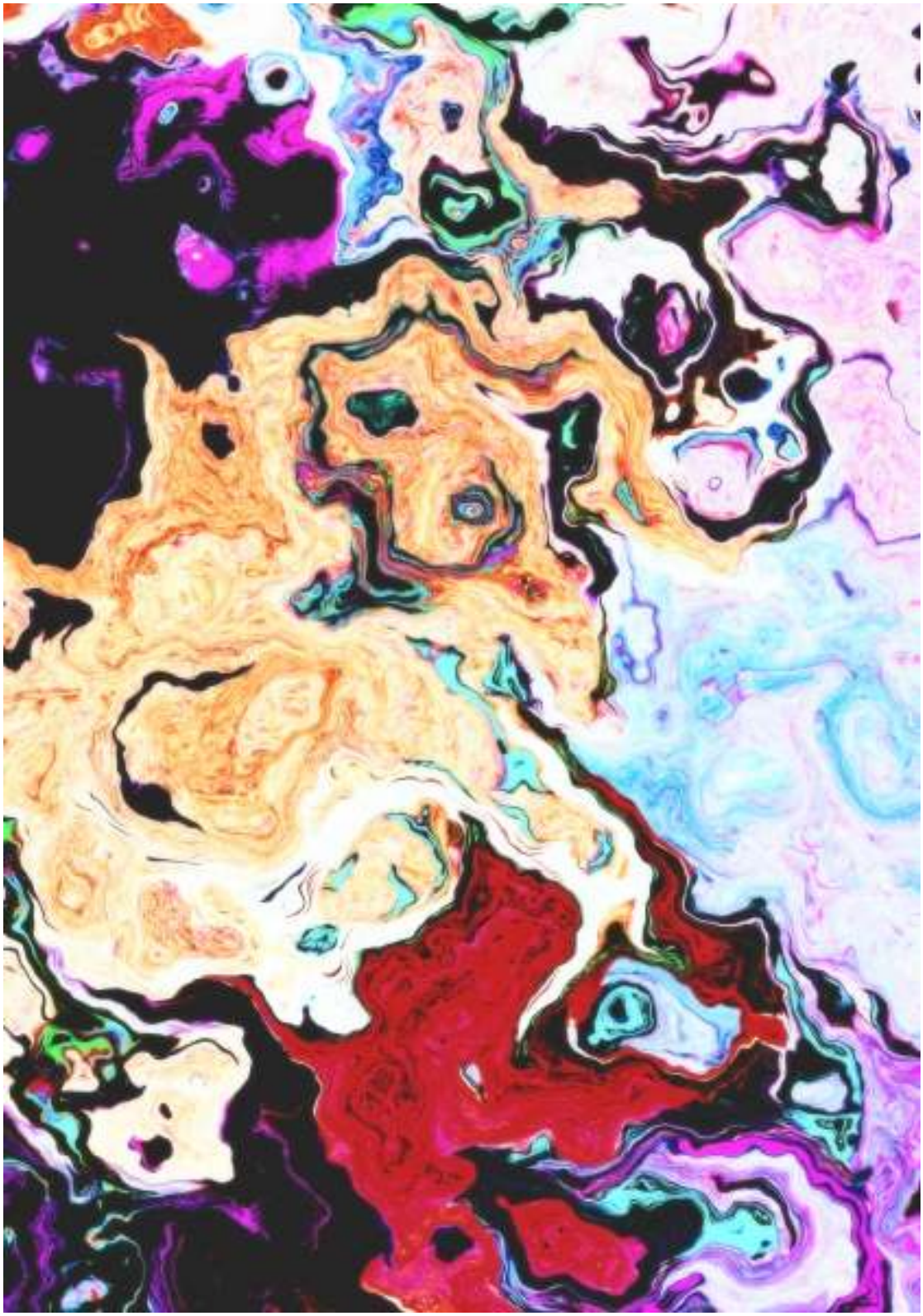

Diverse Voices Quarterly
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http://www.diversevoicesquarterly.com/submission-guidelines

Editor's Note

If I had to describe what we publish in a sentence, it would be:
We publish stories and poems that expose the darker aspects of relationships, while shedding light on life's complexities. This issue lives up to that and so much more. Also, a nice balance of new writers with some who are established—that always makes us happy.

Enjoy!

Krisma

Diverse Voices Quarterly, Volume 4, Issue 14

Cover art: *TwirlGiggleDizzy and the Decades Fade Away* by Amy Tolbert

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Nicole Alexander received her MFA in creative nonfiction from Antioch University–Los Angeles. Because she struggled with self-expression when young she often felt misunderstood; her love for memoir was born of the desire to be heard and understood. Her writings have been featured on Open Salon's Editor's Choice, and her ongoing blog can be found at http://open.salon.com/blog/nicoleathena.

Allie Marini Batts is a graduate of New College of Florida, meaning she can explain deconstructionism, but cannot perform simple math. Her work has appeared in over eighty literary magazines her family hasn't heard of. Batts calls Tallahassee home because it has great trees to climb, and conveniently, her husband happens to live there too. She's pursuing her MFA degree in creative writing through Antioch University–Los Angeles and…oh no! it's getting away! To read more of Batts' work, please visit http://kiddeternity.wordpress.com/, or to read her book reviews and literary blogging, visit http://www.bookshelfbombshells.com.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. His original plays and translations of Molière, Aristophanes, and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway and toured colleges and outdoor performance venues. He currently lives in New York City, where he's busy writing fiction and poetry, which have appeared in numerous literary magazines. His collection of poems, *Expectations*, is available for purchase on Amazon.

Anders Benson lives in the mountains of western Maine with his wife and their menagerie of pets. He loves to be outdoors and is a state-certified wilderness survival instructor. His wanderlust has led him to spend time in North America, Europe, and North Africa. He has held a variety of occupations including welding and steel fabrication, pet care service, and railroad car mechanics. He enjoys hiking, skiing, snowboarding, long-range marksmanship, and whitewater canoeing. He spends his evenings reading about history and theoretical physics. He incorporates varied aspects of his personality in his writing, from his wry sense of humor to his interest in psychology.

Kevin Brown is a professor at Lee University and an MFA student at Murray State University. He has one book of poetry, *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009) and two chapbooks: *Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) and *Holy Days: Poems* (winner of Split Oak Press Chapbook Contest, 2011). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again* (Wipf and Stock, 2012), and a forthcoming book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*. His poems have appeared or are

forthcoming in *The New York Quarterly*, *REAL: Regarding Arts and Letters*, *Folio*, *Connecticut Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Stickman Review*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Palimpsest*, among other journals. He has also published essays in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, *InsideHigherEd.com*, *The Teaching Professor*, and *Eclectica*.

Samantha Chong is in seventh grade, attending middle school. This is her first published piece, and she is very excited about it. In addition to writing, she likes music.

Gail Eisenhart's poems have appeared in *The New Verse News, Assisi, Cantos, Generations of Poetry, New Mirage,* and in *Flood Stage: an anthology of St. Louis Poets*. A retired executive assistant, she works part-time at the Belleville (IL) Public Library and travels in her spare time, collecting memories that show up in new poems.

Kenny Fame is a African-American poet who was born in Paterson, New Jersey, but he currently calls the village of Harlem in NYC his home. He was a recent graduate of Cave Canem's 2011 & 2012 Poetry Conversations Workshop classes. He was the winner of The Tenth National Black Writers Conference Award for Poetry. He has been a featured Poet of the Week on the *Poetry Super Highway* during the week of January 2–8, 2012. His work has appeared in numerous journal both nationally & internationally: *Steel Toe Review* # 7& 10, *River Lit #5*, *The Fine Line, Emerge Literary Journal # 1, Rufous Salon* (Sweden), *Milk Sugar, Prompt Literary Magazine, De La Mancha, Anastomoo*, *ken*again*, *Assisi Journal*, *African-American Review*, *Gloom Cupboard,Black Magnolias Literary Journal # 6.2 & The New Verse News* on December 18, 2011.

Sarah Fonseca is a writer living in south Georgia. A 2012 Lambda Literary fellow, her work has appeared in *The Q Review, Lavender Review, The Miscellany*, and in the digital pages of *Autostraddle* and *BtchFlcks*.

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Robert H. Guard attended Ohio University where he studied poetry writing under Wayne Dodd and Bin Ramke. While at OU, Robert was fortunate to enjoy the influences of prominent visiting writers and writers in residence including Stanley Plumly, Louise Glück, and Carolyn Kizer. Upon graduation he became an advertising copywriter and has worked in the marketing field for the majority of his career. He has completed two tours of "boot camp" with the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop where he studied with David Baker and

Roseanna Warren. Guard's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Argestes, The Chaffin Journal, descant, Eclipse, Nimrod, Zone 3, Quercus Review, Sycamore Review, California Quarterly, Harpur Palate, Milk Money,* and numerous other publications. He resides in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Eileen Hennessy, a native of Long Island, now lives in and loves New York City. Translator of foreign-language documentation and books on art history into English from several other West European languages. Adjunct associate professor in the translation studies program at New York University. Poems and short stories have been published in numerous literary journals, including *Confluence*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Paintbrush*, *The Paris Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, and others. *This Country of Gale-force Winds*, a collection of her poems, was published by NYQ Books in 2011.

Lisa Hill-Corley is an MFA candidate at George Mason University, where she is currently working on a novel for her thesis. Recently, Hill-Corley was the fiction editor for GMU's *So to Speak* and was a finalist in the 2011 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award through *Crab Orchard Review*. Her work has also appeared in *The Oklahoma Review*. She lives in northern Virginia with her husband and two children.

Peycho Kanev is the editor-in-chief of Kanev Books. His poems have appeared in more than 600 literary magazines, such as: *Poetry Quarterly, Evergreen Review, Hawaii Review, The Monarch Review, The Coachella Review, Third Wednesday, Black Market Review, The Cleveland Review, In Posse Review, Mascara Literary Review*, and many others. Kanev has won several European awards for his poetry, and he is nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. His poetry collection *Bone Silence* was released in September 2010 by Desperanto Publishing Group. A new collection of his poetry, titled *Requiem for One Night*, will be published by Desperanto Publishing Group in 2012.

Sue Fagalde Lick spent many years as a journalist in California before moving to Oregon, where she now concentrates on poetry and creative nonfiction. She earned her MFA at Antioch University–Los Angeles and has published several books of prose, including *Stories Grandma Never Told, Shoes Full of Sand,* and *Childless by Marriage*.

Gene McCormick lives, writes, and paints in Wayne, Illinois, where 12" spikes have been driven into and through his feet to keep him from ever discovering the big city of Chicago, where they have sidewalks, taxicabs, and fast food and women.

Zarah C. Moeggenberg is a poet living in the upper peninsula of Michigan. She is an MFA poetry candidate at Northern Michigan University where she is associate poetry editor of *Passages North* and teaches composition courses. She

has been published in *The Sampler, Cultivating a Sense of Place, Through the 3rd Eye,* and *Fusion Magazine*, among others.

Shea Moore is studying English education at Southeast Missouri State University. She has been writing since she was six, but has only recently gained the courage to aspire to be a published author. This is her first publication.

Jed Myers lives, writes, and makes music in Seattle. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner, Nimrod International Journal*, *Golden Handcuffs Review, Atlanta Review, Quiddity, The Monarch Review, Fugue*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the Rose Alley Press anthology *Many Trails to the Summit*, and elsewhere. He is a psychiatrist with a therapy practice and teaches at the University of Washington.

Lynne T. Pickett has a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism from Syracuse University. She was the managing editor for *Adweek Magazine*'s *Marketer's Guide to Media*. She has read her short stories for Chi Chi's Word Parlor at the West Hollywood Book Fair in Los Angeles, California. She is also a trained actress from Broadway's Circle in the Square Theatre School. Lynne lives in Burbank, California, with her husband, daughter, two cats, and a hamster named "Hammy."

Kat Stromquist is an MFA student at the University of New Orleans' Creative Writing Workshop. Previously, her writing has appeared at *Gambit Weekly*, the literary magazines *Crescent City Review, Espresso Ink, Ellipsis,* and *Gambling the Aisle*, the websites NOLADefender.com and NOLAlicious.com, and elsewhere.

