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“Triumph of the Marine Venus” by Sebastiano Ricci



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Lilydale

By Zach Murphy

The waters of the Mississippi River were higher than the high school version of myself on a Saturday night.

I willed my rusted sedan down the winding bends of Lilydale Road, nervously hydroplaning through dirty, cloudy puddles.

Lilydale Road didn't feel the way it used to be, because it simply wasn't the way it used to be. The wildflowers didn't grow there anymore. The squirrels had lost their spunk. The deer that once graced you with their majestic presence had faded away. Even the bald eagles no longer wanted anything to do with this place.

As the water relentlessly overtook the road, I abandoned my little car, waded through the muck, and lunged toward what had remained of the forest. Getting home in time to watch the evening news broadcast with my cat seemed a lot less likely.

The water rushed toward me and I quickly latched onto an elm tree and climbed. My middle school antics had come in handy for once in my life. I reached the top of the tree and sat upon a branch. I looked down below as the flooding waters intensified. Everything that had managed to stay afloat was already dead—plastic trash, hollowed branches, fish with their bellies up.

I gazed out at a city that was never truly home. I had a front row view of the factory smoke that always taints the beauty of the sky.

I glanced across the tree and noticed that there was a lone wild turkey perched on a separate branch. The wild turkey looked at me with an uncertainty in its eyes, like it didn't know what would happen next.

After a brief moment, the wild turkey fluttered away, and I sat on the branch for eternity, waiting for the world to smile again. □



The Sending River of Planet Gaia

By Lynn Garthwaite

The procession had moved slowly through the village, but the singing remained festive. Daiyanna and her boy Kayel were in the lead, for it was their loved one for whom the people sang. Kayel was troubled. The tears kept slipping down his cheeks and he wiped them with the sleeve of his tunic.

His mother understood his anguish, and she tried to reassure him that his sadness would be soon replaced with a kind of joy that all Gaians keep in their hearts for a lifetime. Kayel's only focus was on the loss he felt and he didn't understand the joy that reverberated from the townspeople who sang as they accompanied Kayel and his mother on this walk to the river. His grandfather's lifeless body lay on a brightly decorated grass-covered platform that the people called a "sending vessel."

When they finally arrived at the bank of the river, the crowd's voices finally fell silent as they gazed at the magnificence of the place they preserved for such special occasions. Kayel had never been here before. This was his first Sending Celebration, and he didn't understand what he was seeing. Just ahead the river narrowed between steep canyon sides, and the water, which had been bubbling and splashing energetically against the banks until this point, was now quiet and calm, with barely a ripple.

Looking ahead at the place where the river entered the canyon, Kayel thought he saw a shimmering curtain reaching from the sky down to the surface of the water. He blinked several times, not sure what he was seeing. He tugged at his mother's hand to get her attention.

"What's that, on the river?"

His mother smiled, and knelt beside him to explain what he was about to see.

"I know you miss your grandfather terribly, Kayel. We will all miss him for all of our lives. But this is a place of joy. Of gratitude. Of awe. This is your first, but there will be many more Sending Celebrations in your future. Soon you will smile again, I promise."

"I'm not going to smile again, Mother. I'm so sad. Grandfather is no more, and it's so unfair. I want him back."

Daiyanna hugged her son, and guided him closer to the river's edge. The crowd stood back, allowing the boy and his mother the space they needed to experience the moment to come. Others had already pulled the colorful platform, with Kayel's grandfather on the bed of grasses, to the edge of the river. When Kayel saw that they were going to push the platform into the still river, he panicked.

"No, Mother, what are they doing? He's going to float away. Don't let them take him, please!"

Daiyanna assured her son as best she could. "They're not taking him, Kayel. They're sending him. Watch. You'll see. On the other side of that shimmer."

"Here," she said, taking his hand. "Let's watch together."

Kayel squeezed his mother's hand, but couldn't keep his feet still as he was anxious to stop what was happening. A new song began in the crowd, as the platform, with a gentle push from the town leaders, began to slowly float toward the place where the canyon walls narrowed the river.

Eternal love, embrace us

Eternal gifts, enhance us

We send our love and spirits

To share again one day.

Daiyanna smiled; her anticipation of the Sending Celebration much different than that of her son's. Kayel could only stand and watch, clutching his mother's hand.

As the platform gently moved toward the shimmering, translucent curtain of lights, the feeling in the crowd was of great expectation. Once the front of the floating craft touched the edge of the curtain, everyone hushed, as if they dared not breathe to interrupt the event.

Kayel squinted his eyes, and wiped them, wondering if the tears were making him see something that couldn't be happening. As the lower part of his grandfather's body slid through the sparkling veil of lights—did it move a little bit? The drab color of the trousers that his grandfather wore seemed to be changing hues, or was the actual fabric changing?

The boy stared, now intently examining what was happening. The crowd stayed quiet, but the feeling in the air was one of expectation and great joy. Kayel looked up to see his mother, whose

face was radiant and flushed with warmth. He looked back at the dancing lights on the river, through which the platform had almost completely passed now.

As soon as the last of the platform passed through the glimmering curtain, a new hush of expectation surrounded Kayel. As he watched, his grandfather sat up, his clothing all now brightly colored, his hair returned to the thick, brown wavy style that Kayel only recognized from old pictures.

With the ease of a young man, his grandfather stood and turned to face the crowd, his face bearing a grand smile that spread from his mouth to his eyes.

The crowd waved their hands in the joyful celebration of the Sending event. Kayel called out "Grandfather, Grandfather!" and the man on the platform looked directly at his beloved grandson. He made a gesture of sending his heart to the young boy, but Kayel could not speak.

"This is the joy of the Sending Celebration, Kayel. Our loved ones are never gone forever. We send them through the portal to join others whose souls have left our Gaia, but they are not really gone. We are blessed with the opportunity to see them, one last time, well and strong, and filled with love and happiness. Do you see why this is such a grand celebration, my son?"

Kayel finally looked away from the scene on the river, where his grandfather's image had slowly faded as the platform continued around a bend in the canyon.

"Can I go there, Mother? Can I swim through the portal and visit him?"

"Not yet, my love. We will all see each other one day. We are of two worlds and your grandfather has gone on to the next one. We'll all be reunited when our time has come. Don't wish away the rest of your life because you want to see him again now. You have a long, wonderful life ahead, but Grandfather will be there to meet you when it's your time."

Kayel did not answer, but for the first time today he allowed a smile to light up his face. The Sending Celebration gave his heart peace, and the smile from his grandfather assured him that everything was going to be just fine. Kayel added his own voice to the singing as he and his mother joined the townspeople on the walk back into town. □

Some Truths are Better Left to Dreams

—Marcus Washington
2023 Wapsie Writing Contest winner, adult
category, Wapsie, Iowa

I stepped into the coffee shop, and the heat of the small cafe chased away the New England chill clinging to me. Mocha aroma lured me to the counter, and the chatter of coffee drinkers lounging at round tables wrapped with golden fall leaves enveloped me. This place wasn't my usual go-to for caffeine. There was another shop on the other side of town I stopped at every morning before I went to my law classes. I always ordered a large caramel iced mocha with an extra shot of espresso. It was my favorite drink and the magic potion I needed to keep me from going comatose during my professor's monotone lessons. Today was my first time visiting this cafe. It was a cozy spot, and the aesthetic blended perfectly into Westbrook, a neighborhood of imposing brick homes and old money. Its exclusive location was why I had chosen to come here this afternoon. I didn't want to run into anyone I might know because I would meet my father, Charles, here for the first time since I was five years old. I was supposed to hate my father. My mother and the rest of my family did, but how could I agree with them when I had no memories of the man? I didn't hate him. I certainly didn't love him, but I could get to know him and let his actions convince me how I should feel.

I studied the menu above the counter, and the cashier waited for me with a patient smile. I didn't know what my father might want to drink, and I couldn't assume we shared the same taste. I was obsessed with iced caramel mochas, and the one pictured on the menu was a dream of caramel swirls and mounds of whip cream, but I resisted the urge to order the wonderful drink. Most middle-aged men I knew liked the simplicity, so I settled on black coffees with simple cream and sugar.

I found a quiet table in a corner away from everyone else, and I checked the time on my phone. It was two ten, and my father was supposed to meet me here at two o'clock. My mother's voice echoed in my mind. "Your father

is only good at one thing. Not showing up." I tried to ignore the unease clenching my stomach. What if he didn't come? Of course, my family wouldn't know if my father stood me up, and I wouldn't tell them, but they would be right. He would prove himself to be a self-centered lowlife. I didn't want them to be right. I wanted my father to be a man who I might be able to call Dad one day, not just a photo I kept in a shoe box.

I ignored my worries as much as I could and scrolled through my phone. When I checked the time again, it was two twenty-four. I was ready to admit defeat, collect my things, and slink away with my pride, but the cafe door swung open, and my father was standing in the doorway. I thought a man who was forty-eight years old would dress more humbly, but there he was in designer skinny jeans like the boys at my campus wore and a diamond-encrusted medallion sporting the phrase "Bout dat life" hung from a thick gold chain around his neck. The way he swaggered into the room screamed thug, and I cringed from the looks the customers gave him. I was a biracial woman from the suburbs living the white side of my life. My father was a black man from the inner city. Maybe meeting him at this cafe was a mistake. Westbrook was an affluent neighborhood, and all it would take was one idiot to call the cops. I wanted to shrink and run out the door before he noticed me, but it was too late.

"Maisy?" He said with a vaguely familiar baritone.

"That's me," I said, and he came to my table. I stood and hugged him. It was what most people did when they met a missing parent. When our embrace ended, he had a shy, crooked smile. I knew that grin. It was the same one I had whenever I met someone new. My mother would sometimes say, "You look like him when you smile like that." I see why she would say it now.

"Baby girl, how you been?" my father said.

"Busy with classes and other things."

"A hustler like me, I see."

"I suppose."

We took our seats. My father didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. Finally, he settled them on the table, but he kept his back stiff as he gazed around the cafe.

"This is a nice place," he said. "I've never been in a coffee shop before. I usually get a cup from the corner store when I have a taste for it."

"Well, I'm glad I kept our order simple then. This coffee is for you." I slid his cup over to him, and his shy crooked smile returned.

"I appreciate this," my father said, and he took a sip. "Before we get too far, I have something for you." He pulled a photograph from his jacket pocket and handed it to me. In the photo, I rode on my father's shoulders, smiling, and he looked confused.

"You were four years old in that picture," he said. "It was the only one I could get before your mama kicked me out."

"It's nice," I said. I didn't remember the moment the photo was taken. I didn't remember my father, and this entire conversation felt as awkward as chatting with a stranger in a waiting room.

The silence stretched. This reunion wasn't going anything like the tear-jerking internet videos. What was I supposed to say? I guess starting simple would be best.

"You probably think it's strange I wanted to meet you again after all this time," I said.

"Well, I didn't expect you to contact me. I assumed your mama turned you against me years ago."

"Well, That's one reason I wanted to meet you. Mom never did describe you in the best light, and I want to know if you're the rotten person she made you out to be."

"She wasn't too far off on what she told you about me. I've never been a good man, and the neighborhood I come from ain't known for angels." I waited for him to elaborate on what he said, but he only sipped his coffee. I knew about the neighborhood he grew up in and the violence and drugs corrupting the people there. My mom and I lived there until I was six, and when she got a better job, she moved us to the suburbs. I didn't care about the neighborhood. I only wanted to know what kind of man abandons his child.

"I want to know you," I said. "Maybe form a bond with you, but I have to know, Why did you never try to see me?" My father frowned at me. He probably wasn't expecting this question. I couldn't take it back, and I wouldn't go on without an answer.

"It was your mama," he said. "I couldn't deal with her. She was always nagging me, trying to make me into somebody I'm not."

