River Poets Journal
2019 Special Edition
A Fork in the Road

Brassaï, Hungarian/French Photographer (1899–1984)

2019 Volume 13 Issue 1
$23.00
River Poets Journal
2019 Special Edition
A Fork in the Road

Brassaï, Hungarian/French Photographer (1899–1984)
A Collection of Poems, Memoir, Stories, and Photography

Poets
Vivian Finley Nida 6
Peggy McCray 6
Paul Bernstein 6
James B. Nicola 7
Mike Gallagher 7
Anuel Rodriguez 8
Loretta Diane Walker 9
Lorraine Caputo 9
Jesse Sam Owens 9
Jane Blanchard 10
Diane Webster 10
James Croal Jackson 10
Beate Sigriddaughter 10
Elena Botts 11
Layla Lenhardt 11
Carl Palmer 12
Nancy D. Bonazzoli 12
Arthur Gatti 13
Judith A. Lawrence 14

Authors
Oonah V Joslin 15-16
Mitchell Toews 17-22
Mary Sarko 23-26
Edward M. Cohen 27-32
Carol McCullough 33-34
Bob Chikos 35-38
Susan Tepper 39-42

Photographer 46

Brassaï, Hungarian/French Photographer (1899–1984)
Dear Poets and Writers,

After a year of health issues which unfortunately resulted in a stroke, this publication was delayed by three months.

Though I am recuperating and getting back my strength, I am sad to say I must retire River Poets Journal with the last two issues, this Special Edition and the Seasonal issue published simultaneously.

It has been a phenomenal run, from 2008 until the present. I have been thrilled and privileged to meet so many poets and writers submitting the best of their work over the years from all over the world.

I will still keep the website as long as I am able and will in time add pdf files of the old online issues to read and reminisce.

Congratulations to all published writers artists, and photographers in River Poets Journal since 2008 online and in print.

I thank you all for the amazing volume of work submitted. It has been my pleasure for all these years to read and select from the readings. It has been truly a labor of love.

Judith Lawrence, editor

River Poets Journal retained one time rights to publish all work online and in print. All future rights were retained by the author.

Although River Poets Journal preferred first time submissions, previously published exceptional work was accepted with a note indicating previous publication.

We asked if your work had been published previously by another literary magazine, to provide acknowledgement of the first publication, such as, “previously published by River Poets Journal, plus month/year.”

Simultaneous submissions were accepted. We asked that the author notified us as soon as they were accepted by another literary site or publication.

A short bio of 2-5 lines with submission was requested. Either a personal bio, current list of publications, or combo would do. Listing name and email on all pages of the submission was advised.

Column space presented problems when formatting a poem for a journal. We asked to refrain from mixing long lines in a short or average line length poem.

Although it might have been an excellent poem, it may not have fit publication space restrictions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editorial</th>
<th>Please Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dear Poets and Writers,</td>
<td>River Poets Journal retained one time rights to publish all work online and in print. All future rights were retained by the author.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After a year of health issues which unfortunately resulted in a stroke, this publication was delayed by three months.</td>
<td>Although River Poets Journal preferred first time submissions, previously published exceptional work was accepted with a note indicating previous publication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Though I am recuperating and getting back my strength, I am sad to say I must retire River Poets Journal with the last two issues, this Special Edition and the Seasonal issue published simultaneously.</td>
<td>We asked if your work had been published previously by another literary magazine, to provide acknowledgement of the first publication, such as, “previously published by River Poets Journal, plus month/year.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has been a phenomenal run, from 2008 until the present. I have been thrilled and privileged to meet so many poets and writers submitting the best of their work over the years from all over the world.</td>
<td>Simultaneous submissions were accepted. We asked that the author notified us as soon as they were accepted by another literary site or publication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will still keep the website as long as I am able and will in time add pdf files of the old online issues to read and reminisce.</td>
<td>A short bio of 2-5 lines with submission was requested. Either a personal bio, current list of publications, or combo would do. Listing name and email on all pages of the submission was advised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congratulations to all published writers artists, and photographers in River Poets Journal since 2008 online and in print.</td>
<td>Column space presented problems when formatting a poem for a journal. We asked to refrain from mixing long lines in a short or average line length poem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thank you all for the amazing volume of work submitted. It has been my pleasure for all these years to read and select from the readings. It has been truly a labor of love.</td>
<td>Although it might have been an excellent poem, it may not have fit publication space restrictions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seasonal Edition

The Seasonal Issue is to be released simultaneously with this issue.

River Poets Journal has been published from 2008 - 2019
River Poets Journal Submission Guidelines

River Poets Journal Accepted:

- New and Established Writers
- Poetry - up to 6 poems - please include your name and email on each poem submitted.
- Short Stories - under 5,000 words
- Flash Fiction - under 3,000 words
- Essays - under 500 words
- Short Memoir - under 1,000 words
- Excerpts from novels that can stand on their own - under 3,000 words preferred
- Art (illustrations and paintings) or Photography
- A short bio of 2 - 5 lines
- Simultaneous and previously published “exceptional” poems are accepted as long as we know where poems are being considered or have appeared.

We preferred:

- Work that inspires, excites, feeds the imagination, rich in imagery; work that is memorable.
- Work that is submitted in the body of an email or as a word attachment, but will accept work through snail mail if the writer does not use a computer. Unselected snail mail submissions are returned if the author requests and SASE is provided with sufficient postage.
- When submitting work, please provide a short bio of 3-4 lines. Listing all your published work is not required. If not previously published, write something about your life you would like the readers to know.
- Previously being published is not a requirement for publication in our Journal. We love new writers with great potential.
- Send work in simple format, Times New Roman, Arial, Georgia 12 pt font, single spaced.
- Please note long line poems may need editing to fit constraints of formatting.

We did not accept:

- Unsolicited reviews
- Pornographic and blatantly vulgar language
- Clichéd or over-sentimental poems or stories

Response time was:

3 to 6 months depending on time of year work was submitted. All submissions were thoroughly read.

River Poets Journal Print Editions:

Some older print editions still exist. Please email and ask if available before ordering. $23.00 per issue plus media postage cost. Note: International shipping cost varies. For ordering multiple copies, please email me for exact cost to avoid overpaying postage. Payment accepted through Paypal, Money Order or Check. Please do not send cash. Delivery of printed copies ordered take 4-6 weeks due to response time of orders placed, and fitting into the Print Shop schedule.

Contributor Copies: River Poets Journal issues are free in PDF format online for easy access when available. We do not offer free contributor print copies with the exception of a featured poet, featured artist/photographer, as the printing cost would be too prohibitive for a small press.
**From the Cabin Porch**

I see her early  
with her fawn  
wearing spots  

She swims across  
lake’s narrow inlet  
to the island  

so thick with foliage  
I lose her, go inside  
When I return  

she does also  
Tawny legs wade  
in shallow water  

Binoculars magnify  
twitch of an ear  
ripple of flank  

Half a turn steals  
dark eyes from view  
A leap melts  

her to memory  
Seven days later  
she and fawn swim  

in west neck  
near me  
drifting in kayak  

Speechless, I glide home  
Then, like a gong  
resound the wonder  

©Vivian Finley Nida  

* A slightly different version of “From the Cabin Porch” appears in my book From Circus Town, USA.

---

**Clearing**

A thick, white wall  
Of heavy fog  
Obscures the road  
Ahead of me.  

It makes the way  
Unseen, unknown,  
Impossible  
To navigate.  

Just a small patch  
Of open space  
Allows me room  
To move forward.  

This close clearing  
Reminding me,  
Life lived at hand  
Is the best course.  

©Peggy McCray

---

**My Day and Yours**

You’d like to know  
about my day? My neighbors  
want me gone, my wife  
already left, old crow  

Tiresias cawed at me  
to find the hidden sin  
so I did, at a fork  
in the road, years back,  
where the fool I whacked  
turned out to be the dad  
who wished me dead,  
leaving me, Oedipus, king  
and killer, family man,  
with sisters for daughters  
and mommy in my bed.  
Now I’m supposed to claw  
my eyes out, die homeless,  
and wind up, so they tell me,  
as a god. How was your day?  

©Paul Bernstein  

(Previously published in What the Owls Know, Kelsay Press, 2019.)
Poetry

frostbite #9: A Penny Balanced

I thought about that penny on the ground
and flipping it over or not for the next soul to find
and then thought that if it were suspended on a wire
held taut, there’s no way it could stay there, it would have
to fall to one side or the other, just as

a play becomes a comedy or tragedy;
and that the planet the penny was sitting on
is held in space taut as that stretched-out wire,
so that the penny was going to have to flip
some time or other; and that we’re only in

act two or three of a four or five act play,
which means there’s time for the whole thing to switch
from comedy to tragedy, as when Mercutio kills
Tybalt, accidentally, under Romeo’s arm,

or tragedy to comedy, as in so many tales
where the situation, what with all the poverty
and wartime strife, must be sufficiently
“tragic to be comic,” as they say.

And so whether I flipped it or not would depend on the course
I thought the penny was on, the planet, that is,
and what act we were in, were there time for a switch
to steer us to a happy ending, or
were we on our way inexorably to the unspeakable.
I hovered awhile, then decided. Do you remember?

Oh sure, that penny was only a metaphor,
but metaphor is myth, untrue

but more true, and deserving of consideration.
And now that you’ve seen a penny first, it’s your turn.

And not to flip, or even not to think,
would be a choice as well. O the suspense.

You’ve been asked to think about it, and here’s the penny.

Our road is one; the divergence, in your hands.

©James B. Nicola

(Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater and WordTech Communications)

Take Off

Before this, he toddled,
bounced off stools,
bumped off chairs,
staggered around the room,
grabbed the tangible,
grasped the abstract,
scary gap between
him and
his come-to-me Mum.
Tonight, an airport lounge
offered scope, the space to probe
new limits - no limits.
Of a sudden, he had taken off:
taxied between mock marble walls,
scampered across terrazzo floors,
scrambled along alluring aisles,
played the gallery,
swerved, steadied, stopped,
swaggered into childhood.

©Mike Gallagher

Ships Wake

Churning ridges surge
In stern outrage,
Their recent oneness slit.
Foam seethes in churlish pique,
Spawns a peevish spray.
Waves soar and swell,
Spewing, spitting spite.
Between the angry billows,
Compromise’s green current
Retreats, spurned,
In flailing fury.

Farther back, white horses prance;
Dance on broken hearts.

©Mike Gallagher
**How My Mother Folds Her Ghosts**

Her radiation mask looks like a white birdcage, or a helmet of invisibility. It rests on top of a dusty wooden cabinet above the sink in the washroom.

*It was like a concrete vault and I could smell hair burning,* she says, describing the plunging white darkness of her radiation treatments. She leaves fragments of herself in every room; a luminous trail of feathered ghosts in her footsteps. *There’s no blood in my system,* *I’m always cold,* she says. Her eyes have hardened into jade stones and there’s nothing but air in her veins; she might as well be made of marble. She’s the only mother I know who hates flowers. *They always die,* she says. As a boy I used to draw roses for her and press them into her skin when it was still soft as clay. I watch her now as she listens to the doves singing outside as light filters in through the window shaped like an octagon. She takes a deep breath as her heart beats outside of her chest. I see her as both a lighthouse and a lightkeeper refusing to be crushed by her hidden juggernaut, or the surrogate storms she carries. *I want to be cremated and put in a pizza box,* she says.

I don’t know if she’s being funny or serious. Or maybe she said those words to me in a dream. She checks the lint trap for ghosts. She takes the ones she finds, spreads them across the top of the dryer and folds them neatly like tiny opaque towels. Then she hangs them up on hangers and begins the task of unraveling the pain-haunted fiber of her bones. Sometimes what doesn’t kill her makes her weaker. And sometimes it sleeps behind the spectrum of her light.

©Anuel Rodriguez

**Scattered Condition**

I feel more alive in autumn when the night feels more electric than the day. The leaves on the trees are dying in hues of blood and fire coral—and each death feels like a mini-sunset collapsing in the wind. The smell of smoke and rain is in the air. It makes me think of warmth and simultaneity. My past and future could be occurring at the same time.

I’m young again, existing in a place before my darkness had a name. When my skin was less weathered and my mind was less wounded. When my father would still take me to coastal pumpkin patches in Half Moon Bay and I’d get lost in the corn mazes of my imagination.

I’m an old man caressing my partner’s tired feet by a fire as I pour my words into her veins and write a novel inside her skin. How can I miss her when our bodies haven’t even met? For now, we’re nocturnal strangers with our fragmented selves scattered through time.

©Anuel Rodriguez
Us

In this web we once called us,
you tell me twice you are unhappy.
After we snip the strings,
I see your face on a distant page.
Happiness runs all the way to your eyes
and I dance in a circle of joy.
I would have not known
had I tried to keep you bound to me
with one thin filament.

