clothes from her closet and helping Carolina try them on and by the time Carolina left she had a couple of bags of new clothes to take home.

A nervous laugh escaped from Jessie when she remembered Ivan's play, "Monster In The House", and the conversation they had afterwards. Tall and worn stone steps led up to the simple white building that was Fáo's community theater. A statue of a long-since-forgotten-once-famous explorer was in the courtyard, and a few dying Sycamore trees framed the entrance. Inside, there was a small wooden stage, a few colored spotlights and a dusty red curtain. Jessie paid her five Euros and took a seat on one of the wooden benches.

In the play, Carolina's character gets money stolen from her. It turns out that her roommate has stolen the money so she could buy some new clothes. Carolina's character is so distraught about losing her money that she is willing to do anything to get it back, including sleeping with her roommate's boyfriend, who tells her that he will help her get the money back. But, in the end, no one helps and, eventually, she goes crazy and has to be carted off like a modern-day, Blanche DuBois.

At the time, Jessie thought nothing of the play's theme. All she cared about was watching Carolina – who did her best at infusing some real emotion into the clumsy dialogue. But then there was the conversation on the way home, where, in retrospect, Ivan really gave away too much of himself. They were walking past the little park by the river, and some teenagers were smoking cigarettes on the old and creaky exercise equipment that dotted the park like misunderstood artwork.

"Look at this stupid shit!" Ivan said. "I've never actually seen anyone use this equipment for exercise. It's only about some stupid politician trying to convince the people that they are doing good, but really, it's about wasting the people's money."

A couple of teenagers were making out on the slanted sit-up bench. Jessie and Carolina laughed at this, but Ivan took another thoughtful drag on his cigarette.

"For me I hate money," Ivan continued, "but because I hate money, it has power over me. And I hate that. But I think money has power over lots of people and that is why I wrote the play. That was the inspiration. I try to use this hatred to create art." Ivan explained. "You

STONE COLD SOUP – DOUGLAS HOSDALE – SANTA MONICA, USA

know in Portugal we say something like this, 'big problems in small villages.' Here is no different."

The solitary rooster from the farm next door cried out its lonely call. Jessie looked out her window and saw the gloomy fog settling in. Soon it would be night. Jessie picked up her phone and called the police. She told them she had been robbed and then she sat back down and started to cry. This country that she had loved so much, she began to hate, and the people she had loved and trusted, she began to despise. Now, she'd have to sell her Sprinter van. That was all she had left.

It was dark before there was a knock on her door and a young and overly serious policeman entered her apartment. The policeman was very formal with her, carefully writing down everything that she said and noting every detail of her apartment. She showed him the bag in her room where the money was and he gently used his pen to open the top of it and peer into the void. He was very composed until he asked her how much money was stolen.

"I don't know exactly but it was at least eight thousand Euros, maybe ten," Jessie said.

"Ten thousand Euros!" The policeman repeated in disbelief. "What were you doing with this much cash in your apartment?" The policeman looked at her suspiciously.

Jessie stopped playing with her hair and looked at this boy in a uniform. She started to explain that she used to sell silver jewelry in the marketplaces all over Europe and then everything became jumbled up and confused and she told him how she made a lot of money doing this and how she used to hide her money in the bottom of her dresser drawer but then she moved it to her bag. The tears started to flow from her eyes and she began to shake. How was this boy in a uniform going to help her?

"Who knew you had this money?" the policeman calmly asked her.

"No one." Jessie looked at the ends of her hair, not wanting to tell the truth.

The policeman told her that someone she knew must have stolen the money. He explained to her how nothing else in the apartment was touched, and that if the thief was a random person, things would have been moved, and other things would have been stolen. He explained to her that her expensive camera and computer and new HD TV were all out in plain sight, and that a common thief would have stolen these, and may not have even found the money, but the person who committed this crime didn't touch or move anything, but went right to her bag where the money was and stole it and only it.

That's when Jessie mentioned Ivan and Carolina. The policeman's ears perked up when he heard Ivan's name.

"It's most likely this Ivan character," the policeman said with a certain scorn. "I know him and he comes from a bad family, his father is from Angola and also is a thief." Jessie looked at

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him sharply, she didn't like to hear this kind of talk, but she was suspicious of Ivan herself.

"Well, if all you say is true," the policeman said with a crisp air of authority, "then it's definitely Ivan. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"What the Hell does that mean?" Jessie stopped pulling at her hair.

"Like father, like son. He comes from a broken family and has no job. He saw a vulnerable woman, a woman alone, and took advantage of her. It was only a matter of time."

"If you think it's Ivan, then go to his house and arrest him." Jessie looked the policeman straight in the eye and noticed that he couldn't look at her for too long before he had to look away.

"No, no, no," the policeman said as he shook his head. "We need proof. And you need to remember exactly how much money you had."

"Well, what are you going to do?" Jessie asked.

"We're going to wait," he replied.

"Wait and do nothing?" Jessie couldn't believe her ears.

"We have to wait and watch him and then catch him when he starts spending the money. Everyone knows he has no job, so when he starts buying new things, we'll know it's him."

"And then what?"

"Let me do my job. In the meantime, go with these people. Pretend to be their friends and make them feel like nothing has changed and they'll start to let their guard down and Ivan will relax and slip up."

Jessie looked at him with disbelief.

"Don't worry, I'll come by and check on you." The policeman calmly ripped off a pink piece of paper. "Here's a copy of the report. My name is, Pedro Silva. I've included my personal phone number. You can call me day or night."

Jessie snatched the paper from his hand.

The next day, Jessie picked up her phone and called Carolina and told her what had happened. Soon enough Carolina and Ivan were at her door full of concern and worry. Jessie kept searching their faces for clues. Were they really worried and concerned or just pretending? Was Carolina in on it?

"Where did you keep the money?" Ivan asked.

"In my bag," Jessie said, waving towards the four bags on the coatrack.

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Ivan picked up the big black shoulder bag that had held the money. “You mean this one?” he said. Jessie was speechless for a moment. How did he know it was that bag?

“Yes.”

Ivan immediately began to look out the window, craning his head to the left and the right looking at everything. As he held the bag up and looked out the window he said, “It’s obvious, someone probably saw you put the money in the bag.”

Jessie looked out her window and saw the old and decaying farm staring back.

“It’s not possible.”

“Of course, it is. Look out your window. You can see the street, can’t you? If you can see the street, then someone on the street can see in.”

Jessie pulled on a piece of her hair and put it to her lips. “Yes, I suppose.”

“I’m sure that’s what happened. Someone was watching you and waited until the moment was right and then came in and stole the money. Probably when you and Carolina went to the *Centro Commercial* the other day.”

“Impossible, I locked the front door.”

“Come on, there are many other ways to get into your apartment.” Jessie twisted her hair and listened. “Did you close the door to your balcony?”

“I don’t know.”

“Someone could have climbed up through there. Or picked the lock to your door.”

Jessie was numb.

“Did you call the police?” Carolina asked.

“Yes.”

“And what did they say?”

“He said that it was probably someone I knew,” Jessie paused for a second, as her stomach got cold.

“Let me see the police report.” Ivan read it over and laughed. “They sent over Pedro Silva.” Ivan looked at Jessie. “That guy’s an idiot.”

“You know him?”

“Of course, he’s from the Fáo. He’s only a few years older than me. We both went to the

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same school. He was weak and got picked on a lot. That's why he became a cop. Everyone made fun of him, and no one would date him. He's still desperate and tries to go with any woman he can," Ivan explained.

Carolina nodded her head in agreement. "It's true."

"Oh my god," Jessie said. "I felt something was wrong with him."

"What else did he say?" Ivan asked.

"I don't know," Jessie was confused. "He said that he'd be watching me and be there to protect me."

"You see what a pervert this guy is." Ivan laughed, "This guy is completely useless."

"He *is* worthless," Carolina agreed.

"What am I going to do?" Jessie asked. Ivan started to talk but Jessie stopped listening.

Later on, Carolina took Jessie out to her parent's restaurant. Jessie had no real appetite and the soup tasted old and lifeless.

"In Portugal we have a children's tale. It's called, *Sopa de Pedra* or Stone Soup." Carolina was trying to catch Jessie's eye. "It's a story about an outsider who comes to a village. He's hungry and has no money so he asks the villagers for some food. No one is willing to share any with him, so he comes up with a plan. He tells the villagers that he's got a new type of soup that he's going to make for them."

"Yes, I know the story," Jessie said. "But what does it have to do with me?"

"The moral of the story is that once everyone learns to share then everyone's happy, and the outsider is welcome," Carolina explained.

Jessie looked at Carolina in disbelief. "So, what are you trying to tell me? That I have to share my money with you, the villagers, before I'm accepted?"

Carolina spoke softly, "Don't worry, things are going to get better."