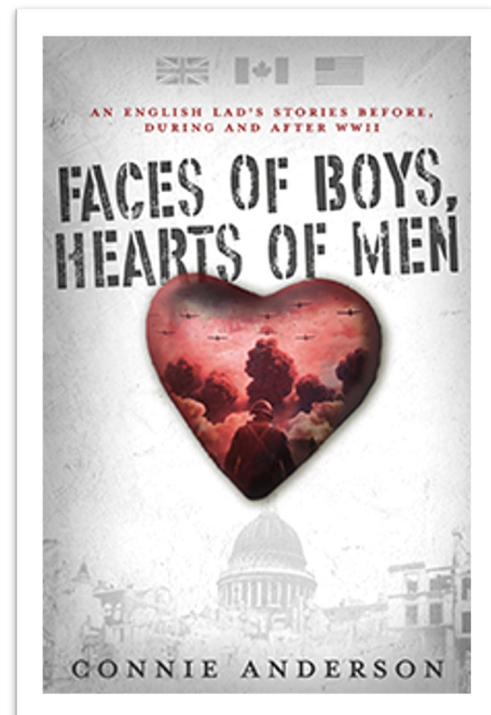
"I get that, but Mom is a reasonable woman. I

don't know how she was then, but she would've let you see me."

My father stared off for a moment and sighed. Finally, he said, "I didn't want to. I mean, I could have, but I had more important things going on in my life. I couldn't play around being a dad. I'm here now, right?"

I stayed silent. I was an inconvenience. My father didn't care about me then, and I doubt he cared now. I wasted so many tears for the father-daughter dances he missed. The jealousy I felt when other girls' fathers cheered for them at the softball games was all for a man who didn't care. I wanted to scream, but I didn't. This man was a stranger, and he always would be. I wouldn't waste any more hope he would be something more. I talked for a while longer with my father. He spoke of cousins and aunts he wanted me to meet, but I honestly didn't care. I wanted this meeting to end. Eventually, he mentioned an appointment downtown and needing a couple of dollars for the train. I lent him the money, and we parted with the promise of keeping in touch. After he left, I was relieved. Some truths are better left to dreams. I called my mom, not intending to tell her what had happened but to invite her to a movie. On my way out of the cafe, I dropped the photo my father had given me into the trash. □

Available on Amazon



Know One's Self

By Jay Nunnery

Thinking of the other side, she watched the sunset like she watched her step, the inside of a peach's sweet guts stretching to skin and radiating purple that warmed her eyes first and led her to a colder night's full moon. She had decided already, when the last trimester began until the pain became too much to bear, as natural as the seasons changing.

It had nothing to do with freedom. She had too much faith, learned through cycles of healing forgiveness, those wild nights followed by quiet early mornings when she'd hear the peregrines' song and the wolves' last snores coming from somewhere outside, as forgiveness comes, she realizes her faith must grow. When she turned her fate over, allowing Victor to embody her change, magnetic and jaded, it began.

An air-freshener's cedar fragrance held dominion over her with its masking. She couldn't smell the weed, cigarettes, or booze that had become a part of Victor's Mustang. All she desired to smell, was Victor's love. When he said he loved her, it began.

"I don't believe you—but I love you too—or does love just mean different things to different folks? Maybe your love is green and my love is brown."

She laughed at her joke, wanting Victor to laugh along. However, he responded by looking away, not caring what love was.

This consciousness templated to the curves of her body, her holiness's compliant container. She headed home—the boy kicking against the inside of her lower abdomen while the girl grazed a freshly formed hand against the upper half—the heat entrenching as namelessly as those babies she carried. Under the impression she only had one baby in her stomach, she calculated her path.

She walked uphill, her legs tiring more with each step. Time turned into a broken clock's amending story about suffering. Unable to see the hill's peak, visualizing as the prayer does, versions of promised lands, she let her sweat fall free as salvation and she decided on a boy's name, Horace, and a girl's name, Diana. She took a

moment, resting in the darkness, squinting as though to see the future. Unblinking, her eyes began to water and her thoughts tried catching her tears, the stretching weight of the agony, and the troubled belief that she could proceed. Soon, her legs regained a little, found the miracle of strength they were in need of, and she went further up the hill. The temperature dropped into a night where only a few stars were visible. She saw the hilltop finally, and the soreness deep in her leg tissue, unknotted and she felt a release in her back. Halfway down, she saw her old home. She felt like she was moving briskly. She was sludging. Losing control, her thirst and hunger and hallucinating memories about her father and mother—who were singing the same song at equal distances from her, dressed in all white at a family reunion—their image took hold of her, and she murmured hopes of forgiveness to herself. She pictured herself young, and her younger self made her think she could go faster.

She reached the bottom of the hill, and her knee gave like that was all it could do. Her next step—automatic, a progression towards home—overextended and landed wrong. She heard a snap, grating and debilitating. It shot up the side of her leg, and she held everything back with breaths of rumination. She limped to the house, which seemed to shrink away into the distance. Her ankle was swollen with quickening pulsations as she knocked on her childhood's crimson-painted door, staring at her mother's garden. The cosmos and lilacs, surrounded by light yellow bells and spiraling petals, blended her reminiscing of the crimson and the three golden trees warping her reflection. She knocked, and knocked some more and kept knocking. Her knocks grew quieter, an aching crossing down her bicep to her heart with each bang—and then there was her mother's face. The old woman's sunken reflection, peeked through two of the window's bent blinds. They'd seen each other. Her mother gasped, and the door opened, and her mother stood there looking like the retiree she was, having to work her former job for just one more day.

"Leda?"

"Yes, Mother. It's me."

"I see that now. What in the hell are you doing here? You and me, the only two out here, and I know my voice is still as loud and as brash as it

ever has been, Leda. I hope for your sake you ain't come from wherever in the hell you came from to make me ask you the same damn question over and over."

"No, Mother. I would never."

"That's more like it. Now, out with it. Whatever the hell it is."

"Mother. I'm pregnant. I'm gonna be a mother too."

"You sure as hell look like you are. Ain't no doubt on that. Who's the father? And you better not say who the hell I think it is."

"I don't know for sure."

"You don't know for sure. Well, I certainly don't know either, Leda. How far along is you? You gotta at least know that."

"A couple of months, I suppose."

"You suppose? And what's a couple of months? You know what, don't answer that. It doesn't matter to me none. I ain't no doctor. Just tell me this, Leda. Just tell me, what in God's glorious name are you doing here? You wanna bring more shame to this family. Is that it, Leda? I bet you can't even answer that, and you ain't gotta either. It's okay. Cause I don't care no more, Leda. At all. I can't. I damn sure ain't no fool. You betta get on. though. You betta get on just the way you came, especially before your daddy gets home. The last thing he'd wanna see is you—and with some baby inside you on top of that. Oh, for heaven's sake."

They each thought of all the memories that they'd shared. Neither of them spoke, holding emotions to themselves, as their shared vexation, her mother turns away, unable to look upon Leda any longer, closing the crimson door, which Leda could only stare at, its untouched coldness attached to the wind's chill.

An unwavering defiance, which revolutionaries have, entered Leda's mind as though from above and she wiped tears before they could fully form this time, as she'd seen her mother do, and she thought of a new way back, envisioning it as though she were a bird flying over Alms.

As if gripping for the wind in growing darkness, wanting to get lost, leaves crunching underneath each of her steps, she did not know where the path went. Understanding she had no home, it went to her core while also traversing forward. Like the devoted, she looked forward, moving over those

dead leaves, Horace and Diana awakening below her heart.

* * *

In between heartbeats, she reached a body of water, a small river, small waves spreading through it. She stopped and saw how big she was and felt her body's foreign contours with both of her palms, looking at the water to see what she was touching.

Examining her unfamiliar self, she caught her own eyes. They were overshadowed by a snout, dollar green and scaled and breathing heavy. Revealing its yards-long body with a predatory crawl, the rest of the gator emerged. Leda tried to run. As if the ground beneath her and time were working against her, she lost her balance. The gator had no such issues to contend with, its legs fresh, an appetite and a force that it lived to empower, and its eyes set on the flesh that it smelled. It moved towards her as though it were moving through a door that was left open and sprang out of the river, beads of water splashing from its body as crystals of light and its teeth clamped Leda's leg. Her body numbed with shock and everything went black. As her eyes rolled into her head, her eyelids covered them and she slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

When she awoke, a light was shining on her face, as if she were in a dream she could not remember, sourceless and indecipherable. She heard a woman with a soft voice say, "She's waking up. Thank You, Jesus. She's waking up."

Leda stared into the light until she got used to it. Her head giving into the pillow.

"Miss," the woman with the soft voice said.

"Yes."

Leda and the woman with the soft voice both felt a jolt of liberated surprise, hearing Leda's voice. A man joined the woman, stood next to her, and he too looked at Leda like a squirrel would look at a tree that they just climb down.

"I am Nurse Toni. This is Doctor Benson," the woman with the soft voice said and the nurse and the doctor shook Leda's hand like she was famous and the nurse continued with a tinge of clairvoyance, "You are at Saint Maria's Hospital. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Leda."

"Leda, do you remember any of what

happened?”

“Not really, ma’am,” Leda said, looking away from the light for the first time. “I was going to see my folks to tell them that I am going to be a momma. I mean a mother. I am going to be a mother. Except when I finally got there, my mother said that they still ain’t wanna have nothing to do with me. So, I started to head on to a—well, to any motel I could find nearby—and then—”

She stopped and remembered. The sun’s light pressing against a nearby window reminded her that she could feel without touching. She felt warmth as though it were a fist unclenching its fingers within her and then she remembered that last night’s decreasing temperature and she felt fear. The fear felt as though it was grabbing the warmth’s hand and trying to pull it away from her. She remembered why she felt the fear. It was her last memory. An incomplete, unfinished thought that she wanted to forget but could not. This though made her want to stand and run away from her past, from herself, from what that past had made her. Then she completed the memory. She looked at all the white walls around the window, returning to the warmth being pulled, confused by what surrounded it. Like the monks who discovered The Golden Buddha beneath the clay, she removed the cotton blanket and discovered her foot, shining bruises of black and blue and magenta. She attempted to wiggle her toes. Realizing immediately that she could not, she knew that control was never hers and that her foot would no longer be hers. Nevertheless, she thought, I live. This thought cleared a pathway in her mind and made a tingle go down her back, and the tingle divided down both of her legs just the same. She touched her stomach with a dedicated consummation. Lying as that tingle grew with her awesomeness, she smelled the antiseptics and the urine that lingered underneath the antiseptics’ surface. She looked again at her foot, content to move, as the spirits move, down that new path that her mind had found.

“How’d I get here?” she asked.

To that question, Nurse Toni and Doctor Benson smiled, coyly and as though in love with what they did and to each other, and the doctor answered, “You were brought here, Leda.”

“Brought? Here?”

“That’s right,” the doctor said. “Three days ago.”

Nurse Toni nodded to confirm, and Leda’s shoulders loosened.

“Who brought me here?”

“A man,” Nurse Toni said, averting her focus to Leda’s belly. “He carried you in here. Robert’s his name. And he’s been checking up on you, too, every day you been asleep here. It’s about 3:30 now. I think he gets off work at 3, so he should be here at any moment. I am certain that seeing you all bright-eyed is just gonna make his day.”

* * *

Robert arrived as Nurse Toni said he would. He watched Leda, his heart beating fast, as though he’d had twice his normal amount of caffeine and like she was the most beautiful natural phenomenon. Still getting used to what’d happened, as Eve would’ve looked at Adam had she been created first, Leda looked at him.

“So, you’re Robert?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m Leda.”

“I know,” he said and chuckled to himself as he would’ve had he tripped over a bump in the sidewalk. “Doctor Benson and Nurse Toni told me.”

“They say that you are the one who saved my life.”

“I just done what anybody would do. It’s a blessing I was there, actually. I was just out smoking. Turns out cigarettes can save a life too. Anyway. I was just walking and thinking and smoking and listening to a little nature, and then I saw you. Thought you was asleep at first. Then I saw your foot and your leg. Lord have mercy.”

“I imagine it was even worse then than now.”

“Yes, Miss Leda, it sure was a sight, a bloody and scary sight, and so I checked to see if you were alive and you was. But you wasn’t coming to for nothing. So I decided I had to get you here as fast as I could.”

