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The Book Smuggler's Den

Back to

School

Crushes
Drama
Friendships

Why you
are never
too old to
get an
education

PLUS

One contributor's thoughts about poet
Michel Weatherall's book, *Sun & Moon*

September 2019

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Letter From the Editor

Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today. - Malcolm X

When I was a kid going to Catholic school, I always had mixed emotions about summer ending and starting a new grade. When I started the sixth grade, that meant having multiple teachers, and I was scared. Scared because of “Big Red.” Big Red was the eighth-grade teacher who taught math. She was also the one who you could hear from the hallways yelling at the top of her lungs when a student was acting up.

The students all had their rumors about her and how strict she was. Things that seemed no big deal to a student meant a lot to her. When you went to Big Red’s math class, your shirt was tucked in, your skirt was below your knees, and you sat up straight at your desk.

I headed through the doorway into her classroom, and it was like we were heading to church. Going through that doorway meant to be quiet, find a seat, and start reviewing the previous night’s homework.

She got up from her desk and smiled at the class, introducing herself despite knowing that everyone at school knew who Big Red was. In the year I had Big Red, she never screamed, never talked down to me, and was always available for extra help after class. (Which was helpful for someone like me who is horrible at math!)

Oh, the things you learn about school. It isn’t just the subjects you take, but the friendships you make and the experiences that shape you as a person.

Without education, there wouldn’t be fantastic writers like the ones who contributed to this month’s magazine! Let’s get to it and read some of the best stories about heading back to school. Thanks again to all of you who submitted!

Dani Watkins

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

Low Probability

By Philip CK

Local scientist receives Queen's Award. What a great honor for my friend Bethany. I have been curious to see what today's paper would say, for the last 20 years. You see, today is the day Bethany would get life in prison.

I met her when I started Secondary School. She stood behind me at the Sorting line. Always the Lady, Bethany introduced herself by pouring her orange juice in my t-shirt. When I felt something cold ran down my back, I jumped with a shriek and turned around to see a tall girl smiling at me. Her intimidating look consisted of a tank top, tight black jeans, and black boots. The cuts on her cheekbones, one on each side, and bruised knuckles were lovely touches, I admitted.

"What, geek?" she asked with a big grin.

I was expecting bullying to start sometime during the following week but, hey, the first day was as good as any.

"I thought I'd cool you down a bit," continued Bethany. "Aren't you gonna say thank you?"

"G... g..." I believe I was searching for getting stuffed. My swearing of choice. Not too aggressive but not too soft either. Not that it made a difference, whether I managed to utter the stupid words or, like that day, not. I choked and started coughing.

"Oh, what's wrong darling?" said Bethany in a mock sympathetic tone. "Are you d.. d... dumb?"

Classy. Everyone roared with laughter. I faced forward again, disgusted with myself, trying to hold the tears in.

"Dumb, dumb, dumbo! Dumb, dumb, dumbo!" chanted the other kids, at Bethany's lead, clapping their hands and stomping their feet.

I was only saved by The Sorting, a few moments later.

I entered a room with a single dentist's chair in the middle, facing a desk with three individuals.

"Hello, em, Susan Jones," said the middle one, an old hag if I had ever seen one, complete with chin hair and a lovely crooked nose. "I am Mrs. Haggard, the Headmistress."
Of course you are, I wanted to say.

"Have a seat."

When I did, the chair tilted backward. Haggard's robots came and strapped my arms and legs to the chair. We all knew about The Sorting so I tried not to panic. "Deep breathing helps," they had told us.

A helmet-like device came from the back of the chair and the Operatives strapped it around my head. They then attached various sensors on my face and lifted my t-shirt to attach more on my chest. I flinched when they inserted two needles in my forearms and shivered at the cold sensation from whatever liquid they pumped in my veins.

"Good to go," said one of the robots.

I'm also good thanks for asking, I thought.

"Proceed," said Haggard.

The room went pitch dark. Loud, intermittent bangs pounded in my head. Deep inside my cranium, in a place headaches never reached, a sharp pain made its appearance. On a scale from one to ten, it started at five and, within seconds, reached eleven. Involuntarily, a scream came out.

"Almost there," said a robot.

If you kick a robot in the crotch does it hurt? I wondered.

The pain moved to the back of my skull and traveled down, inside my spine, inch by aching inch. For good measure, it came back up, took a stroll around my brain one and then it was gone. The only remaining sound came from the rattling equipment. I couldn't stop shaking. Lights came back on, blinding me as if I was being interrogated (well, I suppose in a way I was) and the chair tilted to a seating position. I was released from my shackles.

"The computer will add the data it collected to your file," said the Headmistress.

We waited.

My file was, basically, every piece of data that had been collected during my unremarkable life. Even before it started, actually. Every conversation in my house, through the ever listening microphones or devices. A complete record of all my movements through my parents' phones, and my phone as soon as I had one. Every piece of food that had gone into my body, from shopping carts and card payments. Naturally, exhaustive records of my health, including how many bleeding times I had brushed my teeth. Toys I had played with. TV programs I had watched. Every opinion I had expressed about everything.

A message arrived simultaneously to Haggard's phone and mine. From the Ministry of The Future. "Susan Red, you have been assigned to Bedrock class. Congratulations. You will contribute to the strong base of our society."

A moment of silence.

“That’ll be all, then. Register in building C. Have a great school year,” said Haggard and I made my usual graceful exit by tripping on my laces.

Students with zero potential went to Bedrock classes. The Government didn’t spend a lot of money on Bedrock people because why waste valuable resources that could be used elsewhere. Bedrocks got one year of job training, instead of an education, and started working straight after that.

That way there was more money to spend on the Ores, the high potentials. Their education was excellent and continued until their early twenties. There was a middle ground too, the Faithfuls, who learned some basic reading and writing, and bits of maths. They would become machine programmers.

I’m sure Bedrock class met and exceeded everyone’s expectations, as it did mine. We received training for important jobs in the hospitality industry. Cleaning, mainly. There were a lot of areas in a hotel, we learned, all with their specific cleaning requirements. And a lot of appliances that needed maintenance. I thought our old robot teacher could use some of that. It was rusty and slow, and its voice module was damaged, making it sound like my drunk grandpa.

I didn’t make any friends. Bethany made some. Well, she formed a gang, really. They’d slap the rest of us nerds on the back of our heads, or trip us, or kick our cleaning equipment, scattering them across the class. The teacher didn’t pay any attention to that. Outside its scope, I’d say. As for Haggard, I never saw her again. Some students did, Bethany and her gang, predominantly. Haggard’s robots came from time to time and took someone to detention.

