

NOV 2022-FEB 2023 - ISSUE 13

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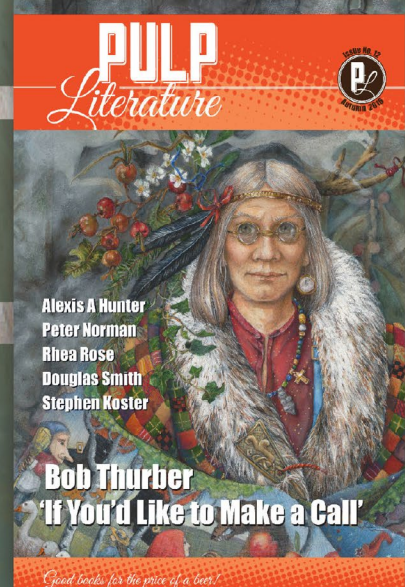
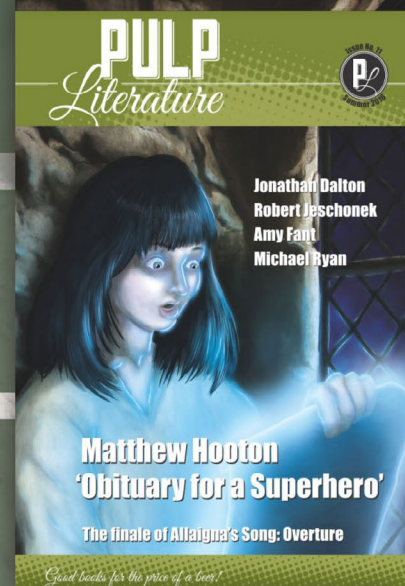
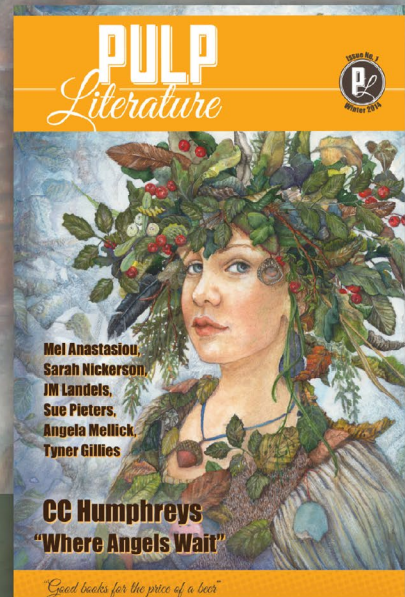
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There are those who came before and fell at my sight.
They reveled at my words that were not my words,
they built me a pedestal, and fawned at my carving. I
dare not move from the position they placed me in...

—Lailani Kenoly

EDITOR'S LETTER

Well shoot, it's almost winter. I'll let you in on a secret - I am not a fan. It's not even 6pm and it's already dark out. At this time of year, I'm not thinking about tobogganing and hot chocolate, much to my children's irritation, I'm wishing for warm sand, blue water, and mai tais. But, as K.L. Johnson writes, "the smooth silver winter regularly comes and you should not be afraid, or cower away from the crackling silence turning the year" (page 6). I love phrases like "crackling silence" - in Johnson's poem, "crackling silence" conjures moody images of ice and snapping snow. But there's another kind of "crackling silence" that almost makes me like winter, because there's nothing better than reading a good magazine in the crackling silence of a warm fire on a winter evening... and here's the perfect magazine for the job! :)

Welcome to Issue 13 of the Dreamers magazine, our winter issue!

In this issue, you'll find lots of winners. Check out the first, second and third place winners of our annual flash contest (pages 3-5). On page 9, find "After the Storm," by Sarah Courteau, winner of the 2023 Pen Parentis Fellowship for New Parents. Congratulations to this year's winners!

In our feature story, "Counselling in the Time of Covid: Healing from the Veranda" (page 16), Rosalind Forster brings us to her veranda sanctuary for a bit of nature-based healing.

Thanks again to all the Dreamers out there! Keep dreaming.

Kat McNichol
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2022 FLASH Contest

Congratulations to the Winners!

FIRST PLACE WINNER

There is Something in the Mirror

Fiction by Lailani Kenoly

A wall of colorless, otherwise unidentifiable orbs float, gathered in a line. They bare no recognizable feature, yet you see me. In a lineup of souls, it's mine you know from the rest. This is what I dream.

To that I would have to ask, what do you see?

I want to tell you all about me.
I would tell you all the things I'm afraid someone will forget.
I would tell you the things I want you to believe about me.
I would tell you the things that are undeniably true.

I wouldn't stop the words that came from me. I would be made to feel as though there's nothing else in this moment I could ever speak of.

You would listen. What would you think?

I need someone to know me.

There is a hidden desperation I carry, often revealing itself among company. With the upmost subtlety I can conjure, I try my hardest to impress them all. The deep fear that I am not known, even in the closest company, permeates my every interaction.

If I say it loud enough, will anyone hear this declaration of myself?
Did they hear me when I said I love the color yellow?
The specific shade of marigold?
When they see something yellow will they think of me?
What will they think when they think of me?
What do they see when I'm standing right here?

Like a lady in waiting, I've tried my hardest to charm and beguile. To wave my hands and present whatever they wanted to see. I will always stand how they want me to stand, sound how they want me to sound, see them the way they want to be seen.

What does a mirror see when it sees itself?
What is my voice when it has nothing to imitate?
Whose beauty is this but not the beautiful ones it mimics?

How will you find me in a crowd?

There are those who came before and fell at my sight. They reveled at my words that were not my words, they built me a pedestal, and fawned at my carving. I dare not move from the position they placed me in. Every angle of my stance, edited by their beguilement, and I contorted willingly. It's only so long that one can hold their place that is not natural to them.

