River Poets Journal
2019 Seasonal issue

Parrot Caretaker in Aartis by Max Liebermann

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Boulevard of the Parrots by Max Liebermann
**Editorial**

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 Seasonal Issue and the Special Edition 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

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**Please Note**

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.

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**Final Edition - Seasonal Edition**

Released simultaneously with the 2019 Special Edition - A Fork in the Road. 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.
Breathing snow

You can do it awhile. Air pockets remain, locked around ice crystals. But not forever -- just long enough to replay the avalanche rolling over life, sweeping love downhill, leaving you flattened in white, no way to reach for sky. If your ears still hear,

eyes are not frozen closed, hand trapped near face can clear a bit of space, you may have sufficient time
to listen for swish of metal probes slicing nearby, promising beams of light. If tempted to sleep, imagine

a new lover finds you, scoops a place by your side, lies close. Together, you breathe hope into deep snow.

©Timothy Pilgrim

(Published by Sue Boynton Poetry Contest, 2013)

It Was Never Your Fault

Heading towards Escambia Bay armed with beer, pen & pad, I look for a setting where time has no hold.

I hug the shore due early morning fog and find anchorage by a cypress aged by the sands of time.

Soon shadows in the fog and sorrowful calls of gulls set my mind to wondering about long forgotten memories.

Tears fall as I pen thoughts, knowing mistakes were not yours and things done cannot be undone.

©Marc Livanos

Cairn

Cascades meadow, peak above pointing through mist. I gather rocks, some annular, others flat.

You set each atop another, gingerly construct a column ascending from a mossy base.

Stones of different size give it a ragged look. Sometimes, shale supports basalt as large as your heart or breasts. I recline beside my pile of rocks, study you from behind, hold my breath.

You bend, lithe, carefully adjust the placement -- stand, pause, assess pillar's stability, its rise to a brightening sky. I hope it takes you all summer to finish this cairn.

©Timothy Pilgrim

(published by Windfall, 2017)

Java

Morning, I wake with roasted beans from the hills of a far away land. Infants dressed in beige layers wrapped in red cotton fabric cradle their mothers bellies while maternal hands overturn flood of green beans over a fire made of wood from trees once danced in a singing forest.

©Jerrice J. Baptiste
Poetry

* You are pulled and the same darkness
lifts your arm around these stars
spread out door to door

knocks so your fist can smell
from blood become your heart again
dragged ahead as if you belong

near distances, end to end
though this cemetery
has forgotten its dead

holds only the invisible hillsides
soaking in stone and narrow alleyways
passed along till they close

and what will be your tears
waits as lips, as the sky brought back
crumbling with not a light left on.

© Simon Perchik

* Branching out and this hillside
bit by bit unraveling
the way your shadow keeps to itself

just by darkening, fed the dirt
you once could see through
as if nothing was there to hum

then swallow some old love song
that came into the world
facing the ground still trying

to leave you and night after night
you listen for these smaller
then smaller stones eating alone

as the cry forever struggling
from its harsh stranglehold
to keep up, side by side and stay.

© Simon Perchik

For My Father

Your tiny baby makes a fist
of its little moving hand
that reaches out to grab the land
it says I stretch my limbs
my toes wiggle to try and walk
and see if they can even talk

do they want to hold me up
so I can stand and be a man
then amble through the sun I ran
into leafy green forests
basking under the moss-covered tree
covering my naked curiosity

I grow tall in your shadow’s width
I play with kites that sing your joy
and furry lions become my toy
I spring up high as an oak
as you direct me on the stages
of my life’s many macrophages

I inscribe my lessons in the stone
hewn by your desires to savor
life’s gustatory alluring flavor
you pass to me through your music
star light notes in the holy grail
as I walk on the beach with my sand pail

I collect the ancient seashells formed
from the envelope of the home
you made for me from the celestial dome
above our door are engraved your arms
waiting for me kept safe
until I no longer am a lost waif

wandering through byways long gone
of streets where our memories walked
you showed me how the Greek gods talked
to each other in the whispering pines
in the ocean waves crashing on shore
the wind speaks through braveries roar

as we amble down through the years
now grown and aging in lime
a drink of the Jinn enhances our time
the magic wand you implanted
waves a mirage woven in silk
that I drink heartily as mother’s milk.

© Sharon Arthur

(Previously published in The Wind Softly Murmurs: Poems of Family Love and Loss.)
**Poetry**

**Change I Watch**

Change I watch  
In the stars  
Airplanes flying so high  
It is obscene  
I find constellations I knew in America and Asia but  
watch them scatter  
They are inky satellites blinking  
Like hazy eyes in the sky  
Change I watch in the moon  
So lost it is tangled in sunset briars  
And wagging dog tails  
The moon is drunk as a boat  
and washed in the tide of clouds  
She is a girl looking for a place to sleep  
Change I watch in clouds; I feel them on my knuckles  
as I scrape my windshield  
They solidified in the sky and froze here  
The awakening moon pulls them up like covers  
The sleepy girl awakes  
Mumbles in her sleep  
And tugs them off the pink and orange fields  
As the glowing June bugs, the satellite stars  
Scatter

©Ruslan Garrey

**Speed Ways**

Cars form communities  
on concrete strips  
in wide-open prairies.  
Engines lead, take charge,  
jestle for position,  
squeeze out weak  
hybrids. Trucks lumber  
oblivious to the lower  
orders, their own elite corps.  
Metal absorbs us into  
cushions and we daydream  
between exit ramps,  
awaken only at those bright  
red strobes that stroke  
a tangled steel pile,  
a glint of chrome,  
and glass fractured into  
shards that pretend to be stars  
in a faultless night sky.

©Richard Dinges

**Wedding Bed in Kabul**

The bed had white lace  
and purple balloons tied  
to its posts.

A ruby studded music box  
next to a lamp on the table  
with a wedding bow still on it.

Never touched.

Before the rubble was cleared,  
still, as distant dogs barking,  
she looked to him, the same  
way she does when he  
awakens in the morning.

©George Payne

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*Tennis Game by the Sea* by Max Liebermann
At an outdoor concert

a solitary pelican does its best wax impression of Icarus falling headfirst from the sky into the shallows of the shore as the tide retreats this last day of March. My first thought: broken neck.

My second, traumatic head injury. But soon enough I see him (testosterones = stupid acts = male of species) raising his head, adjusting his neck as if to swallow his pride or prize. He rides

the praise of green waves briefly, then batters the east-bound waves and wind before hurling himself into the sky as if on fire, winging it in a feathered frenzy I have never seen, amazed at the energy

expended, the power and purpose of his wings as he launches skyward.
And even more surprised when seconds later he is heading west over the early Spring breakers, drunkenly oblivious to his lucky life.

©Richard Weaver

The Reality of Love in your 20’s

My shift lets out at six, five cities away
You take 40-minute train rides after 14-hour shifts
We find time between work and sleep for a few hours each week
Our I love yous are spoken silently
Through fingertips cupped under my ear tracing circles
Through an arm gone numb under my head
Through the lacing of legs on days when we need sleep.

Our love can be loud sometimes because
We keep it to Thursday nights
So, we sometimes find it in the aisles of supermarkets,
with silly jokes and creaky carriages that pass by cans of tuna
Because even if love wants to spend all day in bed together
I have work in eight hours, and you need sleep before your next shift
And we have gotten good at making Thursday nights
Seem like years

©Adrianna Zapata

(Previously published in The Scarlet Leaf Review (10-2019), and the Writers Cafe Magazine (7-2019)
The Book

He locked her in the back shed in Albuquerque in one hundred degree heat—left her there a week or more or less with water of course (they didn’t want her dead) but no food

no foolish ideas no willfulness would let her out her mother would never come, but he came with his book once each day asking if she had thought about her sins

she would say no though she had thought long into the night when it had cooled and she could think at all and she would wonder what those words meant really

words that he spat at her like pigheaded like penance like willfulness and she would question things like why

they didn’t want her stubbornness her extra fat around the middle

they didn’t want her he was a pillar of the church though her can overflowed she must realize what her sins were or she wouldn’t come out yet the bugs did and the rats did at dusk especially when the night was darkest

the other day she turned sixty five and the shade moved while she waited in my car in the heat with the doors locked

the windows up and when I came back from getting the milk I found her crying for the keys

she clenched in her hand and the book, the book

©Nancy Diamante Bonazzoli

(Previously published by Absolution (Luminare Press, 2019)

Cleo's Bath

The sun is as red as a blood clot in the sky because of the nearby wildfires.
I can feel them smoldering inside my lungs every time I breathe.

I’m headed back to what I know—hiking to escape my body as I attempt to find a new one in the hazy grayness of the smoke-smeared morning.

For all I know, the world beyond the mountains could have been wiped away in a retrograde apocalypse. Now the silence tastes like ash and gray matter.

When I reach the baths, I feel like I’ve discovered the last swimming hole on Earth. I pour my history into them and slaughter myself to spread what remains among the altars of rock.

My feet carried me here but the wind will carry fragments of my animal heart over the lakes and spires of pine, back to the bodies I call home.

©Anuel Rodriguez

Biergarten Zu Brannenburg by Max Liebermann
**The Body**

As I sat in the hospital waiting room next to an aquarium that imprisoned two flaming red, fat goldfish, my eyes on the wall-mounted flat screen monitoring my daughter’s gall bladder surgery, I thought of the final section of Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric,” that rhapsodic paean to the human body. And while I too find our bodies preposterously marvelous and intricate and beyond comprehension—sacs of meat internally that function in coordination, each having its place and duty, each regulating the other in harmonious union, but most sublime, acquiring, somehow, consciousness and self-awareness, while I too am dumbstruck by the grand absurdity of it all, none the less I am well aware of how any organ can fail and fester,

how the feet nurture warts and fungi, how the skin can peel with psoriasis, flare with rosacea, sprout tags and adversarial nodules, how the brain can convolute into dementia, how the retinas detach, the teeth crack, how the bones can break and tendons rip, how one need only wait for some inner atrocity (for it will come) . . . and if often I believe the Creator could have done a better job, that the Creator could have fashioned us flawless with perhaps music rather than meat or original clay, so the organs might sing together in a choral symphony, an eternal music of the inner spheres,

when I allow myself the sabotage of such musings, I think back the bed where my wife lay when I met her first and I ran my fingers across her perfect flesh and kissed her everywhere and my body responded in kind, and she bestowed upon me in kind, and the heavens broke upon us and we saw the Creator all right, blasting paradise upon us, and that paradise was meat.