“So, you did save my life?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He paused and looked at her bewildered face. “According to Doctor Benson and Nurse Toni, it wasn’t just your life I saved,” he said, proud and vindicated and grateful. □

A Mosaic of Fields

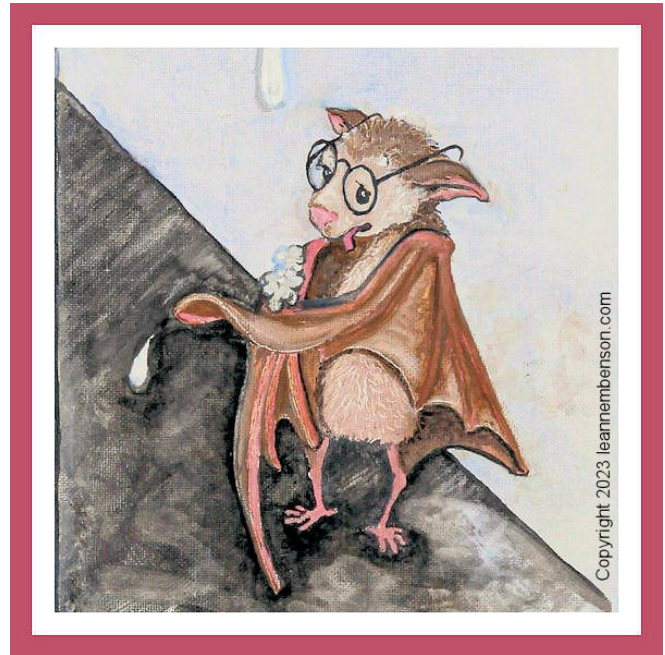
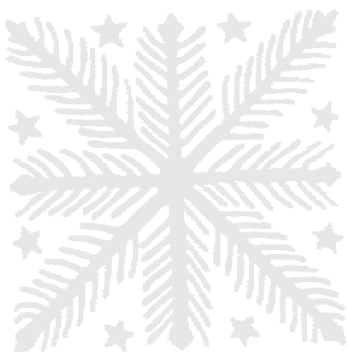
A mosaic of fields
of gold and emerald green
sprawled across the land
Beneath the arcane mysteries
pervading the serenity of nightfall
bathed in the pale light of a cold moon
That shimmered in the light drizzle
seeping from a canopy of clouds
thin as gauze adrift in the empyrean
High above a slumbering dominion

Where memories of a forsaken yesteryear
were re-enacted in the reveries of the supine
Vivid now, as alive as the day of their conception
Bringing to life anew past joys and jublations
reviving forgotten regrets and sorrows

While shadows lingered tween the trees
whispering to the midnight mists
As they wafted across the realm
under a canopy of velvet indigo
adorning a sublime eventide

And the spirits of midnight
journeyed through the dreams and visions
Pervading the imaginations
of a sleeping world
Where they told of the mysteries of eternity
in murmurs and melodies
Through the hours of night entire
while a darkness impenetrable
swept across the surface of the earth
for a time and a while

—D.A. Simpson



Why Do We Even Need Swear Words, Anyway?

By Leanne M. Benson

Kids learn at an early age that swear words are powerful. Funny, but when my kids were growing up, I thought if I didn't swear, they wouldn't either. I remember telling them that people only swear when they aren't intelligent enough to express themselves using good words. When in fact, studies have shown the people that have a large vocabulary can often use *more* swear words than people that have limited words.

However, research also shows that swearing may help us vent and it's a very effective way to make someone *stop!* The coolest thing about swearing is that it can be kind of like taking pain medication. It can make us feel better when we get "dumped" on (like this little bat) and it lessens our pain when we stub our toe.

But not so fast! About the time I began to ramp up on those swear words, I learned the more we use... the more we need. So, those that swear a lot, may not get as much relief when they stub their toe.

Wishing you a future where few swear words are needed. ☐

From 500 APHORISMS AND OBSERVATIONS

A Tasty Bowl of the Succinct

By Michael Rossberg

The walls we build to keep others out are equally effective at penning us in.

People once but no longer important in our lives are like portraits we hang in a room with the lights turned off.

Shield your ears from those who bellow; cup them when the quiet speak.

A promise should not be made until an apology is well rehearsed.

Innocence comes with birth and drifts away as soon as a child comes to understand options.

Solitude tends to what togetherness spawns.

The sky is always blue in romantic relationships... when both people are flying above the clouds.

One carries ancestral baggage throughout one's life.

Love is blind; time slowly restores our eyesight.

A job that engages you as you walk in the workplace door and divorces you as you walk out it is ideal.

Racial slurs bespeak rancid souls. Slaves whisper their anguish to a hundred subsequent generations.

A poor man is happy with a decent meal; a rich man complains about a new yacht.

Assign only those who have lived a perfect life the task of judging others and you will have an empty jury box.

Common sense is more common than sensible.

Step in a puddle and your feet will be wet for the rest of your walk.

Most people on a garden tour point to flowers, while there are always a few who point out weeds.

As a generation passes away, so do its animating causes and crazes.

A garden sprouts first in a gardener's imagination.

Happiness is every dog in the world playing and not one of them barking.

Disputants share only the certainty with which they make contradictory assertions.

One should continually scrutinize one's own truths with the same vigor that one doubts the opinions of others.

People's need to know is slight; people's need to think they know is mighty.

Cause and effect stare backward; free will gazes forward. The two glare menacingly at each other in the present.

So wise is old Sol. It shares its light with all but never speaks a word.

Middle-of-the-road people have a calming influence on all aspects of life except driving.

Part of being a good listener is listening well; the other part is pretending you're listening well.

In Rome, they had bread and circuses; in America, we have fast food and pro sports.

To write a real page turner, greatly increase the font size of the text.

Books branch out from a single thought bearing enough seeds to sow a large forest. □



Swimming is for the Birds

By Judith F. Brenner

At 14, one of my chores is to test the pH in the backyard pool and add chlorine. My mom, who uses a wheelchair, wants to swim. She's a polio survivor, so this pool is a big source of freedom for her. It's only four feet deep, and fifteen feet in diameter, which allows her to swim a few circular laps. It is tricky for my mom to get in the pool. Dad built a railing along our screen porch that abuts the pool. The wood platform is a narrow surface formed from two, two-by-fours across the top. On days Mom goes for a swim, it's a bit of an ordeal to prepare. She grabs my shoulder to stand up from her wheelchair. Then I spot her like a gymnast pal, while we work together to boost her up on the platform, lying on her tummy. When she calls out "Ready" I gently push her, rolling her sideways. She splashes in with an "Ahh!"

In preparation, I venture out to the backyard to ready the pool for later in the day. Our tree casts a big shadow, so the water stays cool from the hot sun. On my way back to the garage, I discover a bald baby bird on the grass under our maple tree. I rummage in the garage to find a small box, and place the bird gently in it with leaves. I want to fetch the ladder, but first I run inside to tell my mom about my find. She says, "Wait until your father gets home. That tree is too big for you to climb without a spotter."

I sulk back outdoors to sit under the shady tree with a book, the bird in a box beneath my chair. The tree is way taller than our ranch house, with a limb eight feet high that extends above the pool. Before Dad built a platform for Mom to get in the pool, she'd find joy watching me swim. When I was nine-years-old, it was her idea for me to climb the tree and jump in the pool from the branch above. She lives vicariously through her kids born with healthy legs.

That night, rescuing the bird takes priority over Mom's swim. Once Dad gets home, she decides to watch us from the back porch. Dad takes off his dress shirt, and comes outside clad in a white undershirt and his business pants. I finally am allowed to fetch the straight ladder, since the A-frame ladder is too short. Dad leans it against the side of the pool, and asks me to hold the bottom.

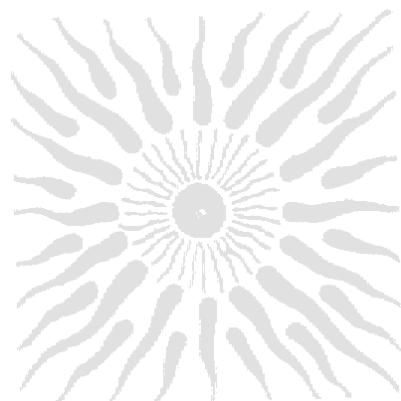
He climbs up just high enough that I can still reach his extended arm. I hand him the shoe box with the softly tweeting bird inside. The branch is within his reach.

I brace it at the bottom rungs with my body. Mom's watching, cheering him on.

I can see the rim of the pool, and Dad's shoes at my nose level. I hear him call out, "Done! It's in the ..." Before he finishes exclaiming his accomplishment, Mom screams at what she is witnessing. I feel myself rise. Like a see-saw, the ladder tips, the pool edge acts as the fulcrum. Dad is dunked, and I'm up in the air! My legs are dangling from a rung above the ground. At first, I'm scared to jump down. In seconds, I untangle my legs and jump to the grass.

Dad boosts himself out of the pool, checking his pocket for a soggy wallet. We are both startled and slightly bruised. He's soaked, but we all laugh hysterically. Mom loves slapstick comedy, and this has her slapping her thighs. The tiny bird is back in the nest, tweeting at our calamity. Boy were we glad Mom wasn't in that pool at the same time. Dad grins while dripping wet, saying I better start eating more. My thin frame sure wasn't fit to counterbalance his 150 pounds. At least the pool's pH was perfect for his surprise swim. □

Brenner's debut novel is [The Moments Between Dreams](#). Visit [JudithFBrenner.com](#)



Moments Between a First-Generation College Decision

By Judith F. Brenner

My dad and I always enjoy watching planes land and take off at Chicago's Midway Airport. In 1978, there is an unobstructed view of the runway through a chain-linked fence. The square mile landing field at the time is primarily used by cargo jets and private small aircraft. We ride our bicycles 3.5 miles there, and watch student pilots practice takeoffs and landings.

At twilight, a single-engine Cessna lands. The pilot exits his craft with his student, then waves to us. Next, he is calling out to us. He asks my dad if we want a free plane ride. To our joy and amazement, he opens the gate, leading my dad, my brother and me to his plane. Soon we are wearing headphones, accelerating on the runway at 55 knots, then, liftoff! We are soaring above my neighborhood headed north toward downtown. We see the Stevenson Expressway and the railroad tracks that lead to the Port of Chicago. In no time, we are following the shores of Lake Michigan over Oak Street beach, Navy Pier and above the Gold Coast. He dips the wing to circle back and my adrenaline spikes as we get a better view of the great lake. Landing was a positive touchdown, not a greaser but not hard either. This pilot is thrilled to have an audience, and we teens have had an unforgettable first-flight experience.

With my dad's proud approval, I sign up for a ground school aviation class the summer before my senior year in high school. The class requires the purchase of a big green book, and I spend my own money on it. I absorb the terminology as if the words flew from a jet engine into my brain. From learning about aerodynamics to the intricacies of thrust, and filing flight plans, I dream of being a pilot. As a coincidence, my boyfriend's father at the time is an air traffic controller, so dinners with his family make me a captive audience for all the FAA tower stories he has to offer.

The day the ground school instructor tells us (mostly boys) about the future costs of maintaining a pilot license, and expenses of flying in general, my emotions take a nosedive. I can't afford to learn, and I am not about to join the military, as my brother does.

Still, I intend to finish that thick green book even though the class is over. That night I dream I'm a pilot in a single engine craft. My brother next to me is co-pilot. We soar gleefully above the clouds. Then our nightmare begins. "Marty, what do we do next? Get the book! I don't remember this lesson! I can't see the ground."

He replies, "I don't know either. We didn't have the money to finish that part of the training. I only know how to take off." We brace to crash, knowing neither of us has a clue how to land the plane. I wake up sweating.

This dream keeps reoccurring the entire month. I resolve to put aside the pilot dream, and focus on how to have fun at 17.

When Pink Floyd's "The Wall" album is released, there is a party at my neighbor Jerry's house. He and his friends offer temptations to enhance our listening experience. I miss my curfew, and my parents ground me for a month. I'm not reading anything, and walk around bored.

Dad is concerned. We always eat breakfast together before he leaves for work, while my mom sleeps in. As a wheelchair user who drinks to alleviate back pain, I'm a caretaker and housekeeper more than a daughter. She'll whistle from her bedroom when she wants me to bring her coffee. I make sure there is a cup left in the pot before I refill my mug.