“What?” the culprit said, invariably.

“This afternoon you will break a window,” the robot answered.

Mischief Anticipation & Neutralisation (MAN) was the equivalent to Crime Anticipation & Neutralisation (CAN) in the grown-ups world. Like CAN, MAN’s artificial intelligence would analyze patterns through hundreds of cameras, installed everywhere imaginable, and predict mischief.

Both systems were foolproof, apparently. CAN had been tested for years, issuing warnings about crimes, which materialized later. It was right every time. Nowadays crime was a distant memory. The more serious crime, actually. CAN didn’t bother with petty crime. Just as MAN didn’t bother with Bethany punching me in the stomach. If school property was at stake, then the robots interfered.

You can imagine our surprise when Crime Anticipation showed up at school, one day. It was during the first period. I was repairing a dishwasher and Bethany was beating her gang's members at arm wrestling. The CAN robots barged in.

"Everyone place your hands behind your heads," their leader announced in a male, authoritative tone, and we complied instantly.

"What is going on, officers?" squeaked our teacher.

The leader shushed him by raising his palm. The police robots moved to Bethany.

"Bethany Cage," the leader said, "you are sentenced to a month's imprisonment for car theft this evening."

"No, I won't do it, I won't!" said Bethany. "I swear!"

It was pointless. The machines didn't say anything else. A quick jab put Bethany to sleep and she was carried out. We looked at each other in horror.

"Now, let me show you how to unclog a sewage pipe," said our teacher.

When Bethany came back she was different. Her eyes were washed out like she had been crying a lot. A tooth was missing. And she was double the bully she used to be. Each and every one of us got a daily beating, to keep us on our toes, I suppose. Whenever she approached me I crouched down, in the position you took when your plane was about to crash.

"That's right, dumbo!" she said and spat on me before the kicking began.

Eventually, my hatred for her grew stronger than my self-preservation instinct. What's the worst that could happen, I told myself. I'll just fight back, there's nothing to lose really, apart from a promising career, of course. At least I'll get to lay a punch if I'm lucky. I repeated these thoughts in my head for a few days, and one morning I came to school ready for everything. But not for what was about to happen.

Before class even started Mischief Anticipation came in.

"Bethany and Susan," one of them said, "you're in detention for the whole day."

I couldn't believe it.

"What?" said Bethany. "What will dumbo do?" causing the obligatory sneer from the gang.

"Wh.. wh.." I said, eloquently as always. What will I do, in case you're wondering.

"Your lunchtime fight will result in school property damage," the robot said.

“Fight?” Bethany and The Baboons laughed idiotically.

As I had expected, the detention room did not have leather armchairs and a good selection of movies. Not even popcorn. No matter, it had other qualities. It smelled of urine, for example. Bethany sat on a pallet of toilet paper, her back against the wall. I tried to get comfortable on some cardboard boxes. We ignored each other but it couldn't last long. There was nothing to do there. And ever since I learned that I would have fought her that day I was a tiny bit braver.

“H... how was j... jail?” I asked.

“Shut up, dumb,” said Bethany.

And I simply have I had enough. Of bullying Bethany, of my illustrious education, of being the bedrock of civilized society, of everything. I stood up and grabbed a broom.

“Bring it on, Bethany!” I said and took what I thought was a plausible defensive stance. Probably comical but at least my stutter had gone. In any case, Bethany didn't laugh. Or attacked. She simply stared at me or rather in my direction but a million miles away for a moment. And then she sighed.

That's a first, I thought.

“I will spend most of my life in jail,” she said.

A small part of me was delighted. Or half of me. OK, all of me. If anyone should rot in jail, that was Bethany.

“On my thirtieth birthday,” she continued, “I will get life in prison. For murder.”

Murder? I supposed it was the natural course of things.

“Who will you kill?” I asked. Still no stutter, could it be true?

“Everyone in a rival gang.” She reached out in her back pocket and retrieved a folded piece of paper. “They have a new system in jail. Like ‘The Sorting’ but ten times better. This is what it printed out for me.”

It looked like a newspaper clipping. Local gang leader gets life in prison, the title said. Bethany Cage (30) arrested before wiping out a rival gang.

“But...” I said.

“I'll go to jail many times. This will just be the last one.”

“But that’s ages away. It might not happen.”

“The system is always true.”

“Actually, there is a 1% probability, on average, that the system’s prediction will not materialize.”

I know what you’re thinking. How did I know what “1%” meant, or “probability”, or some of the other long words that had been used? But I didn’t say all those things.

We turned and saw a small figure emerging from the room’s dark corner. It was a girl in cleaner clothes. We recognized her, she was the Janitor’s assistant.

“What the hell?” said Bethany and moved to confront the newcomer, probably punch her for scaring us.

I grabbed her arm. I actually grabbed Bethany’s arm. I didn’t grab both arms so the other one went up and hovered above my head, ready to knock me out.

“What does she mean?” I asked.

Bethany didn’t smack me. She exhaled, her shoulders relaxing. I quickly released my grasp not believing my luck.

“What do you mean?” Bethany asked the girl.

“And who are you?” I asked.

“My name is Stef and like you I am Bedrock. I graduated last year. Luckily, I was approached by a resistance group. Sorry, I can see you are puzzled and I’m trying to explain as fast as I can. We don’t have time. The resistance is fighting against The Sorting, the Anticipation forces, everything that predicts how we will live our lives and puts us in boxes that, inevitably, make their predictions come true.

What very few people know is that those systems are not 100% accurate. In simple terms, that means that their predictions are not completely true. Things could turn out differently.”

“So, I might not go to jail forever?” asked Bethany.

“I looked at that particular prediction. The system actually gave 98% probability for you receiving a life sentence. That means that there is a slight chance that you won’t. But of course, they will arrest you before the act, they will always arrest you before your alleged crimes and you will never be given a chance.”

“But they tested the system,” I said.

“They lied to us, Susan. There were cases where the system got it wrong. They buried these.”

“And how did you...”

“I’ll try to explain as quickly as I can. I have interfered with all cameras in this room and they are playing a clip of you sitting idle. The system will discover it if I leave it for longer. We are recruiting people for the resistance. Our goal is to expose the truth to the world. Tell everyone that the system is based on statistics, on probabilities. And people’s lives are predetermined based on that. No one is allowed to make their own choices. The system decides how we’ll live!” Bethany and I looked at each other. We smiled. I could have asked, Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Beth? And she would have answered, One hundred percent, Susie. But we didn’t have to.