And with that, the spell is broken.

There I am, recovering the whiplash of magic that breaks. My shiny reflective skin turns opaque in a room alone. My mind is a flurry of words I've never heard strung together.

My voice is unfamiliar and it squeaks.
There is something in the mirror.

What is this that you are seeing?

This figure is alien to these eyes I do not recognize, though I feel an immediate kinship. Through her gaze, she tells me her deepest desire. She is lost, and as afraid as I am to see her.

She is me. With these eyes, I tell her that we crave witness to this form. An anguished desire for someone to divulge in this unknown person.

With my back to yours, I need to tell someone about myself. I need to tell someone what I am. Where I have been. What I did. I have to show someone these fears I have that play in my mind, loop after loop. I need to show someone the parts I have had to hide from myself. The parts of me that make me lose sleep, that I would die if someone knew.

If I tell you this, then you will know me. You will see her, and you will know me.

I desperately need someone to know me.

Your Every Breath

Fiction by Erika Seshadri

Dearest Neeta,

It's my greatest hope that you are happy and well. I trust your father has followed my instructions, and you are reading this on your sixteenth birthday. I know I say this every year, but the day you were born was the happiest time of my life.

Undoubtedly, you've grown into a beautiful young woman and men are starting to take notice. I hope with this writing, I can convey how important it is to find someone as worthy of your heart as your father was of mine.

In the summer of 1976—at the age of twelve—I started helping my parents run their bidi stall. At that time, it was situated in central Bangalore, flanked on the north by a sari shop and to the south by a chai wala. My job was to separate the bundles of tobacco and prepare the leaves for rolling.

One morning, I was crouching on a cardboard mat in the alleyway behind the stall. I'd been picking apart leaves when a voice whined, "That stinks."

I looked to see a scrawny boy about my age, brow furrowed in distaste.

"Smells worse when it's on fire," I replied. "I'm Sumitra. What's your name?"

"Sanjay," he said.

I stood up to brush myself off for a proper greeting. He took one look at my nicotine-stained fingers and returned to learn the business of making chai.

We avoided each other after that. He didn't like the smell of tobacco that lingered on me. I disapproved of his lack of manners. However, since our parents had become close over the years, keeping shop next to each other, they encouraged us to become friends. I refused—until one day, my mother brought a checkerboard and chess pieces from home.

"Sumitra," she said. "Why don't you challenge Sanjay to a game? Show him how smart you are." She winked. It was a temptation I couldn't resist.

As it turned out, Sanjay didn't know how to play chess. So, every day during lunch, we sat in front of the tobacco stall at a tiny table, and I taught him. As to be expected in the beginning, he never won. However, by the end of summer, he was almost good. When it came time to return to school, I gifted the game to him and told him to keep practicing.

Sanjay went off to boarding school in Mysore. I longed for summer so I could see my friend again. Sadly, the opportunity never came. In springtime, my parents decided to send me to care for my ailing grandmother in Madras.

"Why can't she come to Bangalore?" I asked my father.

"Because, Sumitra, she is stubborn and won't acknowledge she needs help. We've told her you're simply having an extended visit."

I was miserable in Madras, and in the cloud of my depression,

I had an accident in the kitchen. With burns to my left hand and cheek, my parents feared the scars meant I'd never find a husband. But I didn't care about that. I just wanted to go home.

My mother visited often, but didn't take me back until three years later when my grandmother passed away.

That first blistering summer day back in Bangalore, I walked with my father to the bidi stall. Standing out front on the sidewalk, he confessed something. "Sanjay never stopped asking about you during his summers here. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I thought it would only make things harder for you in Madras."

I expected to feel something with his words, yet there was nothing. Over the past three years I'd been numbed by time. Numbed by scars. Numbed by watching someone I loved slowly die.

My father opened shop in silence, and I eyed the tiny table, marveling how everything looked the same. Like I'd only been gone a day.

I was hanging tobacco packets when a young man approached me. His familiar lopsided smile struck me directly in the heart, all but dropping me to my knees. The worn checkerboard was tucked safely under his arm.

"How did you know I'd be here?" I stuttered, subconsciously fingering the burn on my cheek. He glanced at my scar, yet his joy in seeing me didn't waver.

"Your dad told me." He set the game board on the table and pulled the bag of pieces out of his rucksack. "But I've been bringing these with me every day since you left... Just in case," his voice cracked.

I never forgot the look he gave me at that moment. Like he would have gladly carried that game around with him for the rest of his life, waiting for my return. In those days, it was taboo to show public displays of affection, but I threw my arms around him and held tight until my father pulled me away.

Sanjay and I continued our daily chess games under the watchful eye of our parents, taking long pauses between moves to smile at each other and imagine a future together. He'd bump my hand gently while moving a rook, or whisper something sweet to me before calling checkmate.

Yet there were no secrets. Everyone around us could see we were quietly learning about love among the earthy, spiced aromas of chai and tobacco.

We were destined to marry young. In doing so, your father and I had five wonderful years together—and a beautiful baby—before I fell sick. He was by my side for every bit of darkness, all the while helping me care for you. So you see, Neeta, he is the man against which all suitors should be measured. I take great comfort in knowing you have each other.

Sweet daughter, my love for you is still alive in your every breath. There is no need to miss me. I am always with you.

Mama

The Last Shift

Fiction by Noah Evan Wilson



You're back in the restaurant.

In uniform.

It's closing time after another long shift.

Bussing the last four-top, you watch your hands (a habit, now). Piling unclean plates and half-empty glasses, they appear smooth—no callouses, oil burns (or fingernails)—they aren't so much hands as the idea of handling things, which are also just impressions, like brush strokes of a painting viewed too close.