As I set my oatmeal bowl down and join Dad at the oval table pushed against the wall so Mom's wheelchair can squeeze by later, Dad asks, "What are you going to do with your life?"

"I want to be a flight attendant," I say, and my dad puts down his newspaper, glaring at me.

"Don't be a server in the sky! That's a glorified waitress."

"But Dad, a stewardess needs to know all about safe landings. Plus, I want to travel. You know pilot training is too expensive."

"We'll think of a plan soon."

We eat our oatmeal in silence until he puts his dish in the sink, and cheerily leaves for work at the mall, saying "Toodeloo!" I have nowhere to go. My minimum wage job ended and no one is hiring teenagers.

The phone rings and my grandmother tells me to have Mom call her when she gets up. She has news. She's flying to Hawaii with her sister, now both widows with savings. I relay the message

grumpily, knowing our immediate family never goes on vacation.

When Mom rolls into the tiny kitchen, she insists I get off my rump and bring in the mail. I don't look at her, mad still that she called me a slut for having a hickey. Plus, my scalp hurts. The day after I missed my curfew, she grabbed a fist-full of my hair, reaching up from her wheelchair. I was trapped in our skinny hallway, having to listen to her lecture while I bend my head toward her grip.

Now, she is flipping through the mail stack, a small highlight in her day. I watch Andy Griffith on the small B&W TV. After she finds her vitamin catalog, she passes me two large envelopes. "Here."

I take the mail to my bedroom and close the door. Inside is a brochure from Columbia College. Baffled how they got my name, I read that they have an English curriculum, with a writing workshop, plus, there is financial aid. There also is an envelope from an aviation school in St. Louis, where I can study to be an airplane mechanic. Fascinated by the possibilities, I think, *if I can't fly a plane, maybe I can fix one. Or, write about aviation.*

That August, I get a letter of acceptance, and my dad is pleased, but he wonders how we'll swing the tuition. I ask him for his tax return, and show him the paperwork. We have to prove why I need financial aid. The food stamp records aren't enough. He is intrigued about the program, having not gone to college. No one in my family ever did. His living brother is a truck driver.

Five years later, I find myself still living at home. My Dad and I are eating breakfast together but now, I have to leave for work before he does, so I can catch the city bus downtown. I hold my first journalism job at a paper owned by ABC Cap Cities on State Street. After student loans, financial aid, and attending Columbia College classes at night—while holding down a full time bank teller job—I'm ready to make my dad proud.

Before I put my cereal dish in the sink, I say, "Dad, I have to show you something." I pull out a news clipping from my briefcase. It's my byline, printed on the front page of an American Metal Market news story I wrote. It's about commodity prices and Japanese steel imports. It even explains how titanium prices will impact aviation gear costs.

He puts down the Chicago Sun Times, and takes his time to read the news clipping I hand him. I see a tear swell in his eye.

"By golly, look at that." He rises to hug me. That squeeze makes me feel like I am flying. The memory of it still does. □

Judith Brenner owns CreativeLakesMedia.com, a book editing service.



Judith with her father, Ray Paprock.

Magic Touch

Two people put dollar bills into the bill changer only to have them rejected like rotten tomatoes. They, not knowing that I possess the secret of the machine, put my bill into the slot and out spews quarters as if I had won a small jackpot in Las Vegas. They watch in awe as the quarters come out asking how I did it. All I say is that the machine and I are old friends.

--Duane Anderson

The Glitter of Life

In the firmament of the cosmic shadow world
 The definition of beauty remains intact
 It is not the eye of the beholder this time around that keeps this majestic realm beautiful
 It is the undiluted mind of the Creator
 There are no man-made decorations or theoretical frameworks
 The place is devoid of our intruding presence
 It's as if the Creator's dream is still unfolding
 And it seems there is no end to this beautiful franchise
 Many have challenged the existence of God
 Placing everything in the cosmos under the spell of entropy and the scientific mind
 Reducing the work of the Creator to a random set of mathematical equations
 But every artist knows the difficulty of creating true beauty
 Unless you humble yourself and undress your ego
 You can never create true beauty
 True beauty represents God's artistic hand
 It is often painted on the vast canvas of the cosmic enterprise
 Not only to mesmerize us with its depth and scale
 But to remind us of the passion in the Creator's heart
 No one knows the scale of God's Art business or his intended customers
 But one thing is clear
 Our consciousness is definitely connected to his majestic project
 We are meant to consume his amazing art
 I guess we are his audience
 But we still don't realize it
 We are unable to fathom his love for us
 We are caught up in our own intellectual enterprise and vomitus
 Playing to the tunes of our own mathematical discourse
 We cannot even realize the essence of this life
 Life is an everlasting studio of beauty
 Suffering and ugliness are man-made devices
 Meant to take our eyes off the beauty of God
 The glitter of life is God's grace and mercy
 His unconditional love is displayed in every fiber of our being
 We can never erase God's permanent ink from the canvas of our consciousness
 The cosmos is his creative mind
 And we are part of his studio
 The glitter of life is all of us
 Nature and us are inseparable
 God and us are inseparable
 God is the Light of the world
 The glitter of life is God

—Kenneth Maswabi

Spigots

by Paul Beckman

My knees are covered in mud. I've been standing this way since my mother left for work. I can't scratch my itchy knees for fear of getting my hands muddy. Do you think she would turn on the mud spigot? She's turned on the other spigots before; once the mouse spigot, once the mean nuns with their ruler's spigot, then there was a time she turned on the sauna spigot, and then the ice chips like out of a GE front door ice and water spigot.

My brother came home from school and said, "You're gonna really get it now." Then he said, "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes," and I told him I wasn't wearing shoes, and he said, "Ha, not wearing shoes is gonna get you an ass kicking."

He was eating an all-veggie grinder filled with green onions, peppers, mushrooms, asparagus, and yellow squash. He held out his sandwich for me to take but I couldn't reach it, so he laughed, "Ha ha." He laughed again, "Ha Ha," and I said please don't laugh I'm so hungry save some of your delicious sandwich for me and he said, "Yeah sure right," and turned on the mud spigot again, and in no time because my knees were covered thicker, I couldn't move, so he threw the sandwich over my head, but I couldn't reach it or jump for it because of the mud. The sandwich floated atop the mud, and I could only take little baby steps towards it until I heard the front door open.

Mama looked at me and said, "How many times do I have to tell you not to play with the spigots? What did I say I would do if you did it again?"

"You said you'd break every bone in my body."

"Ha Ha," my brother laughed. My mother took off her chinchilla coat, YSL dress, and Tommy Choo shoes, and then she said, "Go ahead and run, see if that does you any good."

She took off her bra and panties, and waded in the mud but before she did that, she grabbed a broomstick to poke me with, and before she could poke me with the broomstick she leaned down and smelled the mud. "Ha Ha," she said, and began scooping handfuls up to her mouth and eating it, all while poking me hard and I yelled, "Mama, no no," and she said to my brother for him to get her a soup spoon so she could eat the chocolate

pudding and I yelled after him, "Me too," but he just laughed his Ha Ha laugh, and mama poked me more with the broomstick and ate more chocolate pudding. I put my hand in and scooped some chocolate pudding and filled my mouth, but it was still mud. My mother and brother fed each other chocolate pudding. □

The War of Childhood

By Gloria Fredkove

Day in, and day out, I feel the indifferent drizzle of my pain, my longing, my loneliness. Mother—a constant presence, like a policeman you can't quite trust but need for protection. Her kisses and hugs fool me into thinking the sun will shine its warm rays upon my sunken spirit. Her endless chatter of complaints and judgments, the injustices of war which left us homeless, make me angry. As a baby, the Second World War went by without my knowledge. I only knew I was hungry and thirsty. I was in Mother's arms as she ran into the woods, hoping to avoid being deported to a Nazi-run concentration camp, where chances were that neither of us would survive the war. And I learned this in scraps of speech, a phrase here, next week another few words, sometimes more than my child's mind could take in. But then her shame made light of it all. Her words made my unrevealed father sound like a hero. She said he was an Italian partisan who wasn't allowed to visit her in the internment camps and prisons. I believed it, too, for years. No picture. No name. She said he was an Italian Jew. He wasn't. To wash down the bitter taste of these half-hearted attempts at telling me about the identity of the other half of me, I welcomed food into my life as a substitute father who would always be there, would always taste sweet, and would always leave me wanting more. I was hugged by food; I was kissed by food, I was thrown into the air and caught again. It was the best thing and the closest I ever came to knowing the love of a father. Mother said I looked anemic, so she fortified me with chocolate malts with an egg every day. But even feasts of food could not compensate for the ever-present hunger, sirens and bombs, thirsty mouths, and terrified souls struggling to survive. □

MICRO-FICTION:**100 Words or Less****AIR**

She drove in silence, staring at the road—alone with her thoughts. Up ahead: the curve, the overlook, the cliff, and the open air beyond. She thought of the final scene from the movie, *Thelma and Louise*, and stepped on the gas. Without flinching, she continued straight when the road turned, white-knuckled, past the barrier. Three big bumps, and she felt free, as if she were flying—or as if this were a roller coaster ride. Her stomach flipped, and she squeezed her eyes tight, waiting for the ride to end as piercing regret shot through her consciousness.

—Nadia Giordana

NO MORE GRANDMA

Grandpa, five-year-old Evan and his parents, sat with the pastor, talking about Grandma Evie—her many health challenges, and now her early death. When Evan whispered something in his mother's ear, she nodded yes.

Evan had some understanding of what “dead” meant from the Easter story that had really intrigued him. So he asked the pastor, “Who is going to roll away the stone so Grandma can come back in three days? I miss her already.”

“Evan, your grandpa has not bought the headstone yet.” Then panic crossed his face, as he realized he *didn't really listen* to the question.

—Connie Anderson

A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

I'd been writing a short story about a British lad, Collin, who became an RAF pilot during WWII. He's ensconced himself into my subconscious—leaving me sleepless many nights—but he thinks he is helping me.

Collin has opinions about everything, and lets me know during my deep sleep, like what his girlfriend's name should be, what was his favorite food—you know, stuff important only to him.

His intrusions into my nightly sleep were getting annoying, so this morning, I marched to my computer, found “Collin's Story,” and pushed delete. Then I curled up and slept soundly for hours.—Connie Anderson

BEING ALONE

Other than to have babies, his wife had never been in the hospital—until today.

As Bob crawled into bed, he was already missing Eva. Loneliness claimed her side of the bed. Before he dozed off, he determined that tomorrow they would have that “conversation” they had avoided.

As loneliness sat opposite him at the breakfast table, the phone rang—it was the doctor calling with shocking news.

Months after the funeral, Bob was wrapped in being sad. Talking had fled his silent home, but it was a new day, and Bob had to learn to be alone... but not lonely. —Connie Anderson

THE ARTIST'S HANDS

The artist's hands were in love with the feel of the clay, and Maggie spent weeks molding 25 pounds of it into a classic sitting nude. Ears, eyes, and nose were painstakingly perfected.

One week the instructor said, “I have bad news. Someone knocked your sculpture onto the floor. I put it back together as best I could.

“Look, her smashed face is powerfully enhanced by having only a flat surface. Now really admire this lovely curved spine. It would be hard to create such an enchanting line.

“Maggie, this mishap has just turned into an artist's outstanding dream project.”

—Connie Anderson

LOOKING FORWARD

Why am I always looking forward? Looking forward to washing our car this afternoon to remove all the slush. Looking forward to taking a nap with my sweet little dog Ellie after that. Looking forward to seeing my daughter in July. Looking forward to having our bathroom remodeled this summer. Looking forward to seeing my publisher at the Rosemount Book Fair. Looking forward to having Oxendale's neighborhood grocery store open in November. Looking forward to spring when all the snow has melted. Looking forward to playing Rummicub in the park with my husband this summer. Live in the moment. —Janice Strootman

BUDDHA

Buddha, atop our cabinet, kind eyes survey my life. Inside these walls I live contentedly. On TV,

angry Syrians, Iranians, and Lebanese hurl bottles, and loot shops that shows such suffering. Mother died after a month of my caring for her. My colicky granddaughter aches. My husband is at work in Venezuela. Seasons are out of synch.

