

Between the Lines

2020

South Arkansas
Community College

Preface

2020 has been the most frightening and unusual year, so unusual, we nearly lost this publication to fear of the virus and the distracting need just to press on, somehow, somehow. Still, the writers, whose work fills the pages of this 22nd volume of *Between the Lines* needed to be heard, for no other reason than to recall the beauty in life and the wonder of the creative mind. All the works contained in this volume were submitted before the full weight of the Covid-19 tragedy descended upon us. They are now our guiding light, back from the abyss, standing on safe ground, ready to write and create again. I offer my gratitude to our writers and to our readers. May all have a happy holiday and a protected new year.

Scott Larkin, editor
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Harvest Moon

By Donna Henson

On an early Autumn night, in the Western sky
a magnificent, beneficent moon smiles down.
Evening breezes calm. And I gaze,
believing I'm alone, with the moon looking on,
blessing both sighs and prayers at day's end.

Soon, chitter of birds and call of an owl
let me know: I'm not alone.
Here, in nature, I'm amidst generations
who have witnessed as I do
the Harvest Moon's marking of memories:

Seasons' forever forward cycling;
Summers close;
Blessed, restful breathing time;
Beneath a beneficent moon.

Falling Behind

By Micah Johnson

What on Earth do you do,
when you can't keep up?

How does one shine, when
so little comes to mind?

Hear me out—this
ain't jus' wassup...

All blind, beat, and
stuck, no new drive.

I'm falling behind!

Not for a test, but it's deeper:
this living soul, in my bitter.

Not for a rest, already a sleeper:
sheer in shambles, from a forgiver.

Not for ascension, but Heaven

forbid I belong in detention.

Hear me out again—

this ain't 'ny holdup.

Nor is it too frightful,

to ask for a showdown.

I'm falling behind!

What on Earth do you do,

when you can't keep up?

Between online banking,

and keyboard-smashing...

(What about a building?)

Between Twitter, the Instagram,

emojis, threats, and "likes"...

(Just what in Sam Hill's that?)

Between the left and the right,

the middle, the media...

(Why even mess with it all?)

How do I shine, when just

too much comes to mind?

And leaves me in a bind?

I'm falling behind.

An Outing

By Marilyn Joyner

Millie and Mavis, enthusiastic octogenarians,
donned their Sunday best, climbed into the Buick
and maneuvered it onto the "I-20" road--
a straight shot from Moody, Alabama, to Atlanta.

They liked the one road with no turns,
seeing as how their eyesight was dimming.
They did not even need a map
and Atlanta sounded like a nice town to visit.

They motored down the road at a whopping 43 MPH,
vehicles whizzing by, horns honking, tires screeching.
But Mavis, the driver, kept a steady pace
determined to make the destination by dark.

Mavis asked, "Do you hear a lot of noise?"
"Why no," said Millie, "I'm not wearing my hearing aid."
She turned in her seat surveying the surroundings
and saw cars passing, people doing all kinds of waves.

These friendly folks made Millie smile.
Suddenly a state trooper pulled alongside,
forcing the Buick onto the shoulder.
"Are you ladies on your way to Talladega?"

After a lecture on "I" roads and speed,
the trooper suggested they take the next exit.
They did. But got right back on the "I" road.
Then cranked their speed up to fifty.

Behind the Mask

By Priscila Espinosa

I stared in awe as I watched the crowd and her become one. Every jump she did, every step she took, every lyric she sang, the crowd mirrored with no hesitation. Luna Rose was truly one of the best pop artists, and it was moments like this when I couldn't believe I worked for her. I was lucky to be part of her wardrobe team for her Heaven's Tour, and it was truly an experience. I had been helping Miss Julia, the main wardrobe person, for three years on, dressing Rose up for interviews and photoshoots, so this was my first time being on the road with the team.

To work closely with her was truly a surreal moment for me. Aside from being a fan, I knew her well enough to notice that tiny nervous butterflies would appear whenever I was with her. I do believe it was just a celebrity crush, but there were some moments during shoots when she smiled, and everything just stopped. She truly had a beautiful smile and a lovely voice. However, my favorite thing about her was those green eyes she kept hidden under those thick sunglasses of her.

Rose was discovered about six months before I came along. I was a simple intern and on my last year of college with little to no idea who she was. Upon meeting Rose for the first time, I immediately noticed she wore big, dark sunglasses inside the board room. I thought fame had already gotten to her, but as time progressed, I realized that she was always wearing thick sunglasses. For every photoshoot, every interview, every red carpet, it was always a challenge to pick the right clothing to go well with the glasses. Until one day, she and the band wanted to do a masquerade themed shoot for the album cover. I already picked out the best possible masks to conceal her eyes, and I presented them to her the day of. To everyone's shock, she chose a silver

one that didn't hide her eyes. Only Miss Julia helped her get dressed, for no one but a few trusted associates could know what she really looked like. I instantly fell in love with those deep green eyes, and the media went crazy over them too.

“Jo!”

I jumped and saw Kelly, Rose's manager, making her way towards me. “Yes, ma'am?”

“Julia is looking for you. Needs help in the dressing room,” Kelly said with her eyes fixed on Rose as the band started to perform the last song of the night. I didn't want to leave my spot and miss the finale of the tour, but my aching feet and the thought of a hot shower was enough to get me moving.

I found Miss Julia packing up the dressing room, and I helped with whatever tasks she wanted me to do. There was a lot of big guys rolling carts and packing up equipment backstage, and we had to stay focused on what went where so nothing became lost. The sound of loud cheers and a drum solo reached my ears, and I knew Rose was now saying her final goodnights and thank yous to Los Angeles as I locked the last box up and nodded to the guys to take it to the truck. Finally, we were done.

Backstage was almost empty and quiet by then with almost everyone gone. Only a few workers were still there cleaning up as I tried to find Miss Julia to let her know I was heading back now. “I think she's in the main office?” I whispered under my breath.

My phone buzzed, and I saw that it was Julia texting me to ask if I saw Rose around. It was close to one in the morning, and there was no doubt Rose was on her way back to the hotel or to the plane back home. I was about to respond when something caught the corner of my eye.

It was a small hallway illuminated by the red glow of the “EXIT” sign, and I saw a woman sitting on the ground. Her back was against the wall with one hand holding her head while her other arm rested on her knee. Her hair was blocking her face, but she was holding dark glasses in her hand. I heard small snuffles from her.

Well this is new..., I thought.

I took small steps towards her and gently called her name. “Rose...?”

She tensed up and without moving her hair, she put her glasses back on and looked at me. “Sorry, was just resting a bit for I left.”

She looked like a stranger, and I wanted to ask if she was okay but didn’t know if it was my place to do so. Even though I had worked for her for three years, I was only Miss Julia’s assistant, so Rose and I never really spoke much except the occasional small talk. It was not like she ignored her team, because she was always grateful to those who helped her. It was just she didn’t have the time to talk to everyone.

“It’s just Miss Julia was looking for you...,” I reminded Rose. Something felt off when I studied her. She was sitting in the dark, alone, and crying while possibly ignoring the calls from Kelly.

Rose looked at her phone and let out a small laugh, “I guess she was, huh.”

Her body showed exhaustion, and I wanted her to get some rest. I wondered if she ate before the concert begun. I walked over to her and held out my hand.

“Sooner Kelly sees you, sooner you can get some sleep.”

She stared at my hand for a minute before taking it. Her hand was soft, and I didn't want to let it go. I made sure she was stable before I did, and we started heading to the main office.

.....

My feet were killing me as Miss Julia and I stood in the elevator. I could not wait to jump into a hot shower and watch an episode of *Law and Order*.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Julia reached into her bag and pulled out a folder. “Rose is staying on the same floor as you, so could you give her this? She is in suite 401.”

I nodded and took the folder. My guess, it was possibly a contract of some kind to look over on the plane. The elevator stopped on Miss Julia's floor and then mine. There was music coming from down the hall. It must have been the band enjoying the after party. There were people standing in the halls, some drunk, some chatting and laughing loudly while dancing to the music. I guess sleep wasn't going to happen tonight.

I followed the hotel room numbers to the other end of the hall and was grateful that my room was not directly across from hers, but also as far away from the party as it could be. I knocked a bit loudly on Rose's door, hoping I was not disturbing her sleep, and patiently waited. The butterflies in my stomach were there, but I did my best to ignore them.

'You are just giving her a folder. Nothing more,' I thought.

I was about to knock again when the door opened just a crack. I saw the chain was on, only allowing small access to her face. Like expected, her sunglasses were on. However, I felt a weird vibe coming from her. Something didn't sit right with me as she stood there behind the door.

“Hey, I was told to drop off this to you?” I held up the folder and silently judged myself for how my voice sounded. I could have said it better.

“Oh, right...,” Rose muttered and closed the door. I heard the sound of the chain coming off, and she opened again. My eyes widened. I was used to seeing her in long sleeves, button ups, jackets, anything that covered her upper body. Rarely did I see her in a simple t-shirt, but this was the first time I saw her in a tank top. Since she didn’t wear much that hugged her body, she appeared more petite than I imagined. I had to not stare at her chest, for I didn’t want to be that guy.

I mentally slapped myself to get rid of the thoughts and handed her the folder. I did study her to see if there were any signs of distress, and the only thing I noticed was how skinny she did look. It made me wonder if she had been eating well.

“Well thanks, Jo... have a good night....” Her voice didn’t sound right, and something told me I couldn’t let her be alone. She was about to close the door when I stopped her.

“Have you eaten?”

She shook her head no. “I’m about to order room service, thank you though.”

I scoffed, “You shouldn’t eat hotel food.”

“Oh really? Why not?” She held the door open a bit wider now. I needed to get her out because this was not the woman I knew.

“Artists like you should only dine on the finest of foods.”

“Like?” There was a hint of humor in her voice, and I couldn’t help but smile. I saw my opportunity, but it could have easily backfired.

“Come with me and I’ll show you.”

Despite most of her face being hidden, I knew I took her by surprise. “It’s almost two in the morning, Jo.”

“And? I know a place that will give the best food you will ever taste,” I said in a horrible British accent, but I got a small laugh out of her.

I could see her consider my offer in her mind, and I smiled widely when she told me yes. She grabbed her jacket, and we used the stairs to leave the hotel.

“This is the finest food I will ever taste?” She laughed as I pulled up to a taco stand.

“Never underestimate the food that comes from a food truck, Rose,” I grinned as we got out. There was only a small group of people at one picnic table but they didn’t notice us as we walked by. Rose had her hood up anyways, so we were good for not being spotted.

I knocked on the glass and was greeted with a happy welcome from Julio, the cook of this fine establishment. Thankfully, I didn’t have to decide how to introduce Rose for she introduced herself.

“I was told this was the finest food ever made and just had to stop by after my concert.” Thank God she is bilingual.

Julio studied her for a second and had a huge smile on his face to see that it was the famous LR. How she got recognized still was beyond me. We laughed as he had his little fan moment and proceeded to take our orders. I caught up with Julio as we waited, asking him how his family and business were doing while feeling a sense of home wash over me. Rose remained quiet and watched us two with a small smile on her face. I wonder what she was thinking.

We took our food and paid after Rose gave Julio an autographed napkin and started to head back to the truck.

“Want to see something?” She asked with a small grin on her face. I raised my eyebrow at her and nodded. She then proceeded to hand me her food and took her hood down. Flicking her curly hair behind her shoulder, I saw something click inside her as she walked back to the truck and passed the people. Only this time, they all stared at her. I have been around her enough times to recognize the star struck look on fans when they saw her, but not once had I seen her go into her character.

It all made sense now. I had always wondered how fans and paparazzi were able to recognize her with just glasses and regular clothing on, and now I had seen it. She put on this certain charm and became Luna Rose. I knew Rose was a stage name, for she said so on an interview; but, just like her looks, only a few knew her real name.

I stood there for a minute, amazed at what I just witnessed before I returned to the truck. She had a huge smile on her face, and I knew she was enjoying the look on everyone’s faces. I shook my head, smiling as well, and turned the truck on.

“An artist like you must enjoy a meal with a great view as well.”

“Oh, this trip isn’t over yet?” she asked while chewing on her food.

“Nah, one more stop.”

...

“Wow... this is a great view to enjoy my taco...”

I chuckled as we sat on the bed of the truck, looking out over a view of the city. It was a bit chilly from the winds, causing Rose to press her shoulder against mine for warmth. I did my best to remain unphased, but inside I was freaking out for my crush was so close to me. She smelled nice...

“You live here?” Rose asked.

I looked at her to find her staring at me. “My mom was in the military. This is where I spent my high school years. I come back here every chance I get to see the city.”

She nodded and looked back to the view. “You know where home is and it’s here. I saw that sense of belonging as you talked to your friend.”

“This is where I figured out who I am and got my chance to work with the big leagues.”

“Must be nice to know that...” Her voice was quiet now.

“What is?”

“To know who you are.”

“And you don’t?”

Rose shook her head, but never took her eyes off the view. “Do you know what it’s like to constantly hide behind something so you can have some privacy?”

I remained silent as she spoke in a gentle but broken voice.

“I put these on, and I am suddenly this Luna Rose person who everyone wants to know. Everyone wants to figure out who this person is. All of her deepest thoughts and secrets, who she talks to and who she likes. Every time she breathes, they need to know about it. But do you think

they would be this curious if they knew who I really was? That behind the shades, I'm nothing but an ordinary person who just so happens can sing.”