“When are you going to... expose the truth?” Bethany asked Stef.

“We don’t know yet. We are growing in numbers...” said Stef but Bethany interrupted.

“Why not today? Why not now? There is a terminal in this school!”

We couldn’t wait. Bethany couldn’t wait for more than me. She was snorting like an angry bull. I swear, at that stage, she could headbutt a bull and win.

“Now?” asked Stef, hesitating.

“How long have you been in the resistance?” I asked.

“Maybe two years?” said Stef.

“In the end, you will get caught,” I said. “Can’t you see? It’s now or never. Let’s do it!” Stef stood undecided.

“We will take care of the robots. Can you do it, if we cover your back?” asked Bethany.

“I think so,” said Stef.

The door opened with a bang and the two school security bots rushed in. The interference with the cameras had been discovered. We had talked for too long.

Reading my mind, Bethany said, “No more talking, time for action!”

In a split second, she grabbed a cleaning trolley and charged. The robots had been used to knowing their opponents’ movements because they had been predicted by the system. But this time the system didn’t have enough data to predict what we would do, because it hadn’t been

watching long enough. Bethany rammed one of the robots. It fell on the floor, sliding amidst sparks, and smashing onto the wall.

Meanwhile, the other robot came towards me.

“Run to the terminal,” I shouted at Stef. “Before more bots arrive!”

“OK, yes, you’re right. You’re right” said Stef, gathering strength.

And then she ran.

The robot that was attacking me switched targets in an instant and turned to stop Stef. I didn’t have the luxury of commandeering a cleaning trolley but I still held my broom. Later I read about a French girl called Joan of Arc, and from then on, whenever I pictured my attack I looked like her.

With two hands, I forced the tip of my sword, I mean my broom, upwards under the robot’s jaw. It hadn’t expected that at all. Its head jolted violently backward and I heard several cables breaking and metal joints dislodging. The head ended up hanging on the robot’s back, hanging, as it were, by a thread. The machine collapsed.

Bethany, in the meantime, had removed a metallic shelf from the wall and was finishing the first robot. We looked at each other. Oh, the sweet taste of victory. I wanted to hug her, but we had to run after Stef. Good job we didn’t waste time congratulating each other too. More bots had arrived and had gathered outside the terminal’s room. Apparently, Stef had made it and had locked herself inside. The robots held a siege ram, ready to break the door.

In perfect unison, Bethany and I grabbed a bench from the corridor and made our famous charge. The one that has since been watched live by millions of people. It was all captured, from many different angles, by the school’s numerous cameras. Holding each side of the bench Bethany and I ran like tigers. Like a herd of wild bison. Like a pack of rhinoceros. Anyway, you get the idea. If you are right now picturing the robots in a heap of bent metal and electrical sparks, you’re not far off. It remains the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in my life.

Stef was almost done coding a program that would post the truth in everyone’s social media feeds. But every famous last words contained an almost, didn’t they?

“Step away from that door.”

It was Haggard. Bethany and I looked at each other and held our grounds. But our grounds were suddenly shaky. The whole school shook by the unmistakable sound of a CAN helicopter. Or at least the Bedrock building, where we were. Unlike the Ore and Faithful buildings, which were made of brick and mortar, Bedrock, despite its name, was made of plywood. Or so we were told.

Most of the time it looked like cardboard.

The CAN robots walked through the walls, ripping them apart with minimal effort. It was a bit difficult for Bethany and I to repeat our heroic feats because, for one, CAN robots were armed. They approached us from both sides of the corridor, one robot per side. Even Haggard looked scared as she stepped aside.

The reason those robots were impossible to beat was that they predicted your moves. After they had recognized you, they were scanning our faces right now, it was relatively easy for them to know what you would do. They had all the data and the anticipation systems were never wrong.

Or were they?

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Beth?” I said. I mean, she was now my sister in arms but I still felt that Beth might be pushing it.

“I definitely am, Suse.” Cool answer.

We had realized that the robots thought that I was going to surrender easily. They were expecting resistance from Beth and they were going to focus on her. But it was all probabilities. And there was a small probability that I was going to kick their behinds. Bethany and I nodded at each other. I put my hands up, pretending I had given up. As we had predicted (see the irony?) the robots went straight to Bethany and they almost put her in handcuffs. But almost was as good as never.

The steel rod I had meanwhile picked from the heap of metal, went through a robot’s waist, at the point where its torso met its hips. It was a perfect strike, if I may say so. Its legs lost all control and it wobbled like a drunk person, eventually crashing spectacularly onto the floor. Its colleague diverted its attention from Bethany, pulled its gun and pointed it at me.

I saw its finger squeezing the trigger and closed my eyes. I heard the blast. For a moment I didn’t feel any pain. And another moment. What was the probability of the robot missing? Zero-point a few zeros and then a one. No, the robot hadn’t missed. I opened my eyes to see Bethany holding its arm up. But that lasted a split second. A punch sent Bethany to the floor.

I faced the barrel of the weapon again, and this time there was no one around to stop it.

“Susan Jones,” said the robot. “You’re dead.”

That was a weird phrase for a law enforcer. Someone was behind the wheel. Someone very angry. What had happened?

Stef had exposed the truth online, several minutes ago. Billions of people around the world were now reading about it. And Stef was also streaming live the picture from our school’s corridor. There was an urgent government call to the corporation that had created the anticipation systems.

Before the trigger was pulled, for the second time, my almost killer got shut down.

In the following years, there were dramatic changes in education, law enforcement, our society. Basically, free will was given back to the people. I won't go into details, it was a long and not always easy transition.

But here we are. Instead of a hotel maid, I became a motivational speaker, working with shy and socially awkward kids, usually with stutters, like me. As for Bethany, well, you know. She became a scientist. Basically, a nerd, as I never fail to remind her.

Mount Misery Road Elementary School

By Michele A. Hromada

The road that ascended upward to the entrance of Mount Misery Road Elementary School was lined with dogwood trees. The three-story cigar box style of the mid-20th-century building seemed anchored solidly to the rocky terrain, despite its precipitous position at the summit of Mount Misery Road. From the staff parking lot one could look dead ahead to a panoramic curve of coastal Connecticut, then downward into the foamy, swirling waters of the Long Island Sound. The misguided name for the road came from its British ancestors, who with Puritan reserve equated pleasurable surroundings with suffering.

