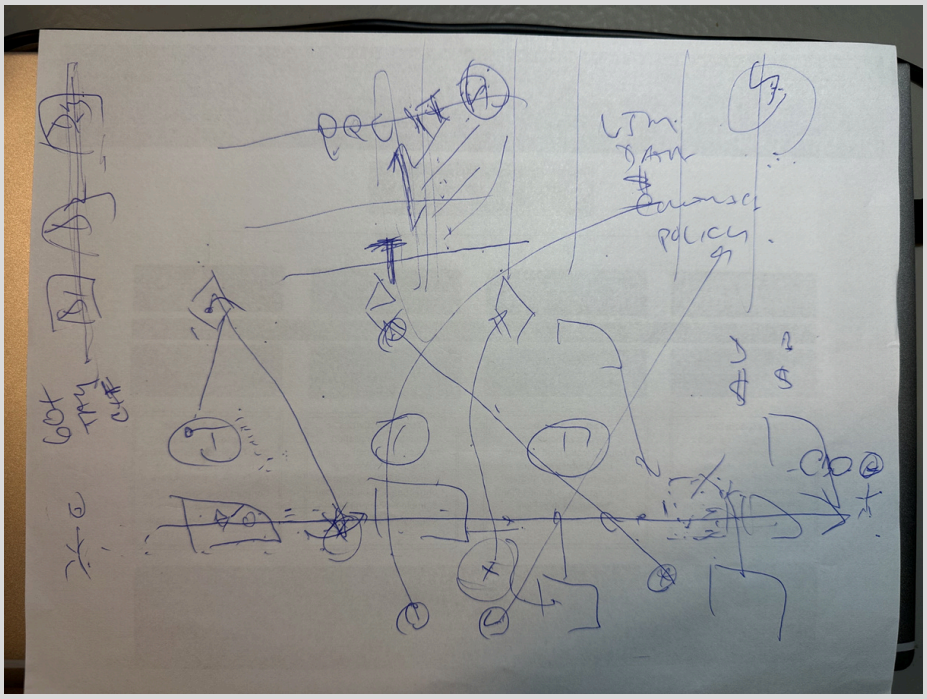
MULESKINNER JOURNAL

Tension

Journal Fifteen - September 2025



Tension

We don't mean to stress you out, but our theme for Journal 15 is Tension.

It's the elephant in the room.
It's the lion tamer's head in the lion's mouth.
BUT,
it's also the engine that drives the drama, the abracadabra that makes the magic, and the need that creates the invention.

For Journal 15, we wanted tension.
We knocked on your door and requested that emotion come out and play.
We pounded on your door and demanded the truth.
We asked for the rubber band taut. We asked for resistance.
We wanted your focus on the gap between where you are and where you want to be, the longing for home, and the need to get away.

And you responded.
You eased our tension with yours. You eased your tension by screaming at us. You turned up the heat. You gave us no break.

AND HERE'S A FLOWER

MULESKINNER JOURNAL

JOURNAL FIFTEEN:
Tension

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Jesus Christ...
Will you look
at the time?

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MARISA P. CLARK

MOTORCYCLE SAFETY

Riding home from your house
some late nights, I'd catch
the red light where Spain

intersects Eubank, and I'd wait,
my motorcycle too lightweight
to trip the sensor that lit

the arrow green. In helmet,
padded leather jacket, boots,
and gloves, I was suited up

for safety, red Ninja throbbing
at my crotch. My left blinker
flashed my intention

uselessly, and no car pulled behind
to lend its heft. How much time
I wasted idling—I didn't dare

to break the law. What if I'd
turned the bike around—
what then? If only I'd opened

the throttle wide and sped back
across town, to you, my Ninja
purring in the cool dark night.

CALLA SMITH

OUR LAND

They didn't have anywhere else to go, so they went to the green grass banks on either side of the train tracks, far from the edges of the city. They didn't know who the land belonged to, but it didn't matter anymore. It was theirs now. They brought their families and lived around the warmth of campfires, basking in the glow of the ashes as the first brick structures went up. They didn't care that the clothes they wore had long since turned into little more than brownish tatters, or that their hair was long and tangled. The only thing they really wanted was a place to call their own.

More people followed, and the grass gradually disappeared, giving way to the red dusty walls, dirt roads, chicken coops, and smoldering piles of garbage. The small stream was soon nothing more than a muddy, diseased tongue with white pieces of trash floating around it like sores. Nobody could do anything about it; there were too many of them now, and the squatters stayed and multiplied because, even if there was no potable water to wash the smoke from the firepits off their ashy skin.

As their number swelled, there was only one obstacle that prevented them from truly feeling they belonged there: the thin lines of tracks and the trains covered in chipping blue paint that crossed through their territory every thirty minutes. They lit fires over the rails, and they picked away at any spare metal they could get their hands on for the cash, but the trains kept coming and coming. They hated the metal monstrosities, with their regularity, sharp whistles, and plumes of smoke. But most of all, they hated the passengers.

Unlike the squatters, the passengers on the train had somewhere to go, someone waiting for them. They could move easily in the outside world, and no one would insult them or treat them like thieves. The squatters weren't thieves, no matter how many things they stole. They were only trying to survive, and they had a right to that and every square inch of land that the train refused to give up. As their numbers grew and it became harder to feed them all, a plan was formed, and a wall was erected.

They would take turns. Some would sit on the wall, and others would bring them big and small rocks, hard stones that could cause some real damage. If they managed to stop the train, they would swarm onto it, taking everything they could and guaranteeing their survival for many days to come.

But even if they didn't make the metal beast shriek to a halt, they could harm those people they hated so much, and the thought of red, sticky blood made their palms sweaty. If enough people died on the trains, they would stop coming, and the squatters could fit more families on the abandoned land. They could put up walls and turn their attention to the rest of the sprawling metropolis, and do what they wanted, because there was no law that would ever find them in the heart of what they all knew was their homeland.

And so, it started. Their aim wasn't good. The rocks dented the already damaged metal, revealing the deep reddish rust that hid under the pain. But the missiles didn't penetrate. Even so, the first day there were casualties inside those cars; they were sure of it. They smelled the fear, and they stayed up until late in the night, adrenaline rushing through their veins.

The next day, the windows were all closed. There were now policemen patrolling the trains. If they were strong enough, though, they could still scratch the glass. One day, they were sure, one of the passengers would forget, or the engines would fail as they so often did. One stone would hit its mark. It would be all over for the outside world then. Everyone else would learn that they would have to just leave the squatters alone or face the consequences.

END

SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER

THE BEEKEEPER

Once a beekeeper placed a ladder
against the sturdy maple trunk,
climbed to the height of a cloud
of bees that had moved otherworldly
into our yard. He reached a gloved
hand into the quiver of darkness
and plucked the queen,
put her in a tiny cardboard box
he stashed into his back pocket
and climbed down.
Within an hour
the swarm melted
into air.

Now, too, my mind
returns from an unsettling.
I awake, look out the window
to the wavy line of mountain tops
seamed between sky and earth
and reach for the dream,
see the last bee leave.

DAVID J.S. PICKERING

YOU SHOULD HAVE LIVED AMONG THE LESBIAN SEPARATISTS

In that girl's residential program, I liked
working with the low-IQ kids who got

so mad they shook in whiteout rage,
the ones who set things on fire. I get

that kind of burn—I was once twelve
minutes from being a sociopath, myself.

But I grew up to be a safe man, showed
you some men could be trusted after all

you had borne at male hands. You left
treatment, thrived. Joined a family. Met

a nice boy with glasses and nerdy grin
who knifed you to death one pretty

December day after you told him no.
As I had taught you to do. In another

life I see you gardening the Separatist
land, raising goats and selling cheese

at a farmer's market, your plaid flannel
set off with silver chains and wary smile,

a loaded .22 in your backpack.

HEATHER PEGAS

FAMILY LORE: A SEMI-HISTORY

War (c. 1952)

Maybe Connie made her special soup at the diner, maybe she saves one bowl to bring home.

Perhaps she intends it for her father, or maybe she was keeping it for herself after shopping, vacuuming, washing, drying and folding the family laundry. My beautiful aunt, the one they only half-jokingly call "the maid," puts her soup in the icebox, I imagine, saving it for later.

It is not to be. Her brothers come home all at once, and they encounter the soup.

I want that, says George, the eldest. I'm going to eat it.

Not so fast, says Manny, the second son, muscling in. I want it too.

What if I want it? says Arthur, the youngest. Why should either of you have it?

The brothers stand and contemplate the soup. There isn't enough to share.

Ptooey. George, the eldest, has spat into the soup. He congratulates himself for his cleverness, for marking the soup as his own.

But no! Manny, the middle son, grabs the bowl, and also spits into it.

And then, again, ptooey. It is the work of a moment for Arthur, the youngest, to bring up a wad of saliva, lean in and contribute to the now thoroughly nasty brew.

They stand a while longer, Manny in the middle holding the bowl, as they sadly regard the soup. Who can eat it now?

Probably they begin to shout and slap at one another, tossing the bowl in the sink, and raising Cain on their way out of kitchen.

Aren't they horrid? Their mother says they ruin everything they touch.

And Connie, how she must seethe as she stands over the sink, the remains of her treat. How to explain it, this particular boisterous, baby-splitting version of jungle law?

Bellum omnium contra omnes.

What hope is there, she might think. What hope, when they are all grown men? But I'd bet she starts making more soup.

Law (c. 1959)

My grandmother, Yiayia, she is the law. Nothing, but nothing, happens but by her decree.

How the money will be spent, who will get it and for what. Who will leave the house, for what purposes. Who will cover which shifts, perform what chore, when, how and to what standard.

She writes the code.

When it is time, she steers Connie toward her husband. And though accounts are murky, it seems she plays an invisible hand in Manny's match as well.

Of course feelings are considered: do her children even like these individuals? Certainly! They are attractive, clean and healthy. They are more than fine. They are Greek!

But is her power benevolent? Not always.

Now she wants a wife for George. Maybe this is harder because he'd spent the war years in the old country. He can butcher a pig or evade the Axis, but his English? It is not so hot. Even after Korea, after the Marines—and he was a sergeant! Even so, he is "village," pretty much through and through.

A girl from a village then.

Yiayia sets about finding her, and when she is located and photos exchanged, she determines to bring the girl to town. If all goes well, George can be married within a month!

But where to get the money for the ticket from Kansas where the girl is, just happens to be, visiting family? Who has that much to spare?

There is only one.

Yiayia heads into the dim lair of her youngest, piled with old clothes, trash, books and papers. She rummages through his books, retrieves an envelope stuffed with savings. Arthur returns to find his money gone, and his mother poker-faced.

When the girl arrives, she is lovely, fresh and grateful. She is told that Arthur has generously funded her trip. So she showers Arthur with thanks, and he becomes a special favorite.

Maybe, in time, he will benefit from her goodwill. But right now there are no bounds to his rage.

He bemoans the loss of that money. Never is it acknowledged that it has been stolen. Never does his mother repay him. Maybe he stops speaking to her and she barely notices. And then broods on ways to get her back, to make her care.

Sic semper tyrannis!

Just not today.

Love (c. 1962)

Yiayia sets about finding a wife for Arthur. The fact that he is out of the Army and at college should help. Over and over, she introduces him to girls from church. She arranges dates. So he stops coming to the Greek Orthodox Church, refuses to meet any curated matches. Once or twice, perhaps, he even doesn't show up for a date she has arranged.

He is out of control.

But not disinterested. He already knows who he wants to marry, knew it from the first date, arranged not by his mother but by a friend, Ann Jones, from school. He has announced his intention to this half-Mexican girl, but she is not taking it quite seriously.

Not yet.

Time passes. Hours and days. He invites the girl home for dinner. It is such a chaotic little home. Yiayia and Papou, Arthur sharing his room with whatever Greek cousin is visiting at the time. Possibly Spiro? And ever since Connie's husband was so shockingly killed in an automobile accident, she is at home now too, along with the little nieces.

Connie's daughters love Arthur's girl, and grab her hand to drag her to their uncle's rathole. They show her the piles, the food wrappers, the tangle of the bedding. She needs to be warned, they snicker.