She went on, “If I reveal who I am, then I would feel like I am letting everyone down. They would expect to see this star who shows off how rich she is when in reality, I do little with my money. I donate most of my earnings to charities and my family, but I just don't lavish myself with expensive jewelry and fancy clothing. I feel guilty for not enjoying this famous life.”

I am no longer staring at Luna Rose; before me was someone I had never met before. My heart ached for her as she sat there, looking exhausted and fragile.

“Feels like everyone is watching me even more now, and it's making me feel more paranoid to the point I have my glasses on in the comfort of my own home. And I know, I know, I signed up for this. I chose to have a career where the spotlight was on me, and I love it but hate that I can't be me anymore. And lately, it feels like I don't know who I am anymore when I take them off...”

“Your favorite color is yellow....”

She looked at me with confusion as I spoke.

“Your favorite song is 'Just One More Yesterday' by Fall Out Boy. You tend to wear beanies a lot, and like chocolate chip pancakes.”

“Those are just trivia answers about me. Doesn't say much.”

“All right. Whenever you talk during interviews, you manage to talk about the band and include them even though they are not there. You always attempt to get to know the people who are working for you. Asking how they are, how's the husband, how did their kid's baseball game

go, something in their lives. During breaks, you read a book while enjoying peach tea until they call you up. When we all get a chance to eat together, you make sure everyone gets a plate first before you. You also hate shrimp and pasta which still baffles me. I know that you have a heart bigger than anything I ever seen because you always put everyone first. I may be a fan of Luna Rose, but I admire the person who is behind those sunglasses. Every little fact I find out about you by working with you, I can't help but feel like I'm closer to knowing who this person is behind the mask. And I promise, I am not disappointed. Just not everyone wants to know and that's a hard fact to swallow at times...."

She remained silent and looked back at the city. I hoped I didn't upset her further.

"Thank you for tonight... I needed this," her voice was soft while her words held a hidden meaning behind them.

"You're welcome."

"After the interview tomorrow, want to get a cup of coffee...?"

"Uh, yeah-h sure..." I stuttered and blushed. God, I'm an idiot....

I saw her smirk, "We should start heading back now. It is late."

I nodded in agreement and hopped off the truck. We both got in, and I turned on the truck and drove away from the view.

"I have a question. What's Jo short for?"

"Joanne... May I ask what your real name is?" I looked over at her and saw a devilish smile.

"Like I'm going to let it be that easy."

The War

By Hannah McCallister

The war would not be happening at all, really, until they stole the emperor's only son.

She pondered this with a quiet scoff, her chin tucked against her chest. Ever since she and her brothers had been told they would be going to war, she'd wondered if it hadn't been even just a little foolish. Foolish on behalf of Zairia, who had so unwittingly upset the valley-country Caembia and an ancient alliance: those who now came from her country, Dacent, in the north, and those who would come from the east, other kings and their sons. She swayed in tune with her horse as she mulled things over.

"The checkpoint is just up ahead, sister," Kyan said, his dark brows drawn low as he held his horse still until it was level with hers, the two great, war-bred animals walking side-by-side. "Then, just a half-day's ride until we get to the city," he continued. The news should have been a relief after endless riding.

She eyed her brother but did not reply, mulling over her thoughts just a little longer. She knew the war was not truly foolish, only the way it began. Who kidnapped a royal boy, the son of an emperor, in the middle of the night to incite continental warfare? Especially when they'd sent the boy's head back to his father in Caembia? Or maybe, they had expected repercussions, wanted them, even. The thought was sobering when she recalled learning the scale of Zairia's armies, the brutal effect of their actions. If what Emperor Eohn had said was true, they were not just marching into a battle to defend one country. They were marching into a battle, the scale of which was unheard of, to defend all free countries.

Oh, God, help us.

"Shiloh?" Kyan asked, leaning in his saddle towards his sister. "Are you in there?"

Playfully, Shiloh took a swing at her brother, landing a firm punch to his nearest shoulder and proving that her mind was, in fact, present. With a grin he pulled on the reins and guided his horse to back up the procession, where her father and other brother led the steady stream of riders.

Beneath her, Amora strained and tossed her head. Her horse could not stand for a walk long; this Shiloh knew very well. She leaned forward and stroked the shiny black neck, murmuring comfort to the antsy creature. Perhaps Amora, even in her inferior horse-mind, knew where they were going. Sensed it. The mighty horse was bred to be a warhorse, as fierce as she was towering, but the scale of the encounter they were heading towards had not yet entered any of their minds. There had been battles, of course: border disputes, rebel lords who invited themselves where they did not belong, invading tribes from across the river. Shiloh had seen the light of life leave a man's eyes. She had felt the thrill, the rush of blood in her veins that only accompanied a fight. She had little taste for the loss of life, but for justice, she hungered all day long.

“The checkpoint! There it is!” The call reverberated down the line, from one rider to the next, until far behind her the shouts of triumph could be heard. They had reached the point of convergence for all the allies. She snapped out of her thoughts, shaking her head as if to dispel any lingering mind-wanderings.

Shiloh loosened her hold on the reins in anticipation. “There, see,” She leaned forward in the saddle and whispered into her horse's flickering ears. “There's your chance, Amora... go!” With the last word a sharp cry, the horse beneath her obeyed in an instant.

Shiloh found herself laughing at the exasperated look on her father's face as she flew past, a black blur with a gray-clad rider, then filled with pleasure at her brothers' playful whoops

that followed her. She could read the exasperation even in her brief look at her father's expression. But a good run for her horse and the wind whipping at her hair were not forbidden things, were they?

The land sloped downward slightly, which Amora took like lightning, thundering down the well-worn path. Shiloh clung to her horse, her stomach and chest pressed to the horse's back and neck. The trees on either side of the trail then melted away, opening up into emerald grass. Before her, Shiloh took in the sight of the checkpoint, which was made up of several-hundred tents already. As the earth inclined downwards, between rising hills, spread a vast grassland, which would soon be covered with tents, campfires, and soldiers.

Shiloh tugged on the reins slightly, to which Amora huffed but obeyed. When her horse slowed to a walk, Shiloh took in the sight of the cantonment. Beyond them, the land tilted again, heading towards the great rises and valleys, the grand hills she'd never seen but soon would.

Shiloh murmured to her mare, urging her forward at a trot. Behind her she could hear hoof beats catching up quickly.

Within a moment, Kyan and Tobias were beside her. The eldest of her brothers, with his tousled golden hair, shone like a warrior in his saddle, his brows drawn over his matching gilt eyes as he surveyed the gathering below. Kyan, with his darker hair, appeared rather brooding, his frown a crease in his sharp face. Shiloh glanced between them and assumed a bright smile. "Brothers... try not to look so excited. Save it for when we win, won't you?"

They both smiled, yet with half-hearted effort. Tobias's face quickly turned grim and Kyan's skeptical; both recognized that her jest was a mere distraction. It was an effort to lighten the dark mood that would soon descend, for war loomed ahead of them, and war was no light thing.

Dacent soldiers poured into the encampment, arousing shouts of greeting. Later, when the cheers of the gathered allies had wreathed around the arriving armies and Dacent forces had assembled their shelters, Shiloh ducked into her father's tent and surveyed it. Without a doubt it was the largest shelter in the entire camp, which housed hundreds upon thousands of men. It was befitting, as a royal tent should be. Her brothers were somewhere outside, laughing as they recalled victories from their near past. She couldn't help but wonder what kind of enemy Zairia would be. A fearsome one, to have executed an emperor's son in such a manner, and to necessitate calling on the alliance for assistance.

Shiloh bent to where her sleeping pallet had been laid out by a servant, picking up her arm guard and sliding it on whilst her mind wandered. She shouldered her quiver, wrapped her fingers around her longbow, lifting the great weapon and smoothing her fingers over the pale wood. The day she'd received the bow, it had been three times as tall as she was, and many years before she'd been able to master it. It had been specially crafted, the lion of Dacent carved in the ash wood, the string tight and true. It felt at home in her hands.

"Shiloh!" Kyan called to her as she ducked out of the large tent, drawing her gaze. Her brothers stood nearby in a small group of men.

"Is Father still at the meeting?" Shiloh asked upon her approach, fingering the bowstring absentmindedly as she glanced about. There were many soldiers present, more than she had ever seen in her entire life. Some milled about, undoubtedly restless, and some hunched over small fires in plain tunics, talking amongst themselves. Others held mock sword fights while their comrades looked on, cheering the loudest for their favorite. The rest likely took shelter in their tents until it was time to move again. Only an emperor, she supposed, could amass such a force with just a message bearing his seal.

“Yes,” Tobias replied, drawing her gaze. “I’m going to join him now. We’ll be there until dark, I assume.” With a nod, he turned and strode off, his towering form weaving between living obstacles.

Father and the lords from Dancent had ducked into a tent near the center of the clearing to meet with the leaders who had arrived the day before. Shiloh could guess at what they were discussing and was rather satisfied only Tobias had been required to attend. With all they had to consider, she was sure her brother was right, and they would be there until nightfall.

Shiloh tilted her head to look at the sky and the great, billowing clouds that cut off the sun, allowing the mass of soldiers below some reprieve from its rays. “Well...” she began, trailing off after glancing around. Two or three of the men gathered with them she could recognize from home, her brother’s friends and training partners, but her mind was somewhere else, so she merely nodded at them. “I’m going up to that ridge to take some shots. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“I’ll come,” Kyan said, uncrossing his arms and nudging her with his broad shoulder. “I need to get some shots in. Haven’t touched my bow in ages.”

Yes, well, that was because Kyan could nail a target from almost a hundred yards away with a spear and disarm anyone within striding distance with a sword. He had little need for a bow. She, on the other hand, did not have the advantage of his superior strength. Her advantages lay elsewhere.

“We’ll explore the ridge, won’t we?” Said one of the men in a joking manner—Kyan’s boyhood friend, whose name was Peter—as he eyed Shiloh with a cocky smile.

“I suppose we will,” Shiloh replied, glancing elsewhere. She had not planned for company. In fact, if she was being honest, she might have hoped against it. But then Kyan returned to her side, holding a dark oak longbow, and she relished in his steady presence.

Two of the men raced each other to the ridge. They were little more than boys, Shiloh thought as they ran laughing up the sloped land. Still, she found herself smiling when they arrived at a plateau to find the two mock-wrestling,.

Then, suddenly, a flash of movement caught her eye, somewhere in the trees at the other side of the ridge. A great ravine opened up between her group and the forest in question and they steered clear of the rocky chasm. Shiloh froze, watching, and felt Kyan at her shoulder.

“What is it?” He asked.

She could give him no sure answer. “A doe, I’m sure,” she replied quietly when she saw nothing else among the woods.

They busied themselves with a few practice shots at a tree far enough away to make it a challenge. Kyan shot lazily, scoffing when his first arrow hit the wide tree *next* to the thinner one they were aiming for and the next disappeared into the undergrowth, missing entirely. At least he had the grace to bow afterward. Tobias would have been more of a natural had he been there. He’d always been closest to her skill with a bow and arrow. As two of the other men shot, each missing the slender tree, she couldn’t help but smile.

Shiloh had rarely felt surer than with her bow in her hands. She notched the arrow and took hold of the string, straightened her back and positioned her feet, all in less than a second. She took in a slow breath in time with drawing the string back. A second later, the back of her hand painting her jaw, she let go. The arrow, its bright green tail feathers vibrating, implanted into the wood of the target tree, dead center, where she’d aimed.

“A contest, then?” Kyan said with a loud laugh. “I think I would win.”

Shiloh threw her head back and welcomed the warm rush the laugh brought.

“Obviously,” she replied with a sly smile. Standing on the outskirts of the unfamiliar forest, on a ridge with a yawning ravine, she’d never been farther from home. Though, just for a moment, sharing a grin with her brother, she rather thought she was home no matter where they went.

Shiloh strode off to retrieve her arrow, the others following. A minute later, at the request of Kyan, they all were stalking among the leaves and vegetation, searching for his second arrow. It seemed to have disappeared without a trace. It was then that Shiloh, with her body bent and her eyes trailing the forest ahead of her, saw the stranger. The man stood very near to the place where she’d seen movement across the ravine earlier, but now he emerged from the trees near where the ravine cut off and the earth came back together. He was headed their way.

He wore familiar colors and stood close enough for her to clearly see the insignia of the owl of Outamar on his chest.

“Outamar,” Shiloh whispered. One of the allied nations that had not responded to the call, and yet there was a scout from that very country. Another moment passed and two other men filtered out of the forest behind the Outamarian. Men bearing the purple colors and fox of Zairia. All three very far from their countries of origin, too close to the checkpoint.

Shiloh burst into action. She turned and shouted over her shoulder: “Zairians!” And knew without a shadow of a doubt that her brother would come. As she shouted, the Outamar scout spotted her where she stood in the trees and must have realized that he stood out in the open. Before the thought could form in his mind to turn and flee for the cover of the forest, she had her arrow notched and had let it fly. Then another, and by the time the third arrow was in place, the third scout, the second Zairian, was gone.

Shiloh took off.

“You shot me,” the man moaned, his guttural groans growing louder as she neared. She heard her brothers and their men fast approaching behind her but did not turn to look at them. Instead, she got to her knees at the side of the Outamarian and looked into his face. Unshaven, as was the custom of their people, and ashen with pain.