©Lou Gallo

**Burning**

The smoke is finally getting to me
The haze is thicker today
Blurring tree limbs out my north window
From fires down the Kenai
Bitterness enthrones itself
On the back of my tongue
Phlegm crowds my throat
Even faithfully taking my medicines
By tomorrow
The slurry collecting in my chest
Will leave me struggling to breathe
Like trying to suck air through
The collapsed straw in a
Luscious too thick milkshake
When I must go out to walk the dogs
The brittle grass crackles under
My sneakers
The sun visibly darkens my skin
In the short time it takes
For the dogs to find their spot
The haze blurring my vision
Concentrating the blistering truth
Rome is burning

©Anne Ward-Masterson

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**Market by Max Liebermann**
Meltdown

We first met standing out in the New York cold unable to buy tickets to see Neil deGrasse Tyson. We walked through the snow and you slipped on the ice and I caught and held you for a precious moment. We found a warm coffee house and talked about astrophysics and you quipped about Mars as a living option to a polluted overheated earth perhaps even the moon with ice now known while I demurred wanting to stay on our pale blue dot, and it snowed that night when we met some time ago.

Now years later into the Anthropocene era I think of you on this day when the North and South poles have melted down to ice cubes. I will drop the first cube into my last drink and save the other to share with you if you would join me to commemorate their final meltdown in a martini glass, while sitting alone looking at the ice as the shape of water and now gone from the world.

I look up and you appear from out of summer heat wearing a teddy coat and long Hermes scarf and you sit close with me to wait at Godot’s Bar for the return of winter when we know all will be well once again when winter kept us warm and covered earth in remembered snow, that night when we met some time ago.

©Jim Hanson

After A Long Night

The wind singing in the higher registers. Steeplejacks reining in their lines. Our minister clinging to his black hat.

It’s the first day of winter, the masses finding it difficult to temper undue suspicions, their kind usually avoiding the likes of me, the short and sweet and surly type, a last sane peasant in the fiefdom of Glee. Informal. Non-linear. Star-shaped in a round world. The grump who relishes the idea of trees bowing to chill gusts and the promise of a storm to come. The one rehearsing lines from a play not yet written. The sort who notices the wind and marks it down. A very short book made of long sentences.

©Bruce McRae
Summer Sips

Summer sips on honeyed ale,
watches Autumn don her plaid,
Then sends the last bees tumbling
through Queen Anne's Lace.

The slant of light in evening shade
deeppens into shadow,
that once shone bright as flame
as Earth peered through a looking glass

The birds are empty nesters now,
packing up for Southern climes.
Leaving only hollow cups
where eggs once warmed in feather beds.

Deep below, a rumbling only Nature hears,
Promises of frozen streams.
Leaves that carpet forest floors
skitter under waning moons.

Summer takes a final drink,
Shuts drowsy eyes til dawn.

Then September steals
the sun and moon,
kept like jewels to bargain
with Winter.

©Sharon Frame Gay

Amsterdam Orphans in the Garden by Max Liebermann

Terrace by Max Liebermann
Poetry

**Shuffle**

Shuffle’s not a dance, just a step  
A pace in time and space  
What I’m saying is that it’s a state of mind, a metaphor  
Suggesting hesitation, dread, uneasiness  
Embellished by the songs of lost autonomy

What I'm saying is that shuffle is an image of my aging self  
Old mans’ shuffle. Old man’s body  
Memento mori in a dirty shirt and wrinkled pants  
Unperceiving and indifferent to its presentation  
Not a dance, just a shuffling in my mind

We shufflers have a hard time turning corners  
In the abasement of our infirmity  
We know we cannot finish on our feet  
What I’m saying is this isn't really poetry  
Just a selfie of the sundown of my life

©David Lewitzky

**Spindrift, Snowdrift, Drift of Apple Bloom**

Under the yew tree, the brindled light of autumn.  
Needles of rain speckled the river.  
The awns of red-maned grasses quivered in the wind.

When the owl called, when the cricket cried,  
she was leaving this world, this body.

*Not knowing where I came from  
into this world,  
nor where I go.  
Nor caring.*

September light upon the river. The Susquehanna,  
flowing, flowing.

*But I see now  
the spindrift, snowdrift, drift of apple bloom.  
The lily light  
of summers long ago.*

©Jeanne Shannon
A Samaritan in Hattiesburg by Jake Morrill

A magazine I once read had a feature on “Southern hospitality.” I remember the photos: a big porch with white pillars. A carved wooden pineapple hung by the door. Inside, some plump sofas and delicate curtains. A life of plenty and ease. I’d be willing to be pampered in a setting like that. But, to me, “Southern hospitality” will always look less like that mansion, and more like a one-room apartment in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. For a time in my life, I sang in a band out of Austin you would not have enjoyed. Mostly, we played in bars to a crowd of ten or so listless drunks. Any money we made went straight into the van. So, pulling into Hattiesburg one night, we were clueless about what we would do for our lodging.

The club was nothing to look at: a cinder-block structure behind a Conoco station. But the parking lot contained the kind of nice cars that go home to places that have room to spare. My requests from the stage for lodging were charming, and frequent. But, as people filtered in and out through the night, no one stepped forward to say, “Stay with me.” The crowd started to thin. Then, the houselights went on. We were milling around, still unclaimed and unsure, when word arrived that, at last, someone was willing.

When she arrived, our savior was exhausted. She’d just finished a shift at a place where she worked as an exotic dancer. Had only meant to come by to pick up her boyfriend—a man with long hair who told us he played bass. She dispensed with small-talk, said, “Follow me. It’s a ways.” And it was. In the dark, we would not have been able to find our way out of the part of town where she lived. There was a yellow linoleum floor for throwing down sleeping bags. The boyfriend wanted to stay up, talking music. But she had to get up in the morning for her other job. So, that was that. We slept soundly till morning.

In the Gospel of Luke, somebody asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” This is when Jesus tells the story of a man knocked in a ditch, passed up by the ones he knows as his own people. Instead, goes the story, who helps out is a Samaritan—the last person on earth the man would have expected. In a middle-class church, you’ll hear the story as if nobody present had ever been near a ditch, much less actually in one. As if the congregation is brimming with Samaritans, who cannot wait to help. But on a night in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the one who gave shelter was far from that church. She had nothing to spare. No plump sofa, no delicate curtains, no carved wooden pineapple hung by the door. No spare bed, no spare towel. Not even spare time. What she did have, however, was a plain sense of kinship with absolute strangers. She was not who I’d figured my neighbor would be. But to the person who asked him, “And who is my neighbor,” Jesus answered by describing a tired exotic dancer in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

You might imagine that this could have happened in any location. That it was just hospitality, nothing Southern about it. And, in a way, you’d be right. Except listen: in the morning, before she left for work, hurried as she was, she made sure to take time to fix us all eggs.

Old Gardener at Breakfast by Max Liebermann
A scarf or cap covered her head whenever she cooked or tidied a bed. A single hair in a pot, or on a sheet, would incite the most turbulent scenes. Her plates sparkled when hung to dry. Her linen glistened like snow on Alps. Cleanliness was the pivot around which her existence revolved. Soap emanated from a pair of roughened hands, whose touch constituted the essence of warmth. To nestle into her fragrance in the dead of the night was to banish an eerie banshee’s cry. She managed to weed and water a very large garden that constantly bore fruit. We had little picnics under her willow tree, where a grandmother’s imagination roamed free, retelling the same never-ending stories.

Like most marriages hers had sleep-walked into a dead end and since divorce was not their way, they had opted to sleep in separate rooms. Too young to construe the meaning of that diplomatic rift I pressed for an answer behind distant beds. This elicited a smile from him, but from her, pursed lips. Grandma never complained or told a lie. The past was buried in her mind. She smoked away every autumn leaf that clung. She had lost three children within a week; three coffins paraded an everlasting grief; three daughters claimed by the same disease.

In Dulles, violets are deemed the saddest flowers, their tiny heads shying away from viewers, hidden below many hearts of green. A plot of violets was her favorite scene, where she hovered, tying three bouquets with thread, for the kitchen, the bedroom and one for my head. Caressing the purple heads in my hand while she arranged luxuriant locks of hair, I always felt the scent penetrate my brain. Pinning beauty behind my ear, she would then kiss the reddening cheek that felt inexplicably honored and piqued. We basked in each other’s smiles when we could look each other in the eye, a love that boasted the fewest words.

We never had the chance to say goodbye. She passed away when I was abroad, a victim to cancer of the throat. But I never see violets without seeing her face, the tender smile, her triumphant grace, the walks in the garden, the heartfelt kiss, the stoic who lent purple the happiest hue.
A Tapestry of Yellows by Susie Gharib

Daphne dips her brush in flaming orange each time her parents have a row. The sun can thaw the ice that follows a plate smashed against a wall. She paints a house where she can take cover from yells and thumps and broken glass, the boat that will sail along a river away from a household rent by wrongs. She warms to yellow roses. Golden petals kill the dimness in her soul. An only child finds solace in letters that yellow sends to saddened eyes. A flower-shop her only station on the onerous walk to school and back, Daphne wishes she could afford a bouquet for their parlor, a peace-offering to a demented house. 'There's nothing sickly about this colour,' she argues with a classmate in the playground. 'Sallow is not the same as the yellow of the cheeks of primroses and buttercups.'

Daphne watches the flames of a campfire, sitting on a log, a meditative scout. A rare beauty kindles in the heart of a bonfire, whose burning arms ward off howling wolves. She basks in the glow of this aerial yellow, currents of warmth stroking her bones. She sees no hell in heat or halos that have been missing from her hearth. Hades must be a tapestry of yellows, the flares and sparks of passionate souls.

Taking refuge in the flicker of a candle at St. Mungo of the Sacred Heart, Daphne finds this thin and hazy slice of yellow a shield from needles in the effigy of her soul, a quiet respite from the blizzards that harrow the embers of an unwanted and unloved child. A candle-glow is yellow borrowed from the torch that burns in Mary’s heart.

Child With Nurse in a Flower Garden by Max Liebermann
In the passenger seat of my truck, Laurel fussed with the tail of her black cat costume all the way home. She was too upset to talk. I turned on the radio. A jazz saxophone was having a conniption.