We also know that Arthur's father, my Papou, takes to this girl right away, as does Connie—the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

The girl is petite, intelligent, smiles and laughs readily. Maybe Yiayia is disarmed, having been prepared to intervene against her. Because being half-Mexican, being Catholic, will not do. But this girl is curious, wants to know everything, about all the food, the relatives, all the history, all those stories. She might even bear a slight resemblance to a young Liz Taylor, which is to say that she could just be the prettiest girl ever brought into the house.

She is good to her core.

Probably Yiayia sees all these things, yet knows this girl does not belong. For what is orthodox, if not generally or traditionally accepted as right or true, established and approved?
But possibly she knows she is going to lose this battle, because what is catholic, after all, but inclusive of a wide variety of things, all-embracing?
Nescit amor habere modum.
There are no limits, not with love. And perhaps Yiayia will re-write the story, so that in years to come she will say, Whatever do you mean, I didn't want her? She was always one of ours.

END

KEN FOXE

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

A man I don't know broke into my house last night. He took my handgun from a safe using an eight-digit combination that only I knew. Then, standing on the Afghan rug in my living room, he shot himself in the side of his head. In the inside pocket of his Paul Smith suit, there was a love letter to him – in what certainly looked like my handwriting. How could I write to a man I did not know? How could I love a man who I had never set eyes upon?

My wife and twin children were in Galway with their grandparents. That is what might be called a small mercy even though all it offered was solitude in which to panic. I had seen dead bodies before, but serene corpses, surrounded by family and friends in funeral homes and master bedrooms. Not with a hole above their ear, their blood already drying into the wool of an antique woven carpet.

There is an instinct that tells us to flee when confronted with human fatality. But it was another one that took hold of me – one that left me standing there, eyes blinking, feet anchored like the roots of a swaying tree. Even as my body seemed suspended, my mind scampered but could not escape the fact that I knew why this was happening.

I broke from immobility at last, pulling down the blinds of the bay window at the front of my semi-detached house so that light could only creep in around the edges.

'Hold yourself together Tommy,' I whispered. 'Get yourself together.'

But it was hard because I never had a dead body in my living room before. I asked myself what a calm person would do and commanded myself to sit down. Flopping into the cushions of our old Chesterfield couch, I felt like I was falling. I pushed myself back up, so that I perched on the sofa's edge and worried I might tumble forward instead.

The corpse lay, head tilted towards me, eyes so still they seemed synthetic. He was brown-skinned with a goatee beard, a few days overgrown. I

thought perhaps he was from North Africa or the Middle East but how could I know for sure? As I looked at him, I noticed that beneath his tailored jacket, he was wearing a cheap blue shirt, which had a fraying collar. His shoes, too, were scuffed beneath the dark blue trousers, soles worn bare.

'Keep composed,' I said.

I got down on my knees so that I could examine him. As I got closer, there was a distinct smell of body odour like he hadn't washed, or been allowed to wash, recently. There was a faint marking around his neck, like something had been looped around it. I leaned over his face, so close I could have kissed him. It was uncanny to be so near to someone and not feel their warmth or hear their breath.

Even though I was on all fours, I was careful not to touch him, as if a stray hair or flake of skin would incriminate me any more than having a cadaver lying unexplained on my rug. It was then that I noticed the envelope in his pocket, a corner of it jutting out from beneath his lapel. Using the tips of my fingernails, I removed it without touching the fabric. My name 'Thomas McMenamin' was written all in capitals in black marker on the front.

"Dear Khaled," it said, its distinctive 'a' like that of a typewriter and just as I would handwrite it. "We can see each other no more. I will always love you, but I cannot bear to live without my children. I wish that it were different, but I know you will find somebody else. My life, it has been, and will remain, a lie. I have at last made peace with that. I wish you every happiness and you must know that I will never forget you, and how you made me feel. Yours, Tommy."

This thing I know I did not write, but the ink on the page tells another story. It is written in print just like my handwriting. In school, they taught me how to join the letters, but I could never stand how ugly it looked. I reverted to the chirography of my early childhood.

As I read the letter, I could see each slant, the pen-pressure, letter-spacing, and strokes, all correct in every way. It was perfect; the work, it seemed, of a master forger. Perhaps an expert could prove it was not mine, but I couldn't see how. Beneath three lovelorn X marks and an illustrated cleaved heart was the date – the 17th of November. I knew what that meant.

That thought was interrupted as the camera doorbell app began to beep

on my phone. If it was not a Sunday morning, I would have assumed it was the postman. I tried to think if we were expecting any other callers. I opened it up on the screen and could see on the video stream that it was two uniformed police, the collars of their fluorescent garda jackets pushed up to protect them from the heavy rain that was falling.

I thought if I ignored them, they might just go away. The bell chimed on my mobile phone again and I wondered if it was loud enough for them to hear. Then, the sound of the door knocker thumping, tchh-tchh, against the brass strike plate three times. They knew I was there; there was no point pretending otherwise.

“What have you done?” I murmured, remembering that November evening and the moment I chose to download those files to a USB key. I had taken every care; the journalist had a ‘cybersecurity expert’ to guide me. He told me each step I should take to ensure it would not be traced. ‘A near zero risk,’ they insisted. The information had not even been made public, yet the Department of Integration had already found out.

I undid the mortice lock of our front door, opened the latch and eased it back towards me. I was half-expecting it to come crashing in, or for a heavy duty-boot to fall upon the travertine hallway floor.

“Very sorry to disturb you Sir,” one of the gardaí said, his voice cordial but with a hint of devilment.

“What’s the trouble?” I asked.

His female colleague answered: “We’ve had a report of a disturbance. Right here in this property.”

“Have you?” I said, and it surprised me how calm my tone was.

“Yessir,” the male garda said. “Non-national. From an illegal encampment no doubt.”

“It’s been quiet here all morning.”

“Mr McMenamin? Isn’t it?” the female officer asked. “Are you alone in the house?”

“My wife and kids are gone for the weekend. It’s only me here.”

“Well, you take care Sir,” the male garda said. “Keep these open,” he said,

theatrically pulling the skin of his cheeks and forehead with his thumb and fingers so that I could see the patchwork of veins in his eyeballs. “These illegal aliens; you could find them creeping and lurking anywhere these days.”

He gave a broad smile before whispering something to his partner. They turned and walked back down the gravel driveway towards their patrol car, kicking gravel as they went. I closed the front door as softly as my anxiety would allow. And on the cold limestone tiles, I sat down and began to weep.

I took out my iPhone and thought of calling my wife, Edel. I so needed her reassurance, to hear my two children Aoibhe and Matthew, how the sound of their voices could soothe like the first warming sunlight of spring. But Edel would know something was wrong; I had never been much good at hiding things from her.

Sitting cross-legged and holding the mobile in front of me, I instead opened the ‘secure’ messaging app I first used to contact the journalist Fitzhenry. What was I thinking? His account was ‘inactive’ now; it hadn’t been the last time I looked. This reporter had a good reputation, once went to jail for six days rather than reveal a source. I was finding it hard not to blame him even as I knew the fault was mine alone.

When I dragged myself from the ground, I pulled over the door of the living room, as if that might somehow make the corpse disappear. I had this transient fantasy that ‘Khaled’, if that was his name, might yet wake up. That he would come strolling into my kitchen wondering where he was. Instead, the imperfect silence of the house dangled like a noose.

Two wood pigeons grazed in the grass beneath the sycamore tree in our back garden. How often had I seen those two birds and paid no heed? I began to take it all in, the colonies of buttercups and daisies, a female blackbird sitting on the wood fence chit-chatting with a hidden companion, the ivy growing over the shed window. My immediate future was laid out in cinderblock and concrete.

At the front of the house, I heard a siren. We all grow accustomed to ambulances and fire engines whizzing past us and their passing lamentations. It was however peculiar that this sound remained stationary. I would not dare open the front door and went back into the living room. With the body on the rug behind me, I tried to peek around the narrow edge of the blinds.

There was another squad car idling across the way, its blue light flickering and siren shrieking. They must have seen me because the driver began to rev the engine then sped away so that plumes of smoke rose from burning rubber. The curtain of a neighbour's house twitched, but there was no chance of help or friendly callers coming. Everybody knew the New-Conservative police were apt to do strange things these days; but people kept their distance for fear those strange things might happen to them.

'Khaled' lay stiffening. The colour of his skin was not happenstance. Heat along the tropics was no longer just intolerable but often unsurvivable. So many people were coming to Ireland on airplanes, dinghies, and in the back of freight trucks. We had agreed to take our share but reneged on those promises. The application forms of the asylum seekers would still smudge your hands even as the hopeful refugees were being corralled, hooded, and flown to West Africa. The Department of Integration called it PEER, the Programme of Expediency for Enforced Removals. What had possessed me? To blow the whistle? With all I had to lose in this New Era of Nativism?

There is a movie mythos moment where the soldier steps on a landmine and hears the click. Another move and he will become steaks of meat and shattered bone. Thoughts scurried through my mind of deep freezers, bath-tub dismemberments, drums of acid, or a body rolled cigar-like in an Afghan rug. Was there a friend I could call upon who would drive with me to the Wicklow Mountains with two shovels and a wrapped cadaver in the boot? Just as quickly, those thoughts would scuttle off like the hopeless delusions they were.

Amid the unyielding panic, there was a resignation too. I had been 'caught'. My next home would be Mountjoy or the prison camp up at Thornton Hall. I won't pretend I didn't think of the sleeping tablets in the medicine cabinet. How many were there left, enough that I might never wake up? But then, my thoughts would twirl back, to the precious voices of Aoibhe and Matthew - that I might one day hear them again.

The knocker hammered three times. I approached the front door, wondering if this time they were coming with handcuffs or cable ties, a burlap sack for my head. As I pulled it open, I saw a man, head covered, striding back down the driveway away from me. I felt a sharp pinch in my neck then, like a vaccination roughly administered. My hand rose instinctively, and I cannot say for certain what happened next.

It was three, perhaps four, hours later. My sense of time and self was fractured that day and has never been recast. I awoke, shivering, unsure of

where I was. The ache in my head was like every hangover I ever had stirred in a cauldron and served in a single bowl. It took me a minute to get my bearings as my eyes slowly began to refocus. The cornices in the ceiling, the glass chandelier, the Chesterfield sofa, the wool raw on my skin – the floor of my own living room.

'Khaled' was gone, and I lay naked on the ground in his place. My clothes were neatly folded and had been placed on the couch as if by a chambermaid. There was something around my neck, a shoelace, and as I began to pull at it, I realised there was a plastic whistle attached. It was odd to feel so exposed in my own home, and as I grabbed my clothes, a photograph fluttered to the floor. It was me, my wife and children. A short sentence scrawled across it: "Be careful of the company you keep."

Even fully dressed, I could not shake the cold, so I made myself a steaming mug of chicken soup and lit a fire. I dangled the family photo above the flames, dropped it, and watched the paper disappear. I was still sitting on the couch, a blanket wrapped around me, when I heard the door knock again. This time, it was gentler. Next, soft familiar voices.

"Daddy, daddy," I could hear. "Let us in."

I went to the front door. The kids hugged me on the leg and darted towards the kitchen to root out snacks and turn on the TV.

My wife Edel came walking from the car carrying two weekend bags and the children's coats over her arms. I kissed her as she walked down the hallway.

"A fire?" she said. "You never light a fire."

"Thought it would be nice for you to come home to."

"Had you a nice relaxing weekend without the kids around to torment you?" she said, smiling.

"Very nice," I replied.