“It’s only your leg,” she said coldly, a pathetic attempt at comfort had that been what she was going for. “You won’t die.” She looked up at Peter, who knelt at the side of the other fallen scout, the Zairian who looked at her with hatred in his eyes. Maybe she should have aimed for a killing shot. But then, the information they needed would be lost.

Kyan glanced down at her from where he stood at her side and she could read the confusion in his eyes.

“An Outamarian.” Shiloh spoke sharply, looking to the man she knelt beside. “And a Zairian. Tell me why an ally of Emperor Eohn has not only ignored his call for aid but now sends a scout to travel with the very enemy plotting against the free world?”

The man beneath her groaned and shut his eyes. As he did so, his head tipped back and a chain around the column of his throat caught her eye. She reached forward and tugged it free, allowing the pendant to slip out. The sight of it had her reeling. This wasn’t just a scout.

“You’re an Outamarian prince,” Kyan said darkly. “Here so close to the checkpoint where the allies have gathered, but not in the company of your army... in the company of two Zairian scouts.”

“A traitor,” Shiloh snapped, fighting the urge to take hold of the arrow shaft in the downed man’s thigh and yank it out. Maybe then the man would feel inclined to respond. “Why would your king, your father, betray the age-old alliance he swore to keep?”

The man opened his eyes, the sweat on his forehead a sheen in the afternoon light. He looked at her and laughed a dark laugh, a comment regarding her gender exiting his mouth, something she would not repeat. Her patience in its thinness did not last long after that, and in a second, she had yanked the barb-tipped arrow out. A snarl was her only reward.

“Start talking,” Kyan growled, dragging the Zairian closer. “You can’t possibly think you’ll succeed if you...” He trailed off at the cold laughter from the Outamarian prince.

“Eohn is weak,” he ground out. “My father saw an opportunity and he...” a pained breath, “he took it. Caembia’s natural resources alone...” The prince’s dark eyes settled on his ripped leg, which bled freely still. His pale face was taut with rage and pain, but Shiloh stared unflinchingly into his eyes. “We are not the only ones who have joined the winning side,” he finished.

The two men could not run, not with one functioning leg each, so they were left prone in the clearing for a moment, under guard by her brother’s men. Shiloh drew Kyan with her towards the trees, where they stood with their heads bent towards one another, speaking quietly.

“There are others, he said,” Shiloh said, her voice sounding smaller than she wanted it to. Suddenly, the fact that her father had been the only king to respond to Eohn’s message made more sense. The others must have turned, no doubt in an effort to take advantage of the unique situation and come out of the coming war on a favorable end.

Their enemies would lose. They had to. *They’ll lose*, Shiloh told herself forcefully. She just had to believe it. “We’ll tell Father and Tobias when we get back to camp,” she said quietly, her eyes on their two wounded captives. “And Eohn, I suppose, when we get to his city.

“In the meantime,” Kyan muttered somberly, “We pray.”

Naturally, it was all they could do at the moment.

The Rider

By Barry Bagwell

Long and lean with saddle below
Few ticks on a clock haunt her so

Turn, turn, turn and fly between
A single chance for dull or keen

To best the pack no doubt the goal
Soon will know if steed or foal

Good fortune and luck some will say
But luck the sum of a thousand days?

Before the rooster since his birth
With countless trips from withers to earth

But if the end be bitter or sweet
Was worth the rain, the cold, the heat

Reins that calloused and dust that choked
The blood from both that bandage soaked

For all the days of toil and sweat
Can't be bought or made with bet

The victor knows the only pride
is not in gold but in the ride

Fifty Years On

By Janet Ryan

Folks forget...

It was a time of division –

politics, lifestyle, war,

politics, fashion, art,

politics – always politics –

A time of division –

Them, us, you, me,

with borders so near and tempting

yet so far, so incredibly far apart.

That “me,” that “us,” that “you”

who watched together unbreathing

as they stepped out of our world

onto that dusty, airless, breathless place –

Was that “me” the same me,

that “us” the same us,

who stand today hostile and bitter,

conflicted on so many issues?

Yet then we stopped, joined, amazed –
 paused our dissent,
 stood united in wonder for a moment,
 unified beneath our moon.

And now, I wonder
 what awe-filled or awful event
 will we need to once more
 meet and become an “us?”

Remember, friends...
it is not too late.

Somali Nights

By Chuck Chapman

Halimo turned her head this way and that, looking to see if anyone were within earshot. Seeing no one, she lowered it almost to the ground level with her friend Salma. Halimo whispered, “Are you prepared for tonight?”

Salma rolled her huge eyes with the impossibly long lashes. “Why are you whispering, Halimo? There is no one here but us.”

“I know,” Halimo answered, speaking normally now. “But that busy-body Ayan just seems to be everywhere. She seems to hear things people are only thinking.”

“You are right about that. Yes, I’m ready. I’ve been running a little extra lately to shed a few pounds, the eggs were all laid last week so that’s not a problem, and I’ve located just the right hill,” Salma assured her.

“I hope so,” Halimo said, doubt tinging her voice. “That last one almost did us in. Just wasn’t enough of a drop on the other side.”

“As you’ve reminded me almost every day for a year now,” Salma said testily.

Halimo scratched at the dry desert pavement with her large clawed foot. “In know, and I’m sorry if I’ve been a pest about it. It’s just that I want it to be just right this year.”

Salma bobbed her head up and down a bit. “Of course you do. So do I! I promise, you’ll love this one.”

A sudden puff of dust told them they were no longer alone. “Good morning, ladies.” The fake, self-absorbed voice brought their heads up to a more usual level as Farah strutted up.

“How good of you to see me today.”

“Like we have a choice,” Salma said, demonstrating once again her eye-rolling ability.

“Come, come, Salma, we all have choices. That’s why I’m here,” Farah replied.

“And what does your being here have to do with choices?” Halimo asked.

“Ah, Halimo, I thought I heard a kudu, but it wasn’t a kudu, it was you-you,” Farah quipped.

“And I thought I heard a dik-dik, and I did-did!” Halimo spat back, laughing uproariously as she walked off.

“Insufferable...,” muttered Farah.

“Don’t let her put you off,” Salma reassured him. “She was hatched on the wrong side of the nest.”

“That whole family... Oh, don’t get me started. Anyway,” Farah sidled up next to Salma, “I hoped you’d allow me to escort you to the Spring Ball tonight.”

Salma moved to put a bit of space between her and the sidling Farah. “Oh Farah, you know I’d love to, if Halimo and I didn’t have plans tonight.”

Farah wheeled around 360 degrees. “You two!” he said testily. “What is it with you? You always seem to have your own thing going. People talk, you know.”

Salma replied, “That may be, but at least in our case we’re worth talking about.”

“Ouch,” said Farah, responding to the dig. “I think I rate at least a little serious talk around here.”

“You do, you do,” said Salma. “And believe me, I would tell you ‘yes’ if I didn’t already have plans.

Farah lowered his head dejectedly. “Al lright, Salma, if that’s the way it’s gotta be. Maybe at next month’s Solstice Soirée?”

“It’s already on my calendar,” Salma said, fluttering her eyelashes as she walked away.

Later, as the Sun had completed its daily rendezvous with the horizon, and the first quarter Moon was shining as brightly as a first quarter moon could, Halimo and Salma had a rendezvous of their own, away from prying eyes and listening ears.

“Well, it’s a fine evening for it,” Salma said optimistically. “Just the right amount of wind from just the right direction.”

“Thanks for the weather report,” Halimo quipped. “Now where’s this ideal place you were talking about?”

“It’s about an hour towards the Moon there,” Salma gestured.

“An hour!” Halimo exclaimed. “You didn’t say anything about hiking!”

Salma shrugged. “If you want to be successful, you do what you gotta do.”

This time it was Halimo who rolled *her* eyes. “Death by a thousand clichés, is that what it’s going to be?”

“Well I hope there’s not going to be any kind of deaths tonight,” Salma retorted. “Now let’s get going. Don’t want the grass growing under our feet.”

“A thousand clichés. There’s number two,” Halimo muttered under her breath.

As the one-mile hike drew near its close, Salma began instructing Halimo about what was coming next. “Now there’s a precise point we’ll run towards as fast as we can. You follow me so you’ll go in the right direction. Just as I get to a large rock, you’ll see me jump. You jump when you get to that rock too. Now what happens next is going to throw you into a panic, but you have to remember one thing: keep your wings stretched straight out to either side, and whatever you do, DON’T...TRY...TO...FLAP...THEM!”

“I-I-I’m not sure I like the sound of this,” Halimo declared.

“You want to make history, don’t you?” Salma asked firmly.

“Yes,” came the reply.

“You want to be the second to do something never done before, don’t you?” Salma continued.

“I’d rather be first.”

“But if you were first, you wouldn’t be first, because if you went first, you’d fail first, get it?” Salma said impatiently.

“No,” Halimo said, “but I’ll take your word for it. Can’t you just fill me in on some more details? This all sounds kind of sketchy to me.”

“If I told you more, you wouldn’t do it because you’d be too scared to,” Salma replied. “Just trust me, and you’ll have a great time, and make history, too. Now look, we’re here. See that rock up there, pointing up and a little to the right?”

“No, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“You’ll see it when you get close enough. It’s the biggest rock out there, and it’ll be the one where I jump. You jump there, too,” Salma reminded her. “And no matter what you do, do what I told you to do?”

“Keep my wings stretched straight out to either side,” Halimo said in a sing-song way.

“And whatever you do, don’t do what?” Salma said, ignoring her tone.

“Try to flap them.”

“That’s exactly right,” Salma said, glowing at her student’s perfect recitation. “Just remember, doing it will be a lot harder than saying it, because you’ll want to panic.

JUST...DON’T!”

“All right, all right,” Halimo said, barely disguising her exasperation. “Can we just get on with it. I can feel the growing grass tickling the bottom of my feet.”

“Very funny, smarty britches. All right, if you’re sure you’re ready, let’s go,” Salma said in an encouraging tone.

“Let’s, uh, go,” Halimo replied, still not so sure about the whole thing. But there was no more time for uncertainty. Salma was already almost at top speed running toward the rock. Halimo quickly followed. “Wait for meeee!”

Salma reached the rock, and jumped. Moments later, so did Halimo. And what Salma said was right. She almost panicked at what she saw—nothing! Nothing but an inky blackness that seemed to go on forever. It wasn’t a hill; it was a cliff! Ahead she saw two white, fluttering shapes ahead and below her, which she made out to be Salma.

Halimo felt herself dropping, but at the same time going faster and faster. As she watched Salma, she noticed her lift her head slightly and begin to rise, so she did the same. It worked! The two of them were soaring through the night sky faster than either of them had thought possible. They were making history in two different ways tonight. Not only were they the very first ostriches to successfully fly unaided, but they were now the two fastest ostriches that ever lived!

Then a thought occurred to Halimo. So far, this had been fairly easy. Too easy, really. Wonder why no one had ever tried this before? “This can’t be *that* easy,” she thought, until she remembered one last detail which Salma failed to go over: How would they land? Didn’t you have to survive in order for your attempt to count? Didn’t you have to survive the attempt in order to be able to tell anyone about it? Even if they don’t believe you?

Realizing her predicament, Halimo decided to do the only thing she could do: Trust Salma, and do whatever Salma did. “After all,” Halimo thought, “she had it successfully planned this far, *surely* she thought out the part about coming down again.”

And, she had, right down to her guess that Halimo would follow her down. They were near the end of the flight path which physics determined they must take, even in a work of fiction. Ahead, it appeared as though there were two moons; but there weren't. The lower of the two bright shapes was a reflection of the other in the only body of water within miles of this part of Somalia. Built by herdsman to catch runoff from rain for their animals, it would provide the intrepid pair of no-longer flightless birds with their best chance for a safe landing.

Salma let herself drop as much as she dared, until she was almost skimming the rough landscape, with Halimo coming along behind her. Just as it seemed she would scrape her belly on a boulder, she reached the water. Raising her wings into a “V” shape, she sank onto the surface, and made history for the third time tonight: She became the world's first body-surfing ostrich. Just as she hoped, she found that she could float; and by paddling her long legs, she could move around in the water.

Quickly she turned around to watch Halimo's approach. What she saw would have made all the blood drain from her face if such could be said of ostriches. Halimo was coming in too low. “Lift your head! Lift your head!” she yelled, and about that time, that's what Halimo did. Except she did too much. As fast as she was going, she wasn't going fast enough to climb very much. But she did climb, just enough that her wings stalled and lost their lift, and down she came onto the water with a resounding splash. She had also made history that night: She was the first ostrich to perform a belly-flop in a body of water.

Shaken, but stirred by the excitement of her accomplishments, Halimo just floated a minute, collecting her wits, her wings laid out on the water's surface on either side like outriggers. Salma paddled over to her. "Are you all right, Halimo? Are you all right, dear?" she said with no little nervousness in her voice.

Coughing a few times, Halimo replied, "I guess so. Do you know what we just did?"

"I have a pretty good idea, since I planned it," Salma replied.

"Well, that too. But we did something else tonight," Halimo said.

"What else?" Salma asked.

Halimo replied, "We proved the truth of the old Somali proverb: 'Duufaanku habeenkii wuu daaqaa.' 'The ostrich flies at night.'"

"You almost got it right," Salma said. "Almost."

"Why?" asked Halimo, as indignantly as an ostrich could be while floating in a livestock tank.