Christine Sullivan earned her bachelor of arts in English/creative writing from William Paterson University. Her hands were always ink-smudged and constantly smelled of eraser; when she wasn't smelling books, she was writing in notebooks, on the backs of business cards, on napkins, and sometimes toilet paper tubes. In 2010, her poem, "Ars Poetica," won High Honorable Mention in William Paterson's Talerico Poetry Contest, while "Sir Christopher" and "The Marionette Who Found Da Vinci's Ear" both won Honorable Mention. Her work is forthcoming in *Folly*.

Having mostly abandoned art for several months now in order to make time for more "practical" pursuits such as getting a college degree, **Amy Tolbert** is struggling to find a way to fit more art back into her life, because staying sane is practical too. A digital gallery of the works she created before succumbing to the demands of practicality can be found on http://amy_tolbert.imagekind.com/.

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NO INTERRUPTIONS

The phone is off the hook,
quaint saying that.
These days, cell phones
don't have hooks, but
they do have off buttons.
I've silenced the e-mail,
darkened the computer,
iPad, iPod, Kindle, Nook,
off, off, all turned off.
All I hear is the fire
crackling out orange heat,
the old dog snoring
in a patch of sunlight,
and my breath moving in and out.
Pen poised, I listen.
Okay, God, I'm ready.

—Sue Fagalde Lick

THE STALKER

I paw her knee and apply pressure.
She's new here; there's a lot I can tell her.

She ignores me…

so I take up residence at her feet. Stubborn as a cowlick,
she balks at control, avoids eye contact—

so I leap, bridge her knees and flood her lap.
She ignores my mew, shoos me from the porch.

Fool; she fumbles through life, thinks I don't see
but everywhere she goes, there I am…

watching.

—Gail Eisenhart

THE GOOD DOCTOR

by

J Carlo Gorgone

Dr. Allen Schoenberg was an upstanding gentleman. He always went to Temple and never charged extra for house calls. The good doctor had gone to Harvard Medical School and completed his residency at Columbia Presbyterian in Manhattan.

On Friday nights he would always leave work early and take the “R” to Brooklyn where he lived with his wife, Nora, and two children, David and Ruth. On Saturday nights he would spend hours playing board games with his children until it was time for them to go to bed. Then he would have sex with his wife. And it was good sex. Hard, wet, passionate. And on Sundays his wife would wake him up with a blow job. And he would come all over the sheets. And Nora would have to change them.

And then, on Sunday nights, he would go into work to “check on the residents.” And that’s what he told Nora and that’s what he told David and that’s what he told Ruth. And he would take the train to some dark neighborhood in lower Manhattan. And he would enter a dark apartment building. And he would open a wooden apartment door. And he would see her bloody lips and he would see her mangled hair and he would see her bruised arms and he would see her tattered lingerie. And he would take her to bed and he would fuck her and he would come, and so would she, and no one would change the sheets.

KWANSABA: PRUNING HYDRANGEAS

Transsexual's body found floating, in a backed-
up, sewage canal. Climbing vines were dismantled,
chopped down, to the root. Smashed out
cigarette butts, rotting beneath: hands & arms
flesh. Half-used lipstick, cracked face-powder
compact, eye-makeup, concealer—and her bloated
body—became washed up litter, for cats.

—Kenny Fame

IT COULD HAVE BEEN ANYBODY

by

Christine Sullivan

She was coming down, so she ran in and locked the door behind her. *Looking for a fun night? Call 551-958-8475.* Stumbling to get her hand in the pocket of her painted-on jeans, she brushed up against the makeshift museum of modern art. *Lookin-smear-75.* Whatever. It wasn't like she was actually going to call. She sat down on the cracked-vomit-crusted toilet and hoped no one else was there to witness her affair. She couldn't hear a damn thing besides the pulsing beat that was clobbering the rusty door—"Let me in," she heard it scream. Fuck it. She unrolled the tissue she managed to take out of her pocket and placed it on her lap. Just to make sure, she bent over, looked to the right—no legs, and to the left—no legs. Good.

She took it like she always did—with a *drip drip* and an "ahhhhh!" She sucked the excess from her arm and threw her vision finder in the tin that had "For Sanitary Napkins" written on it. Licking her lips, she sat upon the piss-glistened seat, waiting for the entrance of her Imaginarium to appear. She noticed a message etched on the stall door that rattled off its hinges: *keep it cool at the freak show.* There it laid, directly in front of her orangish-yellow kind of throne, the entrance to her forest land of trick slides. She stumbled through the entranceway, tearing off her clothes in the process.

Four walls went up around her, four white walls, glistening with the desire to be transformed. She placed her cheek to one of the walls, her pupils dilated, and inhaled…exhaled…inhaled…ex…exhaled—the hair on her arms stood on their heads. "Welcome back, Mommy," the walls screamed, sprouting fingers. This was her happy place because she lost it; the craving she birthed was exhilarating, she could barely keep a breathing pace with it. Inhale… inhale…ex…inha…ex…exhale. She threw herself on the floor and tried to catch up with her breath, but he was too fast. "Wait," she shouted, "wait for me." He was reverberating off the walls, running his hands over her body, licking her; she grabbed him. "Hold my hand through the black light," she said. He closed his eyes and held her tight; she couldn't breathe when he spoke.

"Girl, you look good enough to eat," he whispered, inhale … inh .. in . exhale. He threw her in a corner and told her to wait, for he'd be right back, then he disappeared. She sat, hunched over; her eyes forced open and her body dissolving into the floor, she had let go of her breath. She knew he wasn't gone for good though; he'd be back, or she hoped he'd be back. Inhale… he appeared with a box of paint tubes; she inched closer. Inhale…exhale… she

heard what sounded like a garbageman, right outside her Imaginarium Box, clank two garbage can lids together. He held out a tube for her; she took it and squirted the yellow into the palm of her hand. She heard the clanking of the lids again—*CLANK*, she left the imprint of her hand on one of the walls.

"Touch me," she heard, dribbling from underneath her box, out of the cracks of the floor. It sounded like The Piano Man was making love to his keys, stomping his foot to the beat, as a reminder for her to catch her breath. Inhale…exhale…inhale…in. She looked over at Breath and grabbed his hand. "Take your time," he whispered, handing her a green tube. She heard a taxicab in the distance blaring his horn; she was in a trance. Green—*smack*, pink—*clank clank*, blue—*honk*, red—*smack clank*. She ran through the room, throwing her body against the walls. "Mommy," they continued to scream, grabbing at her body with their fingers, anytime they had a chance. She was a walking rainbow, an alluding rainbow, an illusionary rainbow, but a rainbow nonetheless, puppeteered by the sounds that were pushing themselves into her ear canals.

She grabbed a handful of these noises and shoved them into her mouth, swallowing. She was still hungry and her babies were still calling for her. She whirled around the room, tap dancing to the echoing of a trumpet, the one coming from a small crack in one of the walls. Inhale…inhale…ex…inha…ex… exhale, she was slipping and sliding on the drool that was seeping from the walls. "Feed us," they were telling her, "Mommy, feed us." She heard them, she felt them, she knew. She picked up more paint tubes and showered her body with colors, with feelings, with freeness, and shook her body all along these walls, as to not leave a single white spot on her children. "Mommy knows your hungry, babies. Don't worry.

"Feel the freeness. Feel it. It's almost here." Inhale…exhale…inhale… exhale, her babies were falling right before her, landing at her collaged feet. She picked up one of the tubes and shoved the remaining paint into her vein. She took it with an *ah!* and let it out with an *oh!* She tore down the rest of her surviving babies and jumped onto the sidewalk of her Imaginarium Kingdom. She saw the garbageman clanking his lids together, swing dancing. She caught a glimpse of The Piano Man in his window and yelled up at him, "Keep making love to those keys." She found the taxi that blared its horn and shook the driver's hand. "Keep making music, babies, and one day we'll all be free. I promise," she shouted.

She turned to Breath…inhale…exhale, "Tell me you need me." He grabbed her face and forced himself down her throat. She awoke half-naked and handcuffed to her cracked-vomit-crusted throne. She made out a human silhouette through her blurred vision.

"What…what happened?" she asked.

"We might've fucked, not really sure," he responded.

All that was left was a smudged number on the back of the bathroom door and a distant memory of freedom.

Sleeping Beauty, Retold
—Gene McCormick

SLEEPING BEAUTY, RETOLD

It's black, it's quiet, nothing active: not people,
not cars, not weather and least of all,
not the ash-blond debutante in a coma
medically induced for a drug overdose.

The hospital's midnight shift has disappeared
to dark corners as a man off the streets,
who would be unknown to all regardless,
enters room 612-C/Trauma Wing, looking hard
at the inert body in the adjustable hospital bed.
Slowly taking off his wet raincoat,
he folds it carefully across the chair before
getting in bed with the woman,
touching her every inch, his breath shallow as
his face presses against hers; her eyes flutter.

Alarms sound throughout the sixth floor
as the woman slowly raises on one elbow,
the crumpled sheet sliding off the bed.
The man narrows his eyes, leaves a note,
shakes out his raincoat, and exits
down the fire escape.

—Gene McCormick

FAM

by

Nicole Alexander

My mom flutters around as we wait for the company to arrive. A small gathering to celebrate her new home. A supposed fresh start.

The phone rings. It's my dad. He's just heard my brother's best friend's name on the local news. He's asking questions we can't answer:

"Where's Matthew?"
"When was the last time you saw him, talked to him?"
"Did I do this to him?"

My brother, Matthew, is nearly nine years my junior. I changed his diapers and bathed him and chased him around the house wearing a creepy Halloween mask that caused him to well up with tears and sob dramatically. I thought this was adorable and got a kick out of whipping off the mask and announcing: "Don't be scared. It's only me!" Only to put it back on a minute later and cause more tears. I was mean.

My mom and I turn the television on with rapidly beating hearts. We hear the newscaster pronounce Chris's last name incorrectly and I silently correct him. The mispronunciation pisses me off. I loathe the newscaster's stiff, gelled hair, the tincture of excitement in his voice as he announces that this is the biggest drug bust ever in Westchester County.

Seventy-five thousand dollars in cash.

Nearly a kilo of cocaine.

A loaded handgun.

An assault rifle.

A four-month police investigation has concluded, and Chris is going to jail. "This twenty-year-old drug dealer apparently had no fear of getting caught," the newscaster is saying. I know this isn't true. I picture Chris as he looked when he and Matt were kids, with his backpack on.

Matt has been staying at Chris's place sporadically, as far as we know. But we don't know where Matt is most of the time.

He is everywhere and nowhere.

When he stays over my mom's new place, a freshly renovated co-op with high ceilings, lots of sunlight and charm, it looks like a storm has passed through: damp towels litter the floor, drawers are left open, food wrappers are discarded everywhere but the garbage. I watch myself tidying and organizing, becoming my mother, when he's around. I put things back into place. As if this is really possible.

We tiptoe around Matt, scared to aggravate him further. Dark ink marks the insides of his forearms. Eyes, once bright, now hide in their sockets, darkness encircling, in a face that is all angles and sharpness. He is constantly on his cell phone, involved in hours of screaming matches with his girlfriend. He has been through about five cells phones in less than a year, each phone the victim of some bizarre accident. He always has an elaborate story, and there is always someone or something to blame.

I turn my head to look at my mother who's sitting next to me on the antique Victorian style chair she recently had reupholstered in a glossy, feminine fabric. She adores old things: items that hold stories and secrets. Furniture is plopped down haphazardly in the living room until she decides how she wants to arrange things.

We sit in disarray.

We are both silent.

My mother has her hands clasped together covering her mouth: "I don't think I can handle this."

I don't respond.

Emotions too big to contain, too big to be cleaned or organized away.

We leave messages for Matt who isn't picking up his phone. We try not to sound as frantic as we feel. Matt and Chris have been friends, "fam" as they refer to each other, since they were kids. Matt practically lived at Chris's house when they were in high school.

The newscaster announces that the drug business was run out of Chris's parents' mansion (although there have been no charges brought against them) and his own apartment. It occurs to me that Chris's family lives in a big colonial, but not a mansion, and I think about the ugly side of media, how someone's tragedy is fodder for entertainment.

