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Letter From the Editor

I started reading a book recently by Brene Brown and she starts with a quote from Theodore Roosevelt:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,

because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement,

who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

The author explained what these means in a few different contexts. One of which was writing and art in general. The writing piece was interesting. She said that we feel vulnerable when we share something close to us. Sharing a story, whether it is nonfiction or fiction, is exciting and scary. There is a close bond with the piece of art you’ve written and to potentially have critics come after you and say how they feel about it can hurt us.

But at least you did it. At least you put yourself out there for people to see the gift you have and you should be proud of it. You achieved something that most are scared to do.

To all the authors this month and in past issues, thank you for putting yourself in the arena and sharing your gift with us.

Dani Watkins

Dani Watkins
Editor-In-Chief, Book Smuggler's Den Literary Magazine

Conclusions From Krakens Cutting the Cheese

Amanda Bender

There are a fair number of folks in this world who deny Kraken flatuate. But in fact, Kraken can and quite often do too and, between me and you, it is one of the purest and most fragrant things on this earth to behold. In fact, in some cultures, it has become a christening of sorts because... well, what better way to solidify one's existence than being blessed by sea titans steeped in such rich myth?

Yes, they may have moldy suction-cupped tentacles, and massive heads shaped like hot air balloons, and razors for teeth that make spears look like toothpicks. But deep down—in their bowls—krakens are just like me and like you. For they too have a sphincter that they must let loose every so often to allow all those fermenting gases to pass through, and it's not like they asked for sailors to soil themselves at the sight of them or spin tall tales of their "cruelty." I mean, like it or not a Kraken has to eat.

Granted there was that one Kraken who nearly destroyed that ancient Greek city-state, but that was just one time, and everything turned out fine—for the most part.

So sure Kraken can swallow ships whole, but it's only because they need to ensure they're getting their daily doses of fiber to help them move things along. Unlike the leafy green gunk you and I can fill our guts with to keep our digestive tracks in good health, ships are far better for Kraken because the sodium content in algae is abominable. Which is why, in a recent study, when scientists took a look at the microbes milling about in a Kraken's gut, they discovered that when undigested bits of splinters and sails, or flesh and bone, or silver and gold moved through a Kraken's large intestine, the bacteria feeding off these man-made riches did not secrete hydrogen sulfide, but instead emitted the citrusy essence of grapefruit.

Of course, more intestines will need to be inspected to dispel the disbelief of outspoken and stubborn naysayers. But while the results may still be inconclusive, the evidence certainly suggests that you, me—we—have some serious rethinking to do.

Oh, Julia!

Patrick Bruskiwich

Oh, Julia! Things boiled over just before Julia left for her residency back east. She had just graduated from med school had a few days off.

We had been seeing each other years, but I knew that I was just one boy among many others. For Julia, her career came first.

We didn't have a complicated friendship. We were both very Catholic and went to church together. When she was at med school, I sat for her as her ersatz male patient, and there was no mystery left in me. Still, I loved her.

Early Sunday morning, Julia called to invite me over so that we go for a bicycle ride, then to church and dinner. When she called I did not think anything of it. She was, after all, leaving for residency in Ontario and I might not see her again for many months.

When I arrived Julia was glowing. Her parents were out. Instead of sitting in their living room she invited me into her bedroom for the first time.

I sat on the bed as she got ready. I watched her in the mirror. To my great surprise, she took off her blouse. She did not have a brassiere on.

She turned to me and asked, "Do you like what you see?"

Speechless, I blushed and turned my head away.

She huffed, put back on her blouse and stormed out. I dashed after her. As we stood on the porch she bitinglly said, "I don't want to see you anymore. I invited you into my bedroom and there you just sat speechlessly!"

She slammed the door in my face. That was the last time I saw her. Even after three decades, I am still scratching my head.

Oh, Julia!*

This name has been changed to protect this individual.

For June

David Calandro

I remember June in St. Louis and being poor. My childhood was soaked in summer sweat and sleepless nights. Dripping with sweat I walked through Forest Park, past the Jewel Box, thinking of Tennessee Williams. Tennessee Williams' "Glass Menagerie" was my St. Louis, not Judy Garland's "Meet Me in St. Louis."

Aunt June lived in the state mental hospital where the smell of stale urine was strongest in summer. No air-conditioning for her either. I was already damaged goods by age five myself, so I accompanied my mother to visit her sister. My brother was pristine though. He didn't join us.