"Here's some money for your stone soup." Jessie dropped a few Euros on the table and stood up to leave.

"Jessie, don't worry about it. The soup's free. Keep your money. I was only trying to help."

"If you want to help me, help me find the thief!" Jessie looked sharply at Carolina. "Instead, you're no different from the rest. You're all are like vampires sucking the blood out of me!" Jessie turned and walked out.

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Jessie took the long way home, so she didn't have to pass by Ivan and Carolina's apartment. A few people glanced at her as she passed by on the street, but she didn't look at them. Jessie turned the corner and was at the small tree lined park.

Jessie sat down on a bench and tried to look at the sunset, but it was no good. She looked down at the worn cobblestones and saw a bug trapped on its back. It was a black and green beetle and its legs were flailing helplessly. No matter what it did it could not right itself. It would push a tiny leg against the cobblestone and then another and then with a huge effort try to rock its body, and hop up, but it always landed on its back. It would lay still for a bit, as if it were dead and then try again. She watched the beetle for a long time before she realized that it had two broken legs.

"Hello! Good news!" Jessie looked up and saw the policeman, Pedro Silva, marching towards her, with a look of triumph on his face. Jessie squashed the beetle with the tip of her shoe.

"We have caught the thief!" Pedro was waving a piece of white paper at her. "This is the arrest certificate."

"What?" Jessie was confused. "Who?"

"It was Ivan. Just as I suspected. When Ivan and his girlfriend were over at your place, I took the liberty to search his apartment and found a great sum of money, and when he came home, I arrested him. He is now in jail where he belongs."

"Ohmigod," Jessie gasped, a hopeful smile crossed her face. "So, I'm going to get my money back?"

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

Pedro informed her that unless she could prove how much money it was – *exactly* – and provide receipts for how she earned it, and prove that she had paid taxes on it, the money would have to stay "impounded" for the time being.

"No money, until the Judge says so."

"How long will that take?"

"I don't know." Pedro shrugged his thoughtful shoulders. "Maybe, a couple of months."

Jessie couldn't believe her ears. She sat backdown and stared at the squashed bug. A couple of its legs were still twitching.

A couple of months later, Jessie started to overhear the rumors. Carolina wouldn't even look

at her, and Jessie felt that half the town was against her, but she spoke Portuguese well and could easily understand that everyone was talking about the new jumbo size 215-centimeter flatscreen TV that the policeman, Pedro Silva, had recently purchased. It was sharp and vivid and had great sound. People loved going over to his house to watch the big fútbol match, or the latest Formula 1 race. The flatscreen had done what nothing else could, it made Pedro popular. He was the envy of the whole town.

After that, Jessie packed up her van and left Fáo for good. Her illusions of getting her money back had been shattered, and the country that she had loved so much had turned against her. She'd have to try her luck elsewhere. Perhaps, India. Perhaps, New York City. Anywhere it was big and impersonal, and no one knew her name.

Douglas Hosdale has had his work published at Akashic Books, Limit Experience Journal, Horror, Sleaze, and Trash, and JAB Fiction. He was a winner of the Westchester Film Festival screenwriting competition, as well as, a finalist in Fade-In's screenwriting contest. His short films have been seen at numerous film festivals. He currently resides in Santa Monica, and is working on a book of short stories called, "The Lees of Sunshine." Douglas has studied under Lou Mathews, Paul Mandelbaum, and Stephen Cooper at the UCLA writer's program.

<https://www.facebook.com/douglas.hosdale>

EMPEROR OF IDIOMS

Rick Blum

Envy, how like a carnivorous tide
you erode contentment,
unashamedly dragging
the color green
(an otherwise pleasant hue)
into your toxic patois.

Oh, the injustice:
green – a symbol of hope;
a crocus shoot's promise
to weary sufferers of winter's pall
that monotonal landscapes
are not a permanent condition –
thus defamed by unpredicted proximity.

Were I emperor of idioms,
I'd decree that purple or azure
share its spectral bed
with envy's sordid soul.
But rage has already staked a claim on purple.
And, though *azure with envy*
rolls off the tongue as smoothly
as a Kenny G solo, evoking crystal skies
makes azure an idiomatic misfit.

But my cardinal act
would be to extract green
from envy's evil grip –
freeing it to socialize
with more charming companions,
like horns and gills
and garden-friendly thumbs –
enabling blue-blood poets
to praise its viridian attributes
in rose-colored odes
flush with purple prose.

*First published in The Literary
Hatchet, May 2017*

GREEN

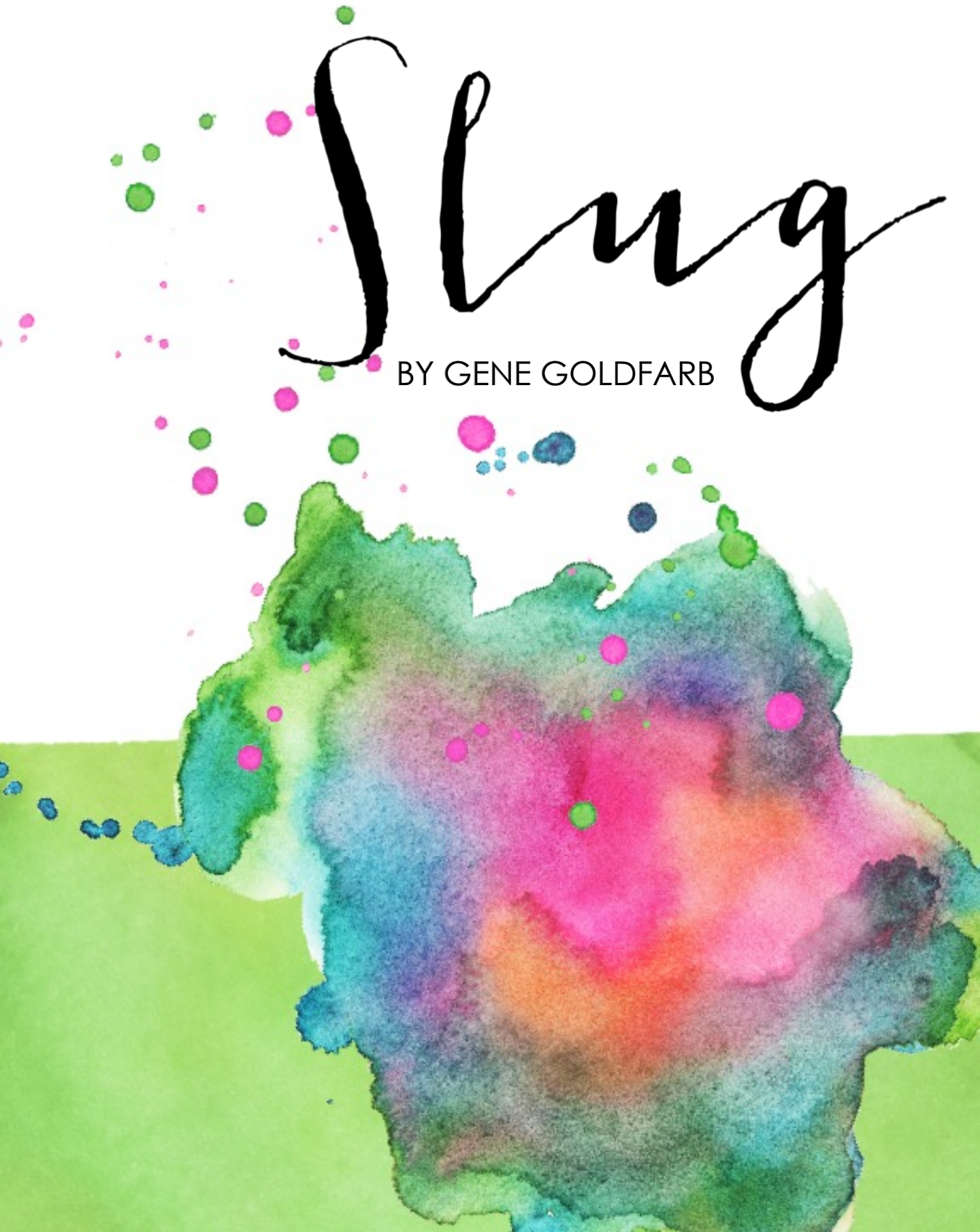
HLG

https://www.instagram.com/the_heart_pages/

With just
a small
atmospheric
change -
it comes down
to wash away;
the narrow
thoughts,
a single day,
and,
the pollutants
that hang
amongst us -
perhaps,
"Mother" knows best,
that showers
will quench,
the Earth
below -
leaving behind;
puddles
to reflect in,
moist soil
to leave imprints,
fresh air
and,
the green, so lush
that we are
envious -
of the power
of nature;
to grow,
to change,
season
to season,
and,
we breathe in deeply,
to harbor
that strength
into our souls.