©Loretta Diane Walker

On The Wings Of Crows

I heard the crows’ raucous calls,
saw them flying one after another
in pairs
Perch upon a barren sycamore,
squawking and cawing in anger.

I see my dreams fly on those wings,
vying each other
for dominance,
for survival.
Which is to win the nest of my soul,
which is to force the other to flee?

Two to live,
two to go away,
to exist in the netherworld sky of my
memory.

©Lorraine Caputo

(Originally published in Talking Leaves (volume 7,
number 1, Fall Equinox 1997)

Rhythm’s Lair

The three musicians’ discontent
arose from tender feelings spent
to purchase animosity between them.
They aimed their angst and enmity
at differences amongst the three
then heard the chime that called them to their music.

The trio joined to form the one
for one in time they must become
to marry their vibrations into music.
Their conjugations filled the air
and letting fly they soon declared
their animosity was but illusion.

As rhythm led into its lair
this fused gestalt became aware
of being in a chrysalis of wonder.
They heard the echoes of the ages
fallen angels, risen sages
weep as one to mourn their separation.

An inchoate messiah cried
that murder is just suicide
But no one in the room could ever see it.
An inchoate redeemer sighed
the day he’d heard the music died
then took his life before he could redeem it.

The fearsome beast humanity
lies hidden just beneath the sea
extending rigid tendrils through to moonlight.
The tempest driven waves erode
to batter each protruding node
these husks of men descend into confusion.

In music and in making love
the mind may quicken to observe
emergence of one’s self into the other.
And every other now and then
from chrysalis we comprehend
connections that we find in one another.

©Jesse Sam Owens
**Beached**

You flirt with purchasing a boat,  
much like the one you owned  
but gave away to save a life  
whose loss was just postponed.

You wish for me to go aboard,  
to fish with ready bait  
where waters meet—some salt, some fresh—  
and then cohabitate.

Before we wed, we once held hands  
while riding waves of foam  
that rolled toward weathered dunes far north  
of this our island home.

That was such fun, but I prefer  
to stay on shore, to spell  
our time with walks on sand, to glance  
at each abandoned shell.

©Jane Blanchard

(Previously published in *Pudding Magazine* 62, 2014)

**Predator**

Like a tiger the grasshopper  
pounces on the car’s hood  
digging in its sticky, claw legs  
until the car races down the highway  
wind jerking left and right  
at the grasshopper until it slides  
behind the bug deflector and rides  
miles from its territory  
until the car stops.

The grasshopper leaps  
barely touching ground  
before a flying shadow  
swoops into a blackbird  
snack hungry but poor peck  
as grasshopper springs  
into tall grass and slinks away.

©Diane Webster

**David, Sasha, Anthony**

seemed natural  
ten years ago  
to be at the pool hall  
drinking coke  
with secret rum  
not worrying  
about climate  
AC blasting  
to beach tunes  
Fresh Prince remixes  
windows open  
to the dust we  
every day inhale  
body sand  
castles  
at the foot  
of warm oceans

©James Croal Jackson

**I Believe**

Vivaldi wrote Spring  
after he listened  
to a red winged blackbird  
sing.

It's probably not true,  
but I so like believing.

©Beate Sigriddaughter

**A Brief Whisper With the Colorado River**

Driving upstream  
along the Colorado River glistening  
in all its glory winding through  
widening vistas, headed far  
for the magnificent Grand Canyon,  
I told the river, *You have no idea*  
*how beautiful it is where you are going.*  
The river glistened back, *And you,*  
*my friend, have no idea*  
*how beautiful it is where you are going.*

©Beate Sigriddaughter
**Poetry**

**what aches**

of extremities are laid out like winter trees shivering in a nonexistent breeze,  
blood has an end to it. i could watch where it runs frantic  
but i do not mind and tend these aches like the premature child  
that i am this is only a skeleton of thoughts  
no longer color but an in-utterable light that is the fluctuation of your ribs when there is so little air  
in them and a heart that slows like the soft feeling of the moonrise just over the hill which was once  
dark in a way that was like no other darkness that we might remember but that does not make it so  
i am tired, everlastingly. a vacant sun today and the sky just  
a vast haze. i would take you to my heart but that is in the hinterland that i am  
not blessed or cursed to roam any longer. i cry for elizaville, and milan, yes,  
and the lake of the deli which is god the surrealist's fond memory.  
i have lost my sound, the crows flung out like dusk  
and the waterfalls now pooling only in my veins  
underneath the skin, unbruised and perfect. this is ruin,  
to be unloving, to be taken out of suffering,  
to be a fool giving nothing to the world. this is  
deepest surrender.

©Elena Botts

**cultural productions**

if you were to be on the hill, or if you were to see-  
there is a ghost ship moored not far from here-  
it is tethered by a strand of wind,  
weighted by the dawn of the world,  
which is tomorrow. maybe i will see you there  
and all the ones i knew before  
though no time could keep us there,  
hours still somewhere in your heart  
which, like a strange unlikely realm  
lingers on in the dry  
winter. the world does not thaw  
just for you-  
we are not moved by any particular breeze  
there is a light on just beyond these naked trees  
do not name it mine, do not name it yours  
as it comes on and then goes

©Elena Botts

**Timid Shame**

That winter split me  
like firewood. I was smaller,  
splintered, Elliot Smith would play  
on cassette in my blue Volkswagen  
while our breath coursed  
through flared nostrils and damaged lungs.  
*  
I hid my pain like a sick dog. I slinked  
out, under the back deck,  
I swallowed some pills.  
In those hideous places  
I can still smell the acrid, peaty heat  
of your breath, reeking like remorse.  
*  
But even though you swore that you left  
I still caught you shoplifting.  
Greedily, you shoved  
every broken piece of me  
into your pockets.  
*  
The more you took, the more  
I couldn’t help but remember you  
feeding our cats, their tails licking  
around your ankles like muted flames.  
And now I’m jealous of people  
I don’t know. I want to be that stranger  
sitting across from you on the subway.  
I want to claim the dust you leave behind.

©Layla Lenhardt
Misstep

Happy with myself the first time in years, able to look folks in the face unashamed, knowing another day has been conquered.

My friends, my family, all proud of me, of how my life is finally turning around, all offering hope, support, courage, love.

Each hour counted, each day, each night, until reaching one solid month, yesterday. I deserved a night off to reward myself.

So what do I do, I celebrate my success by doing exactly what got me here in the first place. Like last time, the time before, take a taste, tell myself I can stop after one. Like last time, knew I would not, could not, and like last time, fail again.

I missed my high, wondered why I ever stopped, why I started again. When the low returns, I return. Like the last time, like the first time, accepted by comrades sharing my journey of steps and missteps. Days sober reset. Tomorrow is my goal.

©Carl Palmer

(Poetry)

(The twelve-step program is a set of guiding principles outlining a course of action for recovery from addiction, compulsion, or other behavioral problem).

Pivot Point

You just know when you have had one of those experiences that within a fleeting instant instantly and irrevocably has changed your life forever.

Out of the blue or seemingly you catch a glimpse then gasp and watch as it processes elbows linked with the father’s to the waiting arms of your altar and before you know it before you even understand you’ve lifted the veil and married grief for better or worse forever.

It is these things upon which a heart pivots.

Today while walking I watched sand turn into dust and fly. After a time it was gone.

If even a mountain does not last crushed down with each step of your sole, how did I ever believe that this would?

©Nancy Diamante Bonazzoli

(Previously published by Absolution (Luminare Press, 2019))
**Shattered Vision**

Our West Village loft had a four-walled mural in the bathroom—a panorama of Lower Manhattan.

In late ‘99 a rampant kitchen blaze brought firemen from the nearby stations to save the day.

Containing the small conflagration brave men ate smoke saved us from homelessness.

To ensure against rogue flames hiding within they broke through wallboard the men who would answer a final call ten months later whose bodies would be shattered in rubble

shattered the image on one wall an image of the Twin Towers ...looking for fire

And the day came when they found fire A bike ride away, smoke and flame the whole world crumbling

I stood in the open air and beheld the funeral pyre of world peace without a voice-over

Sleep was shot with shrapnel of images Dawn struck, confused, disoriented where to go what to feel

I bought a dozen white roses and mad-staggered to the firehouse off Houston Street, on Sixth stood outside gaping....

Surrounded by candles and flowers a lone firefighter’s portrait in a simple frame I did not see a name but I knew the certainty of such memorials noticed the solemn young man leaning against the building a vigil of one

I asked him “Did many men from this station house die?”

“He did,” nodding at the photo. “He was my brother.”

I shattered into spasms of damned-up grief embraced him and before stumbling back through the poison air of the day thrust the roses into his arms I had no words I just went away

©Arthur Gatti
House on the Hill

Once upon a time
in a dilapidated
house on a hill
lived a bearded farm boy
in overalls and sandals
who read Dostoevsky
canned his own vegetables
and ate hashish brownies.

Lived a big-hearted hippie woman
with huge bosom
who loved a charismatic bastard
had bossy ways
and shared bales of marijuana
tucked in the crawl space
of her attic room.

Lived a go-go girl who wore
pasties and a fur coat
she would fling open
in the middle of winter
who needed her thick Lorelei eye glasses
strategically placed beyond
the square corners of her dancing stage
who lined her boyfriends up by the hour
rolled a perfect joint
steered the driver’s wheel
and talked a blue streak
while driving ninety miles an hour.

Lived a housewife with no extended family
no money or formal job training
who had four kids in various stages of development
who escaped from a dangerous marriage
who hid in the back shed
sharing her rickety bed with her brood
who laughed out loud watching icicles form
across the cracks on the ceiling
and bundled her children closer
under piles of coats and covers
who reveled in her new found peace
who for the first time in a very long time
was genuinely happy.

Lived the Master of the house
who was a lonely dreamer
who abandoned corporate life
a demanding greedy wife
who kept no locks on the doors
who filled the house with philosophy
Moody Blues, Blood Sweat Tears,
and Joe Cocker
who fell in love with the housewife
with no future
who broke his heart unavoidably
who forgave her anyway
who shared a joint and held her
in the crook of his arms
in his big fluffy bed where they fell asleep
to the Moody Blues vinyl album
spinning over and over
and for a little while all was content in the
odd communal house on the hill.

Then one glacial winter day
the house groaned and shuddered
the frozen pipes heaved and burst
filling the house with freezing water
chasing the occupants like migrating birds
never to return to the house on the hill
while it stood waiting
cold, desolate, shuttered
with contents intact
just as the inhabitants left it
for ten more years.

—Judith A. Lawrence

Brassaï
Lesson Unspoken by Oonah V Joslin

Little children were to be seen and not heard, and on occasion it was preferable not to be seen either because if you were in sight you were usually in the way and within range of a ‘skelp’. It was difficult enough to stay out from under foot let alone not be heard in a three bed-roomed house with an extended family that included five adults.

It was still pitch dark on 11th January 1960 and I knew it wasn’t time for me to be up. If it had been time to be up, somebody would have wakened me. But the orange glow from beneath the door told me somebody was on the move and I wanted a drink. So I got out of bed and sneaked along the landing quietly so as not to wake the whole house. I was still learning at that stage not to wake the whole house because of some nightmare, pain in my tummy or toothache. But I heard raised voices as I took the dark stairs one by one -- on my bum.

I pushed on the toffee-brown, combed varnish of the living room door. It still smelt like Christmas downstairs – Christmas, the after-burn of town gas, toast and peat briquettes. There were indications enough, even for a five year old, that my presence would be an intrusion. The clashing of dishes in the sink meant Mummy was in a bad fettle. But as I neared the kitchen there was a lull in the argument so I slunk silently to the door, leaning my cheek on the hard jamb, half hidden, shivering in my pyjamas, barefoot on Winter-cold linoleum, and I waited -- despite the conviction that, were I discovered, Mummy would be cross. Daddy was never cross. But then Daddy was working away all week, and Daddy didn’t ‘have the bother of us.’

“You know I have to go to work.”
Her silence indicated she’d already had her say.
“I have to.”
Cups clattered. She had her back turned to him. If he was going he’d better get on with it for she didn’t care.
“Okay. I’m going now, alright?”

He opened the back door. “Are you really not for saying goodbye?” He put down his bag and went back to where she stood at the sink. “Sure, I’ll see you on Friday.” He planted a kiss on the back of her head since that was all she offered. “Okay... So... I’m away then.”
Turning briefly as he left, he noticed me skulking by the door, smiled at me and was gone.

I seized the opportunity to ask for that drink.

“How long have you been standin’ there? Away on back up the stairs wi’ ye,” and she aimed a bussock at my behind for good measure. I managed to escape before the hand connected.