June didn't know when she moved to St. Louis during the war that the city would become famous for electro-shock therapy or for being the place where the actual exorcism occurred that became the blockbuster movie, "The Exorcist." She was a lovely lady. She could remember every Hollywood movie and movie star. She brightened when I visited life there than anywhere else. We brought her cartons of cigarettes that permanently stained her fingers. We brought her boxes of chocolates that she consumed minutes after receiving --a definite sign of how much smarter she was than anyone else in the family, considering that other patients stole her belongings.

Her father, my paternal grandfather, asked about June whenever we visited. By early morning he had already positioned himself with a glass of whiskey. He didn't visit her, nor did her mother, who just sat silently in a corner rocking chair. Aunt June was one of five girls, including my mother, who slept in a single bed in the same shack we visited my grandparents in. The potbelly stove that my grandfather always had to discuss on my every visit sat in the tiny living room as it had always. Soon after greeting me, grandpa would point to the stove and explain for the hundredth time how it was what put Aunt June in the condition she was in.

As a toddler, Aunt June pulled a pan of boiling water from the top of that stove over onto herself and burned almost all of her tiny body. The doctor had come and applied an ointment everywhere on scorched flesh and then wrapped in her bandages head to toe that stayed on for a year. I never quite figured out how those burns and bandages translated into my aunt's nervous breakdown as an intelligent, attractive woman in her early twenties when her husband left with her son and daughter. Maybe it didn't, but I loved Aunt June anyway, and she loved me, and that's all that mattered. I guess now that I was lucky that I was already damaged enough as a young child to be considered immune to entering the dark and scary place of my aunt's abode and consciousness. My aunt is always in my heart and in the St. Louis that was my home, along with the characters of Tennessee Williams and endless humidity and heat.

Martinez

Gloria Cruz

His name was Jesus, though the Navy changed it to Jose, not that anyone called him that. Most people called him Martinez. You might ask what a Mexican kid from the desert southwest had in common with me, a WOP from Providence, Rhode Island. I've wondered the same thing myself.

We were in the US Navy stationed in the Pacific Ocean during the last year of World War II. A group of seriously mean guys had taken a dislike to me. I never figured out why they hated me. Maybe they knew something I didn't know about myself. At least, I didn't realize it then.

One night I finished the last watch and headed to the showers. Scully cornered me in the locker room. Four hulks stood behind him.

"Outta my way, Scully."

"Can't let you do that, Ponzi." Scully landed a blow to my gut and I doubled over in pain.

Chuy pushed his way into the room.

"Get outta here, Martinez. This ain't your fight," yelled Scully.

"You call this a fight? Five to one is more like murder."

"It's none of your business."

"Right! Except that some things just piss me off."

"You're going to defend this wimp?"

"Better than an arrogant asshole."

Scully let fly with a right hook toward Chuy's face. Chuy blocked the punch and landed an uppercut to Scully's jaw. He fell in a heap, out cold. His friends gazed at him and then shuffled out of the room.

Groceries

Molly Fessler

Buckle up.

Yes, ma'am.

We backed out of the driveway, coasting into the street. The leaves had just started to turn, piling in the gutter like lost mittens.

I gotta get to those when we get home.

Wednesday snorted.

I can do it.

She rolled through the stop sign, earning a reproachful eyebrow from a jogger at the corner.

I can.

I said it to myself this time, turning my head away from her. The road cut an asymmetrical slice down the face of the neighborhood. Two lines of identical houses painted on an ocean sky with crayon green lawns and loud red mailboxes.

The trees spilling leaves into the road were young, apologetically so. Their arms were skinny, like mine, but their slightness could be attributed to youth.

I pinched the skin gathered on the tops of my knees.

Do you have the list?

Yeah.

I pulled it out from the loose pocket at my hip.

Wednesday wrinkled her nose.

Don't read it.

While I shrunk, Wednesday grew. It was as if she and the baby were trying to compensate; keep the overall weight of our family triad at equilibrium.

It was perplexing -- Weds was still as nauseous as I was. We took it in turns to kneel on the terry cloth bath mat, occasionally elbowing one another out of the way in the first throws of hot, bulbous panic.

In the beginning, we tried to comfort the other. I pulled back her hair, grown coarse with hormones. She pressed a cool washcloth to the thin, peeling skin on my head.

We'd given these habits away, in favor of simple, roommate-esque kindnesses.

