A Letter from the editor-in-chief

Well, this is exciting! If you’re reading this, that means you are reading our debut issue! I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to discover 3Elements Review. I know you won’t be disappointed.

Our debut issue features both award-winning and never-before-published writers and artists of all ages from all over the United States, England, and Canada. Do read the bios, because they are fascinating—we are thrilled to have an international group of contributors and hope to keep that trend in future issues.

Please feel free to post our journal on Facebook and Twitter, and share it with whomever you think would appreciate great art, poems, and stories.

The next submission period ends on December 1. We’d love to publish you! Consider submitting if the newest elements inspire you.

Thank you again for your support.

Sincerely,
Mikaela Shea
Editor-in-chief
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Cortege

Paul Hostovsky

On our way to bury you, a yellow BMW (a bee among the mourners) was weaving in and out of our funeral procession winding down route 22 to the cemetery. When everyone else had stopped for our lit line of grief—cars, pedestrians,

even a team of tandem bicyclists—this yellow BMW couldn’t or wouldn’t. Swerving in and out between the bereaved,

he reminded me of you—the restlessness, the thoughtlessness—the way he fell in line with us, then left us,

then the left lane slowed and he was back again. I wondered if the sun drowned out the lights that strung our private darkness faintly together.

Or maybe, seeing the lights, he saw the darkness had the right of way and swung into our midst to overtake us,

this acrobat among the yarmulkes, now flying out in front, now closing ranks behind the rabbi’s car.
I always thought you’d recognize yourself eventually, a long time afterwards maybe, the way you used to be when you couldn’t help it, or see it even, and seeing it finally, and in someone else, it would feel a little like love. Only love a little too late. The worst kind of ache. But mostly it felt like perfection as we turned that corner into the cemetery, and out he shot, the bee, as from a jar, as if he’d suffocate to death if death contained him any longer, a thin black cloud of exhaust hanging in the air behind him, like a veil.
Whose Idea was this Con(trap)tion Anyway?

*****

Gillian Moore

I would rather die
than pedal this tandem bicycle with you
one minute more.
I’ve been eyeing the procession of streets passing along our route
and have fought the compulsion to
jump, tuck, and roll
off this contraption at every intersection.
But all the propelling, all this pedaling that
has taken us absolutely nowhere—for so long—
has left every ounce of me to ache and concede
that I’m stuck on this god-forsaken vehicle
until the tire treads wear thin enough,
the rusty chain finally breaks,
we are struck by a passing car,
or struck by reason.
One Hundred + Nineteen

*****

Gilmore Tamny
IN the hours after the Tohoku earthquake, Clara’s parents grew panicky. They left message after message for her.

“Come home, Clara. Get out of there,” said her mother. Her voice was low and hoarse.

“We hope you’re okay, honey,” said her father. “Please call us.”

Clara had forgotten her cell phone at Susumu Igarashi’s the night before, so she didn’t get the messages immediately. And it hadn’t occurred to her to reassure her parents. She assumed that they had looked at a map of Japan and could tell she was a long way from the disaster area. She didn’t think they’d be worried. But now, here she was, on the phone with her nearly hysterical mother. Unglued. Her mother was unglued. She couldn’t stop talking about cars floating into the ocean.

“Oh my God, they’re showing the footage of the tsunami again,” said her mother. “It’s like the end of the world.”

Clara pictured her mother sitting in the armchair next to the landline in the green-walled living room of the clapboard house on Mohawk Circle, back in Syracuse. She probably had that pillow behind her back.
The one that was embroidered with white lambs and the words “God’s Love” in script. Outside, in March, the night sky in upstate New York would be the color of black velvet. Maybe Orion was visible. The television was probably the only light in the room.

Clara stared out the window as her mother talked and cried. It was almost noontime in Kyoto. Gojo Dori was bustling. A group of old men headed into the udon shop. One half of a punk couple waited next to a tandem bicycle. The guy wore an electric blue parka that matched his hair. Before Clara got a chance to respond to her mother, the other half, equally blue-haired, came out of the convenience store. Within a minute, the tandem bicycle and the two riders were gone, camouflaged by the traffic. Clara continued to observe the street. A fashionable young woman, tottering on white majorette boots, led a small dog in the direction of Rokuhara Temple. The busy thoroughfare looked like it always did. In the distance, she could make out the plum trees just starting to blossom in the park.

She tried to explain to her mother that there was no reason to leave. She lived in Kyoto, five hundred kilometers away from the disaster area.

“Look at a map,” she wanted to say to her mother. “Just look at a freakin’ map.”

But she didn’t say anything. She knew that her mother’s world was circumscribed by the new Wal-Mart out on Route 2 and First Presbyterian, by women who looked like her and dressed like her and made the same recipe for meatloaf. Even attending the state fair was a big deal. “We had those special dough things at the Greek booth,” she would say. “Gyros or whatever you call them.”

Clara continued to look out the window, staring at the laundry drying on racks outside the apartments opposite hers. A whole Japanese family’s pajamas fluttered in the breeze. She was used to such sights by now. How so much was exposed here. Ugly electric train wires overhead, garbage
bins, personal bedding draped over balconies, flesh in the public baths. And yet, how much was hidden. Emotions, for one thing. There was so much quiet control. Even at this very instant, even among those suffering terribly.

Her mother babbled on, her anxiety pulsating into Clara’s ear.

“They say that everything’s radioactive. I’m worried about what you are eating, honey. What about the water?”

Clara didn’t dare say that she and Susumu were thinking of volunteering in a few weeks, heading up to Tohoku to help out. People were already organizing weekend brigades. She could hear her father shouting in the background.

“Tell her we’ll send her money for a ticket!” he yelled.

“Here, you tell her, Rob,” said her mother, handing the phone over.

“Just come home, baby,” her father said quickly. “Just come home.”

“I’ll think about it,” answered Clara, but she knew that she wouldn’t. Her head was starting to ache from listening to her mother’s fears.

On Friday, she had been walking down Sanjo, near Kawaramichi, just about to cross the river when the earthquake struck. The bridge had wobbled a bit, but no one paid much attention. Earthquakes were common. Susumu had told her that elsewhere in the city people hadn’t felt a thing. It was early afternoon and she had just finished teaching her classes. She told her parents that much. She didn’t go into details. About how she was on her way to Susumu’s apartment. About having subsequently forgotten her cell phone on the floor next to the rumpled bedding of the futon.

The last time she mentioned Susumu, a musician whom she had met two years earlier, her parents hadn’t reacted the way she had hoped.

“Susumu?” they had repeated. “That doesn’t sound like an American name.”

“It means going forward,” said Clara. “You know, to progress.”
“Their names have meanings?” asked her mother.

“Of course,” said Clara. “What did you think?”

“I don’t know,” said her mother, “Susumu just sounds like nonsense to me.”

Clara sighed. She thought about the distance separating her from her parents. All the bodies of water, all the waves of the Pacific Ocean, the continental shelf itself, the whole canopy of sky stretching from Syracuse to Kyoto.

When her mother grew too tired to continue her rant, her father took the phone again. He got right to the point.

“They’re not gonna protect you, baby. If things get worse. They’re gonna protect their own.”

Clara tried to change the subject, but her father had spent the day soaking up information.

He wanted to talk tsunami and disaster.

“The news said there’s no looting yet,” he said skeptically.

Clara bit her lip. It was the idea of “yet” that annoyed her. Her parents just assumed certain things.

Clara tried talking about her work, a new project she had in mind, but all her father could talk about was the videos he had seen on the Internet. Cars and bicycles and buildings swept up like leaves in a gutter. The sucking sound of the tsunami as it ate its way into the coastline. The procession of displaced people staggering into shelters.

“I don’t know if they...the Japs...the Japanese...will ever recover...not from this one.”

Clara half-listened. Before she left to teach in Kyoto, her father had taken her on a long walk, down Main Street, past the clock shop that he owned, up behind the high school, across the playing fields where Clara had captained the field hockey team, and over to the canal, where they used to ice skate every winter.

“You’re going to the other side of the world,” he said. “I can’t believe
“I can’t wait,” said Clara. She had studied graphic design and Japanese in college.

“You know that Grandpa wouldn’t have been happy with you going over there. To Japan.”

“Grandpa?” she had asked, puzzled. She only had vague memories of her grandfather, his fingers yellowed from smoking too many Camels, his use of the word “icebox.” She remembered him coming up to the house with Christmas presents in his arms, his lopsided walk.

“Why does Grandpa walk that way?” she had once asked as a little girl. The answer came back in one unfamiliar word: shrapnel.

Later, she somewhat recalled the American flag draped over his coffin, the VFW president giving the eulogy at his funeral.

As Clara and her father tossed small stones into the canal, she realized that the whole walk had been leading up to this moment.

“He never talked about the war, you know. He was in the Marianas. The Pacific Theater. He lost a lot of buddies to …them.”

Clara sighed.

“I wish you were teaching closer to home, Clara,” her father said, looking grim.

Later as she was packing her duffle bags, sorting out her possessions before getting ready to fly overseas, Clara would wonder how long people could hang on to something. Grudges, injustices, red-letter dates. 9/11. Pearl Harbor. Who knew what else?

When did people let go and move on?

By the time the telephone call ended, it was eleven o’clock at night on the East Coast. Her parents were getting ready for bed. She could picture her father in his flannel bathrobe, the same one he had had when Clara was a little girl. Red plaid with a floppy belt. Her mother would have her cheeks covered in that moisturizer that smelled like eucalyptus. Even in
March, there was probably still winter snow on the ground in the corners of Mohawk Circle, piled up gray and crusty. Clara could imagine the yard bathed in the yellow glow of her family’s porch light which her father would soon turn off. Then he’d check the door one more time.

“We have to get to bed,” said her father. “But I’ll put Mom on to say goodbye.”

“We miss you, honey, please come home,” said Clara’s mother.

“I love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, night-night.”

Clara waited for her mother to realize that, of course, where Clara was, it wasn’t night time. But her mother merely said, “Sleep tight,” when Clara said goodbye.

Clara thought about the wall calendar her parents kept in the kitchen, hanging on the pantry door. From the John Deere Tractor Store, with photos of different seasons. Hay baling for August, a tractor pulling a load of Christmas trees for December. On her parent’s calendar, it was Saturday. On Clara’s electronic calendar, it was Sunday. She had already left Saturday behind.
Malfunction

*****

Leon Hedstrom

It hurts behind the eyes—the white noise of the city. It hurts like a too-tight dress. It hurts like light through the window the morning after the wedding. It hurts like home. It hurts like a procession of cars through the city. It hurts like the neon wash across the wreckage of a rental van. It hurts like the Latina girl who looks you dead in the eyes & says that she wants to be president someday. It hurts like the presidency. It hurts like flicking through channels. It hurts like love. It hurts like the aftermath. It hurts like waking up without her. It hurts like buying a tandem bike & riding it solo. It hurts like pavement. It hurts like bloodied knuckles. It hurts, it aches. It hurts like watching rocks fall into the sea. It hurts like the sea lapping up against the shore. It hurts like everyone surrounding you all at once & you’re standing there thinking I’m just a kid, I’m just a kid, I can’t possibly help you.
It’s when she asks you where it hurts. It’s when you wake up in the branches of trees. It’s when white linen sheets cover the bodies of protestors. When you dream about birds falling from the sky. When she shakes you by the shoulders. When your heart becomes a procession. When the crowds flood the stadium. When your tandem bicycle crashes into the river. When you cross the frozen lake. When it aches. When it infects. When it spreads. When your legs get lost in a grey winding sheet. When the waves break against the pier. When she stares into the sea for the first time. When you hold her hand & share your light.
End of the Pier

*****

Kerry Rawlinson
End of the Pier

Kerry Rawlinson

I’ve been here before—
on the edge—

hooked and baited;
cast a line from my rancid ruins

with a nagging ache like
splinters wedged
under a nail;
impaled a dinner fish

dumped the bucketed guts
over the rail.

Many storms raged underfoot
in this place, and me the

broken survivor of some
uphill tandem bicycle race.
Life’s rapacious grip shook the
grassy hips of the tiki bar

and slipped their hooks;
pier posts shuddered;

waves
hit the deck till it gave.
I may sit here forever, 
shipwrecked:
dreams and days disappear in drifts 
like spume, like grit

or relentless processions of 
seagull feathers.

Gazing past the middle distance
I cast my thoughts.

Nuance
could change one’s existence
if it could only be 
captured.
Swimming to the Beat of a Different Drummer

Ashini Desai

I once saw a fish riding a bicycle.
Of course, it wasn’t riding it the way
you and I would ride it.
We can’t assume there’s only one way to ride a bicycle.

The fish simply curled itself between the spokes
and dipped downwards to
propel the cycle forward.
Since it was a tandem bicycle,
another fish was latched onto the rear wheel.
They swam in unison —
Swirls of fins and gills
tumbling inside the wheels.

That was the day of the procession
under the sea.
The crabs took to the skateboards
and did perfectly fine!
They gripped the board with their claws
and waved with their legs in the air.
One would think the inverted posture
would cause their bodies to ache,
but they did quite well.
Last in line were the seahorses.
No, they weren’t pulling the carts.
*Again, leave your human prejudices and stereotypes behind in this seascape.*

Seahorses sat on the carts and chose to drive with jellyfish power.
The slender limbs of the jellyfish fluttered behind the cart, performing an elegant dance, showing off their fragility and strength.

Meanwhile, the seahorses sat like royals at the helm and nodded their noble heads to the crowds.

We all stood on our shells and clapped until starfish started twinkling in the moonlight.
I WANTED to kiss Bobby Gomez. He was the kid no one wanted to kiss because everyone thought he was a nerd with his crazy wild hair and big lips and his glasses that were always sliding down his face, but I liked that because I could see his huge green eyes that I swore glimmered every time he saw me. Maybe. I’m pretty sure.

It was the in-between dance, which meant the end of eighth grade and right before high school, where the boys still stayed on one side and the girls the other because no boys would ask the girls to dance. Instead they tried to act all cool with their hands in their pockets and the girls would giggle fixing their dresses and then there was me trying to fix the skirt that used to be my sister’s who was way taller than me because her dad was tall and well, I never knew my pop, but I’m figuring he was short like me.

Anyway, so back to Bobby. He was on the other side of the gym writing in this little red journal he always had, all the pages swallowed by blue ink that stained his left hand, and no girl liked him. No boy liked me though I was smart, so that made me a nerd which meant I was able to hang out
with the popular kids because they needed my help with tests and stuff, but I wasn’t necessarily popular myself, more like popular by association.

So, the gym was covered in twisted streamers and it was the second to last day of class, and Ms. Mendoza and Ms. Coco were standing next to the punch to make sure none of us snuck in anything we grabbed from our parents’ liquor cabinets like Ana Chavez did back in ’85.

“The procession is about to begin,” said Janelle DeJesus the girl who, word in the halls was, already had a tattoo at age fifteen—she was held back a couple of times—and who smoked cigarettes that she snuck out of her mother’s purse. I had never taken part in the procession—where the girls and the boys each walked one by one behind the other in an orderly fashion—and when the boy or girl they liked was passing right next to them, they snuck over and gave them a kiss on the mouth.

I took off my glasses and wiped them on my skirt, and I pushed out my boobs, which really didn’t make much of a difference, and I saw Bobby Gomez get into the back of the boy line. Everyone watched the teachers who were into some heavy discussion over the punch, throwing their hands in the air like they were playing charades, and the music that bassed through the gym floor—as much as Milli Vanilli could bass—went up my cheap shoes, and then we began to walk.

My lips ached, my whole body ached in a good way, and I had never felt that before even when I saw that cute guy who bagged groceries at Butera’s. I knew I wasn’t going to get a kiss from any other boy and I didn’t want any other boy. I didn’t want Jason White who was the captain of the baseball team with his phony mustache I was sure he penciled in to make look fuller. I didn’t want to be kissed by Tommy Muller who had been recruited by all the top high schools to play basketball, though he had great teeth. I wanted who I wanted and now the only question was whether he wanted me.

The procession started and we began to walk by one another, some boys looked over at me like they smelled something awful, and Betty
Hernandez kissed Joe Grifford a few spots in front of me and I heard smooches happen everywhere like bubble wrap popping. The lines were coming to an end and there was Bobby Gomez. He looked nervous and clenched his journal and I thought I could hear his knuckles crack as he did so and he looked at me and I at him and I thought I saw behind those glasses his green eyes get bigger and I leaned in.

I imagined his lips on mine like cheese on toast and us holding hands as we did homework together, and riding a tandem bicycle, him in the front and me in the back because I never learned how to ride a bike and I liked the way the back of his head looked, this birthmark on his neck like Easter Island when he sat in front of me in English Lit and at least he wouldn’t be able to see me look nervous, riding it along the river and over the bridge, and he’d say something romantic from the movies like *no one puts baby in the corner* and he’d listen to my poetry about being alone and misunderstood and song lyrics I wrote though I couldn’t sing nor play an instrument and he’d read me whatever it was he wrote in his journal that I was hoping were poems about me.