When the police came to the door that night, to tell us that Daddy would not be home on Friday, or any other Friday, we each felt our own kind of forsaken. Maybe she thought his heart had failed because of her coldness; iced right up and broken clean in two after that morning spat. The grown-ups uttered quiet euphemisms and shed silent tears, each dealing with the news in their own internal way. They tried to tell us in ways children would understand. The family Doctor laced the teas with whiskey -- the only warm spot in that grievous day and in many a grievous day to come.

That was the day I learned the unspoken lesson. And that was the day I developed this crippling inability to say goodbye.

(continued)
I always kept it to myself how long I’d stood there at that door and how much I’d heard, and she never mentioned it again -- not even when she asked me that one time, how well I remembered my father. Not even when I wrote that poem about him that made her cry again. It was all unspoken. “If you don’t want to know the truth, it’s best not to ask,” she used to say.

When at last I said goodbye to her, for I knew I had to, she didn’t seem to know who I was or how long I’d been standing there. Then suddenly I saw a kind of recognition in her eyes and I knew -- there really are things in this world colder than linoleum and bleaker than January.
The Log Boom by Mitchell Toews

Martin Junior and Frederick

The two stood in a hard-packed dirt barnyard, facing the end wall of an old dairy barn. The smell of cows still permeated the air. It was sweet, fetid and oddly appealing — the kind of smell that was at first unpleasant but that, over time, one grew accustomed to. After a while, it was as if your nose craved it. Marty had always found that strange but undeniable. He craved it now.

The younger one of the two, a tall teenage boy, sniffed and peaked his eyebrows.

“Same smell,” he said.

“Yeah, there hasn’t been a cow here for six years, but...” Marty’s words trailed off as he tilted his head up to find the familiar scent.

The yard was packed hard as asphalt. On the flaking clapboards above the entrance was a white plywood sheet. Attached to it was a once-orange steel basketball rim. The white backboard bore several muddy handprints, their impressions left so distinctly that you could almost hear the slap on the flat wood.

“Highest jump gets to drive to the ferry terminal,” Frederick said, holding up a dirty palm to point at the basketball backboard and illustrate his meaning. Marty hated to be the passenger. He felt so anxious with his son driving; switching lanes and tailgating slow drivers in the left lane.

“You’re on, kid. Remember, I was born in a leap year,” Marty said, hopping up and down and wind milling his arms to warm-up. He was glad he had worn runners that day. He was glad too that Fred had asked to come to the old farm before he went away to school.

Frederick ran over to the door and pulled it open. Just inside was a bushel basket containing four or five chewed-up basketballs. He picked the two likeliest and flipped one to his father.

They shot around for a few minutes; two skinny, broad-shouldered Dutchmen. Their arms were bony and the knuckles of their large hands red, as if from scrubbing with too abrasive a brush. They began doing lay-ups until, without saying anything, Marty ran to a spot — a large flat, oval stone set flush into the dirt surface. It was like meeting an old friend. He clapped his hands and Frederick fired a pass to him. His shot was off in an instant, the ball back-spinning and falling without a sound through the naked hoop.

Their familiar competition began. Frederick reared back like a high-jumper, then raced forward and made a feline leap, reaching with a long arm. Slap! Like a screen door slamming. Marty eyed the backboard beside Frederick’s mark. He approached from the left side, swooping under the rim.

“You got me by an inch, Old-school,” Frederick said, crouching down into a squat with his hands spread out on the packed clay ground. Then he stood under the rim and with just one sudden step bounced up and spanked the backboard with his palm, leaving a gray imprint.

“That’s about ten-seven, eh?” said Martin, bending over from the waist to rub a little dirt on his hand. He looked like a Blue Heron bent in half, drinking. “Tell you what,” he said with a small smile. “If I don’t beat you on this try — you win. But, if I do beat you on this one, I drive the truck and choose the radio station.”

“Deal,” said Fred, hands on narrow hips, long fingers splayed on the front of his shorts.

***

They were in the truck, rolling down the new highway beside the Fraser with Johnny Cash on the radio. The two kidded about the jumping. Frederick was proud of his dad.

“Did you ever do a jump-off like that with Grandpa?” Freddy said.

“No, he could never even dunk, big as he is,” Marty said. “He had played some soccer goal keeper back in Holland, but he said the farm was his sport. He worked every day and quit school
when his dad figured he had enough education to run the farm — reading and writing and math, pretty much. Though I expect he would have made an excellent engineer.”

“He sure loved basketball though.”

“Yeah, he came to all my games and he never missed one of yours from grade six on,” Martin said to Freddie.

Freddie thought of the big man standing on the top row of the bleachers, bellowing relentlessly at the refs and the other team. Then the old man would plead for Frederick’s team to, “Pass it to Freddie, he don’t miss!” Fred secretly loved the attention — Grandpa stomping his cowshit spattered boots and leading the chant when the score clock ticked down.

“We used to be out in that yard shooting until midnight,” Marty said, in a faraway voice. “He would stand under the hoop, rebounding and whipping the balls back out to me. ‘Again!’ he’d yell, over and over.”

A light rain began to fall and they were quiet for a long while as they drove west to the ferry terminal. Frederick started school at UVIC in two days and the last of his gear — bag, backpack, and bike — was under a tarp in the truck box.

Lurching forward in his seat, Frederick turned down the volume of the radio and spoke, breaking in on Marty’s thoughts.

“Dad,” he said with his voice just audible above the hum of the tires, “I want you to know something.” He fussed with the settings on his phone.

“Yes?”

And that is when Frederick told his father. Just like that.

Marty had sometimes wondered how people react when they were told this by one of their children. He was quiet, holding back words — perplexed as much as he was surprised. It could have been much worse, coming so sudden and awkwardly as it did. He had been scared at first and an ice-cold wash of adrenaline had flooded down his spine when Freddy started to speak. Marty thought maybe his son was sick — cancer or some other awful thing — but that didn’t make sense. He would know if anything serious like that was wrong.

The quiet rested on them there in the cab of the truck as Marty considered what Fred had told him. The radio announcer chattered in the background about departure times at the ferry.

“A few times,” Marty said to Fred who sat still in the passenger seat, “I thought about it a few times... I wondered just a bit.” Marty recalled — no girlfriends except a second-cousin for grad; too busy with basketball for dates or dances or other teenager conquests. For Freddie, it was always basketball, school, Grandpa and the farm.

As they drove, Marty watched a tugboat towing a boom of logs on the Fraser. The logs flowed down the inexorable river, riding the current. Frederick noticed Marty studying the boom and said to his father, “That one is huge. Look how many separate booms are strung together.”

The log boom was like a pause button and they both reached for it. “At least three,” Marty said as he pulled the truck over on the shoulder. They sat together and watched the tug as it guided the immense weight of the logs past the pilings of the Alex Fraser Bridge.

“The boom is going downstream, so it’s controllable, I suppose,” Marty said. “But I guess you still have to be pretty careful and plan the path with care.”

“Do you think it’s harder to tow them upstream?” Fred asked, glancing at his dad, his eyes glassy.

_The kid is sharp_, was the thought that came into Marty’s head. _Big hearted as hell. Shit. The logs don’t pick the direction_, Marty thought. He wanted to say that to Freddie, but it sounded too pat — made the whole thing a bit maudlin. It was a good thought, and true, and it made him stronger and helped him to cope with his own feelings, which were loose and rambling in his head, but he did not say it.
“I think the tug captains like it when the current and the tide cancel each other out; when the water is basically still,” Marty said, taking an easier way.

He remembered what a friend — a towboat captain — had told him, “The challenge is to move the logs fast enough to make good time but slow enough so that the booms are not pulled apart and logs lost.”

Fred had his gaze fixed on the floating logs.

“Oh, Fred,” Marty said. “Tell me everything you want me to know and I’ll explain it to Mom.”

“Mom knows,” Fred said, his voice wavering. “But maybe you can tell Grandpa?”

“I’ll tell him,” Marty said, as he shoulder-checked and pulled out into the flow of traffic. He thought about his wife Anneke, and he was surprised she had not said something to him.

“I guess I knew too, Fred. I guess I did, if I’m honest.”

“Sure, Dad. That’s kind of what I thought,” Freddie said, staring down at his hands as he spoke.

Marty said, “I’ll talk to Grandpa, but hell, Fred, you two are close... more than me and him by far. Wouldn’t he rather hear it from you?”

“Not this, Dad,” Fred said, as the radio twanged, “Waylon and Willie and the boys,”

Martin Gerlach Senior had run this farm most of his adult life. He had been chosen by the family in Holland, years ago, to come to Canada and find land, gather a dairy herd, and begin a new life for the family. He had done wonderfully, but his health and his stamina was spent with the effort. When the time came, he passed it to his three sons who moved the Gerlach dairy herd to a new, modern complex a few miles away. Martin senior asked them to leave the old barn standing so he could still use the workshop and store his travel trailer and a few other things. They had been happy to accommodate him.

In the weeks after he told him about Frederick, Marty became concerned about his father. Every day he drove to his parents’ house and each time his mother told him the same thing: “Where else? He’s at the old barn,” she said. “I think he has fixed every broken tool and sharpened every darn blade in the Fraser Valley. He is in a foul mood. Expect a fight.”

***

On a cold morning, before dawn, with sleet slapping on the barn sash, the old man took the axe down from its place on the shop wall. The stone of the sharpening wheel whirled and pulsed in its greased traces, making a hollow, scraping noise that echoed throughout the empty barn. The grating sound unsettled the swallows that nested there. He drank a third of a bottle of Crown Royal while he sharpened the axe with the foot-treadled grindstone in the workshop.

“It’s okay birds, simmer down. Relax,” he rumbled as the tiny creatures darted through the still air of the barn.

Martin lifted the axe, feeling it for balance. Then he stared for a time at the door jamb and all the names and measurements. Already drunk, he opened a tall can of beer and drank half of it. Then he placed the can on the workbench, putting it next to the other — the brutish thing; malevolent and oily.

Martin set his feet and, swinging the axe like a baseball bat, lodged it in the jamb board, above the highest two names. The blade was plunged an inch deep in the faded wood. The names Marty and Frederick were on the splintered chunk of board just below the axe blade.

The tall man felt in a few pockets, then brought out a cellophane wrapped package of Players cigarettes. He opened it, wadding the inner foil in his hand; his red-skinned fingers braided from arthritis. Smelling the tobacco, he went back fifty years in an instant. He saw himself shouting and tugging at a hoe in the wet cement as a truck poured the footing for the barn he stood in now. Martin
lit a cigarette, tasting the burnt brown sugar and sweet caporal flavour, the same way he did that day so long ago.

“The best cigarette was always the first one in the morning, with kaffe, just before milking,” he said out loud, talking to his herd as if they were still there. The cows back then would smell the tobacco and know their urgent pain would end soon, knew that he was there to relieve them.

Martin smoked and thought back to how it used to be. He thought of those mornings, the cows stirring and lowing in their stalls. He would make his plans for the day in those peaceful moments. All those uncles and cousins and brothers back in Holland — all counting on him to get things going. He needed those quiet moments, just to shed the worry and think of other things.

He flicked the cigarette away and pried the axe head loose. Martin aimed and swung again. The next chop was lower, striking at the height of Freddie’s 18th birthday mark. Cut free, the piece of wood with the two names on it fell as the second blow went home, shaking the wall and scattering the birds. The old man left the axe where it struck and leaned over. He dropped one long arm down, like dangling a length of chain, and picked up the fragment. He rubbed over the names with his thumb, his eyes soft and his gaze far away.

Martin Senior held the envelope — “To Marty and Frederick” — written in his best Leeuwarden schoolboy handwriting and gripped it along with the piece of wooden jamb.

He smelled the good dairy barn smell for the last time. He picked up the dark, sinister thing in his free hand and hefted it. It fit the form of his palm and he could feel the sharp, cross-hatched ridges of the handle grip. The steel was cold and it drew the heat from his hand like a wick.

A moment later it was quiet again and the swallows resumed flying in the yard, near the open door where the tall man laid.

***

Marty and Frederick stood in front of the barn in their funeral suits, the backboard and the rain-streaked handprints above their heads. “That was quite a day,” Marty said, looking up.

Frederick stared at the handprints on the basketball backboard. He wandered towards the door. “I want to see the door frame,” Frederick said.

Marty noticed the boy’s stride — slightly pigeon-toed — copying his own awkward waddle. *That’s what they taught us,* Marty thought, remembering his high school coach on the bus, explaining. “There’s so little room in the key, down low. So many big feet... you’ll trip less if you turn your toes inward. Fewer ankle sprains too.” Martin, then the enthusiastic rookie, adopted the toed-in stance and he walked that way still.

“Drink as little water as you can during games — it improves your wind. Toughens you up. You can re-fill after the game.” Marty thought back to what his college coach had said. It was irrefutable then, accepted.

_Not everything they believed was right. Not everything they taught us was good for us,* he mused.