Leaving the toilet seat up.

Swiping slugs of puke from the lip of the bowl.

Flushing.

Turning into the parking lot, Wednesday cut off a mini-van to secure a spot near the doors. The woman behind the wheel honked. My wife lifted a ragged middle finger in her direction. I gave her a high five.

What if we didn't do the grocery shopping today?

We have a jar of cocktail olives.

She parked, pushed the seat back, and tried to wiggle down over the middle console to rest her head on my lap. She made it inches from my shoulder before she got stuck, her belly wedging firmly between steering wheel and door. I leaned into the cup holder to break the distance, stretching my hand out to rest on her distended abdomen.

Planet baby.

We looked out the window together at the carts traveling across the lot. The woman Wednesday had flipped off stalked past, glaring.

Weds stuck her tongue out.

We can do this, I said, taking her hand and squeezing it, grip weaker than the baby's kick. We won't be able to smell anything, probably.

She nodded. I could feel her head bobbing at my shoulder.

We slipped two blue hospital masks over our mouths and noses. She pulled on a pair of surgical men's gloves, her hands swollen with fluid.

Ready?

Ready.

Creature

Mason Finamore

The air was suffocating in the dark room. It was dead silent as nobody dared to make a sound. Shane was in the doorway with a giant, pointed rock in his hand. He was a tall, chubby teen, unlike my slender build. His black hair vanished perfectly in the darkness. His dark brown eyes were the only things illuminated in the light of a small crack at the bottom of the door. His dagger was eaten an hour ago. I was crouched under the table with Vanessa, who had a single, dull knife in her hand. Her wide, blue eyes seeming grey in the midst of the darkness, still managed to stand out perfectly to me, and her wavy, brown hair seemed black in the absence of light. I had no weapon to defend myself from a looming threat.

The very faint sound of a snarl hit my ears, alerting everyone of the incoming threat. A shadow moved past the door, and I felt my already light skin becoming much paler and shivers went up my spine. This was going to be the day I died; the day my friends and I die at the hands of the same beast that had been stalking us all day. We all were too young to die, us only being in our late teens, and now we found ourselves staring directly into the eyes of death. None of us dared to make any sudden movements.

The darkness at the bottom of the door moved past, and a heavy tension was automatically removed from the room. I started breathing again, which I hadn't noticed I stopped. Vanessa turned to me, panic still evident in her eyes, and then turned back to the door. Her face was stone-cold serious, and her whole body trembled every second. Then, as quickly as the tension was lifted away from the room, sheer terror filled it as light flooded the room. The door had been broken through, and the sight before us was nothing short of horrifying.

The creature itself was massive and resembled a lizard. It stood on two feet and had two, razor-sharp looking claws. It had the head and tail of a crocodile. Its eyes were a pale yellow with two small, black orbs for pupils. A long, snake-like tongue hung from the side of its mouth, and a single row of pointed teeth protruded its light-blue gums, eager to take a bite out of the nearest person.

It stood in the doorway for a good minute or two, just sniffing the air. Vanessa and I were both almost completely illuminated. Shane stood beside the doorway, his back completely up against the wall. He held the rock in his hand and raised it to his chest. His eyes were squeezed shut and sweat poured down his forehead. The only sound in the room was the snarls from the creature. Then, slowly, the creature made its way into the room, sniffing the air to find the first victim.

Talas

Karen Frederick

The light departed. Demons roamed the land tearing flesh, consuming hearts. The child, Talas, taken from her mother's dead arms spoke her sorrow song and they took her tongue. She wrote; they took her hands. She cried; they took her eyes. She danced her pain; they took her feet. They tied her ravaged body to a signpost, a warning. Desiccated flesh fell from bone, became new earth, feeding water and air. The tendrils of her heart song rose, whipsawing the land, purging it of pain. Talas sang. Lamentations for the new beginning. The heavens weep Talas sorrow song.

Pocket Watch

Eliot Hudson

Pocket Watch
Silly how it knows time without consulting the heavens, how buried within his pocket he still feels something of a pulse as the bones keep time, beneath shallow pockets of hillsides. But I'm not sure why, because there are no calendars in heaven, only in hell. So I hope grandmother does not know the months that have passed, but I'm sure grandfather does, he feels it lashing the marrow of his soul.

The Piano That Killed Me

Bibiana Ossai

It was such a dream. The day of our wedding. Echoes of laughter, songs in the background, foods and drinks. The whole black community in Queens had come to celebrate with us. A dream that fell short of its freedom and calmness when the sky went dark.