Sling

BY GENE GOLDFARB



SLUG – GENE GOLDFARB - NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

In the summer you went slumming when all your friends were in day camp and you weren't. Without it, you'd be moping around, or doing errands all day long for your mom till she got sick of you pestering her and sent you outside to find someone to play with. Embarrassing, humiliating, call it what you like, but it meant you were a self-evident loser and had to find someone else who was a bigger loser than you or suffer endless boredom.

So, you'd go around the streets searching for someone to play with from the B list. And the B list had almost no one on it. If you found someone, you could go around and do things, play games, not have to come back inside the house and watch TV till supper. Fortunately, I saw Morty, someone I ordinarily don't go near, but this time I buddied up with. Morty didn't seem to care who he played with.

Here was a list of some of the things you could do in those days when there were only two of you to play: 1) fungo, where one of you'd hit balls around with a light bat or a broom handle and one of you'd play the field and catch; 2) "off the curb," (you could do it off the stoop too), which was another type of game launching a ball and going around bases; 3) handball, the only real sport that had actual tournaments with world champs; 4) throw water balloons off the roof of a building onto some stranger, a great mischievous endeavor; 5) hang around the candy store and trade baseball cards or read Classics Illustrated without buying the issue till the owner threw you out of the store for curling the page ends and not buying; 6) go to one or the other's house and play war with toy soldiers, manually dispatch and activate your troops, and use your deep voice as a commander or to simulate machine gun fire, heavy artillery hits you simulated with a single loud 'Pow!' or 'Bam!'

On this hot summer day, Morty and I decided on "Slug." In some neighborhoods they called it, "Ace-King-Queen." You had your own sidewalk box and the one next to it that adjoined the wall of a building, and alongside your line of boxes, your opponent or opponents had their boxes (often there were four players or even more). And you would hit the ball with a bounce before it struck the wall and your opponent had to hit it into another set of boxes temporarily owned by someone else the same way.

Sometimes you'd hit it with a slice. And sometimes you'd hit a shot so low it hit the ground and the wall at almost the same time. We'd call that a 'killer,' where it bounced back so low as to be virtually unreturnable. You always wanted to stay in the first spot or Ace. If you lost the point, you'd be demoted to the lowest unoccupied square and everyone else would move up.

Anyway, after we were playing slug for a while, this other pair of rough-looking guys came along, almost right up to us and the leader said in a loud voice, 'We challenge you for the court.' His friend merely seconded him, saying 'Yeah,' as if he were yawning or already bored by us. This meant if they won, we'd have to surrender the 'court' where we were playing on. I felt a chill. You had to accept the challenge.

'Okay. We accept,' I sighed.

So, we started in, and Morty wasn't bad. We held our own for a while. In fact, with a little effort our chances on winning looked pretty good. But I saw these guys were getting more

SLUG – GENE GOLDFARB - NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

and more frustrated, especially the leader. I was afraid these guys would be looking for an excuse to beat us up. And push us off the court.

At one point, I was able to signal Morty that we'd better take it easy and let them win. No shame in that, they were brawlers not players. Sooner or later they were going to blame us as cheating if we started really pulling ahead.

Then the leader got into an argument with his man. And I kept hoping they kept their sore feelings focused on each other. Morty just smiled in a sneaky way toward me. He was onto them but didn't open his mouth.

I had this growing sick feeling they were about to blame us somehow cheating for their falling behind. Unfortunately, that seemed exactly about to happen.

The leader started waving his arms like an umpire signaling a runner was safe. He yelled, "Wait a minute. Something's goin' on."

"What are you talking about?" I replied. This was the moment on the verge of where we might get our asses kicked.

All of a sudden, a guy rode by on a bike who they seemed to know yelling, "Hey Mickey. Your dad's home and your mom wants you there pronto."

"Oh yeah?"

"I think they're mad, just sayin'."

Mickey took the ball, spiked it angrily, and left with his wing man as quickly as they'd appeared.

"Hey Morty," I confessed, relieved. "Imagine if the stakes were 'Asses Up.'"

That's where the losers lined up facing a wall with their hands raised up against it and their legs spread, and the winners would throw a ball from across the street at your heinie hard as they could. That could really sting.

"Ooh," was all Morty said in agreement, shaking a hand sideways like he was drying it.

"Hey," I popped up, "I'm thirsty. Let's go for a lime rickey."

"Now you're talkin'," Morty cheerily snapped back.

We had luckily dodged a nasty bullet. Somehow the thought then emerged as I was walking home with Morty that I wasn't slumming anymore.

Gene Goldfarb lives in New York City, where he ponders, love, hate, mortality and what's up with the guy who hangs around the building. He loves movies, books, travel, and international cuisine. His works have appeared in the very small press, Adelaide, Black Fox, Bull & Cross, CafeLit, Fallow Ground, Open Door and Storytown.

ENVY

LaVon Robinson

United States

The love I have for you my beloved Queen is one that have been preordained before the beginning of time itself. When space was void and lay host to the uninvited guest of darkness my immense passion for your desire and sweetness was duly felt. I rode freely in search for you on the unconsciousness manifestation of pure thought and found you in all your pristine glory and virtuous persona where the cascading waters of life nourishment rejuvenated my soul into existence with sheer pleasure to truly behold and adore your beauty. On the mystical clouds of the heavens we danced to the sensuous and hypnotic tunes and inspirational lyrics of our heartbeat in harmonious synchronization of the nature of self. The love I have for you and have always had is now as well as back then is a powerful testament of our journey to become as one that's blessed with divine greatness that I'm so grateful for and so very much heartfelt. On our undeniable truth, convictions, adoration and admiration for one another we will definitely stand for and believe. Others will know from the stories about our adventures told as well as see and will delight to possess such a treasure of love with much joy and envy.