A few months earlier, Chris picked Matt up from our aunt's house. He

was dressed nicely, conservatively. Told my aunt and uncle with a light chuckle that he was "one of Matt's clean-cut friends." As if to say that they didn't have to worry about Matt when he was with him. In contrast to Matt's baggy, careless jeans, his audacious ink, Chris's preppy style, his pants that actually fit, seemed to be a relief to my mom, aunt and uncle. Chris seemed to genuinely want my family to like him.

It hits me hard that all these boys really want is to fit in, to feel that they belong somewhere. I'd overheard Matt and his friends joking, "We do big things." It was their catchphrase. I didn't know what it meant but now I understand. My brother, a nineteen-year-old high school dropout, feels insignificant. Danger and drugs have become his identity. Once, when I cautioned him that a certain situation might be dangerous, he told me, "If anything, *we're* the dangerous ones." As if this were something to be proud of.

Matt has always been a risk taker. It took me forever to learn how to ride my pink bike with the floral banana seat, but my brother just jumped on his bike one day and took off. No wobbling, no practicing, no help. "There he goes," my mom and I laughed, stunned that he was gliding away from us. When Matt got a little older, he soared on his bike over a "jump" he and the neighborhood boys had built and landed on his face, cracking his front teeth in half, lengthwise. He came racing home, barging through the front door, hands covering his mouth, red surging through his fingers. His two front teeth were sliced in half, jagged and pointy like Dracula. That didn't deter him from trying it again several weeks later. He fell again, re-breaking the same teeth.

My mother turns off the TV, rationalizing that Matt must not have been with Chris because there was no mention of him on the news; wouldn't they reveal his name if he had been there, if he'd any connection to it?

"I think so," I respond.

I had seen strange appliances and gadgets in my brother's backpack, cringed to think what he might be involved in but never told him I was worried about him. I don't know why.

Now my mother is busying herself in the kitchen, separating herself from me with walls. I hear a soft animal-like cry leave her like a sigh, an attempt at some semblance of relief she cannot reach.

My mom's new kitchen reminds me of an old-fashioned ice cream parlor: black-and-white checkered tiles; small pale green table with antique, wrought iron ice cream chairs. This is fitting because ice cream is my mom's favorite dessert. When I was growing up, she'd blend milkshakes and mix ice cream sodas and egg creams (she was a city girl and could make a mean egg cream) in tall, colorful glasses. Hershey's chocolate syrup and vanilla Häagen-Dazs

were staples of our kitchen. The clank of the spoon against the glass, as she mixed the chocolate syrup in, and the drone of the blender are comforting to me still. The sounds of home. She'd pour a dash of sweetness into our glasses and tell Matt and me to taste it, make sure it didn't need more of anything. I'd nod in approval, licking my lips, and she'd fill up the rest of my glass. Matt, also a fan of creating things in the kitchen, would usually tell her it needed a little more of this or that, or he'd try to add it himself.

The guests finally arrive and a spastic exchange of hugs and kisses happens in a sort of musical chairs-like fashion. My mother greets them with a booming smile. They compliment her decorating choices, discuss the possibility of built-in bookshelves, fabrics for the daybed; someone remarks that she should choose something simple so the various patterns in the living room "won't compete." I think about how in our household patterns were always complex.

"Helen, this cheese is delicious; is it a Greek cheese?" someone is asking. "Oh yes, it's Casetti," my mother sings.

My mother is taking out crystal glasses for wine from the cabinet. The kitchen cabinets are not yet finished (the contractor is MIA), and there is a disorderly mess of glasses and dishes hidden inside, some still enclosed in Bubble Wrap.

My mother explains to everyone that she plans to put a daybed in the extra room that opens into the living room, and someone suggests shutter doors that can be closed when a guest sleeps over. "Oh, that's a wonderful idea," my mother's voice stretches higher. She plays the role.

No one knows that it hasn't ended, that my mother receives anxious phone calls from my father almost daily. That she brings him small sums of money so he can buy his cigarettes, play the lotto, travel to his appointments. He is still her responsibility, her weight.

This past Thanksgiving, my mother and I picked up my father from the homeless shelter he's been living in and went out to eat at a diner. It was a crummy, depressing diner, and I felt a crummy, depressing feeling deep within me. My whole body was heavy with it. Since I was young, I've absorbed all the dark emotions around me, the ones that others didn't, couldn't claim. Matt had fled, was spending the holiday with his girlfriend in Chicago. I always stayed behind, stuck in places I didn't want to be.

The company mingles. I feel lighter. Maybe it's the wine. I take the last sip. My mom is putting away the appetizers and everyone is gathering coats and bags. We head to a restaurant down the street. About half way through dinner my phone rings and I excuse myself.

"Hi Matt, can you hear me?" I'm asking as I leave the buzz of the restaurant. "Where are you?" I question with urgency, scared I'll lose the connection.

"I'm okay. I'm with Chubbs. Tell Mom I'm okay." He sounds sad and worn-out in a way that surpasses his nineteen years. Chubbs is a friend of his I haven't met, but I'm familiar with the nickname. Matt always laughs when my mother uses the nickname, thinks it's cute. She laughs too and says, "Well, what is his real name again?"

Matt tells me he wasn't with Chris, he was not involved. I know that is not entirely true, but it doesn't matter for right now. And I believe him that he wasn't involved extensively or recently; he hasn't had money lately. But I feel worried because the cops in the town we grew up in know him and associate him with Chris.

"Are you going to come stay with Mom?"

He doesn't know; he might get out of town for a few days. He's saying that he has to go.

I catch my mother's eye when I'm back at the dinner table and whisper that he's fine. Her face turn to putty. She will be able to sleep tonight.

Dinner concludes and everyone is walking out of the restaurant, exchanging good-byes. My mother is thanking everyone profusely. "Bye, see you soon" I'm calling out over my shoulder in a chipper voice that feels all wrong.

At my mom's apartment several days later, Matt says that he's concerned with collecting money that is owed to Chris to put toward bail. I tell him, my voice becoming high, not to get involved. He insists that he has to try and help.

A month passes and Chris is out on bail at his parents' home, pending his first court date. If he does ten years, he'll be thirty when he gets out. The thought of this is overwhelming, nauseating. I imagine for a second if it was Matt in this situation, and I have to push the thought away. I can't breathe.

Nothing changes since Chris's arrest. Matt stays at our mother's place once in a while. When he does, the TV flickers all night long; he turns the volume low so as not to disturb us. He always looks disheveled, glassy-eyed, and worn-out. When he speaks, he mumbles and grumbles. If he sits down on the couch or a chair, he falls asleep sitting up. He startles to the music of his cell phone.

He scratches his entire body, and I naively believe it is due to dry skin. I ask if he wants lotion. He doesn't answer so I go get some. "Here," I say," placing the bottle next to him. "I can't stand to see you itching like that." He looks at me, half scowling, listless, and hands it back to me, annoyed. "I don't need this," he growls.

* * *

About a year later, I'm living on the other side of the country. But I cannot escape the heaviness, the fear that something bad will happen.

I'm at work. I pick up the receiver and my fingers begin instinctively to dial my mother's work number. When I spoke with her last she sounded distant. It's a tone I'm familiar with but I hadn't pressed for information. I had just come back from an exercise class and was feeling light. Maybe I didn't want the news just then. But now I need to know.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I ask quietly.

"There is a problem," she admits. And I feel that prickly sensation travel over my body.

Matthew? Dad?

"Matthew's in trouble."

"What… where is he?"

"Jail." I can picture her, stoic, tight-lipped. She, too, is at work, doesn't want others to hear. She has built her life around others not hearing.

She delivers just the facts. He was at a concert with friends in Manhattan. There were pills in his backpack—a lot. She tells me she'll give me more information when we speak this evening.

"Okay, I'll talk to you tonight," I say and hang up. A coworker is standing behind me, has approached my desk to ask a question. I swallow down the sharp emotions lodged in my throat and answer her question.

At least he is okay; thank god he didn't overdose.

My mother works on getting the bail money with the aid of my cousin, an attorney. The process of tracing its origin—she has to prove it's not drug money—is going to take a few more days. He's been in there for eleven days already. If I let my mind wander, imagine what it's like in jail, where there is barely any heat and they don't give you a pillow at night, I start to fight with

my lungs for more air.

When Matt is finally released, he's shipped off Riker's Island back to Manhattan and stranded in Grand Central station with nothing but the clothes on his back. Stripped bare. My mother meets him at Grand Central, and they take the train home together.

His court date is pending. He promises to stay out of trouble, admits he needs help. It is a very real possibility that he will go to jail. The charges against him are serious. He will go into a rehab if the judge agrees. I have to believe that this will happen. I cannot contemplate the alternative.

One day I'm standing in line at a store and notice the young, maybe eight- or nine-year-old boy in front of me. His longish, honey-colored hair is wavy in front like my brother's was at that age. The innocence of this age steals my breath, and I am suddenly angry, thinking about my family dysfunction, how it was during Matt's most vulnerable, impressionable years that things really started to fall apart. How none of us did anything when he started going out every night, coming home whenever he wanted, clearly high and drunk, and finally dropped out of school. He answered to no one. He and his friends hung out in his room, blowing smoke out the window.

During this time, my dad confided in me one day with eyes that spoke volumes of sorrow and regret. "I know I haven't been the best father. I know Matthew doesn't listen to me anymore, but I think he's in trouble. Will you try to talk to him?" He was tentative, looking down, the shame and fear written in the creases of his skin. I said I would, but I didn't know what to say to Matt, how to reach him. I was lost too. In my dreams, I rescued the child version of my brother many times from burning houses, natural disasters, battlefields.

* * *

We don't know it now, but Matt's stay at Riker's is a turning point. The judge allows him to go to rehab, and relief hits me like coming up for air. I feel, for the first time in a long time, maybe ever, that we are lucky.

In a few years from now this sad, ghost of a person my brother has become will be a distant memory. My nightmares of trying to save him will stop. I won't stop wondering, though, about how the past shapes us, about why some people, like my dad, cannot free themselves from their addictions. I tell these stories so I can clear away the cobwebs that still lurk inside me.

IN THE PINES

for Kurt Cobain, on the seventeenth anniversary of his suicide

As for me, I grew up. Music doesn't mean as much
to me as it once did, but today, I thought of you:
that laconic smile, your voice's low groan, as though

you were always getting over a sore throat, a sound
of the pain you stumbled and coughed on. I fell in love

with a man who shares your name, this coincidence
not escaping me. Would you read what has been written
about your head *in bloom* after the first gunshot,

your known *comfort in being sad*? I doubt it, you'd hate
it, that killing yourself only made you more famous.

Even so, today, I listen: you strumming the acoustic
guitar out of the past, that last good record. When I fall
asleep sometimes I hear that song, its faint echo

of childhood, like footfalls in transit down memory's
dark hall. And you, there, dim—but singing a candle.

—Kat Stromquist

LET'S ROB A BANK

by

Anders Benson

(First appeared in *Gemini Magazine*)

"Let's rob a bank," she said, and it made perfect sense at the time.

Of course, things that make sense when you're hopeless and helpless and caught in a soul-sucking vortex of self-loathing and credit card debt, when every last ounce of your spirit is being wrung out of you by the crushing grip of social conformity, when you are desperate to impart some kind of meaning to your life, to leave an indelible trace of your existence, to scream to the heavens in a tiny and feeble voice *I was here…*

Well, let's just say that those same things don't necessarily make sense when you're three steps into the lobby with a shotgun in your hands.

The whole time it's happening, I'm thinking, *It was her idea.* No matter what else is going on, I can't seem to shake that thought.

Layla's always been the one with ideas. Layla the artist, who in her junior year painted a fantastic and inspiring mural down the entire length of a high school hallway. Layla the artist, who now has a little studio in the back of the laundry room, where she dabs listlessly at canvasses that she never shows to anyone. Layla the teacher, who tries day in and day out to breathe a little life into the formulaic drivel she must pound into her students' minds until the classroom is a box of human bonbons, hard shells of cynical indifference coating centers of soft, chewy mediocrity. Layla the teacher, who paints hope onto her face and tries very hard to forget about the mural lying under three coats of eggshell-white interior as she walks that very same hallway, day in and day out.