I leaned in and he leaned in, and the streamers crinkled under the air vents, and my lips popped as I smacked them open, and the lights dimmed just a little from major-fluorescent to less-than-blinding-florescent, and his fingertips covered in ink reached out toward me, and it was going to finally happen, the kiss, and the hand holding, and the French fry sharing, and the tandem bicycle, and my tongue finally dancing with his—did tongues dance?

I was about to kiss Bobby Gomez. Me. Mia Carmen De la Cruz.

Then, “STOP!” echoed through the gym and I thought the windows were going to shatter and shards would fall through the wire mesh, and the white lines on the shiny gym floor blurred, and gasps and *damns* rippled throughout.

“You kids stop it, right now!” yelled Ms. Coco.

I looked at Bobby Gomez and I knew he was going to kiss me and I
knew he was going to go for it anyway because I used my allowance at Goldblatts getting hairspray and body spray and a new headband and some spot-on acne remover. I even bought gloss that made my lips burn a fiery strawberry, but I was ready. He knew it. He knew I put in the time—for him.

He looked at me and grinned and I mirrored him and he lifted not his chin as in oh what the hell, but his shoulders, both at once rose then sank and he turned and walked away leaving me as the only girl in mid-gym, mid-dance, almost mid-kiss position. The whispers as I walked out were the girls talking about what boys they kissed or almost kissed before we were stopped and all the girls giggled but me.

On the way out the door, I left the pack of blue pens I bought for him at his locker, my allowance now gone.

The next day, the last day of school, there was a note on my locker, folded up, like blueberries were squashed all over it.

The note was from Bobby Gomez. The note was for me.

"Hi, Mia Carmen De la Cruz," it began.
What Love Is

Daniel Lassell

Love isn’t a tandem bicycle ride.
It doesn’t shout at the top of its lungs off cliff peaks
so that rural villagers below will hear the echoes.
It isn’t a dancing quartet of groomsmen flailing themselves
down church aisles with legs kicking to gleeful procession tunes.
It doesn’t hold beat-boxes overhead while standing in front lawns
or splash through creeks to opposite banksides.
It isn’t the ache in your chest when a car drives away
and you can still see a face in the rearview mirror.
It isn’t hip thrusting beneath bed-sheets or the moans above them.
It isn’t close-held hugs or skin-pressed lips.
It doesn’t run a block to meet in the middle,
and it’s never the air-bound 360-degree twirl.
It isn’t heart-shaped jewelry, gift-wrapped chocolate bars, or rose petals
on a bedspread with wine glasses filled red.
It doesn’t even spell itself the way it does.

Love is the cowlick on her forehead where her hair begins.
It’s the scar on her back where she fell from her bike and grazed a rock.
It’s the freckles on her nose and the single one between her eyes,
the mole on her belly she had removed, and the mark it left
to remind of its existence.
It’s the curve of her feet when they wiggle into her running shoes
and the way she jumps when a spider scutters from behind the cupboard.
It’s the blue sports bra she wears when she does yoga in the living room
and the smell of her sweat that smells like her, and that’s why you don’t mind.
It’s the speck-sized birthmark on her butt cheek,
and the tiny hairs she missed while shaving she notices two days after.
It’s the way she mumbles in her sleep and snores when she has a cold,
the way she tosses to get comfortable and hugs a pillow between her breasts.
It’s the face she makes to the mirror
as she studies hard her dress swirling halfway round.
It’s the vegan food she cooks for dinner and your choice to eat it.
It’s the way she says your name when she’s flustered
and the “miss you” notes she posts to the fridge on her way to work.
It’s the way she crawls into the shower and wraps
her arms around you from behind,
the way she nuzzles her head beneath your chin,
her eyes closed as the water trickles her face,
and the droplets her breathing pushes to the air.
Dissociation

*****

Adam Pacton

He bought it for us—
Yellow tandem bicycle
Shot through with burgundy
And steel geometries—
Built for two.

But I was two myself.

He wanted us
To be together
Move together
Do something together
When riding on my own
Became too much,
When the months’
Slow numbing growth
Trickled from belly to ankles
And made my ponderous
Gait suspect.

I try.

Push through the ache,
Through the body’s
Distentions
Eruptions
Incremental inside-outings.
It’s becoming someone else’s,
Some future-me’s
Slowly-degrading-neural-network-Saturday-evening-patio story,
A midnight-smiled, finger-laced whisper.

I will remember it then.

Now.

I pedal less
And then less

And now, I suppose,
I have stopped.

But I’m not sure

Houses are melting
    Sliding into each other
    Into the lawns
    Into the streets
    Into a procession of something else

And

He’s looking back at me
And

Somehow

He’s farther down the street

He’s jumping off the bike

He’s

Running
Screaming
Reaching

And

There are pictures in the sky

But

They aren’t pictures of anything

Anymore.
One Hundred + Fifty Five

*****

Gilmore Tamny
A Case of Stage Fright

Matthew Jankiewicz

FOR Old Man MacFarlane, Halloween was the day when children fell prey to his taunts and pranks like flies caught in the adhesive clutches of a spider web. The lure: the simple delicacies of chocolate-covered marshmallows and sugar-coated gummy worms.

On this morning of October 31, he opened his kitchen window to smell the wonderful scents of rotting leaves, pumpkin pulp, and worm-eaten earth, all mixed together in a maelstrom of autumn joy. He couldn’t help but smile.

He claimed the holiday as his own, having been the terror of the neighborhood on this night for nearly fifty years. He felt that it was his job, his responsibility to haunt the minds of all the innocent kiddies (as he preferred to call them) who would stand at the edge of his driveway, cajoling and taunting each other to march up the mountainous driveway as if they were marching in procession to their deaths. All the while, MacFarlane would smirk as he eavesdropped on their conversations.

“I’m not afraid of him,” the Saunders kid would say.

“Oh, really?” the DeMille kid would reply. “Then why don’t you pay
Old Man MacFarlane a visit? What’s the worst he could do? Kill you?”

There would be a pensive silence after this statement. “I’m going up,” another kiddie would say gallantly. “I’m going, I’m going; and don’t you try to stop me. I’m going…” he would say as his voice thinned to a whisper, his courage abandoning him.

Macfarlane would howl at the top of the hill, slapping his knee with delight. He had become a legend, a persona of all things that are horrifying and terrifying about this world. They would have to experience it at one time or another, he thought. So why not infect them young, build up their tolerance for disappointment and fear and uncertainty that will one day confront them? In his mind, he had become the stuff of books and stories that would breathe and live on long after he was gone.

Halloween was not merely a holiday for Old Man Macfarlane. It was a celebration of the crudest forms of human nature. It was a night when all concepts of time expired, when the aged become ageless and the minds of the young become corrupted by the consternations of life.

Like a monument, his house stood as an edict to the ghoulish night. It pulsed with dread, sweated the odor of hauntings, squealed with the noises of creaking doorways and squabbling bats and hooting night owls. Neither spring, nor summer, nor winter could penetrate his house with their various weather patterns or cheery holidays.

An army of ivy climbed along the side of the house, up the lattice and onto the moss-eaten brick siding. The shutters hung limply from the windows, their wooden slats cracked and splintered like broken ribcages. The shingles peeled in this and that direction, balding entirely in some spots. Surrounded by a wall of oak and willow trees, the house seemed to be swallowed up by a tangled arbor that curtailed its visibility from the street. It sat upon a hill as a king to its own throne of horrors. Just one look at the edifice was enough to send dogs barking and growling in a frenzied fright.

Other than for his elaborate taunts, Macfarlane was known around
the neighborhood as a troglodyte, a recluse who hardly ever made an appearance outside of his cavernous abode. How he managed to sustain a stock of food and life necessities without being seen in public remained a mystery to his neighbors. If his reclusion was extreme, his manic behavior on Halloween was incomprehensible.

Sitting in the confines of his kitchen eating his breakfast of fried ham and cheese-coated eggs, he was already in the process of making mental preparations for the evening’s show. He scratched and clawed at what few strands of white hair remained on his otherwise bald head, brooding over his plans.

He was nearly finished eating his breakfast when, with a flurry of inspiration, he catapulted out of his chair. Cackling under his breath, he made his way to the basement to begin the day’s preparations.

The basement was dark and dingy, moldy from years of humidity that had eaten away at the walls and ceiling, exposing marks of blemished wood under its epidermis of paint and drywall. Save for a tiny pathway cutting down the center of the room, the entire laminate floor had been swallowed by mounds of Halloween trinkets and decorations.

In every direction he looked in his treasure-cove of horrors, Macfarlane saw bloody retractable knives, crystal balls, plastic spiders, severed ligaments, gallons upon gallons of fake blood stored in plastic jugs, rolls of cobwebs, and synthetic bats. He smiled a devilishly greedy smile, brought on by the eccentricities of his imagination.

Grinning maliciously, he clapped his hands together like an overgrown child on Christmas morning and then set about the arduous task of searching for the perfect props to match his garish imagination. It would be quite a task to surpass the previous years’ scare tactics.

Five years ago he had worn a fire-proof suit and set flames to himself. A goopy substance that he had plastered onto the suit (a homemade recipe of his own creation) fell onto the pavement of the driveway like burning
flesh. Oh, how the children screamed and shrieked that year!

Fifteen years ago he had arranged dozens of plastic severed body pieces along a table, creating a grotesque reproduction of the Last Supper. He’d dumped blood all over the place to make the gore nauseating. For the finishing touch, he had sprayed himself with a liberal amount of blood down the front of his shirt. When the kiddies made their way up the hill, he’d plunged his face into the feast of body parts and moaned like the crazed undead, starving for the nourishment of human flesh.

As he passed a dusty black cauldron, he was reminded of a Halloween from his novice years during the ‘60s, back when his wife, Margaret, was still alive to take part in the devilish fun. He and his wife had garbed themselves in a wizard and witch costume and then, taking turns, stirred the contents of a cauldron while the other read incantations from a tattered book that he had found in an antique shop. As the kiddies approached (two of them pedaling together on a tandem bicycle dressed as Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum) they were told that the candy was hidden at the bottom of the cauldron. “You’ll find your plunder at the bottom,” MacFarlane had squawked, pointing down at the green soupy concoction in the kettle. The unsuspecting kiddies reached in to grab their sugary fix, he stepped on a pedal and—

Whoosh!

A rotting, blistering hand covered in blood would pop out of the cauldron and startle the kiddies into a sprint down the driveway and out of sight. Some of them had left behind a trail of urine on the pavement.

Oh, those were the days.

He was determined that this year he would put on his greatest fright show yet. He owed it to Margaret, who had always been a good sport with his game. He pulled down a black-and-white striped witch’s hat from the top shelf of a dusty bookcase that housed hundreds of memorabilia from years past.

“I’ll make you proud, Margaret,” he whispered to himself, gently
caressing the hat with his blemished aching hands. “I promise that this will be the best Halloween. The kiddies will be more afraid than I was the day you left me here all alone. I’ll show them what it feels like to be scared, to feel the fear seeping into every organ of your body, polluting each labored breath.” He placed a gentle kiss on the hat and then placed it back in its spot on the shelf.

All day long Macfarlane labored away at the construction of his site, leaving no detail unfinished. On this night, he was the star of his own show, and his driveway was his stage on which he would perform his most insidious nightmares. Hidden away from the rest of the neighborhood, he drudged and toiled in the shadows of the lumbering trees and tangled underbrush.

Nightfall was nigh by the time he had finished his work. He had laid out an elaborate graveyard fabricated with a platform, hundreds of pounds of dirt, and a few clippings of sod. The platform was sloped to create the illusion of the driveway leading into a small family plot. The graveyard was completed with headstones displaying artificial epitaphs, rotten flowers, and a slew of creepy-crawly rubber worms and spiders. As a finishing touch, the luminous fog gave the graveyard an appearance of authenticity, as though it had been transplanted directly from the holy grounds of a church. A charnel house would have amplified the scene to an even greater degree had it been within the limits of his budget.

Three graves were present on the plot, two of which were filled while the third and farthest one from the driveway was an empty hole. If all went according to plan, Macfarlane would wait in hushed excitement inside the vacant grave as the kiddies slowly crept up the driveway. When he was sure they had mounted the summit and had gotten a good glance at the plot, he would spring from his hiding spot and growl and moan and croak.

He imagined the children’s screams, savoring the thought as though
it were a delicious spoonful of pumpkin spice ice cream. What a lark he would have watching the children as they sprawled down the driveway as if the soles of their shoes had been set aflame.

He made the final adjustments, turning on a soundtrack of frightening werewolf howls, and rattling chains, and squealing bats. Then he placed a pot of candy in the bony, outstretched arms of a life-sized Grim Reaper that stood as a welcoming portent to the cemetery. At the last moment, just before show time, he had the splendid idea of using a poleaxe prop to escalate his sardonic appearance.

The kiddies would be arriving shortly.

With his costume and mask donned, MacFarlane settled his way into the exposed grave and waited . . . .

The minutes crept by in slow motion while all around him darkness settled in. Being hidden away in a hole, he had no way of knowing how much time had gone by. His only company was that of the moans and shrieks that caromed against the side of the house. He was surprised to feel his own heart thumping louder and faster as his subconscious fear escalated.

Thoughts began to enter his mind to fill the void of time. Terrible, agonizing thoughts. He wondered what it would feel like if the dirt around him were suddenly to cave in on him and bury him without a trace of his being there.

Who would know?
Who would care to search for him?

As if on cue, rivulets of dirt began to slide down into the hole onto his legs and stomach. Startled, he jerked his body and turned onto his side. This only caused more granulates of dirt to fall into the grave.

His breathing grew instinctively heavier as panic set in.

His heart hammered in his chest.

Thump-a-whump-a-thump-a-whump.

He tried his best efforts to lie still, but even the most concerted attempts
could not prevent his body from trembling. An occasional wheeze would escape from his mouth only to elevate his distress even higher. He wanted to take off his mask to get a breath of fresh air.

*But what about the kiddies? The kiddies will be here soon, and you don’t want to blow the whole show.*

But was he even sure of that? How did he know the kiddies would show up? Perhaps they had decided to avoid his house altogether this year. And then what? Would anyone be able to hear him if he were to call out for help?

*Oh God, I’ve got to get out of here!*

A baritone voice from the soundtrack rumbled like thunder as if it were mocking his pleas. Mwa-ha-ha. The reverberating voice shook the ground, causing a steady stream of dirt to tilt and tumble into the hole.

Suddenly a numbness crept up through his left arm. He made his best efforts to move it, to feel it, but it only rested on his chest like a rotten log.

He felt the sensation of vertigo waging war in his head. His vision blurred, causing everything around him to melt like runny paint. He lifted his head an inch off the ground only to see that his feet were now hidden under a mound of dirt.

A searing headache jackhammered against his temples. It felt as if a gravestone had fallen on his skull.

In the confusion of pain and distress, what he had mistaken to be his thumping heart turned out to be the patter of footsteps coming up the driveway.

Someone is coming! He wanted to scream out for help, but all that came out was a rasp as soft as a breeze. Macfarlane tried his best to move his arms, his legs, his head, anything to try to indicate that he was still alive and in desperate need of medical attention.

The footsteps ceased. Macfarlane wondered what the kiddie standing above him must be thinking, looking down at his motionless body. Maybe it would produce the biggest fright he had ever given.
And at what a time! He could barely contain his laughter as he thought about the irony of it all. It was a joke—this thing called fright, he realized. It’s all about timing, all about the circumstances. He was the victim! There would have been no way to plan for that. Year after year of trying to scare the kiddies, and here he was at their mercy. He was not immune to fear, as he had believed for so long. My, how wonderful a feeling it is. It had been too long since he had acquainted himself with this feeling, this part of himself that he had locked in the dungeon of his heart.

*It’s been a long time,* he thought. *It’s a pleasure to meet you once again fear, terror, panic, and all of your cousins, brothers, and sisters. Trepidation and apprehension and horror. Welcome back, dear friends!*

“Dad!” the child’s voice called out.

“What is it, son?” a voice echoed in the distance, barely audible to Macfarlane’s ears over the sound effects.

“It’s a body.”

“What?” the father replied.

“Old man Macfarlane put a fake zombie in a grave,” the child responded.

“That’s it?”

“Yup.”

“Come on, son. Let’s go. We’ve got a lot more houses to visit.”

*Don’t leave, don’t leave me,* Macfarlane chanted in his head. A current of electrical terror swept over him, more powerful than any he had felt before during his long, expiring life.

“Okay,” the child called back.

The sound of footsteps pattered down the driveway.

*Help me! Help me!* implored Macfarlane. *Helplessness! My goodness, how strange you look tonight. I hardly recognized you.*

Within a matter of seconds the scuttle of footsteps had disappeared.

Growing fainter, too, were Macfarlane’s own pleas and fruitless cries. *Help me, help me, help….****
He Saw Her One Day

*****

Joseph Wolfe

He saw her one day
In a poorly lit 24-hour “café”
Where slurred words birth mirthless comedians
Where eternal optimists drown in wishful thinking
Where junkies drink away the days
Between their last fix and new addiction.
She sat between the fiction writers and moonlighters
Who haggle with stars over the price of sanity
Banging tin dreams against the bars of calamity.
He saw her in the way grass bends to the wind’s embrace
 Noticed the way she was beautifully out of place
Like a heart-of-gold pretty woman at the horse race.
She had eyes like diamonds in a recession
A voice like hope amidst depression
And the grace of a ring bearer in a funeral procession.