Clara, are you dreaming?

There's the sound of running water, clanging dishes, and whistling—she always whistles, washing dishes—

The sound is no longer coming from behind, but right in front of you.

She's standing at the sink, facing away. Beneath her sweat-damp shirt you see the shape of her birthmark, the one you memorized like maps of places too far and costly to go.

Meghan? you say.

She turns her profile toward you and whispers, *Clara, are you dreaming?*

You hear her without listening, just as you'd watched your hands without looking. Only now you do look. Her expression is familiar, the one she wears when imagining her escape.

You step closer.

Now you see it: the uncanny smoothness of her skin, the dimness of her eyes.

Clara, are you—

You lurch back, dropping a tray of plates and glasses (had you been holding it all along?) and remember:

Meghan talking of escape: from her suffocating marriage, this job, this town. How she sometimes glimpses freedom, biking home in the cool night air, but only ever feels truly free lucid dreaming.

Your coworkers mocking her for how she studies her hands, whispers to herself, Am I dreaming? and whistles at work, reinforcing habits to trigger lucidity later, when she's asleep.

And you, asking her to teach you. Hoping to become closer to her, to become her waking escape. Her asking what you'd do if you ever finally have a lucid dream, and you lying because the truth is telling her how you feel.

Hear the dishes shatter!

See Meghan turn.

Now you're sure: you're finally lucid dreaming. But all you can do is focus your attention on painting back in every detail of her face before you awake into the world where she's gone, her life taken by a drunk driver while biking home in the cool night air after a closing shift. Perhaps one just like this.

You look into her eyes, brightening them. And for a moment you swear they look back.

3 A.M.

Poem by K.L. Johnston

Nothing good ever happens at
three a.m., nothing I ever
prepared for. And you are not here.

In this early hour, the phone call
leaves me weeping at the sudden
heaviness of my bones. A car

coughs in the dark, into silence.
A moment more I tell my strained
senses. Wait. It may all be just

a mistake. I am left frozen
with the question I finally ask
myself at 3:08 a.m.,

bewildered, angry and alone
when I should be warm and deeply
asleep, merely waiting for your

home coming. How do I live now?
Awareness of a stranger's tread
on the front walk creeps like snapping

ice along my spine. Shivering
at 3:20, wiping my eyes,
blowing my nose, I rise, still not

prepared to meet this messenger
opening my door to a new world,
an alternative universe.

to my friend in mourning, ten years later

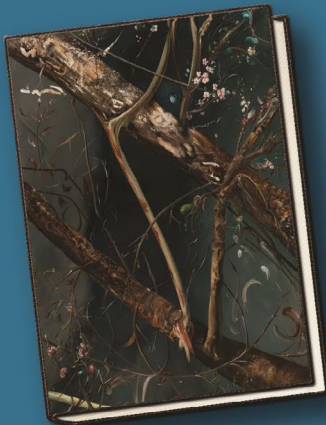
Poem by K.L. Johnston

I don't have any more fancy words.
I think I've used up all the good ones
and you've heard all the platitudes from
everyone else, but I still want to
tell you how the first rain of winter
slides through the last bursting gold of this
year and how the smooth silver winter
regularly comes and you should not
be afraid, or cower away from
the crackling silence turning the year,
with its shivering expectations.

I still want to tell you that life and the
celebratory four stroke beat of
our earth's heart is going on and will
go on, maybe without us someday,
but beloved, un-rued, and never less.
And there will be a new year as long
as the moon rises, the sun tosses
shadows and our home is a golden
blue blur, all celestial. Because
it is imperative to me that
while you continue to live, you live
more than this half-life you are choosing.

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Cat Remembers Being Young

...for Suki, my Siamese cat, my first love

Poem by Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas

I'm lost to dreams of what life once was
when we lived in that old house, the one
where this story began, the house I'd hoped
to live in forever, yet nothing lasts forever,
even my dreams are broken before ending.
But I like lingering on the before rather than after.
Her little bed with its gold sprayed headboard
and the handmade quilt she pulled over us
while napping. Her window, where I viewed
the world beyond and the stillness that surrounded
the hours, where stephanotis brushed against
glass, a flurried reminder of wind marking time.

It was a place of sun-drenched afternoons,
of cruising old neighborhoods in her painted
red wagon as it rolled along the walkway rimmed
with tiny block houses in green, pink, and yellows,
my tail unfurling in all directions as it sliced
through the blueness of air. The overgrown
willow with its elongated leaves that drooped
in handfuls of sallow green down the driveway,
tiny bits of itself cluttering our path to the front yard.
Petunias bursting over the splintered edge
of the planter-box in too many colors to count.
There was more of everything back then,
and she was still there, my paws kneading
the heart beneath her chest as she cradled
my body and stroked my fur.

Oh, to the days of catching an ill-fated
mouse, bringing it back to the steps of that house,
to her, the one who loved me, who kept me
close yet gave me the freedom to roam
from tree to tree in search of sparrows,
magpies or squirrels running free. Our

afternoons filled with wonder, ending
with a warm bowl of milk, eight lives still
to follow, since lost to years and fate,
as she abandoned me for something
called college. Now I laze across the sunlit
grass and consider how my purring has become
complacent, hollow as if a concession for having
to go on without her.

Perhaps this is acceptance, or maybe
death quietly birthing from within as the heart
begins to acquiesce to change in its silent shift
that's always paired with grief. Her mother
ousting me to ominous oaks on the hillside,
forcing me to grapple with wilderness of nature
after breaking her beloved Chinese lamp,
one she never used yet placed thoughtlessly
on the edge of a marble table with its long cord
catching my paw in an unfortunate accident,
without the girl to defend me.