“You sure loved your birthday parties,” Marty said to his son. At the parties, every Gerlach child’s height, name and date were recorded in carpenter’s pencil on the frame of the workshop door in the barn.

Frederick opened the door and a sharp squeal came from the rusted triangular hinges. “Quit complaining, vee all got shit to deal wit’,” Frederick said, in a voice and accent mimicking his grandfather’s. He swung the door the rest of the way. All of the old markings were there; his dad’s, his uncles’ and aunts’, his cousins’ and his own. From one through 18, the level pencil lines showed steady progression. Up through the grades and years they went; a sapling rising from the understory. The lines, like the outer growth rings on a cedar stump, became closer together.
as his height neared its pinnacle and his annual growth slowed.

Frederick remembered the excitement of those childhood measuring days. He recalled his parents standing with Grandma and Grandpa as the tarnished builder’s square was used to position the line on top of his head. He enjoyed thinking of their cheers as he exceeded his cousins and some years — not many — his dad’s mark for the same age.

“Dutch men are tall and straight and true,” Martin Gerlach would say with ceremony, handing over one of the little bags of black liquorice, the candy salty as a deer lick. Frederick thought of his mom laughing, watching him as he pretended to like the Dutch candy, his face in a grimace. It was Grandpa’s favourite moment.

“Grandpa always measured with the old folding wooden ruler,” Frederick said touching the pencil marks. The ruler was imprinted with beautiful cursive — the words of his grandparents’ native language. A language prohibited by Grandpa — “English is the language of the new land. So be it,” he had said to the family, prohibiting Dutch and insisting on high marks in reading, spelling and literature.

“Someday, you can be bigger den me, Grandpa always told me,” Frederick said, thinking of his grandfather — a loving, baggy-eyed giant.

***

Frederick stood staring at the door frame. A few inches above his eye-level was a heavy axe. The tool’s head was rusted and the handle gray; as rough as bark. It had been imbedded in the jamb and stood out sideways as if it had grown there. He looked down at the concrete inside of the doorway where the floor was scrubbed and whitish. Bleach had been used to clean away his grandfather’s blood.

Martin came up behind his son and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

“Like the poem Aunty Agnes read at the funeral, One more is gone. Out of the busy throng. Remember the good in Grandpa — there was a lot,” Marty said in a whisper.

“He never could get over it, could he? Me living in Victoria with David...”

“Don’t think that. Grandpa was very sick. His back hurt him every day and he had chronic bronchitis and diabetes. His heart was weak and he had started smoking again, on the sly, but Grandma knew. He had hardly any feeling in his feet. Grandpa had not been right for a while. His body had abandoned him at the end,” Marty said to his son.

“Grandpa had been strong for a long time before that and he wasn’t any more,” Marty continued. “He felt cut off from the rest of us. He was lost without the family looking to him to lead and — being who he was — he wanted to control things. So that’s what he did. Your news was just one more piece in the puzzle and he would have got used to it in a big hurry and then challenged anyone who thought different to a fight.”

Frederick smiled, thinking of his fearless grandpa, testy and self-assured as he scrapped and pushed his way through life. He loved that part of him and a wave of blackness overcame him for a second.

“Put ‘em up, put up yer goddamn dukes,” Frederick said, and his father nodded, his breath coming out in a hitch, a wave of regret running through him and tears bursting.

They were quiet for a time, standing in the doorway and hugging and crying. They shared Marty’s hanky, each blowing their nose until the little square of cloth had no more dry in it.

Martin Junior thought with guilt that since Fred’s birthday almost a year ago they had not shot any baskets together or competed in any way. Not even ping pong. They used to do something like that together almost every day.

“Listen, Fred,” Marty said. “The night I told Grandpa about you coming out, he was upset. He
was a mess.” Marty remembered the old man sitting in the farm shop on an upended Coke case, the little wood stove crackling — spitting boiling resin every few seconds as the fatwood cedar chips burned. Martin Senior’s face was dark and horrible; he was like a caged bear. Tears of frustration rolled down his blue and red, blood-veined cheeks.

“When I told him, he said, ‘Never. Frederick is like me and like you — he’s the same!’”

“I told him that you weren’t the same but that it was okay, that it didn’t matter. Then I asked him if he remembered when the small barn burned down, years ago when I was a boy. I asked Grandpa, ‘Do you remember what you said to me that night, with all those cows dead and the insurance a big jumble and everything so terrible?’”

“Grandpa said to me, that night after the fire, he said, ‘Marty, this changes everything and this changes nothing.’”

Then Marty pulled off his suit jacket and wiped his eyes. He grabbed one of the old basketballs. “C’mon,” he said, “quick game of 21.”

(Appeared previously on the online lit mag, Storgy, May 2017)

The station is empty now. The door that was once red is now a dull, empty color. Mice have found a home inside. I saw a horned owl in the tree yesterday. They can hear a mouse burrowing under the snow. When I get close I can hear the mice.

Some days I think I hear people talking on the platform. I can’t make out what they’re saying. I know I am just hearing voices from before.

I can’t remember exactly when the Zephyr stopped running. It’s been a long time, I know. Now some people in town want to turn the station into a museum or a gift shop. That’s what has happened to a lot of train stations. If I want to look inside, I’ll have to do it soon.

A picture of the people who worked in the station would be good. I remember two men. One was bald. The other one had brown curly hair and was very serious. Well at least he was when the police came to find me. Now everyone is dead.

The parking lot is always empty. When we took the Twin Cities Zephyr to Chicago we drove our green Chevrolet station wagon to the station. We always had French toast for breakfast in the dining car. I never had thick French toast like that before.

About the time we were eating, the train went right above the Wisconsin River flowing into the Mississippi River. In the winter the snow-covered islands and the empty, snow-covered tree branches looked like giant snowflakes.

Sometimes I imagined the Wisconsin and the Mississippi both starting in the north woods and I thought of the early explorers who saw the rivers for the first time. Later I learned about Black Hawk.

When we got close to Chicago we saw miles of factories and warehouses and I tried to imagine the people who worked there during the week. On the farm we had to work seven days a week. When we went to Chicago, we hired the Hoffman twins to do the milking.

But we still saw cows when we got to Chicago—miles of cows in pens. I asked dad how many he thought there were. He thought 100,000. I tried not to think about how all those cows were going to be killed. I just tried to think about how they came on trains from as far away as the Dakotas and Nebraska.

We ate lunch at the Field Museum and then had dinner on the train. I liked the towering buildings and the busy train station better than the museums. We always went on Sunday, so I didn’t get to see the train station during the week, but even on Sunday a lot of people were traveling on the trains.

The lights of city were already coming on when we left for home. When we went over the Chicago River the shimmering lights on the water looked like stars.

I don’t know why I come to the train station every day. I guess I’m like the cows coming in from pasture. I wonder what the cows did after I sold them. The lawyer said it was best. I couldn’t take care of the farm by myself, and the Hoffman twins left for college.
Around here hollows and ridges are everywhere. I live in Apple Hollow, not far from where our barn was.

When I went to all the funerals I think some people were annoyed. Of course in those days some of the funerals were for men who died in Vietnam. Those funerals were different. More crying and more anger—one time a father shouted when they handed him a flag at the cemetery. He didn’t want a flag. He wanted his son.

Dr. Turner used to ask me what I felt when I went to the funerals. I told her I felt safe. Dr. Turner finally decided I wasn’t going to hurt myself, so Mrs. Showers, my mom’s friend, didn’t have to drive me to her office anymore.

I wasn’t sure why, but I thought I might have to go to jail or some hospital if Dr. Turner said the right thing to the police. I never really told her everything I was thinking.

Mrs. Showers is dead too now. I went to her funeral. She brought me casseroles and pies, and every year for my birthday she made me a cake and brought me a present. The last time she came I turned forty-nine. She said my mom would have wanted me to have a birthday cake. My social worker still buys me a birthday present every year.

I’ve lost track of time a little now. I still go to the train station every day.

The days are getting longer and hotter now. I had a dream last night, but I only remember seeing green and red and a lot of bright lights. The dream woke me up and I could barely breathe. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it would pop out of my chest. I got up and went outside and listened to the frogs until a raccoon wandered by.

When I go to the cemetery I ask Mom, Dad and Karl if there is something I should remember. I know they won’t answer. I just don’t know who else to ask. I think I should be there with them: Anna Marie Weber, Beloved Daughter.

I wish it weren’t so hot out tonight. I might have trouble sleeping. It’s like being inside one of the giant ovens at the Blue Ribbon Bakery.

On the farm, Karl and I used to sleep on the screen porch in the summer. One time when it was hot I said I didn’t want to go to the church supper. I wanted to finish reading *Jane Eyre*. I was going to college in a month.

I remember the book. I remember a fire. I remember a fire. Oh, I can’t breathe.

The air is so heavy. I think I’ll walk a little. It’s not even dark yet. I remember that: “It wasn’t even dark yet.” Who said that? Well, I’ll walk down to the highway.

It’s almost time for the freight train going to Chicago. It comes through every night around eight o’clock. Maybe I should look in the window of the station before they turn it into a gift shop.

Now I’m almost to Sherman’s Curve. “They were at Sherman’s Curve.” Who said that?
There are coyotes around here, but they won’t hurt me.

My knees are hurting a little. They only hurt when I go down the hill. Now I’m just about around the curve and I see the lights flashing. “They should have had warning lights.” Somebody said that, I know.

I’m having trouble breathing again.

Now I really am in a hollow. I can’t breathe. I see silver and now red. I see it now. The beautiful silver Zephyr is on the highway, turned on its side, broken and battered.

I heard the crash. I remember. It sounded like two cymbals being smashed together by a giant. I ran out of the house. I didn’t lock the door and ran all the way to Sherman’s Curve. I saw the train. It was blocking the road. Then I could see the smoke and I looked to the left and in the ditch in front of the Sherman’s farm I saw our green station wagon underneath the engine of the Zephyr.

I could hear Karl calling for help. I took a few steps toward the station wagon and then I heard an explosion. From the road, I saw the flames inside our station wagon. I could hear Mom screaming, and I ran to the car. I reached for the door, but the fire burned my hands. I tried to reach again, but Norbert Sherman grabbed me around the waist and pulled me away. “Anna, it’s too late.” He probably was right. The screaming had stopped.

I remember someone crawling out of the train and sitting on the road and sobbing. Norbert went over to talk to him, to see if he was all right, and the man sobbed, “I just couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop fast enough.”

When Norbert walked away from me, I took one look at the burning car and headed down the road. The train station was only a half of a mile away. I heard the sirens as soon as I started to walk and pretty soon two police cars were racing down the highway. Mrs. Sherman had called right away, I thought.

The station was still open when I got there, but they were getting ready to close. The man with the curly hair watched as I came in and sat down. He didn’t say anything to me at first, but then he came over and looked at my hands. “We better get you some help for those hands.” Maybe he knew what happened. He probably heard the crash, but he didn’t ask me any questions. He went back and made a phone call and then came and sat next to me, but I don’t think he said anything. The police came and took me to the hospital. The doctor bandaged my hands and gave me some medicine and said he was sorry about my loss. I didn’t say anything.

They kept me in the hospital and sent me to another one, so I didn’t go to the funeral. Later I went to funerals.

Yes, it was right here. I remember. It was at Sherman’s Corners. Mr. and Mrs. Sherman are dead now, but their farm is still a farm, not a subdivision. Someone who studied agriculture at Platteville bought the farm. He knew the Hoffman twins. He lives alone, except for one live-in, hired hand. Oh, there he is. I hope he doesn’t mind if I stop here and look for a minute. They still call this Sherman’s Corners. The grass came back. There is still that wooden cross that someone left here. I think it was blue once. The weather is pretty hard on it. Now I know what it’s for.
I think if I could go back to our last trip on the Zephyr and go to Chicago, maybe they wouldn’t be burning in our station wagon. We could ride over the rivers again and look for deer and hawks. So I went to the train station, but I couldn’t save them. I should have saved them. I never took the Zephyr again.

But tonight will be different. Yes, I’m drowning. Weighed down by the heat and the wind and a burning car I didn’t want to see again. But I did, I saw it, I heard the screams. I remembered, and now I will go back and find the Zephyr. One more time I’ll imagine what it must have been like to see the rivers for the first time. I’ll see the dark power of the rivers and I’ll head into Chicago and see the ribbons of traffic and the factories and the miles of cows in pens. And then we’ll head back home on the train and we’ll all talk about the museums and the city, and maybe we’ll meet new people from all over the country. I’ll hear the stories I can’t quite hear and listen to songs no one sings anymore.