He saw her one day
In the way homeowners see bank loaners
Offering low interest on future debts to be paid
The way lawyers play the strings attached like fiddles.
He knew they could learn to whittle their worry into icicles
And carve their legs into tandem bicycles
That never brake for birds or words like
“Grow up, give up, make way.”
He saw her in the way swans see a thawed lake
Saw the way they could dance like a rake
Gathering leaves for the sake of soothing an ache to
Jump without landing, soar without falling
Leap without calling on faith to catch two soulful sinners
In holy book covers and virgin mothers.
He saw her one day
As he marched from the place
Where innocents land after falling from grace
Where orphans ditch dignity to save face
Where drinks are laced with moonbeam dreams
That seep through life’s seams.

The news saw it one day
And the café saw it all like writing that hangs itself from the wall.
They knew it like a lullaby free from lies
Like a cursed nursery rhyme used to tell adults
That night lights don’t always keep monsters at bay:
*A bedchamber gallows for the long night’s sleep*
*It cradles lost children, the shepherdless sheep.*
The café mainstay asked, “Did you know them in some way?”
And all she could say was, “I saw him one day....”
Through your eyes I can still sketch the motions of her funeral procession. There is only one window to that world; when we first met, the soft-focus filter opened.

The glass tears you held never fell—double-glazed, shatterproof. But safe inside, your retinas would ache, playing out the first time you saw her; the early days of lust and fascination; and the end.

You told me all about your romance; it was our first pillow talk. I didn’t mind at all. Our coupling reminded you of love. I kept quiet for awhile, my arms around you. You held me never knowing there were invisible bruises under my skin, under my bones. I had no romance to tell. Your hands skimmed over the broken parts; I forgot them for a moment. Your lips and tongue said I was perfect.
Sometimes we go out together,
the trails stretch on for miles,
and we ride your grief and my scars
like a tandem bicycle.
The pedals turn; we move forward.
Quechua Cartography

Sheena Segady
ON a road trip by myself, I stop in a small town on the northern edge of the Lehigh Valley. The town is called Jim Thorpe.

Jim Thorpe is quaint. Old railroad tracks, no longer in use, run through the center, and there’s a main street that runs perpendicular to the tracks. The main street is lined with well-preserved old buildings, mostly brick. It’s the kind of place where, when you walk the streets, you can picture them in every era: When the streets were dirt. When they were cobbled, and the clops of horses’ hooves echoed off the building facades. When the roads were first paved, and men in black hats waved to each other from the front seats of early cars, as young couples cruised by on tandem bicycles, the young ladies in long wide skirts, their hair blowing in the early twentieth-century wind—I imagine that wind was different then.
I check into a hotel on the main drag.

I go to a restaurant in one of the brick buildings, a gloomy place, with a carpeted floor, a bar in back, and walls covered with framed maps of the town and of the surrounding area. It is early for dinner, and the only other clientele are a few pairs of elderly people, scattered across the restaurant’s dark wooden chairs.

My waitress is young—maybe nineteen—frail, and fairly pretty, except for how frail she is. I come up with a kind of romantic life story for her, in which she is a bright but timid girl, who wants to get out of Jim Thorpe to go to college and see the world, but can’t quite afford it. And she isn’t sure if, when she’s saved enough money, she’ll really be able to leave her comfortable, familiar small town behind, for the terrifying unknown of the world beyond.

Jim Thorpe was once called Mauch Chunk. It was a Lenape name. I tell the waitress I am Lenape. She doesn’t believe me.

In the story, her story, I am the interesting, alluring, only slightly older but much more worldly outsider. I am a traveler from afar. And I’m
attractive, because I’m alien, and because I’m the only diner under the age of seventy.

8

In the 1950s, Mauch Chunk changed its name to encourage tourism. They named it after Jim Thorpe, the great Native American athlete. Jim Thorpe was from Oklahoma, and he had never been to, or heard of, Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania. This is like if a small town in Kansas named itself after, say, Jacques Cousteau.

9

I tell the waitress I am from Jacque Cousteau, Kansas. She nods as though she believes me.

10

Every year, the residents of Mauch Chunk-cum-Jim Thrope hold a parade in honor of their borrowed bastard child. There’s a high-school marching band, floats, girls twirling batons: a procession in homage to revisionist history. My waitress threw batons. She was a great baton twirler, if there can be such a thing.

11

When the waitress comes back to refill my water, she informs me that there is no Jacques Cousteau, Kansas. I ask her how she knows there is no Jacques Cousteau, Kansas. She says she’s just guessing; but since there’s a Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, it would be too convenient for there also to be a Jacques Cousteau, Kansas.
For my romantic story to play out as I imagine it, I have to ask the waitress out. She has to say yes. We have to spend an evening together in which she slowly erodes my preconceptions about her, by being exactly as I imagine her, but at the same time having an uncanny sense of perspective about her own small life, and her place in the world. And by the end of the night, I have to feel as though I am the frail one who doesn’t understand the world and has never truly been able to break free of his limited worldview.

I ask the waitress what she is doing after her shift, something I’ve never done before. I’m not nervous, because I’m sure how this is supposed to play out, and because I feel interesting. She says she’s been wondering if I were going to ask her that. I ask her if, when she wondered, she decided what she was going to say to me. She says she didn’t. I ask if she is a good daydreamer, if she’s ever daydreamed deeply enough to pass through a whole meal by herself without even really noticing. She says no. I ask her what she sees when she looks at me. She says she sees a guy in a blue shirt.

I wonder if the story works better or worse if I have sex with her. If I have sex with her, I’ll feel like a creep. I am too old for her. I’ll never see her again. It seems irresponsible. But, if I don’t have sex with her, how does the story end?

I was in Kansas once, in Topeka, on the campus of Washburn University. I met a young woman there, a student. She was the only teenager I’ve been with, and also my only one-night stand. The whole affair was
uncomfortable, physically and otherwise.

16

The waitress gives me the check, and I decide that I cannot have sex with her. She and I need to get close, right to the brink, and then pull back, panting, holding each other, aching with unconsummated passion. That’s when we part, when we go our separate ways.

17

The waitress brings me change and suggests that I “have a nice night.” I ask her if my night will include a drink with her. She smiles at the stained carpeting and says she “doesn’t think so.” I give her my number for when she changes her mind.

18

I throw on my jacket and stroll up the hill toward my hotel. I trail my finger along the building facades, feeling the grooves in the brick. A town like Jim Thorpe has layers, and I feel like if I scrape away at the bricks, I can reveal Mauch Chunk, and everything will be different. The town will be its true self, and so will I.
Bicycles

Paul Hostovsky

It’s like we’re all bicycles
and we all have these handlebars
and some of the handlebars and some
of the seats are incredibly beautiful
not to mention the way the wheels spin
and the bells ring
and the reflectors reflect and we can’t
look at them and we can’t stop looking at them
and all we really want is to get on top of them
and ride off into the sunset but they say
hey I’m not a bicycle okay
I have an eternal soul that you can’t see
because you’re so focused on my handlebars
look they’re only handlebars okay you’re such a
foot all you think about is pedaling
all you think about is wind wind wind
so then we nod a little guiltily and maybe
finger a spoke a little sheepishly
feeling the ache and asking for their forgiveness
and maybe they feel sorry for us then
because our desire feels ugly to us then
when really it’s beautiful
and they’re beautiful and we’re beautiful
as a tandem bicycle
and they lean over and offer us
their basket which is somehow attached
to the place where their handlebars meet and our lunch
is in there and their lunch is in there too
so we sit together munching our lunches
under the big trees
all desire gone for the time being
the wind playing up in the branches
a funeral procession trundling dumbly by
our souls playing near our discarded shoes
kickstands gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight
The two of us float above the misty asphalt
our ankles speckled with raindrops
His black duster flip, flip, flips
against my boot
and we’re halfway there.
The procession passed
hours ago
black umbrellas
now sit sodden in backseats.
The ache has vanished
the seething knot released;
for there are none left but ghosts
and the moon—
in front of whom
we allow ourselves
to melt.
In Tandem

*****

George Linfield

Achromatic wheels turning through the notions
A perfect procession of intermingling emotions
Up and down the cobbled streets we shake
Our teamwork encapsulated as we brake.

And break we do; split into two.
Our unity erodes; the cycle corrodes
As uphill slopes morph into hollow hopes
The ache leaves me prone; continuing alone.

It takes all my energy to stay upright
As I ride solo on our tandem bike
Wobbling and struggling down the road
Wishing you’d return to help me home.
ACHE. That’s not exactly right but I don’t know what else to name it. An odd pain in my chest, or maybe in my gut, it’s hard to tell. Some of it seems to have settled behind my eyes. At any rate, it’s what you left me. Just that ache and some unwashed laundry at the foot of the bed. You’d think there’d be more to show for us than a load of permanent press.

How is it that after nearly a year you will completely vanish with eight gallons of water (four warm, four cold) and half-cup of Tide?

I stand here staring at what’s left of us and trying to decide which will depress me more...putting what’s left of our relationship in the two dollar washer on the ground floor and watching us wash, rinse, spin out of existence, or leaving us in that desolate pile to remind me of how we ended. In a wrinkled heap, with a coffee stain or two and not enough starch.

The dilemma makes my brain run in odd directions, tangents that help keep the ache at bay. There is a certain morbid poetry in either; laundry as a metaphor for love. Or the loss thereof. There it sits, an 80% Cotton / 20% Lycra raspberry directed at my fantasy of us. A rumpled affront to
romance. A slightly sweat-stained denim treatise on how it came apart.

How unraveled, I think, like the loose thread on the bottom of my shirt, the one you plucked in a moment of tender chivalry. The one that zipped until half the hem fell out. So kind a thought, a gentle act, yet at the end I sat there half undone. You laughed, put the hem back together with borrowed bits of transparent tape, and then moved on without a further thought. My hem is still undone.

And so the laundry lies there, as unfinished as the arguments between us. Piled up one on another, little discords that left their mark, needing a soak and an extra rinse that they never got. Like the marinara sauce you tried to remove from your sleeve with spit and a paper towel, just to clean up the worst of it. The rest we’ll deal with later. The stain remains. The laundry pile builds up.

Alright, fine. You’ve gone. And yet there you lie. Staring at the pile of you is beginning to make me crazed. Well, us. The pile of us. The laundry. Bah. There is that ache.

I can feel the weight of anger building in my shoulders and the grind between my teeth. It makes me want to take you down to the incinerator in the courtyard and find out what denim smells like when it burns. Except there isn’t an incinerator. Hasn’t been since they knocked down the crumbling brick chimney and fire grate to make room for the horseshoe pit and barbeque. As if somehow their very presence would transform the isolated residents into a community of friends. As if the square of sand and the rebar spike anchored a time warp to some idyllic past. As if the smell of chicken browning on the grill would lead us by our noses, one by one, into a social Eden we have no interest in. Build it and they will come. Or not.

Still, there is the grill. A bag of charcoal, lighter fluid, a match, a pair of tongs. That would suffice. I could roast your t-shirt, flipping it to char equally on either side, butterfly it so as not to leave the center raw. “Bloody in the middle,” that’s how you always ordered steak. I wonder
how you’d like your t-shirt done. Rare, with sautéed mushrooms. Too bad for you, you had your chance, I’m cooking here! We’re having blackened t-shirt on the grill. I can add your jeans, the dress I wore in Vera Cruz, my polo shirt with the taped-up hem. A bonfire might be nice. Maybe some marshmallows on a stick.

But then of course the fire department would come and put you out. Well, not you. It. The laundry fire. Can’t have the burnt remains of our romance polluting other people’s air.

I wonder how long it will be before the ache subsides. How many days before I don’t have to remind myself to unclench my jaw. Before I don’t hate you for going.

Not hate, exactly. It’s more this amorphous mass of feeling that I don’t know how to sort. I tried to pour it all into a bucket labeled “sad,” but some of it slopped out. Anger, sadness, wounded pride, self pity, and oddly enough, relief. It’s like trying to sort the reds from the whites so they don’t run, but it seems there are no solid colors, everything’s a print.

What’s the progression people talk about…denial, anger, sadness? Negotiation before acceptance? Who knows? It’s like the procession of clowns in one of those strange French circuses. A line of oddball creatures with the discipline of silly walks. Each one weird and badly dressed, disturbing in some unequal measure. The disorderly parade of feelings makes me mope, or laugh, or want to rage, but still leaves that lingering unease. That’s the part I will not miss: unease. That need for vigilance, the inability to rest. The sense that somehow, no matter how many times I sort, the whites will come out of the dryer pink.

That’s you, you know. Inside my head. Your blazingly white shirt crisp with extra starch. So buttoned down, I wondered that you didn’t crackle when you moved. Even your oft-washed socks seemed to keep their showroom white. What did you want? What were you looking for in my rumpled, lived-in life? “Relaxed,” I said. “Collapsed,” you teased. But then you laughed, and I let it float on by. That was before the marinara on
your sleeve. Before the creeping not-quite-good-enough.

Alright, then, out you go. No camping in my heart, my chest, my fingertips. Out of that spot behind my ear where your warm breath always gave me shivers! If you won’t leave my head, at least I can evict you from my bedroom floor. In four neat piles. The lights, the darks, the reds, the things that are hand-washed. I’ll just unclench my teeth, ignore the ache, and sort. Your gray t-shirt (as yet ungrilled). Your jeans. My polo shirt (without the tape). My red tank top. Your sweater.

Your heathered sweater. The hand-knit one. I cannot breathe.

Faintly, I hear the voice: “…bag may not inflate. Pull the mask firmly towards you and secure the straps. Air will begin to flow…” I’d ignored the routine lecture, but you poked me, teasing, “Pay attention!” and watched her with such earnest focus. “Because you never know when you might need a source of oxygen.” Your look so stern, so serious, all except your eyes. I hold your sweater to my face, inhale you. Oak moss, some musk, a hint of lime, the rest just you. The scent our Jersey trip left behind. You were right about the oxygen. I need a source: the scent of you and wool and Jersey shore.

The tandem bicycle was your idea. “Front or back? If you want to see you’ll have to steer.” I took the back, content to skim the world on either side, you centered in my eyes. We cruised the boardwalk and down the shoreline, your moss-musk-limey-ness wafting past me in the crisp fall air. I thought we seemed a happy couple, our plans and pedals synchronized. In front of me the knitted cables of your sweater. In front of you the open shore. Your view....

With me not in it.

Well crap. And damn! That hurts. I get it now. The day we rode, I watched your hand-knit back… so close, but ever leaving. And there I was, just tagging on behind. A loose thread waiting to be pulled. A French bouffon in comic garb, my silly walk atop the tandem pedals, my disciplined blindness.
Damn you, laundry! You knew all this and yet you lay there saying nothing? That’s just unkind. I guess the Lycra had it right...a raspberry for my fantasy of us. For the we I thought we were.

Such hopeful ignorance.

It seems there’s no need to let you go as you were never really here. And yet there’s still my heart to wash. Eight gallons (four warm, four cold), some change, and half-cup of Tide.
The Kind of Love I Make Angers God

Michael Hixson
The Kind of Love I Make Angers God
Beneath

*****

Tiara Rea

The procession of clouds passes, as all things do, in time.

Oblivious to us, those wildly fanatic dreamscapes –

distinguishable by the ache, which penetrates through us,

the act of remembering things, the pain of time – return.

Tandem bicycle set aside, we two wait here, beneath.
Marriage Test

James Rodgers

The instructor told us
the truest test of a marriage,
of mutual compatibility,
of love,
is either a tandem bicycle
or a double kayak.
None of us were sure
if he was joking or not,
but considering that
Shena and I
had just picked out
a double kayak
for the paddle over
to a nearby island,
we hoped
he was being funny.
The group set off from shore,
single file at first,
a saltwater procession,
that slowly spread out
across the bay,
meandering towards
our destination.
After a few hours
out on the water,
we returned to the beach,
our relationship
none the worse for wear.
No arguments.
No hard feelings.
No bruises.
Just a dull ache
in my ribcage
where her elbow connected,
her reply
to my suggestion
that this afternoon
we should rent a tandem bike.
**Bircher Street Boys**

Robert Mullins

*With Jeffrey, I never had to size up my worth as a friend.*

**IT WAS** the first Saturday of summer break, and we were at the empty lot next to the abandoned house, playing with our army-man action figures. The lot was at the end of our street, at the opposite end from the cul-de-sac. Jeffrey’s house was about halfway, and my house was where the cul-de-sac started; thirty houses away.

If I had known that Jeffrey was going to act as crazy as he did when the firebombs started flying, I would have left the gasoline at home. I thought it would be more realistic to the battlefield. We were pouring gasoline in the sand, using long spoons to collect the flammable mixture, lighting the saturated mud with matches, and throwing the miniature firebombs at each other’s army-man formations.