Though, I have no shame in breaking
her mother's things. Stupid collectibles that cluttered
my route from room to room, hindering my path
in what seemed a deliberate array of breakables.
Today I tap my tail against a dandelion while
admiring my ageless shadow as it looms in
distorted angles beneath the afternoon heat.
I stare and meow at leaves the color of sage
navigating the badlands while pondering memories
of the good old days yet with a sense of indifference.
Just now a rattlesnake is creeping toward me.
It serpentine across the lawn and slithers near.
I hear its sibilant sound never once
having the urge to hiss.



After the Storm

Fiction Story by Sarah Courteau

The hurricane hit like an old boxer—sapped of its former power, but still dangerous. We were hearing reports about power outages. The lights in our house only blinked, and an ornamental bush in the front yard snapped off at the base. I'd had tepid feelings about that bush, a relic of the former owners' manicured aesthetic. Our new home had held up.

The sky washed clean, my husband and I set out to survey the damage to the neighborhood. Ivan strode ahead with our dog. I was moving slowly, filled with the awareness that I was a carapace for something delicate. Our tiny embryo seemed as ephemeral as an idea. Some days I feared a lapse in concentration would be enough to vanquish it from my belly.

Twigs and branches littered the sidewalk, and I picked my way, watching my feet. Still, I nearly stepped on the pink creature curled on the concrete. Perhaps three inches long, hairless and wrinkled, its ears translucent commas, its eyes dim blueberries sealed over with skin. It squirmed, its mouth opening and closing as though on a tiny hinge. A few feet away rose a sixty-foot oak.

I felt a queasiness that wasn't morning sickness and hurried to catch up to Ivan. Turning the corner, we saw a tree limb lodged in the windshield of a car.

"Someone's having a bad day," Ivan said.

The image of the injured pink creature rose in my mind. "This was quite the storm."

I wouldn't tell Ivan, I decided. I would bear the burden of what I had seen alone. After a few more steps, I said, "The wind blew a baby squirrel down from its nest. It's still moving."

"Where?" Ivan asked.

"Back there. By the oak tree in front of the house."

"That's a maple."

"What? No! It's an oak. You can tell by the leaves." Ivan's confidence was part of what attracted me to him. But his sense of the definite was often misplaced.

"It'll be dead by the time we're back," Ivan said. "It probably already is."

We continued our walk. Several cars were damaged, and a couple of streets were blocked by fallen trees. An ambulance screamed by. We moved through the mayhem untouched, like visitors. We were launching our baby's life in a place we barely knew ourselves, a place that suddenly felt dangerous.

As we headed back up the block toward our house, dread gnawed my belly. I wanted Ivan to be right, for the squirrel kitten to be still, its clawed limbs curled in surrender.

Ahead of me, Ivan shooed the dog off the sidewalk, and I quickened my pace. I was again looking down at the squirrel, opening and closing its mouth.

"I have to put it out of its misery," Ivan said.

He was right, but for a moment I hated him. We were helpless to do anything for this tiny creature other than relieve it of its suffering. It was on its own journey.

I reached for the dog's leash, and Ivan picked up a brick. I looked away and heard a thud. When I turned back, he was scraping something off the sidewalk into the grass.

As we mounted the front steps, I reached up and rested my palm on his broad back, not sure whether I was offering consolation or seeking it. I started to speak. Ivan shook his head. "I can't."

We entered our house, together with the mysterious being whose life was already entirely her own. We could do nothing for her but love her. It scarcely seemed enough.

About Pen Parentis

The Pen Parentis Writing Fellowship for New Parents annually honors a talented writer who is the parent of at least one child under 10 years old. This year's fellow receives \$1000 to further their writing career, a year of mentorship, and an opportunity to read their winning story at the Pen Parentis Literary Salon in New York City. To watch the playback of this and other Pen Parentis Literary Salons, visit [youtube.com/penparentis](https://www.youtube.com/penparentis) and subscribe.

This year, submissions called for a new, never

published fiction story, any genre, on any subject, of up to 600 words. Word count changes each year because the main goal of this Fellowship is to motivate writers to continue to create new high-quality creative work at the very busiest time of the parenting journey.

Pen Parentis is a 501C3 literary nonprofit that helps writers stay on creative track after starting a family. Subscribers enjoy Accountability Meetups, Salons and other perks. Find out more at www.penparentis.org/we-want-to-help.

Counselling in the Time of Covid: Healing from the Veranda

Nonfiction Story by Rosalind Forster

"[I] go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order." ~J. Burroughs

March 2020

It looked like a seeded dandelion when it rolled in to town and no amount of breaths from gathered lips could blow it away. It danced on the tiniest droplets that sat on words and twirled amid the energetic propulsion of a laugh, a cough or a sneeze! It cruelly snatched lives and we were stunned by its tenacity. Vibrant hubs of activity became ghost towns; people were mere tumbleweeds, just passing through. Streets and highways hosted little to no traffic and the wild ones started to come. The air became fresh and the city noises dimmed and in marched a new world order. The crowned virus had arrived and fingers of blame stroked the air and stoked the division among many.

Masks were donned, hands were washed and surfaces swiped with murderous intent. We stepped into bubbles and decided who belonged and shut the door on the rest. Regulations were set up and confusion set in. Rule followers and rule breakers divided the congenial waves of social mores and vied for the upper hand. The new order asked us to reorganize and homes became multifunctional hubs of industry. And within the confines of those four walls emotions ebbed and flowed leaving the detritus of loneliness and fear, frustration and anxiety, laughter and wonder. We gobbled up news and became numb and befuddled. Many people hopped onto Zoom and talked with family, friends, colleagues and strangers. Work meetings with technology were now the norm and attendees became school kids fiddling with things under desks. The uninitiated played with apps and turned into cats and the occasional naked figure was tracked by the camera's eye.