THE BECKONING FIGURE

Aislinn Feldberg

New York, United States

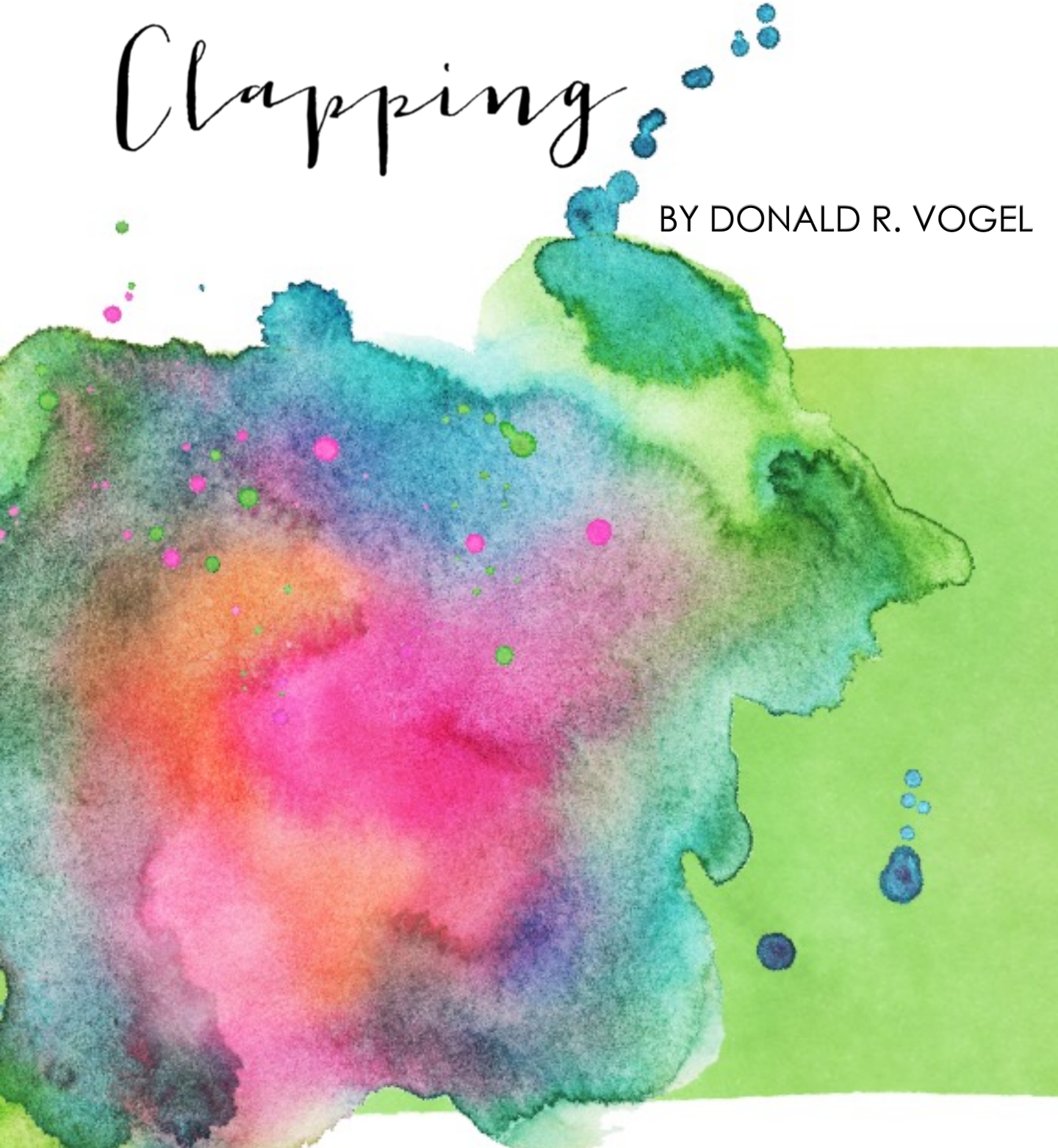
<https://www.oddityplayground.com/>



One Hand

Clapping

BY DONALD R. VOGEL



ONE HAND CLAPPING – DONALD R. VOGEL

How is a kayak trip a metaphor for a socially awkward person making his way in a life marred by sloth and envy? The trite answer is it's a journey. My hope is both excursions are worth hearing anyway. The kayak trip is one I embarked on recently during which two people, one an older woman and the other the group leader, were lost. There were 15 of us on a paddle to Bannerman Castle, the ruins of a Robber Baron estate on an island in the Hudson River. We started at 10 a.m. on a mid-October day, diagonally across from West Point, cannons booming for a football game. It was to be near 70-degrees, and though a drought was ruining the colors of that spectacular autumn weather, bursts of yellow, orange, and reds still greeted us during the approximately 12-mile trip. Only, there was one more surprise burst to come, which shouldn't have been a surprise as this was a serious paddle club.

Diametrically opposed to other groups I have kayaked with on drunken shallow water excursions, this was the touring set. Each member, including myself, had no less than 14 ft craft, meant for serious water, to cut through wind and wave, and a list of requisite safety equipment, including wetsuits with the water in in the 50s that day. The adage is to dress for immersion not the air, but it was the air that became our problem. We began the day with about 5 knot winds to our backs, but the leaders warned everyone before putting in that it often changes. By our first break, we could see white caps, and the trip leader gave us a choice, to explore a creek or head across the river right to Bannerman castle and then home, knowing we would be against the wind and tide. In a decision that seemed like the old joke of searching for lost keys in better light, not where you lost them, we chose the creek because it was sheltered. The winds only increased during that time.

This was obvious as soon as we left the creek to confront the challenging river cross, in two-foot chop. We kept to the plan to still visit Bannerman Castle. Skills and age divided the larger group into subsets, leading to us outpacing two compatriots. Like the military, this club paddled with a 'leave no one behind' credo and structured all excursions to prevent such an occurrence: one co-leader in the front, two on the sides, and the trip leader in the back, all with radios to report direction, hazards, and laggards. If you've ever paddled in rough water you are most stable while moving and, where possible, cutting directly through the waves without looking back. Mother nature wasn't that cooperative as the swells came at angles. By the time we reached the Castle, sheltered but fatigued, we noticed the leader and an older woman not with us and not in sight of the horizon.

The majority of the group waited 45 minutes without a visual of the two, though the co-leaders were in clear and calm communication with the leader escorting the woman. It became a little like *Lord of the Flies*, as our small community broke down. Some paddled to the western shore to ready for the trip back, some stayed by Bannerman. One woman, not a leader but who had her own radio, kept interfering with the necessary communication among the others, screeching for updates, creating a cacophony on the air waves. She kept threatening to leave or call for a rescue, even while the leader confirmed that he and the struggling woman were okay. The panicked woman decided to leave and began paddling on her own into shifting winds and swells to venture solo approximately 5 miles. A co-leader and myself thought it prudent to, first seek permission to follow for her safety and to remove her obstruction of the other rescue.

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The trip back would have been better had we stayed on the other side of the river with the cover of the cliffs, but to cross and then back again, would have been doubly treacherous. So, we slogged, the co-leader in the front, and me taking up the rear to ensure the woman did not fall behind. This formation is safer if you cannot paddle three across. You dare not turn your head to look back without the danger of getting swamped. Slow, calm, and steady was the rule, even when it seemed we were paddling in place. Though the wind muffled communication, one couldn't miss the woman squawking her incessant justifications for leaving. Eventually another member of the group caught up to us and passed as the co-leader fell back to calm the woman. Perhaps out of frustration with her and a burgeoning of my self-preservation instinct, I left them behind me as I focused on following the other paddler. He and I made it back in enough time to clean our boats and load them on our cars before other members of the group straggled back, including the co-leader and boisterous woman. The leader and woman who fell behind earlier were both weary but fine. The leader and another paddler had to rig a towline to get her back.

Not one of my shining moments, I'll admit, especially knowing what being left behind feels like in my own life. This is one of my many issues as a socially awkward person, including raising a child who is in the autistic spectrum. Like my son, I grew up reticent, with limited friends, and spent a lot of time by myself, eschewing sports and social activities, though I have never been diagnosed on the spectrum. What worries me is if my son mirrors me in my envy of the neuro normal and the sloth that has me say 'fuck it all.' My son just graduated college and is working his first job as a music teacher in a private elementary school, a temp job for another teacher on leave. He is fine, except that he has not made any acquaintances with colleagues, and spends most of his time at home, weekends included, playing his trombone. Unlike what I did that day on the Hudson, I will never leave my son behind to fend for himself in life. Along the way in raising him, I have grown weary of regrets and self-recriminations on how I could have guided him to be more sociable. Maybe that is what I should leave behind.

Kayaking as a solo or a group activity says something about me. I've always taken to the nonteam sports, biking and swimming as well. I was uncomfortable with athlete culture's one-dimensional view of tough manhood, because I didn't fit the mold, although I was a good athlete when I applied myself. The basic types of kayaking, recreational and touring, which I've done for 12 years, suit both sides of my personality, and I have a boat for each. Recreational yaks are in the 8-12-foot range and meant mostly for calm lakes or rivers. Anything larger, 14 foot or more are the open water, day tripper variety meant to glide with less effort. Funny, the Hudson trip was both, starting one way and ending the other. Luckily, I am experienced enough to know that this was a trip for the larger boat. When I go in my rec boat, I'm usually with people who, after a mile or so, are ready to crack the first beer. My touring colleagues are the opposite, all business and safety. With all of the trips I took this past summer, group or solo, do you know what the best one was? Me, floating on a lazy river, a 90-degree day, listening to Chuck Prophet sing "It's a Summer Time Thing", feet up, while sucking a cold brew and vaping. I was the envy of anyone passing that day.

In general, I have found that life can be like it was early on the morning of that Hudson River paddle: little wind, favorable current, water like glass. That to me equates with the ignorance

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of youth, untainted by experience that teaches you to prepare for the unexpected wind to come. Thinking back, my youth was not worthy of a memoir in an age in which the word 'compelling' in that genre is equated with 'shock value'. I grew up uneventfully working class and all that it implies with a divorce and the broken individuals that it produces. The man today has on one shoulder the devil of pride saying, 'hey be proud, you're first generation college educated' and on the other the demon that says 'yes, but look at the gulf it has produced between you and some of your no-load siblings.' Before getting any deeper, what I do know at age 60, that the answers to life's questions lie in the muddled middle between the wind of philosophy and waves of experience.

Of course, the kayak trip provides a convenient metaphor, with the middle of a turbulent river in a speck of a boat is the most dangerous place to be and the only way to get through it is to keep paddling without looking behind. The goal is to get back to where you were before, because the shores are lined with rocks and treefall. I'm eschewing it as a model of the path to self-discovery, as I returned grateful for being safe, but with others eschewing me because I broke the cardinal rule to not leave anyone behind. No, I'm weary of knowing myself, and trying for a metaphor of self-acceptance. If exhaustion does not swamp anyone dumb enough to think they can stay fighting in the middle their entire life, loneliness will as anyone closest to you will get exhausted from constantly trying to rescue you from yourself.

Not that some form of self-knowledge on my part is not required, such as recognizing my sins of envy and sloth and the damage that both have wrought. I wonder if it the combination that infects anyone we call a 'slacker.' It is something I see, but find hard to accept, and in discussing it I feel like it puts me in the place of the woman on the river I got weary of and left behind. On envy, it is as I mentioned before, being socially awkward growing up, wanting to be among the privileged, in looks, money, and networks. In high school, you would have found me among whomever occupies the social classes of the goths and stoners today that tend to produce brainiacs, artists or, regrettably, the maladjusted. This is the sin I never want to admit and one that I stashed behind the false idol of being an astute social critic of those groups I most wanted to be among. The self-preservation view to have was they were always shallow and self-absorbed, whereas I found my own self-satisfaction in being deep or enlightened. In reality, I most desired their emotional felicity, perhaps just their joy.