On the day before the first day of school, Matt O'Connor turned his red Jeep into the parking lot. Matt had been given an involuntary transfer from his job as a middle school science teacher. He was now a fifth-grade classroom teacher, punishment for his indiscreet affairs with several female colleagues over the past three years. The school superintendent was fond of moving his faculty members around like pawns on a chessboard because, unable to fire a tenured teacher without a lengthy investigation, this gave him a way to assert power, while at the same time discourage future bad behavior.

The abrupt transfer helped confirm Matt's wife's suspicions about the real reasons for all those evening meetings. He now endured cheerless sessions with a marriage counselor and provocative but unanswerable text messages from Joanna Borgia, guidance counselor and his former lover at Edgar Allen Poe Middle School.

Before Joanna, he dallied with Teri, the elastic-limbed physical education student teacher who lost interest in him after she moved on to a paying job. Prior to Teri, there was stormy Samantha, who taught science in the room next to his. Disaster was averted when she went back to her husband. There was Tanya, the darkly exotic school security guard whose boyfriend showed up one day accusing her of being unfaithful. Matt hid in the science lab, as the dramatic scene caused a building uproar and Tanya's subsequent dismissal.

Matt's relationship with Joanna was over. Joanna had been spoken to in a humiliating conference with Dr. Mary Smith, the middle school principal. She would not be transferred, but was cautioned about repercussions from the conservative school board if she continued to engage in these sorts of dalliances with married colleagues. Matt's wife, Becky, learned about the affair from an anonymous Good Samaritan and, instead of locking him out of their house, gave him yet another chance to provide their son with a stock, suburban home life.

Matt got out of his Jeep toting a large plastic bin filled with teacher manuals and charts and entered the main office. He found his name on one of the cubbyhole mailboxes that were lined up in precise ladder-like rows on the office wall. It was jammed with schedules and memos. Mrs. Grant, the school secretary, nodded at Matt from her desk.

“You must be Mr. O’Connor. Please sign this sheet for your room key and find your photo ID in the box.”

Mrs. Grant was a small woman of about 70 with a gray pageboy and rouged cheeks. Matt suspected she knew, as did everybody else in the place, the details of his job transfer. His colleagues, a cynical bunch, celebrated racy gossip as a welcome diversion from their institutional routines. He piled his mail, ID badge, and room key on top of the bin and climbed the stairs to room 324.

His room was the last room, next to a storage closet and far from the unisex lavatory. Matt unlocked the door; the air was oppressive and antiseptic. He walked across the waxed floors to open the windows. Someone had stacked textbooks by subject on the individual student desks. Matt shuffled through the papers from his mailbox and studied the principal’s weekly agenda. Typed on orange paper, the memo was bordered with autumnal leaves. It listed the times and dates for staff meetings and student assembly programs for the first week of school. There were reminders concerning miscellaneous housekeeping matters. At the bottom of the page he saw his name in an addendum.

Notes: Please welcome Mr. Matthew O’Connor to our fifth-grade staff. Congratulations and welcome back to Mrs. Caroline Mitchell returning from maternity leave to rejoin our third-grade faculty.

Matt looked up from the memo, remembering seeing the name Mitchell on his trip down the corridor. Across the hall on the wall next to room 323 was a poster of a schoolhouse with the words “Welcome Mrs. Mitchell’s Class: Smile if you brought your brain.” Matt walked over and peeked inside her room. Caroline was standing by a table covered with folders. The student desks were arranged in two concentric horseshoe shapes with her desk placed at the top of the horseshoe. She looked up and noticed Matt standing in the doorway. She had been aware of his presence across the hall but had chosen to get her room and lesson plans ready, thinking she would stop by his classroom on her way to the meeting.

“Hi, I’m Matt,” he said.

“I’m Caroline,” she replied as her hand brushed his in a gentle handshake.

She showed him a picture of her daughter Emily encircled in a pink enamel frame. Matt pulled a frayed snapshot of Alex from his wallet and they swapped polite stories.

“If you need any help with lesson planning or record keeping, let me know, I’d be happy to help you,” said Caroline.

“Thanks. I heard Dr. Klein is a control freak who collects plan books and keeps a close eye on his staff.”

“Yes, that’s true, but I don’t think he really has the time to read and know about everything and everybody.”

While Matt looked around her classroom to admire the bulletin board displays, Caroline surveyed him. He was the prototype for all her susceptibilities. Muscular, but not overly, a flat stomach, a solid-looking behind, enough hair, and the boy-man style of dressing that paired worn jeans with oxford shirts and ties. She shifted her gaze away from him and turned to put Emily’s picture back on her desk. Matt walked backward to the door.

“I better get back to my room. I have a lot of work; this is my first time teaching grade school. See you later at the meeting, Caroline.”

Back in his room, Matt threw textbooks into the shelves, dragged student desks around in an arrangement that was identical to Caroline’s room. His teaching style was unstructured and easy. As in life, he did not plot or plan his moves in the classroom. Matt reacted to the situation before him, relying on his placid nature and sense of humor. At Edgar Allen Poe, he enjoyed teaching his students and dealt with their quirks and aberrant adolescent behaviors without losing his temper. He diffused the many crushes girl students had on him with diplomacy. Matt’s son was the same age as his fifth-grade students, and he suspected they would probably be more trusting and easier to entertain than teenagers. Sitting at his desk he reviewed the names on his class list, scribbled some sketchy lesson ideas, and thought about Caroline Mitchell.

He estimated she was probably his age, early thirties. Her body was a nice combination of slim and curvy; her long fair hair was pulled back tightly from her face in a twisted knot with feathery edges spilling out from the teeth of a hair clip. Caroline had not been difficult to approach, but he sensed the usual female contradictions, outwardly composed, living a conventional life, but possessing secrets that were layered within. His good looks were of great assistance, but women were drawn to him because he accepted their complexities without battle, understanding that they wanted to feel appreciated and desired. Matt’s life was defined and envied by men for the things he chose not to have. Despite the fact that Matt would never have money or prestige or the need for either, his easy success with women was the source of his power. He felt Caroline had enjoyed their game of darting glances, and in the past, he would have used his skills to win her over, but his parents were clear about continuing financial assistance if he straightened out his personal life. Even though his wife, Becky, did not excite him much anymore, she was still a buffer from the women he dallied with. The thought of being truly available and beginning a new relationship that exceeded the confines of sex was more threatening to him than maintaining the sameness of his present life.