As a counsellor my avenues to link with people were few. I could Zoom or phone. Not ideal but possible. A little awkward, a little stiff but like ducks to water I plopped in. Zoom journeys beamed me into bedrooms and beds, cars, kitchens, patios and living rooms. Shy people preferred the phone and since I was a fully initiated duck, I could roll with that too. I made the acquaintance of Zoom-bombing dogs and cats; unwitting actors in this blooming new chapter.

As spring morphed into summer an idea sprung forth—a sanctuary on the veranda. It would be a soothing space where people (clients) could trim away at the vines that bound them. The veranda is encircled by stately trees, open fields and forests. Since nature is a worthy antidote to distress, I sensed possibilities. Next to the poison grows the cure.

With the assistance of a creative ally, the image of that space came to life. Curtains were hung, wicker chairs placed, plants moved in as did a metal heron who became the sanctuary guardian. The veranda sits near a small forest the centre of which holds dark mystery. When the sun shines through the leaves of that forest the mystery turns into wonder. To

the side of the forest sits a Buddha in a hosta filled garden, radiating peace and hope. People now come and go and for many I could see how the energy of the place was a worthy assistant. When we are disconnected from ourselves, we disconnect from nature. Since we emanate from one source and are woven into the tapestry of life I am reminded that we are not separate from nature but an integral part of it. As we connect to our inner selves we can reinvigorate that connection to the natural world and let the healing begin.

When fall announced its departure and the chill days of winter moved in, some chose to remain outside. So, with thoughts of warmth and comfort out came magic bags, blankets and peppermint tea. December saw the last of the hardy clients and we down shifted to Zoom. Although much can be accomplished with technology, there is nothing quite like physical presence. As the weeks turned into months and the crowned villain ebbed and flowed, we fell into 2021 with little fanfare. Along with masks and furrowed brows we wondered was this EVER going to end.

April 2021

By April the veranda came back to life. The plants arrived, the curtains were re-hung and the heron resumed her role as she gazed over fallow fields. A fox had her kits in the barn late winter and a family member would dash by the veranda once in a while. Hummingbirds come to the feeder reminding me it is the little things that are important. A resident chipmunk has joined the assembly of wild ones. She is blind in one eye and she is brave. She sits on any willing body, twitching her nose and waiting for food to appear. Chippy once made her way up a client's pant leg generating a smile and a different day saw her sitting in an open purse. An orange feral cat arrived one late afternoon and slept with Buddha for a few days. Then, like Alice in Wonderland's Cheshire cat, he simply disappeared.

Nature offers lessons on impermanence reminding us not to cling; she teaches us about birth and death, growth, destruction and renewal. She reminds us to be patient and shows us that everything has a purpose – even our human troubles. The crowned virus has forced us into situations we could never have imagined. We have wobbled our way through difficult months with emotional ratings from blunt to explosive. Now, as we roll through summer and fall, restrictions have eased and people are pleased, but wait ... what is this thing called Omicron?

2022

As for the sanctuary, I will continue to companion those courageous enough to come and disassemble the ties that bind them. They are in good hands. Nature, my trusty assistant, is listening.







On Cue

Poem by Dr. Claudia Greenwood

Small leaf,
drought burned and curled,
ensnared mid-flight
by a single silver strand
spun during the night
unseen
by someone on a different journey.
You have paused in your death drop
before my window
diverting my thoughts.
As I watch you spin,
pushed now by a breeze
I see myself
in your tiny skeleton,
caught and spinning,
having come to write
a tribute to my son,
but unable to
wrap my heart around
final words.

Ah, there you go.
A stronger breeze
has broken the span
that held you
suspended
and released you gently
to short-cropped grass below.

I, too, must move on.
Thank you for
falling, for waiting, for falling
before my window
to let me know that I, too,
can complete my task,
find peace,
and gentle rest.



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Sacrifice

Fiction by J.C. Scott

The room is smaller and darker than Jules recollects from childhood. That first time was the last time. Until now. Of course, everything was different then. Very different. Second thoughts are beginning to percolate from within. She begins to sweat. Her thoughts reach a fight or flight like crescendo as she tries to rise but is frozen. The little door slides open, and escape is no longer an option.

She has rehearsed this moment for many hours over the past several days. Her right arm moves reflexively up, down and across, as she says, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." She reflects for a moment, before adding, "Amen."

Jules then recites, "Forgive me Father, for I have sinned," though, only because she believes it's expected.

An awkward length of silence clings to the darkness as she founders in her attempt to gather everything she wants to convey into a single mouthful of words. Ultimately, she takes a deep breath and begins.

"It's been a long time since I've been here. Since my first confession, in fact. That's when I still thought I was a boy. I mean, I knew something was different, but only God knew I was a girl. I didn't understand that then. When I did begin to understand, my father beat those thoughts out of me. And, the boys in the neighborhood beat those thoughts out of me. Yeah. Yeah, that was a ..., a time. I'll just leave it at that since that's not why I'm here."

Jules flinches each time she enunciates the word *beat*. The chair creaks behind the wall as the priest shifts, uncomfortably. Before she can continue, Jules is presented with a familiar question she has no answer for.

"Why are you here?"

Without hesitation, she ignores it, regurgitating the thought that possibly the answer would manifest itself, benevolently, to her at some point.

"As I grew up, the thoughts morphed into knowledge, ... that I was a woman. I fought the knowledge for years, even tried marriage, and had a kid, who's an adult now. I just kept thinking that if I could find something to beat the knowledge out of me, everything would be OK. I prayed, a lot, and finally came to the conclusion that God wanted me to have the knowledge, because they were perfectly fine with me being me."