Music and books seem to be the coin of the realm among the socially inept, perpetuating customers and creators of each. My son and I fit both of those molds, but each of us speaks in languages the other may not understand. Jazz is my thing, my son's peripherally, and I find free jazz to be the language I prefer, though my tastes are eclectic. My devices and shelves house a Ph.D. thesis of either musicology or psychology. The thesis statement would be about the search rather than the destination. The same could be said of books. Reading this essay should give some evidence of the creator in me. Where I can't reach my son's level is in the depth of music, expression and interpretation, he has reached. The kid has studied music from single notes up to composition, across instruments, but funneled it all through his trombone. A good critic, of which I am not, could write about emotion and intellection, maybe even intent, in the noise of his practice I hear several hours a day. Might there be some common ground when it is organized cacophony that draws me to free jazz. My vocabulary here is limited.

ONE HAND CLAPPING – DONALD R. VOGEL

Sloth itself is like being on a river without a paddle, unable to help anyone or myself, barely staying afloat. I wrote an essay about this, that was meant to be comical, but thankfully, was never published. Its premise is that of a guide giving a tour of a house of sloth with dust and disproportion visible due to regrettable attempts to fix things, and what it says about the owner. Missing is what sloth has wrought in relationships, because that isn't something I want to figure out (another example of sloth?). As that is like the rough part of the river, the muddled middle, I'll contemplate if I could have done more to ensure my son doesn't wind up like me: self-aware without self-acceptance. Bro-culture was the route my wife and I were most familiar with, and it involved sports. However, that stopped when my son, always uncaring about a game or interacting with the rest of the team, pulled down his pants in the outfield of a t-ball game. His answer to my later admonition, "I had an itch."

His issues were more glaring with scouts, with its emphasis on team building activities, the pinnacle of patriarchy which still dominates our society. I was a co-den leader with a surfer dude father. Most of my time was spent working to get my son to interact with the other boys in activities than it was helping with the overall activities themselves. I envied the felicity with which the surfer dude led the others. The kids loved him. Scouts, like t-ball, didn't last, but my wife and I were adamant that my son had to choose something to stay connected, and he relented on band. For a brief time, he flourished in drama, and one of my greatest memories is of him dancing joyfully with the chimney sweeps in his high school junior year production of *Mary Poppins*. Alas, that interest faded as he preferred the pit with the band. That has led him to where he is now, an artist in search of a teaching job. I spent his school age years failing to connect with others in our town, envying them and their lives of shared community, jocks, beauty queens, and socialites perpetuating their kind. I guess we were fated to do the same.

This is being borne out as we head into the next phase of our life. Right now, our generation's sons and daughters are transitioning from college to the working world and eventually, to their own families. I am not sure that is the trajectory for me with my son as the only progenitor. We see signs of our fate in the extended family: a brother in law in his late fifties living alone in the family home; a nephew turning 40 who lives solitary in his own home. This is just on my wife's side. You might be surprised that envy is still my sin here, because my family, represented by my youngest brother, is the example of those people who shouldn't spawn, but did anyway. The result is a niece, though she is the best thing about this no-load shit brother, who was mostly raised by my mother and smarter than her patriarch. She is currently living in her own home with her boyfriend. This is quite the opposite of her cousin, my son, who has never dated and is pathologically shy around women. Time and again I feel like the woman in the lagging kayak, watching the another version of me paddle ahead and out of sight.

Not that my son will never settle down and have a family, I just wonder how he would do it and how well. This is a kid who, because of his issues, is mostly non-conversational, garnering certain types of glances at group functions from people who don't know him. He gets annoyed when my wife has to ask a thousand questions just to get anything out of him. At most any gathering, he sits looking at his phone, or staring into space. You've heard the old saying that 'even when a fool is quiet, people will think he's wise', well for my son it seems to

ONE HAND CLAPPING – DONALD R. VOGEL

go 'even when a kind soul is quiet, people will think he's unfriendly.' Look, in the wake of so many lone wolf scenarios making the daily front page, I am grateful for who he is, though I sometimes worry if the sideways glances at him could launch a bad trajectory. At the very least, I see the possibility of a future with my wife and I silent among friends sharing pictures of grandkids.

I have to wonder if not caring what people think is a step toward self-acceptance or the rally cry of the slothful. Yet again, competing forces, like wind and water. I may never find an answer, but so what, I hit the lotto every time I get a belly laugh out of this kid. I have spent more time thinking about ways to get him to laugh, than about teaching him how to live life. The world educates you whether you ask for that or not. One gift of being the awkward outsider is seeing the absurdity of life and how that can also be funny. Thank you, Robin Williams, rest in peace. Add comedian to those who are spawned by our awkward crowd. Our best moments are when my son and I are on long drives and I'll say whatever comes to mind to see what clicks, and then riff from there. I'll leave it God to forgive me if there is a lowest common denominator at times, but I can get the kid going and responsive. Conversation it is not, but I am reassured by the fact that his finding the humor is an awareness of the reality that makes it absurd.

I am writing this at the beginning of the Holiday Season, and our just completed Thanksgiving dinner, out at a restaurant, was either the first, or one of the few times my wife, son, and I, ever ate it outside a home. It is an indication of how life whittles down the social networks you do have. Our parents, who used to host these Holidays, are gone, and most of our siblings have moved away. Some cousins are what remain of the extended families, whom we see at various times. This too, is like that day on the Hudson in which the larger group gets separated by circumstance, age, or skill. I'm torn between my envy of friends who have large families and ongoing traditions, and the part of me that has always liked less noise and crowds, and thus appreciates this stage of life. I am noticing how the commercial part of Christmas favors the former, and is unkind to those who are alone. One of our recent Holiday family traditions that will continue, is going to see a jazz or classical Holiday concert. When I hear those old carols, it is more about nostalgia than making memories. In line with the clichés we all adopt as coping mechanisms, I appreciate each moment more now.

I am naively hopeful that the pandemic provided direct insight into the life of the socially awkward, and for that crowd, my son and I, a break from the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). It helped me to mostly get over mine because how can you envy anything that is not happening. Schadenfreude also helped, as I remember at the beginning of the lockdown biking past homes that had set up food pantries for the less fortunate to come and take what they needed. I am most grateful I never had to do that, pray that it never happens, and also have a bit more perspective on life. My type of otherness is nothing compared to theirs, an a point at which I should consider dropping back to help those left behind. Still, I write this after yet another lone wolf shooting that killed five people in a Walmart. The shooter's suicide note alluded to being bullied and ridiculed for being socially awkward. Too many of these individuals fit that profile. I don't empathize with that person, nor do I have any answers on preventing the next one. I can only speak for myself and ask forgiveness for sloth and envy and pray against self-fulfilling prophecies.

ONE HAND CLAPPING – DONALD R. VOGEL

One person I have mostly forgotten about in my convenient paddling metaphor, is the trip co-leader who stayed behind with the struggling woman kayaker, as I forged ahead of them. Sometimes a life coping mechanism is allowing a paddler to come alongside and offer wisdom, while another is finding it in yourself to focus on what's ahead, as I did to keep pace with the kayaker who had surpassed us. If neither is your thing, know that in my sometimes-solitary world of books and music, I have found wisdom, grace, and empathy in the fellowship of unintentional communal moments one finds across years or distance, reminding me I am not alone. Reality is quite often not so altruistic, as I certainly wasn't that windy day on the river. Sometimes instinct takes over, whether that's our tendency toward selfishness or survival. Looking back is helpful, and other times it might take your life. Readers should listen to me, because there is a great tutorial video out there of me on another kayaking trip, that got 45,000 hits in an hour.

Me and my recreational buddies were on the Upper Carman's River on Long Island. We were heading back from paddling upstream against the current and the wind. It was midsummer and I had the requisite safety equipment. We three were headed downriver in a swift current, navigating lots of treefall and jagged rocks, exhausted from the first half of the trip. Fortunately, my buddy behind me caught my deft maneuvering on a Go Pro for posterity. We reached a curve in the river where the flow increased significantly. I was in the middle of the line of boats, and watched the man in front negotiate the treacherous bend. My turn. In the video you will see me, geared up enough to give kayak adventurers a boner, nonchalantly approach, as I was pushed sideways by the current into a tree limb hanging over the swirling stream. In that moment I figured, 'simple enough' and reached up to push way with my right hand.