END

DIANE GOTTLIEB

VOICE OF GOD

I seen this girl last night, a Brooklyn girl, click-clacking down Avenue C. Low-cut top, neon pink. Hair's pink too. Our eyes did that quick little zap. Thought we mighta had something, but she just raised her head high, thick with attitude. Whatever. No skin off my back. Girl looked good, though. I'm watching her sweet swoosh-swoosh, side to side, when right by the church, the one with the homeless shelter, this bruiser guy comes outta nowhere, grabs her by the wrists. She's kicking, punching, but he's stronger. Pulls her toward him. Hard. I can tell she's scared now, real scared, 'cause she stops moving—everything 'cept her eyes. They're lit like pinballs, bouncing left, right, boom, boom, boom, until they brake at the church doors. She's gotta know those doors aren't open. No priest, no prayer, no holy chorus gonna rise up to save her. Neither will the two suits walking by. Or the lady with her scrawny-ass dog, all of 'em pretending they don't see. I see. But don't want to. I can't. I'm just two more months on parole and not taking any chances. Won't so much as breathe the wrong way and risk getting sent back upstate. Nope. But then the girl catches me with her Bambi help-me eyes, and I got no choice. "What you doing?" I ask and take a few steps forward. That's when I notice the tat on his face, a waterfall. He's got this wild twitch, like some guys from the shelter get from their meds. Makes the tat move, like Niagara crashing. He spins the girl around, flashes a big-ass blade, but I'm not backing down. "Let her go," I say. "Let her go." As soon as the words leave my mouth, it all goes silent. Still. The guy's whole body's frozen. Even the waterfall. It's like he's heard the voice of God or something. There we are, the three of us, standing by the stained glass under a halo of security lights like some twisted nativity scene. Guy looks at me—strange. Like he knows it's not just me here calling the shots. He laughs, a friggin belly laugh, and drops the blade. Lets the girl go. Walks away. Just like that. The girl, hair all pink, face all red. I bet she wants to cry, but she holds it. Holds it with all the other crazy shit this messed up world weighs down on her bright neon shoulders. There's no cars passing. No one's on the street. Just pink girl and me. She holds her crying, and I hold the quiet, the big fat holy quiet.

END

BRIANNA NASEER

COIN TOSS

HMaybe there's no baby waiting at the end
of this mile-long string of months,
lining themselves up into years.

Perhaps I'm supposed to buy
a velvet couch to match the cat's eyes,
pass my days scouring vintage shops
for an Issey Miyake dress I heard mention of
on an abandoned corner of the Internet—

our open nights spent swaying
together at whichever concert
tickles our fancy that week,

your thumb making circles against mine
on the quiet car rides home
after Mother's Day brunches.

One day I might
get that ginkgo tattoo I imagine
on my forearm, the state of my body
no longer having to be pristine.

And I would be free of all the math!
Morning cup of coffee plus afternoon tea,
ovulation strip times basal temperature,
hours 'til my period no longer
minutes to midnight.

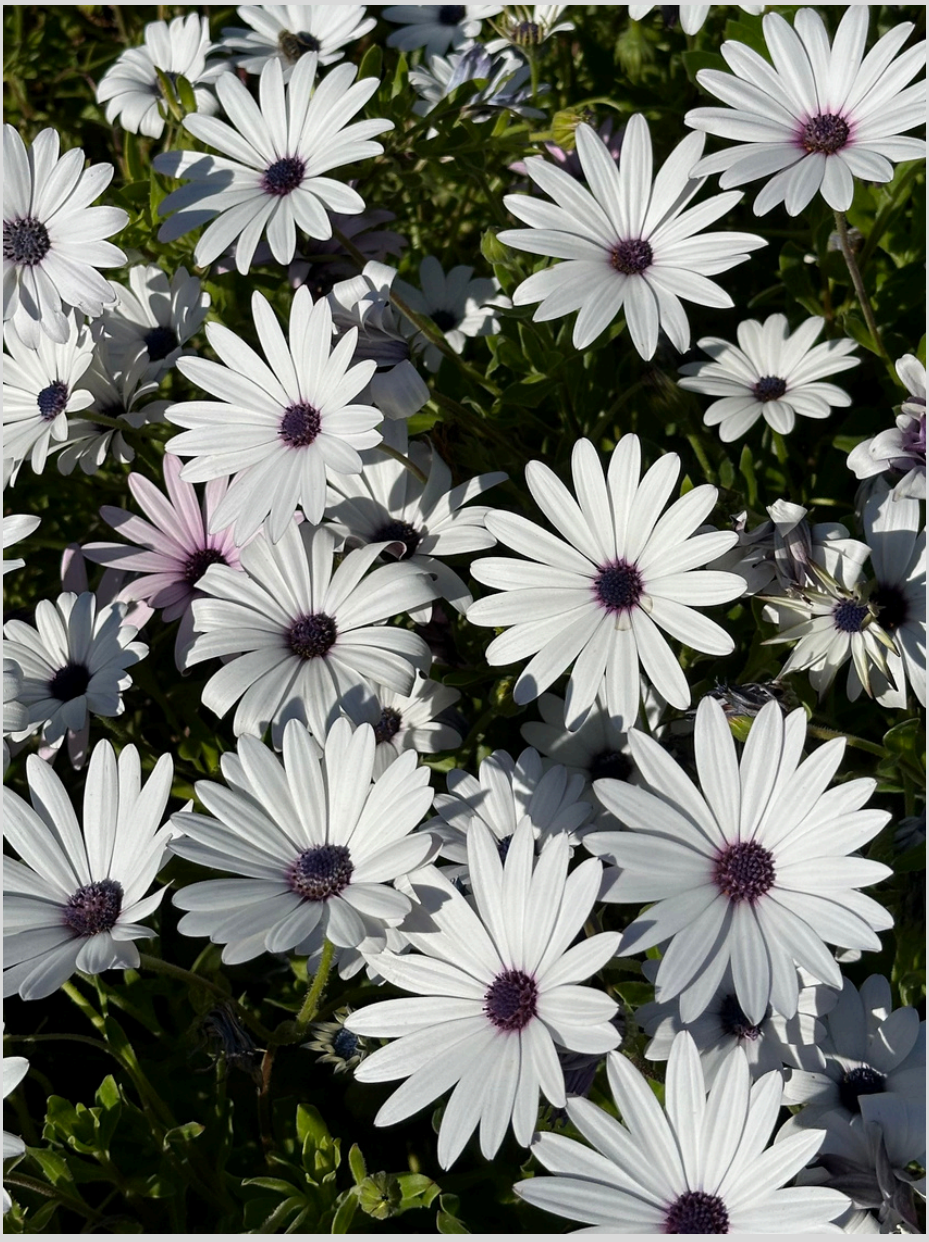
Is it so bad
that the hands of our alarm clocks
may always be drug down by sleep
and the promise of bagel sandwiches
on Sunday mornings?

CONTINUED...

Would I rather a lifetime
of skirting the globe as we wish,
adding mementos from varying cities
into our living room decor—

Manila for dinner,
New Orleans for dessert?

And nothing but time for the only other
who can understand



SHANNON CATES

GIVE IT BACK

"You have my sealskin. Please give it back,
for I belong to the Selkies, and I cannot live
under the sea without my skin."--Selkie Folktale

can you remember who you were
before the seditious moon
stole your faces
and shed your selkien skin to the shore?
sent you seeking satin,
seeking pearl—
wearing caviar-beaded frills and
couture silhouettes of sequined scales
that shown like toxic jellyfish in the darkwater?
remember the quiet
before the ocean left
your head?
have you heard a voice
in every shell, warning:
they will never tame you?
do you know how many women there are in you—
each willing to drown,
naked of lace or tulle,
for the saudade ache of the tide
in your veins?
do you remember what it felt like
in your own skin?

LOGAN MARKKO

THE BUS DRIVER'S ROUTINE

lBefore setting off on his morning route, the bus driver checked his blood pressure with a Velcro cuff that coiled around his right arm like a copperhead. He'd become a shriveled raisin of a man with an achy back; hand tremors from years of cigarettes, black coffee, and booze; and rheumy, bloodshot eyes he hid behind a pair of old-school aviator sunglasses. Stop after stop, children dragged themselves onto the bus, yawning and lethargic. In the afternoons the driver let them scream and cuss as much as they wanted as long as they stayed in their seats, figuring they deserved the chance to blow off a little steam after spending the day cooped up indoors, sitting in the same uncomfortable wooden desks kids had been pushing up against for decades, pretending to listen as their teachers droned on about improper fractions or the Battle of Gettysburg.

As a boy, he'd dreamed of flying jets over the Pacific Ocean on covert military missions or stepping to the plate in the bottom of the ninth inning with the World Series hanging in the balance. But he was colorblind and no good with a baseball bat or a leather glove. On a different try, he could've been a police officer or a firefighter, but instead, he fell in with the freeloaders and burnouts, chasing teenage girlfriends and hard reputations headfirst into a bad deal that left a gas station clerk lying half-dead in a puddle of his own blood. Confused and jittery on a cocktail of amphetamines and malt liquor, he woke up the next morning tasting the jailhouse floor. He copped a plea, learned to say "yes sir" like a good boy, and paroled out a decade later, way after the drugs and shame burned through his brittle body, spitting him into early middle age, cynical and beaten. The court tested his urine every week until a county judge declared him suitably rehabilitated, a credit to the system.

What followed were many wandering years working on oil rigs off the Gulf Coast; summers in Northern Michigan picking cherries and apples through fall; early mornings and late nights in greasy Memphis kitchens cooking brisket and pulled pork for minimum wage; and a long stint near Salt Lake City selling toasters and microwave ovens for commission. For a while there, he tried to play house: married, fathered a child, and went door-to-door with nice men dressed in short-sleeve shirts and ties, only to spiral out after the sweat cooled under his collar. Blackouts and firings ensued, and a list of mistakes so aimlessly American as to frighten off anyone supposing order.

He tried at being sober. When he felt particularly dried up, he'd catch a meeting. Sitting in

musty church basements and sipping burnt coffee out of Styrofoam cups, he'd listen for hours on end to strangers talk about how addiction and self-abuse had ravaged their lives. Once, a young woman with long blonde hair and sad, tender eyes stood up from her folding chair and told the room about the time she'd passed out on the back porch with a lit cigarette in her mouth, waking the next day to find she'd burned the whole house down. She was suing for custody of her daughter, laying off the hard stuff the best she could, really trying to be a good mother. After the meeting, he asked her out for a cup of coffee, and they spent the rest of the weekend between twisted motel bedsheets, passing a plastic jug to and fro. Passion turned to marriage and another family, but that was no good either, and it took them the rest of their best years to figure out there was nothing left that would bring about anything called change.

A friend of a friend who must've believed in second and third chances helped him get the job driving school buses for the local district. Between routes, he sat with the other drivers in the garage on the edge of campus, playing cards and gambling for peanuts. In the evenings, after he'd finished his route and refueled the bus for the next morning's run, he'd drive his pickup truck across town to a quiet subdivision where all the houses were two stories high and every lawn was immaculately manicured. On one of these streets was a yellow house with flower beds bursting with tulips and daffodils. The owners were a nice-looking couple. She wore pantsuits and vibrant red lipstick, and worked in an office building downtown, leaving her husband with the domestic chores, which the bus driver guessed was the way of many modern marriages.

Watching from the truck, he twisted the cap off another indiscriminate brown bottle, promising himself that one day he'd show a little courage, climb the steps to the yellow house, and knock on the front door. If the woman answered, she might slam the door in his face. Although maybe it would be one of the little ones on the other side, and he'd finally get the chance to tell his grandchildren who he was. There was no telling. Their mother might invite him inside and set another place at the table. If they asked about his day, he'd say it was the same as always - kids throwing shit when they thought he wasn't looking, calling each other horrible names, squirming in their sticky leather seats, itching for release.

He took a nip of the stuff in his hand and felt fire burning in his chest, closed his eyes, and drifted way out to sea, slowly becoming aware of the gentle sound of fingers tapping against the truck window. The girl looking up at him was small, seven or eight, with the same blonde hair and doe-like eyes of the women that had come before her. He rolled down the window, and she handed him a sandwich wrapped in a paper towel. He took a bite, tasting turkey, lettuce, and Swiss cheese. Then, they began to talk.

END

JOEL BUSH

FREEWAY

We lived on the freeway,
its constant thrum our meditation.
Headlights pierced our blinds
at night and flickered on the walls.
Eighteen-wheelers
rattled the windows
as they rumbled past.