Me, I'm not much for ideas. I'm just Mack. I'm the easygoing, good-natured guy without a last name who delivers every package to your door with a smile. I'm the guy who's in it for the long run, always chasing the ephemeral carrot of promotion while ducking the ever-present sticks of performance reviews and corporate downsizing. You see dozens of guys like me every day; we only exist for a few seconds while you sign a slip or whatever, then you forget all about us until tomorrow when we exist for another few seconds of your life. I'm one of those forgettable guys. You've probably already forgotten my name. It's Mack, by the way.

We'd talked about it before, Layla and I—not about bank robbery specifically, but about doing something to break up the pointless monotony of our lives. We had hundreds of ideas, some mine, mostly hers, none with even the slightest chance of fulfillment. Let's build a house. Let's start a revolution. Let's go to Burning Man. Let's paint the kitchen. It was kind of how we passed the time, thinking of ways to prove that we were still individuals with depth and substance and free will, not just anonymous faces drifting back and forth through other people's days. So when Layla put down her Xbox controller one night and said, "Fuck it, Mack, let's rob a bank," it made perfect sense. Hell yeah! Let's break some laws and fuck some shit up! Let's give a big middle finger to Corporate America and make off into the sunset like Bonnie and Clyde! Goddamn right, man!

Only here I am now, with a brown wool balaclava pulled over my face and squeezing my neck like an itchy noose, holding this big-ass gun and looking at a whole room full of shit-scared people who are looking back at me and *I don't know what to do*. Goddamn right.

"Everybody down on the floor!" I yell.

"Everyone put up your hands!" Layla screams.

They give us a few seconds to realize what a couple of dumb jackasses we are; then the guard goes for his gun.

"Don't you fucking move!" Layla tells him, dashing up and waving her tiny pistol in his face. "Everyone show us your hands!" she orders again. A few hands go up tentatively; more follow as I fail to issue any conflicting demands. Layla pulls the guard's gun out of his holster and backs away from him. She points both of her weapons around the room randomly, people ducking and flinching as her aim wanders. The tubby bank manager stands frozen in his glass-walled office, like an animal trapped in a cage. The only person who seems to have his wits about him is the assistant manager. He kind of reminds me of myself, a tall, brown-haired, forgettable type of guy. He's got his hands up like everyone else, but from the look on his face, you'd think this is a day in the park. His nametag reads "Hal."

I'm locked up, trying to remember the next part of our plan, and though Layla's face is obscured by the nylon stocking pulled over her head, I can tell she's drawing a blank as well. That's when I have my bright idea: I'll fire a shot into the ceiling, to show them we're serious, right? Totally bad-ass. I pump a round into the chamber and pull the trigger, holding the gun pointed straight up in front of me. The recoil drives the barrel back into my face, and the last thing I hear for a little while is the crunch of my nose breaking. All I can see is a burst of white light, which matches the explosive pain that wraps around my skull like a web of lightning. Fragments of ceiling tile rain down, coating my

eyeballs with a fine, abrasive powder.

Bleary-eyed and half deaf, I watch Hal stride up to me and snatch the shotgun right out of my hands. For some reason, it's like he's taken all of my angst and desperation and futile rage away with it. For just a moment, one perfect, effortless moment that seems to go on forever, I'm totally at peace with the world. As I watch in a blissful daze, Hal spins around and blows his boss away.

Awestruck, I admire the fluid grace of his actions as he pivots on the balls of his feet and raises the weapon to his shoulder, falling easily into an expert's stance. When he fires, the tempered glass wall of the manager's office explodes cinematically. The old dude's chest erupts in gore, and he flies backward, arms flailing, slumping gracelessly across his desk. It's a flawless '80s action movie death. I feel like applauding.

Hal turns around, a casual grin on his face. The cool and confident glint in his eyes has morphed into the unblinking, psychotic stare of the dangerously insane.

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting to do that," he says in a rush of relief.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?!" Layla shrieks, pointing both pistols at him gangsta-style.

Hal goes from ecstatic to murderous in about half a second. "Hey, back off, bitch! You two had your turn, and since you're both clearly incompetent, I'm in charge now!" He advances on her, driving her slowly across the lobby as she backs away. Her guns are still pointed at his chest, but the barrels are wavering uncertainly.

"Fuck you," Layla spits in rage, "*we're* robbing this bank!"

"So rob it, I don't care! I really don't!" Hal rants. "Do you know how many times that fat prick passed me over for promotion? *Five fucking times.* Five! I could be a fucking branch manager by now if that selfish, lazy asshole hadn't kept me here to run the place for him while he sat in there on his fat ass watching Internet porn. So whatever problems you think you have, lady, I really don't care, okay?"

Layla's eyes are just black slits behind her gauzy mask. Spots of saliva are starting to soak through the beige nylon stretched across her mouth. "You goddamn maniac," she shouts, "just get the hell out of here!"

"No!" Hal bellows back at her. "I'll do whatever the fuck I want! Shit,

maybe I'll rob this fucking place after all. Maybe I'll kill a few more people, just for fun. I'm in fucking charge now!"

"Aaaaahhg!" Layla roars, pulling her triggers wildly. Hal fires at the same time, the shotgun's blast nearly drowning the *pop-pop-pop* of the mismatched pistols. Terrified onlookers scatter as the bullets fly. Layla goes down, and my world ends.

So here I am now, trying to scoop my wife's guts up from the blood-slick tiles of a bank lobby floor and put them back in her body, looking into her tear-filled eyes and begging her to stay alive. I press both of my hands across the huge hole in her belly. Somewhere beyond a throbbing cloud of white noise coming through my shattered eardrums, I can hear her sobbing, telling me she loves me. Hal is lurching around, trailing blood, screaming, laughing, shooting people. Way off in the distance, I catch a hint of police sirens, but at this point I don't care about the police, I don't care about Hal or the people he's killing, I don't care about myself. All I care about is Layla, whose hot blood is welling up around my fingers and spilling out of her like an overflowing toilet, and the whole time I'm thinking the same stupid thought over and over: *It was her idea.*

It made so much sense at the time.

ADAPTATION

Urban birds feel more stress
than country birds,
but do not show it
the way humans do.
They don't sing as loud
when they are happy,
they don't brood
when they can't find a meal
or it gets too cold.
They don't seem to care
about city noise,
polluted air,
lack of water,
doing what birds do,
mating, nesting,
reproducing,
despite interference
with nature's way.

—Gary Beck

A SHORT HISTORY OF FLIGHT

A light mark
Against the sky,

Door to a dream,
A something between,

The days are getting,
And so it seems

Only yesterday
They were going,

Emptying themselves
As a bird of bones.

One flick of talc kicked
From the loamy side of the road,

No longer a victim,
Hitches to a thermal,

Takes the first flight
Out of gravity's terminal,

The last condor
Floating over the Andes.

—Robert H. Guard

hunter

in Crete, alongside the water's edge,
we mulch beauty into mildew, you and I. we cleft sinews from bone,
a muscle webbing you once embraced, fallen now to decay,
lighted by the ashy embers of the fire where we made camp.
those murderous games—
me the moon, goddess of the hunt, and you Orion,
felled by Scorpio.
You are hung in the sky, and I have fallen upon my own arrows—
prey, both of us, to the wickedness of your boasting.

—Allie Marini Batts

HIS WHISKER

I found one of his whiskers.
Oh, how I used to curse them
littering the sink
after he trimmed his mustache,
piercing my lips when we kissed,
but now this last one
from the crease of a book
rests atop my fingertip
like a fallen eyelash.
I don't know whether
to save it in a box
or make a wish
and blow it away.

—Sue Fagalde Lick

WHAT KIND OF HAIR

tosses, flips, swings
its hollow shaft, its dark roots?

How does hair
fly, frizzle, twine, wrap?

Why does hair hold darkness?

Why does a horsehair mattress
squeak when the sleeper turns?
How many horses fill a mattress?
How many heads of human hair?

What kind of hair lives
at the nape of a neck?
What kind of hair lies
under the hood on a man
facing a prison dog?
How much hair of the dog

do we need
to cure what scares us?
How much hair makes a rope
for a man to swing from?
Ask your hairdresser.

—Eileen Hennessy

26 DAYS SINCE CONCEPTION

My husband's sister wants me to have a baby.
She wants companions: her children, ages four
and two, tip over tables, wear face paint, run
on stubby legs. They need cousins, she says.
How to explain to her my feelings, my monstrous,
omnipresent, all-consuming *poet's* feelings: sister-
in-law, I am an only child and was born selfish. A baby,
with its drowsy nub of a face, its crinkled forehead,
its paws that wave like the stems of flowers
in a ferocious breeze, has its own peculiar charms:
It cannot abandon you, cannot turn its tail and go
like a snubbed cat. You can do whatever you want
to it and not have to say you're sorry. But I think
it must be the worst kind of investment, taking
time, dividing nights into fragments of incomplete
sleep and wakeful anger, banishing your work
to a dusty bin in a second drawer. The spoiled smell
of formula ruins your sweater, half-moons wax
purple beneath your eyes. A life becomes figments
of scrapbook and memory, words that poured out
like gutter rainwater slow down to a dribble. My mother
told me having a baby sucks the beauty right out
of you, drains it as though it were a spigot.
Then sometimes it does not love you back. A first
pregnancy is a visible concession, a white flag
draped over the baleen hump of your belly.
It says, "This is all I'm ever going to accomplish."

—Kat Stromquist

TWO POEMS AND SMALL COMFORTS

by

Kevin Brown

If you've ever had any sort of aspirations as a writer of any kind, you have certain works that you love that editors seem not to care for. You may even have a large contingent of friends and family who think that that work is the best you've ever done, but this fact does not offer much comfort when one rejection after another rolls in, somehow stinging a bit more than a normal rejection, as this piece means more to you. In fact, those pieces sometimes never get published, save for if one is lucky enough to sneak them into a book at some point in a career; otherwise, they just stay in a file folder or on a hard drive somewhere until they become so old that we've become different writers or even different people, so we just stop sending them out.

There may be other benefits to these pieces, though, that we need to remember, especially during difficult times in our writing lives. They might mean something else to us than just one more publication credit toward attempting to get that book manuscript accepted. Now I am not one to promote the idea of writing as therapy. If people want to lay out their feelings so that they can figure out what they are thinking, they should keep a journal, not write a poem or story or essay or play or anything else about it. If one is writing for publication, put the Oedipal concerns and baggage in a diary somewhere and publish works that mean something to the rest of us. However, literary writing can still have side benefits that we might overlook. I have had two poems offer me these benefits, and they may illustrate my argument.

Both of the poems were written in the same year, about six months apart, so they are related to a certain extent. The first poem is one that I began writing for Valentine's Day for a girlfriend. Of course, almost anyone can see the mistake that I was making simply in my choice of occasions, especially as I am not a particularly gifted occasional poet (as most poets are not). However, I thought the relationship was going well, and I wanted to convey that thought, especially since I already had an idea of how I would structure the poem. I would lay out how others misunderstood the holiday and the idea of love, then turn it back at the end to how clearly we saw matters.

When I describe the process of writing the poem to people, I tell them that it then took a left turn and went downhill quickly. It seems that I was never able to turn the poem back at all; instead, it just kept laying out how everyone misunderstood the holiday and love, ending with,

…and the empty hearts

pretending to love because they're
scared to be alone can only be
redeemed by a miracle.

Needless to say, my girlfriend was not happy to hear that I began writing this poem for her for Valentine's Day (yes, I told her), as it did not seem to convey the feelings that she was looking for in such a poem.

Oddly enough, I was surprised by her reaction, mainly because I thought she was similar to me in how we viewed such events as Valentine's Day. I thought she agreed that it was a pointless holiday thought up and encouraged by card and candy makers to increase their profits by instilling guilt in people about how infrequently they show their "love" to one another. Instead, I realized that she wanted flowers and dinner and the traditional approach to the holiday, even though she never said anything about those, either before or after. Not surprisingly, we broke up within a month after that.