“Do you want to change the station?” I asked.

“No, Wes. It suits the mood.”

Laurel got undressed and into bed, while I made her a mug of herbal tea. She held it in both hands like a magic potion. She still had cat whiskers painted on her cheeks.

“Can you tell me a story?” Twenty-something, she made it sound plaintive.

“Better than that, I can sing you a lullaby.”

“Oh, goody!” The sullen cloud dissipated.

I got my guitar, sat beside the futon, and sang my Lullaby.

Evening is falling, is falling, my dear,  
Shadows assemble and slumber draws near.  
The horse in the stable, the dove in the nest,  
The child in the cradle anticipate rest.

Embers are glowing and ashes are warm,  
Baby is drowsy, protected from harm.  
The wolf in the forest, the thorn on the rose  
Can never endanger my darling’s repose.

Long is the winter and long is the night,  
Long will I hold you and swaddle you tight.  
The mountain is high and the ocean is deep,  
My lullaby’s over, my love is asleep.

Eyes closed, Laurel was nodding. I stole the mug away and tucked her in. She slept through the night like a weary child.

In the morning, Laurel went in the bathroom, saw her face in the mirror, and moaned. She fixed her breakfast of plain yogurt and granola, ate a spoonful, and left the bowl in the sink. Bowed under a burden of dread, she bicycled to her job in the college library.

During the day, she told me later, two campus police officers in matching navy blazers came to talk to her supervisor. Mrs. Duodecimo called Laurel into her private office. The room was small and windowless, like a walk-in closet. When everyone was seated, they were knee to knee.

One officer, whose name badge read “Graves,” had a thick body, a blank expression, and a heavy shadow in his cheeks and upper lip. He seemed to be doing an impression of a by-the-book detective. He began in a flat tone, as if reading from an indictment.

“Miss Fairweather was found at the scene of a disturbance last night in the biology research lab.
She was one of seven or more individuals dressed in Halloween costumes. They broke into the lab, opened the cages of animals being used as subjects in ongoing experiments, and allowed the animals to escape through a fire exit door. According to the statement Miss Fairweather made at the station, the perpetrators belong to a group called Voice of the Turtle, and the reason for the disturbance was to lodge a protest on behalf of animal rights."

“Is this true?” Mrs. Duodecimo stared at Laurel.

Middle-aged and overweight, the college librarian was humorless and persnickety to boot. She had never liked Laurel. The job paid poorly, and it was hard to fill. Young people stayed a year or two. They cared little or nothing for the fine points of book classification, rebinding, cataloging, and shelf space allocation.

“The others got away, and I got caught.”

“I have a dog at home,” Mrs. Duodecimo said, “a Pekingese. I consider myself a friend of animals, but I can’t believe a responsible adult would behave in such a heedless way.” She turned back to Graves. “How bad was it?”

“The department head is assessing,” he said. “A dollar amount will include the value of the animals and the lost research data. It will likely be several thousand. One of our reasons for coming here today is to remind both of you of a standard clause in the Poindexter College employment contract. Damage or destruction of college property may be cited as cause for dismissal.”

“I didn’t damage or destroy anything in the library,” Laurel said.

Mrs. Duodecimo glowered at her. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Laurel. You can consider this your exit interview.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not all,” Officer Graves said. “Miss Fairweather is liable for some or all of the cost to repair the damage.”

“All?” Laurel said. “What about the others in the group?”

“Exactly,” Graves said. “We would be very interested in learning their names and addresses.”

“You want me to inform on my friends?”

“In exchange for your cooperation, Miss Fairweather, we might be able to arrange a lesser penalty,” Graves looked at his companion, a woman not much older than Laurel, with the same long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her name badge read “Hopewell.”

“Squeal for a deal,” Hopewell said.

“Not that we want to put any pressure on you,” Graves said. “The offer is on the table.”

“Good for how long?” Laurel asked. The two police officers were surprised. Laurel’s back was up, and she felt she had heard enough.
She turned to her boss.

“You can’t fire me just like that, and you know it. There’s a process, human resources gets involved, and I have the right to appeal. Besides, nothing has been proved against me.” She turned to Graves and Hopewell. “You put my job in jeopardy, and you threaten me with a fine I can’t pay. If I betray my friends in Voice of the Turtle, I won’t have any friends left. What else do I have to lose? I need to consult my attorney.”

Laurel’s eyes flashed as she told me this over supper. She relived the moment then returned to the present.

“That was a total lie, of course. I don’t have an attorney, but it sounded good, like something the accused would say in a movie. And you’re still my friend. Aren’t you?”

“Through thick and thin.”

“I’m in trouble. What should I do?”

“Sam Dobbin might be able to help. He’s the attorney who helped me years ago. He handles traffic tickets, insurance claims, overdue bills, unfair taxes, neighbors who sue, all of life’s little issues. He got me out of jail.”

“You were in jail?”

“That’s a story for another time. Let’s just say I wasn’t a political prisoner. I was drunk.”

“Isn’t legal help expensive?”

“What’s the alternative?”

“I’ll have to cooperate,” Laurel sighed. “They gave me one day. Mrs. Duodecimo said she was putting me on leave pending the outcome of the investigation.”

“She got that from the same movie.”

While I was at work, Laurel went to see Sam Dobbin at his office on Court Square. She took her copy of the Poindexter College employment contract. He read it quickly, as though he had seen it before, and handed it back to her.

“The language is clear, Miss Fairweather. It applies to any college property, not where you work. Trying to make a case that the damage is irrelevant would be a waste of time.”

“So I’m definitely fired.”

“It looks that way. As for the other point, you can negotiate with the campus police. You have information they want. The question is, how much will they pay for it? Immunity from prosecution would be a good asking price.”

“Prosecution for what?”
“Trespassing to start. Graves and Hopewell mentioned the cost of the damage. Poindexter College may try to recover by getting a court judgment against you and your friends. What is the group called?”

“Voice of the Turtle. They won’t be my friends after I squeal on them.”

“Probably not. How much are you willing to pay?”

“In friendship? Or dollars?”

“Exactly. That’s what the legal system does. It assigns a value to things.”

“And people.”

“Do you have any assets, savings, income other than wages?”

“No. I have student loans to pay.”

“Then your course is clear.”

“To negotiate, wouldn’t I be in a stronger position if you came with me?”

“Yes.”

“And how much do you cost?”

“Considerably less than you will pay without me.”

“You’re hired, Mr. Dobbin.”
It was the first Friday since March that there wasn’t a drop of or sign of rain. Ray and his boy, Hank, headed down to the Meet-Up after Ray got off work. The Meet-Up, a cozy, dimly lit round belvedere structure that was large enough to comfortably fit one hundred and fifty persons and was surrounded almost entirely by dense woods, was where the local socialites did their chatting and because everyone over the age of nineteen had at least one kid, it was where all of their kids really got to know each other outside of the school house. The Meet-Up wasn’t a place for revelry and debauchery but an unspoken place of gossip and mightier than thou attitudes where the depravity was well hidden behind wide smiling faces. The Meet-Up was for the honest, church goers. It was a place to highlight accomplishments in the community and then pretend to listen as others did the same. There was occasionally music from a fiddle or someone strumming a guitar but the music was overwhelmingly ignored by the attendees of the Meet-Up.

Ray didn’t so much like the gossip and the braggadocious jabbering, in fact Ray, like most of the men, just stood off to the side talking about crops and tractors and how long the work days were and how nothing could be done about it. Since Lorraine had passed, Ray never missed the company down at the Meet-Up and it was good for Hank, too. Hank was a quiet boy and never really showed interest in baseball and football or harassing the children who wore glasses glasses or had limps. Hank just kind of kept to himself. So Ray liked taking him to the Meet-Up where he hoped Hank would find friendship.

It was always the same story though, every time. Hank would disappear into the woods while the other kids his age would wrestle, play tackle football or throw rocks at each other. When Hank would show back up towards the end of the night, he’d always have some little specimen with him. One time Hank came back with what he thought was a space rock and what Ray quickly discovered was hardened deer droppings. But sometimes, the specimen was more of a trinket, like small metal bands intricately bent around each other, often creating broach like designs. Hank always said that they were just things he’d find on the forest floor and Ray never thought much more about it. Hank would always come back in time to leave and so Ray really had nothing to complain about.

It was a few Fridays later, that Ray became suspicious of his son’s affairs in the woods. Hank appeared through the thick underbrush of the woods with a Star of David patch pinned to his flannel. Ray asked him where he got it and Hank said he found it on the forest floor, just like everything else he brought back. The next Friday, as Hank ambled off into the woods like he did every Friday, Ray, giving a wide berth, followed his son into the thicket.

Due to Ray’s size, navigating his way through brambles wasn’t as painless as he imagined it was for Hank but he didn’t let it deter him. He could still make out the yellow lines of Hank’s flannel but the red and green lines were scarcely detectable. The moon was shining through the tree tops and lighting up Hank’s curly yellow blond hair, his head Ray’s guiding light. A light began to make itself apparent about a hundred and fifty yards from Ray, maybe a hundred yards from Hank. Ray began to close in on his son a little quicker now that he realized someone else was there. He closed in close enough to see his son moving out of the thick of the underbrush and out into an open area where a fire was roaring and tent was haphazardly pitched. Then Ray made out a figure, much larger than his son gyrating from behind the fire, hopping around in a feat of gesticulation. Ray, under the assumption the character was on the verge of harming his son, burst through the brush that he’d been onerously trudging his way through, unseen branches snapping him on the cheek and in the eye.

“Hank. Get over here now,” Ray demanded. Both Hank and the figure dancing around the fire froze in bewilderment. Ray’s face was lined with welts and scrapes from brambles and the wild branches. The dancing figure, which was now clear to Ray to be a sinewy, middle aged man with stringy hair streaming down from the top of his head into his face, stopped its movement long enough to take in Ray’s face and let out a guttural chuckle.
“What’s so damn funny then?” Ray said. Hank remained frozen in the perplexity of the situation.

“Well, the woods are supposed to be your friend. You look like you’ve been getting in fights with them,” the man said through a wide smile. Ray could feel the warmth of the fire on his jeans and it was an unwelcome comfort in what was to him a truly outlandish and aggravating situation.