Yes, the Zephyr is coming to take me now. I hear the steady grinding of the metal wheels on the tracks. I see the probing headlight coming toward me. It is almost dark, and when the Zephyr wraps itself around me, I will be carried back and become as light as the wind.
My mother always complained that my father awoke in the middle of the night and ate her out of house and home. He took so many naps during the day, she said, that how could he sleep at night? So he paced the apartment, making enough noise, she assured us, that he woke her too and, after all these years, she had given up on sleep: listening to him pace until he ended at the refrigerator, making himself pastrami sandwiches. No wonder he complained of heartburn, she said. And those goddamned Cheese Doodles, she said, worse than potato chips, saltier and fattier and greasier, and he gobbled them down a bag at a time.

Eventually, he died, at eighty eight, five weeks after she did. She had been ninety one, my father was three years younger. That fact had been kept from us all our lives but once there were all these forms to be filled out – Medicare and hospital admissions and Visiting Nurse applications – my brother figured it out and he told my sister and me. But my mother never acknowledged it. It’s no big deal nowadays – my brother’s daughter is married to a guy six years her junior – but in my mother’s day it was a scandal. Also it meant she was in her thirties when she married, not twenty-nine like she had told us.

They had both been in ill health so it was no surprise when they died and the fact that they did so closely together was no surprise either. They had been intensely entwined all their married lives but it wasn’t love that held my parents together. It was nagging, it was anger. It was frustration, disappointment, her tears, his rage, constant hissing and secrets and lies.

And, I suppose, it was sex. When they were in their seventies she confided to me, “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this but, sexually, he’s worse than ever!”

From the time I was little, she would wait for me to return from school with cookies and milk to keep me pasted to my seat so she could embroider her tales of how he had frightened her, misunderstood, ignored, hurt and betrayed her; some of it not altogether imagined. I remember him once, throwing a glass vase that shattered against the wall and splintered in her hair.

“Ma, you’ve got to get a divorce,” I would plead, all of ten or eleven. But she would explain that he had all his money socked away in secret bank accounts so the I.R.S. couldn’t find it and she’d never be able to prove in court how much he had and would be left destitute with her three babies, especially my sister, then a newborn.

And I, of course, believed her.

After hours and hours of waiting for him by the kitchen window, twirling her hankie around nervous fingers, sighing and sniffling so that my brother and I could not ignore her, finally, at whatever hour, never on time, he would come home. She would race across the linoleum to greet him and a strange, sweet smell swept through the apartment and, no matter how late, the hot sun would at last seem to beam through the windows.

We didn’t know, my brother and I, what to make of it but I figured it out later when I was able to identify that smell of desire. And I grew enraged at her deception: the whining, the claims for my sympathy, the burden she placed on my shoulders, the worry, the tears, the helplessness – only to have her racing across the linoleum when he finally – whenever – came home.

So they ended up old and sickly and bound together; no friends, unloved by their children. I visited only with gritted teeth. Rachel, my sister, married and moved cross-country. My brother, Barney, a big-shot corporate attorney, sent cars to shlepp them to doctors, paid for a home aide, handled their money and papers – but stayed away as much as he could.

It’s been six, seven – maybe it’s eight? – years since my father died. I hated him all my life because of her sob stories and often wondered if I’d feel remorse, but I didn’t. At least, until now.

The details of his last days have been haunting me and that, I suppose, is why I am writing them down.

***
I remember that when she died, he came to the funeral in a wheel chair so the leg problem that killed him – we thought it was gout – had started by then. I had never seen him cry before but he was an ugly man, thickened pock marked skin, tiny eyes burdened with heavy bags, enormous crooked nose and you couldn’t take your eyes off the bead of snot that was dripping from a nostril.

He insisted on talking to the Rabbi beforehand.

“This woman,” he sobbed to the stranger, “never had a bad word to say about anyone! You’ve got to say that. A saint with never a bad word to say!”

This, after all those years she had cursed him, complained about him, told me and anybody who would listen how cruel he was, how he mistreated her, what a cheap bastard he was!

Lies, all lies from both of them.

***

Lying came naturally to him, I suppose, because he was a lawyer also, but not a big shot like my brother; a storefront hustler with a clientele of bookies and hookers, immigrant families who didn’t have the cash to pay so he ended up with business partnerships, half ownerships of useless real estate. Once, I remember, he had been given free reign in a kosher deli as a fee so, for months, we spent Sundays there, eating hot dogs with sauerkraut and his beloved pastrami sandwiches. For years, he was part owner of a gay bar – in the days before Stonewall when gay bars were run by pay-offs to the cops and the Mafia - and he used to visit every night to collect his piece of the take and my mother was constantly crying that he was going to be killed – or God knows what!

I was in my late teens by then, already a regular at the city’s gay bars, so I noted the name of this one and resolved to stay away.

Later on, he inherited a slum building in the South Bronx which he was trying to repair so he could rent rooms and get his money out, and she claimed he was sure to fall through the floor boards or get bitten by a rat.

That’s when he met Tieman, a Rastafarian from the neighborhood with a huge head of dreadlocks whom, of course, my mother never trusted. But Tieman could hammer a nail and knew something about plumbing and would come up with building supplies - planks and wire and even electric tools – from where, nobody asked. As my father’s sight deteriorated, he counted on Tieman to drive him – to the Bronx to check out the building, to his other mysterious businesses, to medical appointments because he took such pleasure in turning down my brother’s assistance.

In exchange, Tieman would borrow the car whenever he needed and, often, would be gone with it for days. Tieman didn’t have a phone so my parents would be stuck, waiting to hear – even though they never went anywhere - my mother whining about how the car had been stolen, once and for all. She knew it would happen and how would they ever get it back and what if Tieman had used it in a stick-up and the police would come pounding on their door. What would the neighbors say?

Eventually, Tieman would appear – he had gotten arrested, or he had run out of gas and hadn’t had the money to fill the tank – and my mother would get on the phone with the story of how she didn’t know where they had gone or when they would get it back or even if Tieman had a driver’s license! Then my brother started worrying about whatever deal was between them. Was my father paying him? Had he signed away assets to Tieman, had he made a secret will?

But the old man just trotted off after Tieman whenever the black man appeared and waited eagerly until he did. Obviously he enjoyed sharing his exploits with Tieman, making plans, scheduling renovations, checking progress, keeping a schedule. After all, who else did he have?

I remember once, on a rare visit, my father paid no attention to me because Tieman was coming to take him to the dermatology clinic. Of course, my mother rattled on, arms crossed in
frustration, he wouldn’t go to a regular doctor even though insurance pays and my brother could
arrange it. No, he has to go to a clinic where you sit for hours and you never know if it’s a doctor or a
first year student and it keeps him out of the house for the entire day, and God knows where else
they went, but if he went in my brother’s car service, he would be home in three quarters of an hour.
But no, that would be the same way of doing it and that wasn’t my father’s way.

I listened until, at last, Tieman arrived and whispered, “Mr. C., you don’t look so good.” He
headed for the bathroom and returned with a towel, a bowl of hot water, a straight edge razor and he
shaved my father in the living room, my mother and I stunned into silence; my father, closing his
eyes, resting his head, enjoying the luxury, as Tieman slowly applied the lotion, lovingly slid the
razor over his cheeks, patted him dry, sprinkled on after-shave, beamed his approval, and then they
left.

***

The weeks after my mother’s funeral, I visited more regularly but it was difficult without her
to fill the silence. I often found him, curled on the sofa, nursing his leg, a blanket held tightly under
his chin.

He had always been a big man, thick necked and hairy, grossly overweight but his hanging
belly had been supported by muscular legs. He had large workmen’s hands which, even at an
advanced age, would curl into fists when he was angry. And he was always angry, always in a rush,
always hungry; devouring whatever my mother set before him, then cleaning the left-overs off her
plate.

I called Barney and told him the old man was shrinking before our eyes, and Barney agreed
but neither of us knew what to do. Besides, he was all backed up with legal stuff he had ignored,
arranging my mother’s funeral, and Rachel had gone home and nobody was in the mood for another
family crisis.

Where the hell was Tieman, Barney asked, and did he have the car?

***

So, when he ended up in the hospital, we told Rachel it wasn’t necessary for her to come in
and Barney and I divvied up the visiting hours. They told us he had a blood clot in his leg but, as far
as we knew, this was something that could be cured with an IV, so long as he kept the leg elevated.
Nobody figured he was going to die.

Before long, he was bitching about the food, certainly a positive sign.

“Norman,” he said to me, “you’re no good to me here. This is what I want you to do. Are you
listening to me, Norman?”

“Sure, Dad. I’m listening.”

“I want you to go to my house. I want you to look in the kitchen cabinets. In one, you’ll find
Cheese Doodles. I want you to bring me a bag so I have something to munch on between these
crappy meals. Now go!”

“Dad, you can’t eat Cheese Doodles. The nurses won’t allow...”

“What do I care what they won’t allow? Who’s going to tell them, you? Go get the Cheese
Doodles. Bring them here. Then you can go home.”

“Dad, please...”

“DO AS I’M SAYING!”

So I left. What else was I supposed to do? Stay there and argue? Of course, I had no intention
of bringing him the Cheese Doodles. How could you feed a hospital patient greasy, fatty Cheese
Cheese Doodles by Edward M. Cohen

Doodles? But I figured I could deal with that later. The important thing was that he was coming back to normal. His state of normal.

Later that night, my brother called.
“NORMAN! WHAT IN HELL WERE YOU THINKING?”
That’s the way we greet each other in my family.
“Barney, what’s up?
“I visited him tonight, he was in a crazy state. “Where’s Norman with the Cheese Doodles?” That’s all he wanted to know. How could you promise to bring them if you weren’t going to? Rachel called long distance while I was there. He doesn’t say hello, no how are you. ‘Where the hell is your brother with the Cheese Doodles?’ and she burst into tears, poor kid.”
“Barney, calm down....”
“What’s the matter with you? Rachel got upset. I got upset.”
“Do you really think I should have brought him the Cheese Doodles? I thought he’d forget.”
“Forget? Are you crazy? He doesn’t give a damn that I’m there. He doesn’t care that Rachel called. All he wants is his Cheese Doodles!”
“All right. All right. I’ll bring them tomorrow.”
“I have a bad feeling about tomorrow. I have a bad feeling about everything. You know, when I left today I remembered that when Mom was sick he told me, whatever happened, he didn’t want to be hooked up to a machine. ‘If I’m going,’ he said, ‘you let me go. I don’t want wires coming out of my ass.’ So, I stopped off at the desk, this is how upset I was, and told the nurse I wanted it entered on his chart: No extraordinary measures. Of course, the computer was down but she said she’d enter it tomorrow. That’s how depressed this whole thing made me with the goddamned Cheese Doodles!”
“Barney, everything is going to be fine. The son of a bitch is strong as an ox.”
In the middle of that night, he had a stroke.

***

Rachel took the first plane in. Barney and I headed for the hospital. I thought of stopping off for the Cheese Doodles – but what would have been the point?
The doctor met us in the hallway and explained that the clot in the leg had hemorrhaged elsewhere. Or something. I’m not sure I got it right. It had been a danger from the beginning, the doctor said, but I don’t recall anyone telling us that. He said we should be prepared for the state he was in.

Of course, Barney’s instructions had never made it onto the computer so there he was, connected to a machine with a dozen wires, a painful tube stuck down his throat, his hands strapped down so he couldn’t tear it out.

He was pale, his skin was waxen. He looked like he was dead already. But that wasn’t the worst of it because, at first, his eyes were closed. He seemed to be sleeping, but then he woke up. His beady eyes opened and you could tell by the terrified expression – just in the eyes, the rest of his face couldn’t move because of the tube – that he didn’t know where he was or what was happening and he was pleading with us. “Get me out of here! Do something, Norman!” Never, ever, in our wildest hatred, would we have wished him in such a state: to be choking, to be strapped down, to be helpless, to be scared.

Barney, devastated, went into the hallway and collapsed on a bench. When Rachel arrived, all she could do was cry. And I, I could only think of that mess with the Cheese Doodles. His last thoughts had been of my failure.

I know Barney had real reason for his regrets. After all, he had been responsible for the legal and medical issues. I know my sister had her own guilt because she had moved so far away. Maybe
their concerns were more serious. But that didn’t alleviate my pain as I sat next to them and all three of us suffered privately.

Barney raised holy hell about the computer and the instructions but the staff told us that getting a patient off a life preserving machine was a complicated matter. A meeting of the Ethics Committee had to be called; there had to be a hearing. That would take time. Days passed, the old man suffering, the three of us in anguish.

Then, one day, Tieman appeared. God knows how he had learned where to find us. He mumbled greetings, went to stand by my father. and did the most astonishing thing. While the three of us watched in amazement, he leaned down over my father’s face, patted his brow over and over, massaged his scalp, gently closed his eyes and whispered into his ear. What was he saying? Who knows? But I could imagine: “Take it easy, Mr. C. This is going to pass. You’re going to be fine. I’m here to take care.” Maybe, even, “I love you, Mr. C.” Things it never would have occurred to me to say.