Jeffrey got carried away throwing the flaming dirt clods, and a fire broke out in the weeds. Soon, the fire spread beyond our corner of the lot. I tried to put it out, but the weeds were dry, and the fire quickly got out
of control. We needed to get away. I had to knock Jeffrey down and shake him before he would stop.

“Jeffrey, follow me!” I yelled.

We ran fast. We ran past the Tastee Freeze and into the maze of orange grove trees, where we watched the firemen put out the fire. Small by their standards, they were quickly packed up and gone. We didn’t know at the time but, Mrs. McKee—who lived across from the sand lot—witnessed everything she felt it was her duty to phone my father and tell him all about it. She didn’t know Jeffrey, and my dad tried to make me tattle on who was with me but I wouldn’t do it.

Dad wailed on me pretty good with his belt, and for the first time he slapped my face – hard. I knew he was waiting for me to start crying, but I wouldn’t; I was twelve and used to his beatings.

“Enough!” Mom yelled.

Dad went back to his six-pack.

Mom bent down to look at me. I stood there, arms extended to my sides, fists clenched, gasping silently for air. My eyes were tightly shut. I could tell she was getting closer. I knew her face was right up against mine. I could smell her cigarette breath and feel the hot wind coming from her nostrils.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

In that moment, tears poured down my face, and all I could do was shake my head up and down. Mom finally went back into the front room, and I ran out to the backyard and into the shed, where I let out the fury that was in me.

Soon after that fire-filled day, my dad loaded his truck and moved away. I didn’t help him—or say goodbye. Mom told me that she had run the mean old bastard off, and I had better be good from then on or she’d bring him back.
I was extra careful after that, but still found trouble in the usual ways of summer. I’d get caught riding my bike across lawns, hiding newspapers, and taking oranges from the orange grove. By far the worst of it that summer was the crossing over of the witch lady’s wall.

Her name was Mrs. Bircher and she lived at the end of the cul-de-sac. Climbing her wall and walking the length of it was our only short cut to the real world outside of the neighborhood.

That summer would be the final year of the Gilbert School summer camp. The next year the YMCA would be open, and we would go there. The neighborhood moms and Jeffrey’s dad got together and decided that all of us kids would walk to camp this year – after all, they agreed, it was less than a mile away. Most of the kids would go the long way, but not our gang; we would take the shortcut.

“Percy, which way should we go this summer?” Jeffrey asked me.

Jeffrey was small for his age, redheaded, and a bit chubby. His dad dressed him in slacks and a plaid button-up shirt, even though it was summertime. Last summer Jeffrey couldn’t climb the wall, and I’d had to go all the way around just so we could walk together. I hadn’t minded. We were best friends, but now Jeffrey was bigger, and I wanted to take the shortcut.

“Do you want to go over Mrs. Bircher’s wall?” I asked him.

“Are you sure the gang will be groovy with it?” Jeffrey asked, trying to sound cool.

“I’m sure, as long as you can get up there. Have you been practicing?” I asked.

“Yes, on my back wall. It’s almost the same size.”

Just as we reached the wall, several older members of the gang arrived. This was a popular shortcut because of the dangerous trapeze-walk along the top, the hop-down rolling-tumble, and then the adventure
through the alley past the sleeping men. Our reward was that the rest of the way consisted of weaving through the apartments where the pretty girls lived. The girls were fun to talk to, and some of them still wore mini-skirts.

“Are you guys gonna go or not?” Steven yelled.

“You guys go first,” I offered.

“No, no, no, no, NO.” Danny said. “We want to see Jeffrey go.”

“You sure you want to go this way, Jeffrey? I don’t mind walking around,” I whispered.

“Of course I do. Piece of cake.”

“Groovy then. Throw your lunch up there and get going,” I said.

“I’ll be right behind you.”

The lunch toss had to be made with precision or Mrs. Bircher’s dog would get it before you could jump down and climb back up. One time Mr. Biscuit barked so loud that Mrs. Bircher came out with her broom and knocked six boys off the wall and into Mr. Jackson’s backyard.

Mr. Jackson, an odd looking man, was short, hairy, and very round. I guess you could say he was fat and ugly, but my Mom said that wasn’t nice, so we never said it out loud. He always wore sweatpants and smelly, sleeveless white t-shirts. His arms were laced with tattoos. Nobody really knows why, but we were all afraid of him.

“Nice toss, Jeffrey! Now get up on that wall! Remember, no boosts,” Danny said.

The “no boost” rule kept traffic down. Jeffrey finally got up on the wall and lay there a second trying to push back tears. During the climb, he scraped some skin from his underarms and belly. Finally up on his feet, he began the trapeze-walk. Then Steven, then Danny, and then I climbed up on the wall. The four of us began a slow-walking chain-like procession, a trapeze-act the forty or so steps to the drop down, tumble, and the freedom of the alley.
Then it happened. Jeffrey dropped his lunch. Mr. Biscuit, who was silently watching from below, gobbled up the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and left the paper sack littered in the yard. Then Jeffrey fell. On his way down he tried to hold on but fell anyway. The rest of us ran instinctively across the top of the wall, and as we tore by, I glanced back to see that Jeffrey had landed amongst Mrs. Bircher’s prized blue-ribbon roses.

“You guys, we gotta go back,” I begged.

“No way! Jeffrey took the pledge, Percy. He knows if one of us gets caught, you leave the gang out of it and take your punishment,” Danny said.

“I’m going back. Danny, give me a boost.”

“Nope, no boosts, and if you go back, you and Jeffrey are out of the gang.”

I left my sack lunch and flew up the wall. Scraping my knees, I made it to the top.

“Jeffrey, I’m on my way!” I called out.

Mrs. Bircher had been watching through her back door all this time. She rushed to where Jeffrey landed, Mr. Biscuit circling closely, still licking his lips from the peanut butter. With only a gesture, she beckoned me off the wall. I moved, seemingly not of my own accord, because suddenly I was on the ground. Silently, she motioned for me to come closer. I did and she held me until she could wrench Jeffrey out of the roses and stood him up next to me. The moment she touched me, it was like my head was a hot-air balloon, filled with buoyant gasses.

She said nothing, and time stood still. She had coal black eyes, and when I looked into them, I saw myself looking back. Her face looked like crumpled cardboard, her smile black, and her gums dark blue. The stench of her breath was awful. Jeffrey just stood there whimpering in the presence of Mrs. Bircher’s countenance.

Before she could say a word, I pushed Jeffrey in the back and shoved
him toward the wall. We bolted to the top, trapeze-ran to the end, jumped down, tumble-rolled to the alley, dashed past the sleeping men, ran through the apartments where the pretty girls lived, and stood on the sidewalk next to the dairy, directly across from the schoolyard, transfixed by what just happened.

Breathing deeply, Jeffrey leapt off the curb and into the street, the big street, not watching for cars, his eyes fixed on his destination – the opposite sidewalk. The sound of skidding tires was frightening, first one car, then another, and then a big truck began to turn sideways, smoking the tires. I turned away.

I couldn’t help myself and turned back to see Jeffrey pounce across the pavement like a bird in flight. It was like slow motion and then Jeffrey was planted on the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street, at which time he began screaming and screaming until the entire schoolyard ran over to see what was the matter. By this time I had made it safely across the street and slipped in without notice.

Jeffrey had to go home early that day. He sat motionless on the grass waiting for his dad, not uttering a sound. When he arrived in his noisy blue truck with the fancy white shell, Jeffrey’s dad grabbed him up by the arm and threw him in the truck on the driver’s side. We watched in silence as the truck drove away.

“What happened back there, Percy?” Danny asked.

“Forget you, Danny! You just left us there and ran off like a chicken. I’m not telling you anything!”

It was a long first day at camp, and I remained steadfast not saying a thing to Danny or Steven about what happened in Mrs. Bircher’s back yard, even though they asked me at least a dozen times.

The light-headedness from the experience in that backyard slowly dissipated and left me with a dull ache behind my eyes. The walk home took forever; I had to go all the way around past the Circle K and through the alley right by the neighborhood bar where my dad’s truck was parked.
in the back.
I had to make sure Jeffrey was okay; I decided go by his house before going home. Jeffrey’s dad’s truck wasn’t in the driveway. I figured it was safe. Reaching the end of the walk, I tripped over the first step, landing in a heap on Jeffrey’s porch. The door opened, and looking up all I could see were two flared nostrils and one eye staring down at me. It was Jeffrey’s dad’s girlfriend, Susan.

“Percy, don’t you think you caused enough trouble today? We told Jeffrey not to take that stupid path across that crazy lady’s wall, and he went anyway. It’s all your fault. Now get out of here before I tell your mother what you’ve been up to.”

Days went by and no sign of Jeffrey. I watched his house from across the street, hiding in the bushes, but he never came out. That night, when I lay down to sleep, I vowed to myself that I would go to Jeffrey’s house the next day and straighten this whole mess out; it’d been almost two weeks.

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It was dark outside, pre-dawn. I could hear the sounds, but I couldn’t yet see. Perched on the couch, sitting on the high back, I stared into the dizzying mist of the morning. When I pulled the sheer curtains back, the madness unfolded directly in front of my house. A much younger Mrs. Bircher was riding, not a broom, but a tandem bicycle. She was in the front seat peddling with younger, stronger legs in unison with her backseat passenger. Mr. Biscuit rode in the wicker basket, and they emitted a noisy chorus of cackling and barking. It was a song like no other: a screeching witch and a yapping mutt.

She wore a flowery jump suit and a large wide-brimmed derby hat with a ribbon so long that it streamed around and beyond her backseat passenger: a plump-bellied, red-haired boy, about my age, wearing slacks and a plaid shirt.

I could see the boy’s face, but I couldn’t make out the features. Yet I knew it was Jeffrey, I just knew.
I awoke in the morning clutching my pillow, awash in tears but not crying. Late that day, after dinner and before the streetlights came on, I went out to look for him. Just then, Jeffrey, on his old bike with the banana seat, rounded the corner coming in my direction. I stood steely quiet in my driveway, watching. Jeffrey was different; he had a faraway look on his face. He didn’t appear to see me. He rode in circles in front of my house until I went out there to stop him.

“Jeffrey, what are you doing?” I asked.

Jeffrey looked at me as if he had just come out of a trance. Finally, after what seemed like forever, he spoke. “My dad grounded me for a whole two weeks, Percy, it’s been awful. I don’t know why I’m riding this stupid old bike; I felt I had to because of the nightmares. I’m trying to make them go away. Every night I dream that I’m on the back of this strange bicycle with the witch lady and Mr. Biscuit, and every time I try to get off, her ribbon pulls me back. Sometimes it grabs me around the neck and I feel like I’m going to choke, and then I’m back on the seat riding along with her and that crazy dog of hers.”

“I’m having nightmares, too, Jeffrey. We’ve got to find a way to make them stop.”

“What can we do?” he asked.

“I have an idea. Can you come over tomorrow and help me with my paper route? We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

With that familiar loud pop and then the hissing sound, the streetlights came on – that meant we both had exactly five minutes to get home. The next day was a Saturday and the perfect day to enact my plan.

“Meet me here at five-thirty,” I said.
It was dark when I began folding papers. Down at the end of the street – the cul-de-sac end – directly at the base of Mrs. Bircher’s wall, I saw a small cherry-colored ember glowing. I could tell it was the end of a cigarette. I knew it had to be her, lurking in the darkness. If I kept still, I could hear a raspy wheezing sound and a painful muffled coughing.

An hour later, slowly making his way up the driveway – chin to chest – came Jeffrey.

“Where have you been? I’m all done folding, I thought you were going to help me?”

“I’m sorry, Percy. My dad almost wouldn’t let me out of the house,” Jeffrey said.

“We better get going,” I said.

I went the opposite way of my normal route, because I wanted Mrs. Bircher’s circle to be last. Strangely for me, the closer we got to her house, the more nervous I became. It felt like I had a piece of toast stuck down in my throat, it was so dry. We had to finish this wall business. The nightmares were getting more intense. Just as we reached Mrs. Bircher’s driveway, we stopped cold, looking up at the wall.

“Jeffrey, you know what we have to do,” I said. “We have to get up there and finish walking Mrs. Bircher’s wall without falling into her yard. Then, I think the nightmares will stop.”

“I can’t do that. You know my dad will kill me, and what if I fall again?”

“You won’t fall, I’m here to make sure of it,” I said. “Besides, last time you were just nervous–you got this.”

Jeffrey didn’t answer; he put his kickstand down, got off his bike, and exhibited a newfound bravery. He moved toward the wall with the patience of a lit firecracker. Now, it was me that was worried. My mind raced too fast for my thoughts. I forced my mind to go blank, to
concentrate on that wall so this nightmare would be over for both of us. You’ve done this a million times, I told myself. Jeffrey turned to look at me, and without a sound, hurried up the wall. He stood at the top, waiting for me.

I felt panicked. The voice inside me, the one that knew my name but never said it, that tried to convince me that I was worthless, spoke to me in my dad’s voice. *Run home, boy. Run before you screw this up.*

I was frozen. The wall seemed to breathe. Though my head ached, I had to move.

“Here I come. I’m right behind you.”

Jeffrey led the way, but I didn’t mind. I looked down at the top of the wall to keep from falling, causing me to see both sides of the wall at the same time, stitched in a warped panorama that didn’t match up, that blended into one view. I became dizzy.

Moving slowly along in scooching steps, I saw a crack. *That wasn’t there before!* I thought. Jeffrey skipped right over it and disappeared into the safety of the alley. Watching him distracted me, and I fell in silent movie slow motion. I landed on my belly and chin, right on the top of the wall. My chin felt hot when I touched it to see if it was bleeding. I would have screamed right then, but no blood, just searing pain, even worse than the cold slap from my dad.

Trying to stand up was like surfing for the first time. The wall was moving in a rolling wave-like motion, up and down and side to side. I was lying face down on the top with my legs swaying, almost toppling over. I thought for sure I would fall to the ground, but I didn’t.

Finally on my feet, I saw Jeffrey at the opposite end of the wall, scraped and bruised from the climb. My lungs were working harder with every scooching step. A voice strange and distant, my own voice, urged me on. *You can do it. Keep moving. Just a few more steps.*

Seconds later, I was at the end of the wall. After the roll down tumble, and the walk through the alley where the old men slept, Jeffrey and I
finally peeked over at each other. As we parted ways, I turned and leaned toward Jeffrey, and whispered, “Sweet dreams, Jeffrey.”
Rat Race

Sarah Lyn Rogers

Our housecat decimates
a raspberry
while I (hands pruning
in Palmolive foam)
ponder the tameable wild.

Riding past, a pair
atop a tandem bicycle
reads like a commercial
for wrist leashes
taupe upholstery
the champagne-colored cars
prescribed to persons
of reasonable means and intelligence.

We make meaning from this
procession of wants:
the house one can afford,
a tasteful coat of paint—
not what stokes a fire in the mind,
not what a taskless hunter’s craze creates.

I ache
to make something
of substance,
goaded by the knowing glance
of a sweet, primeval
creature in my kitchen,
both of us domesticated;
framed.
Rite of Passage

Candace Butler

A procession of clouds
drives across the sky,
headlights on,
to a funeral of sorts.

A line of nimbuses
crosses the mountain ridge,
one looks like a tandem bicycle
among the cumulus cars.

An icy rain of tears weeps
through the bulging ceiling.
A pan catching those drips
needs dumping by the hour.

I know the dull ache of fingers that
shuck silk collars off corn,
leave the husks in a heap,

let the pan run over.
Jellyfish vs. Pain

Sarah Kayss
Seashells

Mona Dash

THE SEASHELLS jingle in my pocket, different sizes and shapes, some of them still sandy. I have collected them all afternoon, running through the waves to dig out the purple shells wedged in the wet sand; sometimes going farther in the sea to find a rare unbroken one. The sand is still in my hair and the salty sea spray on my lips.

The moment we reach home, Archie and I rush out of the car and get our bikes out from the garage. We can see Nora, Rahul, and the others. Broxbourne road where we live has this green bit at the end, so every evening we play there. We cycle on the wide pavements. It’s good exercise, Dad says.

Now, we cycle down the road to the others.

Rahul’s mum is standing on her driveway with a book. She stands there when Rahul is playing outside with us. His dad sometimes watches from the window.

‘Why do you stand here and watch us?’ I had asked her once.

‘Well, some of these cars are so fast; some people may not be nice. You know, I need to make sure Rahul is safe, you all are safe, I mean.’
That struck me as odd. Mum and Dad don’t worry. Run along and play, they say. As long as we are out of the way so that Mum can enjoy her wine after a hard day’s work and Dad can do his gardening as that relaxes him, they are fine with what we do.

‘I used to play on this road when I was a child. It was perfectly safe then, perfectly safe now,’ Dad said when I told him about Rahul’s mum.

‘Look Nora!’ I shout, ‘I’m doing ballet on my bike.’ I am lying flat on the bike, my hair streaming behind me, my tummy flat, my hands outstretched. I am a mermaid.

‘I can do that as well,’ she says. I know she can’t. She has a purple bike which is fast, but she is much bigger and taller than me. She can’t balance as well. I sit up and pedal fast; after a while, when the bike is well in motion, I once again lie flat across it.