Sometimes works try to tell us things we should already know, but we cannot see for ourselves. I always felt that I did not know her as I should, that she was always keeping something back from me, some part of her that I was not allowed to reach. The example of Valentine's Day seems simple enough, but it conveyed the clear differences between the ways we each saw the world, and I knew that well enough to write it in a poem, but not enough to express it. It reminds me of the first short story I wrote, when I was a junior in college and not attempting to be any sort of writer. The plot was simple: One grocery store chain had bought out all the others, so they could do whatever the wanted, overcharging customers, taking advantage of their employees, anything. The main character realizes this and attempts to remedy the problem and walks out before he can be fired (read "A&P" by John Updike, if you haven't already; it's a similar idea, much better executed). Looking back on that, I can see my interest in supporting local businesses and paying employees fair wages, but I was unable to voice those beliefs until almost a decade later, even though it's clear that I held them.

The second poem came in the fall of the same year as the Valentine's Day fiasco. I had written a few poems after that one, but I had effectively stopped writing, as I had not written anything for half the year. I was never very prolific, but I could usually count on averaging roughly twenty poems a year, and I had now gone six months with absolutely nothing to show for it. Not surprisingly, this dry period was a result of the previous experience and another rough relationship over the summer in between. Most people, including myself normally, can write out of the dark places in life, but I was finding absolutely nothing, so I simply stopped.

In listening to the radio one day, though, I heard a story about the protests over the G8 meetings in France, as they became more and more violent. I heard a story about Carlo Giuliani who attacked a police officer with a fire extinguisher; he was shot and killed for his actions. I could not stop thinking about his story, as I certainly did not agree with his action of aggression, but I also thought the response was too extreme. There seemed nothing I could do about the situation, of course, so I did what I used to do: I wrote a poem about it. I believed that I could get the poem read, and people would remember his name and what he had done.

Of course, to this day, more than nine years later, no one beyond a few friends have ever read the poem, not counting the editors who have rejected it. As far as I know, no one remembers his name or what he did there or what happened to him. I would guess that no one remembers those G8 meetings at all, outside of a few economists and historians, as they were much less controversial than the Battle in Seattle from the year before, which has now been turned into a movie.

However, what I take comfort in is that I have remembered him and his actions and what happened. If nothing else, one person remembers who he is and was, and, as long as I remember, he will not be forgotten. I would love for someone to publish the poem, not because it would be one more publication credit, but because he deserves at least that much.

What also came from this occurrence is that I was able to write again. I still did not write as often as I should; it did not make me more prolific or even more political in my writings. However, it did remind me that dry periods end, that the writing will begin again, if I simply trust it and myself. That event has gotten me through other dry periods that have come since, and it has helped remind me that there are times poetry needs to speak about the political.

Neither of these poems matter to anyone other than me. They will never be anthologized nor taught in any kind of classroom. They will take up space on my hard drive until I die, I suppose, as I cannot imagine ever deleting them. But they will get me through difficult times again, just as they have done before. They will remind me that poetry is there to teach me about the world, as much as it is for me to try to say something about it to others. And they will remind me that I will write again, even if no one ever publishes another word. That is small comfort when the rejections come, but it is comfort, nonetheless.

CHEESE SANDWICHES

by

Lynne T. Pickett

She cranked down the rusty window. Her shoulder twinged as she threw all of her strength into it. How could this be happening to her? All of her life she waited for Prince Charming. How did her chariot become an overpaid lemon of a car that her brand-new husband had secretly purchased with all of their wedding present money? She hung the tip of her nose out the window as they crept down the interstate. As she hypnotized herself by staring at the white divider line in the highway, she searched her mind for her feelings, her thoughts. Instead, all that flashed before her eyes were plastic baggies and cheese sandwiches. Why did it disturb her so much?

Cheese sandwiches, cheese sandwiches. She suddenly felt sick to her stomach. Why, why hadn't she realized it before? She had agreed, signed on the dotted line, to a life of beaten-up, broken-down cars and a cooler of Kraft American cheese sandwiches. Her brand-new two-hundred dollar black-and-white polka dot, breezy chiffon, palazzo pants that she had swooned over and had to have would be an odd fit with a soggy cheese sandwich in a rundown motel miles from the beach.

She looked over at him. His dark rumpled hair, his dark furry eyebrows. He had seemed so intense. Artistic. Sure of himself. Now in the cold light of marriage, he had the look of a homeless man shuffling through garbage. He was mumbling the lines of a monologue in a play he had been working on in his class. He took that play with him everywhere. The play book had become tattered, and he kept it curled up in the back pocket of his grimy black jeans. Genius, she had fantasized. As he pounded the dashboard of the car with his fist and grunted the lines, she realized what she had mistook for genius was probably a personality disorder. He actually was someone who needed to be shut away in a psych ward. Preferably for twenty years.

The car lurched off the exit ramp to the beach. She could see the white caps pounding the beach. They continued past the roar of the ocean, past the shiny new hotels and restaurants. The car was squeaking and sputtering as it drove down a dark street. They stopped at the garish neon light from a seedy motel. She shuddered as she watched a guy in a white sleeveless undershirt walk into one of the rooms, drinking from an oversized can of beer.

Her breathing was becoming shallow, her head whirling into a complete fog. No, she couldn't do it; she didn't want this life of peel-the-plastic-off cheese sandwiches. She felt the thickness of his breath on her neck. "Did you bring

the mustard?" She looked at his neon-lit face, which gave a green pallor to his skin. "Yes, dear." She had been so careful; she had even sublet her apartment for a year, just in case it didn't work out between them. Now the apartment was gone and her special made-to-order black-and-pink flower print designer couch sat ruined in his living room from his careless maneuvering of it up the five flights of stairs to his railroad apartment. He never even acknowledged the flapping torn fabric. She felt like grabbing that mustard from the plastic cooler and running as fast as she could to the beach and squeezing out an SOS with it. Maybe someone would see it and swoop down and save her from this life of mismatched desires.

He started tugging at the gargantuan, unbending mattress in the backseat of their clown-sized car. He had a bad back and insisted that the one hundred "special" metal disks in the mattress were crucial to his sleeping. He refused to sleep on anything else. This meant the monstrosity went with them whenever they went on an overnight trip, no matter where they were going.

The car was starting to smell of burning oil. She looked up to see the engine overheating. The plume of smoke looked like a genie trying to escape from its tarnished lamp. She tried to catch his eye to see if she should get out. *Damn*, she thought, *the car's on fire!,* she yelled out the window. He pulled again at the mattress, ignoring her. She jumped out. *What do we do?,* she yelled frantically at the top of his head.

He didn't respond as he continued to struggle with the mattress.

The clerk from the motel ran over to her. "Stand back." The man with his dangling cigarette resting on his bottom lip sprayed the smoldering engine with a fire extinguisher. Her brand-new husband stood triumphant with his released mattress, completely oblivious to the smoldering engine or to her.

As she lugged in her suitcases and began to hang her dressy clothes on the flimsy wire hangers in the damp, moldy motel room, she had to admit to herself, she had made a mistake. But what should she do? What could she do? Her apartment was gone. The presents opened. It was a wedding that everyone had called a fairy tale. How could she ever admit to anyone that it was a tragedy?

She tentatively laid down on the rough white sheets. She tried not to imagine millions of miniscule bed bugs digging into her recently massaged and lavender-oiled skin. She wondered why he didn't choose to save his beloved cheese sandwiches from the burning car instead of the bed. She laughed out loud to herself in what seemed to her the maniacal laughter of the insane. Maybe she would tell him the mustard had melted during the car fire. That would send him off the deep end, she plotted and then she released a deep sigh that twisted into tiny eruptions of laughter and tears that she could not

control. As she covered her stinging, saltwater-filled eyes from the overly bright light of the stark white lamp, she knew what she would do. It was the only way to survive. Shopping. Tomorrow she would go shopping. It's all she could think to do to keep her sanity. Denial was the only way out. At least she still had her own credit cards. Thank God for that. Maybe she could write SOS on the credit card slips.

Maraschino Sunday
—Gene McCormick

MARASCHINO SUNDAY

Sunday evenings a handful of broken bodies
gather at the village church rectory
working through AA's 12-step process
as though earning Boy Scout merit badges.
Most are gravely damaged, cashing a last
ounce of strength and will power
for physical or spiritual redemption,
which is the maraschino cherry atop
the Sunday morning church congregation
sitting in orderly pews, singing and clapping
and praying for someone else to heal them.
Fat chance.

—Gene McCormick

PART OF THE CITY

I guess that I am nothing more than
a piece of old chewing gum stuck
at the shoe of some pedestrian
hurried in the night.

She lost her sweetness and was thrown
on the street by some child who
demanded immediate for his next
enjoyment in his life.

To be scraped from the sole of the shoe
and left on the street is not so bad,
but to have some dirty little stone into the
middle of the white where the heart
is supposed to be.

—Peycho Kanev

GIRL TEXTING AT THE BAR

Her phone is a born line in her palm—textual crease
from thumb-crotch to wrist-bend. It opens

like clockwork. Her fingertips are all periods, no commas
in knuckle-twitch. Trace prints

of sweat, shallow dip of hand-bend. She's all hand.
All arm. All shoulder, jaw, swallow

of stutter-words. I wanna write
all over her—wild cursive, pulsed line—draw

into her slouch. Breathe her lips warm, make them move.
Replace Twitter with my hand.

—Zarah C. Moeggenberg

LIMBS TO ROOTS

by

Sarah Fonseca

To move freely you must be deeply rooted.
—Bella Lewitzky

We liked each other. It was simple, enough to make us want to give a long-distance relationship the time of day. Internet dates became real ones when Laura's parents bought her a plane ticket to visit three months later.

That initial visit alone was the most terrifying moment of being heavily involved with someone I'd never physically met. Despite obvious connection, there was always the possibility of something as simple as an initial hug throwing chemistry off its axis, reversing any previous sentiments. People always seemed to look and sound differently in person. I wondered if this would be a situation where "different" made Laura and I strangers in person. Fortunately, it was the opposite. As we wrapped our limbs around one another, the contact we'd been missing out on felt as good as expected.

Laura stayed for a week. My Cuban skin tanned to chestnut while her Irish skin freckled and burned. Aside from that, Georgia was hospitable to her—to us—which debunked her fears of Ku Klux Klan marches and tent revivals on every corner.

We were fans of going dutch. Three months later, it was my turn to visit.

* * *

Despite having a driving record as dirty as the Okefenokee, my roommate flew down Interstate 16 from Statesboro, Georgia, to the nearest Greyhound station in Savannah. Bess has promised to drive me, yet wound up getting off work later than expected that Sunday afternoon. She still wore her rubber work boots, which were a seven-layer cake of dog shit and mud.

Bess' mother was an upper-tier executive at the Coca-Cola company in Atlanta. Yet aside from a large collection of glass Coke bottles scattered about the apartment and a religious devotion to Coke products, she had little to show for it. She worked daily at a nearby kennel. Bess' parents had money. She did not.

Neither did I. After much delay, I'd only just bought my ticket via telephone after making enough in tips during my lunch shift; fifteen minutes

before the bus departed.

* * *

The way Laura pulled her silver bullet of a Saturn wagon to a stop was intoxicating. A sneaker rose from the brake to press the gas. She made the turn, and the curves of my body bent with those of the Michigan left. I could have easily tumbled into her lap—and I did so many times during that nine-day visit. Just never in her car. I was tempted. The seat belt pulled tight across my chest, a sobering, "No."

The drive from Allendale to Grand Rapids mirrored a roller coaster's descent as the buildings on the horizon grew taller and taller, dwarfing us and the other Ford, GM, and Chrysler models on the motorway. Instead of playing punch buggy, I indulged in a solo game of "spot the foreign car"—they're taboo rarities, and for good reason: 29,000 Michiganders are employed by The Big Three. Laura's dad was among them.

"How are you feeling?"

"I am all right," I lied, continuing my search for illicit BMWs and Mazdas. I wedged distance in between us before my Georgia-bound Greyhound could do so, like a sticky candy wrapper pressed between theater seat cushions. I'd been doing it for days; from the moment in which I felt that I would not be returning.