Once there was a car crash
right outside the house.
A squeal of breaks,
a jawbreaker crunch.
I went outside to find
two cars capsized
on the flat, black sea.
One spun by its roof on
the pavement as the shattered
glass trickled out.

We lived on the freeway,
the white dotted lines
leading to all the exits
we could have taken.

ANNIE WEEKS

DER TOD

An Eastern Province of The Netherlands
April 1944

The Audi bucked its way along the two narrow tracks that passed for a driveway. Stones pinged and clacked inside the wheel well. An overhanging fir chattered over the roof. How the Dutch had gotten the reputation for being neat and orderly, he would never know.

Lieutenant Hans Becker glanced at his watch. He had been driving for at least fifteen minutes and still there was no sign of the de Groot farmhouse. That was the name, wasn't it? de Groot? He patted his shirt pockets. Verdammt. He must have left the instructions in the jacket he had tossed into the back seat. He braked, gently pushed the gearshift into neutral, and waited as the car nudged itself into a long, shallow pothole.

Becker found the small, folded paper in his left jacket pocket, along with a comb. Ah yes, he had remembered correctly. De Groot, Jan and Willy. Ages approximately 60 and 35. No children present. Off the Wildekamp just south of Bennekom. Guilty of hiding a Jew.

Before continuing his journey, Becker shifted himself sideways, smiled into the rearview mirror and carefully combed his hair. Should he have shaved? This thought made him chuckle.

A clunking jerk in reverse pulled the Audi out of the pothole. A sharp push of the gearshift into first, a spinning tire, and he was off. A sixty-year old man as defender? Foolishness.

It was a new thing for him, this role of lone Jew killer. It was patriotic, even thrilling at times. There was no fuss to be made of it, no bounty was required. No need to make a record of the event. No officialdom. Unless things got out of control. Even then, well . . . Becker preferred to remain positive in all of his undertakings.

As the car jostled along, rays of sunlight stabbed through the side windows. He checked his watch again. If all went as planned, he would leave the farm within the hour. It would be impossible to navigate the driveway after sunset.

A neat row of poplars came into view, followed by an opening that revealed several acres

of potatoes flanked by rectangles of intense green. Pollarded willows were set alongside a narrow canal running parallel to the driveway. To his left, sheep had congregated, ewes accompanied by tentative lambs; a ram off to the side. It was hard to ignore the slight ache of homesickness that rose up at these pastoral scenes.

***

On his last visit home, in March, Berta had changed. Instead of the usual colorful attire that had attracted him seven years earlier, his wife was dressed in dark colours: brown, dark green, a navy scarf. She wore black, laced oxfords instead of the high pumps that, even three months ago, had still animated him. She immediately and coldly stated that he was no longer welcome. He had wheedled and cajoled. “But, schatz, we must make more children for our Fuhrer.”

“What?” Berta replied, her voice catching. “For what? So they can be blown to pieces by English bombs?” Berta turned her back to him. “There are plenty of girls around. One or two on each street corner. In case you’re wondering, the children have been sent to school outside the city.”

“Where?” he asked.

“None of your business.”

That night, he drank schnapps with a girl in a bar who was willing to do the minimum — for an exorbitant sum. When he complained, she said it was actually a bargain. It had taken him over ten minutes — others were waiting. “I’ve got mouths to feed,” she grinned. “Including my own.”

In the WC, he scrubbed hard to remove the bright perfumed lipstick. “Schiese” he grumbled. He did not return to his home that night, instead boarding a late train to Arnhem.

***

Another ten minutes passed before Becker caught his first glimpse of the farmhouse. A structure of weathered wood and green painted shutters, topped by a rusting metal roof. A large barn built in a similar fashion stood several metres away. Various buildings — a chicken house, a hog pen, a tool shed, were dotted throughout the property, separated by stands of elm and beech trees. He patted the holster at his waist. He had no doubt that a firearm of some kind was stashed somewhere inside.

“Did you hear something?” Willy asked Jan, who was sprawled on the worn chesterfield. A cup of tea cooled next to him. The Handelsblad had fallen to the floor, and his eyes were closing fast. “What?” he said, yawning. “That goddamn paper is getting smaller and smaller. Soon it will be down to one page, shouting only great German victories.”

“Listen,” Willy said. “It sounds like a car backfiring.”

“Ach,” said Jan. “Likely the neighbors shooting crows.”

“Shhh,” she said, holding her finger to her lips. She heard strange scraping and popping sounds. The intermittent rumble of an impatiently gunned engine.

“Well,” Willy said curtly, “if you’re not interested, I am.” She quickly headed toward the door, pulling on a cardigan as she walked.

“Take the pistol,” Jan said. Willy grunted, looping back to the sideboard. Her mouth tightened as she removed her grandfather’s Mauser from its case, carefully tucking the pistol underneath her sweater. “Maybe it’s nothing . . .”

Several moments passed by. Jan heard a soft rumbling. A choking gasp of exhaust as a car came to a halt. He pushed aside the curtain. Willy had been right.

“That’s quite the driveway you have. How long is it actually?” The German Lieutenant leaned casually against the Audi, arms folded, boots crossed at the ankles. “Oh,” he said, his voice mild and friendly. “I’m sorry. I’m Lieutenant Becker, Lieutenant Hans Becker. Sorry for appearing without my jacket, or my cap. It’s a warm evening . . . and you?” Becker paused. His eyes flickered over his surroundings. “Well, never mind. I’m here just to check on some of you isolated farm people. You know that there have been random attacks…”

Jan and Willy remained silent.

“I see you have a good crop of potatoes on the go. And a healthy looking flock of sheep. I’m very fond of lambs. I expect you are too . . . Mevrouw.” Becker smiled at Willy. His eyes crinkled. He took a deep breath, adjusting his gaze to include Jan.

“May I ask if there are other residents here? A hired hand perhaps? We want to make sure everyone is safe and accounted for.”

“No,” Jan replied curtly. “And,” he cleared his throat,” I must tell you, a couple of extra hands wouldn’t hurt.”

“If you don’t mind, Mr . . . ?”

“De Groot. Jan, Jan de Groot.”

“Ah, yes. May I call you Jan? If you don’t mind Jan, will you accompany me while I explore your farm a little bit? I’ve always had an interest in agriculture.”

They walked side by side in silence. Clouds stacked at the horizon began to colour pink.

“That is a wonderful name really, de Groot, that is. Very grand.” Becker turned to Jan, grinning. “No Russian royalty in your background?”

How had the man been blessed with such straight white teeth?

Jan cleared his throat, and said dryly, “In my case nothing is true. I am neither tall, nor royal.”

“Hmm,” Becker said. “I wonder,” Becker added, placing a hand on Jan’s shoulder, “if it would be wise to keep a guard dog. Just the two of you here. Anyone . . .”

Jan interjected, “. . . could come at anytime.” He shrugged off Becker’s hand.

Jan de Groot led Becker on a circuitous route. He looped twice around the chicken house. Inspected the main storage shed piled with sacks of wheat, oats and barley. Attended to the barn with an empty hayloft where pigeons flapped under the rafters. Sweat beaded between his shoulder blades.

Jan gestured to the hayloft. “The hay is still growing.”

“Of course.”

“Cows are in the upper pasture . . . a couple of horses too.”

“Hmm.” Becker nodded. “Do you keep a bull on the property?” He chuckled. “Keep the cows happy.” Jan rolled his eyes.

“Tool shed.” Jan slapped the side of a small wooden building.

“Hmm.” Becker said. He framed his eyes with the palms of his hands and peered through a dusty window. “Yes, definitely a tool shed.”

Jan walked Becker alongside the creek, and next to the pasture fence. Quail scuffled in the tall grass. All the while, Becker commented on the obvious difficulties of running a farm.

“You realize of course how valued you are, people like you and Willy. You are the real heroes.”

“Apples and plums over here,” Jan said, motioning with his arm.

“Ah,” Becker said, nodding. Jan zigzagged, then approached the orchard from the east.

“Haven’t we been here before?” Becker asked.

“Hmm,” growled Jan. “Maybe.”

Boots shusshed through patches of long grass. Shadows grew long.

“I assume you have an outhouse?”

“You need it?”

“Ha. Well, to tell you the truth, I do.” He turned to look at Jan. “But, you know, I don’t mind pissing out here . . . you don’t mind, do you?”

Jan waited while Becker made his way to the rear of the toolshed. His mind raced. How could he get word to the boys?

“The cows and horses will need to be put in for the night, quite soon, I expect,” Becker said as he reappeared, buttoning his fly. Jan nodded. His hands were damp. “Puts me in mind of my childhood,” Becker said affably. “Pissing outside, that is.”

In the pigpen, sows of varying sizes barked and snuffled. “I’m not crazy about pigs,” Becker said, speeding up his pace. He turned his head toward Jan. “My grandfather raised pigs.

“Oh . . .where?”

“Münster.”

“Hmm . . . don’t know it.”

“You know the Jews won’t eat them. The pigs.” Becker’s voice grew louder. “Stupid — no ham or bacon, no pork roast with spaetzle and sauerkraut — just stupid.”

“Tell me, Jan,” Becker said, pointing to his left. “What is that building?”

“Where?” said Jan, looking right. “There,” he said, pointing again. “See?”

“Oh, oh, that building. My neighbour uses it for storage.”

“Can you take me there, please?” Jan’s neck prickled.

“Well …” Jan ran a damp hand down his face. He looked down. “We would be trespassing…”

“Let’s go. Now.” Becker’s voice had turned hard. He set off at a jog, quickly outpacing the farmer.

When Jan arrived, breathing heavily, the door stood wide open, and Becker was inside. A slash of bright orange light illuminated a small table set with plates and cutlery. A curl of steam rose from the kettle.

“What’s this then?” Becker asked, his arms spread wide. “And this,” pulling back a blanket and sheet from one of the cots. “What is it exactly that your “neighbour” is storing here, Herr de Groot? Juden? Is that it?”

“I think,” Jan’s voice shook. He swallowed. “I think you’d better get off my land, Lieutenant.”

Becker turned back to face Jan and laughed. He unsnapped his holster.

The shot was short and sharp, only a “pop” really, as if released from a toy. These things remained: a swirl of blue fog; blood spatter across a shirt; the shriek and flap of a single blackbird.

“I knew you’d get here sooner or later.”

“Willy, my God, Willy . . .” Jan shifted his left foot away from the Lieutenant’s body, where it had sagged and folded, now resting next to the gas burner.

“I hid behind the wardrobe.”

“It had to be done.”

“I know, but …”

“I’ve already thought that out.”

“Oh,” Jan said.

“He was an evil man,” Willy said.

END

CALLIE CROUCH

AMERICAN SPIRIT

It was half burnt
in a Ziplock taped
to your fridge, labeled
“next drunk cigarette”
and I saw
myself there, somewhere
between what you
started and
couldn’t finish,
what you put between
your lips but
couldn’t stomach
sober.

A.Z. FOREMAN

OMAR IN GAZA SCROLLS THROUGH HIS FEED

He scrolls. A glen in Scotland: moss and mist,
a stag knee-deep in silence, sky like pewter.
His thumb shakes. Here the morning has just hissed
with drones then blood. This screen is always truer
than rubble. There, no sirens. Just a fern
curling from stone. Just light. No checkpoint. Wall.
The sheep don't flinch. The mountains do not burn.
His breath turns glassy. Then he feels it fall—

a thought: was this the crime? to be born here?
To wake where gods are made of wire and smoke?
To live and die and never once come near
a world that isn't broken, starved, or choked?
The Highlands gleam, untouched, beyond the shrapnel.
He stares. And weeps. And doesn't drop the panel.