Matt moved about the room in his rolling desk chair. He checked the supplies and reviewed the fifth-grade computer programs. He piled workbooks on each of the desks and noticed that if he rolled his chair a little to the left of his own desk, he had a clear view into Caroline’s room. This possibility would be the best antidote to the boredom he expected to set in as the months progressed. The rest of the morning Matt readied his classroom, then strolled down the hallway introducing himself to his neighbors before making his way downstairs for Principal Klein’s staff meeting.

The next few weeks constituted the honeymoon period of getting back to school. Calm, rested teachers gently enforced new regulations to summer-weary students made compliant by the changes in their daily surroundings. Matt discovered he had been right about fifth-grade kids; they were receptive to silly humor. It required more hours of planning each week to keep their minds busy, but his efforts paid off. By the end of September, he could sit at his desk, check papers, and his students stayed engrossed in their assignments.

Caroline Mitchell, however, found it hard to adjust to her back-to-work schedule. Emily kept her awake each night teething and fussing. Her husband, Tom, would heat up a bottle, but often fell asleep in the rocking chair, leaving Caroline to comfort the baby into the wee hours of the morning. After little sleep, she showered, dressed, and got Emily ready to drop off at her mother's house for the day. Even though it was practically October, Caroline felt overwhelmed, not really connecting with the diverse personalities of her students. She often glanced at the clock and imagined what Emily and her mother were doing at different times during the day.

Caroline had been late again that morning and had hurried past Matt O'Connor's door, her hands filled with a book bag and coffee mug. She had straightened her back, feeling self-conscious, distressed that she looked disheveled. She knew he would be there to greet her as usual. Caroline turned to see that he had, in fact, been waiting for her, having rolled his chair away from his desk to the front of the doorway. Matt waved and said hello; she was alarmed how this made her heart race. They didn't have substantial conversations, but she was acutely aware of him throughout the day.

Matt liked to skulk into her room announced. Once, he made faces at her students while standing behind her. When she moved backward, bumping into him, she jumped, knocking a Venn diagram from the easel. Her students found Mr. O'Connor's surprise visits entertaining. In the past, she would not have been an easy mark for such juvenile games, but now she felt off-balance. Caroline hoped that all she needed was more rest.

By early November, Matt's students were becoming more demanding. He noticed how much they enjoyed doing watered-down versions of the science experiments he had done as a middle school teacher. The prospect of doing experiments every week acted as a reward for their collective good behavior. Today was the volcano project.

After lunch, Matt dropped off his class at the art room to start his prep period. He stopped at the airless closet of a bathroom; Caroline was coming down the hall carrying a stack of copied worksheets. Yawning, she reached for the doorknob as Matt walked out. They collided and their eyes met, direct and steady. Caroline blushed and slammed the door behind her.

God, he's on to me and probably knows the blush means something. She splashed water on her face and stared into the mirror, realizing she had forgotten to darken her lashes with mascara. Matt went outside to the parking lot to smoke a cigarette. It was a cloudless day; dry fallen leaves crunched under his feet as he hurried to his Jeep, parked in the last spot in the lot perched above a steep drop-down to the Long Island Sound. He unlocked the door and sat down on the driver's side and opened his window. The interior of the car was cluttered. A dented soda can rested crookedly in the cupholder. Since he was a little boy, he liked the thrill he got from high places. He dragged on his cigarette, opened his fly, and while touching himself imagined driving a silver Porsche convertible; the top was down.

Matt exhaled and saw himself speeding along a darkly lit highway. Caroline was sitting next to him. She was naked except for black leather boots. Her thighs were tapered and smooth, leading into a tuft of hair between her legs. Caroline's breasts were firm and pointed. The ocean wind whipped through her hair, causing it to fly straight up in curling tendrils. Leaving her sitting position she crouched on her knees and swung her right leg over the car's console, easing her body onto Matt's lap. With both knees bent she placed her right thigh so it fit snugly into the small space by his door. She opened his jeans. She took him into her hand and looked into his eyes. Caroline's fingers stroked him upward in one direction only. She repeated this movement again and again, while her mouth lightly sucked his lower lip. She released her hand and slid forward, allowing him to enter her. She gasped and pressed her face against his. The road wound ahead and with one hand on the steering wheel he pushed himself further into Caroline's body. Matt reduced the speed of the Porsche and found a dark driveway that led to a moonlit beach. At the peak of their spasms he brought the car to a gentle stop. They kissed. Caroline eased herself off his body. The moonlight on the cratered sand dunes gave the illusion of being on a distant planet. Moonlight turned into daylight.

Matt shielded his eyes, flicked the cigarette out the window, and reached for the crushed box of tissues under the passenger seat. He cleaned himself up but still felt aroused. Fearing a noticeable bulge, he decided to wear his white lab coat for the rest of the day. After his prep period, the kids would be constructing a paper-mâché volcano. Matt preferred controlled chaos to quiet seatwork. He needed vinegar, baking soda, and dishwasher detergent for the eruption, so he dropped by the kitchen to find Mary and Dora, the cafeteria ladies. They liked when he teased and chatted with them as he ordered his lunch each day, and he was rewarded with extra scoops of macaroni and cheese or potato puffs. Today they gave him what he needed and added a cup of coffee.

In room 323, Caroline struggled to keep her eyes open. The three hours between lunch and dismissal were difficult for her. She often resorted to assigning silent reading in the science textbook and then handed out a worksheet for the students to complete. She placed her chair near the open window, letting the autumn breeze form goosebumps on the exposed skin of her neck. Propping the science book on her lap, she said, "Boys and girls, let's continue reading about the characteristics of the common toad. Madison, please read the key facts listed on page sixty." Madison pushed her glasses back up her nose and read: "The common toad has mottled skin that provides it with excellent camouflage in its natural habitat. To deter predators, poisonous venom is secreted from glands on the chest and back. Its tongue is four inches long and sticky. The hinge at the front of the mouth allows the toad to flick it in and out with amazing speed. The toad

emits a long croak during mating season, when it goes to ponds to breed, then returns to its solitary life in summer.”

“Nice reading, Madison,” praised Caroline. “Now, read the rest of the chapter silently.” Caroline turned her face away from class to look out the window. She imagined herself arranged on a white boudoir chair.