‘Ballet on my bike, that I really like,’ I sing.

I stop at Rahul’s mum, get off gracefully, and bow.

‘Well done, Isabelle! You cycle so well! Rahul, did you just see what Isabelle did? Why don’t you try cycling without your stabilisers at least?’

Rahul is on his blue scooter and I notice his mother’s eyebrows crease when he almost stumbles.

There’s a sudden movement in the upstairs window. Rahul’s dad is sitting at his desk, watching us. We see him there sometimes, working on his computer and looking out of the window at us. Just today in the car, Mum said they sometimes travelled together on the same train to London.

‘He’s quite a charming man,’ she told Dad.

‘Really,’ Dad was driving.

‘Yes, was asking me about everyone. He’s quite new, isn’t he? Very handsome really.’

‘Nora says he’s the most handsome man she’s seen. But me, I still like Justin Beiber,’ I’d said.

‘Hmmm, Nora finds Rahul’s dad handsome? You stick with Justin
Beiber, Isabelle,’ Dad had laughed.

Rahul’s dad always smiles at Nora, but doesn’t always notice me. Even as I think this, I realise he’s waving at me. I look away; surely he hasn’t read my thoughts!

‘I went to the beach today,’ I tell Rahul’s mum.

‘Really, which one?’ she asks.

‘I don’t know. It was quite far.’ Mum and Dad just said beach and that’s all we know. But she likes to tell Rahul every bit of information. When he came back from holiday, he said, ‘We had been to California. It’s in another country called America. It is on the west coast.’ He knows every small thing.

‘Was it a pebbly beach?’

‘No, sandy. Very sandy.’ I think of the sand castle I made. It was massive, but then Archie sat on it and broke all of it. He’s five but acts like he’s two. No one told him off; they just said I could make another one.

‘Look, I am still wearing my swim suit.’ I lift my top up to show her.

‘Nice,’ she says absentmindedly.

‘I am also wearing the bottoms.’ I love my very first pink-with-white-dots bikini. Mum wouldn’t let me buy it, but I had seen Nora’s. A lot of tears, a lot of please can I, and finally Mum had agreed to buy it for me.

‘That’s nice.’ She is looking at her phone now and typing into it.

‘I like your top,’ I tell her. She is wearing a sleeveless lime green top. Her arms are shining and brown. She looks like a child, just a little taller than me.

‘Really? Thank you.’ She looks up from her phone. She is always so happy when I tell her something nice. Maybe no one else does.

‘I like your hair up like that.’

‘Thank you, Isabelle. You are such a kind girl.’

‘I wanted to do my hair up in beads like the girl next to us on the beach. But Mum didn’t let me.’

‘But your hair looks good enough like this; and maybe Mum thought
they would be too hard to take off?’

‘Still, I really wanted it.’

‘Why don’t you go and play along with the others?’ she says.

‘OK.’ And just as I am leaving, she calls out: ‘And that’s such a pretty skirt you are wearing!’

‘It’s my favourite!’ It’s black with red and pink flowers and puffs out like a ballerina’s.

Nora is playing with the boys. They have borrowed Rahul’s light sabres and are walking in a procession, pretending to be Jedis and Padavans.

‘Swoosh,’ says Nora flashing her green sabre.

‘Flick,’ says Peter flashing his blue sabre.

‘That’s not the sound Yoda’s light sabre makes,’ Rahul protests.

‘It is,’ Peter says.

‘No it isn’t.’

‘It is, Rahul. Peter knows these things,’ Alex says. They are brothers and always team up.

‘It’s not. I know, as it’s my light sabre. And I have seen the movies.’ I think Rahul is right.

Archie is cycling ‘round the close. He doesn’t like these made up games and even I don’t really. I go back to Rahul’s mum.

‘Can I get a drink, please?’

‘Sure. What would you like to have?’

I want a fruit shoot. Earlier she used to have fruit shoots on the kitchen counter. Archie and I love fruit shoots, but we don’t have any at home.

‘Can I come in to get the drink?’

‘Of course,’ I follow her into the kitchen.

‘What would you like to have,’ she asks again, ‘some water, squash?’

‘Can I have a fruit shoot?’

‘Oh, I don’t have any.’ She looks worried. I settle for some water. She chooses a pink glass for me. She has glasses in every colour.

Just then there is a loud shout: ‘Mummy, Mummy!’
Just then there is a loud shout: ‘Mummy, Mummy!’

‘Rahul! I knew he shouldn’t be playing outside. Are you all right?’ She runs out, leaving the glass there.

I go to the door. Nothing has happened. The boys have had a fight possibly. But Rahul’s mum looks panicked and is explaining something to Peter. Maybe Alex has whacked him with the light sabre. They are always fighting. I go back inside to fill my glass.

‘Hello there!’ a voice says.

I jump. It’s Rahul’s dad, but I hadn’t heard him come downstairs. He looks different from Rahul and his mum. Of course he isn’t really Rahul’s dad. Rahul’s dad died some years back. His mum found him a new dad finally. But Rahul says he doesn’t always like him.

‘Hello,’ I say.

‘You aren’t playing with the others?’

‘I just came to get a drink. Am a bit tired today.’

‘You should be in bed then.’

‘It’s too early for bed! I went to the beach today.’

‘Nice day to be at the beach. Did you swim in the sea?’

‘Yes, I did. I haven’t even changed out of my costume!’

He smiles at me and then opens the fridge. ‘Now, let’s see, what can a man get?’

I notice a strange instrument on the kitchen counter. It’s made of wood and has a few holes along one side of it. I pick it up, wondering what’s done with it.

‘That’s a flute,’ he says. ‘I got it for Rahul yesterday.’ He puts it to his mouth, and suddenly a low tune comes out of it.

‘Amazing,’ I say.

‘Do you like it? You can have a go.’ He hands it to me, but when I try, nothing happens. Not the tiniest sound.

He is standing there smiling at me, his head to one side, looking quite amused.
‘I may have another one of those actually. Let me think…I may have a spare,’ he says.

Nora had said he used to be a musician and made music all day. He played on the drums. He walks towards the stairs, and I stand there looking up. I love their house. We are never told off even when we make a mess. I like their garden. It has a hill on one end that we love to run down. They have nice pictures on the walls. There’s one of all of them, even his dad, in Indian clothes, so shiny and colourful. Someday I will ask if I can see his mum’s Indian clothes.

‘There it is,’ he says from somewhere upstairs. ‘Come on up, I will show you.’

I go upstairs. He is in Rahul’s room, holding out a flute, only this one is red.

‘Thanks,’ I say, and then feeling brave, I ask, ‘Can I play Rahul’s guitar?’ Rahul shares most of his toys with us, but he doesn’t let us touch the guitar. We all want to have a go on it, but we are not allowed as he is sure we will break it. He got it for his birthday.

He is smiling and he does look very handsome, his hair all in curls. ‘Of course you can. There it is.’

The guitar is standing on a small stand in the corner. When I play it, sitting on the carpet, my fingers just running along the strings, music fills the room. It’s so quiet here, and I hear nothing but the steady strum of the strings. I hope Mum and Dad buy me a guitar this Christmas.

‘You play well,’ he says, sitting down next to me. ‘Let me show you something.’ He takes the guitar from me and moves his fingers along the strings. Trnnn, trnnnnnn, they sound, and he shuts his eyes and keeps playing. ‘Do you know this song?’ he asks, his eyes closed. I don’t know the words, but it sounds beautiful. Rahul’s dad looks like he is from a magazine, not like my daddy, plump and cuddly.

After a while, he opens his eyes and still moving his fingers on the
strings, asks ‘And what’s this?’ It’s the tattoo on my arm; a big butterfly, glittery and purple. Archie got a green frog.

‘I got it at the beach today. It’s a butterfly. I wanted another one, but Mum said no. I wanted a fairy…’

‘Where would you have had that?’

‘Oh, on my back.’ I don’t know why I say that as I hadn’t thought where to have it. Mum said we could have only one tattoo each.

‘Like here?’ he asks, running his fingers along my back.’ That would have been really nice.’ I can feel his fingers stop on my swimming top.

‘Your swimming costume?’

‘I am still wearing it,’ I smile, lifting my top up a little.

‘Let’s see.’ He lifts my top completely off me. ‘Nice, really nice.’

The seashells fall out of my pocket. There’s sand on the clean cream carpet.

‘Oh sorry,’ I say. I try hastily to collect them.

‘Don’t worry, don’t worry. Just collect them later.’

‘There’s sand everywhere now.’

‘That doesn’t matter. We can clean it up later, can’t we?’ He speaks real soft. I see that the door of Rahul’s room is shut. He must have shut it. I haven’t noticed when.

‘Where did she find him?’ Mum had asked once, watching Rahul’s mum and dad cycle down the road on their tandem bike. Mum found it funny.

‘At their age?’ she had giggled.

‘That’s so cool, Mum.’ I’d said.

‘Nice bloke,’ said Dad.

‘You think everyone is nice. We hardly know him.’ Mum had said. But now, even Mum found him charming.

He runs his finger along the inside of my swimming top, all ‘round my chest.
‘Flat, quite flat, how old are you?’
‘Nine. Nora is ten.’

‘Nora, yes, Nora. I know her.’ His eyes are blue, but nothing like the sea’s blue. ‘She is ten, isn’t she? Tattoos, seashells, swimming costume, whatever next! Any more shells in your pocket?’ He ruffles my hair.

‘No.’ I know I must run, but I don’t know how.

‘Let’s play a game. Let’s check if there are any more shells hiding on you. Any here?’ He runs his fingers inside my pocket. Then along my legs. It’s ticklish. ‘Here?’ Inside my swimming bottoms, at the back, at the front. Suddenly his fingers go into me. I feel it somewhere; it’s sharp, sudden. Is there a hole in me? Once in the changing rooms at swimming, Nora had asked me to inspect her. We must know how we look, she’d said. But we hadn’t seen any holes.

He lays me down now. ‘There you go. Now I can search better. Carefully. Nice, really nice.’ I am resting against Rahul’s big soft lion; he had won it in Chessington. Its mane is soft. ‘Now let’s see if you have been a good girl?’ He pushes his finger into my bottom almost turning me. ‘Let’s see…let’s see, yes, you are a clean, tidy girl. Nice, nice.’ And then once again, his fingers into my front. It hurts. When he takes it out I see his finger is red. I feel something drip. He looks around and reaches out to wipe it on the lion, but then wipes it on my skirt. ‘Red flowers. That’s nice. Nice skirt.’

Somewhere far away I hear a bell ring. The ice cream van. Sometimes Rahul’s mum buys us ice cream.

I hear Rahul’s mum. ‘Isabelle? Isabelle? Your daddy is here!’
He immediately stands up. He opens the door quickly. ‘Darling, one of them is here upstairs.’ He disappears from the room. I get up. Collect my shells. I leave the flute.

‘Isabelle?’ Rahul’s mum is at the stairs looking up. ‘Are you there?’
Then I hear her tell Dad, ‘I am sorry; I didn’t know she was upstairs. I thought she had gone home. Rahul screamed, and I panicked.'
There was this car…it was so fast. Poor Alex got a scare, he was right in front of it. Rahul shouted, so I had run out to check…forgot about Isabelle….’

‘That’s not a problem, don’t worry.’ Dad is standing just outside the door. ‘What would you like, Isabelle? The van is about to leave.’

‘She will have a fruit pastille, I am sure,’ Rahul’s mum trills. ‘Archie, a whippy with a single Flake. Nora a Fab lolly, and Rahul a twister!’

I nod in agreement. I want him to go to the van; I don’t want him to ask me anything else.

The little procession of Jedis is standing across the driveway, holding ice creams in various colours. Rahul’s mum gives them some tissues, fusses over them.

I don’t say anything as I walk past.

‘Bye, Isabelle! See you later,’ she calls out.

I feel something hurt, a dull ache somewhere inside. My skirt is black and red. The spots don’t show.

The shells still jingle in my pocket. I know I have left behind the most beautiful, whole shell I had found deep in the waves.

The oceans fall and rise, the waves restless near the shore; deep in the depths, the ocean’s kingdom is perfect. And sometimes, when the moon wills it, the tides rise and throw away their secrets; the shells break, crushed by the sea, purple and pink bits slowly eroding into the sand. Then everything continues as before.
Jellyfish vs. Pain

*****

Sarah Kayss
The garage door inches open on me, painting the frame of the old bike I begged from my cousin, navy blue to match the fenders I purchased from Sears Roebuck and the pneumatic tires—I who never bought anything and didn’t really want a bicycle to ride. Why did I ache for one then at age 10?

Our road, as my mother pointed out, was too dangerous, and the roads behind went nowhere. But her father wouldn’t allow her one, so she wouldn’t deny me like that, especially when the cousin was her sister’s daughter. That cousin was pregnant by age 17 and never went anywhere.

The bike went on all my moves, as I got out of Canton, and a procession of Ohio cities: Columbus, Vermillion, Oberlin, Cleveland, Findlay, then on to Rochester, Boston, and back to Ohio where my city planner friend returned, too, decades later, with a job promoting our path for bikes, and mine sits in storage, as it always has.

Committed to green, my friend is, as I am, still forty years of my life with a bike I never rode, and wondered about till now, reading Susan B. Anthony, who said the bike “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world… gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance.”
I never needed a mountain, racing, touring bike, or cruiser, though I dreamed of a tandem so I could ride and sing, “Give me your answer, do,” but loyally stuck with what I had, though I never named it, like Willard, who named her bike “Gladys” because it gladdened her the way the bikes of my life have gladdened me, propped in my garages, ready if I ever needed them, come gas shortage or no, and I could see myself, as Anthony saw such girls as me: “the picture of free, untrammeled womanhood.”
What was that oddly comic-sounding Italian phrase on Story Corp where a woman had fled Mussolini in Turin as a child with her family because the bombing had been so intense that people trembled and shouted a litany that sounded like tissue’s praise song for our nose?

Ora pro nobis, ora pro nobis. Pray for us. Pray for us.

Trembling, then joining the swelling procession on roads out of the city, abandoning the royal ice depots of Porta Palazzo and the Gateway to Infinity at La Fontana Angelica on Piazza Solferino where alchemists in black hoods once stood,

where she had eaten stuzzichini and silky panna cottas before joining the procession swelling on the roads out of the city, in her case astraddle tandem bicycles because her mother couldn’t ride by herself. Not funny but the kind of galgenhumor that Germans would come to appreciate when SS Commander Heinrich Himmler issued
an order making it criminal to name any domesticated animal ‘Adolf.’ Did he ever catch Charlîe Chaplin as Adenoid Hynkel?

For a few glorious moments the grim ache of the reality of the pressing situation fades as dopamine floods the mind.

Reveling in sheer absurdity to keep from crying out aghast at the brute ignorant forces that gain from building mortars.

There’s another phrase in Italian that embodies this impulse: *Una risata vi seppellirà.* It will be a laugh that buries you.
And He Grew Too Fast

Ted Van Deventer
“HOW old was she when she passed?”
“Twenty-eight.”
“That’s about right. And how old were you?”
“Twenty-nine.”
“And how old are you now?”
“Forty-five, almost.”
“So it’s just been the two of you for fifteen years? That’s a long time.”
“Not long enough.”

When he was a boy of seven, his father brought him to Chicago on a week-long trip. Visitors from the outside, two men figuring out the puzzle of city lain before them. Upon his father’s shoulders, he watched the lines of traffic sit at a standstill as the two of them made progress through the streets, one block at a time. The world was on pause, the boy and the man the only hint of motion in view. A height of eight feet, three inches made them nearly invincible, a monster with the power to stop the
world with a single glance.

The railway above the boy’s head shrieked as a train closed in on its stop. From what he could tell, the railways were the easiest method of travel throughout the city. They hardly stopped and could travel the expanse of the city without bothering the passengers to drive themselves. The motion above him and the lack thereof to his right was a curious sight to him.

“Do you think Mom would’ve liked it here?” he asked, pulling lightly on his father’s arm.

The man smiled. “I think so. I always wanted to bring her here, but I never got the chance.”

The boy could always sense his father’s longing when he spoke of her. “Do you think it was my fault?”

They stopped. His father’s arms went into the boy’s armpits and carried him effortlessly to the sidewalk. The man kneeled and looked at the boy with concern. “Why would you ask that?” he asked sternly.

The child was confused by the question. He thought the reason was obvious. “Because she died right after I was born.”

“Son,” the man searched for words that were now lost to him. “I... she was sick when you were born. That wasn’t your fault. It’s just how it happened.”

“Okay.”

“There’s nothing anyone could’ve done. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. Not mine, not hers, and certainly not yours. You don’t really think it was your fault, do you?”

The boy, uncertain, shook his head.

“Good.”

From behind the man, a high-pitched bicycle horn squeaked its way into their conversation. The two of them watched as a procession of cyclists made their way from around a street corner, passing by the cars on the road. Riders came in a wide variety, from young, single riders to
tandem cyclists to old men on penny-farthings. They came dressed in unique attire, from ponchos and sombreros to bare chests and fake afros. They followed no rules.