We grew so embarrassed that, eventually, we went into the hall to leave them alone. After a long time, after Tieman had gotten my father to fall back asleep, he left the old man’s side and curled behind the window drapes and, from the way they were quivering, we could tell that he was sobbing.

***

Days passed in a fog. I don’t remember how many. Tieman never re-appeared. I guess he felt awkward around us. Who could blame him? I guess he felt he had said his good-byes. Eventually, Barney was called to the desk to schedule the Ethics Committee hearing and Rachel went with him. They left me alone with my father. I knew what I wanted to do. I had been thinking about it for days.

I stood close by him, leaned over the way Tieman had and tried to do what he had done. I soothed his brow, closed his eyes with my fingertips, whispered, “It’s going to be all right, Dad. Barney is taking care. Rachel is here. We’re going to make it right. Don’t you worry, Dad. We’re all here. We’re going to make it right…”

I don’t remember the last time I had touched him. We never hugged. We never even shook hands. My mother had told me that, when I was a baby, he had been too scared to hold me. The tradition had continued all of my life. So it was strange to feel his skin, to run my hands over his cheeks, to try to calm him with my touch. That’s all I can say. That’s all I remember: how strange it was. And that I never did say, “I love you.”

***

At the hearing, Barney told the committee about his conversation with the nurse, how the computer was down so the information was never entered on his chart and the nurse confirmed the story. My sister told them that my father had been devastated by my mother’s death and he was in no emotional state, not to mention his physical problems, to fight off an inevitable death. I told them about his background, a child of immigrant parents, he had gone to law school at night while driving a cab all day. All his life, he had fought, been active and energetic, had to stay in control. The most devastating pain to him was to be helpless and imprisoned – imagine what he must be suffering now. What was the point of putting a dying man through his worst imagined agony?

We had shed tears while we talked, all of them sincere. But, afterward, my brother said the committee must have thought that he was the most wonderful father, beloved by his children, and we all laughed grimly.

***
The Committee agreed to go along with our wishes and we were all present when they disconnected him from the machine. We could see at once that his body shrugged with relief and, breathing peacefully at last, he fell into an immediate sleep, from which he was never to awake. More than ever, we were convinced we had done the right thing.

Actually, for an hour or so the numbers on the monitor remained steady so it looked like he was holding his own and we joked that maybe he would make it back to surprise us all. But, when the numbers started to plummet, bells and hisses were set off and my sister cried, “What’s happening?!!” although we all knew, certainly when the flat-line appeared accompanied by the ominous buzz.

For all our preparation, it had happened so quickly that we were shocked and confused as the nurses hurried us out of the room. We stumbled down the hallway, not knowing exactly what to do. There were relatives to call, arrangements to be made but we could not really accept that he was gone. He had been such a powerful presence in all our lives. At the elevator, I realized that I had stupidly left my coat in the room and had to ask the others to wait while I raced back to retrieve it.

Nurses had him laid out flat, his arms taped to his torso, his legs tied together at the ankles, and they were zipping him into a body bag. It was not a sight I wished to have stored in my memory. But everything had been so screwed up between us since I was born. And now, this.

(Previously published in the Fall, 2005 issue of Gertrude)
As an impressionable youth, I was moved by John Kennedy’s “Ask Not” speech and the desire to do something worthwhile with my life. I majored in sociology in college and I wanted to study people, make a difference, maybe change the world.

I was also moved by not having any money when I graduated and a questionable skill set at the BA level in sociology. I couldn’t afford grad school, which I needed to save the world...or so I thought.

While I was looking for a real job, I put my name on the substitute teacher list for the Atlanta Public Schools. They paid a whopping $25 a day, and took no tax out—a fact that thrilled me, until I had a serious talk with the IRS that April.

The second day of school I was called in to take a job for a teacher who had been rushed to the hospital the day before. The position was a departmental English teacher for 6th and 7th grade, and then we all taught our homeroom for social studies, art, music, handwriting, spelling, and as I was about to find out, a few other landmines: health, and sex ed. I was 21 years old. My students were 12 or 13. Except for Lamar Grady who had been held back a time or two.

He was as tall as I was and his body was more adult than child. He had to shave his beard before the year was out. He had a scowl and he looked tough--tougher than he was, actually, but he fooled a lot of people. Students left him alone and adults walked a wide berth around him. Of course, I didn’t find that our until much later.

The first day, I made a deer in the headlights look experienced and confident. I had never had an education course, and could only hope I had picked up ideas by osmosis from my parents, who were educators. Probably the reason I had sworn never to be.

The teacher did not leave a roll, a schedule, a textbook or a lunch time. I was flying blind. I sent Lamar and a few husky boys for textbooks from the department chair. This was before girls had the equal opportunity for manual labor.

I found out when we went to lunch and when we went outside. Every time I had a pause or needed something, Lamar was standing there. When he said he would do something, no one argued with him, least of all me. He organized a group to set up files, stamped the text books and had others hand them out. I thought he was an exceptional leader. I complimented him, and he just shrugged his shoulders, but his scowl was less pronounced.

After a few days, I noticed the other teachers were walking by my door a lot and looking in. I thought they were being supportive, but one finally admitted that they were afraid I was being taken advantage of. Young, naïve and with no experience...they could have been right.

I had no luck with landing another job, and when the absent teacher had to have surgery, they asked me to stay and finish the quarter until they could hire someone. The principal saw something in me that I didn’t realize I had. No matter how much I resisted, I was a teacher.

I got a good bit of attention because Lamar wasn’t spending any time in detention, or the principal’s office. And though he was no scholar, he did bring his books to class.

At Halloween, years before any school shooting or stabbing, and the age of “zero tolerance” had not
arrived, I planned a lesson combining art, music and carving pumpkins. The principal was walking down the hall and what he saw in our room clearly shocked him: Lamar with a big knife. He stared—long enough to see an intricate design appearing.

The principal said, “Lamar...you have a knife. Are you being careful?” Lamar never looked up. “Yes sir. I’m a different kid, now.”

It was hard to say which of the 3 of us was most surprised. But Lamar made a habit of surprising us that year. He followed directions, tried to do everything I asked him to, and tried again and again on some tasks.

At the end of the first quarter, the time I would leave and finally find a real job, the principal called me in. He referred to a stack of papers in front of him as he rattled off information. Lamar hadn’t been in a single fight; he hadn’t been sent to the office a single time; he hadn’t missed a day of school and had only been late twice, once when the bus broke down and he ran the rest of the way to school instead of waiting for a replacement bus.

“Miss McCullough, what are you doing to make Lamar a normal student?” Good question!

That day he asked me to finish the school year, and bumped my salary from $25 a day to $6900 for the year. As it turns out, I was a natural. All the qualities that my major professor had told me would make me a good researcher could also make me a good teacher.

At the end of the year, two important things happened. Lamar had the best year of his young academic life and was promoted, legitimately, to 8th grade, and I was named Teacher of the Year by the faculty.

I chose the road I never thought I would take, and it brought me great satisfaction and success for 31 years... if not a lot of money. So, teaching was a real job, and I discovered THAT was the way to change the world...one child at a time.

Lamar Grady, you’ve got a lot to answer for.
My first year of community college hadn’t been the typical college experience. There was no drinking, no girls, no football games. My high school career had included obesity and low grades. I was sick of that life and worked my tail off to reverse both. My days were spent going to class, while my nights were spent studying and exercising.

It worked. By the end of my freshman year, I had lost 80 pounds and made the dean’s list. I also made some friends.

One was Ally. If there was anything going on with Ally or her family, everyone was invited. “I’ve got a job lifeguarding at a pool. Come on over.” “Our family’s having a bonfire. Come on over.” And the one that sets up this story, “We’re going to the Wisconsin State Fair. Come on over.” Ally rode shotgun. Rick, Ally’s boyfriend, got in the driver’s seat. I climbed in the back; Ally’s sister Sara, and Sara’s friend Laura also got in. I had met them both before.

But, who was this other girl getting in?

“Bob, this is my friend Kerry,” Laura said.

Kerry: Long, slightly curly blonde hair, blue eyes. A 5’2” Barbie doll. Any heterosexual 18-year-old guy would have salivated. This one was trying to not make it obvious.

“Hi” I half-waved and smiled, avoiding further eye contact.

The conversation on the way up consisted of Ally trying to shout over Rick’s Metallica CD. I looked straight ahead at the back of Rick’s seat, hoping I wasn’t blushing, not wanting to give away that I wanted to stare at Kerry.

At the fair, we roam in a pack. Sara bungee jumped and her shirt flew up on the descent. After a futile attempt at pulling it back, she resigned herself and threw out her arms in glory.

As it was the last day of the fair, they were selling food at half price, trying to get rid of perishables.

“Want some cheese curds?” Ally asked.

“Cheese curds?”

“You’ve never heard of fried cheese curds? You live a half hour from Wisconsin and you’ve never heard of fried cheese curds?”

I had not. I wasn’t exactly a man of the World or even much of a man of the Midwest.

Cheating on my diet, I ate some. Forbidden food is always the most delicious.

After the cheese curds, Sara singled me out to get cream puffs with her. I didn’t let on that I hadn’t heard of those, either, but they sounded great.

Once we got out of earshot from the pack Sara sing-songed, “Kerry said she likes you!”

My face said, Come on!

She smiled and nodded.

“She said, ‘Does he have a girlfriend?’ I said no. Then she said, ‘What’s wrong with him? Why doesn’t he have a girlfriend?’ I said, ‘There’s nothing wrong with him. He’s just kind of shy’.”

The cream puffs were even better than the curds.

The night was filled with bright multi-colored lights on a black sky, carnival barkers attempting to deliver a new sucker every minute, the unmistakable odor of beer belches from the native cheeseheads, and screams of coaster passengers savoring every last moment of terror.

We went on one last ride, a spinning ride, like Disney World’s Tea Cups. Despite my tendency for motion sickness, I couldn’t show weakness in front of a pretty girl. On the ride, Kerry mocked fear and leaned into me. I heard about these techniques, like the ol’ “yawn-stretch at the movie theatre to get your arm around the girl” trick, but nothing like this had ever happened to me before!

When the fair was closing we walked through the parking lot. I recalled from math how to calculate odds and I figured there were 24 possible seating combinations with four people in the back and 12 involved me next to Kerry.
At the car, Sara and Laura, giggling, jumped in the two far-right spots, leaving the two remaining seats for Kerry and me. Silently, I thanked them.

As Rick started the car, I felt something soft interlace the fingers on my right hand. It was a hand—a girl’s hand! This was uncharted territory. It was so...small, so soft, completely unlike my left hand, the only other hand my right hand had ever held.

As we worked our way out of the parking lot and onto the highway she put her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. I hesitatingly put my right arm around her. It was a hot summer night but the radiating warmth of her body felt sublime. Her perfume had a slight fruity scent. Her head and shoulders smelled...nothing like Head and Shoulders.

I felt like Superman, cradling Lois Lane as he flew her away from a burning building.

It happened so fast. Eight hours earlier I was a loser, the perpetual third wheel, meeting up with friends to go to the fair. I didn’t really care what happened after this night, if I’d see her again or not. For once, the past and future did not exist.

I wasn’t in the habit of asking God for things. But at that moment, I asked for a traffic jam. Not an enormous one, just one big enough to make this moment last forever. But, of course, you don’t always get what you want.

Before the night was over I got her number (I got her number!!!) and said I’d call. The next day, after eventually working up the courage, I did.

I felt like a telemarketer, interrupting somebody’s dinner, but she answered with a friendly voice. I said that I liked her and she said she liked me too. I asked if she wanted to go out sometime. She said she could go out the next night.

I met Ally at her pool that day.

“I called Kerry. We’re going out tomorrow night!”

Ally sighed.

“What?”

“I didn’t know if I should tell you this, but I think you need to know. Kerry’s kind of a player.”

“A player? What’s that?” (Remember, not a man of the World.)

Ally tried to choose her words carefully. “She’s not into long-term relationships. She’ll go out with a guy a few times then move onto another one. I know that’s not what you’re looking for. I just don’t want you to get high expectations.”

It hurt a little. A lot, actually. I worked so hard to get the weight off and waited a long time for this. It wasn’t fair. I wasn’t mad at Ally for delivering the news but I thought that maybe I was an exception. Maybe Kerry just hadn’t found a nice guy. Maybe I could be one for her.

The next evening, I went to pick her up. I arrived at a ‘50s style ranch in a working-class subdivision and parked in the street. Charcoal smoke drifted through the air while cicadas buzzed their mating song and the sun began its descent. I checked the address on my slip of paper a dozen times, making sure I had it right.

My heart thumped against my chest as I walked toward her door.

When the door opens, will she be there? I thought. Is this a big practical joke? Will her dad answer the door, thinking I’m yet another guy in a long line, all after the same thing?