MARGOT WIZANSKY

TO LOVE IN THAT INSANE TORTORED WAY

From “Reading Dostoyevsky at Seventeen”
by Dante Di Stefano

Love was supposed to be torture, I believed.
He came to me after I’d married another man.
It was dark in my memory and I was alone,
though it was no doubt daytime, that tender
green Pennsylvania spring, and it reminded me
of what we’d been to each other, first spring
of our awakening. He had a way of showing up.
He looked at me like he wanted to say something,
but didn’t. He never touched me. I was terrified
I’d be found out, accused of inviting him.
At the Gardner Museum last week I thought of him,
the portrait of him I did so many years ago, his name
I painted in Spanish down one side. I wanted to appear
indifferent like Madame X in Sargent’s painting. As if
my shoulders were bared to him like hers in that strapless
gown, I couldn’t be aloof. He’d left me and I was
too angry to forgive him. The first of serial betrayals.
He hadn’t had strength enough to defy his father,
to tell me what he felt for me, yet he couldn’t let me go.
Last time I ran into him, it was at a concert. My then-husband
said something to him I couldn’t hear, maybe threatening
to murder him if he came near me. Today I’m watching
the ocean, pale under a pale sky streaked with trails of cloud,
thinking my life’s become less colorful, closing down.
How would things have been if he hadn’t left me,
if I hadn’t begun to live recklessly, leapt into
an ill-considered marriage and was betrayed again,
before it turned out this way, sea lavender blooming
every spring, its delicate color almost no color,
the tiny precious flowers, my precious days,
not insane, not tortured.

JULIAN BAULD

FATHER IN THE NEXT ROOM

The corner of Acadia and Rupert Street
is soft as felt.
The drivers don't stop at all,
but roll softly into their turns,
like fallen lovers lost to sleep.

The tree shakes in the winter
and swells in the summer
when I've watched from my window,
I too wanting to leave.

My grandfather died in this bed
and I lie sleepless in it now
looking out the window
thinking about waking my own father
who lies sleeping in the next room
dressed in his cancer's costume,
bony and bald.

Let's leave it all here, I want to say.
let's go away.
But here we stay,
Not trapped, but knowing
that no road is soft,
and that there is nowhere to be lost.

DAVID KIRBY

POLINA GELMAN HAS A LOT OF STORIES

The next time you can't sleep
tell yourself it's World War II and you're a German soldier
on the Eastern front
and your bunkmate is going on about how he's going to get a second tattoo
of der Führer on his other arm

when suddenly out of the sky comes the whistling noise a bomb makes
only you hadn't heard any aircraft
and that's when you realize it's the night witches
Russian women aviators flying planes of wood and fabric that were meant
for training purposes only

Die Nachthexen shouts your bunkie
as the women power down their engines
and swoosh through the darkness like gnarly old crones on broomsticks
even though they're young and fresh-faced
which makes you love them even more
plus they hate Hitler
that's sexy right there

Polina Gelman was a night witch
boy does she have some stories
at just under five feet she was too short
to be a pilot and trained as a navigator instead
not that it mattered since the planes had dual controls
and often the navigators flew them anyway

those planes were so primitive that the Germans never saw them coming
first of all they were slow
Gelman remembers looking down and seeing hers being passed
by a car on the ground
they weren't made of metal
and they didn't have radios
meaning radar couldn't pick them up

CONTINUED...

the idea was to keep the Germans from sleeping
but the night witches didn't sleep either
so the pilots and navigators made a deal
one would sleep on the way out
the other later on the way back to base

compare Polina Gelman's story
to what the movies tell us about people
the movies tell us that a brooding billionaire uses trauma
as an excuse to commit felonies while wearing fancy pajamas
or a scientist falls into a vat of something
and immediately decides to fight crime instead of calling a doctor

when the war was over
Polina Gelman got married
had a daughter
became a teacher

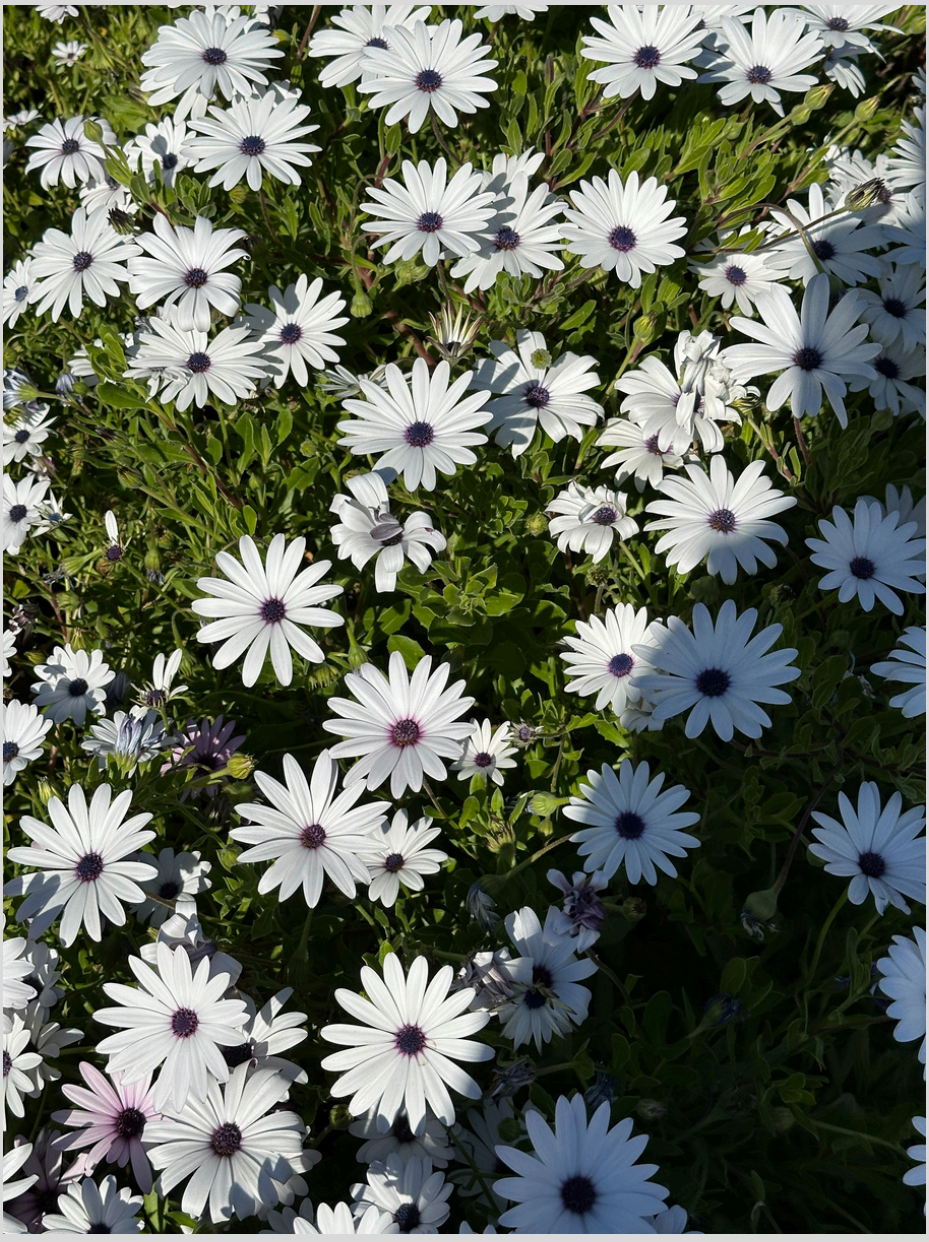
most heroic deeds aren't performed
by a goddess in bullet-proof armor who discovers that justice
is best served with slow-motion hair flips
or a teenage wall-crawler who finally understands that puberty and supervillains
are basically the same thing

they're performed by people like Polina Gelman

a lot of what we know about the night witches
is thanks to Gelman
who became a spokeswitch of sorts
though it bothered her when it seemed as though the world
only wanted to hear about the night witches from her

it wasn't just me she told an interviewer in her Moscow apartment
we all had to fly
Some people like to brag
I don't want to be seen that way

doesn't that make you love her even more
Polina Gelman you're so stealthy
go Polina go



PAUL HOSTOVSKY

BACK DOOR, 1973

My thumb is pushing the thin metal thumb lock
of the screen door up and down, up and down,
locking it and unlocking it—click, click, click, click—
while I gaze out past at our tiny poor excuse
for a backyard, just big enough for a tetherball pole.
My mother is sitting at the kitchen table, smoking.
My father is in and out of the hospital, dying.
Her line of sight is a ray: it goes out to infinity and doesn't
meet mine. The tetherball, pendulous, bruised, oscillates
against the pole like a head scratching itself with no hands.
My nose, pressed up against the screen, is sniffing the air
for the life that's waiting for me—I don't know where.
Click, click, click, click. "Stop doing that!" yells my mother,
breaking eye contact with infinity, looking straight at me.

ATMA FRANS

RETURNING HOME

Arthur threw a pair of secateurs into the wheelbarrow and put on a coverall. While he was struggling with the jammed zipper, Frank grabbed a hoe and said he'd weed. It wasn't on the list of chores, yet the guard just said, "Right on, Frankie," and sat down in the shade next to the shed and opened a newspaper.

Even though it was only morning, the sun was biting into Arthur's neck. He didn't mind that by nightfall his skin, no longer used to the outdoors, would blister. He pushed the wheelbarrow to the rosebushes and started deadheading the wilted flowers. He caught one into his gloved hand and brought the bleached petals close to his face. Breathing in the lingering fragrance of honey, persimmon and frankincense, he became all nose. For a moment the world fell away. He dropped the rose in his wheelbarrow and, kneeling down, gathered the dead leaves under the bush. Beneath the debris, the earth was moist and released a rich scent of rot and compost. He took off his gloves and burrowed his hands into the dirt. A worm wriggled between his fingers. How he had missed touching something alive! Inside the Brussels' prison, the walls were a drab green, and sound bounced off all the hard surfaces. The worst of it was the stink of detergent, boiled cabbage and the sweat of too many men cooped up together. He looked over his shoulder at Frank, who was standing in the shade of an old oak. The hoe was leaning against the trunk. Arthur could tell from the slightly bent posture that Frank was listening intently to his phone. Likely talking business. Another drug run? Frank could get you anything you wanted but Arthur never asked for stuff. There was a price to be paid afterwards, and not just in money.

Arthur put on his gloves. He'd better get on it with it. If they didn't get enough done, he would get the blame and lose this new privilege of working in the walled garden of the warden on Fridays. He had gotten this coveted placement because he only had two months left to serve, and a record of spotless behaviour, whereas Frank had simply asked for it. Although overweight and in his late fifties, Frank made everyone run circles around him, even the guards. It wasn't his first time inside.

The warden's garden felt like a park. A large manicured lawn was bordered with tall rhododendrons and rosebushes, hiding most of the brick enclosure and its parapet, strung with barbed wire. Several mature trees spread shade over the grass. Not only was the garden wide, it ran the whole length of the prison, a brick building with rows of tiny windows, one of them Arthur's. Since he was tall, he could look through it if he stood on the

table in his cell. Unfortunately, the walls were thick and he could only see a slice of the outside: a bit of lawn, rhododendron and a cherry tree, whose overgrown crown had bothered him all year. Tangled up in itself, the poor thing had no breathing space. He pushed the wheelbarrow towards it. At the far end of the garden was the warden's house, an elegant mansion, part of its limestone facade covered with honeysuckle. On one side of the patio was a low basin with a dolphin sculpture spilling water into it. If it wasn't for the city' traffic noise, Arthur could imagine himself inside a countryside domain.

A sliding door opened, spitting out two children. The girl chased the boy across the patio. Her laughter rang high and clear, so unlike the laughter in prison with all its undertones of threat, power, and humiliation. He had seen the children before, running around the garden, zipping in and out of the small frame of his window. Often, their mother played with them, or at least that's who he assumed the beautiful, plump woman to be. She had thick black hair cut in a bob, and skin the colour of honey. The girl looked like her. It was strange that the children were home now. The guard had told Arthur and Frank to return to the shed by three as by then the children would be coming back from preschool. It was just after ten, and they were still in their pyjamas. Why had they not left? And where was the woman? Arthur gripped the handles of his wheelbarrow and walked on. This was none of his business.