In the five-minute parking spot, our last hug was brief, swaying beneath the weight of my duffel bag.

For that last hour of my nine-day visit, avoiding eye contact was key. With a thousand miles of interstate stretched out before me, this was the definitive way to gingerly ease into withdrawal before we lost the ability to exchange all sensory information: odors, tastes, and textures. They'd all become, with new experiences, with Michigan lefts, with Laura. Initially, the Michigan mitten seemed to fit. I am left-handed and -footed. The curls on the left side of my head grow like ivy compared to the limp ones on the right. Months later, I'd notice a mound of paperbacks and water bottles on the floor by the left side of my bed. My nightstand—vacant, abandoned, neglected—is on the right.

"I'll see you when I see you," I said over my shoulder. Inside the bus terminal, I wiped my blearing eyes on my coat sleeve. It was not the ordinary sadness that stemmed from a sunsetting relationship, but the inability to fit in after trying so damned hard.

* * *

We'd binged on one another, paring away at one another's clothing while nights out did the same to our savings account balances.

I met six or so of Laura's closest friends for the first time at a chain steakhouse for a birthday party. They were upper-middle class twentysomethings who listed "student" as their field of employment, but whose affinity for T-shirts and well-worn jeans kept them humble.

Before leaving Laura's apartment, I anxiously pivoted between outfits. Having settled on a skirt and sleeveless blouse, I was overdressed. My anxiety lingered at the table as I repeatedly folded my hands over one another beneath the table. I needed a drink.

"What do you have on tap?" I asked the server, who named off beers on her fingers.

"Now *she* knows how to order drinks," the birthday girl Andrea winked, sipping the first of four slur-inducing Long Island iced teas.

I reddened, knowing full well that I couldn't name a single ingredient in Andrea's Long Island. After months of working in a Mexican restaurant, I could barely bullshit-bartend my way through a margarita. Laura was marginally disappointed when she learned that I could not make her favorite cocktail and the legendary drink of my "homeland": the mojito.

However, in between salting glasses and pouring Patron, I did learn the ultimate cop-out: beer on tap. Beer alone is simple—a cheap, butch drink that coaxed me into conversation. Beer *on tap*, however, when served in an iced Pilsner glass, became as elegant as chardonnay in stemware. It was all in the presentation.

Laura's usual aversion to public displays of affection turned to indifference after having a margarita. Her hand inched up my leg beneath the table. I chained my fingers into hers, preventing them from moving further up my skirt.

When someone at the table ordered a "pop," the server mystically understood this to be a Pepsi. Yet when I told the server that I'd like a Coke as a chaser for my beer, she squinted, needing elaboration.

"Okay… Would you like Diet, Classic, or Zero?"

"Classic."

That time, my beverage selection failed to impress. Unlike in Georgia, "Coke" was not deemed king, a universal default for, "I want something sugary,

fizzy, and with enough of an acidic kick to make my intestines resemble Swiss cheese." In Michigan, the relationship between Coke and Pepsi was treated as diplomatically as the East Coast/West Coast rivalry between 2Pac and The Notorious B.I.G.

And, usually, Biggie won.

I confused Laura, who looked at me the way reporters did Madonna when she sporadically adopted an English accent in the late '90s: Her head tilted to the side, a puzzled frown pulsing across her thin lips. A strand of wispy blond hair became trapped in her eyelashes.

"I thought you liked Pepsi…"

"I do normally," I said, feeling like a heretic of the state I was trying so hard to like. With my index finger and thumb, I separated the wavy hairs from her eyelashes, then looked at the waning glass of summer ale in front of me. "Maybe I'm more of a hick when I drink," I decided.

It's quite possible that I have made efforts to repress some parts of the Southern mythology from taking root, my brain unconsciously correcting a Southern drawl and desire to fish for bass or hunt white tails. Maybe I am just a repressed Daisy Duke, an inevitable Blanche Devereaux: It only takes twelve ounces of beer to undo twenty-two years; worth of inhibition—or, as the next day indicated, a call from Mama.

"Did ya get my letter this week?" My seventy-year-old mother asked. The letter in question contained what Mama called "Love Money," but in reality it was "Starvation Prevention Money," usually enough to stock up on my collegiate diet of eggs and instant oatmeal. Each week, I received an executive envelope in the mail. Within that envelope was another, on which a brief note was written, always ending in, "Love, Mom :-)." At the center of the Russian nesting egg doll of a letter was a ten dollar bill. This was Mama's Western Union, the alternative to online banking for a woman who referred to computers as "nosy boxes."

"I don't know, Mama. I'm in Michigan right now," I said into the phone pinned between my ear and collarbone.

"What on earth's in Michigan?!"

I was cross-legged on the floor of Laura's room, who was seated at her desk with a bottle of citrus-mint lotion, applying it to any part of her soft body that was covered in skin after our shower. We both wore towels.

"Not much…a *friend*."

"Oh, I see…" She said, knowing everything without my disclosing anything, as Southern women tend to do.

We bounced between hometown gossip and national news like elderly women at a sit-a-spell, then said our good-byes.

"I heard a little bit of Southern creepin' in thur," Laura mocked when the call ended, continuing to rub lotion into porcelain flesh, like polish into a suit of armor.

* * *

I sat on my blue duffel in front of the steely door of Gate 2. Feeling hollow, I thought of the Granny Smith apple and bottle of water tucked into my carry-on. I acknowledged that it wasn't the sort of void that could be filled with food. Besides—flat-broke—I needed to save what little I had for the 27-hour journey home.

Despite telling Laura that the only thing remotely canine about Greyhounds are how the passengers are treated like dogs, the station in Grand Rapids was one of the nicest ones in the nation. Ignoring food, I filled myself on the interactions of passengers accumulating in the terminal; the Hispanic father and son on the iron bench beside me, muttering about a delayed bus. I not only understood, but I could also relate. Though the Russian spoken by a woman in an Adidas track suit was entirely lost on me. As was the conversation she shared with a handsome Turk in a leather jacket and matching black loafers, words indecipherable but chemistry flowing between them. As they held one another's gaze, I felt everything.

* * *

In late August, Allendale, Michigan—with its 80 degree highs—was what I wished the south could be. I was sucked into a world where liberal people and miles of idealistic corn fields coexisted. Yet the fantasy wavered as I saw my first Hispanic resident of the city: An insignificant brown blip in one of these fields.

I cackled at my realization, hands slapping against my thighs as my head pressed back against the headrest.

Laura looked over at me like I'm a sanatorium resident.

"What?"

"This is honestly the longest I've gone in my life without seeing someone

who looks like me. And when I finally do, they're stooped over in a field."

"That really bothers you about this place, doesn't it?" At night, we had shared whispers about my moving northward that always seemed ludicrous by sunrise.

"A bit, yeah."

She returned her attention to the road, and I couldn't help but feel like I had overreacted. I was the child in the passenger seat, playing a feminist version of The License Plate Game, relief playing across my face each time I saw a person of color in an automobile beside us at a red light.

I was perpetually searching for foreign cars and foreign people.

* * *

I gaped out the window, hypnotizing myself with yellow highway dashes on the bus from Grand Rapids to Benton Harbor. Two rows in front of me, a sun-damaged face squished between two headrests.

"Hey!"

I avoided his big eyes and the bloodshot stare which they contain. I'd frequently witnessed drunken girls teeter home on spike heels, swaying like 6-foot tall skyscrapers, yet I could not tell if he was exhausted or inebriated.

The man stood with considerable effort, using the headrests as plush crutches as he made his way toward the rear of the bus. I ducked behind the book that I was not reading. Having noticed him, a nearby passenger engaged in a loud phone conversation had already lowered her voice to a whisper.

But instead of continuing, he paused in the aisle beside my seat as the arching roads continued to challenge his balance. His paper-dry lips uttered inaudible words as he stared at me.

"What?"

"I said, 'Can I sit here?'" He pointed to the aisle seat. Relieved that there would be no argument, I couldn't help but notice this man—who later introduced himself as "Paul"—looked like Otis Campbell's long-lost son.

I took him in, from his Puerto Rican trucker hat to the way his blue button down his half-buttoned and partially untucked from his overalls. I could see a bandage on his chest and a hospital wristlet barely visible beneath his right cuff. My eyes made their way back up his weathered body. His mouth

wasn't just papery: He was the tree, and his mouth was the knothole; spittle cobwebbing between lips and an occasional tooth presenting itself.

He connected his words with a single, shallow breath, taking the sentence as far as possible in a single slur before beginning again. Unless Paul had an additional death wish, he was no drunk.

"I wanted to sit by you because you were reading the Bible."

I glanced down at the thick Patricia Cornwell novel in my lap, and—for the first time in my life—I actually felt guilty for not owning one of those damned things.

"It's just a book. Not a Bible. I'm sorry."

"Did I upset you?" Paul's embarrassed, drooping, bloodhound eyes killed me.

"No, no! You're good. You're good…"

"I asked because I'm dying," he said. The spittle cobwebs expanded.

"Everyone dies at some point."

"Everybody says that!" He bemoaned, calling me out on my useless cliché.

"It's okay. I'm not afraid of dying," he concluded before I could apologize.

I asked about his hat; he told me about immigrating by plane at eight; he told me about keeping this a secret from new acquaintances. *I'm not afraid of dying*, he said into the silence each time the conversation waned. He told me about his work as a comedian in Florida. *I used to open for…naw, you don't know him. Too young.* Try me. *Rodney Dangerfield.* I do. My mom loves him. *I'm not afraid of dying.* The cobwebs dried up. I handed him my water bottle.

Telling Paul that I was half-Cuban felt like a confession, Catholic to priest. We spoke of food, occasional Spanish words sneaking into our conversation, gradually forming simple sentences. *When you find a nice Cuban man, you need to learn to cook these things for him.* Okay. *I'm not afraid of dying.* Ordinarily, I correct individuals when they make assumptions about who I love. *It's girlfriend, not friend. It is wife, not husband.* Yet I was so starved for acknowledgment as a Latina that when he acknowledged that root of who I am, it was enough. I felt wholly validated. I was a little bit closer to home.

Our language was childlike. Paul had forgotten the words that I'd yet to learn. We were babies on a bus. *I'm not afraid of dying*.

The bus driver, familiar with Paul's weekly trips to the oncologist, took the time to guide him to his connecting bus in Kalamazoo to ensure that he was seated on a bench at the right gate. Before we could pull away, I hopped off the bus to give Paul my apple.

* * *

I slept through Chicago, my body cocooned around itself in the black leather seat, comforted by my bearded, boot-clad seat partner cursings at a passenger's ringing phone. When I woke at 4 p.m., I could see the golden dome of the capitol building on the darkening horizon.

The sweaty bus driver—like Laura—was unaccustomed to the Georgia highs. The farther south we traveled, the colder the buses became with each transfer, and the tighter I wrapped my arms around my ribcage. At 2 a.m., the driver murmured, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Savannah," into his microphone before flicking on the bus' track lighting, stunning us all like june bugs.

I was doubly stunned as my feet hit the parking lot. Savannah stuck to my skin, a memory of drunken camping trips on Tybee Island, fudge from River Street sweets, and hurricane warnings that were never taken seriously.

Bess, my roommate, towered above all the other patient family members and friends in the terminal. She helped me pitch my luggage into her trunk. For a moment, the interior of her foreign-made Toyota feels like the most beautiful form of heresy. In the passenger seat, I pulled two envelopes from under my butt.

By the time Bess had said, "Oh, your mom wrote," I'd already torn open the two letters and tugged out their green contents.

In the console there were three wadded-up twenties—a few day's pay for her work at the kennel.

For a moment, we were rolling in it.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Starved."

We stop at the nearest station. She stood in front of a cooler and—without a moment's hesitation—grabbed a Diet Coke.

SUMMER OF BEE

by

Shea Moore

Bartleby Lavoisier was thirteen years old when his parents decided that forcing him to socialize during the summer was a job wider than their reach. He was sent to Camp Sherwood, settled in the woods of a town precisely an hour and thirty four minutes away from his bedroom and the desk he typically occupied. Bee didn't exactly have a line of potential friends waiting outside his door. In fact, the coolest thing about him was probably his nickname, which didn't even have a cool story behind it like most kids'. His mother used it as a term of endearment, and Bee had never gotten used to answering to Bartleby.