"It should be, 'Daqsiyadu waxay duulaan habeenkii,'" Salma declared.

"Of course, honey, you're right: 'The ostrichES fly at night,'" Halimo said.

"Yes, they do," Salma agreed. And they both burst out laughing, and began using their wings to splash each other beneath the slowly sinking Moon of a Somali night such as Earth had never seen before.

Saving Me

By Priscila Espinosa

There was a distant muffling sound that was gradually getting louder. It was voices talking, but there were too many and so disoriented that I couldn't understand anything. I couldn't see anything, and I felt extremely weak. I wanted to at least stretch, but it seemed that I couldn't pinpoint where my limbs were. I couldn't even muster a simple moan for I couldn't even feel my mouth. "Why can't I feel anything? Why can't I see? Where are the sounds coming from and why can't I understand them?"

My anxiety was spiking up, but it felt like I couldn't even begin my hyperventilating. I couldn't take a deep breath to calm down because I couldn't expand my chest to do so. "Nothing is there! Where is my body?" My mind seemed to be the only thing working, but all my senses were gone. "Am I dead? Is THIS what death feels like? Your mind is awake, but it has lost all feeling in everything? No heaven or hell, no reincarnation or wandering the earth as a ghostly mist? Just darkness with only your mind awake? No, no, no...."

The muffled sounds were getting even louder. "I should be happy to still have my hearing, but not to understand anything is even worse. What happened to me? I can't even remember how I got here in the first place. I want to scream, I want cry, I want to desperately breathe, but I can't. My thoughts are nothing but fear for this is how I am going to spend the rest of eternity, stuck with my tormenting thoughts, soundlessly screaming for help in this dark state."

One loud muffled voice shouted, and the others went quiet. Only the one was talking, and I only wished I could understand. It was like I was trapped underwater and someone was just

speaking to me on the other side. His talking was soon interrupted by a loud ringing in my ears, and I wanted to cover them to make it stop. I wish I could cry....

Soon it stopped abruptly, and a male voice spoke.

“Abby, can you hear me?”

“What? I mean, yes, I can but what’s happening?”

“Can you hear me, girlie?” he asked again. Why does his voice sound familiar?

Another male spoke, “Can she hear us, Ash?”

“She should....” It was a female voice this time.

“Can she move?”

“We are working on it.”

“We need to get her breathing.” This one was a different male, but his voice was gentle, “How much longer until we don’t need the tube?”

“Me and Ashley are working on it, Blade. It’s not easy fixing her organs, you know.”

That was a different female with another recognizable voice. All these voices were familiar to me. Who they belong to was something in the back of my mind.

“Just keep talking to her, Blade. If Ashley says her hearing is back, then fill her in on what’s happening. Her mind is working, so she can understand all of us now. You can keep her calm while we work,” Male #1 instructed.

“Abby... you have nothing to worry about. Okay?” his voice was soft and kind. “I know this is a frightening moment, but we are all here and we are helping you to wake up. There was

an accident when you were on your way to work – but it wasn't your fault. Don't think that, okay? You are still alive and currently in the hospital, okay?"

He paused, and all I heard was the sound of the others talking in hushed voices. I was confused and scared. I wanted to move, to breathe, to do something. The information he told me didn't make sense, and I desperately wanted to ask him questions.

“Mike is keeping us updated on your health and progress. You remember him? Mike, the tech guru and one who knows all? He mainly talks to Tyler, and Tyler just notified us about what he said. But don't worry; we are all here. You'll wake up, I promise....”

His voice was gentle as he fed me information. Blade? Right? Somehow his voice calmed my anxiety down. I was still terrified about what was happening to me, and maybe I was losing my mind and hearing voices. What does he mean that everyone is helping?

Blade continued, “Aside from healing you, our focus is to wake you up. You've been in a coma for two weeks now.”

I'm sorry, what? “

“Ashley and Beauty are in charge of healing your body while Lucas and Tyler are healing your brain. Time is a bit weird around here; sooner or later it's going to be a month when it only felt like 10 minutes. But don't worry; we are here to help you. We won't let you down; never have, never will.”

I felt love and safety as he spoke. He continued to assure me that everything was going to be okay. Of course, I was not surprised by this. This is how Blade always was –

I remembered him. Oh my, I remembered him. I was a struggling journalist at... some company I can't remember. Blade Grace was the main protagonist in a book idea I could never seem to get myself to write. These friends of his, they were in it too... but I don't remember their role....

Blade was the typical bad boy, a soft spot teen who comes from a rich, loving family with five siblings. He was amazing at piano and had a love of scarves. He was very charismatic and tended to fall hard for anyone who managed to get past his hard exterior and understood his mind like no other.

There was joy welling up inside me about the fact that I remembered small details about my life. I wanted to jump with glee or at least laugh at the return of a memory. However, there was a now growing pain in my chest. The thought of feeling something was entering my mind and I should have been happy, but the pain was growing. It was becoming uncomfortable, and the fact that I couldn't breathe was making it worse.

“Her lungs! They're healed,” Female #2 shouted with excitement while Female #1 squealed.

I could feel my chest now, and it was burning up. I desperately wanted to breathe, but it felt like someone was preventing me from doing so. I wanted to thrash around or gasp, do something, but I couldn't feel the rest of my body yet.

“They will remove the tube now, right?” Lucas asked. Wait, Lucas? Lucas! Blade's best friend.

The feeling of my mouth came back, and I quickly gasped. Fresh air entered my lungs and took away the burning. It felt like a cool blanket was wrapped around me as my heart

returned back to normal. The voices all cheered and laughed when I took my first breath, and their joy was rubbing off on me so I couldn't help but smile softly.

“Well that's one issue down,” Lucas said. “Is her face healing well, Beauty?”

“She is going to be beautiful as always,” her voice had great confidence when she answered. Beauty... Beauty, Beauty, Beauty.... Yes! Another friend of Blade. My love of Beauty and the Beast is what created her, but I was still having trouble on her name, so I settled for Beauty for the time being. She was the model friend, the definition of a gorgeous woman. Girls envied her while boys adored her, and she never let her looks get to her. She was humble, knowing that brains were what would get her far in life, and she was the best mechanic there ever was.

Lucas happened to be Blade's best friend since middle school. He was the parent friend in the group, despite being very childish personally. He did his best to make sure everyone was responsible and reminded them of their important duties. He took care of everyone when they were sick or too drunk at a party, and he had a great love for each friend. He also matched scarves with Blade while he made fun of them at the same time.

“She is remembering more,” Lucas said.

“Meaning...?” Female #1 asked whom I think Lucas said was Ash?

“She may have just short-term memory loss or just no memory of the crash when she wakes up. In other words, she will still remember her family, friends, and other important details like work and such.”

“And her talents?” Blade asked.

“If she is remembering us, then her writing skills along with photography, piano, and baking will return. My main focus, however, is just making sure she can talk, walk, read, anything that she truly needs.” It was the other male voice. Blade said his name was Tyler?

“How long has it been?”

“Mike said its three weeks now, but she is making excellent progress.”

Mike was the information guy, like Blade pointed out. He wasn't part of this friend group but still someone they could rely on. He was closer to Tyler for they were roommates at this private school. He knew all about anyone and anything. I believed Tyler was the smart one in the group but carried the role of being the trustworthy friend, the one who will hold no judgment when you are telling your secrets and will offer the best advice he could give. His talents included singing, dancing, painting, and knitting.

From my understanding, each friend had a role in my healing process. I could now also feel my toes and fingers and remember more of my life outside of this coma. I remembered my two siblings and father, as well as my real friends. My job, my apartment, and my hobbies as Tyler stated were writing, photography, and piano. Since Blade had reassured that everyone was working hard to wake me up, I could take a guess on who was in charge of what.

Blade was charismatic. He knew how to talk to people, meaning he could defuse an argument in just a few words. He knew at some point I would start to freak out, so his words comforted me to prevent fear from tormenting me. Lucas had a great love for his friends and family, so he must be helping regain my memories of my life and the love of my family and friends. Tyler was very creative and smart so his role was self-explanatory. Aside from making sure I had my motor skills working, he was making sure I kept in touch with my creativity while

Mike kept him updated on what was happening in reality. Beauty must have been healing the outside, making sure any cuts and bruises healed nicely and I looked “beautiful” as she claimed I am. That just leaves... Ashley.

Blade’s adoptive sister, Lucas’s girl, and owner of a bunny. I remembered Ashley had a rough upbringing in life before joining the Grace family at age 10. She was tough and knew how this world worked and rarely took off her mask to show her true vulnerability and feelings. Due to her rough childhood, she knew a thing or two about the human body and how it healed. Her role was fixing the interior damage the crash has done. My lungs, heart, bones, everything.

“She is remembering more. She knows who you are now, Ashley,” Blade said.

“Oh really? In that the case. Then why am I British? I’ve always wondered that.”

“Why question it? I love that British accent of yours,” Lucas flirted.

Tyler chimed in, “I think the more important question would be why is Beauty afraid of frogs?”

I heard Blade chuckle as Beauty answered, “Listen, we don’t judge my fears. It just be like that sometimes.”

I wanted to chuckle at this conversation, but even though I had feeling in my mouth, I couldn’t move it or find my voice. It was a process, and I just needed to be patient. Besides, I would be a bit freaked out if I could speak to them. They were supposed to be made up characters from an idea that I was too afraid to make it a reality.

And yet... maybe it’s the concussion that’s making me hear them, but the fact is that these five people are doing everything they can to make sure I wake up. Even if I am losing my

mind, it's nice to know and hear these voices tell me that they are fixing me. That they are here for me and leaving me alone with my own thoughts. I have heard stories of people in comas hearing their families talk to them, but I have yet to hear anyone from the outside. I have no doubt someone is with me while I lie on the bed, but I am just as grateful to have these five friends with me during this time.

“How much longer, Tyler?” Blade’s voice was quiet this time and it could be the person who was beside my bed stroking my hair, but it almost felt like it was Blade’s gentle touch.

“Mike says she is close to waking up now. We have done as much as we can do.”

What? Really? How long has it been?

“A month now,” Ashley answered. Can they understand me? “Yes, but because you are unconscious, you can’t answer really.”

I took a deep breath, welcoming the air, knowing that there was no pain in my body thanks to Ashley. I had no doubt Beauty did an excellent job on making sure there were only little cuts and bruises. I have trusted that Lucas and Tyler made sure my brain worked, and Blade made sure to keep me relaxed throughout this entire process. I wished I could speak to them, to thank them for helping me, for being here when I needed someone. Maybe it was time I make them a reality...

“Ooo, if you do make us, can I be an expert at sword fighting?” Lucas asked.

“Why do you need to know how to swing a sword? Aren’t we in high school,” I can hear the confusion in Ashley’s voice. I too would like to know why he wants to fight with a sword.

“Because why not? I think that’ll be cool.” I can practically see him bouncing on his feet at the thought of wielding a sword for fun.

“My request is can you make me and Tyler a thing now? I am tired of waiting,” Beauty huffed.

“Wait, what? You like me?”

“Yes? Idiot, have you not figured that out?” I was on the fence about making her and Tyler together. I guess this was a sign to make it happen. The question was how do I proceed with that?

My head started to feel a bit fuzzy and everyone went silent.

“Mike says she is waking up...,” Tyler whispers.

“All right... Abby, I think I can speak for all of us that we do care. We really do love you, and we really hope that you will be brave enough to write us one day. We won’t rush, but we look forward to what you will come up with. Just know that whether we become real on paper or stay in this mind of yours, you are not alone. We are here for you and we love you.”

I felt five soft kisses on my forehead as my head felt heavier by the second. I didn’t want them to leave, but at the same time I was ready to wake up. I vowed to myself that I would make them real and hoped that they knew how much they meant to me.

There was now a pounding headache forming, and I groaned. My senses were coming back now. I smelled medicine and felt a semi-scratching blanket over my legs. My back was killing me, and my neck felt stiff while my mouth was dry. My eyelids felt heavy, but I fought to open them, and I heard a small gasp.

When I did, I was greeted by a dim room with a light on next to me and my father sitting next to my bed. He had small tears in his eyes while he held my hand, and his face showed great happiness to see his oldest daughter wake from a one-month coma.

I smiled softly at him and gave his hand a gentle squeeze, “Hi, Dad.”

On A Bench

By Desiree' Stipp-Bethune

My life was pretty ordinary. I had married a preacher man, lived in a house next to the church, and walked my kids to and from school every day. I did dishes, cleaned house, shuttled children to doctor's appointments, and shopped for necessities. Each week typically looked like the one before and the one after, with only the weather changing. I had made a friend on the walk to and from school. Jenn lived a block into my walk, and one of her sons was a classmate of one of mine. They became friends, we became friends, and we shared our rather ordinary lives with each other. She talked about gardening and cleaning. I talked about my distaste for both.

When we got to school in the afternoon, we sat on a bench outside the school, waiting for our little ones to emerge after their day of education. A small crowd of other parents was there, too, women wearing yoga pants and a few men with expensive haircuts. The conversations were mostly predictable. Once, a father came into the crowd of chattering women asking if anyone could recommend a good vacuum cleaner that was cheap. His died, and he was looking for a quick replacement. One woman came with her preschooler dressed as a different super hero every day. Everyone seemed like me, aside from the fact that you wouldn't catch me dead in yoga pants.