Seeing them pass through the streets, the boy realized he was wrong about the modes of travel in the city. Rail was now second best. Sure, it was still fast, but these cycles could move wherever they wanted without regard to traffic. They could even travel in packs if they chose. “We should do that, Dad.”

The man looked back at his son and stood up, holding the boy’s hand. “When you’re old enough.”

“How old is that?”

“Old enough.” The man turned the boy around, placed his hands under the boy’s arms, and lifted him back onto his shoulders. Once in place, the boy’s hands lifted out to the sides like an airplane, letting his father do the work. He was flying.

He thought he had become an expert on noticing the signs. But, amongst the traits of stubbornness, curiosity, and high cheek bones that the boy had inherited from his mother, there also came one of enduring pain without saying anything. Still, how could he miss the signs? The boy had occasionally complained of stomach pain, sure, and everyone got nosebleeds from time to time. Maybe it had just been too long since he’d seen the signs from the boy’s mother. Maybe the last decade of the man’s life, spent sipping coffee over boardroom meetings talking about quarterly projections and business reviews, had dulled him to the point that even his personal life was brought down. Maybe the boy wasn’t telling his father exactly how much pain there really was. Or maybe he recognized every last bit of it, but pushed it to the side because he didn’t want it to be real.

Yet here they were.

“About six months,” said the doctor, “with treatment. We recommend
both radiation and chemotherapy.” He paused to gauge the reaction of the patient and the father. The boy didn’t flinch, as though it hadn’t sunk in yet. And the father hadn’t blinked in minutes. With no objections raised, he continued cautiously. “There are two basic types of lymphoma, with subsets below each one. What we’re looking at is Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Typically, this particular disease doesn’t require radiation, but given the advanced stage, and the fact that the disease has already spread to the liver and bone marrow, we recommend going full force in order to prolong the fight.”

From his chair next to his son’s table, the man leaned into his palms, placed in front of him as if praying. He wasn’t crying, but his face was turning blood red, warm with the rage that was seething beneath his collar.

The boy watched the look on the doctor’s face. For all of the years that doctors trained in medical school, there were never enough classes on how to deliver a death sentence; the doctor’s grimace showed as much. “My mother died from Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

The doctor was somewhat taken aback at how matter-of-fact the boy stated this. It was almost as if he had been waiting for the prognosis himself for a long time. Leaning toward the boy’s father, he asked in a whispered voice, “How old was she when she passed?”

The man lifted his eyes from the daze they were in to meet the doctors’. He breathed in deeply. “Twenty-eight.”

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Above the dinner table in the dining room came a half-light from a bulb struggling to do its job. The man and the boy sat at opposite ends of the table, plates of spaghetti and meatballs sitting in front of them. Both of them twirled the noodles around without eating. If they ate another meal, it would mean that there would be one fewer that they would have together.
The boy, wearing a gray knit cap, dropped his fork to his plate. Looking at his father, he said, without provocation, “I don’t want to do the treatments anymore.”

The man stopped twirling his food and quivered. He met his son’s gaze. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t want them anymore. They’re not doing me any good.”

The man shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re just hungry. Eat your food.” He gestured toward it by pointing his fork.

“I do know what I’m talking about.”

“No, you don’t!” He hadn’t intended to yell, but that was how the words came. He spoke lower, “Every treatment is giving you more time here. You can’t just give up.”

The boy raised his hand to his head and removed his cap. Where he once had a mane of golden-brown hair, the crown of his head was bald and white, nearly translucent, with veins visible even in the dim light. His skinny fingers dropped the cap on the table. “I’m dead either way.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“It’s true. Even with the treatment, I have about three months left.”

The man was shaking, trying not to lose control. “Three long months. Three months. No less, you hear me?”

The boy shook his head. “I’m sick of being sick. I just want to go on my own terms.” He gave a concerned look to his father, narrowing what would’ve been his eyebrows if he still had them. “I just need to know that you’ll be okay. Will you?”

It took a moment for the question to sink in. He had spent so much time thinking about his son, he hadn’t given much thought to his own wellbeing. “I don’t know.”

“I need to know, Dad. Tell me, yes or no?”

The man felt like he was being interrogated. He could feel himself turning red. “I don’t want to lie to you.”
Realizing he wasn’t going to get an answer, the boy turned back to his food. He stabbed a meatball and took a bite. With his mouth full, “Do you ever think about Chicago?”

His father was still in a daze. “What?”

“Chicago? The bike ride?” The boy swallowed his food. “Think I’m old enough now?”

“Let’s go over the route one more time,” said the man, holding a map in his hands. The two were surrounded by other cyclists, all about to start a similar trip. In front of them waved a sign for a charity sponsoring the bike ride.

“I think I’ve got it, Dad.”

“Are you sure?”

The boy hopped on the second seat of the tandem bicycle. “I think we just follow the people in front of us, right?”

The man shook his head. “How did you still manage to get your mother’s sarcasm when I was the one that raised you?” Something to the right of them had caught the man’s eye, and he tried to follow it nonchalantly.

“Good genes, I guess.” The boy saw that his father’s focus was diverted. He was looking at a woman in a black riding jersey with white polka dots. She was talking to the strangers around her with a big smile on her face. “She’s pretty,” said the boy. “You should talk to her.”

He knew he had been caught. “How do you always know what I’m looking at?”

The boy shrugged. “I guess I get some good genes from you, too.” He saw a sideways smile crack on his father’s face. “Seriously, go talk to her.”

“I’ve got other things on my mind right now.”

Leaning back on the bike, the boy said, “Don’t let me get in your way.”

The man groaned as he looked at a digital clock displaying a countdown near the starting line. They had less than a minute. “All right,” said the
man, “last chance. You sure you’re up for the twenty mile? We can still do the five.”

With the crowd growing louder as the timer closed in on zero, the boy had to yell. “We’re doing twenty, Dad. We’re warriors.”

Bystanders began counting down from ten. The two felt as if they were on a stage, actors about to endure their last performance on Broadway. The shouts mixed in with catcalls, screams, whistles. They only knew to go when the cycle in front of them started.

Working together, the pedals were moving with ease. They were a team, working in unison toward a common goal, their only enemy the exhaustion that would eventually settle in. But for the time being, they moved through the streets with leisure, dropping back in the race due to their inexperience and the awkwardness of their machine. They weren’t concerned with speed, only with finishing.

Through the grid of downtown Chicago they paced, navigating turn after turn by following the procession of bikers ahead of them. They felt like racecar drivers that were drafting behind their predecessors, letting the speed of others do their work. The people of the city watched them as they swept through, entranced by the weightlessness of it all. Once they made it past the five mile marker, they knew they had accomplished something real.

They rode for what felt like hours before the drag really set in. They had made their way toward the back of the pack now, a scattering of cyclists filled in vacancies on the city streets, moving at their own leisurely pace. It was at mile twelve that the man could feel the weight.

“Are you okay?” asked the man, looking back over his shoulder. “Can you finish?”

The pedaling had worn the boy’s joints. An ache had set in like he hadn’t felt since he had his bone marrow drawn. The feeling of a needle piercing his hip bone stuck out in his mind. Trying to find breath, he managed an answer. “No.”
The man looked at the vast, empty road in front of him. It was laid out especially for them, and he wasn’t about to turn it away. “Let me carry you.”

When his son’s feet left the pedals, the man realized that he was at a disadvantage. The rear seat gives the power, and he was now without it. He was going to have to manage to pull the weight of both of them by his lonesome.

The boy released his arms into the air like the wings of a plane. With wind blowing against him, he closed his eyes to better imagine his flight. He was letting his father take control, letting his father lead him as he had always done. Toward safety, home. He leaned forward, lowering his head and placing his right hand on the bike’s handle, his left on his father’s shoulder.

The man felt his son’s hand upon his shoulder, and it hit him that he wouldn’t have that touch for much longer. Thus, he had a big decision in front of him. The route called for them to turn left, south, toward the finish line. Or, they could continue straight, break free from the pack, head west through the suburbs, fight traffic as a two-man team, make their way through miles and miles of Illinois to debate whether to continue only to breeze their way through the windblown cornstalks of Iowa and Nebraska, making pit stops in Des Moines and Omaha to see the local fare, to check out a local diner, to prove to complete strangers that it matters that they exist, and shout to the farmers that “this is not our end,” so they could hop back on the bike and endure the bitter cold of Colorado and Utah and fight, fight, fight, their way to the top of each mountain they faced just for the sole purpose of coasting, flying down the other side where they would encounter the heat of the Nevada desert, face the loneliness of the expanse of nothing together until they would meet the sandy beaches of California to ponder at the beauty of it all before they would turn around, head east through the south until one day they would stop and end it all not because they were defeated but because
this would be how they had chosen to go: father and son together until the bitter end, until the lightness of air called them home.

At the finish line, the pair crossed slowly and felt a warm greeting from a gathered audience. Hopping off the bike, the two embraced, the man careful not to squeeze too tightly around the boy’s fragile frame. The boy was still exhausted, drinking quickly from his water bottle until it was empty.

They wheeled their bike to the side of a nearby building where the man took a seat to rest his aching muscles. The boy stood above him, shaking the empty bottle. “I’m going to go get a refill. Do you want anything?”

The man shook his head. He watched his son walk away, nearly entering a crowd before turning and shouting, “You’re going to be okay!”

He thought he saw his son’s eyes glance at something above him, but before he could look, he heard a voice say, “Is that your boy?” He glanced up to see the sun creating an eclipse around the figure of a woman in a black polka-dotted rider’s jersey.

The man smiled.
On the Death of Their Parents

Jennifer Strawson

When their parents died
they would not risk the hearse.
Instead, they hauled the tandem bicycle
from the garage.

It had been bought for a different time,
Tuscan sunsets, tagliatelle hills,
the ecstasy of crickets.

With a bucket of soapy water,
they cleaned the metal until it
reflected back their own surprise,
tied silky black ribbons from the handle bars.

The funeral procession took place at midday,
the two adolescents, late, pounding against ancient cogs,
 bobbed up and down like black-suited meerkats
as they ascended the final hill to the crematorium.

After the funeral
they returned home in silence,
let the tarmac do the talking.

Together they lifted the bicycle across
the threshold of their forefathers,
leaning its massive hulk against
the kitchen counter.
Days later the Ache presented itself.
They put it down to the motion of cycling,
the lack of exercise,
the disuse of muscle.

But it rose from the muscle beds,
sliding unnoticed into the capillaries;
it climbed the step ladder of vertebrae
to the heart.

It was warm in the chambers and so
from its heavy pockets the Ache took
a ball of yarn and began to knit a scarf
that has no end,

wool soft as yearning,
black as nostalgia,
the constant clicking of needles
sounding something like grief.
Fred aches to pedal up the hill
while Ruth lags behind. Enjoying
the autumn roar in her ashen hair,
Ruth smiles in the stained glass sunlight
of burnt and golden leaves. Ahead,
Fred pilots onward, churning and pumping
his pistons to turn the gears. He muses on
the simple machinery of a bicycle while the
procession of his nerves and muscles read like
a NASA schematic. Ruth’s childish laughter
reaches his ears from somewhere behind
as he stands on the pedals to reach the hill’s crest.

For a moment, they are both at once uphill
and downhill, leeward and wayward, the precipice
of plummeting.

Ruth’s added weight that had made the climb
so arduous, suddenly propels them both forward
in tandem, bicycle and soul.
“HEY MAN, while you’re up, can you get me more coffee? You make the best coffee. You know that, don’t you?”

Jay knew. He picked up Matt’s cup and limped into the kitchen. He should be the one getting served. The ache in his right leg was such a constant companion that he was thinking of giving it a name. Maybe if he pretended the ache was a person, he could ignore it and it would go away. Matt was even worse off. His hands were swollen with burns and sometimes he didn’t breathe so well. What a pair—neither of them halfway through their sixth decade and both as creaky as old men.

The coffee was good. That much was certain—about the only certain thing in Jay’s life these days, especially since Matt had come to stay. Three weeks ago.


And still no sign of him leaving—or coming up with any money to pay for the coffee he consumed by the mugful whenever Jay made it—and Jay made it a lot because he pretty much lived on coffee, cigarettes, the occasional meal, and in the evenings, beer. And now Matt did too.
“Here.”

Jay put the mug on the plastic outdoor table at Matt’s elbow. He turned away before he had to look too closely at Matt’s hands. The bandages had come off a few days ago. The doctor said air was good for the burns, but Jay wished the bandages could have stayed on longer—like until Matt left. He still didn’t know what happened. Matt showed up at his door, said something about an accident, asked if he could stay.


“Thanks, man.”

One thing Jay could say for Matt. He always said thank you. He never offered to pay expenses or told Jay when he was leaving, but Jay couldn’t fault his manners. His mother must have taught him something. She just left out the bit about paying your way.

“Remember the time Janice got so drunk we had to put a seatbelt on her so she wouldn’t jump out of the car?” Matt asked.

They did a lot of remembering when they were together. Maybe it wasn’t healthy, but the old days were a hell of a lot more interesting than the new days. New days. That’s a laugh. They were old men talking about old days when they were young men.

Fucking twisted.

“Those were the days when we never wore seat belts,” Jay said as he took another gulp of coffee. “Remember? If you got into a car and put on a seat belt the driver’d look at you and ask how come you didn’t trust his driving.”

“Yeah. Janice fought like a banshee. I had a scratch across my cheek that took weeks to heal. She was something.”

The two men went quiet, both trawling through memories of the lovely Janice who bedded both of them, although not at the same time. Things weren’t quite so loose in those days—not like now when there was no end to what bodies got up to with each other.

“Shame about Janice.”
“Five years ago wasn’t it? I heard she looked awful rough by the end.”
“Cancer. Yeah.”
“Yeah.”

At least he’d escaped cancer—so far. Probably it was coming his way any year now. He smoked a pack a day when he could afford to and couldn’t walk up stairs without wheezing. And Matt was worse. Jay looked over at his friend who was drinking his coffee and gazing out at the brown grass in the back yard. His hair was already sparse and white—wisps now where there used to be thick black hanks that grazed his shoulders and made him look like a Renaissance prince or something—at least from a distance. The face that had once been sharp planes and smooth skin now looked like porridge studded with mashed blueberries. Too much drink, too many cigarettes, too much pain. Since when was 64 old? Jay’s father had lived to 93 and walked two miles every day until a few months before he died. He never drank or smoked or did much of anything that brought him joy—or anyone else, including Jay’s mother. He’d been a right old bastard. But he’d been a bloody healthy one.

“You seein’ the doc today?” Jay asked.
“Nah. Next week.”
“I’ll be walkin’ into town later. Groceries.”
“Great.”
“You want anything?”
“Whatever you’re havin’s good. Thanks, man.” Matt smiled, then coughed and sputtered for a good minute before he caught his breath and took a gulp of coffee. “Bad one.”
“Yeah.”
“I’m off then. You okay here?”
“Fine. I got the paper. Might go for a walk.”
“Good idea.” Jay wanted to add that Matt might consider a walk to the bus stop to buy a ticket out of town, but of course he didn’t.
“Still got that friend staying with you?” Sandra at the checkout was kind of a nosy bitch, but she was one of the few people Jay had met since moving to the town after his father died, leaving him with just enough of an inheritance to buy a small house in a small town with some left over to live on if he was real careful.

“Yeah.”

Sandra slid through a few packages of hamburger meat and a big plastic bag of macaroni, then plunked a handful of onions on the scale. “How long’s it been?”

“Three weeks.”

“Long time.”

“Yeah.”

Sandra rolled her eyes, shrugged thick shoulders. She had spiky hair the color of old sticks and looked a few years younger than Jay. Sometimes Jay wondered if she was sort of flirting with him. Unlikely. He was no prize. Mind you, she wasn’t either. And she was nice enough—good sense of humour and a smile that hinted at beauty when she was young.

Well, they’d all looked good when they were young.

“You gonna ask him to leave? I would if it was me. You’ve said before he’s not payin’ his way. Seems kind of mean.” She dragged through a mesh bag of potatoes and then heaved them into a bag. “You’re not made of money.”

“Who is?”

“True enough. You want your milk in a bag?”

“Yeah.”

“OK. That’ll be $59.20. Debit?”

“Cash.”

She took the three twenties without comment, although Jay knew she was curious. He never paid cash.

He took his change. A flash of guilt made the coins feel hot in his hand.
"Rob a bank?"
"Nah. Thanks, Sandra. See you next week."
"I'll be here."

Jay picked up the four plastic bags and limped out of the store. As usual, he'd forgotten to bring shopping bags and had to pay extra for the plastic ones. He remembered when he was a kid and all the bags were big brown paper ones. They used the paper to cover their school textbooks back in the days when he and Matt roamed the halls, looking for ways to skip class and score another lid of pot.

Matt was still sitting on the porch when Jay got back. He'd finished his coffee but other than that, it didn't look like he'd done more than wiggle his big butt in the hard plastic chair. Jay brought out two beers and put them on the plastic table.

"Sun over the yard arm?" he asked.