Removing my hand from the paddle necessary to control the boat was the first stupid mistake in a confluence of dumbass one might study if you were to make this a lesson on what not to do. Remember, I said before that my recreational buddies were the ones to crack the first beer after the first mile. We did six miles that day. Anyway, the effect of me pushing with my right hand, instead of using the paddle to brace or navigate, created a force counter to the flow underneath, essentially capsizing me. You might think my expert survival skills from years of paddling kicked in and I made a seamless wet entry into my boat that would be the envy of the kayak community. Nope, I just stood. Outside of this being the first time I ever capsized in over a decade of paddling, the most embarrassing thing about the incident was that the river we were on averaged about two feet in depth. The video closes with me pumping furiously, and my buddies fore and aft taking bets on how many pumps it would take to dewater. The lesson here is simple, it just might be as stupid to make a kayak trip a metaphor for life.



*Featured
Authors*

Cathy Hollister



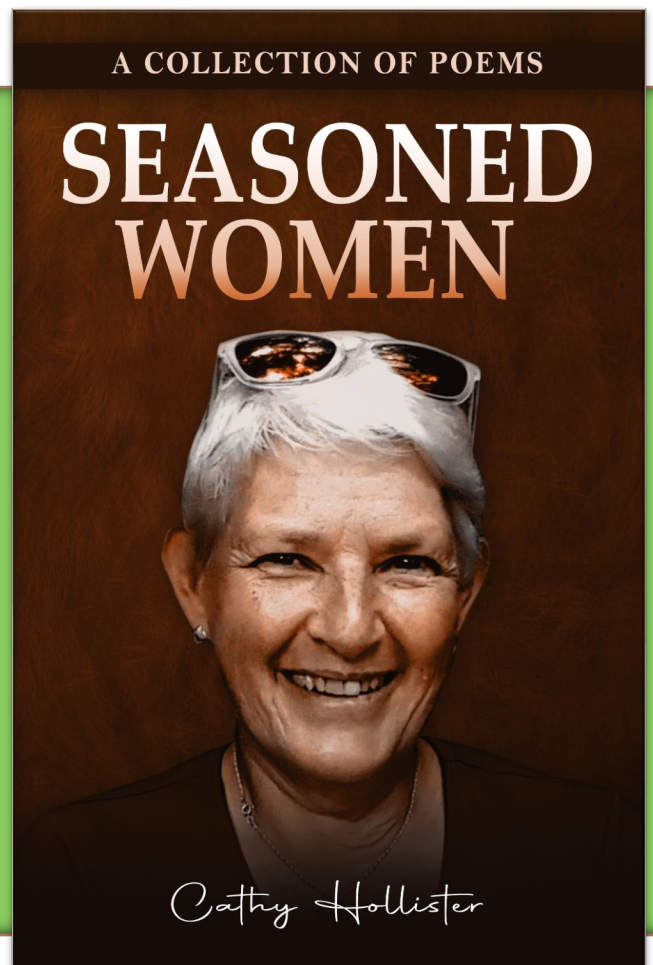
[Cathy's Website](#)

Cathy Hollister is a champion of ageist poetry. A retired public health professional, she fills her time with grandchildren, reading, hiking, and leading dances. When not writing you might find her on the dance floor enjoying the company of friends or deep in the woods basking in the peace of solitude. Her work has been in *Humans of the World Blog*, *Open Door Magazine*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Poet's Choice* anthologies, and others. Her new book ***Seasoned Women*** is available at [Poet's Choice](#). She lives in middle Tennessee; find her online at www.cathyhollister.com

CATHY HOLLISTER – AUTHOR FEATURE

<https://www.poetschoice.in/our-authors.php>

Growing older is full of opportunities. That is the philosophy expressed ***Seasoned Women: A Collection of Poems*** by Cathy Hollister. Poems in the book begin in autumn with contentment and reflection. Winter brings some harder times of depression though always tempered by hope. Spring and summer laugh, appreciate the wonders of nature, and the joys of family. A must for readers of a certain age, ***Seasoned Women*** calls to attention some benefits of growing older that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.



CATHY HOLLISTER – AUTHOR FEATURE

I ALWAYS WASH THE DISHES ALONE LIFE LESSON

Noise from the TV in the next room tries to reach
me
but it shies away from the task at hand.
It doesn't peek around the corner, lest it be
asked
to dry, to stack, to scrape.

My secret hand spa is mine alone.

Warm water softens stiff joints,
made stiffer by the unpaid bill on the counter;
a worry for another day.

The soft swish, swish of the sponge
whisks away the clotted remains of snubbed
vegetables
and gobbled mac & cheese.
The satisfying squeak of thumb on degreased
china
fills my fairy bubble,
my armor of chores
where evenly spaced plates,
the good little children,
line up clean, stately,
and cater to my every wish to behave, stand still,
and wait.

I'll never tell how much I enjoy this.

At six years old, in a new school,
first grade games taught him so much.
Be good, play fair, yes that's the rule,
not always easy to follow such.

First grade games taught him so much,
playing checkers with his friends.
Not always easy to follow such
straight roads. Turn to devious bends?

Playing checkers with his friends,
play fair and lose? Or to devise?
Straight roads turn to devious bends.
So tempting, victory the shiny prize.

Play fair and lose? Or to devise.
The man recalls his early years.
So tempting, victory, the shiny prize,
but squandered trust brought on fears.

The man recalls his early years
at checkers and their playground games.
But squandered trust brought on fears,
when he was left alone and shamed.

At checkers and their playground games,
honesty first took its roots.
When he was left alone and shamed,
he was not picked for Duck, Duck, Goose.
Honesty first took its roots.
He knew why, though it was cruel,
he was not picked for Duck, Duck, Goose,
at six years old, in a new school.

Scott Thomas Outlar



<https://17numa.com/>

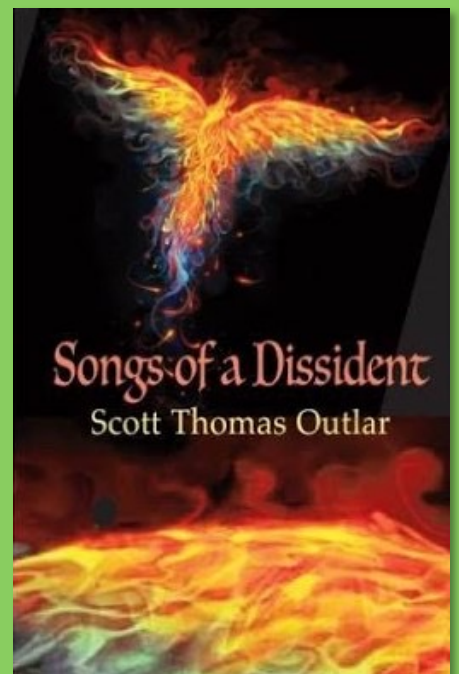
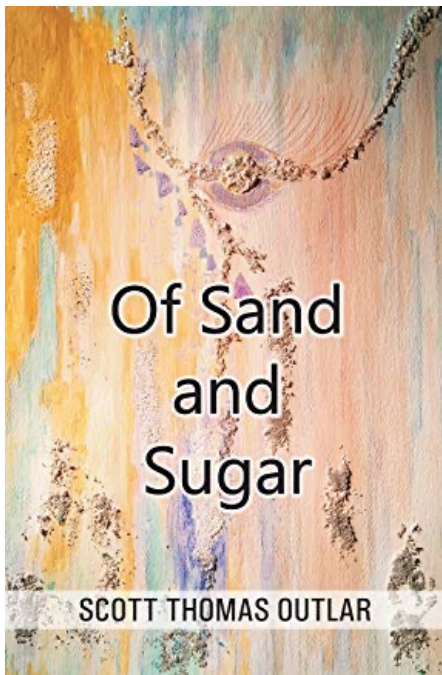
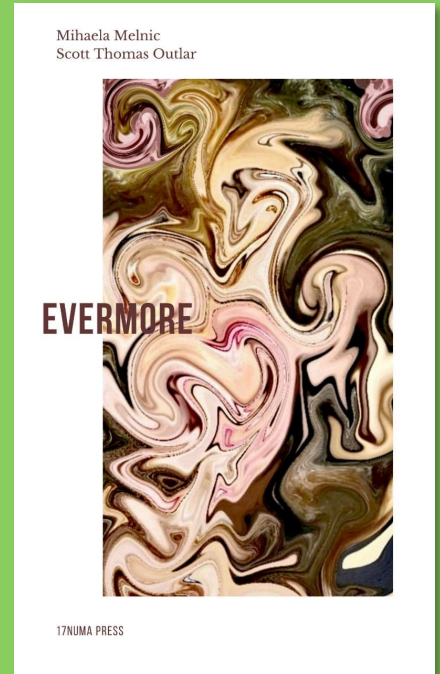
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Scott Thomas Outlar is originally from Atlanta, Georgia. He now lives and writes in Frederick, Maryland. His work has been nominated multiple times for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. More than 2,300 of his poems, essays, and short stories have been published in 400 different literary venues in the USA and internationally. He guest-edited the Hope Anthology of Poetry from CultureCult Press as well as the 2019-2023 Western Voices editions of Setu Mag. He is the author of seven books, including *Songs of a Dissident* (2015), *Abstract Visions of Light* (2018), *Of Sand and Sugar* (2019), and *Evermore* (2021 - written with co-author Mihaela Melnic). Selections of his poetry have been translated and published in Afrikaans, Albanian, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Cherokee, Dutch, French, Hindi, Italian, Kurdish, Malayalam, Persian, Serbian, and Spanish. He has been a weekly contributor at Dissident Voice for the past eight and a half years. More about Outlar's work can be found at [17Numa.com](https://17numa.com).

SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR – AUTHOR FEATURE



SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR – AUTHOR FEATURE

TRANSCENDING DEFINITIONS

Art is not an institution...
it is an inner fire
born out of those
whose eyes pierce deeply
into hidden burning beauty.

Art is not a class taught by Academia...
it is a holy vibration
pulsing through the veins
of those who sense the truth
of this world's perfect purity.

Art is not a transaction...
it is a soulful expression
that has no choice
but to be released
as a reflection of the Source.

Art is not a sales pitch...
it is an intense emotion
coupled with a vision
of crystalline transcendence
that ruptures open new dimensions.

Art is not yet ready for the grave...
it is a raging protest
against the mortal flesh
that sings the sweetest melody
about overcoming life's suffering.

REVELATIONS IN THE MARROW

The vastness of your scope
as I stare into the sky
reveals itself here and there
with glimpses into the absolute glimmer,
yet the mystery remains ineffable
in a context beyond that which
my primitive consciousness can grasp,
and I'm beginning to understand
that the seduction of your existential aloofness
is part and parcel
to the inherent romance in this experience of life.

I cannot come to know you fully
in the spaces of my mind,
but I can feel you in my guts,
in my heart, in my veins,
through my blood, in my bones,
down to the marrow.

These two open eyes
cannot glean your greatness,
but when they are closed
I can see dimensions
beyond this physical plane of existence,
and I can sense the raw power
which pulses from your source
as it radiates outward
to be divined by those who truly seek.

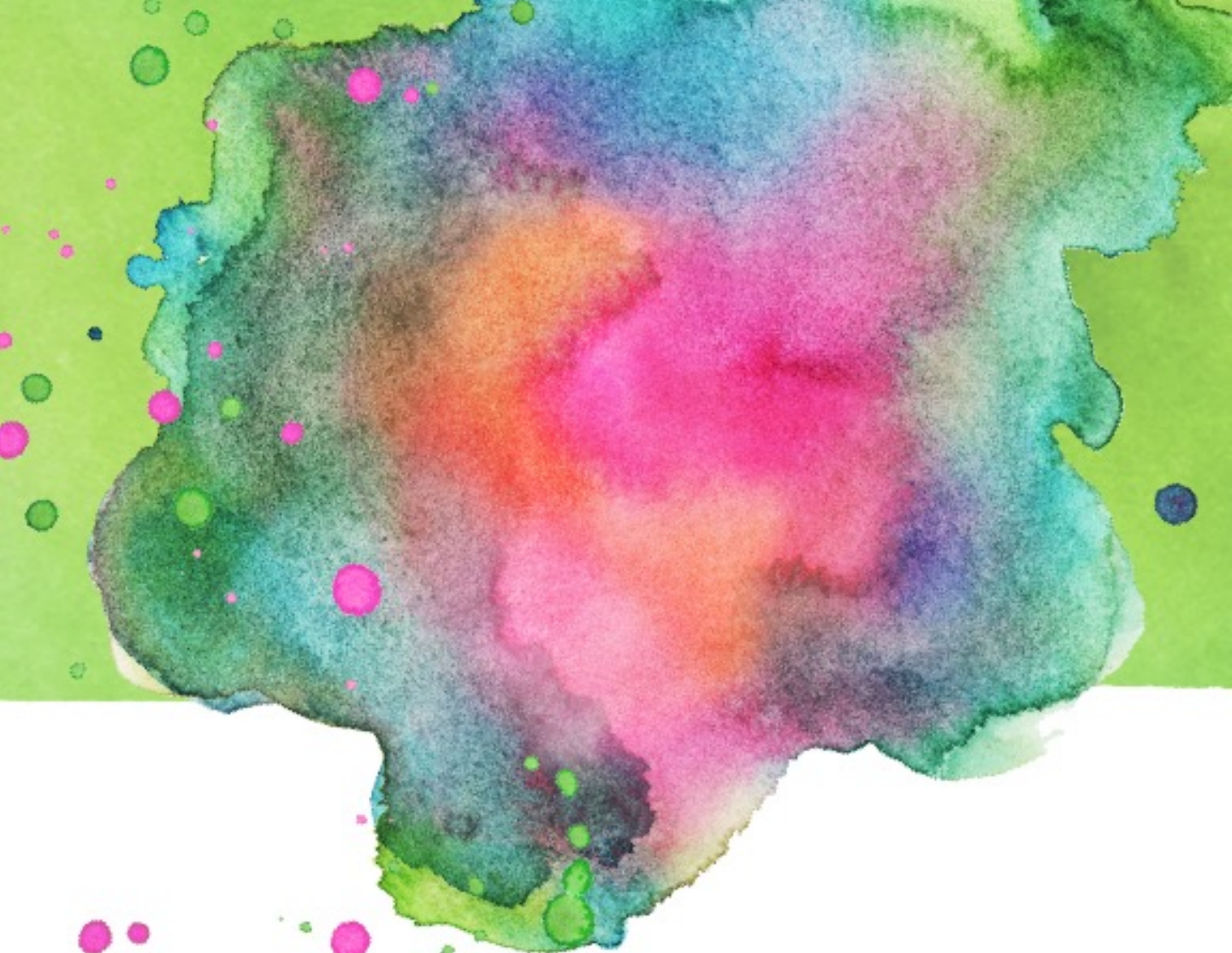
The names which you have been called by
throughout the ages
mean nothing to me at this point –
simple words babbled from broken tongues
cannot capture the purity of your meaning;
it is your essence
to which I am addicted,
and I will never cease
reaching toward your unconditional love
until every urgent craving in my soul
has been satiated by your presence.

SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR – AUTHOR FEATURE

BLUE PINES ELUSIVE

I consulted my stars
during a dry spell in the plains
they told me to lie down in the grass
make a blanket of the leaves
told me to build a fire
in the season when the sky grows cold
told me age is just a number
until it kills you
warm in the bones where the ache melts
told me the trees will always love you
but they alone cannot protect from the storm
told me that even saints will cheat
when they're trying to save the soul of a sinner
told me clocks of time are just illusions
so add another hour when you're feeling slow
I spoke to my ghosts
in the night with the moon hung low
they told me every choice leads to another
but don't forget to breathe

We're all looking
for something better
than what we are;
something deeper
than what we've felt;
something stronger
than what we've sensed;
something more honest
than what we've
been telling ourselves;
something more steady;
something more calm;
something more real
than what we've experienced;
something that never
winds up hurting us
in the end;
something sweet
that isn't addictive;
something alive
that doesn't die on us;
something powerful
that never loses its grace;
something that never runs dry;
something that never talks back;
something that comforts us
when we are hurting;
something that understands
the existential pain;
something that does not lack
in the moments
when we need it most;
something that is brave
when we are full of fear;
something that fits the bill;
something that naturally
smiles for the camera
without having to fake any cheese;
something rich without pretension;
something high without a kite.



● Our
Co-Creators

Kassie J Runyan



I've always had an affinity for reading and writing. I heard that every good reader is also a good writer. If that's true, then I'm in luck. I was always the odd kid walking down the hallway while reading a book... which may also explain my clumsiness... or had book(s) hidden in various places around the house, just in case I had a spare minute while I was supposed to be doing chores. Nothing has really changed all that much. My writing started in much the same way. Here and there, scribbled into notebooks, starting when I was younger. With the start of my first novel when I was 18. It was almost an escape from the real world at a time in my life where I needed it most. Eventually life got in the way and I put down the novel for over 10 years, picking it back up in my early 30's and finishing it. Poetry is my 'magazine writing.' When I have an emotion or an idea and I have to get it on paper but didn't have time to work it into a book, it came out as a song or a poem. That makes this endeavor with Mel even more special. It's something that we both love to write and read, and we get to help build others up while also getting some wonderful things to read. Best of both worlds!