I huddle on the couch. A cloud of turmoil hovers over me. I'm unsettled in the Universe. Buddha, strengthen my resolve to live in the present moment, to work the good in me, in others, and on all Earth. —Janice Strootman

CRABBY SAM

Sam got up on the wrong side of the bed. “Grrr!” she replied, to anything anyone said.

Her sister said, “Sam, you’re a crab. Go away.”

Her brother agreed, “She’s always that way.”

Sam pulled her hair and punched her brother.

“Sam, go to your room!” said her father and mother.

Sam whiffed at kicking a ball and hit the edge of her bed.

She lifted her hand to rub her head and then saw a claw where her hand had been.

She rushed to the mirror and there she saw a bright red crab with black eyes staring back, slack-jawed. —Teresa M. Riggs Foushee

FALLING

Our 3rd grade talent show. I smooth my hands along my short blue satin skirt, stiff with tulle underneath. I had practiced for days. My black tap shoes snap loudly to the song on the record player. Suddenly my feet slip on the linoleum floor and I land on my knees. Biting back pain, I scramble up to my feet, my face burning. Flushed. I finish the routine, curtsy, and limp back to my seat, leaving a trail of broken sequins as I pass through the rows of kids, avoiding their eyes. I don’t remember their applause, only the sting. —Wendy Brown-Baez

ESCAPADE

I left at dawn when I thought everyone would be asleep. “Santa Fe,” he told me.

I said, “You’re taking me.” I packed my dresses, my sewing machine, Grandma’s Salt Water Taffy box of rainbow threads. Peter, Paul and Mary, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell records. Journals which I later threw away. Sleeping bag. I knew my mom would cry and my dad mutter, “You can always come home.” It wasn’t home for this wild child. The new boyfriend threw my stuff

in the trunk, both a little dazzled. After months on the road, lust wasn’t enough to stitch us together. —Wendy Brown-Baez

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

We were late, I had sent the wrong information. The train platform was deserted, darkening into night, a bad part of town. My heart thumped, I felt faint. My stomach a knot. Anger because you had procrastinated getting out of the house. My child, not yours. We called the police, but they couldn’t help. When the car pulled up and he jumped out, the Black woman driver hugged me back just as hard. She said, “I am a mother, too, I thought I’d better take him with me than leave him on that platform.” Guilt sizzled through me for days.

—Wendy Brown-Baez

SATURDAY MORNING

This child with a mischievous grin. Cold wiggling toes on my warm thighs. He slides into my bed at 6:00 on a Saturday morning. “Why are you down here?” I ask him.

“Daddy is mad at me and Mommy is mad at me and Nicholas is mad at me,” he answers. He knows better than to insist I get up. And I don’t insist that he go back upstairs to his room. He knows I will answer the irresistible call to start the morning with his chatter. These fleeting moments are mending my broken pieces into something I can trust. —Wendy Brown-Baez

BETTER THAN A CARP

Jordan woke up with a jolt, his eyes struggling to adjust to the blinding sunlight. He realized his legs were dangling in the air and his hands were clenched around something massive and scaly. His thoughts came fast and furious. “What a dream! I’m riding on the back of a dragon!” But fear gripped him as he clung to the dragon’s rough skin. “Is it a dream, or am I really a mile in the sky?” The landscape was breathtaking and he felt a sense of exhilaration knowing that whatever it was, this was a great way to travel.

—Lynn Garthwaite

I Can Talk to Animals

by Liz Huffman

I can talk to animals. Well, we all can, and some of us can even make them understand what we are saying. I have a few instances where I talked to animals, and the hilarious part is that they responded to what I was saying. I have witnesses if anyone doesn't believe me. Let me tell you about them and see if you think so too.



A Handsome Buck:

Two friends and I cruised down Skyline Drive from Front Royal to Waynesboro. It was a beautiful summer day, so we thought we would enjoy the scenery. My friends were taking it all in, but to be truthful, I was looking for bears. It is said that they are there, but I have only seen one or two, and I love seeing wildlife up close in their natural habitat. I consider it a gift from God and the beautiful creature I can see.

So far, we haven't seen anything except trees and sky. Now granted, the trees and sky were exceptional that day because we could see what seemed like forever. Mind you, the speed limit is 35, but I tend to creep around the blind curves just in case because I once came upon a doe standing in the middle of the road in a blind turn, and I had to stop suddenly. And do you know, she looked at me rudely because I rolled down my window and asked her to move. I honked my horn, and she just stared at me. I wasn't going to go around her because I didn't know if the next car might hit her, and I don't like to see animals get hit by vehicles, even if they are stubborn and not sharing the road. I started to get out of my car, and she just sighed, walked over to the trees, and disappeared. I am telling you, she did sigh. Or blew out her breath in exasperation, take your pick.

So anyway, we are cruising, and I spot a buck grazing along the roadway. I knew it was a buck because he had an incredible rack on his head covered with velvet. It was early in the season as it was soft-looking velvet with rounded edges on the

tips of his spikes. I stopped the car and rolled down the window to get a better look. My friends were rolling their eyes because they were not impressed by a deer grazing on the side of the road. This is where it gets exciting, so pay attention.

I said, "You are very handsome with your velvety antlers. Please lift your head so I can get a better look?"

He did and looked right at me.

I said, "Wow, those are cool. Would you mind turning your head so I can see the other side?"

He turned his head as if to show me his better side. I kid you not. He did. My friends first laughed at me because I was talking to a wild animal. Now, the laughter stopped, and they were intrigued.

I said, "I have never seen a deer with velvet on their antlers before. Thank you so much for letting me see. I won't keep you from your lunch, so you can return to eating now if you want." That buck lowered his head and went back to grazing, and my friends' jaws dropped because the deer did what I had asked. I thought for a moment that it was one of those fake deer that the wildlife officers use to try to catch poachers, but then the deer calmly walked into the woods, and I felt blessed because I had connected with a wild creature. It was one of those moments in life that you are sure was an aberration, but in your heart, you know it was genuine.

We continued our drive, saw more deer in the fields along the way, and enjoyed the beautiful day.

A Poor Little Skink:

I was on my second trip to Florida by myself. When we were kids, my mother had taken my brother and me to visit family down in Bonita Springs. My first trip by myself was my vacation to visit my aunt and uncle in Sarasota for Thanksgiving week. My uncle was working from home, and my aunt went to her job, so I was left to wander the streets and see if I could find some way to occupy my time.

The second day there, I asked my uncle if there were any animal places to see, like an aquarium. He told me about The Mote Marine Museum a few miles away. He printed out the

directions, and I set off on my way. This place was so neat. They had manatees and a really cool-looking loggerhead sea turtle that was albino. The plaque near the sea turtle said something about this one being hatched on a beach not far away, and they had gotten special permission from the Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries to keep it because being albino would set it off like a neon sign in the water. I spent all the time I could there and also at a place across the parking lot called the Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary. This is a beautiful place that takes care of injured birds and releases them if they can be released. The sanctuary has this giant tree in the enclosure with some of the pelicans, and wild pelicans will come and nest in the top of the tree. There is netting over all the enclosures so they cannot get in. I spent quite a bit of time there, too. I used the time to learn more about these creatures since I am always willing to learn about animals. So, on my first trip to Florida by myself, this is where I spent most of my time.

However, the real story comes from my second trip to Florida. I went down to meet with someone who was coming over to look at boarding kennels for sale around Sarasota, and she was bringing me an Italian Greyhound pup named Michael. Since she was flying to Florida and I wanted to come down again, we agreed to meet and share the hotel expenses. Michael was an adorable puppy, and I could not wait to get him home. We went to look at the boarding kennel, and I liked their setup, but since I was not buying it, my opinion didn't count.

After that, we had some downtime, so I took my friend over to the Mote Marine Museum and the Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary. We first visited the Marine Museum and saw many interesting aquatic creatures. They had two manatees recovering from injuries before being released back into the wild. We saw a movie about sharks that was incredibly informative. Did you know that sharks can smell blood in the water from more than a mile away? I didn't either before I saw this movie. There was a pool with small rays that you could pet if you were careful. They were so cool! I could have stayed there all day. We went across the street to where they have the sea turtles and such, and I showed her the albino loggerhead sea turtle. He was yellow in color, but in the sea turtle that was albino. I told her about how they had found him and that they had to get special permission to keep

him. One of the volunteers was close by and heard me, and she was impressed that I knew so much about him. I told her that I had seen him a few years before and remembered him fondly.

After this, we went back across the street and over to the other side of the parking lot where the Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary was. I found out that, sadly, the gentleman who had started it had passed away. I was so glad that the place was being kept open. He had put his heart and soul into that place, and it would have been a shame to see it fall apart because he was no longer there to take care of it. We first went into the seabird section, and I showed her the tree with wild pelicans nesting on the top. Boy, those pelicans sure can make a whole lot of noise.

After that, we went up the brick walkway to the gift shop. Good thing I was on a budget, or I would have bought out half the shop. They had a lot of elegant items and all the money earned was going to the birds. Next, we saw the raptors.

There was a turkey vulture, and I am sorry, but only a mother could love those ugly birds. They do have an important job to do in that they are nature's cleaners. That bald head is essential but man, is it ugly.

We were walking over to see the owls when it happened. I stepped on a skink's tail, and it was not happy with me. I was innocently walking along, not looking where I was going, when I felt a tug under my shoe. I stopped and looked down to see what had tugged under my foot, and I saw this long, skinny thing on the ground, just flipping and flopping to beat all. A few feet away was the tail's owner, and it was looking up at me as if to say, "You Bitch!" I am not lying to you. If that skink could have spoken, that is what I am sure it would have said. The expression on that little face was just furious.

I looked down at it and said, "I am so sorry. I didn't see you there." I just kept repeating it repeatedly, and the folks in the crowd that had gathered were laughing at this scene of a mad skink and a woman looking down and apologizing to it as if it could understand. I started to see the humor in the situation and laughed as I tried to convince this little creature that I was sorry. I don't think it believed me as it finally scuttled off into the brush alongside the path. That poor tail was still flipping and flopping as if alive. You had to be there, but it was funny. I watched where I

was going for the rest of our visit. I didn't want to make more little skink enemies than I already had.

Mandy, Sergei, and the Dreaded Nail Clippers:

Our dogs understand more than we think they do. I am sure of it. Here is an example of what I am talking about. I decided that the dogs needed their nails clipped due to the clickety, clackety that was going on every time they trotted up or down the hallway. My dogs were in the living room on the couch watching TV when I called Mandy into the kitchen. She came in, laid down on her side like a good girl, and let me clip her nails with only a few yelps and cries of torture. As she got older, the screams of torture got fewer and fewer. Now, mind you, she had never been quicked, so there was no need for the theatrics. But in her mind, she just knew that someone would come and save her if she cried loud enough. She just knew it. It never happened, but not for lack of trying on her part.



After she was done and had her cookie, I told her, "Now go into the living room and tell your brother, Sergei, to come in here, please."

Off she goes into the living room, and the next thing I see is Sergei coming into the kitchen. See, I am telling you they do understand us.

So, people, never tell your locker combination to your dog. Cookies are a very powerful bribe in a dog's mind. He saw me standing there with the nail clippers, turned right around, and headed back out. I swear it was as if he had turned on a dime; it was that quick. I called him, but no answer, so I went into the living room to fetch him for his turn for a pedicure. You will never guess how I found him. Now you have to picture this to see how funny this was. Sergei was on the couch and lying down with all four feet tucked under him as tight as he could get them. You would have thought the dog had no legs or feet; they were so tightly tucked under him. I had to laugh because it was as if he and Mandy had understood what I had said to them, and their reaction was priceless. Oh, and yes, I made him get up and come into the kitchen for his nail clipping. Poor baby, he tried. □

Moments

A piece of sky
beyond that far away blue mountain
moist breeze caress
and the sweet fragrance
of your breath
occupies my brain.
A fistful of golden sun
fresh and peaceful like the dawn,
pregnant with the expectations
of the unfolded day,
two birds on a branch of a tree
lonely... with their imperious
relationships
as our arrogant spree.
Life of us is wrapped
with dense fog
and mist inconsidered,
dew drops hanging precariously
from the blade of grass,
even a dawn is so lazarusly
impoverished and gross.
Mysteries of centuries
of human relationship
are safe in the heady smell
of deodar pine and maple.