Three years after our wedding, Malik lost his factory job and I had none. So, we relied on the money and inheritance my parents left me before they died. Like my Mama, I decided to be a housewife, to care for Malik and Junior, our precious little boy. But, with the loss of his job, invented a whole new Malik, an alcoholic who lost all the care in the world. A violent and devilish doppelganger who lavished all of our money on the most expensive wines.

When we started dating in 1993, Malik was one of the few to be employed in the brewery factory that had just opened 50 miles from where we lived. He was a young orphan, successful, handsome, caring and had loving. We met at a bar a few blocks away from my parents' home, and I had just come out of college at the time. Malik came in with a couple of his guy friends who knew my friends, we all sat together around the same table, talking and laughing the night away.

At around 11 pm, I got up to leave, and Malik escorted me home. In his words "a young lady like yourself shouldn't be seen out at this time of night, I will walk you home."

All of our friends, who I am sure were drunk said in unison "what a gentleman. And a great idea."

On getting to my parents' home, he kissed me good night on my blushing cheeks and said "hope to see you some other time Miss. Goodbye." Our next meeting was our official date, which led us down the path of marriage in 1995.

Then came a cold winter evening in 1997, we had just returned from church and I was playing the old white piano that rested on the white wall several inches beneath our framed wedding picture, for our little one-year-old boy when Malik hit the back of my head with one of his expensive wine bottles. My head slumped onto the piano's keyboard. It was the last song I played, the last time I felt the rhythm of the piano and the last time I felt my little boy's palms grab my ankle. My lost love is all I remember of the earth.

Enraptured in Shadow

W.T. Paterson

They tumbled through the door, kissing and groping. They landed on a twin-sized bed that was tucked in a little too tight, the dead air from the mattress exhaling in a groan.

Detective Bowery unclipped the badge from his belt and tossed it to the floor, where it landed on the cold wood planks with a solitary piercing collision. Annette leaned back to start to peel her sweater off when she began to notice the room. Old posters that were frayed at the edges hung from thumbtacks on the wall, perhaps always crooked and misaligned.

The thin wood doors to the closet were open. Belts tied into loops choking the shelves, shirts hanging lifelessly from their hangers, pants sprawled across the floor. The natural light from the windows angled away from the closet leaving it enraptured in shadow.

There was a stereo system on the dresser near the door. A 3-disc changer, a relic of sorts, with a neatly stacked tower of CD's next to it. None of the CD's seemed to match the posters on the wall. Instead of punk rock and metal, there were best of compilations, and jazz covers of Christmas songs.

A braided rug dyed blue and yellow was at the foot of the bed. It still had the remains of the tag where the price was stapled, the white paper unable to wriggle free. It was new, and not worn out like everything else she saw, like it was a detail added to a story after it had already been published.

"Are you worried about your son coming home?" Annette asked, eyeing the markings on the doorframe. They measured height. Each year, starting with shaky lines, someone had tracked growth. The lines became steadier the further up the door they went, but no new additions had been made in two years.

"No," Bowery said in barely a whisper.

The mood was gone, the passion had faltered. Bowery sat softly on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands wondering why all good things in his life were destined to leave him.

"We don't have to do this now," Annette said. She picked up a framed picture from the bedside table. It showed a teen with sad eyes, the same proud chin as his father and same caring eyebrows of the mother, in between those same members. They were all smiling, but it was just for the picture.

"Yes we do," he said. He tried to unbutton the rest of his shirt, but they kept slipping out of his grasp. His fingers were trembling, which spread to his wrists and slid up towards his elbows. Instead of giving in to grace, he gripped the side of his shirt and pulled so hard that the buttons

flew off and bounced off of the ground. They landed with a similar noise to the marbles that used to tink across the wood only a decade before.

My son barely talks to me anymore, too,” Annette said, rising to her feet and adjusting her sweater. She put a compassionate hand on Bowery’s shoulder, but he slipped it off with a shrug.

Bowery unclipped the gun and holster from his belt and placed it gently on the nightstand. The barrel was silently pointed at the pillow.

“It’s different,” he said.