At Camp Sherwood, Bee was able to make some semblance of friends, though there was still no line for his attention. Bee wasn't used to being around his peers for extended periods of time. His parents had begun homeschooling him in the third grade, when it was obvious that he was advancing at a much faster rate than his classmates. The first person he was able to befriend was Jesse, a boy his age and just as quiet. They were usually accompanied by Tommy and Madison, which seemed to confuse Jesse because they were "too cool" to hang out with them. Bee was confused by the hidden hierarchy that Jesse seemed to believe in. Tommy was a year older and almost a foot taller. He usually talked to them for outdoor activities, pushing them to play a bit harder than Bee considered recreational. Madison sometimes ate dinner with them, when she wasn't with her female friends. She looked like she could star in a Nickelodeon show.

"What do you mean 'too cool'?" Bee asked Jesse as they sloppily bounced a basketball between them during one of the camp's free periods.

"I don't have many friends at my school, because a lot of people say they're too cool to be my friend," Jesse said, his cheeks turning pink. Jesse had very fair skin, which stood out against his jet-black hair. Bee didn't want to ask, but he assumed Jesse had dyed it.

"Neither do I. Because I'm homeschooled. But my parents take me to all these events for homeschooled children, and I don't seem to make many friends there either."

"I wish I was homeschooled," Jesse sighed.

"Then ask your mom and dad." Bee shrugged. His parents usually listened when he asked for things, not because he was spoiled, but because he was a good kid.

"I have." Jesse returned the ball with a bit too much force. "They don't listen."

"My parents listen too much. They're psychiatrists." Jesse laughed at the self-deprecating way Bee said it, which made Bee laugh as well.

"C'mon guys! Supper's gonna start," Tommy called, walking toward them from the tetherball. Bee raised an eyebrow at Jesse and nodded his head in the direction of the pudgy boy walking away from them.

"Sure," Jesse said, following closely behind his friend.

* * *

Bee and Jesse spent the entire week shadowing the other. Occasionally, Tommy would join them, but he always left before long, irritated that the boys were being "weird." It had first begun when Bee was explaining to Jesse why certain lizards were blue and others were green or brown. Tommy was also irritated that Jesse had spent an entire session of Frisbee, telling them about his cat back home. He said it was "sissy" and Madison had agreed. Usually, Tommy would leave before whatever they were doing was over. So when the end of camp was approaching and Tommy was still intermittently socializing with them, Bee was surprised. Not as surprised, however, as when Madison approached him on his own. She usually was only around if Tommy was tolerating them for the moment.

"Hey, Bee, wait up!" Madison called from across the basketball court, jogging toward him.

"I'm heading back to my cabin, actually," Bee said with a well-practiced polite tone.

"Well, I was just wondering if you were going to be at the bonfire tonight?" She said, spinning a piece of her dirty blond hair between her fingers.

"It's mandatory," he responded with a flat voice.

"What?" She giggled, despite the lack of humor.

"It's mandatory. Everyone is going."

"Oh, right. You know, you're different than the other guys here." She was back to twirling her hair. Bee noticed it was getting a knot in it, but didn't bother telling her.

"How so?" Bee asked.

"You don't stare at my boobs like the rest of them." He couldn't help it; he looked. He didn't see why they'd attract attention. There was a lot of them showing in her purple tank top, and they looked a little lumpy.

"Except now," she giggled.

"Sorry," Bee said sincerely.

"It's okay. I don't really mind if *you* look," Madison said, blinking quickly in a way that he thought was supposed to look flirty, but just made her look like a giant bug.

"Well, okay. I'm going to go back to my cabin now," Bee said, turning away before she could say anymore. He spent the afternoon lying in his bunk and determinedly not thinking about how disappointed he was that it was the last day of camp. Eventually, Jesse found him, like he always did, and they went to dinner, where Tommy graced them with his sweaty presence.

"After lunch today, Madison came up to me and started talking about her breasts," Bee said through a mouthful of ham sandwich.

"Oh my God, dude, they're so hot," Tommy said.

"I've never noticed them. What'd she say?" Jesse asked, crunching his carrot in between words.

"She thought I was cool because I don't look at them, but then she told me I could look at them. It was all very hypocritical," Bee said, scowling.

"She likes you, man!" Tommy exclaimed, slapping Bee on the shoulder.

"So?" Bee said, stirring the straw in his chocolate milk. He saw Jesse grin and continued. "I mean, she isn't very smart, is she?"

"Why does it matter? She's hot," Tommy said.

"Appearance isn't all that matters, Tom," Jesse muttered.

"Whatever, you two are fags." Tommy grabbed his plate and left the table.

"What does 'fags' mean?" Bee asked, watching the large back of Tommy as he walked away. It wasn't the first time Bee had to question someone's slang while at camp, so Jesse was used to explaining it to him.

"Geez, Bee, don't say it," Jesse whispered, his eyebrows coming together.

"Oh, is it a bad word?" Bee asked.

"Some people think it is," Jesse said. He took a deep breath, threw his shoulders back, and stood up. "C'mon, let's go play some basketball."

"You do realize we only ever bounce it around, don't you?" Bee said, already distracted from his earlier question, because it seemed to bother Jesse.

"Then let's go do that," Jesse said, smiling again. The boys disposed of their plates and headed outside. The court was pretty empty, since everyone else was getting ready for the bonfire. They bounced the ball back and forth, occasionally talking, until some of the kids started walking toward the yard where the bonfire would be.

"This is lame," Jesse said, noting the luau theme, complete with the counselors wearing fake grass skirts.

"This whole camp is lame," Bee said, even though he didn't fully mean it. Without this week, he wouldn't have even known saying "lame" was a popular thing to do.

"Yeah, if it weren't for you, I would have hated it here," Jesse said, slowly leading them away from the crowd and sitting down on a log.

"Glad I could be of service," Bee said in a British accent. He had learned that imitating things was funny while he was at camp—Bee was learning how to be funny, something he'd never envisioned for himself. He sat down beside Jesse, automatically scooting closer for warmth that the distant bonfire was unable to provide.

"You actually made it pretty awesome." Jesse laughed. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Bee said. Jesse leaned in a little closer, and Bee could feel something strumming in the air between their knees and shoulders. It reminded him of the second before you got shocked by a doorknob.

"Will you write me letters after camp? I've never really had a friend before," Jesse said, looking at his feet.

“I have the Internet,” Bee scoffed. “It’s the twenty-first century.”

“I know,” Jesse defended, “but letters feel nicer.”

“Then I’ll write you once a week.” Bee smiled at the idea of being someone’s friend.

“Will you still be my friend even though I’m a freak?” Jesse whispered after a long pause.

Bee laughed and looked around the camp. Over by the fire, Tommy’s brothers were having a sword fight with their roasting sticks, hot dogs still attached to the ends. Further out, Madison and a pack of girls were swaying back in forth in a circle. The counselors were trying to form a human pyramid.

“Jess, look around. We’re all freaks here,” Bee said.

“No, I’m kind of a freak in a different sort of way…” Jesse took a deep breath, but Bee interrupted him.

“Sometimes, different is good.” Jesse smiled, grateful he didn’t have to continue. He placed his hand on top of Bee’s, silently thanking him for understanding. Bee interlocked their fingers and squeezed.

“Maybe I’ll write twice a week.”

UNEXPECTED TREASURES

by

Samantha Chong

Overnight, the snow had thawed to reveal the top of a huge treasure chest. It was brown and was really old. It seemed like age and the weather elements made it fragile. The snow made it wet and a darker shade of brown. I was outside with my cousins, Tammy and Matthew. We tried to open the chest, but there was a huge lock, the size of a small textbook. The key was the only way to open it. As we examined the lock, I put my hand behind it. I felt a small button. I pressed and I heard a small click. In my hand was a piece of paper. It said, "If you are worthy to have the treasures of this chest, you will be able to find the key. Follow the map, and you will find the key. Good luck."

"Ugh. We have to hunt for the key?" Tammy sighed heavily and groaned.

Matthew, trying to stay optimistic, said, "But it says *treasures of this chest*. There will be treasures!"

"Yeah, but in movies and books, people search for treasures, and then it turns out to be something useless or they find the treasure and can't keep it."

I gave Tammy a look. She always highlights the negative things in a situation. "Well," I stared at the treasure chest while my cousins stopped fighting. "We found it, we open it. Fair?"

Matthew, excited that someone agreed with him, jumped up and down. "Fair!" he yelled.

I smiled. "What about you, Tammy?"

She frowned. "Well, someone has to control Matthew's hyperness, and I *know* it's not going to be you."

Matthew, completely oblivious our conversation, suddenly announced, "This map leads to Redwall Park. I think it's near our favorite tree." He bounced ahead.

"Tammy, I need to know that you will enjoy this and be happy." I blocked her before she could run after her brother.

"I don't make promises. I'm here to take care of Matthew."

"Don't mess this up for Matthew. He's really excited and you can't ruin this."

"Why do you always think *I'm* going to mess things up? I've been helping Matthew, supporting him, comforting him when things go wrong. I take care of him. He's *my* brother. So don't tell me how to take care of him." She stomped off in the direction Matthew was going.

I sighed, quickly ran up into my house, yelled to my mom that Tammy, Matthew, and I were going to the park and would be back for dinner, and raced to the park. Matthew was jumping up and down in front of our favorite tree. It's our favorite because when we were little, we would climb it and pretend we were monkeys. Tammy was saying something to him, but stopped as soon as she saw me. Probably trying to talk him out of finding the key.

My cousin gave me a look. I hate it when she thinks she can overpower me. Even though she's three months older than I, she thinks she's the boss. I always find the negative side to her perky, annoying positive side. I can never win because I know that she's right. I really shouldn't always say the opposite of everything that comes out of her mouth, but I have to. If I let her tell me what to do *once*, it will never change and it will be the same as when we were little. It gets annoying having to go against her, and she's my cousin. She never knows why I'm so negative and she never will. I could tolerate her at age seven, but after a few years, the things she says can really irritate me. What really pushed me into going anti-cousin is when my mom said, "No, let your cousin watch Matthew, you can't handle him yet," I knew I had to do something about her dictatorship. So I stopped. I stopped playing games where she always got her way, I stopped letting her take care of Matthew when she wanted to; I stopped doing things that she had to do, but made me do. After that, I could tell she wanted that power over me, but I refused to give in. All the nice comments, baking me brownies, encouraging me when I was losing my mind—all lies. Most of all, I was *not* going to let her take over my position as "sister" to Matthew. I knew it would happen unless I did something. I try not to be too mean if she's defending Matthew, but it makes me angry. He's *my* brother, and I am completely capable of taking care of him. She doesn't need to defend him against me, I would never try to hurt him. But here she is, taking charge of the treasure hunt.

"Look! The map says the key is supposed to be right here. Let's start digging NOW!" He was smiling so big, even Tammy started to smile.

"Okay, okay, we'll start digging; just calm down." Tammy said while trying to make Matthew stop bouncing. We got on our knees and started to dig. After about fifteen minutes Tammy announced, "I think I hit something." She dug a little more and pulled out a dented piece of metal.

"Well," I observed the piece of metal, "let's go back to my house and see if it works. But we have to do it fast because I told Mom that we'd be done before dinner and look!" The sun was starting to set, making pretty orange and purple colors across the sky.

"We'd better hurry!" We scrambled to our feet and ran for my house. When we got to the chest, we knelt down in front of it and studied the lock for a little bit. Matthew, breaking the silence, whispered, "Can we open it now?"

I smiled at him. "Sure. You want to do it?"

He shook his head. "No, I think Tammy should do it."

Tammy, looking surprised, said, "Really? Okay, I will. That's so nice of you, Matthew."

As she turned the key, we held our breath. The lock fell, allowing us to push the top open, revealing nothing.

NO WORDS NECESSARY

I part the curtains to where I was born.
As I've suspected, it's dark,
it's warm. A small room, no room
for anyone else—very private.