I have three poetry collections out currently, as well as my debut novel, "The Death and Life of John Doe" All available wherever books are sold! These are for sale along with other reader/writer gifts on my website at [KassieJRunyan.com](https://www.KassieJRunyan.com)

<https://www.KassieJRunyan.com>

<https://www.Facebook.com/kassiejrunyan>

<https://www.Instagram.com/kirunyan>

<https://www.Twitter.com/kassandrerrunyan>

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvSEcLEfE196OE_Ya2LNNN3kjFp82Kt2

KASSIE J RUNYAN – CO-CREATOR

REFLECTION

In quiet moments, shine mirrors reflect,
Envy awakens, with cruel intent.
Faces fair and features divine,
A longing stirs, bitter discontent.

Their skin, a canvas of flawless allure,
Radiant hues that magic the eye.
Each curve and contour flawlessly blessed,
A beauty that leaves me asking why.

Envy whispers my weary thoughts,
Comparisons formed, a relentless cascade.
Their smiles, sunbeams, effortlessly bright,
While I, in shadows, find myself afraid.

Oh, to possess that elusive charm,
The grace of those more fair than I.
A siren's song, a tempting illusion,
Tugs my heartstrings with an envious sigh.

But envy, a treacherous game,
That blinds the truth and what we see.
For beauty lies not solely in appearance,
But in the spirit running free.

Each face, unique, a tale waiting to be sung,
A symphony of strengths, vulnerabilities untold.
No longer shall I measure against their light,
For I am a constellation, my own story to unfold.

Embrace the beauty, unbounded and true,
Let the monster relinquish its hold.
Celebrate the diversity that colors our world,
For prettiness fades, but inner radiance, bold.

So rise above this envious strife,
Embrace self-love with an inner grace.
For true beauty blooms in authenticity,
In every unique soul, finding its place.

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JOHN DOE – KASSIE J RUNYAN

<https://www.kassierunyan.com/thedeathandlifeofjohndoe>

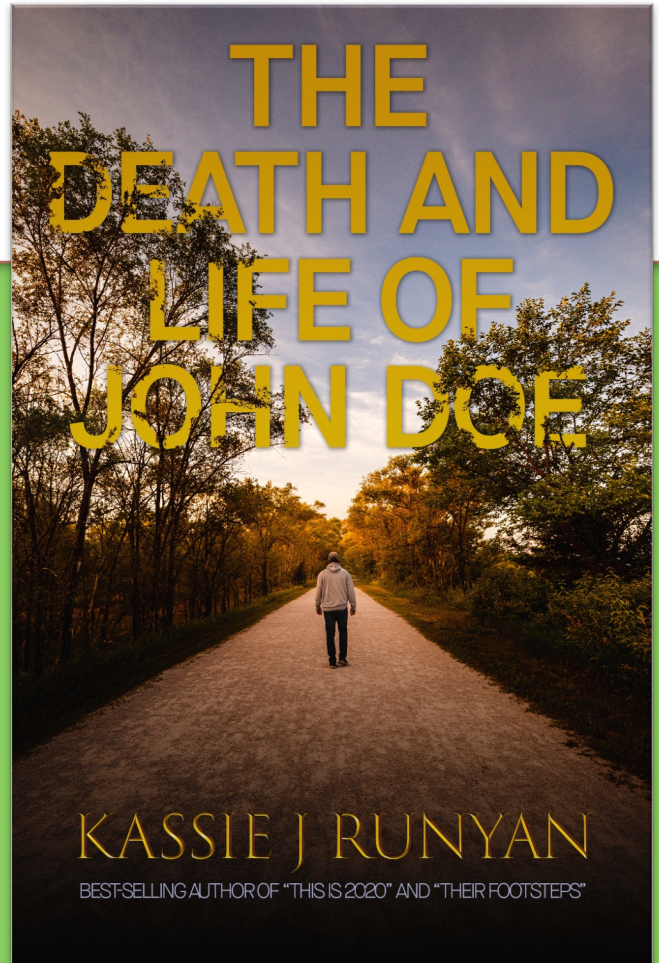
From best-selling poet of "This is 2020" and "Their Footsteps," Kassie J Runyan, comes her debut novel, "The Death and Life of John Doe," which takes a deep look into trauma, the human psyche, and the struggle of living on the street.

Our nameless nomad walks out the front door of his suburban home, leaving his life behind. Not knowing what it is he's looking for... or what it is he's running from. He closes the door and walks into a world full of the pain and joy that waits for him with each step. He keeps moving forward; driven by a desire to find a reason for his life and to discover his forgotten past. What he wasn't prepared for were the dreams.

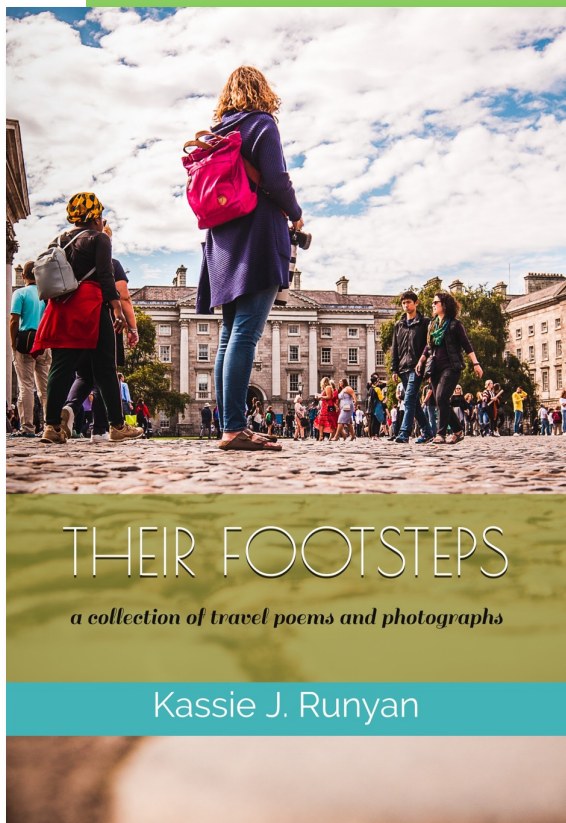
What is your name?

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- Joni Rachell, Author



KASSIE J RUNYAN – CO CREATOR



<https://www.amazon.com/Their-Footsteps-collection-travel-photographs/dp/1735514020/>

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1735514004/>



Mel Haagman

I am a special needs teacher from the UK. I live by the sea and love nothing more than walking along the beach with a coffee from my favourite café. I have always loved reading and writing poetry and I am so excited to begin a new venture with Kassie on OpenDoor Poetry magazine.

I have written three books. My first book, 'Open Heart Poetry' was self-published in 2019. This book of poems aims to break the stigma attached to living with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. The first part focusses heavily on mental health and the second part contains more relatable, light-hearted poetry about a range of everyday life subjects.

My second book, Lexical Lockdown: Poems about Binge-Watching, Exercise Mishaps, Fridge-Surfing and other Pandemical Pursuits was written throughout the UK lockdown. It is written in a diary format, chronologically capturing the daily updates from the pandemic in rhyme as well as the difficulties we all faced being in lockdown. It is written in a raw, honest and at times comical way. Lexical lockdown will be a historical keepsake that accurately portrays the challenging times we have faced and are still facing.



<https://www.Facebook.com/girlontheedge90>

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LOST IN MIND: FOUND AT HEART – MELANIE HAAGMAN

<https://www.amazon.com/Lost-Mind-Found-At-Heart/dp/191491354X/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Girlontheedge90/>

Lost in Mind; Found at Heart really did write itself. Every time I feel a strong emotion, whether it be a negative or a positive one, I find nothing more therapeutic and satisfying than writing a poem about it and of course they have always got to rhyme!

Poetry for me is an innate coping mechanism to deal with whatever life throws at me. I do my best to try and write honestly and always aim to end with an uplifting line. This book reflects that no matter how hard things get, when we are truthful and transparent with our emotions, we can make meaningful connections with others who will in turn help us to get through. As well as learning how to get back up when we fall and realising that this is how we learn, develop, and grow.

It has never been more important to speak out about mental health and the similar struggles that we are facing. I hope that these poems can help others to know that they aren't alone with their feelings. This book is divided into subsections to quickly help you find the perfect poem to get you through the day. Whether you need advice, a little injection of humour, a poem about feelings, down-days, or even friendship! I hope that you can laugh, cry, smile, relate to and most importantly enjoy this book.



MEL HAAGMAN – CO-CREATOR

Lexical Lockdown

*Poems about binge-watching, exercise mishaps,
fridge-surfing and other pandemical pursuits*



*Creative juices are flowing,
I can only think in rhymes,
This happens sporadically
At very stressful times.*

Melanie Haagman

<https://www.amazon.com/Lexical-Lockdown-binge-watching-fridge-surfing-pandemical-ebook/dp/B08D6RPYY7/>

<https://www.amazon.com/Open-Heart-Poetry-Melanie-Haagman/dp/1527238407/>

Open Heart Poetry



By Melanie Haagman

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AUTUMN ISSUE = FOLKLORE & FAIRY TALES

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