Everyone seemed like me, except one. A woman who sat on the bench Jenn and I shared seemed different from the rest. Unlike us, she grinned with unconcern. She was exotic in some way, with no care how she was perceived by the crowd. Her grin appeared to hide a secret, a very interesting secret. Because Jenn was the extrovert of the two of us, she managed to pry this woman open. She was, indeed, different from the rest of us.

She told all kinds of stories about herself. Such diverse stories that sometimes I wondered if she was just making them up. Here I was, in my preacher's-wife, three-kids-at-school life, and this woman had been all over the place, having all kinds of adventures. I must admit, I was envious. Jenn never seemed so. She just seemed interested in finding more out about this woman.

The stories she told Jenn usually started with, "Did I ever tell you about the time I..." and then she would describe something unusual, or curious, or beautiful, or amazing. Even when Jenn had heard the story before, she would say she hadn't, because she knew the woman would tell the story in a different and maybe even more interesting way. The woman never contradicted herself, and her stories were so detailed that I realized they were true.

Did I ever tell you about when I dated the classical guitarist? I was so in lust with him! His father was the manager of the Civic Center in Portland, and we got free tickets to see different shows there, and even in other cities, as a perk. I saw Bonnie Raitt, Winton Marsalis, and Lyle Lovett, all free. He took me into his father's office one night, and showed me a drawer filled with tickets to an Elvis concert. The next show Elvis was slated to do was in Portland, but he died before he could do the show. Most people returned their tickets to get their money back, but these tickets were collector's items, priceless. My boyfriend gave me two of them.

Did I ever tell you about the time I lived in the convent? I was there for a summer, trying to decide if I wanted to become a nun. The sisters all had jobs, and one of them was doing all of our laundry. One day, early in the summer, I came "home" to find my underwear blowing in the wind on a line on the front porch. A friend of mine told me to wear red lacy jobbies so that passersby would wonder what the nuns were up to.

Did I ever tell you about how I camped in a grocery store parking lot in New York City in 1977? My mother parked our camper across the street from a drive-in theatre showing Star Wars. Though we couldn't hear much, we had already seen the movie, so we knew what was going on. Star Wars was unlike anything we had ever seen before, and we couldn't get enough. After each day of sightseeing in the city, having taken the subway from this part of town to Manhattan, Mom would pop us popcorn and we would sit outside in lawn chairs and watch the movie.

Did I ever tell you about the time I lived on an Indian reservation? The first time I went to the post office, I was so uncomfortable. I walked in the front door, and the hallway was flanked by Indians all the way down, sitting in chairs visiting with each other. All conversation stopped when I walked in, all eyes on me, the white woman. I decided that I would mail my letters in the blue US Post Office box outside so I wouldn't have to endure that anymore. After about two months, the post master approached me and said, "Are you the one mailing letters in the outside mailbox?" "The one" were words that instantly unnerved me. I was the ONLY one that mailed letters outside? "Kids are throwing fire crackers in the mailbox and burning your mail. From now on, mail your stuff inside."

Did I ever tell you I was an oceanographer? On one of our research cruises, I was standing with my back to the railing, talking with some of the other scientists, when all of their eyes popped out and jaws dropped. I heard a wet blowing behind me, and when I turned, I saw what they saw. A minke whale had come right up beside our boat. It was spraying me while it blew through its blow hole. It was so near, I could see the texture of its skin.

Did I ever tell you about the time I camped in Yellowstone? Every morning I woke up to another foot of fallen snow. One morning I woke up with an elk nibbling on my tent rope.

Riding waves in Malibu, hiking on buttes in New Mexico, celebrating St. Patrick's Day in Chicago, cross country skiing in the backwoods of Maine, tenting in a sandstorm in Nevada, picnicking in Monet's Garden in France, eating melted chocolate in Death Valley...she seemed to have been everywhere in the country and even beyond. This woman's tales of her adventures seemed never-ending. My life seemed so pitiable compared to hers. The only consolation I had was I had never seen her children. Did she even HAVE children?!

Yesterday, as I was getting ready to walk my children to school, I looked in the mirror. And I caught a glimpse of that other woman. The one who had had all the adventures. I reminded myself that that woman was ME. ME before I was married and settled down and had children. I had been that adventurer. And though I was a different woman then, she had brought me to the place I am now. I grinned, the unconcerned and secretive grin of that woman. This woman.

What Night Means

By Donna Henson

For some, night means welcome day's end
and rest within,
a peaceful place,
and change of pace.

Yet, while for some night time brings rest,
to give their best
through that same time
night workers shine.

Unrecognized through day, at night
they bring to light
the work required
to keep an economy fired.

Night's work, whether at home, in stores,
clinic doors, or factory floors,
supports our life
both day and night.

The Trophy

By Marilyn Joyner

I pulled into the parking lot of the doomed building known to me as Main Tower. I just sat there looking straight ahead, not wanting to raise my eyes to the third floor--the floor that was witness to a range of my emotions. Had it been three years? Yes, it had and not once had I come back. I would not be back now except for the pressure from my science buds.

There were six of us, four boys and two girls. We were the science team. We went to the state contest our senior year and won first place. We were determined to win and held many study sessions in that third-floor science lab. It was fun. Mr. Garrett, our instructor, was always there. He ordered pizza and his wife sent cakes and cookies. We devised games and songs to remember elements and formulas. Winning was so great. We were the first team to bring home the science trophy. We didn't want it placed in the trophy case downstairs. It had to be in the science lab, our room.

How quickly our joy disappeared when Anna, one of our team, was found dead in that very room. Homicide we were told. A murder that remains unsolved.

I glanced up. The third-floor window openings were covered with aging plywood. The last time I was here I saw gaping holes with a few wooden fragments. That was the day after the explosion and the day after my graduation. At the time, I did not know that Anna's body lay in the wreckage of our room. I said I would never come back. But here I am to view Main Tower before the structure's demolition.

The explosion that occurred that night rendered the entire third floor unusable. Repair costs were excessive and a new building was already in the planning stage. So that floor was

locked and never used again. I often wondered if anything was salvaged. What about our trophy? Was it removed?

After they found Anna, I just wanted to run away. I wanted to go as far from this place as I could. I had planned a carefree summer before starting college in the fall, but opted instead to start right away.

My eyes were fixed on the third floor, but my mind was seeing the undisturbed science lab. I saw Anna, Wendy, Michael, Pete, David and myself reciting, answering, and memorizing. Such happy times. And the trophy later sat on the shelf in the front of the room.

I had to see inside the room. The structure would be gone soon. I ran to the new main building. The doors were locked. The school year was over and no one was around. I called Mr. Garrett's number and found out that he had moved to another school district. We chatted for some time. After several tries, I got in touch with the principal. He remembered me and after much persuasion, he told me to meet him at the school around noon the next day.

I went to my parents' house and for the first time spoke of Anna. Mom gave me a box containing all of the newspaper clippings about Anna. She said that she knew one day I would be ready to read them.

Mom told me to invite my science buds over for supper. Pete and Michael would be there to eat and Wendy and David would arrive a little later. I began to read the clippings.

Later, when everyone had arrived, I brought up Anna. A silence followed. I told about meeting the principal the next day and suggested we all go and look at the room one more time. We discussed the explosion and tried to find a reason for Anna being in the lab. We all had been questioned many times by the police but this was the first time that our group expressed their

thoughts together. We figured the reason for Mr. Garrett's leaving was similar to ours. He just wanted to get away.

We read and reread the clippings. We called the detective that investigated the case. We asked if he knew what caused the explosion. It was in his notes he said and he agreed to meet us the next morning at eight. He was as anxious as us to find more clues to the murder.

The next morning, we all arrived early at police headquarters. Detective Simmons informed us that the lab showed that it was probably hydrogen peroxide and sulfuric acid that caused the explosion. Someone knew what they were doing, and it wasn't Anna.

When we asked who the possible subjects in the murder were, he said all of us were on the list, as well as Mr. Garrett. The list also included Anna's former boyfriend, Adam. The police had considered someone looking for valuables, but there were more of these items on the lower floors. Also, the lab should have been locked. None of us admitted back then that we had a spare key hidden under a ceiling tile in the hallway, but revealed so now. We were chastised for omitting this information and the detective wanted us to show him the spot in question. Detective Simmons would accompany us to the visit with the principal.

At noon, the six of us arrived at Main Tower. The principal, Mr. Cleveland, was waiting. He looked at me and questioned the group accompanying me. Detective Simmons assured him that this was a legitimate mission. Mr. Cleveland unlocked the doors and we immediately went to the third floor. We found a chair and checked the ceiling tile for the key. It was not there. Each of us searched in the crevices. Definitely no key. We went in. It was our custom to leave the key under our trophy while we were in the room. The trophy was still on the shelf. The detective lifted it and there was the key. Anna must have opened the door. But why.

We knew that Anna had broken up with her boyfriend about a month before graduation. It was something she had been planning to do. She went to the graduation dance with her brother's friend, Johnny Rhodes. Since he was driving from college and would get in late, they met at the dance. Afterwards, Johnny left in his car and went to his mother's house. Anna told him that she had a stop to make and would then go home. Anna's parents knew she would be in late and went to bed. Her brother was at a movie.

The explosion occurred about one o'clock in the morning. Fire trucks arrived and put out the fire. Everyone thought Anna was asleep in her bed. Due to the debris and the darkness, emergency personnel did not discover Anna's body until the next morning. It was also the next morning when Anna's parents noticed her car missing and checked her room to find it empty.

Police determined that Anna was killed by a blow on the head before the explosion. Mr. Garrett and the five team members were suspected since the person that caused the explosion knew where the chemicals were located and knew what the results of the hydrogen peroxide and sulfuric acid combination. Other members of the science labs, current and prior, were also questioned. The ex-boyfriend was eliminated since he had never been in the lab.

Detective Simmons walked back to the trophy, snapped some pictures, then lifted the trophy to take a picture of the key. That's when he noticed a white post-it note stuck to the underside of the trophy. He took another picture, then removed the paper. On it was written, "MEET ME AT THE LAB AFTER THE DANCE. LL".

He put the trophy, key, and note in an evidence bag and asked Mr. Cleveland to lock up. He told the five of us to go home. He and Mr. Cleveland then went to the principal's office.

Two days later, a front page spread in the newspaper announced that Larry Lavine had been arrested for Anna's murder. After interrogation he had confessed.

Anna had won the sixth spot on the science team over Larry. Apparently, he held a grudge or thought she owed him something because of this. Anna was a trusting soul and probably did not think that Larry was harmful. Out of habit, she had put the key in our hiding place along with the note.

Mr. Cleveland called me when the trophy was returned. I gathered the rest of the science team and we went to the school to add our trophy to the display case. Then we placed the key under it.

* * *

I admire you

By Crystal Carodine

I admire you

How do you hold the pain inside

But never talk about the time you also died?

You tutor us so that we can become better.

Even though your life also has stormy weather.

I admire you

Single mothers. I tip my hat off to you.

No one realizes what you really go through

To feed your children and keep them safe from harm.

Anyone can become a mother but being a mother is hard!

I admire you

For all the soldiers that fought the good fight.

I salute y'all because you gave up your life so that we can be free.

BEING A SOLDIER IS BIGGER THAN WHAT PEOPLE MAKE IT OUT TO BE.

LEAVING YOUR WIFE AND CHILDREN BEHIND

PUTTING YOUR OWN LIFE ON THE LINE

NOT KNOWING IF YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE IT BACK.

SOLDIERS DESERVE MORE THAN JUST A PAT ON THE BACK .

I ADMIRE YOU.

I RESPECT ALL THE FATHERS THAT TAKE CARE OF THEIR CHILDREN

BECAUSE IT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE

BETWEEN A BOY BECOMING A MAN

OR A BOY BECOMING A STATISTIC.

I ADMIRE YOU

FOR JUMPING OUT THAT CAR WINDOW WHEN THAT CAR CRASHED.

SOMEHOW YOU WERE ABLE TO THINK FAST, AND I
AM HAPPY YOU'RE STILL ALIVE.

EVEN THOUGH YOU ENDURE MUCH PAIN NOW
GOD SAVED YOUR LIFE JUST IN THE NICK OF TIME.

I ADMIRE YOU

FOR ALL MY PEOPLE THAT SUDDENLY GET THAT CALL YOU DON'T WANT TO
HEAR.

BUT FOR YOUR FAMILY YOU STAY STRONG

EVEN WHEN THE DOCTORS SAY YOU DON'T HAVE LONG

YOU SLOWLY GET YOUR FAMILY PREPARED WHEN THAT TIME IS NEAR.

I ADMIRE YOU.

TO ALL THE LEADERS THAT HAVE FOUGHT A LONG HARD FIGHT FOR OUR
FREEDOM AND OUR PEACE.

I ADMIRE YOU

FOR THE YOUNG GIRL THAT IS AFRAID TO USE HER VOICE BECAUSE IT HAS BEEN
TAKEN AWAY FROM HER BY MAN.

I ENCOURAGE YOU TO RISE UP AND TAKE A STAND.

I ADMIRE YOU

For all the people I have spoken of today. You were in my poem because you made a difference
in a special way.

Old Red

By Vanessa Williams

Oh my God.

I am about to be free from this miserable thing some call a life. Fifty years of something close to hell. Things have finally taken a turn for my benefit.

I'm going up to Mars to live on the colony. "What?" "What colony?" you say. Well, let me just tell you all about it.