I've imagined it would be quiet.
But as I let myself in—do I
remember? How could I?—the roar
through these walls that seem to press

with an uncanny evenness. No words
necessary—the song is the ocean's
original business, urgent, endless,
and again, I can't stay long.

—Jed Myers

SEE STAFF

by

Lisa Hill-Corley

Kim got out of her car and scurried through the parking lot, her heels clicking, to get in the door of her son's school before the driver of the minivan she nearly cut off could park and get out. Inside, she went to the room that housed the school-aged after-care program, or SACC, and looked through the crowd of kids for Jayson. Her mocha-colored son was usually easy to spot among the pale sea of Codys and Kaylas.

Kim spotted Jayson sitting, arms folded, with a deep scowl. He kicked the side of a bookshelf next to a young SACC teacher who ignored him except to stop his feet from kicking her as she played a game with a group of girls, who eyed him warily. Kim scanned the sign-in/out sheet and wasn't surprised to see the dreaded message, "See Staff," next to Jayson's name. Her chest tightened and her watch suddenly felt too small on her wrist. They needed to be on the road in five minutes if they were going to make their group therapy session on time.

"Hi, Mrs. Kenley." It was Jill, the staffer who was in charge. She looked to be in her early thirties, closer to Kim's age than most of the others, who seemed to be fresh out of college—at least Kim hoped they'd gone to college.

"Hi, what's happening?" Kim said. She'd found that question to be the least confrontational. "What's the problem?" or even "Is there a problem?" appeared to put the staff on the polite defensive, leaving Kim in a position to have to backtrack, which was just more time and energy than she had to spend on a group day.

"Well, he's fine." They always started off by telling her that.

"We had a shutdown today," Jill said. "Jayson wasn't done with the circles he was cutting out for his Olympic flag when it was time to go to the gym." Miss Jill pointed over at a bulletin board where several construction paper renditions of the Olympic flag were displayed.

"He got a little upset when Mr. Kenny said it was time to clean up, and he threw his crayons and scissors on the floor. He wouldn't pick them up when Mr. Kenny asked him to, and then he stopped talking to everyone. So he had to stay back in here with Miss Cara, and so far, no one's been able to get through to him."

"Did they avoid having the kids try to cheer him up? We talked about that earlier with these situations," Kim said.

Miss Jill nodded. "Of course. We remembered about how the attention just feeds into it."

Kim looked over and watched as Jayson wrenched away from another little boy in that Kim recognized from Jayson's first grade class. The boy held out a toy robot. Miss Cara accepted the robot and tried to place it on Jayson's lap, but Jayson shifted his leg so that the robot fell to the floor. Kim's cheeks began to heat up when she saw that Miss Jill had caught that exchange as well.

"How about the feelings journal he worked on with his teacher? We brought a copy down here. Did someone have him look at that? He's supposed to find the feeling he's having in there."

Miss Jill looked over at her desk, then at the corner where Jayson was sitting. "I'm not sure. It's just hard sometimes with so many kids, and we're just not trained specifically for special needs kids."

"I understand that," Kim snapped, then paused. She knew she was being rude, but she could not face Jill's 'we don't have the training' speech today. "Ms. Turner designed the book so that Jayson could look at it and do the work himself. He needs to know that it's *his* job to make you understand where he's coming from."

"Whew! That's a big job for anyone, isn't it?" Miss Jill said with a little laugh.

Kim was confused with this abrupt change. Was this sympathy for Jayson or a shot at their methods?

"Well, just keep us posted on how the group is doing," said Miss Jill.

"Of course, well, I'll try to figure out what set this one off and get him in a better mood for tomorrow. Did anything else happen?"

Miss Jill smiled and shook her head. "No, that was really it; he was having a good day up until that. We like having him here."

The teachers always told Kim that too.

Kim smiled at Miss Jill and walked over to Jayson and Miss Cara. She raised an eyebrow at Jayson, who jerked his head down and covered his face with his hands. "I hear we've had some trouble today."

"Ohhh, we're not feeling social right now," Miss Cara said.

"Let's go, Jayson." Kim took her son's hand and drew him from the chair. "Pick that up," she said, pointing to the robot, which was still on the floor. Jayson shook his head. Kim felt herself tensing up.

She attempted the light voice she'd heard Jayson's special education teachers use. "All right, Jay-Jay, let's give the robot back to Miss Cara; c'mon, it's time to go play with Aiden."

Jayson shook his head again. Miss Cara, with half her attention on other students and half on Jayson and Kim, smiled in sympathy but did not say anything.

"Jayson," said Kim, reverting back to stern, "pick up the robot. I know you put it on the floor." Without waiting for an answer, Kim bent down with Jayson's hand and put it on the toy.

"Stop it!" wailed Jayson, who had miraculously recovered his powers of speech in time to cause a scene. The girls Miss Cara was playing with paused in their game to watch.

"Then pick it up," Kim hissed.

"No!"

"Pick it up!" Kim could tell their voices were beginning to rise above the general din of the SACC room. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Miss Cara look past them. Kim assumed the girl was getting some nonverbal instruction from someone behind her, and her cheeks flamed again. She lowered her volume, but not her intensity.

"Now," Kim said, summoning the lowest part of her register for her sternest parent voice. Her mother had had a deadly serious parent voice that rose barely above a whisper and made Kim and her sisters stop cold in their tracks. That was Kim's goal—but so far she did not seem to be able to produce the same effect.

Jayson grasped the robot and slammed it on the seat of the chair where he had been sitting. He tore his wrist from Kim's grasp.

"That is not where it belongs, and you know not to slam toys like that!" snapped Kim.

Jayson put his hands up over his face.

Miss Cara slid over and picked up the toy. With a look at Kim, she said, "All right, Jayson, tomorrow you're going to help clean up, okay? I know it's been kind of hard today."

Kim swallowed and said, "Thank you, Miss Cara, we'll be in a better mood tomorrow."

"Of course!" the young woman answered brightly.

Kim took Jayson by the wrist and led him to the area where the kids kept their belongings. She checked her watch and realized that along with enduring the embarrassment of being handled by a woman who was probably about twenty-two years old, she would now have to be the late mom at Jayson's social skills group, rushing in and apologizing to the others.

As Kim jammed Jayson's lunch bag and art project into his backpack, a little voice behind her said, "I tried to see if he wanted to play and not be sad…" then trailed off.

Kim turned. It was the child who had offered the toy robot. Kim recognized him now; he was the one kid Jayson had described as his friend.

"I'm sorry, Ryan; Jayson will be ready to play tomorrow, okay?" Kim said to him.

"Maybe tomorrow," said Ryan, "bye, Jayson."

Jayson deliberately turned away from him.

"Thank you, Ryan, you're a good friend." Kim patted Ryan's arm.

"Yeah." Ryan scampered off without any more attempts to engage Jayson. Kim watched him go wistfully. She was always grateful for how quickly the other boy seemed to get over Jayson's snubs and seek him out to play again. She wondered how long it would last until kids like Ryan gave up and what they would do then.

When they finally got out into the hallway, Kim let go of her son. She never liked to be in physical contact with him when he'd made her angry. She focused on the sound her heels made on the school's polished linoleum and listened for the scuffling of Jayson's sneakers behind her. By the time they reached the exit, she was able to resist slamming the door open.

The doctor that lead the social skills group often told Kim to try to resist calling attention to the disruptive mood and ignore any non self-destructive

behavior. Kim sighed, realized that she had messed up again. She completely mishandled the robot incident, by getting frustrated and trying to control the situation—running after the same pipe dream of commanding the respect her mother seemed to get with one look back in the ’70s. Kim wasn’t her mother, and this wasn’t the ’70s. The women in this neighborhood thought raised voices were child abuse; Kim knew she probably had Miss Cara and Miss Jill back there contemplating whether or not to call Child Protective Services.

Kim got in the car and leaned back in the seat as Jayson climbed in and put on his seat belt. She looked in the little mirror installed above the rearview that allowed a full shot of the backseat. Jayson was leaning against the window, his head resting on one hand. Kim immediately felt sorry for him.

She put on her own seat belt and checked her watch again. They were definitely late.

Kim knew that the right thing to do was to call Bea, the other mother in the group Kim had gotten to know. But she hesitated. Bea seemed perfectly nice, but Kim still wasn’t sure how to approach this white stay-at-home mother who was always there on time, sitting patiently in the waiting room with a big bag of books and kids snacks, taking calls from a husband who apparently couldn’t make a move if she wasn’t in the house. But still, they had exchanged phone numbers for exactly this kind of situation.

While she listened to Bea’s phone ring, Kim saw Jayson pick up a book from the small plastic catch-all bin she put in the backseat for his books and toys.

“*This Way Myrtle* by Laura Snell, pictures by Robert Vee,” he read from the title page of the top book.

“Mommy, Myrtle the turtle is lost, but they find her,” Jayson said, as if he hadn’t just reported this fact, in those exact words, on the way to the school that morning.

“Yeah, they sure do. Do you remember how?”

“She was lost,” said Jayson.

“Riiight, but do you remember how she gets found?” Kim said patiently as she prayed Bea didn’t pick up so she could get away with leaving a message.

No such luck. “Hi, Kim!”

“Hi, Bea. Listen, can you let Jeannie know we’re coming? We’re just now leaving the school. Bad pickup,” lowered her voice on the last part as Jayson

continued reading aloud.

"Uh oh," Bea said, "don't you just love those days? Our school director gets all folksy on you, like hey, 'Can I chat at 'cha?' I know what she's doing, but it still sucks."

Kim had planned to make the call short, but instead surprised herself by saying, "Yeah, I guess there's no good way to tell somebody their autistic child is acting up in your classroom, huh?"

"Tell me about it. Aiden threw a toy train smack into a whiteboard last week when I was in there for snack volunteers. I was seriously contemplating making a run for it."

Kim laughed. *"Aiden?"*

"Yeah, it's his latest thing, lashing out when people don't understand what he's saying."

"Well, I don't blame poor Aiden. There are plenty of people who don't understand me that I feel like throwing things at," said Kim.

"We should swap pickups so we could deal with the opposite problem for a change," said Bea.

Kim sighed. "Yeah, I'm sure not doing my pickups right."

"Well, I hear Jayson talking in the background," said Bea gently, "so that's something. When we started, if he'd had a bad pickup, he'd be unresponsive until about the midway point of the session, right? This is good."

Kim hadn't realized that. "Yeah…I guess you're right."

"Mommy! Myrtle gets to ride in the basket of the girl's bike!" Jayson said from the backseat.

"Oh, is that how she gets home?" Kim said.

"We'll see!" said Jayson, which was what Kim usually told him when he asked her questions about a book. Kim smiled.

To Bea she said, "Well, at least we can enjoy the same book for days on end. It's new every time!"

Bea laughed. "Think of the money we're saving. I have to go toy and book shopping about once a year; you just keep rotating the stuff you have! So God

gave us some advantages to this whole special needs thing, right?"

"Exactly," Kim said. With the promise that they were only minutes away, Kim ended her call. Jayson had paused in the story of Myrtle.

"Mommy? Circles are round, not oval."

"That's true," Kim said absently. She was used to abrupt changes in subject.

"So that's why I couldn't put them on my flag. We were making circles, and circles are not ovals."

Kim's mental antennae went up. "You mean on the Olympic flag?" she asked carefully.

"Yeah. The white flags have circles, one is red and one is green and one is blue and there are two other colors."

"Right. Well, how about next time you just ask them to stay and finish if you don't like your circles?"

"Yeah…" After a beat he whispered, "and pick up the robots."

"Riiight," said Kim, wishing there was room to dance around in the front seat of her car.

Soon they pulled into the parking lot of the office park where the group met.

"Ready to go play with Aiden?"

"Oh, wait." Jayson looked down at his lap. Myrtle had not quite gotten home yet. Kim figured it wouldn't hurt to let him finish, at least where they were going, people understood that it was just easier to let the child finish what he was doing and get to group in a good mood.

"The next time the family went out, everyone said, 'Go this way, Myrtle!' and she did." Jayson said. He finished the story the way he ended all of his books, by holding it up over his head and clapping it shut with both hands.

"The end," they said together.