I pressed the doorbell before I could allow myself to chicken out. Sooner than expected, the wooden door with the “No Solicitors” sign squeaked open.

What a sight! She was all dolled up. Hair, makeup, clothes, perfume—all done subtly and with care. I imagined years of practicing with dolls made her an expert on how to make herself beautiful. I was so flattered that she went through all this trouble for me.

I was expecting to be invited inside, to be grilled by her dad about my intentions with his daughter. Instead, she came out and locked the door behind her. It was only about 50 feet from her front door to my car, but I grabbed her hand to hold anyway.
“You sure look nice,” I said, holding the door open for her.
“It’s all right. Where are we going?”
We went to a restaurant.
I ordered a hamburger. I didn’t have an appetite. I was so nervous I had to force it down. I envied how the other couples in the place could be so relaxed with each other. I wasn’t much of a conversationalist and it probably came off as a business interview. I wanted to shout, “Hey everyone! She is with me and she’s not a relative or anything! This is a date!”

Somewhere in the conversation, the topic of her friend Laura came up.
Laura was a nice girl with long reddish hair and freckles. She was short, maybe five feet tall, and quite heavy.
Looking down, Kerry picked at her fries and said, “I hang out with Laura so guys will look at me first.”
Did I hear that?
Suddenly, I felt like we were from two warring tribes. Even though I had lost the weight, my people were misfits and I always identified with them. Somehow, I had infiltrated the other tribe and was now privy to what they said about us.
I had always wanted to be in their camp but now I was seeing the ugliness of vanity.
I noticed things I hadn’t before. She rarely made eye contact when we spoke. When I tried to say something funny she half-rolled her eyes. When the waitress visited our table, she didn’t acknowledge her.
After the restaurant, we went to her house. Her parents were gone and we were alone.
“Have a seat. I’ll be out in a minute.” She said while walking toward the bathroom.
I studied the living room from the couch: Large screen TV, Last Supper and eerie Jesus portraits, souvenir conch shells.
She returned and put a Boys II Men CD into the stereo. She sat next to me, cross-legged, looked into my eyes and gave a coy smile.
I was in over my head and it was happening too fast.
I reached for her hand, hoping to pick up where we left off the other night.
“This is a nice CD,” I said.
She shrugged.
“I have kind of an unusual taste in music.” I added, “My dad calls me the world’s youngest senior citizen because I like guys like Lou Rawls and Roger Whittaker. You ever hear of them?”
She shook her head.
I didn’t know the rules to this game. I had heard that girls like to talk, but apparently, I had been misinformed. I was looking into the eyes of the first girl who actually wanted me and I clearly saw the green light. But I couldn’t go and I didn’t know why.
“So, what are you interested in studying?” I asked.
She sighed, raised her eyebrows, and slowly rolled her eyes.
Now I knew why I couldn’t go. I didn’t want her. Since she wasn’t talking, the only voice I heard echoed in my head, I hang out with Laura so guys will look at me first.
The hand I’d held and cherished a few hours prior now felt cold and clammy.
We spent a long hour sitting and holding hands. I intermittently tried to start new conversations but each one fizzled after one-word replies.
When I left she saw me to the door. Descending the two front porch steps I noticed a cold front had come into town and the cicadas called it a night. I got in my car and turned on the heat. Looking at the house before pulling away, I saw she had already closed the front door.
Kerry by Bob Chikos

We never went out after that. The following week on campus I saw her with another guy. The next week another. And then another.

We can make our own sense out of anything that happens to us. I choose to believe that our trials are, in fact, learning opportunities.

In my heart, I thank Kerry. In only one night she taught me that prettiness is not beauty, that lust is not love, and, while trophies are nice to look at, a lot of them are hollow.

Now I’m married to someone who loves me for who I am, not what I look like. I know that if weight is ever an issue, it’s because she wants me to be healthy and live a long, long time.

I asked for a gorgeous girl but was given a beautiful woman.

Brassaï, Hungarian/French Photographer (1899–1984)
When Uncle Sloppy wouldn’t stop crying after about a week, my cousin Pete, who is seven, placed a tiny velvet music box in the old man’s mouth. It was red and soft and squishy like a velvet tomato, with little rows of seed pearls sewn on. It belonged to my mother, and when I first saw it, I naturally took it to be a pin cushion.

My younger sister Bibi said that Uncle would choke and die on the pearls. I stared at him and thought if he died it would be a blessing. He hadn’t moved a finger or a toe in more than a year since the roof of his house caved in. My mother sometimes said: a simple roof repair... but then her voice trailed off. Uncle had always been in this mess or that, which is how come they nicknamed him Sloppy. I had just started the sixth grade after they brought Uncle here; and had a hard time concentrating on math, my worst subject.

He lay flat out in a bed they dragged onto our enclosed back porch, staying perfectly still with his mouth flung open. Pete said Uncle was like a stick of butter. The only thing that moved on Uncle were his tears.

As we stood around his bed, the velvet music box began playing the theme song from Mighty Joe Young.

“What the...?” said Bibi her brown eyes wide and gaping.
“He must have bit down on his own!” I yelled. We three inched closer to the bed.
“If he bit down then it’s a miracle,” said Bibi.
“Like with Jesus?” Pete wanted to know.
“Yeah, sorta something like that,” I answered, shushing him.

These days I wasn’t giving Jesus too much credit. Not since the priest made everyone stand up in church and say the pledge. All the grownups stood up and swore to God they wouldn’t read any dirty books or watch dirty movies. The priest called them banned by the church but I knew what he had in mind.

We three didn’t stand up. Nobody looked our way. Probably they figured it didn’t matter, that we were just bored kids not paying attention.

I felt proud that day. I had whispered to Bibi and Pete to stay down, and they usually listened, so we all stayed down in the pew. It didn’t feel right, that old priest deciding which books and movies. I wondered when was the last time he’d been to see a movie. I figured a lot of the men would sneak off, anyway, while their wives were busy cleaning the house or at the supermarket. Maybe even a few of the women, too. My own dear mother had Peyton Place buried deep in her underwear drawer. I found it accidentally when I went on a search for safety pins to hold our kite together. I had heard her say you must read Peyton Place to my aunt Cecile, then the both of them giggled.

The soft velvet box in Uncle’s mouth played Beautiful Dreamer. Uncle seemed to calm down. Or maybe it was just shock, hearing sounds coming out of his mouth after all this time. It didn’t much matter. That same pretty music had calmed down Mighty Joe Young. I loved the way the big ape twirled ‘round and ‘round to the music.

“Watch out, you’re stepping on Uncle’s tube,” Bibi said to Pete.

Pete’s habit of tripping over things, or sitting on stuff and breaking them was getting out of control. Last week he sat on my mother’s favorite LP record of Patty Page singing the sand dune song. Then, the other day, he tripped and disconnected one of Uncle’s wires. It must’ve been an important wire because Uncle started to turn a funny color, then his eyes rolled back in his head and my mother had to phone the doctor to get him reconnected. Afterwards she was very angry. She said if we couldn’t be more careful she’d have to ban us from visiting Uncle’s room.

“This is all your fault,” Bibi had yelled at Pete near the garage. He’d hung his head in shame, so we three made a pow-wow to forgive him. Pete loved Uncle more than anything. Before the roof, when Uncle was still himself, he used to bounce Pete on his knee and call him little sonny boy. Pete
missed that; he missed Uncle more than all of us combined.
   “All right, all right, stop your sniveling,” I’d told Pete.
   He’d wiped his nose and stood before the garage looking at me like a dog waiting for the next
   command.
   Growing bored with the velvet music box, I said, “Let’s go get some ice cream.”  Bungalow
   Bar truck had just hit our street and was ringing its bell.
   “Do you think it’s OK leaving the box with Uncle?”  Bibi looked worried.
   Halfway out of the room, I turned to stare back at him.  The song had played itself three or
   four times now.  “He’s fine.  Leave it with him, I think it makes him feel better.”
   When Bibi got worried she squeezed her eyes under long dark bangs.  She was doing it now.
   “What if he chokes on the little pearls while we’re getting our ice cream?”
   “Then it’ll be God’s will.”
   “How can you say that Henrietta?”
   “Look, I want a toasted almond bar.” I pinched my sister’s arm and she jabbed me back.  It
   was a sweltering day.  If I didn’t get my toasted almond bar, I couldn’t predict what might happen.
   “C’mon, we have to hurry or the ice cream man will think we’re not coming.”
   Pete pushed past me speeding down the hallway.  I ran behind him listening to the truck bell
   sounding weaker, like it was pulling away.  Sure enough, outside, the ice cream truck was already
   three houses past ours’.  We had to run fast to catch up.
   “Stoooooooooop!”  I screamed over the ringing.  It came to a stop in front of the Malone
   house, the four Malone children quickly surrounding the truck window.  I felt panicked, kept
   running toward it, the sweat rolling down my face.  Those Malone’s might buy up all the toasted
   almond bars.  Because once they’d found out I liked them best, they decided toasted almond was
   their favorite, too.
   My mother only allowed us one ice cream each.  The Malone children were allowed two, and
   their mother bought bags and bags of cookies and candy and potato chips and big cartons of soda
   they stored in the garage.
   I stood there fidgety waiting my turn.  I watched each Malone get two toasted almond bars a
   piece.  Debbie Malone took a bite grinning at me with ice cream on her chin.  The bars today looked
   especially golden toasted.
   That’s 8 gone already, I was calculating.  And that’s not counting other streets where kids had
   already gotten their ice cream.  Suddenly I felt miserable.  Those damn Malone’s and all their candy
   in their magical candy house.  And now they beat us to the truck.  Bibi and Pete were looking
   envious, too.
   Finally it was our turn and there were enough left.  “It’s a total miracle,” I said, giving those
   Malone’s a mean look.
   The Malone house was small like ours, identical to ours and all the others on our block, and
   the surrounding blocks.  Most of the fathers had been in World War II.  I don’t think Mr. Malone
   served.  Besides all the sweets in their house, it was the only house with a huge tree out front, that
   made caterpillar nests in the summer, and horrible black hairy caterpillars that crawled all over the
   place.  The sidewalk always had hundreds of squashed ones.  My mother said that Mr. Malone went
   out at night and stepped on the caterpillars.  Once I saw him chain their dog to the basement post,
   whipping the poor beast almost to death.  He was a thin man with dark greasy hair.  My mother had
   said he was wiry, and that she didn’t trust wiry men.  I wasn’t afraid of him.  He beat the dog but
   mostly acted nice toward us kids.
   Time and again we were warned to stay out of the Malone house.  But then my mother would
   get busy with Uncle, and we would get that urge for sweets and go knocking on their back door.
   Mary Malone was the youngest, a skinny girl with a face like a bird, who had no problem sharing.
Her sisters, older and fatter, only gave out one cookie at a time. They watched you eat it, then whispered among themselves about whether to give you another. The older sisters never shared the candy. Never. They stood in front of that candy cabinet like guards.

After we finished off the toasted almond bars, walking back toward the house, Pete yelped and pointed at the sky. Army planes from Mitchell Field were swooping and diving. “That one’s doing a figure-8,” Pete shouted. “Let’s go to the air show.”

I watched a plane coming down so low I was sure it would hit the ground. Twisting and swirling it pulled back up into the sky. Pete was jumping up and down. I looked toward the Malone house and wondered if they were going to the Mitchell Field Air Show after having their ice cream, too.

Inside the chain link fence, that surrounded the air base, it seemed like a million people had come to see the trick-flying planes. We stood watching the sky a while, until Bibi said she had to go to the bathroom. “Do you think they have a bathroom?” she asked me.

“I guess they have to have one somewhere.”

A lady standing nearby overheard and she told us to go to the building with the flag out front. “You can get cake in that building,” said the lady.

“Cake in a bathroom?” Bibi whispered.

I was thinking I wouldn’t mind a piece of cake.

We went to the building with the flag, and there was the cake. So big it looked like a door had been put underneath to hold it. We stood there admiring it. A big flat cake with white icing and a big picture of the Mitchell Field Air Base made out of colored icing. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” Pete said.

Other people began coming in to see the cake, too. We were right up next to the cake. Soon the room was filled with people and they started to shove. Each time they shoved we were pushed into the table that held the cake, and the cake moved. When the cake moved like it would tip over, everyone close to the cake let out screams.

A man’s voice shouted through a megaphone: Clear the room. Clear the room so we can cut the cake and dispense a piece to y’all.

“I just want to find the bathroom,” said Bibi practically crying by then.

It took a while to clear the room. People didn’t want to leave the cake. A lot of people were saying the army had no intention of giving us a slice.

Finally the people behind us cleared out, then we cleared out. Another lady told Bibi the bathroom was outside and around the side of the building. “Me and Pete will wait for you here,” I told her. I wanted to stick in the room watching the cake cutting. “If they give out cake we’ll get you a piece.”