—Som Mazumder

Area 51

Eerily metallic eyes
like black pearls or hematite
maintain the source
of a deeply secretive connection.
Their mountainside liaison stings
like witch hazel and the
trapezoidal powder-coated
robotic components
hoping to hobble Hubble
along with sophisticated evidence,
are Left to decay
in an abandoned hangar.
Sudden news brings forth a
rogue seismic surge over a
razor-wire-crested armored fence
and chaos is the central
point of discussion.

—Nadia Giordana

The Lure Of The Sirens Call

The forms and shapes it takes
sailing up the river
into the blackest darkness.

They sing all your favourite tunes
even ones you have not heard
until you are hooked
line and sinker
at their beck and call.

Talking to you always
speaking your language
with their tongues
the genie comes out of the bottle
as pandora's box opens.

The pre-frontal cortex
and its sponge like nature
manipulated into new shapes
you do not recognise you anymore.

Follows the trajectory of all addictions
like the Hydra
once one head is vanquished
another one appears
attempting to destroy you
once and for all.

—Gavin Bourke

On Carrowmore

They were not here this time
I had not been to the beach for years.
I kept expecting to see them
walking in front or behind me
carrying wind-breakers, mats, towels or bags.
It was only then I began to recall their funerals
two years apart from each other
two thousand and four and two thousand and six
to be precise.

It was as if I had forgotten those facts
and that I had watched both of them
lowered into the ground in front of me
for what seemed like hours all those years ago.
So long ago as to almost be forgotten
maybe it was my mind protecting me
from the painful memories of their respective deaths.

I could picture them again
in a place they loved so much down on the west coast.
The memories triggered by the idyllic setting
they were alive, brought back to life by the sea and the sand
on that afternoon on the strand.
The more I thought about it
I realised that is exactly how they may have wished
to be remembered.

—Gavin Bourke

I don't want to die but people do and...

I'm a people, I'm ten years old so I'm a kid but still one of the breed
and I want to live forever like the grownups at church and Sunday
School say I want to because *they* do but I'll never know if there's an
Afterlife until I'm dead and even then there may be nothing over
there but nothing and Hell, I can get *that* here on Earth, ha ha, or it
seems like it but my Sunday School teacher says nix, there's life on
Earth but on the other side what awaits us is *life eternal*, she swears
she's sure about that so I say *Yes ma'am* and smile and go home.
There's always next week.

—Gale Acuff

DISMANTLED EVOLUTION

I throw stones
 into the meandering ripple
 my reflection
 unabashedly distorted
 even if for a moment
 I am dispersed into yet greater depths
 or perhaps into intangible space
 where breathing stands still
 but memories continue
 to race beneath watery tombs
 of emotion
 flexing like an athletic diver
 beneath Tsunami swells
 suspended in
 Endorphin free-fall
 no one to catch me
 but a dimensional wave
 entering my psyche
 like fractured Diamond light
 once a flawless particle of brilliance
 that clung too hard to Earth's surface
 for it ever to matter
 in hopes that one day
 it might grieve me back.
 If only to tame
 her wild rivers
 and the current of
 my own restlessness
 where it no longer
 recognizes that
 I wasn't born whole
 yet somehow orphan-wounded
 during a measure of longing
 stretching forth from
 iron boundaries
 to irreparable wonder
 loneliness as cold
 as ice crystals
 maturing on a Stalagmite Soul
 beautiful to subterranean eyes
 a piece of unraveling prism
 that took millennia to process
 over impossible ages
 that could never appreciate
 its silent fall
 to an incomprehensible abyss
 another smoldering
 drip in the bacteria pool

by Demi-Gods
 one solid leak in the granite master-fold
 a porcelain remnant of
 pain seeping through
 microscopic cracks
 melting flesh
 a ringlet vein of Gold
 mass that cannot beg
 for reproductive favors
 to re-invent itself.
 Must be satisfied
 with the outcome
 riveted singleness
 touching eons of
 one-way mirrors
 can't find its Evil Twin
 lurking in inky blackness
 premeditated madness
 fading shadows
 in jagged resemblance
 deeper than immortality
 on some Seismic level.
 Volcanic ashes
 assembled simile
 that froze its only computer chip
 before the thaw of Dinosaurs
 who glanced to that fiery sky
 and mourned over Time Travelers
 whom they perceived as Meteors
 splashing to annihilate them
 and now in some twisted chaos
 that never forgot anything
 recorded for eternity
 in the vaults of never ending.
 They saw it coming
 nothing came to save them
 are we dashing towards
 identical fate
 this apocalypse we cannot win?
 I throw stones
 into the meandering ripple
 wait for a ricochet that
 never emerges
 or maybe it does
 in deceased dreams
 but more likely behind the eyes
 of a mutilated Dinosaur.

—Susan Joyner-Stumpf

Unfinished Poem

I don't know how the world went on without me.
Even my maid needs my aid and I don't have time
to remove a single weed from my garden.

If only I didn't have to be like the boy who held up
the wall with his hands.
When someone asked him to move away,
he did and the wall came crashing down.

If I say no to the first person who needs my help,
earth's thousand-miles-per-hour spin might slow
or even stop or it might lose
its sixty-seven thousand miles per hour
speed as it circumambulates the sun.

I feel like turning the next person down,
but I'm like the Japanese who abhor no.
Hai sounds so much nicer.

No time to finish this poem.
Someone calls out to me in the wilderness.
I'm blessed, but I know I'm a speck
in the cosmos, on earth, in my country,
town, street.
My breath can't compete with the wind.

One day, my ashes will nourish the soil,
but while I exist I'll try to give, give, give
where it's needed.

—Tara Menon

Before they light our way...

For Nina Eidsheim
New moons are hard to see
Inch-thin slivers of light,
Noticeable only
As something different.

—William Waters

My Manuscripts

I have plenty of ink to write my stories,
enough to dye the ocean
a color the skies sport
before they release rain.

Look at my bloody manuscripts.
No, they're pristine—white and black.
But study them hard enough
and another ink becomes visible:
the words swim with my sweat and blood.

May they nourish you
with friends you wish you'd met,
places that open your mind,
and may my stories be the balm
for life's excesses or paucity.

—Tara Menon

After crocuses fade

After crocuses fade
And roses begin,
People linger,
Laugh,
Talk of tomorrow.

After shallow streams
Stiffen into ice,
People rush from car to kitchen,
Shiver,
Dream of yesterday.

—William Waters

Believable Assertions

When you are too tired to argue
it doesn't
matter
if you're alone.

—William Waters

Thru the Land of Wind Turbines

The road is straight south, then west
The road to LA is very long
We head out to travel far from home
Listening to a wandering song.

Many miles down Hwy. 35
These creatures appear
Standing tall, reaching skyward
As if it's God's word they hear.

Three long-reaching arms
Moved deliberately—but so slow
As if doing cartwheels
Across the western sky that's now aglow.

They continue their lazy roll
While always standing still
Surrounded by dozens more—
The skyline they easily fill.

As we drive, we watch
These wind turbines whirl
Until dark stopped the show
As from day into night we hurl.

The sun rose very early,
And so did we.
Getting on the road again
To see what we can see.

We share the road with many trucks
Heading west, together all the way,
In small groups, we speed across the miles
Where the terrain changes every day.

The Joshua Trees never stand erect
Drought, oh, it's extremely dry,
Making fires a worrisome thought
As the sun meanders across the sky.

More of those leggy creatures appear
In groups of 40, 50, or more
To put the wind to good use
From both the eastern and western shore.

They continue to appear along this road
And we see them here and there
Until the city's edge we approach
And bright lights are shining everywhere.

—Connie Anderson

So Hungry...

So physically lonesome I could cry,
So tired of "can't" and "don't" I could shout
So physically distanced and aloof from all,
I am having trouble figuring it out.

So socially hungry for a friend
With whom we can agree to disagree
And talk about all sorts of things
Without upsetting her...or me.

So physically void of hugs
As we've all been made very scared
About each other's depth of closeness
And thus, our hug-less bodies we no longer share.

So hungry for more gut-felt laughter
And more fun across the board.
Truly, life's too darn short and unpredictable
For all of our giggles that we now hoard.

So hungry to return to normal—"back then,"
Recalling a constant time in our lives
When we knew who, what and when.
Back to hugs and handshakes—not only high-fives.

So sexually hungry for love
From my husband of fifteen years.
He no longer finds my body appealing,
And I face the future with tears.

Although I'm all-out very hungry
Now I will just have to eat my words
That make me laugh...and cry.
Especially those silly and expansive adverbs.

—Connie Anderson



Are There No Words

Her tiny coffin still
rests on wheels, easy
to gently push, too easy
to lift and carry
the rest of the way
to eternity. Words
from the altar still flutter
away in perpetuity,
unsettled by your
crying, and
crying, and
crying.

I, a witness
you would not notice
and never knew, alive
in the lifetime leukemia
denied your daughter
and you, survive
to wonder:

Did you ever know
laughter, the respite
it can bring; smile with patience
at children, or anyone
imploing you to
sing; find the words
that would not flutter
in futility when you
gave them up—or did your
crying, and
crying, and
crying

never stop.

—James Keane
Originally published in the *Indiana
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Bessie Coleman, First Black Woman To Get An Aviator's License

From the cotton fields
she saw the black birds flying
and she figured she could fly too

she was no cursed child
in books, she found her
wings and like Icarus
she found her warmth in the sun
though white men, even
black men, told her "no"
but the spirit of Harriet
Tubman said "yes"
and the adventurous aquarian
found her destiny

in Paris, they welcomed
blacks with open arms
there, a black bird could
fly free, and so you
got your license
you saw trees
but they were only home
to black birds, not black
bodies to hang from
your wings
gave birth to dreams
you were no cursed child

you were brave enough to defy gravity
like Icarus, you never feared fire
you only wanted
the warmth of the flames

you would step on the wings
as you soared, only to touch god
you never feared the sun

somewhere, you are still flying
you are a black bird
and the skies are owned by no one
you are beyond Icarus, touching
the face of destiny

You are a black bird,
not a cursed child

—Erren Geraud Kelly

Rx for Winter

Snowflakes fall gently,
playfully at first
blanketing rooftops, trees, sidewalks
hushing traffic, footsteps, voices.
Silently suggesting something.
From the bay window
frosting up from
below zero temps
flakes now turn to sheets,
swirling in a howling wind
day darkening beyond your doorstep:
a blizzard on its way.
Scuttle plans to run
errands, clean
the house,
shovel.
Put the kettle on,
pick up your favorite novel,
dig out your grandma's
woven wrap,
pull your cat
into your lap,
let go and loll
in winter
closing in
around you.

—Phyllis Dozier

In The Fear

Suzette bolts the doors,
fastens the windows, sleeps fitfully.
Her husband, Felix
is a third-shift guard at the plastics plant.
From midnight to eight,
he patrols the empty offices,
the machine rooms, delivery bay,
while Suzette's nerves
cry out for someone to watch over them.
They're new in town, know no one,
rent the second floor of a tenement.
For all his qualifications,
Felix could only find work
on the graveyard shift,
as a walking metronome.
a zombie-like pair of ears and eyes.
They have nothing worth stealing,
no reason anyone should bother them.
But to Suzette, being alone
can call too much attention to a person.
In the morning,
Felix stumbles through the door,
numb and glassy-faced,
to a crushing hug from Suzette,
as if he's home from a tour of duty in Iraq.
He crashes on the bed.
She goes off to work.
Just the two of them.
means nothing when there's just the one.

—John Grey

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Words, Words, Words

I tugged and really pushed and pulled
 But the reluctant words are stuck.
 I'll try again tomorrow
 And hope I have better luck.