The shade of the cherry fell over him like a cooling blanket. He slipped the secateurs into his belt, pulled himself up into the crown and surveyed the maze of crisscrossing branches. When he was eighteen, he had worked at a landscaping company. Hating the physical work, he had quit after a year. Now, he enjoyed the feeling of his muscles working, the smell of the cut branches, the leaves brushing against his arms. Could he do this work when he got out? He could trade in his old Citroen for a truck. If he hired a couple of refugees, he could pay them cash. That way, he could launder the stashed-away money from his thefts. He could come up with a catchy name, and a logo, to paint on the side of his truck. Print it on shirts for his guys. That would look really professional. He remembered the way his old boss used to talk to wealthy clients, the way he changed his vocabulary and mannerisms, a role Arthur could imitate. He could make a pile of money, looking after rich people's gardens, gardens like this one. He should take some pictures and make a website. Ask Frank for a phone. Arthur dropped down from the tree and started piling the cut branches into the wheelbarrow. No, no, he shouldn't ask Frank for favours. When he got out of prison, he would become an honest man, meet a nice girl, start a family.

"Lemme in! Lemme in!" The boy's shrill voice pulled Arthur from his daydream. The child was trying to hoist himself up onto the stone rim of the fountain and join his sister who was wading around in it, her pyjamas drenched up to her waist. Before Arthur got arrested, he used to spend Sundays with his sister Magda and her family. She never let her daughter play in the pink plastic pool on her own, even though it was shallow. The mother must be watching from inside, Arthur thought, and she would come out any minute. He piled the last branches on the wheelbarrow. Still no mother. His stomach twisted the way it used to when he was thieving and something wasn't right. He should get a bit closer, just to make sure the kids were fine. Not wanting to frighten them, he approached the patio at a slow pace. He

had always been good at not being noticed. He could blend in anywhere. It was what was keeping him safe in prison, safe from Frank's bullies.

Staying close to the bushes, he snipped the wilted roses as he went. Meanwhile, the boy ran inside and returned with a plastic mini-chair. He climbed on it and flopped into the fountain, water splashing over the rim. He crawled to the stone dolphin and pulled himself up, then patted the snout, which was green with algae.

"You're ogling the kiddos?" Frank was right behind Arthur.

"Oh God, no!"

The children froze, looked straight at Frank, then clambered out off the fountain and ran into the house.

Frank crossed his arms, smirking, as if he had something on Arthur. The rambunctious children had indeed awakened a yearning inside Arthur, but not in the way Frank suggested. The grime of prison had seeped into Arthur, choking every pore. He couldn't face having to go back inside this afternoon. How he longed to be free.

"I think something is wrong," he said. "They seem to be on their own. We should get the guard." The guard was still reading next to the shed in the far corner of the yard.

"Yeah, right." Frank walked straight to the open sliding door.

Arthur stayed at the edge of the bushes, and waited. A deep silence fell over the garden. What was Frank up to? Arthur left the protection of the greenery and crossed the sunlit patio.

Inside the house it was silent. It smelled nice here, a scent of vanilla and cinnamon. Toy cars were scattered under and around a table. An empty glass bottle lay in a white puddle on the kitchen counter. On the floor, two plates with half eaten sandwiches, next to a ripped paper bag, bread slices spilling from it, and a pot of Nutella, a knife stuck in the hazelnut cocoa spread. It looked like the kids had made their own breakfast and had a picnic on the kitchen floor. A wet trail lead to a pile of crumpled pyjamas near a door at the rear. It opened and Frank appeared, waving his phone as if it was a lollipop. "Come on!"

Arthur followed him into the hallway. A wide staircase curved up to a second floor, its railing decorated with floral ironwork that gleamed and glistened in the light streaming down from the upper floor. "We shouldn't be here," Arthur said.

"Stop whining and gimme the clippers!" Without waiting, Frank snapped them from Arthur's belt and walked through a side door leading to a small, dark, library. Wooden shelves lined both sides of a fireplace. Two easy chairs stood in front of it, their green velvet upholstery

faded in places. A tartan blanket lay in a crumpled heap on one of the seats. Arthur couldn't picture the stern, stiff warden in a room this homey, a place of such loose relaxation.

Frank swept the magazines from the coffee table and pulled it to the wall. He climbed on top of it and ran the tip of the secateurs along the frame of the window, breaking the paint, causing flakes to snow down around him. This was all so wrong yet Arthur felt the old excitement return, the rush of the forbidden. The danger heightened his senses and the house seemed to breathe around him, alive. Frank pulled on the handle of the window. In the silence, Arthur could hear the muffled voices of the children, somewhere close by. Frank started scraping again, deepening the groove. On the Persian carpet, barely noticeable on the bright pattern, lay a golden bracelet. Arthur shoved his hands deep into his pockets and clenched his fists. He shouldn't, he really shouldn't. It was beautiful though. Two metal ribbons snaked around each other. It looked antique, fifties maybe. Would anyone even miss it? Before he knew it, it was in his pocket.

In the hallway, a phone rang. An answering machine kicked in, a warm female voice calling herself Ellen, asked to leave a message. After the beep, another woman, asked why Ellen hadn't shown up at the cafe. The woman had been waiting there for an hour. Could Ellen please call her? The machine clicked. Was the mother still home then? Could she appear any minute? With a loud crack, Frank jerked the window open. A gust of wind rushed into the room, filling it with delirious freedom.

Frank poked his head out. Grunting, he heaved himself onto the window sill. Then, he dropped down into the narrow side street.

It would be so easy to leave, Arthur thought. As their coveralls hid their prison clothing, people would likely think they were just a pair of workmen. He could be out of here, right now. A cyclist rode by, ringing his bell. Across the road two girls walked by arm in arm, their laughter clattering on the sidewalk. He would be a fugitive though. He could change his appearance: grow a beard, dye his hair. Nobody would find him. Frank could probably get him a fake ID. Frank could get you anything.

"Hurry!" Frank said. "We've got a ride waiting."

Then it hit Arthur, Frank would own him. Already Frank was talking as if they were in this together. Arthur would become one of Frank's puppets. He wouldn't be able to have his own landscaping business. Could he split ways once he was out the window? But where would he hide? Magda wouldn't want to have anything to do with him and none of his friends had visited him in prison. He'd be on his own. This was madness. He had only two months left. He shook his head. He would stick it out.

"Suit yourself." Frank stared at Arthur. "Not a peep till three a clock."

Arthur nodded and backed away. He should get out of the house fast, get back to the

garden before the guard noticed their absence.

In the hallway, a loud moan froze him. It felt animal-like, frightened. The sound stopped, then started again, coming from behind a pair of French doors. Their frosted glass obscured his sight. Curious, he turned the knob, opening the doors half an inch.

On the couch sat the beautiful woman he had so often seen in the garden, the children cuddled against her. The boy was pushing a nose onto a Mr Potato-head. Did kids still play with that stuff? The boy's forehead was furrowed with concentration. The girl was hugging a large stuffed rabbit, one of its floppy ears in her mouth. She stopped sucking it and looked straight at the door. Arthur was about to close it when he noticed something was wrong with the mother. She was slumping. One shoulder had sunk lower than the other and the spaghetti strap of her yellow dress had slid off. Her position was unnatural as if her body had shifted under its own weight. She looked up and said, "Whee do," moving only half of her mouth.

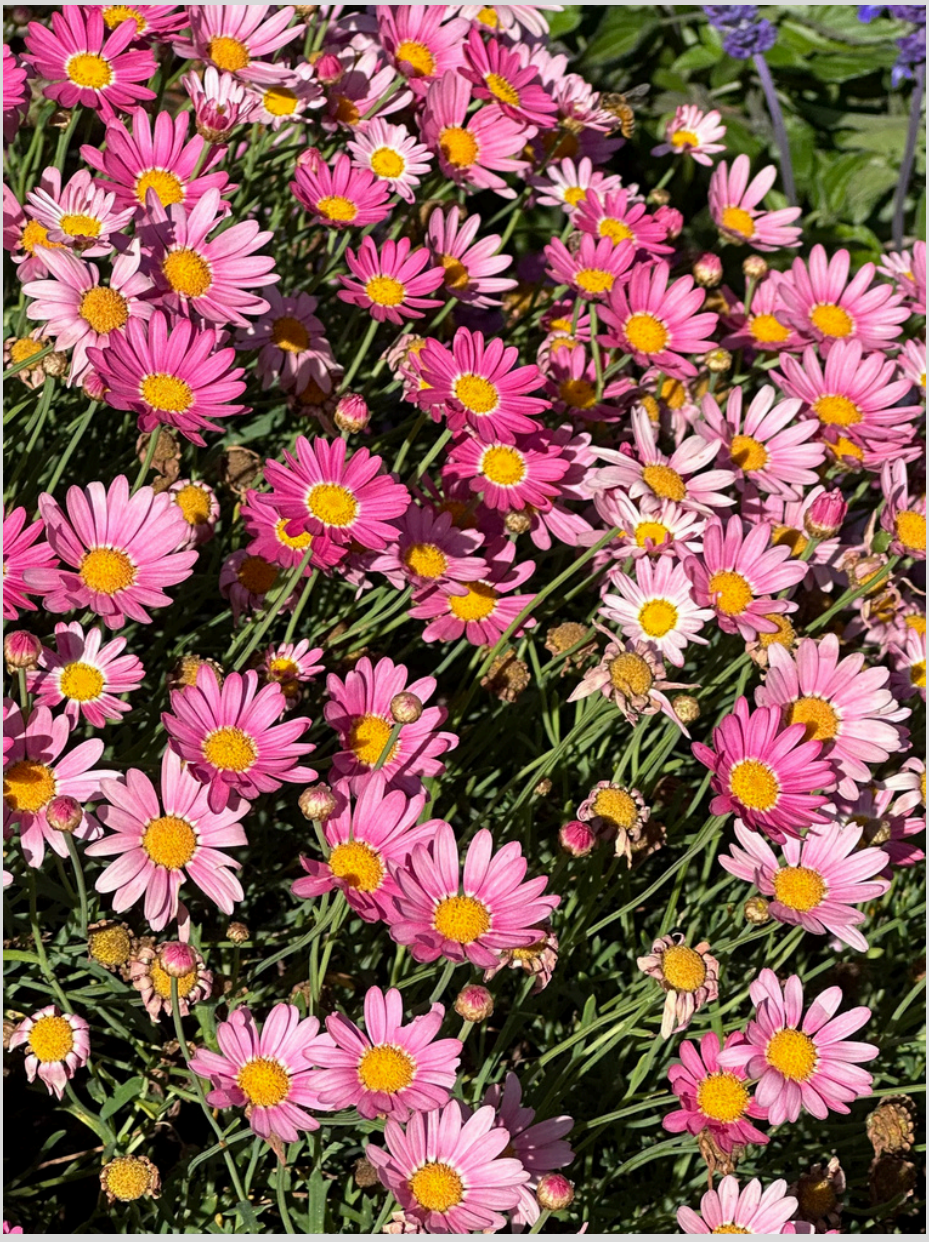
Was she drunk? Her face looked weird too, as if it had melted, then solidified in all the wrong places. She lifted a hand. It hung midair for a second as if unsure what it was supposed to do, then dropped on the couch. Arthur's great-aunt's had moved in a similar stilted and awkward way after she had a stroke. She had slurred her words too. Could young people have strokes? His great-aunt had been lucky, his family had said, that a neighbour had found her. She could have died otherwise.

"Whelp," the woman said. "Eat whelph."

He closed the door, wishing he had never opened it. If only he had kept going, out, out of this house. Damn it. Now her life was on his hands. He stopped in front of the creamy white telephone. Making a call would put a target on his back. In and out of prison, Frank controlled the gang. Arthur had seen what they were capable of, and how the guards always waited just a bit too long. Arthur walked on, then stopped. When he had seen the woman running across the grass, she had looked so happy, so beautiful, so full of life. If this was Magda, he would want a stranger to help her, wouldn't he? Maybe nobody would find out it had been him putting a call through. He listened for a dial tone. No, no! Frank wasn't stupid. Arthur lowered the receiver. Then he thought of the terrible accidents that could happen if the kids were left alone all day, the fragility of small bones and skulls. And the mother powerless to do anything, maybe dying in front of them! He laid the receiver down next to the phone, and put the golden bracelet beside it. They would be here soon enough: the police, the fire brigade, an ambulance.