“Come on, Hank. Let’s go,” Ray said.

“But dad, Mr. Kofax isn’t dangerous. Heck, he couldn’t hurt a fly,” Hank said.

The name Kofax struck Ray as familiar. Ray commanded his son to come with him once again and an acquiescent Hank led the way back toward the Meet-Up. For the next few days, the name Kofax continued to tumble through Ray’s thoughts until he couldn’t stand it any longer. He had to find out where he knew the name from. Ray went to the paper and rummaged through archives.

“Looking for anything specific? Something on your record breaking season?” the editor of the paper, Elmer Purkey, asked Ray.

“I’m looking for anything on a Kofax. Caught my boy out in the woods hangin’ out with the guy at his campsite. Hank called him Mr. Kofax. I know I know the name from somewhere but for the life of me I just don’t know where.”

“Check through the Spring of ’46. I bet you’ll find what you’re looking for,” Elmer said to Ray with a comforting air of confidence. Before Ray could thank him, Elmer was off across the room sitting on the desk of Mary Gaitskill, his new reporter. Ray started his looking in February of ’46 just to be safe but nothing came up. Onto March then April and still no luck. Then he came to something of interest. May 5, 1946: Charles Kofax, a Purple Heart veteran, gets home from the war, gets locked up for public intoxication and starts a riot in the jailhouse all in the same night. Hess County is, was and likely always will be a dry county so the town was real hard on Kofax. Ray was in high school at the time and remembered the occasion vaguely. He mostly remembered what his mom and his friends were saying about Kofax. About how he was the devil and how he was going to bring hell upon the town if he stayed. It had to be him, out there all alone in the woods. Drinking homemade mash liquor and dancing around his fire. Eating berries and squirrels he managed to trap. Ray made Hank promise him that he wouldn’t go back out into the woods to see Mr. Kofax. Hank begrudgingly promised his dad he wouldn’t go see Mr. Kofax anymore. Whether Hank had any intention of keeping true to that promise was at the time unknown even to Hank.

A few Fridays at the Meet-Up came and went and it was obvious that word had gone around about Ray’s boy’s clandestine journeys out to the deep of the woods where he’d hang out with an exiled lunatic. And even worse, an alcohol consuming exiled lunatic. Nobody in Hess County drank and if you did you weren’t someone in Hess County. And nowhere had Ray seen dancing like the dancing of Mr. Kofax that night. People danced sometimes but it was all very respectable, usually in large groups as line dances. Nothing so suggestive as Mr. Kofax had demonstrated.

“What’s he look like?” the Bishop boy asked Hank at the Meet-Up on Friday, April 27.

“No, no. Who cares about that? What’s he smell like?” Spence Martin asked.

Hank had been minding his own business, fiddling with a knick knack Mr. Kofax had given him. Mr. Kofax enjoyed having Hank visit him. Hank would just sit and listen to his stories about being in other places and some stories about killing other men. Hank never really understood the extent and weight of the stories but liked how animated Mr. Kofax would become while he told them. And how the more Mr. Kofax pulled from his clear jars, often letting the liquid from them run down his cheeks onto the tight skin of his chest, the more he danced between stories and then he’d always send Hank on his way with a keepsake. A gesture of thanks for being good company.

When word got out that Mr. Kofax was living deep in the woods, a group of gossipers, mostly mothers with imaginations running wild with extravagant and grotesque scenarios, concerned for the health and safety of their fledglings, but also a few men concerned about the safety of their wives,
spread across the woods in search of the campsite. Upon discovering it, the group leader, Beulah Bishop, raised a flabby arm to stop the progress. The gang watched cautiously and attentively from the protection of a thick bramble the scene of the campsite which was lighted by an undulating fire. Around the fire danced Mr. Kofax with a big glass mason jar splashing this way and that. Beulah Bishop had seen everything she had needed to see. She motioned for the group to head back and when they were out of earshot of the campsite informed everyone she’d be in contact with the sheriff, post haste.

“My mom said that he lost his all his toenails in the war and now the devil seeps through the ground up into his body through his toes and that’s why he dances like that,” Bobby Bishop had said to Hank at school a few days earlier.

“That’s why I always wear shoes,” Spence added.

When the gang appeared from the woods, Ray realized he hadn’t seen Hank in a while and moved about the Meet-Up searching for him and calling out his name. When it appeared that he was nowhere to be found he went to Spence and Bobby whom Ray had seen Hank talking to earlier in the night. They shrugged their shoulders and both unconsciously glanced at the woods. Ray understood the situation perfectly well and took off to the campsite where he found his son sitting on a stump, uproariously laughing at a very animated and shoeless Mr. Kofax laying on his back and waving his feet in the air.

“That’s it, Hank. And you promised you’d stay away. Let’s go. Now,” Ray said. He was furiously gesticulating, almost like Mr. Kofax had been the first time Ray had seen him.

“Come on, man. The kid just wants to have a little fun. He’s suffocating around all those stuffy windbags back there,” Mr. Kofax said. “We aren’t hurting anything. Plus he’s mighty good company.”

“If you think for one second I’m gonna let my son live like a pagan out here disrespecting himself and the laws of the county then you really have lost your mind Mr. Kofax.”

“Listen to your pa, Hank. He knows what’s best for you,” Mr. Kofax said, half sarcastically taking a pull from one of his jars.

“Now, Hank,” Ray said. He grabbed a hold of Hank’s sleeve and Hank jerked loose.

“I want to stay here, with Mr. Kofax,” Hank pleaded. “He’s the only smart person in this whole county. I hate everyone else. Mr. Kofax is the only one that’s any fun to hang out with. And he’s showing me how to dance to impress the girls,” Hank said.

“Damnit, Hank. No. It’s over. Now let’s go. And you’ll never be seeing Mr. Kofax again. It’s for your own damn good.” Hank had never heard his dad use two curse words in such close succession. Ray looked right into Mr. Kofax’s eyes and said, “You better watch your ass, Kofax.” Ray had to practically drag his son away from the campsite. “Keep on dancing, kid,” was all that Mr. Kofax said.

With Hank thrown over his shoulder, Ray appeared from the woods to the delight of a conglomeration of southern socialites looking for just this type of entertainment on a Friday night at the Meet-Up.

“That boy’s headed straight for hell,” Beulah Bishop could be heard muttering.

“He’s got his momma’s wild genes,” said someone else.

Spence and Bobby ran up behind Ray where Hank’s upper body lay limp against his father’s back.

“Is it true, Hank? About the toenails?” Bobby whispered.

Hank didn’t grasp the question immediately but after a moment of thought lifted his head from his father’s lower lumbar, cracked a smile and nodded a discreet nod. The boys went wild. When they got home, Ray gave Hank a whipping for the ages and he took it only shedding a few tears. It wasn’t often that Ray had to whip his son, but this time Hank was asking for it. He’d embarrassed Ray in front of the whole town. No longer could Ray let it slide. Hank retired to his room after a short supper of stew and cornbread and stayed there all weekend, not coming out once.
Monday morning came around and it was time for Hank to go to school. Ray had intentionally left his son alone all weekend. To let him think about his wrongdoing. But now Ray requested his son come downstairs and get ready for school. When there was no apparent stirring upstairs, Ray decided he’d go reason with his son. Explain that everything he did was in Hank’s best interest and that sometimes it was hard to deal with that reality but that was just the way it was and that Hank would understand when he was older.

Ray knocked on Hank’s door and when there was no answer, turned the knob which was locked. Ray, frustrated now and growing more frustrated by the second, began banging on the door, demanding that Hank open it. When it became apparent that maybe Hank wasn’t in the room, Ray put his shoulder through the door and it crashed open, swinging hard against the wall, the knob leaving quite an impression. On the floor of Hank’s bedroom, Ray discovered a knife, ten toenails speckled with blood and a little trail of blood leading out the window. The scene both confused and sent a horrifying shiver down Ray’s spine. He knew where his son was. He knew that if he could see his son now, he’d see shoeless feet covered with socks soaked to the ankle in blood. He would see that curly blonde mop bouncing in the clear country morning air. He would see tears streaming over soft slightly chubby cheeks past a wide smile. He would see his son, happier than he’d ever seen him, letting the devil into himself, dancing his life away with the alcohol consuming exile of Hess County.
Reverend Langston Penniman sat on the edge of his bed, stretching his black fingers. Everything had either twisted up on him or shrunk except his stomach. Once six-foot-five, he now plunged to six two, still tall, but not the imposing dignitary he once was standing behind the lectern in front of his congregation.

His parishioners aged, too. So hard nowadays to attract the young, he thought standing from the bed he shared with his wife of fifty-two years. His knees cracked. He’d gotten his cholesterol under control, but at seventy-five, his health headed south as his age pushed north.

Born and raised in Montgomery, Reverend Penniman had a hard time staying relevant, what with tattoos, body piercing, rap music, not to mention homosexuals getting married and reefer being legalized. For a man his age, changing was like pulling a mule uphill through molasses.

The smell of bacon and eggs drifted down the hall. He heard the coffeemaker gurgle. How he loved his mornings with the Montgomery Daily News—not Internet news—something he could hold in his hands, smell the ink. He even enjoyed licking his fingers to separate the pages.

Off in the direction of the Alabama River, he thought he heard a siren, not far from his church.

“Breakfast ready,” Flo shouted from the kitchen.

Flo was the sweetest gift the Lord ever bestowed upon a man. Oh, he was fortunate, he thought, passing her picture on the dresser bureau and the photo of their three boys and two girls. Proud of his church, he was even prouder of their five children. Three graduated from college, all of them respectable citizens.

“It’s gonna get cold if you don’t come and get it.”

“I’m a comin. Just let me wash up.”

The siren sounded closer.

The Alabama spring day was warmer than usual. At nine in the morning, it was headed off the charts, as the kids say nowadays.

Reverend Penniman washed and dressed. At the bureau, he brushed back the sides of his white hair, his bald crown parted like the Red Sea. When his kids teased him about looking like Uncle Ben, he grew whiskers just as white. His boys joked he looked like Uncle Ben with a beard. He chuckled. He would have preferred Morgan Freeman.

“I’ll feed it to the garbage disposal if you don’t come and get it.”

“I’m a comin now, sweet thing.”

He heard the siren turn the corner at Bankhead and Parks.