My great grandpa knew that his children and their children would finish destroying the Earth. So, in his infinite wisdom, he worked with some very rich people, whom I cannot name for fear of excommunication, as in meet my grave swiftly if I name them, to purchase my very own house on Mars. Yes, house. I will not be confined in some room on a space station. I will have my own mini-station with everything I need.

My house will have its own water and water purifiers. I will have my own gardens and servants to tend them and prepare my meals. I will have my own power grids so that I can listen to the songs on my many playlists, depending on my mood. I think I'll play "Survivor" a lot because after all, I will have survived. I'm leaving all those who have stolen my first 50 behind me. I'll finally have time to read, write, meditate, dance, and be leisurely. I can't wait!

My first 50 weren't all bad. I didn't have children because the world already has too many. I enjoyed a fruitful career but found that I was often bored. I moved from this to that and back again and finally landed in a coveted role by many. A role defined by my husband's calling. Who knows, I may have been great like my grandpa if I could have stayed long enough to make a mark, my own mark. I was a top-notch wife. I did it all and gave lessons to others as

to how to do it. Ah, the people business. The good life supported by the faithful business. Helping people all the time. This class, that class, Wednesday night, Sunday morning (twice), Sunday night. OHHHHHHHH, Sister will you pray for me? Pray for my cat? My spoiled brat? Trouble is, nobody helped me. Users, every last one of them. That's ok; I left all of them something special. I just cannot stay long enough to see the results of my last gift to the faithful.

I'm going to Mars. I'll have all the help I need with no one there that I have to help, pray for, or lie to. I'll pretend to sunbathe underneath my special lights. Try my hand at growing a rosebush. Do you think it will bloom on Old Red? We'll see. I'll have to send you an email. Wait, will email work on Mars? Well, who would I talk to anyway? All the people I helped probably never bothered to think of me again once they got what they wanted. Ah life, 50 years of shadow dancing, and not with Andy.

I wonder how long I'll live on Mars? Do you think it has less pollution, so I'll not have to breathe in all these particles full of bacteria, viruses, smog, and other people's breaths? I hope so. Maybe I'll write a book about how not to live. I think I'm really good at that.

There were so many things I meant to do in my first 50. I wanted to head a division, wear power suits, and start my own non-profit. What happened? Other people's lives. Other people's pitiful lives. I took care of my husband. I took care of his parents. I took care of his dog and his faithful. What did I get? A very nice house, several cars, a driver, a billboard, and lots of fake people in my face coveting my life. If only they knew...

That's ok because Grandpa paid for a home just for me on Mars.

Who will I take with me to Old Red? Certainly not my husband's dog or my husband. If I could send him to Mercury to burn, I would. I wonder how long it would take. Would he

realize that he was combusting? Probably not, he's too busy noticing other things. Like his secretary. Cliché, right? Yep, you'd think he would have busted out of that cliché and banged his yoga instructor to thank her for building his core. But, no, it was the secretary. I wonder if she wants to go to Mars with me. She's probably tired of my husband too.

Mars. Terraforming. Stretching out the rest of my birthdays. My grandpa is going to get me a ride with Elon. They're good buddies. I know, you must be wondering how old my grandpa is. Well, he's old. Not as old as Methuselah but pretty old just the same. Hey, don't worry though. His mind is sharp. That's why he got me a house on Mars. He knew that I would need one with the Earth failing and my husband doing extra work on his core with his secretary.

I hope there's nobody there who expects my help with anything. Those days are over. I don't need a career. I don't need recognition. I just need my house and my music. Oh, and bacon. I have to have bacon. I haven't had bacon in the 30 years I've been married. Had to watch my figure so he would not bang the secretary. I don't think my vegan friends would approve, but hey, I don't have to be polite on Mars. No pretending. No more prayers for the cat or the brat. My husband will be gone to Mercury. I have enough sense to get to Mars. I will not be taking any followers. No Kool-Aid for them. I'll eventually hear of their demise from some bacteria, virus, or a wife that just got tired of the secretaries and yoga instructors. I wonder how long the news delay will be.

It is finally my turn. My husband will say farewell at precisely 2.52 my time. I'm going to bring his secretary with me to work my personal terraforming project, do laundry, and such. I will not let her near the food and drink though. I simply cannot trust her. Grandpa has arranged for a limo to pick me up at the airport so I can get to the launch. Miss Secretary has already been

secured. I'll be up and away like Superman before anybody wonders about a thing. I absolutely love my grandpa. I will miss him.

I would have brought along my therapist too. I liked her just fine until recently. I told her I did not need any meds, just a change in scenery. She said she was going to have me committed. Something about my husband, George. She'll be joining George. She can work on her tan. It'll be quicker than spray tanning.

Residual Deficit

By Allan Pirniqué

While riding in her car
her left hand went blank.
In time it returned
to her commands,
but something else was gone
and did not return.
For ten years
she's had no tears;
no laughter either.
A place within
her brain once
active and alert
now silent--a
void for joy
or sadness.
Her husband
of fifty years
just passed away.
A major loss
but no tears.
She could not cry
and wondered why.

The Lady at the Gate

By Allan Pirnique

Having driven her car through
she has closed the red gate.
Cowboy boots, slacks, and vest--not a show-off--
just normal gear
for a North Arkansas lady.
Going where?
A trip to town?
A visit to a friend?
Pick up feed and seed?
She had a purpose,
not just going about.
Swinging the big gate closed
she was Norman Rockwell
on a sunny Fall day.

Image Maker

By Allan Pirnique

I have a patient, blind for some time,
who has hallucinations--
visual--seeing things that
to me are not there.
Ladies in long skirts,
mules in the yard,
children playing.
Recently her visitors
have changed. Only
colors now appear.
Blankets of blue, red,
and yellow.
She likes her scenes
and hopes that they continue.
I too hope so.

A Single Family House

By Janet Ryan

I grew up at 84 Park Terrace Avenue, a short street of seven single-family houses.

That's a sentence that needs some explanation. First, "street" means it had once been paved and there were still some residues of tar remaining. Second, "avenue" means the road went roughly north and south, not east and west. Third, we were the fifth house, not the 84th. I have no idea why – that's just the way it was.

"Park Terrace" might sound a bit pretentious, but it was named that because it ran along the edge of Painter Park, about a quarter of a mile east of and downhill from it. Pretentious or not, we did consider ourselves to be more fortunate, perhaps even a notch better, than the folks a few blocks further east who lived in two- and three-family houses. After all, they had to share their houses with strangers. We lived with family.

"Single-family house" does not mean single story. Our house was one story with a mostly unfinished attic, but the other houses had two stories for living plus a full attic for storage. "Single-family house" meant there was only one front door and one back door. I mean, you wouldn't make family use a different door, would you?

And now comes the tricky part. How should I explain "family"? We were a family of four – mother, father, and baby...and mother's older sister, Agnes. Or as I called them, Mommy and Daddy and Luddla. Luddla? That's just what I called her. The reason, if there were one, was lost long ago in that infant's mind that I have remodeled and kept living in all these years. Perhaps I'll discover it when I get old – older than I am now – and start clearing out debris. But

Luddla she remained until I reached high school, when somehow the three of them became Dot, Merritt, and Ag.

Ag lived with us – ate with us, watched TV with us (after we got a TV), had her own easy chair in the living room, put her clothes in with ours for Dot to wash on Mondays. But she slept upstairs in a finished room in the mostly unfinished attic – a room she called “eighty-four-and-a-half,” for which she paid rent. The second room upstairs in the unfinished attic was Merritt’s doghouse, more or less finished, where he worked on the drawings for his inventions – which he never finished. Nor was the rest of the attic ever finished.

My friend Earlyn, over on Atwood Avenue, lived in a family of four, too – mother, father, and baby...and father’s father. She called them Mother, Father, and Pappy. I called them Mrs. and Mr. Westlund, and Pappy. Everyone called him Pappy.

Pappy Westlund was a wizened little gnome of a man, always smiling, and he lived in that single-family house but he did not live with the family. He lived in a separate part of the upstairs, where he had his own bedroom, his own bathroom, and his own little kitchen that had once been a closet so it had no window. Because there was no kitchen ventilation, cooking odors accumulated in the hall leading to Earlyn’s room and her parents’ bedroom, odors I couldn’t identify – fishy, sour, greasy? Earlyn didn’t seem to notice them.

Pappy was allowed to use the back door – after all, it was a single-family house – but he was not allowed to eat or to sit downstairs. Why? I never asked. That’s just how it was.

And Pappy was allowed to watch over us when we played outside in the yard. There were no strangers to fear in our isolated little neighborhood, but it was nice to have him there. I enjoyed having a grandparent to play with, even if he wasn’t mine.

The folks who lived next door to us, Mr. and Mrs. Sasse, had a large family, though they never had children. What they had was Mrs. Sasse's relatives, who lived on the second floor in a warren of rooms. Her father, William Williams, died in those rooms the year after we moved to Park Terrace Avenue, and her sister, Miss Mabel, followed him when I was about four. Mrs. Sasse's other siblings, Al, Fred, and Harriet, continued to live there for many years. They had their own kitchen and bath upstairs, but they sometimes joined the Sasses for a meal or to sit and talk in the living room downstairs. It was, after all, a single-family house.

Up at the farm in Wolcott, my grandfather, Pop, lived with his family – second wife, Mae, and their son, Bob – on the second floor of the old wood and stone building. Below lived my Uncle Ed and his family – first (about to be ex-) wife, Ruth, and son, Eddy. Two families, one back door (they never used the front door), so still a one-family house. But they visited up and down stairs like neighbors.

Families came in a great variety of sizes, complexities, and intensities, but as a rule, when a man married, he acquired his wife's unmarried kin -- the unmarriageable and the bereaved and the disentangled. Also, as a rule, families were multi-generational. Almost everyone my age had grandparents around the house. And most of those grandparents were hard to understand.

In fact, most old people talked funny. They used strange words, like tuchus and bupkis and cochon and Teta and Jiddie and Mädlein and mangia and merde. You'd think that would be an opportunity to learn another language, but things didn't work that way. I tried once.

Earlyn and I had been playing down the street with Skipper, and now back at home I was playing a bit too roughly with my parakeet, Susie. Susie and I didn't always see eye to eye about

playing. Beak to nose, yes, but not eye to eye. “Don’t ever say something you don’t understand,” was my mother’s admonition. As in right after Susie bit my nose:

What did you say?”

I repeated it.

“What does it mean?”

No idea.

“Where did you hear it?”

Skipper’s Jiddie said it when the dogs were digging in the garden.

Silence. “Don’t ever say that again, young lady! Do you hear me?” And as she turned away, she muttered, “If you’re going to talk like your uncle, at least do it in English so I know what you’re saying, dammit.”

(Uncle Ed was a master of the King’s English. He could swear for ten minutes without ever repeating a word. And that was when he was in a good mood. On a bad day, when the solder wouldn’t stick to the pipes or he couldn’t see where the leak was or the insulation didn’t strip off without breaking the wires, he could carry on a monolog of ever more inventive phraseology. I learned a lot the time he installed a new furnace and heating system in our house.)

Skipper, by the way, was named Siad after his father, but we called him Skipper. His Teta and Jiddie didn’t live with him but with his uncle’s family, though they visited often.

The names of our neighbors and family, my friends and schoolmates, reflected a world dismantled by war. Figuenick, Bednarczyk, Piscitelli, Perlstein, Armonaitis, Ammerman, Archambault, Jasiorkowski and Jasudowicz, Lindquist, Omicioli, DuCharme, Codiane and Colonnese and Cohen and Cantor, Ramadon, McKechnie, Tsolis, Strontzer and Scholz...the names were a multiethnic musical background to my childhood.

And most of the people I knew had someone living upstairs or in a back room, someone who talked funny. Someone reunited with a family that had been torn apart; a family at least partially reassembled and living in their own single-family home, each and every one now a single family.

Some of them spoke English, some did not...but even those who thought they were speaking English were hard to understand. I knew nothing about immigration or refugees or accents, not even that my grandfather was born somewhere (I've never learned where) in Europe; I just knew that old folks sounded different.

I figured that was part of growing old – age brought glasses and canes and funny ways of talking. Someday maybe I would be old and no one would understand me. I practiced talking funny and walking with a cane, so I'd be ready.

“Don't make fun of people,” said my mother.

But when I looked into their faces, these old people who talked funny, these single family remnants, I saw stories. So many stories they would never tell, could never tell, in any language.

That's just the way it was.

I wish I'd had the maturity, the wit, to hear and to understand.

Snakes

By Desiree' Stipp-Bethune

“Mommy! You screamed so loud, you woke up the snake!” I was ashamed. My little boy was reprimanding me. And after I had given my two young children a soothing talk about not fearing snakes on the path.

I wasn't afraid of snakes when I was a kid. Part of the reason I wanted to be a forest ranger when I grew up was that I felt I had a good handle on what it took to deal with a rattlesnake. And I liked trees.

But one of those pivotal events in my life happened in high school that changed all that.