Outside, on the lawn, a trail of dead flower heads led from the patio back to the wheelbarrow. Less than half an hour ago, he had cut the wilted roses. Now gathering them, he felt like a hero in the stories he used to read to his niece, the trail of pale petals glowing in the dark-green grass, showing him the long and perilous way home.

END



SCOTT RUESCHER

AGAINST THE CURRENT

At the riverside camp run by indigenous entrepreneurs,
in the lush lowland jungle of eastern-most Ecuador,
a few hours downhill by bus, truck, and motorized canoe
from capital city Quito, twenty miles from the borders
of Colombia and Peru, I swam in place against the current
of the Cuyabeno River, disregarding the small piranhas
that nipped but didn't chew, and mindful of the nocturnal
crocodiles in the shallows of the lagoon around the bend
whose gold eyes had glowed at our flashlights in the dark
when we stood on the shore in awe the night before.

Keeping my distance from venomous snakes and malarial
mosquitoes on the bank, I alternated the standard
breaststroke with the common crawl, then rolled onto my back
in time to admire, flying upriver ten feet above, a flock
of blue and gold macaws, like a slew of winged arrows
drawn from the quivers of camouflaged hunters
who'd never seen a conquistador before—a contrast, in form
and color, to the ungainly brown hoatzin birds known
as "stinky turkeys," the homely green turtles basking on logs,
and the gangly gray garzas I'd seen the day before
on the same muddy shore of the crocodiles' lagoon.

While my fellow viajeros slept in, in open-walled huts,
dreaming, maybe, of tarantulas, jaguars, anacondas, and boas
on mosquito-net platform beds, at the camp in the clearing,
I did the backstroke, inhaling and exhaling with each pair
of strokes, and watching the pliable branches, in the highest
boughs of the trees on the bank, bending under the weight
of spider monkeys chattering and tempting their fate.

Then I rolled over like a skinned log to continue my steady
crawl against the current, making minor waves of my own,

CONTINUED...

and wishing that the freshwater dolphins we'd seen
stitching the surface of the river the day before, bowing
their pink and gray bodies for aquadynamic oblong effect,
and using their sleek skins and fins to ripple the fast water,
like me gaining strength in resistance to a greater
power than my own, would flank me as I swam in place
against a watershed loaded with cold gray run-off
from the glaciers melting on the peaks along the cordillera's
corridor of volcanoes— Cayambe, Chimborazo, Cotopaxi—
on route to Rîo Aquarico and its confluence in the Amazon.

NICK DI CARLO

JOE LOVES MARY. MARY LOVES – PERFUME?

I'm thinking how my partner, Joe Morgan, is the best homicide detective I've known. He's got quirks, but mostly they're personal things that he never lets interfere with the job. "Compartmentalizing," he calls it. I can't do that. Stuff is always rumbling around in my head. "Neurotic," Joe calls it. But tonight? Tonight, it's Joe who's acting bug-fuck-nuts. I've chased him three blocks, up six flights of a six-story walk-up and onto the roof where he's about to toss some guy over the edge.

"Joe, what the hell? Watcha doin'? Who is this guy? Joe!" I jump onto Joe's back and throw a sleeper on him, shouting, "Knock it off or I'll put your lights out. What the hell's wrong wichyu?"

I yank Joe off the guy who gets up and starts running, making me chase and bring him down. I cuff him, grab him by his belt and drag hm to where I left Joe spitting and swearing, calling the guy names worse than any longshoreman ever imagined.

Joe lunges toward the guy, but I block him and knock him down again. "Cut the crap and talk to me, tell me what's got you acting like a lunatic."

"Mary."

"Mary—your wife? That Mary?"

"She's been banging that scum."

I've known Mary as long as I've known Joe. She's a sweetheart. Kind. Loving. Loyal. Joe's off his rocker. "That can't be right."

"It's right. She's in his apartment. 6B."

"No way."

"Wanna bet?"

I ask the guy, "You live in 6B?"

He nods his head.

“Gimme the key.”

We go downstairs, first Joe, then the guy with me holding him by the collar. I unlock the door, and what the hell—Mary’s pacing the floor, a lit cigarette in her left hand and a half-glass of red wine in her right.

Joe goes for her, and I’m referee again, breaking up the clinch.

“Mary,” I ask, “What the hell?”

“You wouldn’t understand, Sol.” She calls me Sol ‘cause my name’s Ben Solomon.

“Try me.”

Mary goes on a while about how I know nothing about Joe, what a real shit he is, how he treats her like a prisoner and servant, not a wife. How when people are around, he puts on a great show and she goes along with it, otherwise there’s hell to pay.

Maybe that’s true. I never saw it. But now she’s with this Schmoe. And Joe’s homicidal.

“He’s a good man. He loves me,” Mary proclaims. “His name’s Shemar.”

Shemar? I think—the Samaritan? Geesh!

“He’s a fucking pimp. A dead pimp,” Joe spits.

“Nobody’s dying here tonight,” I say. “You kill him, then what?”

“She’s next. After she watches the motherfucker bleed out.”

Not sure what to do, I tell Mary to wait in the bedroom. I take Joe’s cuffs and shove the Samaritan into the bathroom where I chain his hands to the radiator and cuff an ankle to a water pipe. “Relax, asshole. I’ll figure this out.”

“Joe, pour yourself a drink. Have a seat. But—one step toward the bathroom and I’ll duct tape you to the chair.” I search the apartment, finding two pieces—a .22 revolver and a .38 snub nose. I pocket the .22 and shove the .38 under my belt.

“Joe, so far, all this is manageable. Mary just wants out and Shemar won’t press charges. Why not just let things go?”

“I earn my living, risk my life stopping bad people from doing bad things. These are bad

people. They're up to something. Maybe to do me in."

"They haven't broken any laws. Tonight, you have."

"Ain't about law. It's about justice."

"Vengeance."

"Tomato, potato. I call it justice."

"How're you gonna do it?"

"I'm takin' asshole back to the roof. He's gonna slip and fall."

"Then?"

"Mary's grief compels her to press the muzzle of that .38 upon her ample breast and bang."
"What about me?"

"I hope you're gonna leave the hardware behind, walk down the block, knock back a few bourbons before heading home to bed. Once you're gone, I set the scene, so nobody ever knows we were here."

"I can't do that."

"I think I can take you," Joe says. "Take your service piece, plus Shalimar's hardware you're storing. I do what needs doin' and afterwards you do what you gotta do. Turn me in, take me in, put me down."

"Shemar," I say.

"Huh?"

"You said 'Shalimar' like the perfume."

"Screw off."

"Joe, you're talkin' like a friggin' crazy man."

"Will you testify that in court?"

Mary calls from the bedroom, "Sol?"

I open the bedroom door and Mary's pointing an S&W .357 at me, center mass.

“Mary?”

“Sol. Shemar and I are leaving. I’d like your help. I don’t want nobody hurt. Not even Joe.”

Staring at the .357, I think three-pistola Shemar ain’t quite the Samaritan Mary claims. I wonder if him and Mary ain’t up to something nefarious? I’m having doubts now about Joe—but I’ve gotta compartmentalize here.

“I’ll help.”

“Toss your pistol and Shemar’s guns onto the bed.”

I do that.

“Now, we’re going to unchain Shemar and cuff Joe instead.”

We walk into the living room. Joe leaps from his seat.

Mary shows him the .357.

“Joe,” I say, “She’s got us. Let it go.”

Joe looks puzzled. I nod. He looks again. I nod. Then—he nods and sits down.

Mary and I unchain Shemar. They step from the bathroom and Joe takes Shemar down. I wrench the revolver from Mary.

In the living room, Mary and Shemar sit on the couch. Joe and I don nitrile gloves. Joe rounds up the guns, unloads them, wipes them clean. Hands the .38 to Mary and the .357 to Shemar. Joe takes them back, reloads them.

I pour two glasses of wine, tell the couple to drink and set the glasses down again.

I help Mary hold the .38 to her ample bosom. Joe guides Shemar’s hand with the .357 to the Schmoe’s temple.

END

MARYAH CONVERSE

SEEKING CITRUS

Shafiq knew there would be shooting. There was always shooting. And he knew he would probably come home empty-handed. Again. It didn't change why he had to go.

His feet hurt, blistered where the strap of his sandal snapped on yesterday's trek, battered by rubble poking into his thick calluses through too-thin soles of what were meant to be indoor shoes. Most of all, sore to the bone from all the hours he'd been on his feet today, and yesterday, and every day of the last three weeks since they'd come south again. But the pain in his feet was no worse than the persistent ache in his belly.

A few days ago, his sister had found a handful of khubeyza, scraggly weeds growing out of the corner of a collapsed building, and Mama had shredded it finely and boiled it in lots of salty seawater, a thin broth that almost felt like food but was mostly brine. Yesterday the khubeyza broth was gone; all Mama had left to boil for them was a couple sugar packets and a chamomile teabag she'd been saving for medicinal purposes since they'd left the rubble of their twice-bombed home.

The first time they had left their home in Nazla, they'd driven away in Baba's car – five children squeezed in the back seat, the baby on Mama's lap, each with a bag of essentials in the trunk, all the canned goods and pasta from their cupboards on the floorboards under the kids' feet. Shafiq held in his lap a heavy bag of oranges, lemons and clementines, the first fruits of a harvest from their walled back garden.

Since he was a little boy, he had soaked up every piece of knowledge he could find about caring for citrus, growing a private orchard that was the envy of their neighbors, because he knew what the family tradition of nurturing citrus trees meant to his mother. Her favorite grandmother Teita's farm up north in Sawafir had produced bountiful citrus harvests year after year for generations, selling Jaffa oranges and green and yellow lemons as far away as Jerusalem, and exporting from the port of Gaza to even farther afield. As they were driving away, Mama had strung the Nazla house's key around her neck, next to the skeleton key to her Teita's stone house in Sawafir that almost certainly hadn't existed for decades. Shafiq craned his neck to watch out the rear window until the last crown of the last citrus tree disappeared from view.

Mama's brother had a copy of the Nazla housekey, and a few days later, khaaloh Tawfiq

and two other uncles had moved their families out of their apartments in the besieged, cramped warren of Jabaliya Camp, into the three bedrooms of Mama and Baba's house. When the phones worked, they sometimes heard from the uncles in Nazla, and khaaloh Tawfiq had made a point of praising Shafiq's luscious oranges and clementines.

By the time the first ceasefire came, Baba's car had been crushed under a falling minaret, but they found someone going north to look for his mother in Beit Lahya; he had seats free for Baba and Mama and the baby in the cab, and let the kids ride in the back of his pickup truck. They still had their little bags of essentials, but there remained only a handful of canned vegetables and a couple kilos of rice. These things were becoming expensive, with fewer and fewer aid trucks coming through the only two open border crossings that remained.

Shafiq had heard weeks ago that the house had been hit – fortunately, none of his cousins had been in the bedroom that had taken the most damage. That didn't prepare him for the look of a corner of the house and garden wall turned to rubble, the posters on his sister's wall now visible from the street. In six months of war, Shafiq had seen thousands of bombed out buildings as they'd moved from shared apartment to school-turned-shelter to abandoned half a house, but this time it was personal, his sister's curtains, the bismullah cut short that his mother had painted cerulean blue high on the external wall for protection. This destruction unsettled his stomach in a new, more disconcerting way, made his fingers tremble.

But he didn't cry until he came around the back of the house and saw the second crater. Smaller than the blast out front, it had ripped through three of his most mature citrus trees – two oranges and a green lemon – and a section of the garden wall where for several years he'd been training grapes on a trellis. The trees listed at hard angles away from each other, torn limbs leaving gaping wounds in the trunks, roots protruding towards the sky.