Reverend Penniman looked at the cell phone lying on his dresser. He’d yet to master how to get his thick fingers to press one picture at a time, or type on that itty bitty keyboard. He couldn’t even hold it in the crook of his neck.

He hurried down the hall. The floorboards of the fifty-year-old house creaked just like him. Not quite shotgun, his house did have a similar layout what with add-ons for the three boys.

The siren was upon them.

“Lord have mercy,” Flo said as she put the food on the table. “That sure sounds angry.”

“Sure does. Let me take a look,” the reverend said from the kitchen’s entrance.

He went to the living room window and saw a police car pull into his driveway, the siren cut-off. Two uniformed police officers, one black, the other white, got out of the cruiser and headed up his footpath.

He opened the door.

“Are you Reverend Penniman?”

“I am. What’s the problem?”

“There’s a girl up on the bell tower of your church. Says she’s gonna jump,” the black officer said.

“Good Lord!” Flo cried, standing behind her husband.

“Let me get my keys,” the reverend said.
“No time, sir. Come with us. You’ll get there faster.”

Flo took off and came back with the reverend’s cell phone. “Here baby. I’m gonna meet you there soon as I shut down the kitchen. You should at least have your toast. I can put it in a baggie for you.”

“No time,” he said as he hurried out the door with the officers.

Reverend Penniman sat in the back of the car with a screen separating him from the policemen.

“Who is she?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” the young white officer answered.

“What’s she look like?”

“Black teen, skinny, baggy pants, chain hanging from the pocket, hoodie pulled over a ball cap.”

“Akeesha.”

“You know her?”

“Like one of my own.” The reverend looked out the window as the car pulled away. He clasped his hands together and said a quick prayer for the troubled girl. Lord, help me help her, he repeated to himself. “Did she ask for me?”

“No.”

“How’d you find me?”

“Your name is on the marquee of your church.”

“Oh, right.”

“I’m Officer Johnson,” the older man said. “This is Officer Perry.”

Officer Perry reached forward and turned on the siren. The noise deafened everything, including the pounding of Reverend Penniman’s heart.

They drove toward downtown Montgomery along the banks of the Alabama, the RSA tower soared above the city’s skyline.

The speed limit was forty. The reverend guessed they were doing twice that. His right knee pumped like the needle on Flo’s sewing machine.

The siren screamed. The lights blinked and rotated flashing red and blue on the hood of the car. Reverend Penniman felt like he was up on that bell tower, on the edge, with his arms stretched out, his body holding back the weight of all his parishioners who had wept in his arms.

At the corner of Graves and Buckley, the cruiser slowed, the siren cut-off. Officer Johnson made a right turn. People rushed along the sidewalk their cell phones pressed against their ears.

Halfway down the block, Reverend Penniman saw more people standing outside his church than he ever had inside. A fire truck parked in the lot with men unloading a ladder.

The police car jumped the curb and drove to the side of the brick building. He saw Greaty, Akeesha’s great-grandmother in her burgundy wig, mussed like a tornado whirled through it. She cupped her black hands on the sides of her mouth screaming and crying at the roof. Her pink housecoat hung open revealing her cotton nightie.

Before the car came to a stop, the minister jumped out.

Greaty saw Reverend Penniman and ran to him. “You get my baby off the roof, you hear, Reverend? She done gone and have a meltdown.”

“We’ll get her down. Just craving attention like all teenagers.”

“She cravin’ nothin’ but death. She gonna jump. She all I have!”

He ran to the front of the church. Greaty followed. The reverend gasped. “Good Lord.” Akeesha teetered on the edge of the bell’s shelter. Her baggy pants flapped in the breeze.

Two firefighters carried a ladder to the roof. They propped it against the gutters.

“Get away,” Akeesha screamed. “I’ll jump, you try to get me.” Her voice carried over the mob.

“I know the child. I can get her down.”

“Don’t think so, Reverend.”

The minister turned to see Officer Johnson standing beside him. “Then why’d you get me?”
“It’s your church. I thought you’d be younger.”
“I’m young enough and I’ll get her down.” He gazed up at the girl. “Akeesha!” he shouted using his pulpit voice. “I’m coming to you, child.” He sprinted around the side of the church, to the back, amazed at how his body complied with his will. Officer Johnson’s leather holster crunched with each matching stride.

Akeesha had broken the frame of the door and busted in.
“If I have to cuff you Reverend, I will,” Officer Johnson said.
“You really want to save this child?” Reverend Penniman asked. “I’ve known her since she was four. I’m the only father she’s ever known. Now you let me do my business.”
He pushed open the door when he heard car wheels on gravel.
“Langston,” Flo yelled out the window. “Where do think you’re going?” She slammed the driver’s door.
“Good Lord, woman, I don’t need you pestering me too.”
Flo ran up to her husband. “Officer, you arrest this man if he so much—.”
“You gotta save her . . . she my baby—she all I have!” Greaty screamed coming around the corner.
“Calm down,” Reverend Penniman said.
Greaty wiped her face with the sleeve of her house coat. “She never been so upset. She so angry. Them girls who beat her up. Them punks who tried to rape her.”

The reverend looked at Officer Johnson. “Get all those people away from the front of my church. And tell those firemen to take down the ladder.”
“I’m the one in charge here, Reverend.”
“How about we get Captain Martinez?” Officer Perry asked. “They can secure the reverend with a rope and harness.” Before his superior had a chance to argue, young Perry ran off.
“Thank you,” Reverend Penniman shouted.
“She a good girl except for her sin,” Greaty sobbed.
Flo put her arm around Akeesha’s great-grandmother.
“Flo, take her to the car,” Reverend Penniman said. “I’ll be okay.”
“Keep him safe, Officer. Don’t let him do anything foolish,” Flo said as she led Greaty away.
Reverend Penniman heard the whirling blades of a helicopter. “Good Lord. A child’s life is at stake and this is turning into a circus,” he said entering the back of his church.
“How’d she get up to the bell tower?” Officer Johnson asked.
“There’s a room with pulleys. A stairway curls around leading up to the bells.” Reverend Penniman could kick himself for letting Jake show Akeesha the inside of the tower.
Officer Johnson shot up the stairs.
“Wait! You can’t go that way. You’d come out behind her. I swear, man. You let me handle this my way or that girl is going to die.”
Officer Johnson turned on the landing. The reverend had him in an eye-lock. “Please,” he said, not used to the sound of the word or the helpless feeling that it carried.
“Why is she up there?” the policeman asked.
“She’s a homosexual.”
“My brother’s gay,” Officer Johnson said.
The minister watched how the cop’s eyes captured a memory, something powerful enough to soften his features.
Reverend Penniman climbed the fourteen steps to the landing. He’d always been proud of his bell tower, right now he’d wished his ancestors never built it.
Officer Perry returned with Captain Martinez and a boyish looking black man. Both men held gear as they took the steps in three strides.
“Well Johnson, your call,” the captain said.
“We’ll feed Reverend Penniman below her, on the roof.”
“Thank you.”
The reverend led the men around a corner to a loft with stairs to the church roof.
“Got your Nikes on, I see,” Martinez said. “Good.”
“Now put that contraption on me and let me out there.”
The firefighters held the harness for the reverend to step into. They hooked the cloth rope to the
straps, gave it a tug jolting the reverend backwards, then tossed the rope to another man who waited
below. “Side-step going down the incline. It’s not steep, but we got you no matter what.”
“Get rid of the ladder and the lookyloos. And stay well below. I don’t want her knowing you’re
around.”
“We’ll be down on the first landing,” Captain Martinez said.
“I’ve had enough talk, gentlemen.”
Reverend Penniman took the steps to the roof praying as he went, for Akeesha, for Greaty, but
most of all for himself. That he’d say the right thing, be sincere, because Akeesha had the gift of
honesty. He prayed, asking the Holy Spirit to fill him with wisdom.
The door to the roof was ajar. He gently touched it. He felt the rope tug the harness. The door
swung open.
The roof slanted and leveled out several feet down. The area around the tower was flat.
He smelled the fumes from the asphalt as he stepped sideways onto the shingles, planted himself
and managed the incline. He took his time placing his right foot, then his left, and held for a
moment. He did it again until the roof flattened out.
Applause and shouts broke out. “Get back!” Officer Johnson shouted. “Everyone!”
The reverend glanced at the Alabama River. The spectacular Montgomery skyline like a
masterpiece God painted. Then he looked below. He saw the van of a local TV station, the helicopter
off in the distance; the crowd herded across the street by young Perry, and so many cell phones held
up to the bell tower it looked like Beyonce held court.
He heard sniffles, then crying.
“Akeesha. I’m here to talk, child.”
“Won’t do no good.”
“Well, I didn’t climb all the way up here thinking it wouldn’t do no good. You and I have a way
together, now don’t we?”
“Prayin’ don’t work. I’m still gay.”
“No reason taking your life.” He thought back to the convention when one minister said, let the
gays kill themselves. We need to protect our children. Only problem with that was all the molesting
he knew came from men with little girls. He left those conferences feeling tired and old, the same
men year after year with their stale jokes and self-righteous rhetoric. He felt trapped by the old ways
and frightened by the new.
“Everyone knows. It’s on Facebook.” Akeesha whimpered.” My girlfriend broke with me.”
Reverend Penniman made his way around the side of the bell tower feeling the tug of the harness.
He looked up at the teenager.
Her hoodie covered all but the bill of her ball cap. She wiped her tears with the black leather band
she wore on her wrist. “I wanna die.” She inched forward to the lip of the shelter. Her hand left the
arch.
“No!” Reverend Penniman yelled his arms stretched out as if he could catch her.
The crowd oohed.
He moved slowly around the tower until his back was to the mob. “Sit on the ledge baby.”
“I’m goin to hell when I die. Bible says so.” Her voice quivered. “Greaty found out. Said I’d bring
shame on her house—more than my mama in jail. Said a woman’s body parts were made for a man to make babies.” Her voice trailed off.

“Greaty loves you, child. She’s running around screaming and bossing, telling us to get her baby off the tower. You hear me, child?” He watched horrified as she balanced herself on the rim of the tower. A slip and she would die.

“They callin me a freak.”

“Sit down now. We need to talk.”

“Jump faggot!” someone hollered across the street.

Reverend Penniman looked back at the crowd. Officer Johnson grabbed the man. Perry hauled him away.

“They all stupid.” Akeesha sobbed.