Matt smiled at the old joke. When they were just out of high school, they'd crewed on a sailboat in the Caribbean for six months. It had been gruelling work, and they'd hated every minute of it. But when they talked about the days hauling wet lines, sleeping next to the one stinking toilet, eating stale biscuits soaked in rum, drinking beers as the sun sank, they agreed it had been the best six months of their lives.

Certainly better than now.

"Remember when we got real stoned and took your little brother on that tandem bicycle of my dad's?" Matt asked. "What an old wreck!"

"Yeah. But Dad loved that bike. He said he got it when he was a teenager during the war or something."

"Then we went and crashed it into the ravine."

"How many stitches did your brother need?"

"Forty, give or take."

"I remember meetin' your mom in Emergency. She sure was pissed at you."

Jay grimaced. He still remembered the smash of his father's fist into
his jaw. “It was bad. But stupid little Timmy should have known enough to stay still and hang on instead of squirming around and throwing us off balance.”

“Where is he these days?”

“Back east, I think. We lost touch.”

“Shame.”

“I don’t miss him.”

“I guess.” Matt went quiet and Jay knew he was thinking about the woman who threw him out three weeks before. He said Marsha needed to get over herself before she’d let him come back.

Marsha was taking her sweet time getting over herself.

Afternoon leached into early evening and then sunset when the mosquitoes dive-bombed and the men abandoned the porch for the kitchen. Jay made a big batch of what his mom used to call Sloppy Joes and Jay called hamburger with stuff in it. Matt gobbled it up, smacked his lips, and didn’t forget to say thank you.

“I’m gonna call Marsha tonight.”

“You do that.” A pinprick of hope. If Marsha had gotten over herself, Jay would be alone again within days. The prospect made him smile.

“Yeah. I’ll call her. She can’t stay mad forever.”

Jay took the phone from the counter and handed it to Matt. “I’ll be outside.

Matt took the phone, held it between his two shiny pink hands. Some of the fingers looked half-eaten away, like they’d been gnawed on by rats. Jay wondered if he should offer to dial the number, then saw Matt point his little finger—the only one without burns—at the keys and begin to press. The beeps sounded very loud in the quiet kitchen. Jay hobbled onto the back porch, lit a cigarette, and sat down to listen.

“Hey baby! Oh come on now, babe. Don’t hang up. You know I’m sorry.”

Jay held his breath. He’d never met the famous Marsha. Matt had hooked up with her when he moved north about twenty years ago.
Jay never had the money to go visit him and he gathered Marsha had no time for her boyfriend’s oldest friend. She sounded like a hell of a ballbreaker to Jay, but then his experience with women was limited. He’d had one real girlfriend—Lori of the bad habits—and that was about it. Maybe he should ask Sandra to go for a coffee or a beer or something. At least she didn’t have tracks on her arms or stink of whisky.

“No, no. Yeah. He’s good. Yeah. No. Don’t know.” Then Matt’s voice dropped so low that Jay couldn’t hear more than a few words—two of which were “money” and “Jay.” He ground the stub of his cigarette into the dirt next to the porch with the heel of his good leg. The change in his pocket from Matt’s sixty bucks weighed a ton. What if Matt had already noticed the missing money? What if he told Marsha?

A red shame blazed across Jay’s face in the cool of the evening. Marsha would think Matt’s friend was a total loser. And she’d be right. He stepped towards the door. As soon as Matt got off the phone, he’d tell him.

“And yeah, Jay’s been just great. I still got that six hundred from the car. You know? I’m gonna give half of it to him and then I’ll be home before you know it, baby. Yeah. I know. I miss you, too.”

Matt’s voice dropped again and Jay quickly changed his mind. Why tell Matt and ruin his good mood? In the morning, Jay would slip out to the bank, get the cash and have it slotted back into Matt’s wallet before he woke up. Matt never crawled out of bed before noon.

Jay strolled into the smoky kitchen just as the phone beeped off.

“You heard?”

“What? Nah. Weren’t listening. What she say?”

Matt smiled. The years fell away and Jay saw the boy with long loose limbs, a goofy grin, and the profile of a Renaissance prince. “She’s taking me back. I’m to get the bus tomorrow. You know when it goes?”

“Too early for you, man.” The bus went at 7 am. Jay couldn’t get to the bank machine unless he slipped out in the middle of the night after Matt was asleep. And he couldn’t walk that far in the dark with his leg the way
it was. Damn it. He should have left well enough alone. He should have trusted Matt. He was his oldest friend for Christ’s sake.

“I don’t care. I’ll stay up all night if I have to. She’s taking me back, man!”

“What happened to your hands, Matt? You never said.”

“These?” Matt held up his hands as if he’d never seen them before. Their shiny pinkness with chunks missing here and there made Jay wince, but he forced himself to keep looking.

“Was it Marsha who done that?” he asked.

“Yeah well, I kind of provoked her. I called her a cow.”

“Yeah?”

“She poured hot coffee over them. Hurt like a sonofabitch.”

“And you’re goin’ back to her?” Jay considered himself a hard man to shock, but shocked he was, to his core. “Hey man! That’s not right. Why don’t you just stay here? You know you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you want. We get along great.”

“I know and I’m grateful. Really. And before I forget, let me give you some money. I’ve been meanin’ to for weeks, you know?”

“It’s okay. Friends, right?”

“Yeah, but even friends pay their way. I’ll do it now. I got the cash. I just been too depressed to think about it. It was the money I got selling the car before Marsha went ape shit on me.”

“Really, it’s okay. I can wait.”

“You’re the best, man.” Matt struggled to his feet, using his forearms instead of his hands to leverage himself. Jay watched helplessly as Matt stumped into the living room where he had set himself up a little nest on the couch. In addition to the sixty dollars Jay used to buy groceries, he’d taken another 10 crisp twenties and spent five of them on the hydro bill. There’s no way Matt couldn’t notice.

Jay squirmed with shame. He struggled to his feet. “Hey, Matt!” Damn this leg. He felt the knee buckle, had to sit down again, hard. When he
looked up, Matt was leaning against the door frame, his body filling the space. Over the years, Matt had put on a few pounds—okay, about a hundred pounds—most of it around his middle. With his balding head and lopsided grin, he looked a bit like Tweedle Dee. He was holding his wallet, had it open. Jay could see the thin wad of bills.

“You know, man, I must have screwed up on my calculations, or maybe lost a few hundred on my way here. My hands weren’t working too good and these fucking new bills stick together. But I think I got enough. Two hundred do it?” His voice had gone up an octave and he was looking from the money to the dirty kitchen floor.

Jay saw that the twisted hands holding the wallet were shaking. “It’s okay, man,” he said. “Keep what you got. You’ll need it to get home.” He wanted to say more. He had to say more.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Really. I’m fine.”

Jay felt the guilt lodge in his throat, cutting off the air, reminding him of the day he’d gone water skiing with Matt back in the summer of 1965. Jay had wiped out and sunk too deep. He looked up through the clear water and saw a smudge of bright yellow that kept getting farther and farther away. He was going to drown. He knew it, and for some reason he didn’t mind. His mom would be sad, but she had Timmy, and his dad wouldn’t be too bothered, except he’d be furious about the funeral costs. Cheap bastard. As the water pressed into his eyes, roared in his ears, Jay saw his family walking up the aisle of the church—a sad little procession. Maybe Matt would join them. Matt. He was up there in the boat. If Jay didn’t make it to the air, Matt would carry the memory for the rest of his life.

Jay kicked out, his lungs two sacks of searing pain. Slow motion. Agony. Impossible to hold on any longer. Then his head broke through and he saw Matt’s white face looking down at him from the white boat.

Matt closed the wallet and slipped it into his back pocket.
“Got another beer?”
“Sure.”
Jay grabbed two more beers from the fridge, handed one to Matt.
“Thanks, man.”
“I wish you wouldn’t go back to her.”
“I know, man, but she’s all I have.”
Jay nodded, not understanding but not knowing what to say to make it better. He’d never known what to say to make things better.

The next morning, Jay didn’t wave as the bus pulled out. But on his way home, he stopped by the grocery store and asked Sandra for a coffee.
One Hundred + Fifty One

*****

Gilmore Tamny
I am holding your old books in my hands
in your musky basement where you played
bits of Beethoven and Debussy on organ
and taught me minor keys.

I am peeling away the maggots from pages
of Maugham and Hemingway while your body
rests in the ground and the robins and blue jays
feast on your leftover seed in the feeder by the lilacs.

I pedal my tandem bicycle alone
to the procession where the blind mourners ache.
The diffident and ignorant see the grave
as the badge of death and rot.

I am standing in a field of emerald blades
and as the delta waves pummel my heart
and apples fall from the sky in a torrent,
you float by, gold seeping from your skin,
and ask me how I think you look.
Perennials

Wes Solether

My neighbor
with cracked
and weathered hands
shovels fall dirt from
the vegetable garden

His cat
watches
with those
tandem bicycle
eyes
back and forth
the spectator
a procession
of ants maybe
the pile builds
the shovel swings
back and forth
her old bones
ache on
the windowsill
her tail
swishes
back and forth

“Can’t dig a hole
in the winter”
“It’ll be good
for the garden”

I’d like to think
she feels her age
decay the leaves
HE DRUMMED his fingers on the table once and the ache emanated from his fingertips to his knuckles into his wrist. He stared down at his swollen hands, perched on the table in a slant of soft light cast by the clouded day outside. The pain dulled after a moment, and he wondered if they would drum again. He should know, but his body had become foreign to him, like a familiar friend who had begun to act odd, crying at strange times over seeming trifles, laughing when in a room alone, continuing to explain incredible pain to him for hours and hours when he knew nothing could be done.

His fingers drummed again and a searing ache pushed into his forearm. He stared at his sagging skin, the sharp bones beneath poking at the surface. He tried to see his nerves—beneath his waxy skin, between his angular bones, inside his fingers—firing electrical signals to pain centers in his brain, pleading dire alarms to his consciousness, bulletins of which he already knew. He wanted to ask them to stop, to match their insistence and warning with his own anguish. He should explain to them as the doctor had explained to him: the clinical terms, the statistical likelihoods
of the outcome. But he did not complain to the doctor, who likely had another patient to see, though he offered to stay for a moment, for as long as he needed. He did not protest or get angry at the charts, the medical images; he must go, and this was how. He longed to convey this to his body, that he knew, that they could stow their wasted warnings, that their incessant and overwhelming import had made them meaningless.

He found himself lost in such thoughts for long moments, and the snap back to reality was unsettling, not for the reality he returned to, but for the length of time he’d left. He drummed his fingers again and stood with effort. He had a call to make.

As he reached the phone that hung on the kitchen wall, he lingered over the calendar hanging next to it. He lifted the pages to show the coming months, one by one, and dropped them back down shuffling over themselves until they settled into the present. On today’s date he would have written Gregory Spires’ name and phone number, but he could no longer write. He’d memorized the number from the tasteful, cream-colored business card instead. The somber tone had said much more than the actual words.

*With love and respect eternally.*

The phone rang in his ear twice, then was answered by a woman with a soothing but still stern voice.

“Gregory Spires, please,” he said.

“May I ask who’s calling.”

“Morton Gerblaski. He will know,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Gerblaski. One moment please.” She did not stumble a moment in saying his name.

A familiar but distant voice came on the line. “Gregory Spires, how may I assist you today?”
“Gregory, it’s Morton. I’m calling to discuss the arrangements. I’ve made a decision.”

“Morton, so good to hear from you. Give me one moment to call up your specifics.” Morton heard a soft snapping off the line and imagined the sullen man snapping his fingers at the secretary to hand him an appropriate file. Morton recalled not seeing a computer in the man’s office. He began to remember the first time he had bought a computer for the house; it was a Christmas present to the entire family, and he remembered how his children would line up waiting for their turn to play solitaire or minesweeper, games embarrassingly simple now, a memory embarrassingly simple. He was interrupted by Gregory Spires on the phone.

“Yes, Morton,” he said, “I have it here. So you would like to update your arrangements.”

“Yes, thank you, I have made the decision about the route.”

“Of course.” Spires hesitated. “Mr. …” he began again, “Morton, if I may. I hope it would not be indelicate to suggest something at this juncture. If I may.”

“Please, go ahead,” Morton said.

“It’s just that, I see you have made all the arrangements for your own service. While this is not incredibly unusual, I would like to posit that, for some, for loved ones, the planning and decisions can be a useful part of the grieving process. Often they find that this process offers a sense of direction, some sense of purpose at a difficult time which can be useful, helpful, in a time that often feels directionless for loved ones of the deceased.”

“I am the deceased,” Morton said, though his voice was flat. And he meant to continue but could not think of what would come next. He said, “I do not want to burden my children with this, the details.”

“As I was saying,” Spires said, “if it is all right, often it is not a burden at all but quite the opposite. It is a chance to pay tribute to—”
“It is a chance to pay,” Morton said and he felt angry. “A chance to be suggestive to those in an aggrieved state. I am aggrieved enough, Mr. Spires. My services will be appropriately extravagant.” He finished with a harshness but realized he was not angry at what Gregory Spires had said.

“I am truly sorry, Morton. I did not mean to suggest—”

“I’m sorry,” Morton said. “That came from an old place.” He paused again. “The route. I’ve made the decision about the route. The police escort has been arranged?”

“Yes, sir.” Gregory took a moment, presumably looking over the files to confirm his statement. “Two off-duty officers have been retained, pending a date.”

“There will be a date. And the officers will be instructed to ensure no one enters the line. It’s very important to me,” Morton said into the phone, “that the procession not be interrupted. That time, between the service and the cemetery, is delicate.”

“Yes, sir.”

“No, I must insist. I remember my wife’s funeral. A car pulled out from a side street, got into the procession—they pulled in just behind the hearse! It was awful, this tan Dodge. The incongruity, it was ruinous!” He felt on the verge of tears at the memory.

“Yes, sir. I will ensure that extra precautions are taken.”

Morton swallowed and felt pain in his shoulders and arms. “Idiots,” he said.

After a moment, Spires said, “Yes, sir.”

“That’s how things are. What will mean the most to you…” but his anger had slipped away, and he did not think he was one to express sentimentality, so he let the thought dissipate.

“Yes, sir,” Gregory said. “I give you my utmost assurance that the procession will not be impinged.”

“Yes… thank you,” Morton said. “It may be a small matter, but I’ll not have anything ridiculous happening, some unforeseen construction
detour or the driver taking a wrong turn.”

“It is not a small matter,” Gregory said.

“They should be left with their thoughts,” he said.

“Yes, sir. Well, I can assure you the arrangements for the escort have been made, and I will be doubly sure the transition from the memoriam to the on-site service is not disturbed.”

“The route,” Morton said remembering. “I have made a decision about the route.”

“The route?”

“Yes. Though I know it will be a slightly inefficient expansion, I would like the procession to arrive at the cemetery by way of Cortlandt Street,” Morton said.

“Cortlandt,” Spires whispered as if jotting a note in his files.

“Yes, sir. Cortlandt.” He paused. “The trees overhang the road in such a way,” he said. “They create a canopy.” He hesitated again, thinking of how finally to say something he’d been thinking about for the past two days. “It’s shaded,” he said. “Serene. It will offer everyone some time for reflection.”

“Very well,” said Spires.

“After the cemetery,” Morton said, “it will be off to the receptions and prepared meals; it will be carpool arrangements back to the church, and discussions of how hungry each is, whether or not to eat at the house or wait until later, and polite talk of how the service was appropriate; my eldest daughter’s eulogy will be stirring, and they will note that. But, between the church and the cemetery, on the ride, they will still be in the thick of this. They will have the best moments to experience their feelings about my death,” he said. “Cortlandt, I have thought, will offer a more apt setting for those moments.”

“Your life, sir,” Spires said.

“I’m sorry?”

“They will experience their feelings about your life, sir, if I may.
They will reflect on your life and how it has impacted them each in the most important ways.”

“They may, in the months to come,” Morton said, “maybe even at times years from now. But that ride over….When my wife died, I’m afraid it was her death I felt. Her life could not be appreciated at the same time.”

“Perhaps,” Spires said, “they will do both.”

Morton inhaled, his chest rising toward the phone. “Perhaps,” he said. Then finding himself in his kitchen, leaning against the wall, he said, “Thank you, Mr. Spires. I will phone again if anything changes.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Gerblaski. Please call with any concerns at all.”

Morton hung the phone back in its cradle. No one else he knew still had a phone wired into the wall. They would throw it out when they cleaned the house. He tried to feel some nostalgia about conversations he’d had standing there, talking into that phone, but he could not remember any of importance.

The service was held on a Tuesday, a crisp morning for coats with no scarves. The parade of black limousines moved against a bright sky, passing McMullen Street to make its way five blocks farther east then left down Persephone to Cortlandt.