She was wearing a silk dressing gown; beneath it her body was naked. Behind her were French doors covered with toile draperies, the panes of glass darkened black. Matt was on his knees on an oriental rug in front of her chair. He was dressed in tight jeans and a linen shirt. She felt his deft hands touching her breasts, his fingertips circling her nipples. Kneeling between her legs, he bent his head and licked her inner thighs while tracing concentric circles on her breasts. The circling was in sync with the rhythm of his darting tongue. She slumped lower into the chair, abandoning herself to pleasure as his tongue darted further inside her. Caroline’s hands were locked around the back of his neck, but she released her grip to run her fingers through his hair. Matt lifted his face and slid upward to kiss her. He removed his clothes, then guided her down onto the rug, where he entered her body and stayed until her quiet moans subsided.

Caroline, seated on her chair, her thighs and pelvis pressed tight, let free the hold on her lower body and felt a surge of unexpected pleasure. It was the same phenomenon she experienced sometimes after a brief, erotic dream invaded her sleep, filling her body with sensual release. Her eyes were closed and she was smiling.

Meanwhile, the class had finished the reading assignment, and there was whispering and fidgeting. Andrew waved his hand in front of her face.

“Yes, Andrew, do you have a question about the reading?”

“No, Mrs. Mitchell, I’m finished. But why are you so happy today?”

“Don’t I usually look happy?” Caroline asked him in dismay.

“No, not like today.”

“Well, I guess I was just thinking about how nice life must be for the common female toad.”

Across the hall, Matt was dividing his students up into what he hoped were compatible groups. The best artists worked on a mural illustrating the topography of a land volcano. The few good writers in the class were given the task of writing about the events that led to a land volcano eruption. Matt instructed another group to print out information from the Internet. His most energetic crew slapped white glue onto wet sheets of newspaper to be molded into the conical shape of a volcano. The activity was noisy and messy; the volcano dried just before bus dismissal time. Matt measured out the baking soda, dishwasher detergent, and water, deciding to use larger proportions for a better effect. The class put on their safety glasses as Matt put a container inside the volcano model and poured in the magical vinegar.

“Stand back, everybody, and observe a foaming bed of lava,” he told them in a stage whisper.

A small white cloud rose above the project, some sudsy bubbles dripped down the sides, but the sour smell of vinegar was the most dramatic aftereffect of the experiment.

“What, no hot magma and molten rock? This sucks, Mr. O’Connor!” said Brian. He was a student Matt liked, but now perched on the windowsill, swinging his legs back and fourth, he was an obnoxious combination of precociousness and preadolescent mania. Brian’s proclamation got the others riled up, and they were holding their noses or hanging out of the windows pretending to choke and gasp for air. Matt calmed them down; then raced the class down the steps as the bus drivers were revving their engines to exit around the school’s circular driveway.

Matt’s colleagues heckled him as he rushed his students onto their buses. “Hey, mad scientist, what was that foul smell coming from your room? Next week we could team up our classes and dry plant specimens. I think we should start with cannabis,” shouted a fellow fifth-grade teacher.

“Nice eruption,” yelled someone else. “I enjoy one myself, once in a while.”

Caroline walked past him with her head down. He glanced at her bare legs and short skirt as she made her way through the small group of teachers.

The principal walked over to him; he often appeared at the end of the day to monitor the bus traffic. A baseball cap with the school logo shielded his gray head from the afternoon sun.

“Mr. O’Connor, your class almost missed the bus today. Another science project?” he asked, eyeing the white coat.

“Sorry, Dr. Klein; it took longer than I expected. You know the kids get excited.”

“That’s what I like to see, engaged learners. You seem to have made a nice transition to teaching grade school youngsters. In fact, some parents called to tell me their children were enjoying your class. I need a new person to coordinate the spring science fair. Ms. Ortiz usually does it, but she is scheduled for knee surgery around that time. Think about it. It would get you some positive exposure,” said Dr. Klein.

“Sure, I’d love to help you out,” said Matt.

“Good, I’ll have Ms. Ortiz share her expertise with you. And when you’re ready, we can bounce some ideas back and forth.”

Matt was shocked at having received a compliment from the boss, and even more surprised that he had agreed to do extra work. He trudged upstairs to clean his messy classroom before heading home.

By December, Matt had settled into the Mount Misery Road Elementary School routine. His teacher performance evaluation was the best one of his career, and he was the official coordinator of the spring science fair. Matt had thought about asking Caroline to be his assistant, but she had been absent from school due to a family illness, and anyway, he didn't think she would accept.

He and Becky had ended their sessions with the marriage counselor, and she had eased up on tracking his whereabouts every minute of the day. Joanna Borgia had been making regular appearances in Matt's dreams. The staff holiday party was next week. He would make sure to find Joanna and have a drink with her.

The day before winter recess was festive, with the students attending a holiday music pageant. Teachers lightened the assignment load and threw classroom parties with games and cupcakes, all contributing to a heightened noise level and a lax enforcement of rules. Late as usual for dismissal, Matt's students were tossing popcorn at each other. Wearing a Santa hat, Matt coaxed the kids down the steps to the bus circle. Dr. Klein, wearing a reindeer antler headband, stood on the steps wishing students a happy holiday. Matt noticed that Caroline was carrying boxes and shopping bags to the parking lot, while a bearded young man minded her class. He had been the substitute teacher when she was out, and Matt had found his high-pitched voice so irritating that he kept his door closed all day.

Dr. Klein was reminding students to read books over the break. Nobody listened; they were already boarding buses, and the staff was making plans to meet at the holiday party held at a local pub down the road. Matt saw Caroline return from the parking lot and sensed she was walking toward him with an urgent message. She had a girlish red and green plaid bow caught up in her hair.

"I just wanted to say good-bye, Matt. I'm taking an emergency leave, and I probably won't be back till next fall. My mom is recuperating from heart surgery, and I need to help her. Mr. Bernstein will be teaching my class for the rest of the year."

"I'm so sorry, Caroline," said Matt, somewhat dazed by the seriousness of her speech and the closeness of her body.

"It's okay; it will give me more time to be with Emily."

Caroline threw her arms around him in a tight embrace, her hands caressing the back of his neck as her lips brushed his in a kiss. For a brief moment she relaxed her body against his. Caught off guard by the intensity and passion of the encounter, he hugged her, but held back a bit. In his arms she felt fragile, small-boned, and real, not quite the juicy wench he had been plowing fore and aft in his fantasies.

"I have to go back inside to get a few more things," said Caroline.

"Do you need any help?" Matt asked.

“No thanks, I’m just about done. Good-bye, Matt. It was fun working across the hall from you.” She felt shaky and ready to cry; it was a good thing she was leaving.