Devil's Food

Laura Roberts

The Inspired Devotion Company has always made cakes that taste heavenly. Their specialty is Angel Food, of course, though somehow they've even managed to inspire a chorus of Gabriel's finest with their take on the devil's own chocolate cake. Today I was using one of their finest mixes, a coconut cake that was supposed to be light and airy enough to convert all the sinners at my Easter table. Lord knows I needed the help, as Pete had invited our next door neighbors—a bunch of proud pagans who wore pentagrams and lit bonfires nightly in their backyard. The bell jar that surrounded my cake was just for show. At least until Betty Sue started to grow horns during the blessing. When her eyes turned red and she started shouting "Hail Satan!" in that otherworldly voice, well, I just had to take matters into my own hands, didn't I? Martha Stewart would have approved of the way I managed to slay the demon using only a glass cake topper and serving wedge, without getting a single drop of blood on my Sunday best. "Slice of cake, anyone?"

A Stone's Throw

M.C. Schmidt

We come to the end of this block, to the north side of the downtown cemetery, eye-level with weathered gravestones, the dead nestled into a rising hill and secured by a bailey and wrought iron fence.

“Again?” I say.

“This is where the street ends.” Her little shrug.

Violet walks on, up the ramp and through the gate. I watch her sandals follow the painted yellow stripe, worn now to uneven dashes and dots.

On the fence, a metal sign memorializes the years of these grounds' operation, but age has rusted it unreadable, the cemetery itself now a sort of corpse. The city, swelled to its borders, is here made to stop in grudging respect, streets that long to be built stilted by this constellation of crumbling shale and granite, obvious intersections unrealized, the dead still having their say.

On the street, cars begin to slow and fall into formation at a changed light, their drivers' eyes settling on me. I remove myself up the ramp.

Violet's ahead of me, rows of graves between us, her head lowered like some pious angel come to shepherd these lost souls. I call out the same joke as last time: “Barbara! They're coming to get you, Barbara!”

She ignores me, doesn't get it maybe.

I frown at her from this distance.

There are other places we could walk, a school with a playground at the other end of our street. There, I could push her on the swings, be cute. I wouldn't mind a push myself, honestly, what with everything gone so serious lately. Just the two of us, flying, close our eyes and jump and see if we can hold hands all the way to the ground.

Dumb, but that's where my head is. All day, I've felt a louche in my blood, looked forward to getting off and coming home, though maybe tonight she'd want to stay in. A person can only feel lousy for so many hours a day, after all, and for so many days in a row. But death is life in a steal town, my father under a spilt crane load when I was nine, Violet's father last winter, her mother right now losing to that same familiar cancer, her plot waiting beside her husband's in the cemetery across town, the one we never go to, Violet instead walking me here each evening like she's rehearsing with these wizened strangers before she can perform her grief for the unaccustomed dead man who was once her life's only essential man.

At the bottom of the hill, the light changes, I hear cars roll forward. Engine and radio sound advance and recedes like stones thrown by the living to protest this cemetery's reminder of finality. I walk to her, my partner since childhood, taller now, hips and a bust like the beautifully exaggerated sarcophagus of my childhood playmate whom I married at twenty not twenty months ago, promising myself to her until this town forces her to walk alone.

American Spirit

Michael Tiffin

The air in the church is suffocating. Actually, it might not be the air. It could be the rows of people dressed in black that could be mistaken for a death march. It's a beautiful church, one that could put the Vatican to shame. Uncle Jonathan always joked that it took special events to get him here. "Easter, Christmas, and Ash Wednesday," He counted on his meaty fingers in between drinks. I guess he forgot to count dying.

My mom stumbles up to the podium behind Uncle Jonathan's casket. He was a massive man, six five with fists like bricks. I flinched when I saw him. "My brother Jonathan was a great man," My mom begins, shaking like a leaf. I'm surprised they let her out of rehab. "Despite having lost his wife, he took my son in when I couldn't care for him. I'll be eternally grateful for that." I roll my eyes. Mom always has her head in the clouds. She never notices what is right in front of her. She makes it back to her seat without tripping. Family members that I don't recognize take their turns, raving about my Uncle's virtues.

After the fourth person mentions how generous Jonathan was to take me in, I can't take it anymore. I stand and push my way out of the pew. The speaker falls silent. Walking out is the easiest thing I've ever done.

I take a deep breath as the door slams behind me. The air feels lighter. I wander around the cemetery and run into a man sitting on a bench. I sit down next to him.

"What are you running from?" He asks.

"I'm not running."

"Yes, you are." He pulls out a pack of American Spirits. "Want one?"