“I don’t care,” my sister said.

When she came back, we waited a long time for the cake but nobody cut into it. “Let’s go home,” I said.

We left the base, crossed the highway and wandered toward our house. Bibi and I sat on the grass. Pete climbed onto the back of a plastic lawn deer yelling giddyup and slapping its rump though it was forbidden to ride them. He said he was going to get a rifle and blast through the Malone candy cabinet.

“Well that’s really dumb,” said Bibi. “Don’t you think you’ll wreck all the candy? Don’t you think you’ll blast it to bits?” He looked surprised, toppling the deer over and landing on the grass. He said he didn’t want any of their damn candy anyway.

“We’ll get our own,” I told them. “And you better put that deer back up before my mother sees and has a fit.”

“We don’t have any money,” said Pete standing it up next to the other two deer.
“Uncle does. Uncle has money in a bunch of socks,” I said. “Look, that deer is cockeyed, it’s not straight anymore, you dented its nose.”

“Are you making this up about the socks, Henrietta?” My sister looked doubtful about Uncle having money. She squatted in the grass pulling out dandelions. “If he has money, then why is he living here with us? Why isn’t he in the Shady Rest Home getting better? Mom said he’s here because he’s got no money.”

I laughed loudly, jumping up and running toward the house. Inside, I could hear Beautiful Dreamer coming from the back porch. I went there, gave Uncle a wave, then sat on the windowsill pushing up the screen and dangling my legs outside. Big purple hydrangeas bloomed near the downspout.

“Uncle you have hydrangeas growing out your window,” I said not looking at him. There wasn’t much you could say to him these days. There wasn’t much to say to anyone who couldn’t answer you back. Beautiful Dreamer had stopped. But then he must’ve bit down again because it started playing.

“That song you’re playing is called Beautiful Dreamer.” I told him despite his not being able to answer. I tilted my head back listening to the music play itself out. It made me feel calm, too.

Then Pete came in, then Bibi. “His eyes are closed,” my sister said.

“He’s dreaming. A beautiful dream.” I smiled. “We made Uncle feel peaceful. We have every right to be proud.”

“Henrietta! Bibi!” Mother was shouting our names and rushing toward his bed. She pulled the velvet box out of Uncle’s mouth, placing her ear against his chest. Finally she straightened up.

Looking at us she said, “He’s not breathing.”

Stunned, we stared back. The little red velvet music box sat quietly on her palm.

“We’ll never talk about this,” she said. “Not a single word.”

Then she left the porch, and us alone with Uncle.
Writers’ Bios

**Paul Bernstein** is a self-taught poet who has published regularly in journals and anthologies. His book-length collection *What the Owls Know* was published in 2019 by Kelsay Books. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Down in the Dirt, Fourth and Sycamore, Muddy River Poetry Review,* and *U.S. 1 Worksheets.*

**Jane Blanchard** lives and writes in Georgia. Her poetry has been published around the world as well as posted online. Her collections—the shorter *Unloosed* and the longer *Tides & Currents*—are available from Kelsay Books.

**Nancy Diamante Bonazzoli,** D. Min., is an Oregon poet, writer, and Zen Buddhist Minister. She earned an M.A. in Clinical Psychology from the Fielding Institute and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Mathew Fox’s University of Creation Spirituality. Her work has been published in various journals, as well as in the anthology *Sacred Voices: Essential Women’s Wisdom through the Ages* by Mary Ford-Grabowski, and she is a past winner of the William G. Doody Memorial Prize for Poetry.

**Elena Botts** has lived in the Hudson Valley, Johannesburg, Berlin, NYC, DC, and many other places. In the past few years, her poems have been published in dozens of literary magazines. She is the winner of four poetry contests and has had six books published. Her visual artwork has won numerous awards and has been exhibited in various galleries. She has also collaborated on, released and exhibited sound and moving image art.

**Lorraine Caputo** is a documentary poet, translator and travel writer. Her works appear in over 150 journals in Canada, the US, Latin America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa; 12 chapbooks of poetry – including *Caribbean Nights* (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2014), *Notes from the Patagonia* (dancing girl press, 2017) and the upcoming *On Galápagos Shores* (dancing girl press, 2019); and 18 anthologies. She has also authored a dozen travel guidebooks. In March 2011, the Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada chose her verse as poem of the month. Caputo has done over 200 literary readings, from Alaska to the Patagonia. She travels through Latin America, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth.

**Bob Chikos** teaches special education at Crystal Lake Central High School and lives in Cary, IL with his spouse Aileen and son Martin.

**Edward M. Cohen**'s novel, "$250,000," was published by Putnam's; his non fiction books by Prima, *Prentice Hall, Limelight Editions,* SUNY Press. He has published over 35 stories in literary journals and has received grants from the N.E.A. and NY State Council on the Arts.

**Mike Gallagher,** an Irish poet and editor, has been published and translated worldwide. His writing has been translated into six languages. He won the Michael Hartnett Viva Voce award in 2010 and 2016, the Desmond O'Grady International award in 2012 and was shortlisted for the Hennessy award in 2011. His collection, *Stick on Stone,* is published by Revival Press.

**Arthur Gatti** is a SDS community organizer right out of college. He was absent from the poetry scene for many years while engaged in journalism and editing. Through his screenwriting, he is a member of the Producer-Writers Guild of America. Now, finally out of a self-imposed forty-year exile from poetry, he came crawling back to the Muse. His third book, which was his first book of poetry, is a half-century of poems written about his experiences in our sister nation, called “Mexico—Dust in My Blood.” Under the auspices of DarkLight publishers, he has a bilingual book of poetry entitled *Songs of Mute Eagles.*

**James Croal Jackson** has a chapbook, *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017),
Writers’ Bios

and poems in Pacifica, Reservoir, and indefinite space. He edits The Mantle (themantlepoetry.com). Currently, he works in the film industry in Pittsburgh, PA. (jimjakk.com)

Oonah V Joslin lives in Northumberland, England and is poetry editor at The Linnet’s Wings. Her chapbook, Three Pounds of Cells is available on Amazon and you can see Oonah reading online at Almost on Brantwood Jetty for the National Trust. You can follow Oonah on Facebook or on her blog at Parallel Oonahverse. She’d love you to visit and browse.

Judith A. Lawrence is the editor/publisher of River Poets Journal. She is currently working on a memoir, and a second book of short stories, titled “Uncharted Territories.” She has published several chapbooks of her poetry. Her poetry/fiction/memoir has been published in various anthologies, chapbooks, online and in print literary journals.

Layla Lenhardt is Editor in Chief of 1932 Quarterly. She has been most recently published in Poetry Quarterly, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, The Opiate, The Charleston Anvil, and Sears. Her forthcoming Poetry Book, These Ghosts are Mine is due for publication this fall. She currently resides in Indianapolis.

Peggy McCray has been writing for over 30 years and has been published in various magazines and journals, such as, American Grit, Country, and Tributaries 5, a journal of nature writing by the Cuyahoga Valley Nature Writers. Peggy also won a commendation award in the 2000 Chester H. Jones Foundation National Poetry Competition. Originally from Ohio, she has a BS in English from Northern Arizona University and currently resides in Elyria, Ohio.

Carol McCullough is a native Atlantan, attended Furman University undergraduate, and Georgia State, Emory University and University of Georgia and none of her degrees were in anything related to writing! She calls herself a fairly old dog, trying to learn a new trick. Since retirement, she has been reflecting on how she got to be the person she is. Her story is one of a series of personal essays. She finds the process rewarding, and the product fun.

James B. Nicola’s poetry and prose have appeared in River Poets Journal; the Antioch, Southwest, Green Mountains, and Atlanta Reviews; Rattle; and Barrow Street. His full-length collections are Manhattan Plaza, Stage to Page, Wind in the Cave, Out of Nothing, and Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond (2019). His nonfiction book Playing the Audience won a Choice award. A Yale graduate, he hosts the Hell’s Kitchen International Writers’ Roundtable at Manhattan’s Columbus Library: walk-ins welcome!

Vivian Finley Nida, a retired English and Creative Writing teacher, is a frequent contributor for Songs of Eretz Poetry Review, a Mark Allen Everett Poetry Series poet, and a Woody Guthrie poet. She holds a B.A. in English and M.S. in Secondary Education from Oklahoma State University. Her work has appeared in River Poets Journal “Windows” Special Themed Issue, her book From Circus Town, USA, and elsewhere. She and her husband live in Oklahoma City.

Jesse Sam Owens is a Daytona Beach attorney specializing in environmental and land use law. He is a guitarist and songwriter and has performed at all major folk festivals in the state of Florida. Jesse’s songs have been referred to as “poetry songs.” His songs and poems are born primarily from melody, which leads to cadence, which lead to the words. His writing was influenced by the symbolic songs of Bob Dylan and Paul Simon and by the true spacing of notes by the guitarist, Norman Blake. He is the author of a book of poems and songs, title, “A Tired Man’s Fantasy, and Other Musings.”
Carl “Papa” Palmer of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, Virginia, lives in University Place, Washington. He is retired from the military and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) enjoying life now as “Papa” to his grand descendants and being a Franciscan Hospice volunteer. Carl is a Pushcart Prize and Micro Award nominee. MOTTO: Long Weekends Forever!

Anuel Rodriguez is a Mexican-American poet living in the San Francisco Bay Area. His poetry has appeared in Glass: Poets Resist and The Road Not Taken.

Mary Sarko is a translator of Spanish and Quechua, and an editor and writer. This short story was first inspired by a train from a different epoch that now is parked in front of a former train depot. When I was very young, the same model of train hit a car and six high school students on their way to a wrestling match were killed a block from my home. I translated some of that into this story, but shifted time even more because I wanted a train called the Zephyr for my story in which the choice to stay home and read Jane Eyre changes a young women’s life.

Beate Sigriddaughter, www.sigriddaughter.net, grew up in Germany and lives in Silver City, New Mexico (Land of Enchantment) where she was poet laureate from 2017 - 2019. Her chapbook Dancing in Santa Fe and other poems is out from Červená Barva Press.

Susan Tepper is a twenty year writer and the author of eight published books of fiction and poetry. Her recent title What Drives Men is a funky road novel that has been short-listed in American Book Fest Best Book Awards for 2019. Stories, poems, interviews, essays, and opinion columns by Tepper appear in journals and magazines worldwide. Honors include eighteen Pushcart Prize Nominations, a Pulitzer Prize Nomination from Cervena Barva Press for the novel What May Have Been (currently being adapted as a stage play), 7th place Winner in the Zoetrope sponsored contest for the novel (2003), Second Place Winner in Story/South Million Writers Award and more. Tepper is a native New Yorker. www.susantepper.com

Mitchell Toews - “The small, conservative community in which I grew up reached a point of departure a few years ago and hosted a gay pride parade. An unthinkable event once, but on that first day there were grey-haired Mennonite Omas, carrying both Bibles and provocative rainbow signs, marching in a show of undeniable love and courage alongside their LGBTQ grandchildren. This divergence made me wonder about the choices made, the bridges crossed, and the inevitable painful refusals. "The Log Boom" was the result of lives imagined and, "how way leads on to way."

Loretta Diane Walker, a musician who plays her tenor saxophone sometimes, a daughter navigating a new world, a teacher who still likes her students, and an artist who has been humbled and inspired by a collection of remarkable people and poets, is a multiple Pushcart Nominee, and Best of the Net Nominee, won the 2016 Phillis Wheatley Book Award for poetry, for her collection, In This House (Bluelight Press). She has published five collections of poetry. Her most recent collection is Ode to My Mother's Voice and Other Poems, Lamar University Press. Her manuscript Word Ghetto won the 2011 Bluelight Press Book Award.

Diane Webster's goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life or nature or an overheard phrase. Many nights she falls asleep juggling images to fit into a poem. Her work has appeared in "Philadelphia Poets," "Home Planet News Online," "Better Than Starbucks" and other literary magazines.
Brassaï, a pseudonym of Gyula Halász – (September, 9th, 1899 – July 8th, 1984) was a Hungarian–French photographer, sculptor, medalist, writer, and filmmaker who rose to international fame in France in the 20th century. He was one of the numerous Hungarian artists who flourished in Paris between the world wars.

In the early 21st century, the discovery of more than 200 letters and hundreds of drawings and other items from the period 1940 to 1984 has provided scholars with material for understanding his later life and career.

Brassaï captured the essence of the city in his photographs, published as his first collection in the 1933 book entitled Paris de nuit (Paris by Night). His book gained great success, resulting in being called "The Eye of Paris" in an essay by Henry Miller.
Brassaï, Hungarian/French Photographer (1899–1984)

River Poets Journal
Published by Lilly Press
www.riverpoetsjournal.com