They knew the peace would be incomplete and brief, and Shafiq knew he might not have long with his trees. He begged Baba and his uncles for every minute of internet they would give him on their phones to research citrus propagation. Deciding that cuttings would be the most mobile, he scoured the streets and rubble all around the neighborhood for discarded water bottles and juice boxes, and painstakingly sawed the tops off with a sharp rock. Shafiq scoured the limbs of the undamaged trees for the healthiest twigs with several bright, pale green leaf nodes, and convinced his mother to let him use one of the kitchen knives they would inevitably have to leave behind, in order to sever his cuttings as cleanly as possible.

It wasn't advisable to use garden soil that might carry diseases, but that was all Shafiq had.

He did his best to mix the cleanest-looking dirt collected farthest from the blast sites with plenty of pebbles to resemble a pumice mix. There was no hope of finding rooting hormones, so he prayed over his cuttings instead. Prayed, bismullah, that they would root, would remain healthy long enough to be replanted, would grow tall and strong and produce citrus for his Mama again, inshallah. He settled the cuttings together in the bottom half of an empty olive oil tin, tied plastic over the top, and set it in a sunny spot.

When they were forced southward again, Shafiq bored holes in the oil tin so he could tie on a shredded T-shirt handle and haul his seedlings along through displacement after displacement until, one day while Mama and the little kids were waiting at the soup kitchen and Shafiq was searching for water for his seedlings, a bomb struck the half of a ruined house they'd been staying in. A wall collapsed on his seedlings, and his napping Baba and elder brother, too; none survived.

Shafiq was man of the house now, provider for Mama, three little sisters and the baby.

After the second ceasefire showed signs of lasting, when families began moving north again, Shafiq's family went with them, on foot this time, their bags much lighter now, and their bellies, too. He dreamed of his orange and lemon and clementine trees every night. Sometimes they beckoned him onward, or sang him the lullabies his Mama had sung to all her babies. Sometimes the citrus trees burned in a whirling inferno, and Shafiq woke choking on a scream he didn't want his Mama to hear.

But when they finally made it back to their small rhomboid of land, there was no house, no trees. Little remained but splintered wood and shattered cinderblocks half-buried between hardened bulldozer tracks in the mud. No home, no trees, no seedlings, no brother, no Baba.

Even so, they were back on their land, and this time they were determined to stay as long as they could. Most of the concrete pad that had been their patio remained, and a small piece of wall. They were able to scavenge some rebar and scraps of wood to frame a shelter, and a patchwork of feed bags and blankets and tarps, even some corrugated metal, enough for two walls and a roof. It didn't help with the cold, but kept some of the rain off. Mama told the girls they were nomads like their father's Bedouin grandfather, finding life in the desert wherever they could, like the original Arabs.

Most days Mama sent the girls on a long "Arab trek" with dented soup pots to wait in line at the soup kitchen, and most days they returned with a thin soup of lentils and vegetables, very occasionally with a few rounds of bread. When they returned empty-handed, Mama knew where khubeyza and other edible weeds were beginning to emerge between the occupier's bulldozer tracks.

Then the bombs came again, and the total blockade. They'd been hungry for months, but now even the soup kitchens were shutting down. There was no food but weeds, no food but what scraps the occupiers were doling out at gunpoint.

To even have a chance of these small handouts, they had to leave their land and return south again, walking three days with tens of thousands of others – mothers with children in hand, grandmothers held upright by grandsons, brothers carrying amputees on their backs, orphans with their found families. They trudged over and around the mounds and shattered shells of restaurants, mosques, apartment buildings, clinics and offices. They slept where they could find shelter amid the ruins, and started again in the morning.

Fellow travelers tried to share what scraps of food were available, what water could be boiled, but the girls were getting weaker and weaker. They had long learned not to complain of their pinched stomachs and parched lips, but the baby was inconsolable. He should be taking his first unsteady steps, but was still as small and weak as a baby half his age. Mama always let the girls eat first, and didn't get enough for herself to keep her milk flowing, but the hospitals and clinics they passed were running out of formula, and the baby needed more than thin khubeyza broth.

When they finally arrived back in the south, within a couple hours' walk of one of the two new aid distribution sites, they found shelter in the remaining corner of a bombed-out apartment's sitting room, but at least it offered a sliver of roof in the rain.

Only Shafiq remained to fetch food for his family.

So, he ignored the pain in his feet, his legs, his belly, his knotted shoulders, and trudged onward in the thin pre-dawn light. These new distribution centers ran out of supplies even faster than most, and it wasn't a short walk, so he tried to get moving as early as he could. With the sun just inches above the horizon, the high chain-link fence topped in barbed wire came into view, the narrow cattle chutes they all squeezed into while they waited.

He was early enough to be near the front, but the more people squeezed in behind him, the more uneasily he watched the occupation soldiers with their rifles angled down. Someone stumbled against the fence, rattled the chain-link, and the rifles jerked up. Shafiq suddenly felt an itch between his eyes, as if someone were staring at him through their crosshairs.

A shot rang out, and then another. The air was shrill with screaming as Shafiq was buffeted from all sides from frantically jostling bodies, but there was nowhere to go, no escape. When a steady barrage of gunfire followed, Shafiq dropped down, knees close to his chest, arms curled over his head. Was this how it was written that he would die?

Shafiq tightened his arms over his ears, trying to drown out the sounds of terror and pain,

and closed his eyes. The faces of his family flashed through his mind, and his father and brother in their burial shrouds. He saw his mother's beloved citrus trees: tangerines, Jaffa oranges, green and yellow lemons. He pictured each careful step of selecting and preparing his cuttings. He imagined their final planting behind a new family home, settling his seedlings in the ground in a peaceful hillside meadow, patting the soil down around them, surrounding each with a low dirt berm, then pouring water around each from a clay pitcher that never grew empty.

If this was Shafiq's time, let him die dreaming of what he loved.

END

AUTHOR BIOS

Marisa P. Clark is the author of the poetry collection BIRD (Unicorn P, 2024). Her prose and poetry appear in Shenandoah, Cream City Review, Nimrod, Epiphany, Foglifter, Prairie Fire, Rust + Moth, and elsewhere. Best American Essays 2011 recognized her creative nonfiction among its Notable Essays. A queer writer, she grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, came out in Atlanta, Georgia, and lives in New Mexico with two parrots, a standard poodle, and whatever wildlife and strays chance to visit.

Calla Smith lives and writes in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home. She has published a collection of flash fiction "What Doesn't Kill You", and her work can also be found in several literary journals.

Sarah Dickenson Snyder carves in stone & rides her bike. Travel opens her eyes. She has four poetry collections: The Human Contract (2017), Notes from a Nomad (nominated for the Massachusetts Book Awards 2018), With a Polaroid Camera (2019), and Now These Three Remain (nominated for the Massachusetts Book Awards 2023). Poems have been nominated for Best of Net and Pushcart Prizes. Work is in Rattle, Verse Daily, and RHINO. sarahdickensonsnyder.com @sarahdickensonsnyder

David J.S. Pickering is a native Oregonian, born and raised in the working class of the North Coast. His first poetry collection, Jesus Comes to Me as Judy Garland, received the Airlie Prize in 2020. His poetry may be found in a variety of journals including Cirque, Relief: A Journal of Art and Faith, Passager, Tar River Poetry, Mantis, Lips, Reed Magazine, and Gertrude. David lives with his husband in Portland where, even as you read this, he has likely had too much coffee.

Heather Pegas lives in Los Angeles where she writes grant proposals, essays, stories and flash. Her work is featured in publications such as Heavy Feather Review, Does It Have Pockets, Weird Lit and Tiny Molecules. You can find her at www.heatherpegas.com.

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Diane Gottlieb is the editor of Awakenings: Stories of Body & Consciousness, Manna Songs: Stories of Jewish Culture & Heritage, and Grieving Hope. Her writing appears in Brevity, Witness, SmokeLong Quarterly, 2023 Best Microfiction, Florida Review, and River Teeth among many other lovely places. Diane is the Prose/CNF Editor at Emerge Literary Journal and the Special Projects Editor at ELJ Editions. Find her on social @DianeGotAuthor.

Briana Naseer is a Pakistani-American school psychologist and poet living in Chicago, Illinois. She has a bachelor's degree from the University of South Florida, and a master's degree in education and an education specialist degree from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology. Her debut poetry collection is entitled Rind.

Shannon Cates, a UX designer living in Annapolis, Maryland, finds comfort in rainy days and the written word. When not crafting digital experiences, she's immersed in poetry, often with her cat by her side. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Black Fox, Press Pause Press, and Bodega Magazine among other journals.

Logan Markko's recent fiction has been published in Consequence, Chaotic Merge, The Literary Hatchet, and Brilliant Flash Fiction. He lives in Michigan with his wonderful wife, their two sons, and a 100-pound American Bulldog named Sampson.

Joel Bush reads things. He also writes things. Well, sometimes he reads the things he writes. That tends to help. His work has been featured in The Spotlong Review, Meniscus, and Thimble Literary Magazine.

CONTINUED...

AUTHOR BIOS

Annie Weeks has been writing fiction since the beginning of 2019, after a long career as a graphic designer. "Der Tod", is one chapter in a full-length novel in progress.

Callie Crouch has an MA in Writing Studies from Saint Joseph's University and is attending law school at CU Boulder. Her work is inspired by growing up in the South and appears in numerous journals and anthologies, including Barbar, Coffin Bell, Olit, Volney Road Review, Quarter Press, River and South Review, and Barely South Review. Callie is from Florida but lives and writes in Colorado with her cat, Idgie. You can find her at calliecrouch.com

A. Z. Foreman is a linguist, poet, short story author and/or translator pursuing a doctorate at the Ohio State University. His work has been featured in the Threepenny Review, ANMLY, Rattle, the Los Angeles Review and elsewhere including two people's tattoos but not yet the Starfleet Academy Quarterly or Tattooine Monthly. He writes from the edge of thought between sleep and waking. He wants to pet your dog.

Margot Wizansky's poems have appeared in Missouri Review, Bellevue, and elsewhere. She edited What the Poem Knows, won residencies with Carlow University, Innisfree, Ireland, and with Writers@Work. Lily Poetry Review published Wild for Life. Kelsay Books, The Yellow Sweater, and her new collection Random Music in a Small Galaxy (2025).

Julian Bauld grew up in Nova Scotia and is a writer and teacher in Toronto, Canada.

David Kirby teaches at Florida State University. His latest books are a poetry collection, The Winter Dance Party, Poems 1983-2023, and a textbook modestly entitled The Knowledge: Where Poems Come From and How to Write Them. Entertainment Weekly has called Kirby's poetry one of "5 Reasons to Live."

Paul Hostovsky's poems and essays appear widely online and in print. He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and the Writer's Almanac. His newest book is PERFECT DISAPPEARANCES (Kelsay, 2025). He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter and braille instructor. Website: paulhostovsky.com

Atma Frans' writing has won first prize in Quagmire Magazine's Poetry Contest, second in Muriel's Journey Prize and has been nominated for Best of the Net 2026. Her work has been published in Arc Poetry Magazine, Contemporary Verse 2, The New Quarterly, FreeFall, Prairie Fire Magazine, Obsessed with Pipework, Lighthouse Literary Journal and elsewhere. She lives on the unceded territory of the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh people in Gibsons, B.C, Canada where she hikes, writes and wild swims.

Scott Ruescher's new book, Above the Fold, is available from Finishing Line Press. He has new poems in Black Horse Review, Pangyrus, the Somerville News, and The Lantern --the online magazine of the Colby Museum of Art. https://www.scottruescher.com/

Nick Di Carlo has taught writing and literature in traditional and nontraditional settings, including maximum security correctional facilities where Lawrence R. Reis, author of Wolf Masks: Violence in Contemporary Poetry, noted: "Dr. Di Carlo quickly gained the respect and cooperation of the inmates. The men in his classes recognized many similarities between their experiences and his. Those experiences, often dark and sometimes violent, inform and power Dr. Di Carlo's own writing."

Now a 2025 Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Fellow in Jordan, **Maryah Converse** was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Jordan (2004-2006), an English teacher in Jordan (2008-2010), and a student in Cairo during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Her publications include New Madrid Journal, Silk Road Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, L'Éphémère Review, and more. She holds a Masters in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, and is a PhD candidate in Arabic applied linguistics.


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