My sophomore biology teacher, Mr. Lee, had his class go snake hunting. We were sent out in groups of threes to catch as many garter snakes as possible in the time allowed. We were equipped with a long metal rod with a bend in one end, and a two gallon pickle jar. The rod was to press over the neck of the snake to hold it down while it was picked up by the head, behind the jaw. The jar was to carry them in. I was sent out with Ross and his best friend, Greg. They were good enough guys. I was the official jar carrier. Greg would lift a rock or log to see if a snake was under it. Then, Ross would hold the snake down with the rod while Greg picked it up. I opened the jar, and Greg would put the snake in, tail first. I would quickly put the lid back on to keep any prior inmates captive. After about 45 minutes, intertwining snakes were nine inches deep in the pickle jar. It was getting heavy, but we had plenty more room. Greg was walking toward me with his latest conquest. I took off the lid, and he tried to get the snake in. The snake would not cooperate, moving its tail to one side or other of the mouth of the jar. While Greg was

struggling with getting the tail in, the snakes inside the jar sniffed freedom. They came to the top of the jar, poked their heads out, and hurled themselves over the edge. Dozens of snakes poured out of the jar, down my arms, and dripped down off my elbows onto the ground, radiating in every direction. “Desireé! Close the jar!” the boys were yelling at me. But I couldn’t because snake bodies were blocking the lid from going into place. By the time it was over, only a few snakes remained, and the boys were angry with me. Which is saying something, because Ross had a crush on me. We shuffled into our classroom to dump our pittance into the 60-gallon aquarium Mr. Lee had designated as the snake receptacle. Hundreds of snakes knotted themselves, pushed up against the glass for all to see.

I have no idea what happened to all the snakes after we left.

I had nightmares for weeks about snakes. My brother had bought a convertible, and I had a dream that we were driving down the road, and snakes filled the car, presumably because the top was down. Everywhere I touched in my dream I found a snake. I would never be the same.

I had many mostly harmless run-ins with a snake here and there over the years. In college, I was in a Behavioral Biology lab on a day that the Teacher’s Assistant decided to demonstrate the phenomenon that all terrestrial animals keep their eyes level with the horizon. He brought in all kinds of animals, including his baby, Wolfgang, pushed in a stroller by his mother, another biology T.A. The T.A. held up each animal and rolled it in the air from side to side. Each animal kept its head straight while its body rolled. A turtle, a bird, the baby, and you guessed it, a snake, all kept their eyes level with the horizon. At some point, one of the students discovered that the snake, a black constrictor of some sort, had escaped. Our T.A., in a frenzy, sent his wife and baby packing. Wolfgang’s life was at risk with an evil constrictor on the loose. The men of the class tried to show their machismo, hunting down the snake. No one could find

it. And finally, someone noticed the very tip of its tail hanging down from under the metal frame of a wooden folding table, the snake pushing its muscles outward from inside the frame. Four of my male classmates tried to show their strength and courage by pulling the snake out, but they couldn't do it easily. The snake was fighting them. They finally got it out from under the table, and back into its poorly secured cage. I don't know how far Wolfgang and his mother were from the lab by that time. If it were me, I would have had that baby clear across campus.

Living alone on the edge of town in Nebraska, I had snakes in the yard. Every time I mowed the lawn, there was a garter snake that would come out of its hole to taunt me. I named it so that I wouldn't be afraid of it anymore. Snakey Snoo is what I called him. I would keep my eyes on him as best I could while I was mowing. I didn't want him causing any mischief. I lost sight of him once, and the next thing I knew, the blade shot Snakey Snoo out from under the mower. Snakey Snoo just laid there upside down, white belly showing, trickle of blood to tell me I had injured him. I felt terrible, despite my general nausea regarding snakes. But after my next mow lap around the yard, Snakey Snoo was gone. Perhaps unbelievably, I liked to think he pulled himself together and went down his hole to live a respectable life. The other end to the story could be that an animal got him in his vulnerable state. I have always figured that the sound of the lawn mower would have kept any normal animals at a distance.

I came home from work after dark. It had been a cool autumn day. My back door opened onto a landing, with stairs going down into the basement and a few steps going up into my kitchen. I opened the screen door to unlock the storm door, and flipped the light on inside just in time to see a huge black snake high-tailing it down the framework of my stairs into the basement. "Oh, God, I have a snake in my basement!" It was a half basement, with half-walls topped with dirt. I shuddered to think where the snake went. I think it had gotten in between my

two outside doors to soak up the warmth of the setting western sun, and I inadvertently corralled it into the house. I could have stepped on the darned thing! I called my landlord the next day. “I have a snake in my basement.” He said he would come and seal the windows. I presumed that meant he would seal the snake into the house. When I got home that day, presumption verified. I found the basement windows sealed from the outside, with some kind of foaming sealant indelicately squirted all over the cracks, sills, and windows. I figured it was just the snake and me inside.

I had box elder bugs in the basement on the warm side of the house, and I decided if a poison fogger would kill box elder bugs, it would probably kill a snake, too. So, that night, I set off a fogger, fled the house, and kept myself occupied until I thought the coast was clear. Whenever I went into the basement to retrieve something I had stored down there, it was with a bit of trepidation. But I never saw a live snake down there again.

And then Dad came to my house to help me chop wood for my fireplace. I kept the wood box down in the basement, and went to fetch it to fill with our freshly chopped wood. The lid was open as I climbed the stairs, and I saw a baby snake, head cocked, slide across the bottom of the box. I screamed. And then I realized it was dead, preserved in a very life-like position. And as I staggered out the door, I realized that there were at least three more baby snakes dried up in the bottom of that box. I screamed, interrupting Dad’s chopping. I told him what I saw. “And you’re screaming about...dead...snakes?” Dad questioned. He made me sound like an idiot. OK, they were gross anyway. The thought of having reached into my wood box with baby snakes squirming their way around the wood nearly gave me a retroactive heart attack. I had inadvertently killed a slew of snakes with that fogger.

When I moved from the same house, an eight-year-old was helping me sweep out the basement. I swept up some more dried baby snakes. I shuddered. The thought of baby snakes in my basement, and in such numerous quantities gave me the willies. The little girl said, “And you’re carrying on about...dead...snakes? They’re dead. They can’t do anything to you now.” She was a farm kid who never had snakes slither down her arms in numerous quantities, apparently. Her grandma thought my fear of snakes was a real rib-tickler herself.

I never did find the mama snake.

A few years went by, and I got married and had children. And I still loved to hike in the woods, the forest ranger in me repressed but not gone. I told my three- and four-year-old boys that because it was a cool day, and the sun was shining, it was the perfect day for snakes to be sunning themselves on the path. “Don’t be alarmed,” I said. “Just walk around them.” I didn’t want my boys to think I was a sissy, and I sure didn’t want to pass my fear of snakes on to them.

We didn’t see any snakes. I kept an internal dialog going, though. “Don’t yell. Don’t be afraid. Show those boys you are strong.” A groundskeeper came riding frantically up on the path behind us in a little cart. “Did you see that huge bull snake back there on the trail?” The boys were disinterested. I wasn’t. “It was lying clear across the path when I came up to it, and it moved out of the way. I figured you surely would have seen it!” Well, we hadn’t, and if it was a snake that was long enough to span the path, I surely wanted no part of it. He drove off on his merry way.

The path was almost completely shaded by trees, with only dappling sunshine here and there. And the boys were yelling and chasing each other with sticks up ahead of me. And just as my front foot was about to hit the ground, I saw the snake right where my foot was going to land.

I screamed as I shifted my weight to avoid stepping on it. I had never seen a snake in the configuration this one was in. It was a rather small snake, but it had moved its body to be only in the sun between the shadows of the individual leaves, even in right angles like it had been broken to make a square. The boys came hurtling back when they heard the scream, and saw the snake begin to move. That was when my boy told me that I had awakened it. I couldn't believe the boys hadn't disturbed it with all of their carrying on. And I was a sissy.

I found a huge molted snake skin right outside my front door last year, and what looked like snake holes in the front garden. I deeply wish that my snake encounters were over. But I know they aren't. I don't know where I'm safe. Any day, any step, any false move could bring the next snake into my life.

Lego My Legos

By Marilyn Joyner

I have a few Legos,
maybe a thousand or more.
Some put together.
Some on the floor.

I have a few Legos.
Mom says I have too many
and if I don't pick them up,
I might not have any.

I have a few Legos.
Those together I look at and smile.
Then go on to another,
and work on it for a while.

I have a few Legos,
more with the one I just bought.
I wanted to stay up and complete it,
but mom saw me and I got caught.

I have a few Legos,
several scattered by dad's chair.
When he stood and stepped on them,
the shouting gave me a scare.

I have a few Legos.

But, not as many as before.

For dad took the broom and swept up
all of them on the floor.

Summer Feet

By Janet Ryan

Summer feet run naked through the grass
dew-fresh and cool in early morning,
crisp-fried by end of day.

Summer feet walk heedless of the dangers
in the street, revel as sun-baked road tar
yields beneath the heel.

Summer feet rest sprawled upon dry sand,
its softness sharp between the toes –
stand firmly planted at the water's edge
while waves wash grains away
like time erodes the best foundations.

Summer feet wait, unburdened by the weight of age,
innocent of love and death and mourning
or the need for arch supports.

Summer feet breathe free of laces
and regimented classes,
free to learn the lessons of the earth.

Gray Is the Way

By Micah Johnson

Yesterday, I saw the cloudy sky
resting above in silvery elegance.

Of where the war
tween sun and shade
halt to let the color betray.

Tonight, a bulb of light
shines in the midst
of night. I lie in bed but
sometimes get up. You see?

Gray is the way.

Tomorrow, no one knows how
everything will go. Shall the energy
from lights erase all shadows?
Shall darkness swallow blazes whole?

The Rose Killer

By Priscila Espinosa

He's cute... but a bit on the young side... How about her? I do like redheads...

A customer caught my attention and asked for another round of shots. I smiled and silently prepared their drinks, pondering if maybe him or his buddies are the one. The sound of someone entering the bar reaches my ears along with girls squealing as their friend joins them.

Tall one... Maybe too tall but she could be it...

Megan, coworker and nice acquaintance, returned to the bar and started fixing up more drinks while making conversation with the men sitting here. I wish I had her confidence and smile. Honestly, if she were the one, I would have not minded at all. I've worked with her long enough to know what she is like. Intelligent, kind, lovely, innocent, and ambitious with a hint of a sass. Why she loves working here is something I don't quite understand yet.

If only...

"You'll learn not to use the book after a while; the drinks are easy to remember," I said after I handed her the uniform.

"I hope so. How long did it take for you?" Her eyes showed nervousness and excitement.

I shrugged, "I think after a good few weeks."

Megan nodded and looked at the uniform, notepad, and pen. She is pretty... I wonder...

She started to fiddle around with the pen, "Is it easy working here?"

“Well, speaking as a young woman, you’ll learn how to handle the men who can’t take no for an answer.”

She nodded and looked more anxious. Maybe Hugo shouldn’t have hired her...

She was about to speak again until her pen fell from her fingers. I reached down to pick it up at the same time she did, causing our heads to bump into each a bit too hard. We both stepped back and gave our awkward laughs while rubbing our heads. That actually hurt...

Megan giggled, “Well, looks like we aren’t meant to be then.”

I smiled and picked up the pen, “I guess not.”

I greeted one of our regulars and handed him his drink. Eric is CEO of Washington Enterprise and one of America’s favorite bachelors. Pretty face, amazingly built, charismatic, and filthy rich. He is the whole package. I remember the first time I saw him; I quickly stomped on his foot. He was a bit taken back but laughed when it wasn’t the first time a woman tried to hurt him. He soon became a regular, here and I’ve gotten to know him well. I’ve learned that there is more to him than just CEO, and only a few people know.

And I am one of them.

“You hear what happened on Westwood?” Eric asked while he checked his phone.

I started wiping the clean counter and Eric looked up to me, raising an eyebrow. I felt heat rise in my cheeks as I bit my lip, trying to look busy.

“They found three dead in the apartment. Downstairs neighbor called the cops when they heard a lot of crashing going on.”

I pretended to wipe off an imaginary stain that wouldn't go away while his disappointed eyes watched me.

“The cameras couldn't identify the person, and the killer was fast to leave the scene.”

“Witness?” I asked.

He shook his head no while he finished his drink. I began to refill it. “Evidence?”

“Just the same thing the killers always leave like the last ten deaths. Cops don't have any idea who the suspect is. Buddy down at the station finally figured out a name for the killer. Wanna know what it is?”

I finally looked at him, feeling a huge weight on my shoulder. “What's the name?”

“The Rose Killer.”

“Because she leaves a rose on the victim's body...”

He nodded and leaned in towards me. I lean in as well and feel his breath tickle my ear as he whispers, “Luna, when is this going to stop...?”

I pull back, fake giggling as Hugo makes his appearance and I pretend to look busy. Eric studies me as he drinks while having a fake smile plastered on his face. Hugo greets the customers, and Megan, smiles at me but gives me a warning look.

Busted.

I gave Eric an apologetic smile and went back to work. He shortly finished up his drink and left the money, a tip, and a note for me.

'Car.'

Looks like I have a ride tonight.

...

I slung the car door shut and began to undress. Eric started the car and drove off, turning down his classical music. How can he listen to that all day? I enjoy symphony music, but to constantly listen to it all day? I smiled slightly as a memory of him being “insulted” by my lack of appreciation towards Bach.

I put on my special attire as Eric drove, ignoring the feeling of him watching me. Stuffing my work uniform inside the bag and pulling out my tools I needed for the night. I flung the bag into the back, knowing Eric would have it at my place by the time I got home, and tried to relax my pounding heart.

“Read up on the new discovery on this soulmate search?”

“I know almost everything about it. Which discovery are you talking about?”

“Someone can find another after their soulmate passes.”