I take the cigarette. We sit in silence for a while.

"He was an asshole, and I couldn't stand my family calling him a hero." Tears roll down my face.

"What'd he do?" The man doesn't look at me.

"All I could hear in there was the crack of his belt."

"Welcome to life, kid. It just gets worse." He refuses to look at me.

"No. No. That can't be true. Life's full of bullshit, but there's got to be more to it. I have to go back in there." I toss the cigarette away.

Just as I stand up, people start streaming out of the church. Hopes of making a scene disappear. I sit back down.

“Life never works out the way you want,” he finishes his smoke and starts another.

“I have nowhere to go.”

The realization dawns on me. Mom will go back to rehab. uncle Jonathan was the only one who took me in. To the rest of my family, I was trash sitting on the curb.

“Told you son, it just gets worse.” The man says. We sit there for a while. I start to agree with him. Eventually, he stands up, nodding goodbye. The sun sinks. I wish I wasn't alone.

All-Seeing Eyes

Yuliia Vereta

Five-year-old Kyle Johnson was standing in the middle of his grandmother's living room. His attention was tied to an old-fashioned tin box, standing on the shelf. He focused his eyes on it, thinking of the propriety of the thing he was planning to do.

Earlier this morning, after having some toasts and eggs for breakfast he got a sweet treat to taste with his milk. The box was full of prunes in chocolate. His grandma gave him two at the beginning and one more later, when he started begging so hard. Those prunes seemed to be best sweets he ever tasted.

“Can I have one more, Grandma?” he asked.

“I will be too much then,” she replied.

“What if I say ‘Pleease’?”

“Oh, Kyle, you should always say ‘please’, but still, you are not getting any of them before lunch. I don't want your mom to think that I spoil you and give you whatever you want.”

No matter what Kyle promised to do and what things to help out, his grandma didn't give him another candy.

It took him about an hour of waiting before he could finally sneak in the living room, while his grandma was in the garden. He hesitated for a minute, then took the chair, climbed on it and took one prune from the box. Then another. Then he put the box where it belonged and came back to the garden. Eating too many prunes could reveal him.

The moment he approached his grandma, she smelt the sweet flavor.

“Kyle, did not I tell you that I don't want you to spoil the appetite before lunch? Your mom will not be happy at all if you don't eat properly when she comes. She will be angry with me, not you.”

“But, it is not your fault if you didn't know,” he smiled, “It was me myself who took it, so there is nothing wrong, -he knew that grandma never punished him.

“It is wrong, Kyle. Doing things you were prohibited from is always wrong.”

“I should have been more careful. Next time you will not guess what I did if you never see it,” Kyle smiled.

“Even if I did not see it, God still saw what you did. Remember what I told you? God is all-seeing.”

“What does that mean?”

“God can see our deeds through our eyes and through other people’s eyes too. He can see everyone, anywhere in the world.”

“How would he see if I squeezed my eyes when taking prunes?”

“Remember that icon on the wall in the living room? God can see your deeds through Saint Andrew’s eyes too, so you better not touch prunes,” Grandma was getting impatient talking so much about things he wanted to do wrong.

During the next half an hour Kyle was busy helping his grandma in the garden. She did not come back to the prune issue until he came back ‘from the bathroom’ and stepped close enough for her to be able to smell the sweet flavor of chocolate prunes.

“Kyle, did not I tell you that God will punish you if you do wrong things?-He will never know, grandma.-Because you squeezed your eyes when eating?”

“No, because I cut that Saint’s eyes out.”

Smokes

Madeline Sexten-Yeatts

Seventy-seven miles per hour with the windows down. His thin lips barely held to the cigarette he was nursing. His last smoke. We were quitting and we were antsy. The wind was tying my hair into knots and the beginnings of a tan were just creeping up my right arm. I pointed feebly at the fields and the cows that dotted them, grazing and lazing in the remaining warmth of the setting June sun. I wanted to join them. The ride was smooth and silent. Maybe our wheels weren't even touching the pavement. We drove until night and kept going. I fell asleep for I don't know how long. I woke up to the front of the car crushed and my legs pinned. The impotent air bag on the driver's side was still neatly tucked inside the steering wheel. I had begged him to get it fixed. There was a fence down and some cattle had gotten loose. I couldn't make myself look and I didn't want to; I knew. I called an ambulance and lit a cigarette. Not my last smoke.