She stops for a moment. Looking down at the hands resting in her lap, she says, "So, I'm a transgender woman." She listens for any audible reaction, such as a sigh.

"Did you get that? Have you checked out on me?" Jules asks the questions rhetorically, but hears, "I have not, ... checked out."

"Hmm, OK, so, my son, he suffers from schizophrenia. You know, he'd actually like talking to you, because he believes he has a direct communication channel to God. But he also believes the illuminati run everything in the world, and when he gets going, it can be hard to calm him down. So, maybe that wouldn't be a good idea, I don't know."

She hesitates for a moment, in a way yearning to hear something like, *I would love to talk to him*, but only silence echoes from the other side. No matter. Jules is beginning to feel very warm and glances at her Fitbit. 119 bpm. She is feeling emotional but doesn't want to begin crying again.

"Anyway, I've been receiving gender-affirming therapies, and presenting more and more as me, looking more feminine, just waiting for the right time to come out to my son. So..., uh..., a couple weeks ago now, I take him to his favorite taqueria. We're eating outside, even though it's cold, because he doesn't like to be around strangers. Anyway, he says, Dad, you're beginning to look like a woman. I look at him kind of funny, like, and he quickly says he's just joking. But, I think, this is it. This is the time. So, I try and explain everything to him, and he starts looking all around. I ask him if he's OK. He slams his hands down on the table and tells me I'm one of *them*. He practically screams that I have snipers hidden all over. I'm in shock. I don't know what to say, and then he gets up and runs away. It takes me a minute to gather myself. I start crying as I pay up. I go look for him. Turns out a cop had to pull him out of the highway. He ends up being TDO'd to a psychiatric unit at Inova. Of course, he's an adult, so I can't get any information, and I'm really freaking out."

Jules begins crying and reaches into her purse for a tissue.

"Take your time," the priest says, calmly. Jules tries to detect sympathy in his voice, but she can't tell one way or the other. Fuck it all, she thinks, but immediately feels bad and tries to rewind the thought, to no avail.

"Finally, I get a call from the doctor. He tells me my son thinks that I'm being programmed by the illuminati to be a woman and suggests the only way to help him get better is to reassure him it's all a mistake. I tell the doc it's not a mistake, the part about being a woman, that is, and I clarify that I'm transgender and was trying to come out to my son. He doesn't say anything for a while, and I have to ask if he's still there. He says yes, and explains medications can only do so much, and that I have a decision to make."

"So, you're here to ask my advice?"

"God no," Jules immediately responds. Angry with herself, she rises, fumbling with the door on her way out.

Jules thinks, *why the fuck DID I go there*, as she speeds away from the church parking lot. *There's no decision to make.*

Why the Girl?

Poem by Nicole Farmer

A new friend tells me he is writing songs about his dog, and then confesses the songs are from the dog's perspective but mostly about himself, but perhaps more about his daughter. The dog was her dog first. I ask him about her, and he tells me she was a real free spirit, always following her heart and traveling around the country. I hear the word "was" and yet I am stunned when he says she was murdered five years ago. I say what everyone says, hearing the words "I'm so sorry" come out of my mouth and knowing they do not suffice. What should I have said? How can I describe the rest of my evening? How I cried in my car the whole way home, imagining the suffering he and his partner have lived through, imagining the mysterious undeserved death of an untamable girl just turned twenty.

With no details except "she got herself in a bad situation", my mind races. Why is it always the girl? Girls die at the hands of a man hundreds of times a day, for hundreds of reasons: he wanted

her body, he was ashamed of her body, he was ashamed for wanting her body, he wanted her money, he resented her money, he had to punish her and take her money, he hated her freedom, he was threatened by her freedom, he wanted her freedom, he took her freedom to feel better about resenting her freedom, she was in his way, she should pay for being in his way, he was attracted to her and it was her fault, he had to rape her and kill her in order to feel better about the fact that he resented her, he had to rape her because he could not control himself, and that was her fault, so she deserved to die, this girl - any girl - who is simply there, and inconvenient to his agenda.

I want to understand humanity, but I can make no sense of this. This timeless tragedy plays out again and again. What shall I say when I see my friend? I can only hold his hand and listen, if he should ever want to speak again about the father he once was.



*This poem was previously published online by Viewless Wings Literary magazine in Dec. 2021.

My Past Reminisces Confirm My Present

Nonfiction Story by Faith J. Forster

When I feel my life is insignificant, I reconnect with past times and places by sifting through my extensive collection of business cards. Each card deserves consideration to determine why and how it represents a meaningful moment in my life's experiences. I plan on whittling down the uncontrollable pack by purging one here and there.

Manolo Pittore Studio D'Arte tucked at the bottom of a dusty hill in Via Grande Sicily was pointed out by the gregarious vintner at the top of the hill. Manolo, a local artist greets me and walks me through his gallery stopping every few steps to explain his paintings of Sicilian sights; bright red and blue fishing boats resting on the shore, white washed walls plastered with purple bougainvillea, the dark and mysterious olive groves and a view of Porto Empedocle, birthplace of Camilleri, the author of detective Montalbano. Manolo points out a pastoral scene of an olive grove and I am drawn into the dark green depths of the fields where olive trees cast black shadows over the bright green of sunlit grasses. I can frame it before I send it to you, he offers. This clinches the sale. During the long Canadian winter, I escape into the depth of the picture, follow the direct line through the olive grove and come out into the glorious fields bathed in the sunshine of Sicily. Manolo's card is a keeper.