“Good-bye, Caroline,” said Matt and he watched her walk back into the school. Sighing, he wished he had the silver Porsche to entice her with a farewell drive down to the deserted beach.

Matt pulled off his Santa hat and stuffed it into the pocket of his jacket. Most of the teachers and students were gone. He stood alone and positioned himself behind the enormous trunk of a leafless oak tree; he cupped his hands to light a cigarette and watched the back of the school buses make their careful descent down the driveway that led to Mount Misery Road.

The Queen of Mirth and Me

By David McVey

I didn't particularly enjoy school, but I got by academically and I certainly wasn't a refractory pupil. In fact, I liked many of our teachers, few of them were to be dreaded and even fewer seemed to take a particular dislike to me. But writing about Scottish schooldays requires a grisly tale of teacher-terror (it's the law), so I'm going to focus on the exception. Yes, there was Mrs. Argyll. Not, of course, her real name.

Music was one of my poorest subjects; by second year I was just making up the numbers as I would drop it before third year and the beginning of the countdown to O Grades (this was the 1970s). I couldn't (and still can't) play an instrument, hated singing, and couldn't manage the latter in tune or time, anyway. No one ever sits in front of me in church twice.

My first-year music teacher, Miss Mitchell, didn't seem to mind this. She was barely in her thirties but jolly in an old-fashioned, hearty way. She was beautiful too, though she often hid her looks behind dark-rimmed specs and by piling her long, velvety-black hair in a Wilma Flintstone beehive. She encouraged the talented and committed but didn't make the rest of us feel like we were worthless plankton. An accomplished pianist with an astonishing classical singing voice, such was her charm and loveliness that some of us, for the first time, listened to that kind of music without flinching. I can still hear her singing, to her own accompaniment, Schubert's arrangement of The Erl-king.

Our principal teacher of music was dreamy-eyed, donnish Mr. Sage. The vainglorious Rector of our school had cajoled him into writing the music for our school song; as if such a colonial-era public-school notion was not ludicrous enough for an ordinary comprehensive school in the West of Scotland, the Rector's self-penned lyrics began;

Forward with flags unfurled;
Meeting the changing world...

'What flags?' asked every set of first years exposed to this nul points horror, 'What does 'unfurled' mean?' I've forgotten the rest of the lyrics and I bet every other former pupil has too.

Our other music teacher was Mr. Robertson; I was never in his classes. He was a drab-looking soul, with a tweedy jacket and a dreich mustache, the very picture of a minor council clerk, yet he had a reputation as a 'cool' music teacher. Sometimes, when Miss Mitchell or Mr. Sage was banging on about Mozart or Schubert, we'd hear Beatles or David Bowie recordings coming from Mr. Robertson's room. I once arrived in a class that he'd just left and saw the lyrics of Hawkwind's Silver Machine chalked on the board.

Mr. Sage taught my class at the start of our second year. We were one of the 'LG' classes, deemed promising enough on first-year evidence to learn German or Latin in second year. I took Latin and dropped it like a hot petra after just the one year (Philistine...).

Like Miss Mitchell, Mr. Sage often required us to sing songs as a class, while he worked away sensitively at the piano. Now and again, he'd cry out 'Next verse, Joan, solo!' or 'Chorus, William, solo!' and the named individual would sing as appropriate. He always chose those whom he knew to be strong singers, in one of the school choirs, perhaps, or someone who would be specialising in singing for O Grade Music. Then Mrs. Argyll arrived and Mr Sage no longer had to take our class. You can see where this is going.

Our music teacher complement was now complete and after the Christmas holidays, we went to an unfamiliar room where Mrs. Argyll was waiting for us. She was small, dumpy and mumsy, and wore big lavender-rimmed owl specs, a voluminous woolly skirt and a capacious cardigan. Yes, there was perhaps something of the Dame Edna Everage about her appearance, or perhaps Dolores Umbridge in the Harry Potter films. Her manner was bright and hearty as she learned our names, but she seemed to lack the warmth, the niceness, and certainly the looks of Miss Mitchell.

She settled herself at the piano and indicated the words of a song we were to sing. The chorus, at least, is branded permanently on my memory for reasons I'll go into shortly; it went;

Long live the merry, merry heart
That laughs by night and day.
Like the Queen of Mirth
No matter what some folks say.

I've since looked the song up and found that it's a mid-19th century work by Stephen Foster, one of the fathers of American song, who wrote genuine classics like Beautiful Dreamer and I Dream of Jeannie (Mrs. Argyll never explained this, by the way, as Mr. Sage or Miss Mitchell would have done). This must have been the product of an off-day. It had little to say to a class of Scottish teenagers. Why, I wonder, weren't we instead looking at our own rich heritage of traditional song?

In particular, I didn't really grasp what the song was about and Mrs. Argyll certainly didn't tell us. As we sang, I was haunted by an image, like something from a Poe story, of a hideous, blood-dripping human heart that cackled all through the long night. And the Queen of Mirth; who was she?

Anyway, we did our best with it, and then, suddenly, Mrs. Argyll stopped playing and the singing stopped an instant after, like a vehicle responding to its brakes. Mrs. Argyll broke the sudden silence by shouting 'David!'

There were four Davids in our class, but she was looking at me, no doubt about that.

'You were not singing, David!'

'Yes I was, miss,' I said, weakly. And, yes, I had been.

‘Don’t argue with me, David. In my class, those who don’t sing with the class, sing to the class. Do you understand?’

‘Miss I was singing...’

‘Do you understand?’

I nodded and offered a feeble ‘Yes, miss,’ though I didn’t understand at all. Mrs. Argyll then played through the piece again and I sang, all right, I gave it everything I had which, considering the material, ought to have earned me some credit. I was no more in tune or time than usual, but I was very much a part of our unheavenly choir.

The song ended. Mrs. Argyll turned towards us and released a deep sigh. ‘You still were not singing, David. Come out here.’

‘Miss, I was. I was singing.’

‘Come out here!’

Out I came, confused, head reeling, and was directed to stand by the piano.

‘Now, I’m going to play through the chorus, and I want you to sing it out to the rest of the class.’

She did so and I stood there, the picture of misery, my flutey, piping, yet-unbroken voice aiming at each note of the ghastly chorus and missing every time. We finished and I looked hopefully at Mrs. Argyll for news of my release.

‘That was dreadful,’ she said with a chilly, sinister quietness.

I wasn’t arguing.

‘You start on this note. This note,’ she said, striking a bright chime from the keys.