“We can work this out.”

“Don’t dish with me, Reverend. Talkin’s no good,” she shouted.

He lifted his head up to see her lip quivering. “Can be,” he said.

“I’m goin to hell. Might as well get it over with.”

“Now, don’t talk like that.” He thought of all those times they knelt together holding hands. Their eyes shut tight, the way Akeesha repeated his words to rid herself of the sin of homosexuality. When they were through, her face was wet with tears. He’d never forget how she’d wipe her fingers several times across her jeans like she’d been holding hands with a leper. He knew then she’d yet to be cured.

He talked to his daughter about it. Rose told him the gay people she knew said they were born that way. She told him his generation treated the Bible like a deli, picking and choosing what to live by, who to hate and the nonsense of fearing God. His conversations with his middle child made him reflect. That’s all it did. He loved his children equally, but Rose had the gift of benevolence.

“Akeesha.”

“What?”

“You jump, I’ll try to catch you. Then I’ll die trying to save you. You know that’d make Flo mighty mad, child.” He took a careful step back to get a look at her face. She gazed out at the Montgomery horizon. Her calm scared him.

He remembered the first time Greaty brought her to church. She was four, always carrying her dump truck and running it along the pews. During the sermon, she’d nestle into Greaty’s bosom, thumb in her mouth. Her short hair braided. When she got older, she sang in the choir. For extra money she gardened around the church. He’d take her to McDonald’s afterwards. They talked. She was a good girl—even if she did look like a gang banger—thoughtful and quiet, never swore, didn’t do drugs. But she suffered at school. It showed in her grades, and she finally dropped out. He was the only man in her short life, and she clung to him like a daddy. Her great grandmother looked after her like a one-eyed cat watching two rat holes. She ain’t goin to end up in jail like her mama, or dead like her granny. She gonna be respectful, yes, indeed, she gonna be a fine woman when she grow up.

“Akeesha,” he said with a stern voice. “You want to give Greaty a heart attack? I told you how worked up she is.”

“She always worked up.”

“She loves you.”

“Quit lyin!” She spread her arms out.

“I’m not lying. You’ve seen her below. Running around. Now you hold onto that post.” The noon light threw no shadows. The wind rippled his shirt. He felt the sun beating down on his bald spot.

“God loves you.”

“Then how come we pray to change me?”

“Cause you wanted to be like other girls. Remember? I’m not a psychiatrist. Praying is all I know.”
Reverend Penniman took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. In the 1980s, he buried a young man who died of AIDS. He’d never forget how his boyfriend threw himself on top of the casket crying and shouting the dead boy’s name. He never thought homosexuals had feelings until he witnessed that young man’s grief.

“We prayed to make your life easier. So you’d be happy.”

“Didn’t work. My life be easier if people left me alone.”

“You’re probably right, child.” The reverend wiped his mouth with the handkerchief and put it in his pocket. Even if his heart struggled with what he was going to say, perhaps he could save her.

“Maybe God made you perfect the way you are,” he said, thinking of Rose.

“You lyin so I don’t kill myself.”

“No child. I’m saying it cause God has a reason for you being here.” He heard sniffles. Then he saw her skinny hand swipe across her face. “Oh baby, come down and let’s have a good cry together.”

He watched for any movement from her feet.

“Quite a view up here,” he said, trying to sound casual. “We live in a beautiful city. Don’t you think?”

“I wanna go to California.”

“Now, why would you want to do that? What about Greaty?”

“What about her?”

“Girl, I’m getting a crick in my neck looking up at you. I haven’t eaten today. At my age, I’m on a schedule, and I get awfully tired if I’m hungry. We can talk better down here. Sit behind the tower. Alone. I want to talk to you like a grown-up.”

“I am grown up.” She shifted and pulled the hoodie off her head so it fell around her neck.

“Jalissa broke with me. Who gonna love me?”

“You not being honest.” She tugged the hoodie back up. “You wanna boy to love me. I don’t wanna boy.”

“Darlin baby, I admit I don’t know much about such things. All I know is that I love you, and that love is greater than any judgment I cast upon you.” He hesitated, and thought about the words that flowed out of him so effortlessly. It sounded like something coming from Rose’s lips, not his.

He looked up. “Akeesha!” Where’d she go? He held onto the tower. He circled it fearing she jumped from the other side. “Akeesha!” he cried. He didn’t dare to take that part of the roof. The slant angled too steep. He felt weak, a little dizzy but his adrenalin rushed. He went back the way he came, the harness tugging. Sweat poured into his eyes.

The door to the roof creaked open.

“What you wearing Reverend?” Akeesha stood in the archway.

“Lord have mercy, child!” His heart felt like a bowl of confetti. Instead of fearing the worst, she had climbed inside the tower and took the stairs to the roof. “You could have answered me when I called. You done scared the daylights out of me, child.”

“What you mean, your love greater than your judgment?” Akeesha asked.

“Oh, oh, my darlin baby—we should enjoy this magnificent view of our city and thank the good Lord for the beautiful child that you are.”

“I’m not beautiful.”

“In God’s eyes and mine you are.”

“You lyin’.”

“I swear on my sweet Flo’s life.”

“Then why we waste all that time prayin when I’m already okay?”

He caught a glint of the stud that she wore in the center of her tongue.
“You not as smart as you think, Reverend.”
Reverend Penniman let out a hearty laugh. “Well, I’ll tell you a secret, Akeesha, I don’t have all the answers. Sometimes I have to make it seem like I do or no one would come to my church.”
“They won’t come anyway, lyin and all.”
He thought about what Rose said, how the young have turned away from religion. “You know my daughter, Rose? She’d agree with you. You know she’s studied in India. Traveled the world. Says God is always expanding—not sure what that means.” He walked slowly toward the girl. “You know something, Akeesha?”
“What, Reverend?”
“You taught me something.” His voice fractured. “You taught me, child. And I’m truly grateful.”
“Taught you what?”
“Can we sit here, for a minute? I’m really tired.” He slid down the wall. The harness grabbed at his thighs as he sat.
Akeesha walked like she’d been on the roof a hundred times, maybe she had, he thought. She sat next to him.
“You taught me to accept you.” He slowly pulled the hoodie down so he could see her face. “I’ve always thought of you as one of my own. Flo, too.”
Akeesha took his gnarled old hand. She spread each of his fingers to include hers. He felt love in her fingertips.
The confetti in his heart flung out over his beloved Montgomery. It showered like a vital rain. “I think there’s only love in God’s house,” the reverend mused. “So much of life is good.”
“Can we go to KFC?”
Reverend Penniman smiled. “Not McDonald’s? We always go to McDonald’s.”
“No. KFC.”
“Sure enough. My treat,” he said. “I could take you to a fancy place where we sit at a table with a white cloth and linen napkins. We can order ribs. They have finger bowls with water so our hands don’t get all sticky. Eat as much as we want.”
“No. KFC,” she said, standing and holding her hand out for the reverend to grasp.
Nora packed her suitcase so tight she needed all her strength to snap it shut. The wheels had long fallen off from the weight of too many other fast-get-a-ways. She tied a rope to the handle, dragged it down the three steps from her boyfriend Guy’s rental bungalow, and sat on the bottom step waiting for the cab that would take her from Jenkintown Pa. to the Greyhound bus station in Trenton, NJ.

A month before she had decided to leave Guy for good. Meanwhile the motor went on her old car, and she lost her job. While Guy was at work, she went through all her boxes lined up on the shelf under the eaves, carefully selecting what she wanted to take with her, marking, and repacking them. It turned out there was more she wanted to keep than leave behind. She felt certain what was left would be trashed as soon as she was gone. He would not forgive her this time for leaving. He had told her so many times.

It was the third time she and Guy had tried to resurrect their union. As always she realized once again how incompatible they were, as the battles ensued following the short honeymoon stage of their make-up. It was undeniable the raw attraction between them was still there, but it was living day to day with his preference for living the isolated life, his dislike of humans in general, and the daily routine of repeating the same motions day after day.

While it was restful for a period of time, she soon grew bored. Her desire was to experience as much of life as she could. His desire was to live in a cocoon. She imagined herself one day dying an old woman cooped up in their stifling space, with the sky view ceiling mocking her as if she could escape through the clouds. The bungalow stood on a hill, on a piece of land separated from all other homes and humans. Guy would likely bury her in a pine box on the land. Who would know?

***

Nora had no family. Her parents deserted her when she was young. She was raised by an ailing aunt who died and was buried in a pauper’s field when Nora was fifteen. For a few months, she became a ward of the city, and spent time in a girl’s home. When she turned sixteen, she ran away, living on the streets for a time, until she found a job waitressing at an Irish family owned restaurant in the Olney section of Philadelphia. She lived in a rooming house on Broad Street, sharing bathroom and kitchen privileges.

At seventeen, she impulsively married a sailor she met while he was on leave. Two weeks later he shipped out on duty to Germany. At first he wrote to her, but the letters stopped suddenly. A few months later he sent her a final letter explaining that he met and fell in love with a German girl, and hoped she would grant him a divorce. In a way, it was a relief for her. She had only sought marriage for stability.

Eventually she moved to Abington, PA to work at a high class popular restaurant. She could finally afford an apartment. The restaurant was where she met Guy in the parking lot one night. Her battery was dead from leaving her parking lights on, and he stopped to give her battery a jumpstart with his cables. After her car started, they drove in separate cars to a diner for a cup of coffee, and left her car running to be sure it was charged. They were strongly attracted from the beginning. He was a great story teller, and loved to mimic people. Soon she was spending more time at his place than her own.

In the beginning she liked that Guy had no friends, and that he paid no attention to the large constantly warring family he was born to and kept at bay. She liked that his world revolved around her. No one had made her the center of anything in her life. A few months later at Guy’s request, she moved in with him.

***
Nora made it to the bus stop with only eight minutes to spare. It took two men to help her load her suitcase in the storage section of the bus. She sought warmth and was headed to a beach in Florida. Any Florida beach would do. She felt certain she would know the place where she was meant to be when she saw it through the bus window as she traveled.

People got on and off at various designations. One woman got on at South of the Border in Dillon, South Carolina. When she settled in the seat next to Nora, she pleasantly asked Nora where she was heading.

“It looks like I’m heading to nowhere,” Nora responded, turning to gaze out the window.