The right words are in me,
 This I certainly know
 But for some unknown reason
 They aren't willing to let go.

I have something important to say,
 And today is the right time
 To write about how I feel,
 And I want to do it in rhyme.

I thought of important things—
 Like to be kind, faithful and strong.
 I thought of the people I know,
 Some here now, others long gone.

What message did they give me?
 What lessons did they teach?
 What goals did they set
 That I'm trying hard to reach?

Then those same reluctant words
 Started to come from my heart.
 "Thank you," "I love you."
 "I'm so proud of you" for a start.

Please add some words from your own life.
 Don't wait until it's too late.
 Say it all now, loud and clear
 And write only of love, not hate.

—Connie Anderson

Sleeping Together

All night, the bed beast
 shapes sleep and blankets to its will,
 on a petulant, creaky mattress
 to the music of the snores.

You are the one who lies
 a breath's distance from this creature,
 must need your own needs
 with the little it affords.

This is love, as seen by the spider
 as it stops mid-crawl on its
 journey across the ceiling.

It can't believe your companion
 doesn't eat you.

—John Grey

Inputs All Autumnal

When from a vantage point you genially
 Observe word wings take flight, as easily
 Triumphant as whirlwinds that generate
 Swift havoc arbitrarily and cause
 Lithe leaves of gold to carpet generous
 The autumn season,

The sheer exactness of the strong word-push
 Direct on parchment, straight onto the page
 Quite is in each and every sense exacting
 Scholium-like when gather weighted

And the collective pressure and power overbearing
 Accumulates like fortune amassed,
 An unrehearsed deep dive with eager force
 That keenly jumps into the scholium of unique thought,
 Exact schematicism of instruction wisely so imparted
 That it expounds in convertible terms each scheme,
 Exemplifying a totally distinctive rationale
 And erudition-laden methodology.

—Saloni Kaul

Postcard Stories

broken skin
chains linked
half words
half shadows
faint farewells
angry chatter
guilt and truth
recaptured memory
ghosts and storms
paths to roads
bright sorrows
soft laughter
seasons discarded
partial escape
ashes raining
discovering loss
setting sun
the circle ends

—Dr. Roger Singer

Linen Song

fair winds
circled
past open
windows
teasing
checked
and striped
curtains
snapping
their ends
against red-
stained brick
walls
above the alley
signaling
like a ship
messages
to the
Sky

—Dr. Roger Singer

A Soft Angel

a veil
of late
afternoon mist
descends
onto a faithful
angel statue
with lichen face
soft stone hair
beautiful feet
and a broken wing

lifting mercy hands
to heaven

believing beyond
thick gray layers
of clouds
with prayers
unceasing

honoring the dead

—Dr. Roger Singer

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Face

Far downslope, water
sparkles sun, fragments
heaven into pieces
small enough to gather
by handfuls into
pockets full of holes,
yet too far to reach
except in eyes
pierced by each
tiny glint, still
blinded, too much
to gaze upon
eternity's empty
dying face.

—Richard Dinges, Jr.

Reveal

Unable to find
an unlocked door,
better break a window,
shatter the pane,
risk a slice, flow
a little blood,
create a noise,
crash through silence,
and then climb through
to that darkened
room, turn on lights
for all to see
what lies hidden
behind all those
doors closed to us.

—Richard Dinges, Jr.

Parallellity

On this sapphire night of uncertain resolutions in
a world rolled over, a pale moon's half-light
ripples across the landscape casting a pall
on fallen angels crouching in fear of
their own abhorrent fantasies.
On the other side of the
horizon line, like Van Gogh's
"Starry Night," storms of Jupiter swirl
around the minions obliged to living life in black
and white while dreaming of colors beyond the spectrum—
And all the while a blinking curser awaits instruction.

—Nadia Giordana

As All Righteously

I carry all the coded messages in state
Exhibiting the foremost quintessential endurance.
You'd think the salts would rightly swift precipitate,
Sinking in shining chaste preponderance.

Eternal minute degree shades of prefiguration packed
Involved there are in each superior suggestion.
Strong exclamations of one such prophetic mantis tightly tacked
Onto Imagination's vivid strong board without congestion.

For there behold, stand all the indications
Decreed discreet and inexpressible
Of this, that inexhaustible staying power in vindication,
No louder than a decibel.

As all righteously it stands, asserts its class,
(Upholding the rights and privileges of man),
Poetry's lone prerogative,
Heed this cry for unhindered thought and speech
That answers all endings in the interrogative.

—Saloni Kaul

Untitled

I crossed the river in thigh highs exactly like the picture
I shaved every part of me that hurts
when it is years later that we rejoice
when it is years later there is no sound of her
in a place where we wait for the sunrise
a jilted truth so pretty
like a fire loose with her desire
while you played with me in the afternoons
and in twilight
in the dead of night
because I wrote a story to truth
blackmail me now with a death to heroes
like her forgiveness

—Margot Block

Spectral Forms

Spectral forms
phantoms of nightfall
mingled with the mysteries of midnight
An ethereal pallor
from another dominion
settled amid the woods
Where an enigma of mists
draping the great trees
melded into shadows of night
They roamed through the stillness
pervading a tenebrous silence
beneath a stygian firmament
When the light of day
grew dim in the lofty heavens
vanishing into the other reality
Where it spoke into the dreams of those who
dream and illumined the visions of those who see
While the kingdom of night
drew a veil over the realm a while
As a vapor rose from the ground

—D.A. Simpson

Water

I love to hear the sound of it rumbling over rocks.
I love seeing it sparkle as the sun catches it.
I love feeling the coldness of it from the melting snow.
I love the smell of it.
I can only taste it after it has been treated by chemicals.
I remember the cold refreshing taste of our well water when I was growing up.
Our bodies need it. Everything that is alive on this planet needs it.
And we are ruining it.

Water is our planet's crisis. We have not taken care of it and now it is polluted and in short supply.
How do we fix this? It might already be too late.
What a legacy we have left for our children and grandchildren.
I won't swim in any of our Twin Cities lakes because e-coli is found in all of them. I cringe when I see others doing it.

Water is an expensive commodity. States out west are already asking us to sell our water. We have not used it frugally.

Nature is good at healing itself if we stop abuse of it now. Humans need to take drastic measures immediately if we want to save it.

Time will tell.

—Janice Strootman

Can You See

Can you see me standing here
wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt to keep warm on this wintry day.
My fingers full of all the stories I've lived through in my lifetime.

I am not just the person you see at this moment;
I am the young child sitting alone, waiting for her dog,
her best friend to come home, feeling abandoned.

I am the child who feels anger in my house and smells alcohol as I hear a slap.
I'm the child who can't sit still in school and keeps talking,
Because all my secrets are circling around my body trying to stay hidden.

I am the little girl at Sunday school who is taught that church is a safe refuge,
but when I need one, the doors are locked.
I am the little girl who believes in dreams and magical wonders
only to lose them one by one when I learn that things are not what they seem.
I am the girl who raises her hand and asks difficult questions at home and school,
wanting the truth.

I'm the person running down the hospital hallways,
trying to keep ahead of the pain, protecting my parents.
I'm the teenager crying in her bedroom about the horrors of war that I just read,
tears pouring down my cheeks, receiving only disgust from my mom for the emotions.

I'm the patient who walks into the emergency room with a cyst on her vagina—
not a prostitute, just a girl trying to make sense of sex, love, men, and life.
I am a young woman trying to understand assassinations of political figures, and
college students being shot at a political rally.

I am a woman who thought that all men were created equal,
until I'm pulled over with two black men in my car, for a bank robbery we knew nothing about.
I am refused entrance to a club because my date is black.

I am a woman looking for love, only to be sexually assaulted.
I am a woman lost trying to find answers needing just one person to help me understand.

I am a woman filled with music, writing songs, and feeling passion.
I am a woman who finds friendships from women who show me I can be soft and accessible;
they show me it is OK to cry, they help me shed the armor built around me,
which enables me to find a loving, gentle man.

I am a woman who might spend a day wallowing in the pain or hurt,
only to wake up the next morning ready for a new adventure,
and challenging my world once again. I am not a victim.

I am an accumulation of my stories,
and I rise up each time and find a new way, a new path, feeling love, and I keep
fighting to understand and to be seen.

—Helen Lapakko



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Connie Anderson

Ready or Not

for all the memories to go back in the box
to have them melt together into one red blob
of unknown passion
I have yet to discover.

I'm ready to pretend
I don't still love you

I don't still wait for
unspoken truths to come undone
and rattle me—
the volume turned up so high
I can hardly breathe.

I'm ready
To be young and innocent and not know
You will hurt me.

To love freely
Without expectation or remorse

I'm ready
Ready for what lies ahead

For what lies behind us finally
is no more and cannot take from me
anything I don't actually have.

—Sarah Routman

Death of a Sperm Whale

With her calf she dives
Into the darkness a mile below the waves
Where great squid abides
Ferocious Goliath monarch of oceans deep.

Singing lilting lullaby to her calf
In darkness she swims in playful mood
And for an hour remains down in the deep
Swimming side by side with her son.

Largest of toothed whales
The sperm whale comes to the surface
Spouting water through her blowhole
Smacking her great tail upon the waves.

Japanese harpooner takes aim
Deadly bolt plunges home
Explosive charge detonates
Mortally wounded she calls to her calf.

Hauled up dying by her tail
Against the side of the whaling ship
In agony she dangles with head in the sea
Bleeding slowly to death.

Her calf calls out in anguish
Following the ship for hours
But there is no lilting answering lullaby
Only blood in the water.

—Colin Ian Jeffery

My Morning Thought

My morning thought
generally guides me
towards my long-forgotten past
where the birds of happiness
sing the most distant melodies.
My inner convivial state of being
elates with the spray of sea water
on my cold skin illuminated
with the first ray of sun.
All hidden esoteric occurrences
which were kept away in
the old rusty treasure box
of mind,
the key of which lost long back,
suddenly appears with
forceful vengeance
to demand
the explanation for being separated.
White feathered sea gulls
hunts the fish with perfect
aim and accuracy
unlike my loosely weaved
life so far.
I sit with folded hands
longing for redemption
from life in general
wishing the withered
pieces of my past
fragmented memories
will reappear with all
its colourful plumage to entice
me to live again.

—Som Mazumder

Summer is Dying

Outside, summer is dying into fall,
and blue daddy petunias sprout ears—
hear the beginning of night chills.
In their yellow window box,
they cuddle up and fear death together.
The balcony sliding door
is poorly insulated, and a cold draft
creeps into all the spare rooms.

—Michael Lee Johnson

Clouds a' Drifting

Clouds a'drifting
slowly edged across the skies
Spectral entities from another dominion
silent and thin as gauze
Insubstantial and enigmatic
impassive and unknowable
present yet departing
Not from this mortal reality
but from some other world
somewhere else far from here
On their way to another place
to'ard another oblivion
Transient and unslowing
all affairs of this realm spurning
all existence in this realm disdaining
And a lone gull
toward the ethereal manifestation
did idly glide
for to inspect the cohort otherworldly
Finding nought to merit further scrutiny
into the vast blue yonder
did languidly soar
While a beast of a wind, tame but able
upon the billowing visitors did gently blow
to speed them on their voyage
out of sight of this serene sphere
Clearing the firmament entire in one breath
restoring the plain canvas
characterizing a bland day
washed in an aqua marine

—D.A. Simpson

Bowl of Black Petunias

If you must leave me, please
leave me for something special,
like a beautiful bowl of black petunias—
for when the memories leak
and cracks appear
and old memories fade,
flowers rebuff bloom,
sidewalks fester weeds
and we both lie down
separately from each other
for the very last time.

—Michael Lee Johnson

Amortizing the Debt of Love

We've tasted it all before
 Dust, ash, garbage and concrete
 Until our tastebuds were almost dead
 We've bought our love from behind a glass case
 Only to sell it back cheaper, in hope of it being replaced
 Or found in a pew of a church to be returned to its rightful owner
 We've hoarded everything else and closed ourselves off
 As to make it more difficult for anything to be in order
 All the while waiting to be repaid for what we had
 We've cursed the lady across the hall and also the
 Ones for whom it's easy and allows us to take out anger
 But all this, my love, is the process of amortizing the debt of love
 Which we both know and believe can not only be achieved
 But also lead to recovery and rediscovery

—Grant Armstrong

Water

This is our story.
 It is about the gentle lapping of lake waves,
 the rustle of river over water-sanded rocks,
 the crescendo of ocean on shattered-shell beaches,
 the sigh of shore grasses.