Contributors

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David Calandro is a semi-retired nurse and teacher who really wanted to be a journalist. His children's book, *Open*, was published in 2018, as was his article on the Four Freedoms. Born in St. Louis, he now lives in New Jersey. He has written a mystery novel for which he is seeking a publisher.

Gloria Cruz is an unpublished author currently living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her stories reflect issues of growing up Hispanic in the desert Southwest. "Martinez" is a 250-word flash fiction piece about the beginning of a friendship between two men from very different cultures.

Molly Fessler grew up on a llama farm outside Detroit, and studied at Bryn Mawr College. She is currently a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Her work has been published in *Real Simple*, *NPR.org*, and *Cicada Magazine*, among others. She bakes a fierce carrot cake. Her favorite type of berry is blue and she believes the best poems are written when stopped at a traffic light.

Mason Finamore is a 10th-grade student at Lincoln Park Performing Arts Chart School where his major is in literary arts, and these are three pieces that I have selected because I write 500-word stories that I feel pack a lot of meaning into a small space. You can follow Mason on Twitter is [@caffeineaddictedteen](#).

Karen Frederick is an avid reader, active runner and teacher. She has converted her lifelong joy of reading into a commitment to teaching very young children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to read and write. Karen Frederick comes from a musical family and grew up singing Bach and playing classical music.

Eliot Hudson is a native New Yorker and has been featured as "Author of the Month" for The Missing Slate and read at their Edinburgh Reading; he's also represented Lalitamba by reading at the Popsickle Brooklyn Literary Festival. His work has appeared in The Missing Slate, Lalitamba, Every Day Fiction, The Punxsutawney Spirit, Exploration, and his poems have been featured in the collections, Garlic and Sapphire, and Cleaves. His latest short stories, "Russian Dolls" will be coming out in Mystery Weekly next month, while "Hummingbird Suite" will be coming out in Story Of later this year; his poetry will be published in the print journal Gravititas (Volume 18.2), and Castabout Art & Literature. You can learn more about Eliot on his website www.EliotHudson.com.

Bibiana Ossai is a writer, poet and professional artist. She currently is a student in the MFA Creative Writing program at Long Island University, Brooklyn. She is an aspiring author and upcoming artist. Bibiana is a freelance writer, who has written for news blogs as well as creative writing blogs.

Bibiana Ossai was born and raised in Lagos city, Nigeria. She has a degree in Mass Communication from Redeemer's University, Nigeria and currently a MFA Creative Writing student in Long Island University, Brooklyn. Bibiana is a writer, poet and professional abstract artist. She is also a freelance writer, who has written for news blogs as well as creative writing blogs. You can follow her on [Goodreads](#).

W. T. Paterson is the author of the novels "Dark Satellites" and "WOTNA". A Pushcart Prize nominee and graduate of Second City Chicago, his work has appeared

in over 50 publications worldwide include Fiction Magazine, The Gateway Review, and The Paragon Press. A number of stories have been anthologized by Lycan Valley, North 2 South Press, and Thuggish Itch. He spends most nights yelling for his cat to "Get down from there!"

Laura Roberts can leg-press an average-sized sumo wrestler, has written an entire novel in just three days, and is the founding editor of Black Heart Magazine. She publishes books that press buttons at Buttontapper Press, and her short fiction has appeared in such publications as A Twist of Noir, The Flash Fiction Offensive, 34th Parallel, and Mad Scientist Journal. She currently lives in Sacramento, California with her artist husband and their literary kitties and can be found on Twitter @buttontapper.

M.C. Schmidt has an MFA in Creative Writing from Miami University. His recent work has appeared in Litro Online and Every Day Fiction.

Michael Tiffin is a high school senior in Pennsylvania. He is attending Emory University next year to study writing. His work has been published in the form of a novella self-published through Amazon.

Yuliia Vereta a young writer from Ukraine, traveling the world and getting inspiration from other cultures to write short stories, poetry, creative non-fiction and whatever else that can comfort the disturbed and disturb the comforted. Her works were published in 2019 in Penultimate Peanut Magazine (USA) and Litro Magazine (UK). I received the 2018 City of Rockingham Short Story Award for short fiction (Australia) and became the finalist in 2019 Poetry Matters Project (USA) as well as 2019 Hessler Poetry Contest (USA).

Madeline Sexten-Yeatts has been writing poetry for years and is beginning to dabble in fiction. She has always loved to read, and writing is a natural offspring of that love.