The Baguette Bistro card comes up and I wonder how it fared during the pandemic and whether the pandemic is really over for the restaurateurs. Bonsoir the proprietor calls out when I walk through the door. She creates an empty spot in a room where all the seating is taken. In my cramped seat, I wait for her juicy duck confit and her offer of a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. When I am finished, she leaves me some time before she serves a delectable Crème Brûlée for dessert. The occasional jab in the ribs by fellow eaters is easily tolerated while immersed in the outstanding fare of this crowded eatery.

Kate Spade, New York printed in black on a bare pink surface is simple but eye catching. Why would such a talented designer find it necessary to end it all in 2018. Her decision puzzles me and I try to place her in her studio as I touch the rich burgundy leather of her designer handbag and pink pocketbook. Kate is no friend of mine; I have never met her. But still there is something about her death that makes me fonder of this particular handbag. Perhaps it is because once the artist has left us, we covet the enduring art. I am not finished with her bare pink card yet.

Secure Yacht Services invokes memories of David, the skilled skipper of our small sailing vessel, Xanadu. At dusk, it's impossible to tear our eyes away from the inferno of the bright red and orange sky over the Salish Sea, until David cautions us to watch for stray logs, other vessels and navigation aids. Our charming captain woos our single female friend who's along for the adventure, cooks the best scrambled eggs as the boat jumps about in the chop of rough waters and returns us back home without a scratch. In the evening, he regales us with tales of gin palaces on the high seas full of ladies kipped up in the wrong sleeping quarters and bodies strewn through the galley. Skipper, yarn spinner, cook and charmer par excellence, David lands on the keep pile.

Casa de Principe, Lisbon Bed and Breakfast is featured in black and white on one side of a card and when I turn the card over there is a colourful picture of the people's saint, King D. Pedro V. To enter the premises, we pass through a nondescript street door, ride up in a tiny elevator and arrive at an elegant décor of chandeliers, crown molding, and ceilings decorated in an intricate network of vines and leaves painted in the old-world greens, blues and yellows. Lovely arched windows give us a bird's eye view of the street life of Praça do Principe. Each morning we perch on dainty golden chairs around a miniature dining table for a continental breakfast of crisp rolls with tomatoes smothered in bocconcini and basil and enjoy a steady stream of fresh coffee. I watch the Portuguese waiter slap from place to place in shoes twice the size needed to accommodate his feet. He graciously offers me more coffee and then shambles back to the kitchen. I will keep the card and return some day.

Graves is a perfect name of a barrister and solicitor who discusses the details of death and the preparation of a will. My friend remarks, "I get it, a grave must be dug before a will can be executed."

"It is certainly not a subject to be joked about," I say.

I toss Mr. Graves's card into the bin and replace it with the card of Ms. Taylor, the new lawyer, who is an expensive but necessary overseer of assets that remain after death.

Angelo, the Greek offers me a black card with details of his construction company printed in white. A stocky muscular young man with loads of woolly black hair and sensitive brown eyes set in the face of an angel, he looks me in the eye and says, "I'm gonna make you the best stairs to last forever."

For days he arrives early and works non stop in the heat of the baking sun. "You see I insert screws under the wood so they are invisible. So good for beautiful stairs. You'll see."

The job is not complete until Angelo's father arrives to inspect his son's handiwork. He yells loudly in Greek as I hover close by trusting everything is as solid as it looks. Angelo mentions his father likes wine and since I have plenty of bottles of home made in our garage begging for any sort of appreciation, I am generous with my offer. Years later when I was able to contact Angelo for some minor stair repairs, he swears his father loved the homemade. With a ready supply of several more bottles, I take him at his word but leave a few choice vintages in reserve for future fixes.

Bruno printed next to the blue head of lion on a cream background, the calling card of my mechanic, is teetering on the verge of discard after a recent estimate of four thousand five hundred dollars for replacing my 2012 Tiqan turbocharger. What I know about any car less than a decade old could fill a thimble so just finding out that my car had a turbocharger was news. Further discussion with other car mechanics provides me with a more convincing estimate in the neighbourhood of three thousand five hundred. Bruno is stunned by such an audacious

challenge to his quote but after his own sleuthing, he agrees with me. Not long ago, my car's undercarriage was badly knocked about when I ran over some metal debris left on the road. Bruno was summoned to jack the car up on a hoist for a damage check. "All good underneath," he said with a smile and a "no charge." The Blue Lion stays put for now.

The Inka Treasure card, with the Chakana (Indigenous cross) emblazoned against a black background takes me to a dark and heavily decorated hotel bedroom in Cusco where I lie each night in the grip of fear. Cusco is three thousand and four hundred meters above sea level with a barometric pressure of four hundred and eighty millimeters of mercury compared to one thousand millimeters of mercury at sea level where I normally reside. A three-fold increase in my rate of breathing keeps me hypervigilant counting breaths and watching the clock until dawn. The Peruvians of Cusco offer coca leaves in baskets, "take for your health," they say but no amount of these leaves gives me any relief from shortness of breath. The card reminds me of altitude sickness and I decide that is a useful thing.

The Sweetwater Bistro has bittersweet memories of great food, excellent wine and near-death experiences. The only way to get to the bistro is by sailing our thirty-foot Catalina approximately 15 nautical miles through channels and wild stretches of open ocean. This may not sound like a major feat to most but to me sailing is an experience of agony or ecstasy. Our collective fear slowly grows from the agony of hellish experiences. One time we were careening about loose in a channel with a gaping group of onlookers shouting out desperate commands to try and stop us from clipping the bow or stern of other docked ships.

"Everyone has such an experience," those who rescue us confide as if this is consolation.

We pledge we will overcome our fears and once off the dock, we grit our teeth and carry on until we eventually arrive at our destination. Before leaving, we pray for no rogue waves, huge gusts of wind or stray rocks. On entering the marina, we solicit the help of anyone who happens to look at us and through helpful advice, hands on lines and encouraging words, we secure our craft firmly to the dock cleats. Once snug in the bistro, we order our congratulatory bottle of wine and while we wait for some fine food, we engage in exaggerated talk of future sailing adventures.