In the third car, Morton’s youngest daughter rode with her husband, her eyes red, tears still escaping at some thoughts, but she had quieted her sniffing. She knew the town well from her childhood and realized that they had passed the obvious route to the cemetery. She understood why as they turned on Persephone, recognized her father’s ceaseless planning, each fastidious detail held as important, even when no one else would appreciate what he’d done. But this she could appreciate. The dappled light they would roll through down Cortlandt Street, the small rustles of the branches protecting them above—but from what, she thought, on such a beautiful morning. She looked ahead to the turn they would make,
and it struck her again: though he had been very sick for nearly a year, the actual loss, the overwhelming absence was still sudden. It would dissipate, as her mother’s had, but it didn’t seem so now. As they neared Cortlandt, which would take them the back way into the cemetery, she caught a yellow fleck out of the corner of her eye. She turned to her window and saw a couple riding a banana yellow tandem bicycle jerkily. It was preposterous, and she laughed. Her husband leaned past her to see, and smiled at her wet eyes above her smile. The riding couple pulled up short and both reached down with opposite feet to balance, which nearly toppled them. Inside the limousine, their smiles held as they made the turn onto Cortlandt. As they came under the shade of the overhanging trees, Morton’s youngest daughter reached up and pressed the button to slide back the sunroof. It whirred for a moment, and she stared up into the luminous green of the leaves as they passed, but she could not make out any individual one.
One Hundred + Forty Eight

*****

Gilmore Tamny
Pacemaker Ache

Tim Skeen

The doctors want to tame my father’s wild heart with electronic shoelaces threaded through
the right atrium, into the right ventricle, connected to the generator implanted between
his skin and chest muscle. They want all of the fireflies to light up in unison.

They want him to ride their tandem bicycle. They do not know his solitary heart like I do.

It beats its own rhythm, which only now, after 78 years, is declared wrong.

He could sink a 10 penny nail with three strokes. He could drive for two days. Amid the sounds
of the cardiac ward, the beeps and blurps, he can barely lift his coffee cup, or speak
to the helpful nurses who are always walking away. I hate the hideous sound my wet shoes make

on the polished floor—it’s rained every day my father has been in here—not all the time so that one might
have confidence and conviction in one’s loathing of the circumstances, but merely most of the time so that I must question the reason I feel numb as I stand for half-an-hour to look at the oil painting near the entrance, “The Difficult Case,” in memory of Denis Radefeld, M.D., with the good doctor at his desk, 1960’s medical instruments, a microscope, an open textbook, his meditative face absorbed with the case at hand, while over his shoulder the white-robed, brown-bearded Jesus leans comfortably down to point out with his index finger the exact paragraph, sentence, word that leads to the diagnosis.

In the final days I lived in this town where I grew up, my girlfriend’s house was off Fairless Avenue— why has it taken me 30 years to realize that irony? My father does not chuckle when I tell him
about the beat-up car parked in the hospital lot
with a bumper sticker proclaiming, *At least I can still smoke*

_{in my own car._ From here on, we will have to rely on
a procession of things we have never understood—

technology, irony and love.
The Weight

Naima Woods

War is like a rodeo procession—
a flag, the dust-stomped boots
the whinny of mothers
losing their sons to
the desert. This repeats
like the bridge of a song,
like the bumps of
noses broken and set,
hills of bone violent and then
quiet, made invisible

We haven’t seen war
in decades
but we feel it
underneath our fingernails,
hear it explained
by thin, tanned lips
Your mother says
*How handsome* he is
but the anchor shows
how the ache of
*fifteen thousand*
has pulled down the edges of
his face
I met an army wife
who lost her husband’s feet,
his hands, the back
of his neck, lost him
entirely in the muted
vacuum of combat,
but when she bit down
on her tongue, she
could feel him, drawing
blood to her mouth

She said
that she carried her grief
in her pants pockets,
rode it around
on her tandem bicycle,
the back seat empty
but the wheels still creaking
with the weight of loss,
and she whispered,
*lean with me or we’ll fall*
because at least with the agony
she’s not alone
We haven’t had the ground split open, haven’t had our fathers leave for milk and return ashen and crippled with awe, we haven’t had our hills vallied and scraped dry and yet, we feel our bones broken and set, made loud and quieted and invisible
Achy Tandem Procession

Jen Muir
3Elements Contributors

**Issac Blum** is the 2013 Emerging Writer-in-Residence at Penn State Altoona. He recently finished up his MFA at Rutgers-Camden. His stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Review*, the *Oklahoma Review*, *Poetica Magazine*, *West Trade Review*, *YARN*, and the *Humor Times*, among others.

**Gabriella Brand’s** poems and short stories have appeared in a variety of publications including *Room Magazine*, *The Mom Egg*, *PIF*, *The Citron Review* and *Cordite*. A recent short story won the Story Cubes Prize. Gabriella divides her time between New England, where she teaches languages, and Quebec, where she writes, canoes and daydreams. An avid outdoors person and hiker, she has spent considerable time in Japan, including walking around the island of Shikoku.

**Candace Butler** is an MFA candidate at Antioch University of Los Angeles. She is a writer, artist, and musician residing in her hometown of Sugar Grove, Virginia, a small town in the Appalachian Mountains.

**Carol Cram** has lived all her life, apart from stints in England and Toronto, in and around Vancouver, British Columbia. After enjoying a career as an educator and the author of over 50 textbooks on business communications and software applications, Carol has recently switched her focus to fiction. Her second novel, *The Towers of Tuscany*, will be released shortly. She is currently working on her third novel and a collection of short stories. She holds an MA in Drama from the University of Toronto and an MBA from Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh. After 20 years as a faculty member for Capilino University, Carol now lives on Bowen Island near Vancouver, BC, with her husband. When she’s not writing or hanging out with Bowen Island’s artistic community, she adores walks among the arbutus trees and dancing Nia, and traveling frequently to Europe for inspiration.
Mona Dash lives in London; as an MBA she works in a Telecoms company. Mona however is devoted to writing and is a stranger to television and other such niceties. She writes whenever she can—while travelling, waiting, and deep into the night. She is currently working towards an MA in Creative Writing at the London Metropolitan University. Her first novel is represented by RedInk Literary agency, and she is working on her second.

Ashini J. Desai’s poems have been published in anthologies including Overplay, Underdone, Word Masala, Yellow as Tumeric, Fragrant as Cloves, as well as Philadelphia Poets and Thema journals. Her essay was included in Labor Pains & Birth Stories. She has book reviews, articles on writing, parenting, and poetry published online. Poems can be found at www.ashinipoetry.blogspot.com.

Kate Garrett was born in Cincinnati, Ohio but moved to the UK in 1999. Her poetry and flash fiction have been published online and in print. Kate lives in Sheffield, England with her three kids, three cats and a computer programmer.

Leon Hedstrom is a full-time student living in Minneapolis, Minnesota with work in Switched-on Gutenberg.

Michael Hixson finds it easier than ever to connect with other men in an increasingly digital age. The rise of the aughts saw the growing use of webcams and social media—two inventions he uses obsessively. His work depicts how the internet and technology both hinder and progress his relationship with other men across the world using screen-capped images from porn. The images are worn down, scanned, and created into a collage. The work in this series depicts the ache he feels for never having a substantial or real relationship in the eyes of many people in America.
Contributors (continued...)

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Paul Hostovsky’s latest book of poems is Naming Names (2013, Main Street Rag). He makes his living in Boston as an interpreter for the Deaf. Visit him at www.paulhostovsky.com

Matthew Jankiewicz is a graduate student in the fiction department at Columbia College Chicago. His short stories have been published in the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Toasted Cheese, and the Alembic. He is also the co-founder of Daydream Alchemy Press, a small Chicago-based publishing company, which will be publishing a literary journal called Flyleaf beginning in 2014.

Sarah Katharina Kayss was born in 1985 in Koblenz, Germany, studied Comparative Religion and Modern History in Germany and Britain. In autumn 2012, she became a PhD candidate at the War Studies Department of King’s College London. Her artwork, essays and poetry have appeared in literary magazines, journals and anthologies in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the United Kingdom, Italy, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Sarah is a recipient of the Austrian-VKSÖ Prize (2012) and winner of the manuscript-award of the German Writers Association for her poetry-collection Homage to the 21st century (2013). Her first poetry collection, I like the world the way it is, will be published in Germany in autumn 2013. She edits the bilingual literature magazine, The Transnational (former: PostPoetry), and lives in London.

Diane Kendig has worked as a poet, writer, translator and teacher for 40 years and authored four poetry collections, including The Places We Find Ourselves. A recipient of two Ohio Arts Council Fellowships, she has published most recently in J Journal, Wordgathering, About Place, and Qarrtsiluni. www.dianekendig.com.
Daniel Lassell is the poetry winner of the 2013 William J. Maier Writing Award, and has been featured in several publications, which include literary journals such as *Sixfold, Steam Ticket, Future Cycle, Penduline, Riverrun, Pure Francis*, and *Haiku Journal*. He lives in Huntington, West Virginia, where he teaches at Marshall University.

George Linfield is an eighteen-year-old student currently studying English with History at New College of the Humanities in London, and spends a lot of his free time writing.

Scott MacDonald is a graduate of Central Connecticut State University. He majored in English with a minor in Creative Fiction Writing. Scott has loved writing and reading since elementary school, and has also been performing stand-up on open mic night at comedy clubs in Connecticut for the last year and a half.

Zee Martín is an engineer and artist, an award-winning dancer and teacher, a marksman and a small-time rancher. She lives with her husband and a whole lot of critters on a small farm on a dirt road near a very tiny town in the Missouri Ozarks. And sometimes, she likes to write.

Gillian Moore has been writing for her own enjoyment and catharsis for about 20 years, with the usual bouts of inability to conjure inspiration and write anything at all. She’s been published online twice.

Jen Muir is an illustrator based in the UK. She enjoys working with watercolours and drawing odd things.
Contributors (continued...)

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Robert Mullins lives and writes in Los Angeles. He is a former golf professional and long-time precision machinist. While he rarely uses his skills as a machinist, he can still be found roaming the Southern California fairways looking for a little white ball. His short stories are destined to appear online in various publications—the submissions are out there.

Adam Pacton’s poetry has appeared in Now and Then: The Appalachian Magazine. He has published creative nonfiction in Writing on the Edge and in The Great Lakes Book Project. His scholarly work has appeared in Composition Studies, Pedagogy, Modern Language Studies, and other forums. He teaches Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Mark Plattner lives in Tampa, Florida with his dog Zoey.

Kerry Rawlinson emigrated to Canada from Zambia thirty years ago with her husband and children, putting aside her artistic and literary aspirations and paying unto Rome what was owed. Recently relocated to Canada’s inspirational Okanagan Valley with said husband, she’s begun the almost-Herculean task of reconnecting her life’s beginnings. She has many projects in progress. She has been published in Prospective: Journal of Speculation (poems and cover art); Unshod Quills; Kind of a Hurricane Press Sun and Sand Anthology; a winner in 2013 Ascent Aspirations Anthology Contest; Postcards, Poems and Prose Contest.

Tiara Rea is currently the Quality Assurance Analyst for Savings.com, but she will always be a poet and writer at heart. Her poems and essays have been published in several print and online publications, including Symposium: a Journal of Ideas and Web Hosting Magazine.
James Rodgers has been writing poetry for over two decades. He has a daily blog of silly haiku at: jamesrodgershaikooky@blogspot.com. He has published poems in multiple publications, and took first prize in the Washington Poetry Association’s Charles Proctor Award for Humor.

Sarah Lyn Rogers is an MFA student at San José State University, where her emphases are fiction and poetry. When she’s not writing, she is Assistant Fiction Editor at The Weekly Rumpus. She also works as a writing mentor, copyeditor, and layout manager for Society of Young Inklings, a nonprofit writing community and publishing imprint for young writers.

Sheena Segady lives in Pittsburgh. She enjoys the convergence of time and light.

Ravi Shankar is the founding editor and Executive Director of Drunken Boat, one of the world’s oldest electronic journals of the arts. He has published or edited seven books and chapbooks of poetry, including the 2010 National Poetry Review Prize winner, Deepening Groove. He has edited W.W. Norton’s Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East & Beyond, called “a beautiful achievement for world literature” by Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer. He has won a Pushcart Prize, been featured in The New York Times and the Chronicle of Higher Education, appeared as a commentator on the BBC and NPR, received fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, and has performed his work around the world. He is currently Chairman of the Connecticut Young Writers Trust, on the faculty of the first international MFA Program at City University of Hong Kong and an Associate Professor of English at CCSU.
Contributors (continued...)

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Ronald Stout is a 2009 graduate of Eastern Michigan University’s Creative Writing program. In the year of his graduation, he was diagnosed with Stage 3 Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, which he battled for six months. He has been cancer-free since April 2010 and enjoys participating in events and volunteering for cancer research programs. He currently lives and works in Columbus, OH.

Jennifer Strawson is 30 years old and works as a doctor in palliative medicine. She has a keen interest in writing and tries to sneak poetry and literature into the lives of her patients and colleagues whenever she can. She has a Masters in Creative Writing from London Metropolitan University and when she’s not working, she can be found writing poetry with a large cafe latte by her side. You should also know that she loves avocados and that she will challenge you to a duel if you try and take the only ripe one from her in the supermarket.
**Gilmore Tamny** is the author of one book of poems, *The Small Time Smirker and In Nevada I Was Rabbity or FLUFFY CLOUDS* (Joe Books). Her essays, artwork, interviews, short stories and op-ed pieces have been published in *Madison Smartt Bell’s Narrative Design*, *Not A Rose by Heide Hatry*, *The Dan Clowes Reader*, *Columbus Alive*, and more. She wrote songs for three albums, under the name The Yips. She received an MFA from Emerson College. Currently, her agent is working on finding publication for two novels. www.ohioedit.com/category/visual-art

**Evan Tingey** is a 24-year-old senior at Central Connecticut State University. He is an avid sports fan, writer, reader, foodie, and student. He loves learning new things and having new experiences. He is trying to get published to further his writing portfolio for graduate school.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to take the time to thank the following individuals:

Ravi Shankar and Cyn Vargas for encouraging their students to submit their work to us, which helped us shape our vision and create our forthcoming sister journal, 3Elements Review: Teen Writers.

Marlon Fowler for designing our website, making sure that it is always up and running to the highest of standards, and for the design and layout of this very journal.

Submittable, New Pages, Writer’s Cafe, Chicago Artists Resource, Writer’s Relief, Daydream Alchemy, Megan Stielstra, Kate Duva, Liz Sidell, Sahar Mustafah, Abby Sheaffer of Chicago Literati, Jeanne Lyet Gassman, and Alicia Hauge for the delicious coffee at Intelligentsia!
Submission due dates are December 1, March 1, June 1, and September 1 for issues forthcoming January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1, respectively, unless otherwise noted on our website. Minimum word count is 500 words for fiction, maximum is 3,500. Poems must be under two typed pages.

We will only accept blind submissions sent to us through Submittable. It is equally important that all three elements given for the specific submission period be included within your story or poem. Artists and photographers are only required to represent one out of the three elements.

For multiple submissions, fiction is capped at no more than three stories per submission period. Poems are limited to five per submission period. In the event your material is accepted elsewhere, we request that you withdraw your submission from 3Elements Review.

Visit www.3ElementsReview.com for more info.
Mikaela Shea is in her thesis hours of her MFA in Fiction at Columbia College Chicago. She has published stories in *Midwestern Gothic*, *Foliate Oak*, *Hypertext Magazine*, *Columbia College’s Annual Story Week Reader*, and a children’s book, *Ib’s Ice Age Adventure*, for the State Historical Society of Iowa. Mikaela is currently writing a novel, editor-in-chief of *3Elements Review*, assistant editor at *Flyleaf Journal*, and a contributing writer for *Gapers Block Book Club* and *Chicago Literati*. She loves her family, puppies, Paris, creepy things, running, coffee, cooking, and whiskey. www.MikaelaShea.com

C.J. Matthews, a writing teacher by day and writing group facilitator by night, earned her B.A. at Cornell College and her Master’s at the University of Iowa. She adores reading, writing, traveling, elegant food, bold red wine, and her two little dogs, Hercules and Hucklebee. C.J.’s most recent work can be read in *Spoilage Magazine*, *Cahoodaloodaling*, and the *In Gilded Frame Anthology* from Kind of a Hurricane Press.

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Marlon Fowler is a Chicago-based web developer and designer for 3Elements Review. He received his bachelors degree in Journalism with a major in Advertising from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Marlon enjoys all things technology, making websites “do things,” running, reading nonfiction, sports, movies, video games, and Chicago food. He would really like to learn PHP and get back to Paris. You can check out Marlon’s portfolio at www.marlonfowler.com.

Carol Roh Spaulding is co-author, with Kay Fenton Smith, of Zakery’s Bridge: Children’s Journeys From Around the World to Iowa (2011). A Professor of English at Drake University, Spaulding teaches courses in writing and American literature. She is the author of several award-winning short stories, including a Pushcart Prize, best story of the year in Ploughshares, the Glimmer Train Fiction Open, and the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction. Her new novel, Helen Button, tells the story of avant-garde writer Gertrude Stein and her life in Central France during World War II. Spaulding is also director of the newly-established Drake University Community Press. The Press produces attractive full-color, illustrated editions serving a community readership while providing students with practical knowledge of book editing and production using a cross-disciplinary and collaborative focus. She lives in Des Moines, IA with her husband, Tim, and son Jonah.
The End