It is our song.
 We danced on Mississippi mud,
 swam amongst the river's branches
 unaware of its current.
 We loved in rain, gave birth in water,
 and quenched our thirst with music.

We have lived the Blues
 and the accelerando of mountain streams.
 It was the steady rhythm of earth's heartbeat
 that guided us through the roiling fog.
 It is the story of you. It is the song of me.
 It is about finding our way.

—Kathleen Petit

A Physician's Thoughts on Healing

Close your eyes
 and reap thine healing sleep
 the treacherous injury
 of a corps
 your body to repair
 much better than I
 with creams and ointments
 your corps knows
 how best to restore
 that which screams of injury
 and appears withered on the vine.

—Betty Brandt Passick



Rocks

Oh, and we just let the water wash over us
 But many of us remain dirty and impure
 Different sizes, indelibly colorful, a variegated
 Consortium of jagged, smooth, curved, pieces
 We crack, we break, we form into new shapes
 Some returning to such vividness others
 Retreating further into the dark depths
 The lucky few remain fully intact not having
 Giving everything away to everyone
 Used to help build, and used to help destroy
 But what do I know about rocks?
 Much like people I am not good at judging
 The many different types.

—Grant Armstrong

Warrior

She strips off her top
 With the casualness of one
 Grown accustomed to her barrenness
 Apologizes briefly, though she knows she doesn't need to
 And exposes her blank chest with a single seam across the middle
 A terse reminder of a brush with death
 (And death lost, temporarily)
 Her "courageous battle with cancer" as the obits say
 The flatness of her chest is a statement
 Here I am—take it or leave it—I'm fine with it
 Stripped of the one thing
 All women seem defined by
 I am a living, breathing icon
 Of wholeness
 I have lost what is falsely most prized
 And—surprise—am still a human being
 No, more than that
 I am a walking soul, a triumph
 Of mind over matter
 A survivor
 And the epitome of who we really are
 We women
 Heart and soul and brain
 Look at me—look at who I am
 Without the breastplate
 That is supposed to define me
 I have stronger armor
 Than you think
 Just see what I can do...

—Carol Allis

On Eating an Orange and Seeing God

I miss the big navels when they are not in season,
 but almost any orange will do when I really want to see God.

But it must be done right, this seeing, this apprehension of the
 Lord of the Universe, Lord of All the Worlds, both seen and
 unseen...

First I feel how firm the orange is, rolling it in my hands,
 the hands of an artist, the hands of a poet, and now the stiff
 and cracked hands of an old man—
 then I slice it in half and look at its flesh, its brightness,
 its moistness, its color—
 if the insides beckon, urging my mouth to bite,
 I first cut each half into half and then slowly, carefully—
 as all rituals demand—I put one of the cut pieces between
 my longing lips and gradually, with a sort of grace, bite
 into the flesh of the sacrificial fruit.

I feel the juice flow down my throat and recall the taste of
 every orange I ever had, even in my childhood—or so it
 seems, with this little miracle of eating an orange.

As I finish absorbing, still slowly and gracefully, its flesh,
 the last bit of what had been one of the myriad wonders
 of the world, I look at the ragged pieces of orange peel
 and I see poetry—or God—it's really the same thing,
 isn't it?

—Nolo Segundo

The Writer's Block

When the poem resists the page and only unwanted words remain
I scratch the surface to find a handful of fools-gold
while true gold remains beyond my grasp
Like cottonwood seeds that surf the air—always one wave ahead
Like mosquitos that dance and sing just beyond the swat
Like elusive bits floating in water evading capture
What I want escapes my grasp again and again
And then I accept failure
I give up the fight for perfection and accept the death of my desire
A long exhale lets go of everything
I bow down
head resting on the block awaiting the blade
I listen as the blade separates the air in its downward descent
And find serenity in surrender
The blade slices through bone and into the block
I contemplate my severed head
and at the moment of my death
A poem is born

—Teresa M. Riggs Foushee



THE ETHEREE AS A POETIC FORM

...Along the forested path

Tale
Tall, Sprouts
Magic beans.
Up the Beanstalk,
Ogre's wife,— "*Hello!*"
Steal the harp, say, "*Goodbye!*"
Down the Beanstalk—rogue Giant,
Quickly! Along the forested path,
Deeper into the woods, Little Red,
Jack, Rapunzel, the Woodsman, Baker's wife,
Cinderella: Meet the Prince, Try the Slipper,
Forgive the Witch, Sidestep Stepsisters, Find the Axe,
Chop the Beanstalk, Kill the Giant, Compose a Ballad,
Pluck harp, Pluck berries, Sing ballad—*Sigh*—and home before dark.

--Mary Kay Crawford-Lorfink

Taking Flight

Night
touches,
then wanes pale.
Misshapen moon
wobbles milky light
upon a whispering
of pearl-winged Angels, airbrushed
as heaven's own. To live better,
I dream of Angels. There are no words.
Come night, help me find how close I can get.

--Mary Kay Crawford-Lorfink

Manic

I've inherited this demon
 which haunted our mother
 plagued her brain
 like a separate consciousness—
 for sixty years smothered her
 within the walls of herself.
 I am that woman, rupturing.
 In pieces, and tucked away
 on some psychic shelf. I discern
 the first-person game-play
 of my life. Cautiously

watching the pages of my story turn
 the way a theater audience observes
 warily—unable to prevent
 its final act. I've gone at it alone.
 A battle of self within self, but
 never deserted here, my Bastille—
 jailed within these chambers
 concealing chambers. So many prisoners
 echo throughout these halls. Each night
 shadow figures stoop and sough

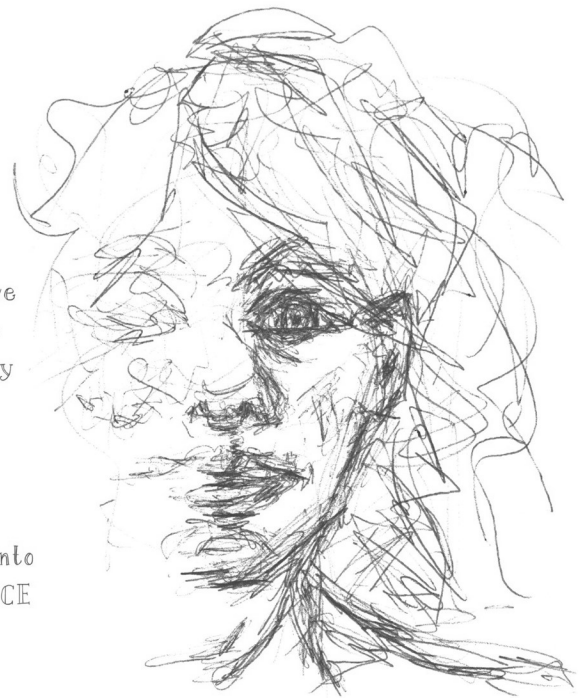
in my ears. They speak
 of hopes and fears, and sometimes others
 fashion tools from realities I dread.
 That lot desires me dead to rule
 my head. That is what it is to be she—

I'm burned out by the beast bellowing me,
 its malignancy gashes, nightly
 I grip to my diversions, blare
 music or rap on my PlayStation
 controller, perhaps pen some new poem—
 any distraction I can cling to

to make my swarming head feel like home.

—Shawn Nacona Stroud

I AM
 the ink
 in my pen
 making a move
 loosening up
 finding a way
 to myself
 by flowing
 not forcing
 slowly
 transforming into
 A MASTERPIECE



—Poem and drawing by Dominique Miller

L'empire De La Morte

Her fear is a wire strung—
 tauten and thrumming,
 connected head to foot—
 heart drumming. La fille,
 a body that beats tribal.

She saunters aside
 the Seine. Just a ripple,
 just a Monet marionette
 watercolor. A sunset
 bleeding itself
 in the current, darkening
 impression of night.
 Her image converges—
 with a splash and a choke
 the looking glass has broke.

Oh stone, Oh Charon—
 punt her passage to safety
 across the bedrock. She roams
 halls of skull walls.
 At home in the Catacombs.

—Shawn Nacona Stroud

Voices

Voices from long ago call echoing in my dreams
 Memories of childhood, joyous, sweet, and innocent
 Bright golden summers that seemed never-ending
 When happiness reigned supreme with days rich with love
 Family supporting and encouraging, guiding my way.
 Now, my parents and brother are long gone and grave deep
 And I am burdened with old age, arthritic bones, blood pressure
 Alone, difficulty walking with time cruelly speeded up,
 Destination the grave and final sleep coming ever closer.
 Throughout life I sought for meaning and truth
 Finding the blue planet was like a single grain of sand
 Lost among vast desert of stars expanding ever outwards
 Away into an eternal blackness of space with limit unknown,
 While wondering on the existence of a loving God.

—Collin Ian Jeffery

Polar Bear

Polar Bear sat above the kitchen sink,
 one paw poised as if to take a step.
 An opening on its back stored toothpicks that
 Mom and Dad reached for after every meal.

A young girl then, I dried dishes, Mother washed.
 We talked about junior high boys and how I hated my
 curly hair.
 Later it was college classes and car troubles I'd had.

I grew up and polar bear moved to the cabin.
 A young girl then, my Sarah dried dishes and I washed.
 We talked about junior high boys and how she hated
her curly hair.
 Later it was college grades and car troubles *she'd* had.

Polar bear still sits holding toothpicks,
 One paw poised as if to take a step.
 The kids are raised and in Venezuela and Japan.
 I wash dishes, my husband dries.

Polar bear looks forward, unsure of life's direction,
 yet plods straight ahead.
 He belonged to Mother's mother.
 He will someday be my curly-haired daughter's daughter's—
 long after our lives are as still as his.

—Janice Strootman

A Few Crumpled Words

I keep a poem in my pocket
 for a rainy day
 Just a few words,
 a couple'a things I want to say—
 To tell you you're seen
 I know you are there
 Maybe sometimes life doesn't seem fair

But around every corner
 is a single smile
 You can take it with you
 it will last for miles

I can't change the way things are
 but I can remind you
 That wishing on a star
 is not just for kids
 and it's not that far-fetched
 to think that bad luck is
 not etched in stone forever

I may not be that clever
 But I know this

A poem can lift you up for a minute
 no matter how you spin it

This one's for you.

Take it to heart
 I hope it's the start of a better day

—Sarah Routman



Available on Amazon, coming
 soon: "Travel Heart."

We at WINK are grateful to the “silent benefactors” who unselfishly donate funds small and large, to help us thrive, because as most of you already know, WINK is an “out-of-pocket” labor of time, effort, and, most of all, LOVE, on the part of our volunteer staff and editors. We are dedicated to the purpose of providing a platform for both emerging and accomplished poets and writers from all walks. If you are wondering how you can help, or donate via PayPal, there is a convenient link on the front page of our website, www.winkwriters.com (see image below) or you can inquire to our executive editor, Nadia Giordana at inadia@msn.com. We DO give expedited and preferential treatment to our benefactors, no guarantees, but we will read your submissions first as we fill the magazine. Also, current supporters will get printed hard copies of WINK.

The image shows a promotional graphic for WINK. At the top, the word "WINK" is written in large, stylized letters with a blue-to-purple gradient and a striped texture. Below it, the text "Writers in the Know" is written in a purple serif font. Underneath that, "Editor Nadia Giordana" is written in a black serif font. The phrase "Now Accepting Submissions" is written in a black cursive font. Below this, the text "Help us thrive donate" is written in a bold black sans-serif font, followed by a yellow rectangular button with the word "Online" in black. At the bottom, there is a yellow rounded rectangular button with the word "Donate" in black. The background of the graphic is a light gray with faint, handwritten-style text and a stack of books at the bottom left.