The Hotel des Deux Clefs in the charming village of Turckhiem in the Alsace dates back to the Renaissance. Inside the hotel we discover a maze of Medieval Bohemian rooms where guests play bridge during the afternoon and later in the evening they sit back in soft overstuffed chairs and enjoy the soft soothing blue tones of Miles Davis.

Never enter the village boulangerie without singing out bonjour and once you secure a freshly baked baguette in a crisp paper bag call out au revoir as you leave. These perfunctory greetings on arrival and departure are essential for reasonable service. At the hotel we break open a bottle of chilled Chablis, a totally excellent companion for the fresh crunchy baguette which we load with the regional Munster cheese.

Back home I study the calling card for Hotel des Deux Clefs. Outside it is raining and overcast. I ask my partner, "Will we go back to France?"

"Soon, real soon," he replies with a nostalgic faraway look.

The Surf Motel built in 1963 in Victoria is a mid century modern curiosity. With zero curb appeal it is well situated on the waterfront across from Ogden Point. Early in the morning I walk

the breakwater in the fresh salty ocean air before I visit my dying mother.

"Where are you staying?" she asks when she is aware of my presence.

"At the Surf," I answer and she smiles as her mind floats back to her courtship with my father. Parked along the shore at Ogden Point he asks her to marry him. I have her ashes scattered off the breakwater where close to her youth she can gently drift in and out on the rippling waves.

The memory of my mother is intimately linked to the Surf. Some day soon, I will return to walk on the breakwater and seek spiritual union with mother.

When looking out at the Pacific breaking on the sands of the *Long Beach Peninsula*, Washington, I am mindful of an infinite universe. No mountain, cliff, rock or any object marks the horizon and the expanse of the ocean is uninterrupted. Each year the cottage we rent is set farther and farther from the ocean as the sand dunes and accretions build up every winter and now nestled in the hollows of sand, we can no longer see the ocean from the deck.

We inquire, "where can you buy the best oysters this year or is it razor clam season?" The best oysters from Willapa Bay on the other side of the peninsula become tender juicy morsels when sauteed in butter for just the right amount of time.

A bike ride to the post office in nearby Nahcotta is entertaining as we tune in to the locals who meet and discuss the eco politics of the region. "I hear they had to close down the old Ark oyster bed because of invasive grasses."

"It's the American beachgrass. Should be on the Atlantic, not here."

The thunder buns with pecans and currants baked at the *Post Office Bakery* are impossible to resist. We pedal back to the ocean to savour our sweets and contemplate the zig zag path of sandpipers at the shore.

The Hotel Janitzio is close to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico but off the destination list of any respectable tourist. Enrique is crossed off the calling card and Francisco, the recent replacement is written above in pen. He welcomes us with a finger to his lips, "uno momento." Our room will be ready "pronto." While we wait, he takes our passports for safekeeping in his suitcase which he zips, locks and places far back under his bed out of harms way. He takes stock of a steady stream of male visitors who come and go to a waiting bus parked out on a dusty gravel patch beside the hotel.

While we wait, we sip cerveza and watch the frenetic movements of flies as they dart back and forth, our eyes moving in tandem with their flight path. A plump perspiring senora crosses our vision on her way out to the street. Our stupor is disrupted when Francisco victoriously announces, "room is listo!"

Everything has been hosed down but the steam from recent heavy action rises from the surface of the bed and shower. Diesel fumes warn of inhabitant cockroaches but we are young, travel weary and poor and with nowhere else to go we sleep soundly.

Nowadays with everything instant most people no longer keep calling cards. With text, Twitter and Instagram, they don't understand the touch, design and memories of business cards. Many dismiss me as old fashioned but with only one card on the discard pile, I have regained a measure of satisfaction with my life.

You Don't Want Me To Say

Poem by Kelly Cammack

I startle awake in fear of falling, I remember
clumsy stumbles on the way to Sunday school
Dirt stains on knee socks that no longer stayed up,
scuffed toe of my shiny party shoes
Blood on knee, matching blood dripping
from the holes in Jesus's hands and feet
he shedding scarlet tears, mine clear
and in that moment, I love him

I wake up sweating, I remember
The familiar dream of a man groping me
On the movie screen behind closed eyes
I see my father's face as he reaches across the stove
The look of ownership as his meaty hand inches
towards my favourite embroidered peasant blouse
I smell the greasy pork chop in the frying pan
"Your breasts are growing"
and in that moment, I despise him

I work amongst men, I remember
white starched shirts, tight necked ties
engineers, draughtsmen, they all husbands, fathers
The times they cycled in and out of my work area
figures in a cuckoo clock, in one door, out the other
for no other reason than to stare,
I feel like I have been pimped out
the starring act of a vaudeville peep show
And in those moments, I pity them

You grab my breast as I am getting dressed, I remember

You don't want me to say

"You remind me of my father"

A Slow Death

Poem by Kelly Cammack

My sister is slowly killing me
with every failed suicide.
I tell her, "You really suck at this,
throw yourself in front of a train"
an almost certain death
knowing there are no trains on our island.

I am not a good sister.
She tells me this
Not when she is sober,
when the alcohol runs alongside her blood
a lymph system of manipulation
it freezes her heart,
her words, meant to melt mine
chip away, her tongue an ice pick

I have been an easy target
The toddler she batted around
like a stuffed animal
with the memory of an elephant

"Walk into the ocean"
I suggest on a stormy day, "You can't swim",
an almost certain death
And then I remember,
the one thing we have in common
We float



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