The woman buried her face into a Danielle Steel novel, and never said another word for over 335 miles, until the bus stopped in Jacksonville, Florida.

Nora welcomed the silence. She wanted to be a blank slate, with no past, no future, and no explanation to anyone. Life would deliver her to where she needed to be, and she could begin from there.

As the woman got up to leave at her stop, she patted Nora’s shoulder, pulled out of her lunch bag a ripe Bosc pear and handed it to her, saying, “Good luck. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Nora welcomed the luscious pear, biting into it, letting the juice drip down her chin nesting in the creases of her flowery peasant blouse, and pair of faded blue jeans. Other than a cup of coffee and a donut she bought at a bus stop along the way, it was all she had eaten. She had saved fifteen hundred dollars to begin her new life, and every penny of it would be needed for rent, furnishings, and food while she searched for a job.

After the next stop, she fell into a deep sleep as she rode along, dreaming of being on a beach. She was building a sandcastle with giggling children surrounding her, as they scooped shovels of sand into beach buckets. The sun shone on the water like movable glittering diamonds. She reached out as if to grab one, and was woken up by a jolt from a bumpy curb as the bus driver entered a lot. Looking out her window, she saw she was at a bus stop, and turned to ask the man seated behind her.

“Where are we?”

“In Daytona Beach, we’re here for fifteen minutes if you want to get out and stretch your legs.”

Nora grabbed her purse, headed out to find a bathroom, and grab something to eat. Across the street was a colorfully painted eatery with a sign bearing the name, Sam’s Bistro. The aroma of French fries, and burgers drifted toward her whetting her appetite. She ordered a cheeseburger and coke and ran to the bathroom. As she headed back to the counter, she saw a sign posted, “Waitress needed.”

She pointed, “Is the position still open?”

“Let me ask the owner.”

A tall middle-aged man walked over and greeted her. “Hi, I’m Sam Turner. Are you looking for a waitress job?”

Nora introduced herself and explained, “I just arrived from Jenkintown, PA off that Greyhound Bus across the street. I have a lot of experience working as a waitress on and off for the last ten years. I’m a terrific worker. If there’s a job available, I’ll take it. I can begin tomorrow. I’ll need to know right now, as I have to get my luggage off the bus in the next five minutes and find a cheap motel room to stay at until I find an apartment.”

Sam Turner looked her up and down. He liked her directness, and was used to relying on his intuition.

“I do need someone right away. I can put you to work tomorrow from 10:00am to 3:00pm if you’re available. After tomorrow we can figure out days and hours for the next couple weeks. We pay $7.50 an hour for three to four days a week. Is that ok with you? I’ll see how you work out over a
month period, and if all works out, I can extend your hours.”
   “Yes, that’s fine. I’ll try to find a room close by.”
   They shook hands and she ran across the street to get her luggage off the bus.
   It’s a sign, she thought.  
   The bus driver struggled to get her suitcase out, and climbed back into the bus to take off.
   Nora stood there helpless knowing she would not be able to pick the suitcase up without help.
She had no idea how she would be able to drag the suitcase from motel to motel, looking for a room.
   Sam Turner stood watching her through his front window.
   As Nora tried pulling the suitcase with the rope, it suddenly burst open spilling much of the
   contents on the sidewalk. People stopped to help her pick things up but there was no way she could
   pack them back into the split suitcase.
   Mr. Turner was suddenly standing beside her. He instructed her to wait there while he went to
   get his car.
   Nora’s face was bright red. All she could do was nod.
   In just a couple minutes he was back and helping her pick up the odd collected things from
   her life, her papers, photos, clothes, shoes, and underwear, including the small porcelain piece that
   broke in half when it hit the pavement.
   “It’s an even break. It can be fixed,” he said, and carefully placed all of her things in the trunk
   of his shiny re-modeled 1996 champagne colored Lincoln Town car, and shut the lid.
   Nora could not stop blushing, but Sam Turner put her at ease.
   “I think there is a very small apartment rental on ocean side just over the bridge, if you would
   like to take a look. Our busboy lived there, and he said it wasn’t bad.”
   In her head, Nora was thanking her guardian angel for looking out for her by sending her Sam
   Turner.
   By late afternoon, she had secured the studio walk-up nestled in a dilapidated old house.
   Another renter lived downstairs. Her apartment had a tiny kitchenette, a broom closet bathroom
   with stained ancient claw-footed tub, a miniscule pantry, an enclave mock closet for her clothes, and
   a small front living room/bedroom with three large bay windows, and painted bluish-gray wood
   plank floors. The best thing about the apartment was the entry deck at the top of the landing, off
   from the kitchen. The rental was $450 a month, plus utilities and $25 a month toward a $450
   escrow. Nora paid cash.
   Sam helped her get her things upstairs, and after thanking him again, he left. She worked at
   cleaning up the place as best she could with old supplies left by the previous renter.
   An hour later, Sam returned with two sandwiches and a beer. He handed them to her, and
   said, “See you tomorrow. I’m sending Larry, our busboy, to pick you up in the morning. After work, I
   can help you find some furnishings. There are quite a lot of used furniture stores in town. My wife
   has a decent single bed in the attic, and I think my nephew has an old bike he can give you to help
   you get around.”
   She was overwhelmed with his generosity. She promised him she would never forget his
   kindness and that she would be the best waitress he ever hired.
   After he left, as night fell, she stood on the back deck, watching the uneven rows of hotel lights
   blinking, hearing the sound of firecrackers from a beach celebration along with band music, and
   seeing the boardwalk rides light up and spin on the pier.
   She made a bed of her sweater coat, folded a pile of nightgowns for her pillow, lay on the
   covered floor, and gazed out the windows at the stars. The busy street below was noisy with cars and
   people coming and going until the late hours. After months of silence, the sounds of life felt soothing
   to her.
   From what Sam told her, this was their busy season. The hotels, beach, the Halifax River
boats, bars, restaurants, shops and clubs surrounding were teeming with people. As she drifted off to sleep from the angle she was in, the reflection of a gold lit church cross on the corner appeared through her window.

“Yes, it’s a sign,” she whispered, and closed her eyes.

***

The next few days were extremely busy. Nora worked through five days in a row at Sam’s Bistro. After work, Sam or Charlie, the busboy, would drive her around in Sam’s pick-up truck to second hand shops to furnish her place. She picked up a set of dishes, silverware, and linens in one shop, and some pots and pans in another. She found a tiny kitchen table set, a mirrored bureau badly needing painting, and a wood bench with pillows. By pay day, she shopped for groceries at Walmart, and had enough of her pay left over for some potted plants for the deck. She still needed a lamp, a couple throw rugs, a rocking chair for the deck, and some sheer white curtains for the windows. Luckily she was situated high enough above the building across the street, so no one could see in as she slept or dressed.

Sam’s nephew gave her his old bike. It was practically an antique, and the chain had a habit of slipping off, but it was enough to get her back and forth over the bridge each day of work.

In the early work mornings, she rode her bike to the beach to watch the sunrise, stopping at McDonald’s for an Egg McMuffin meal. In the evenings she watched the nightlights of Daytona Beach from her back deck. The whole town was a beach goer paradise by day and an ongoing carnival at night.

On her days off, she rode up and down the sandy beach, and grew tan as a native. Her slim figure and honey colored long hair flying as she pedaled around town became a common sight.

People stopped to talk to her as if they knew her, and looked out for her when she walked or rode on her bike at night. It seemed to her that the inhabitants of Daytona Beach had wrapped their arms around her.

***

Down the road from Sam’s Bistro’s was a small Italian bakery. Every late Wednesday afternoon, Nora would drop by the bakery, peering into the glass case of delicacies like a child in a candy shop, always selecting something new.

For Pasquale, the owner’s nephew, Wednesday afternoon was his favorite time in the shop. After four o’clock he would wait near the door watching the young woman bike up to the entrance, lock her bike to the post, and step in like a touch of sunshine with her long hair flowing behind her. Being shy, he would quick run behind the counter to observe her from the kitchen entry, standing there admiring her while dusting off flour from his white apron, always wondering what she would choose from the case.

Pasquale was in Daytona on a visa working at his Aunt’s bakery after classes at the university and on weekends baking. He was brushing up his English, and earning his Bachelor’s degree on a student exchange program, but he really wanted to go to school to be a Master pastry chef once he returned to Italy. He slept in a spare room at the back of the shop, and his Aunt provided occasional meals.

***

Aunt Sophia usually waited on the customers in the bakery, but this day, she was on an
errand, and left Pasquale in charge.

Nora was aware of him though she didn’t know his name. She thought he was very handsome with his blonde curly hair and dark eyes, but he was at least a few years younger than her, so she paid him no mind.

This day he confided to her he was testing a new recipe. He asked if she wouldn’t mind tasting a slice of his ricotta with cream cheese and blueberries pie, at no cost to her.

Nora’s eyes lit up, and she readily agreed. They shook hands and introduced each other. She told him, “I work at Sam’s Bistro up the street.”

Pasquale said, “Yes I’ve seen you there. I just started going there for take-out.”

“Oh, I haven’t seen you. The place is always packed, and I don’t handle the register. Next time wave me over. I’ll prepare a special sandwich for you.”

Pasquale poured a cup of coffee for each of them, and they sat at a small square table, while he quietly watched her enjoying each morsel of a generous slice of the pie. He reached over to tentatively push away a tendril of her hair hovering near her mouth. She was startled but did not seem to mind.

“Oh my. Thank you. That was delicious,” she exclaimed, swallowing the last bite. “I would love to buy a slice to take home if I may.”

Hoping for more time with Nora, he was about to engage her in conversation when Aunt Sophia walked in, shooting daggers with her eyes at her nephew sitting with a customer.

Nora paid for the second piece of pie and left. Pasquale slipped the cost of the first piece of pie in the cash drawer while his Aunt unpacked her purchases. Before she had a chance to berate him, he explained the young lady bought two pieces of pie, one she ate there, one for home, and had asked him about the recipe. That appeased her. She actually crookedly smiled. It was a rare occurrence. Aunt Sophia was born with a permanent scowl on her face.

“Bake some more of those pies to refrigerate for next week, and up the price a dollar,” she commanded.

***

The following Wednesday, Pasquale again stood near the door, but Nora did not arrive. For the rest of the day, he worried where she might be?