“Oh, that one. Rare cases of that happening; they don’t understand it much. We barely understand how we can find the first one.”

“They say the person doesn’t have to be born. It just moves to the next person who could be your forever after. It’s like this whatever magical force has this long line of people you are most compatible with, and just goes down the line when the person passes. Quite stupid if you ask me.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware of your opinion on all this. Who’s the lucky girl this week? Take a right on the next street. I’m not going home tonight.”

He stayed silent but did what I told him to do. I was just waiting for his attempt to talk me out of this.

“Her name is Victoria? I think? I don’t know. I drank since then. You know it’s late, almost 2 in the morning. You should be aching to go to bed. See, look at that! You’re yawning,” he teased as he saw me yawn silently.

I playfully punched his arm and told him to go down this road. My nerves were now starting to get to me, and my leg bounced out of nervous habit.

Eric placed his hand on my knee to calm me down, and I took his hand in mine. He immediately held tightly while stroking the back of my hand with his thumb.

“You know, there are other ways to find them...”

Here we go...

I sighed, “But I’m tired of waiting... I’m not like you. I don’t want quick love; I want my forever. I am determined to find him... or her...”

He let go of my hand abruptly and put it back on the steering wheel. Even in the dark, I could see his hands clenching onto it. He was mad again.

“And what do you think is going to happen? He’s gonna immediately ask you to marry him right then and there? She’s gonna squeal and laugh as she runs up to you and kisses you? Who in the right mind would want to fall in love with you?” He spat out the last sentence and I flinched from his tone.

Eric slowly pulled over, looked at me. The light from the stereo illuminated his face just enough to see his regret and sorrow. I played with the tools in my hand and took in my

surroundings. I've been on this street before, but he knows well enough that I'll be walking to a different direction.

"I'm sorry, Luna... I just don't understand why you have to do this."

I looked at him and smiled sadly, "Why do you have to live your double life?"

He let out a low chuckle and shook his head, "Who knows?"

I took his hand again and gave it a squeeze. He squeezed right back and then reached in the glove compartment and handed me his gun. I sighed as I took it, knowing it was better not to argue. I never had to use the gun, nor did I wish to, but Eric worried about my safety when I did this.

"Remember the deal?" he asked in a strict voice.

My hands won't stop shaking as Eric drove off, away from the house. I didn't trust myself to speak, and I refused to wipe the tears from my eyes, knowing my gloves were dirty. My adrenaline was still coursing through my veins, but I was at a total loss on why Eric showed up tonight with two big men.

He pulled up to a big, fancy house and turned off the car; however, he didn't unlock the door.

We remained silent, both processing on what we saw. I knew I was done for.

"What's your reason?" he asked in a low voice.

My leg started bouncing as I spoke in a raspy voice, "I got tired of waiting..."

“So quickest way is to do this...?”

I nodded as tears kept pouring down my cheeks.

Eric looked at me and pulled out something from his breast pocket of his suit. “Wipe your nose.”

He handed me a handkerchief, and I took it. It was soft...

I wiped my nose and choked back a sob that wanted to come out. Eric just faced forward again, checking his phone every now and then. We stayed silent again, and I finally was able to calm down, but the tears kept going.

I pondered again why he was there tonight as I studied him, and it seemed that he read my mind.

Eric sighed and loosened his tie, “I run a mafia, Luna.”

What...?

“As you know, my father was the one who built the Washington Enterprise and just passed it onto me when he retired. What I didn’t know was that he was also passing on his empire to his son. You can imagine my surprise when I was told I was the new godfather.”

He looked over at me and smiled a bit, “But not a day goes by where I wish I wasn’t.”

I cleared my throat, “What were you doing there tonight?”

“Let’s just say he displeased me. Was going to go there and show him what happens when you disrespect me, but I did not expect to see you there. I mean, a bartender who likes to bake goodies for your usual customers? And for your reason? You got tired of waiting for this

soulmate? And I thought I was crazy,” he chuckled. “And you’re slick too. My men didn’t have to do much cleaning. At first, I thought you were an expert at this, but considering the state that you were in when we came in... thought maybe not.”

I played with the handkerchief, nervous for what would happen to me. I haven’t been doing this that long...

“What’s with the roses? Is it like leaving flowers on a tombstone?”

I nodded, hoping he understood that I didn’t mean to become like this.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Luna.” His voice was strict, “I’m not going to say a word about this. However, you must agree to not go after those who are married, those with a family of their own as well. No one that looks young, must be close to your age. And never bring me into this because I will get you and make you wish the police did. Understand?”

I nodded silently and he smiled as he unlocked the door.

“Now come, you need rest and a shower.”

I nodded, “Yes, I remember.”

“Good.”

I looked out the window to see a lovely house with a tire swing on the tree in the front yard. I wondered how happy the couple was with their kids. One day I’ll have that too...

I placed my hand on the handle and I felt a tug at my sleeve of the hoodie. I looked back to see Eric’s face so close to mine. I didn’t move back, but I knew what he was about to do.

He leaned in and kissed me ever so softly. I kissed back but pulled away first and put my face mask on. Eric chuckled as he leaned back.

“You really have lost it... It’s not too late to agree to my offer.”

I chuckled, “If only I can’t hurt you.”

I punched his shoulder hard, laughing when he yelped in pain, and got out the car.

...

I believe there is that one special someone that was meant for you. Someone to love you no matter what horrors lies in the past. To understand why you are the way you are and accept every flaw they see. I believe “hooking up” with random people is a waste of time when the one meant for you is out there, searching for you. I believe in true love and doing whatever it takes to find it.

When you find that person who you are supposed to spend the rest of your life, you want to protect them always. Never be the reason to hurt them and keep them away from all harm. It’s why the universe decided to help us find our true love by not hurting them physically.

There has been plenty of cases where people have found their soulmates and cannot cause any physical harm to them. It all dated back to the 1600’s when just one random couple realized this discovery and soon it was spreading everywhere. It was very frequent in the 1800’s, but slowly died down when everyone got tired of searching. It still is a common thing to be told of, and there are still frequent cases of people finding love today. I was so excited when I first learned about this that I started punching everyone at school to find my soulmate. However, as time continued to pass by and I found no one yet, I have grown tired...

My ways of finding my love has grown a bit more extreme over the last few weeks. The studies show that when you attempt to hurt your soulmate with skin on skin contact such as punching, the person will not experience pain. When you use objects such as a baseball bat, the object will break on contact. So, I started experimenting that on my own by physical violence, but slowly went into throwing objects at those with great force at the bar since it was the only time to hit blackout drunks without fearing of getting in trouble. However, that was getting me nowhere...

I sighed as I looked up to the fire escape. Maybe Eric was right... Maybe I am going crazy over this...

I played with the rose in my hand while replaying the conversation. The feeling of his lips still lingers on mine, but we are not meant to be.

I shook my head and buried the strange feelings I have towards him. No time to ponder what he means to me; I have a soulmate to find.

With that thought in my mind, I climbed up the ladder.

...

“I know you said you didn’t want to be involved, but please....” I begged as Eric paced back and forth in his office. His TV was on mute, but it was showing its first real evidence on who the Rose Killer was after months of constant searching.

Eric groaned as he sat down in his chair, rubbing his face. I played with the handkerchief he gave me that night, nervous that he would say no in the end.

“If I send someone down there to get rid of it, that means they will have to stay on this until it finally blows over. However, for as long as you keep doing this, they will never get to rest,” he said while glaring at me.

I pouted at him and he simply sighed. His eyes studied me for a minute until he nodded.

“You owe me.”

“Thank you, Eric. Do you need a drink?”

He quickly got up, “More than anything.”

I smiled softly and followed him out the door and to the elevator.

“Did you hear about the crash on Main?” I asked, hoping to distract him and take his mind off things.

“Yeah, driver flat lined on the way to the hospital. Heard his kid in the back was good, just a few bruises.”

“Heard it was a drunk driver that hit them. What is wrong with people these days,” I said disapprovingly.

Eric looked at me and chuckled, “You really are crazy.”

I blushed as the doors open. The company’s mailman pushed his cart inside hurriedly while apologizing to us as we were forced to step to the side quickly. As Eric had his hands on my shoulders to pull me back, my feet stumbled a bit and I stepped on his shoes.

The door closed again and continued down to the main floor. It was a bit of a tight squeeze and I remained standing on Eric’s foot.

He hadn't shifted yet...

I looked up to him and he was smiling, showing no pain at all. That's strange. To test this, I stomped on his foot with my heel and he remained unphased.

What changed...?

His hands rubbed my arms while he kissed my forehead, waiting for us to reach the ground floor. He looked happy...

'Who in the right mind would fall in love with you?'

"You have, Eric. Are you in the right mind? "

"You really are crazy...", he whispered in my ear and I smiled.

If I'm crazy to become the Rose Killer, you are just as crazy for falling in love with her.

Barry Bagwell, in addition to his important duties as the head manager of the El Dorado Conference Center, writes wonderful poems, mostly about the outdoors and those humans who love it. He has an excellent eye for detail and for subtle and profound insight, a talented renaissance man.

Crystal Carodine is currently studying Culinary Arts on SouthArk's east campus. Last year, her poem was selected for the magazine *Between the Lines*, a very personal verse about her life. This year's piece is a tribute poem. With her culinary certificate, she plans to have her own restaurant business one day, with a full menu, just as delicious as Grandma's, created and prepared by contented co-workers and staff.

Rev. Charles T. Chapman, Jr. was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1955. His interest in writing began early, leading in high school to a third prize in the annual West Tennessee Poetry Society contest. After graduating from Union University (1976) and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1979), he joined the Episcopal Church in 1981. He was ordained a priest in 1987. He served in Tennessee, Kansas, Texas, and El Dorado (20 years) and retired to Magnolia in 2017. His published works include the poetic texts of two sacred choral anthems, and the book, *The Message of the Book of Revelation*.

Priscila Espinosa is in her fourth semester at SouthArk. Writing stories was a hobby of hers in middle school and high school, and for a few years did not write, until beginning again now. She has two beloved pit bull dogs named Blu and Doll, and she loves to spend Sundays with her brother. Her only published story is "A Shadow's Life" in the 2015 *Writer's Ink* magazine, winning honorable mention in the Junior Division Short Fiction category.

Donna Henson is a native of South Arkansas. She reads and writes poetry for enjoyment as a way of sharing interests with friends. She has found that poetry can provide hearts and minds a needed break (and sometimes a bridge) midst the stresses of modern life. As an expression of appreciation for poetry, Donna is a member of South Arkansas Poets of the Pines (SAPOP) and of Poets' Roundtable of Arkansas (PRA). Both organizations exist to encourage poetry for everyday life, and their membership is open to all interested persons—readers and writers.

Micah W. Johnson graduated from SouthArk in December 2018 with an AA degree. (His works have appeared in SouthArk's *Between the Lines* magazine in the past, as well as on the *iFixit* website, on the online New York-based *October Hill Magazine*, and on his blog, *Diamond Extra*.) Since leaving the campus, he has happily worked for both Antigua's Grill and Securitas Security Services USA in the El Dorado region of South Arkansas, pitching in to help keep family finances stable. When not writing, he is reading, and vice versa. He also enjoys video games, history topics, English etymology, Germanic folklore and myth, and visits with several friends every so often.

Marilyn Joyner is a longtime member of the South Arkansas Poets of the Pines and South Arkansas Writers group. Over the years, her work has been published in many publications, thankfully appearing several times in this journal's pages, gracing the pages with her perception, wit, and enormous talent.

Hannah McCallister is a student at South Arkansas Community College who reads and interprets literature in her classes most skillfully. Lately, she has joined the ranks of the authors, creating memorable stories of her own. Who knows how far her gifts will carry her? To the heights, we hope.

Allan Pirnique is an Arkansan--born in Little Rock on October 21, 1939, reared here, and stayed. He took his education in Arkansas and Detroit. In 1964 he married a Benton girl, Janey Kelley. They have two boys, David and Michael, and have had fifty-five wonderful years. In 2010, he retired after forty years of medical practice. He often says, "My patients were great; I learned a lot from them." When describing his writing process he quips, "My poetry writing is enjoyable to me--sometimes easy and sometimes it just ain't there. Will keep trying."

Janet Ryan was born and raised in Connecticut and got her doctorate in biochemistry in Florida. She met Jack Ryan while in graduate school and they've been married for more than half a century. They lived in Arizona and Texas before settling in Arkansas, where they raised two sons. She has reached an age where it seems the past is more immediate than the future, though nowhere nearly as enjoyable as the present.

Desiree' Stipp-Bethune has lived in 18 different places in the United States, mostly in the east and midwest. Among them was Maine, which does not have any native poisonous snakes. Exploring the world, and her little part of it, keeps her happy. Currently I am Director of Religious Education in Camden. I belong to the South Arkansas Writers group, the highlight of my life in El Dorado.

Vanessa Williams was born and raised in Magnolia, Arkansas. She graduated from Southern Arkansas University with a bachelor's degree in sociology, a minor in criminal justice, and a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling. Vanessa is currently pursuing her doctorate in public administration at Walden University. She is the director of counseling and disability support services and the Title IX Coordinator at South Arkansas Community College. She and her family live in El Dorado, Arkansas.

Vanessa is married and the mother of a soon-to-be teenage son, Smokey Bear (Cane Corso) and Ginger (Maine Coon). She enjoys reading fantasy and science fiction novels and watching historical dramas, horror, and action thrillers in her spare time.