Another week went by, and Nora did not come by again. After work, Pasquale stopped in at Sam’s Bistro and inquired about her.

Charley said, “Hi Pasquale, Nora’s home. She’s sick with pneumonia. We’re hoping she gets better soon.”

“Do you have her address so I can stop by to see if she needs any help?”

“Didn’t know you knew her, Pasquale.”

“Oh yes, we’re friends. She comes to my Aunt’s bakery a lot.”

The following day Pasquale made three ricotta pies using the same recipe, and hid one from his aunt. After work, he drove the bakery truck over to Nora’s place, with the boxed pie tucked under the seat belt next to him.

He climbed up the deck steps wondering what he would say, and hoping she wouldn’t be offended.

Nora heard the knock on the door, but she was disheveled and feverish still, so reluctant to answer. After several knocks, she wrapped her blanket around her and padded barefoot to the back door.

Looking through the door window she was surprised to see Pasquale smiling back at her, and opened the door.
He was thinking, how was it possible she could be so lovely while sick? Her tousled appearance with her pink cheeks revealed a sweet vulnerability.

“I’m not sure you should be coming in, she said. I don’t want you to get sick as well.”

“It’s ok. I’m as healthy as a horse. I just wanted to check to see if you’re alright, and if you need anything. I bought a pie for you to eat. I baked too many and didn’t want it to go to waste.”

How could she resist him or the pie? She ushered him in.

She put on a kettle of tea, and the two of them sat drinking tea, eating pie, and talking for the next couple hours. He was charming and very funny, with a soulful side to him making him seem older than his age. She forgot the difference in their ages.

After Pasquale left, Nora began to feel better. Her appetite was returning, so she made a pot of chicken and pastini soup later that night.

Over the next couple days as Nora mended, Pasquale showed up with more pastries, a box of chocolates, and red roses. They spent hours talking, and each day she grew stronger. By the following week, she was back to work, much to Sam and the crew’s relief.

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Over the next few months, Pasquale and Nora continued to see each other in spite of Aunt Sophia’s objections to her nephew for dating an American rather than an Italian girl, and worse, she had no family. Still they were falling in love, and nothing could dampen their happiness.

Nora and Pasquale rose each morning to head to the beach to watch the sunrise, and fell into sleep each night wrapped in each other’s arms.

As Pasquale baked cakes and pies in her tiny kitchen, Nora took up painting beach scenes, her watercolors purchased by tourists passing through wanting to take a bit of Daytona Beach home with them.

Pasquale’s Visa was due to end in June of the following year. On Christmas Eve he gave Nora an engagement ring that his grandmother had given him for his intended, and asked for her hand in marriage. He hoped that she would agree to move to Italy with him. Nora said yes with no reservations. As June rolled around, and Pasquale graduated college, Nora carefully wrapped and packed her personal things that she had acquired over the years, and mailed three boxes full, as well as some of her paintings to Pasquale’s family villa in Italy. Just before leaving Florida, Nora found a handmade lace wedding dress with matching veil in a dress shop in Orlando Beach, Fl, and packed it in her suitcase. On their arrival in Italy, they were greeted by Pasquale’s adorable parents, Pasquale Sr. and Lucia, who immediately adopted Nora as their own. An invitation for the wedding was sent to Sam Turner and his wife, which they happily accepted. It would be their first trip overseas, so they would be making a vacation of it while they stayed at Pasquale’s parent’s quarters. In October of 2010, Pasquale and Nora were married in the medieval town of Cefalù, in the province of Palermo, Italy. Pasquale was twenty-three, and Nora was thirty years old. They settled in Pasquale’s family villa overlooking the sea. It was coincidently named by Pasquale’s great-great grandfather on his mother’s side, “Per Mezza del Nulla,” (The Middle of Nowhere), so named because when Roberto arrived with his family to build his home there, ancient buildings were reduced to rubble, and he was cut off from the main road, making the rocky terrain difficult to maneuver building materials, concrete, and supplies in. People would ask Roberto, “Where do you live?”

“Over there,” he would gesture toward the cliffs, “per mezza del nulla.”
Sharon Arthur has a B.S. degree in therapeutic recreation and a B.F.A. degree in painting and printmaking. She had a successful 20-year career as an artist and a painter in oils on canvas, with a commercial fine art gallery in Duck, North Carolina. She was a caregiver for her elderly parents for 10 years until their passing. In 2019 she independently published a poetry book, “The Wind Softly Murmurs Poems of Family Love and Loss.” In October of 2019 two of the poems from this book, "The Brow" and "The Begotten" have been chosen for publication by Transcendent Zero Press for the fall issue of their literary magazine, Harbinger Asylum.

Jerrice J. Baptiste has been writing since the age of six, and has eight books published. Most recently, her writing has appeared in Kosmos Journal; African Diaspora Earthcare Coalition; Spadina Literary Review; Autism Parenting Magazine and many others.

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-Grabowsky, and she is a past winner of the William G. Doody Memorial Prize for Poetry.


DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story and flash fiction writer with over 175 stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: 34th Parallel, So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, Lunch Ticket, Raven Chronicles, Silver Pen, Front Porch Review, and many others. DC was nominated for Best of the Net Anthology. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals. dcdiamondopolous.com

Richard Dinges has an MA in literary studies from University of Iowa, and manage information systems risk at an insurance company. North Dakota Quarterly, Old Red Kimono, Writer's Bloc, Neologism, and Ship of Fools most recently accepted my poems for their publications.


Ruslan Garrey is a Russian-born poet, now based in Speicher, Germany. He previously founded the North Fork Oklahoma Writers and his work has appeared in The Nude Bruce Review, Former People, and Better Than Starbucks.
**Writers’ Bios**

**Sharon Frame Gay** grew up a child of the highway, playing by the side of the road. Her work has appeared in many anthologies and magazines, including *Chicken Soup For The Soul*, *Typehouse, Owl Hollow Press, Fiction on the Web, Literally Stories, Lowestoft Chronicle, Thrice Fiction, Saddlebag Dispatches, Crannog*, and others. She was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize.


**Jim Hanson** has a doctorate degree in sociology and is a lay-ordinated Zen Buddhist. He lives in the St. Louis area and in past years has published two books through Greenwood Publishing Group and more than twenty articles in the social sciences. He is a member of the St. Louis Poetry Center, participating in workshops and reading at Poetry at the Pointe. Recent poetry has been published or posted in *Dissident Voice, I am not a silent poet, International Journal of Fear Studies, Nebo, New Verse News, Otolith, Poetry24, Sacred Journey, Writers Resist.*

**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.

**David Lewitzky** is a 79 year old former social worker/family therapist living in Buffalo, New York. In 2002 He resumed writing poetry after a 35 year hiatus. During that time he carried a sandwich board in his head declaring him: "Poet. Not writing!” He has published about 100 poems in a variety of journals such as *Nimrod, Passages North, Red Rock Review.*


**Anne Ward-Masterson** has been writing poetry on and off for about 40 years. She grew up in NH and went to school just outside of Boston, MA. She earned her MLIS at Simmons, married into the USAF and saw a bigger world than New England. For now she resides in Alaska with her family.

**Bruce McRae**, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with over 1,400 poems published internationally in magazines such as Poetry, Rattle and the North American Review. His books are ‘The So-Called Sonnets (Silenced Press); ‘An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy; (Cawing Crow Press) and ‘Like As If’ (Pski’s Porch), Hearsay (The Poet’s Haven).

**Jake Morrill** is a minister and therapist in East Tennessee. He holds degrees from the Iowa Writers Workshop and Harvard Divinity School, and he is a recipient of the post-graduate Michener-Copernicus Fellowship from the Iowa Writers Workshop. His 2011 novella, *Randy Bradley*, was published by *Solid Objects (New York).*
Writers’ Bios

George Payne was born and raised in the Adirondack region of upstate New York, George Cassidy Payne is interested in the intersection of poetry, social justice, representations of spirituality, and concepts of self. He is a part-time professor of philosophy at the State University of New York (SUNY) and teaches workshops focusing on writing and philosophy. He holds master’s degrees in philosophical theology from Emory University and Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous journals, including Barnstorm Journal, Chronogram Magazine, Adelaide, the Adirondack Almanac, Tea House, The Mindful Word, Ink, Sweat, and Tears, the Scarlet Leaf Review, The Writing Disorder, Califragile, Zingara Poetry Review, Deep South Magazine, Allegro Poetry Review, and several others. His debut full-length collection, A Time Before Teachers, was released in 2019 from Cholla Needles Literary Press in Joshua Tree, CA.

Simon Perchik’s poetry has also appeared in Partisan Review, The Nation, The New Yorker and elsewhere.

Timothy Pilgrim, a Pacific Northwest poet, has several hundred acceptances from journals like Seattle Review, Third Wednesday, Windsor Review and Hobart. He is author of Mapping Water (Flying Trout Press, 2016).

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.

Jeanne Shannon’s work, including fiction and memoir as well as poetry, has appeared in numerous small-press and university publications. Among her recent books and chapbooks are At the Horizon Line and In a Rose Wood Wandering. Her poetry collection Summoning won the 2016 New Mexico Book Award, and her novella, The Sourwood Tree, won a 2018 New Mexico Book Award for fiction. A native of Virginia, she lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Nick Skoda is a writer of short fiction, currently working towards his MFA at Spalding University. He writes for the weekly newspaper The Lincoln County Journal in the St. Louis Metropolitan area. He lives in St. Charles, Mo, along the great Missouri River.

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore City where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, acts as the Archivist-at-large for a Jesuit college, and is the Official poet-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub and Restaurant. He’s the author of The Stars Undone (Duende Press). His poems have appeared in River Poet’s Journal, Southern Review, Black Warrior Review, Pembroke, Adelaide, Vanderbilt Poetry Review, and Dead Mule.

Adrianna Zapata is a Creative Writing major studying at Salem State University, she will be graduating spring of 2019.

Artist

Max Liebermann, 1847–1935, born in Berlin, Germany was a German painter and printmaker of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, and one of the leading proponents of Impressionism in Germany. In 1899 Liebermann founded the Berliner Sezession, a group of artists who supported the academically unpopular styles of Impressionism and Art Nouveau. Despite his association with the antiestablishment Sezession, he became a member of the Berlin Academy, and in 1920 he was elected its president. In 1932 the Nazis forced him to resign from his position.