By now, my head was swirling and I barely knew why I was there, or what I was supposed to be doing. I asked if she could play it again.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Could you please...’

‘Speak up, boy!’

‘...play it again.’

Her face seemed to chill even further and the room iced up.

‘David,’ she said, in tones that would have suited an SS Officer in an old war film, ‘if there is one thing you will learn in my class it is this; you never, ever give me an order.’

Of course, I’d done nothing of the kind; I was just an embarrassed, confused, humiliated 13-year-old who wanted to go back to his seat and die.

As I squealed and squawked again through that chorus whose words I would never forget, I sneaked a quick look at the class.

There is no crueller beast than a class of thirty 13 and 14-year-olds. Yet I saw no enjoyment in the faces of my peers, even among those I didn’t get on with. Instead, they were puzzled; why was this teacher picking on McVey? Oh, he’s not much to look at and he’s rubbish at music, but he’s OK at most other things and he’s no troublemaker. They recognized that Mrs. Argyll’s choice had been random; pick on a handy, unprepossessing-looking specimen to humiliate and in so doing scent-spray, at the outset, her power and authority. And it need not have been me; it could have been any of them.

I finished the last chorus.

‘Dreadful, dreadful,’ said Mrs. Argyll, sadly, as if I’d personally insulted her, and waved me back to my seat.

In the weeks that followed, she sang other songs with us. Now and again, she would direct her malevolent gaze at me when we’d finished, and shout ‘David!’ and suggest that I hadn’t been putting my whole might into the song. It was a threat to me, a threat to us all. Then, gradually, she left me alone. I’d served my purpose.

We arrived back in August for third year and found that she had left; I’m not sure why. The word was that she’d moved to the Roman Catholic secondary in the town. It was scholastically more prestigious than ours, but also had a reputation for boisterousness. I later heard that she’d left that school, too, on long-term sick leave after a pupil had thrown a chair at her. Of course, this may well have been a schoolboy urban myth or even a fabrication dreamt up by thoughtful schoolmates who knew how the humiliation she’d dealt me still hurt.

But that didn’t trouble me. The image of a chair crashing into my tormentor was not unpleasing. I still find it strangely warming. Please don’t judge me harshly; you were not the one standing in a cold sweat by that piano. And, it goes without saying, if you’re a teacher, tutor or lecturer (as I am, now), make sure you never treat any of your students in that way.

Mommy Loves You

By John Power

I remember... I remember cubbies. Blue. No, yellow. Well, yellow on the outside, but each cubby was blue on the inside. They were set up in the back of the classroom. Back behind all of the little desks. They were the desks that open up. You lift the lid and they open and all of your books and pens and pencils were inside. The legs were stainless steel or some kind of shiny metal. The top of the desk was wood or made to look like wood. I don't think it was actually wood. It was fake. Looked like wood, but it wasn't. But the cubbies were wood, definitely wood. I remember once I got a splinter in my finger from the cubby and Mr. Paulson sent me down to the nurse. Mrs. Lefrarie. The nurse's name was Mrs. Lefrarie. Each year we would have eye and ear checkups in her office. For about three days straight she just had one long line of kids outside her office. Kindergarten, first grade, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. Three classes in each grade. Tons and tons of kids for her to see.

I remember I went down with the other fifth graders and we lined up outside of the office and we all waited our turn. For the eye exam, I guess some of the younger kids didn't know their alphabet, so they just had the letter E and you had to tell if it pointed up or down or left or right. And then for the hearing exam, there were these brown plastic headphones that you put on, and a little beep would come up in one ear and you raised the hand on the side that you heard the beep on. Flying colors she would say, Mrs. Lefrarie. I always passed those tests with flying colors.

Mr. Paulson was a nice teacher. We all thought he was cool because he was young and wore jeans to class. All the other male teachers, I think there were only one or two others in the school, dressed nicely, with ties, and they were serious. But Mr. Paulson was cool. On the first day of class he was so funny. We were all so nervous, me and the other kids. We were in fifth grade so we weren't new to first days and we all knew each other since kindergarten, but everyone's always so nervous the first day back to school. No one knows what to expect from the teacher. And fourth grade was easy. I didn't do so well at it, but it was easy. But fifth grade—fractions, and decimals, and harder books, and grammar. Fifth grade was hard. Everyone told me that fifth grade was hard, and it was. Mr. Paulson was nice and all, but it was hard. There were tests and quizzes and it was hard.

But on the first day of class we showed up and we all had a cubby with our own name on it, and we put our lunch boxes and backpacks in there. Each desk also had our name on it, and we had to find our seats. I was sitting next to Dennis and Sean. Sean was my best friend, and Dennis was one of the coolest kids in the class.

Dennis had this Tiger Club ranking system for everyone in the class. It was tiger, puma, leopard, cheetah, lynx, lion, and wolverine. Wolverine was the worst, but only because there was this other kid in the class who thought he was so cool that he started his own Wolverine Club. No one liked him, and he was the only member. Everyone was in the Tiger Club. I think I was a leopard. Sean was a puma. Dennis and one other kid, Brian, were the only two tigers. We had an hour for lunch and we'd always eat as fast as we could and then go out and play football.

Dennis and Brian were always the quarterbacks because they were the best. We only played two-hand touch because we were out on a big blacktop playground. Even in the winter we would just put on jackets and keep playing. The only way they could get us off that blacktop was when it rained, and that was because they wouldn't let us go outside. Whenever it rained they put us in the auditorium and made us watch a movie. I think the school only had about two movies because I must have seen "Labyrinth" and "The Never Ending Story" about five hundred times before I graduated.

I was happy with my seat next to Sean and Dennis. The first day Mr. Paulson made fun of all our names and it was so funny. What was one of them? Sean. Sean's last name is McBride. So Mr. Paulson said "aye, Mr. Sean McBride" with this big Irish brogue and we all started laughing. That day we played a few games so he could remember our names, and then he gave us a sheet of paper with the supplies we would need written on it, and that was all we did.

The next day we started to work, though. With fractions and decimals and grammar and geography and science, and he told us that we would have a test next week and I didn't understand what we were doing. I barely passed fourth grade and now I had all of this work to do and I couldn't do it. I knew I couldn't do it. After the first day I was lost and I didn't understand what he was saying, and I was confused and I knew I wouldn't be ready for the test next week and I...

"Calm down William."

Sorry. So I went on in the year. And I was getting behind on everything. Tests came and grades came back and I forgot about homework and I was near the bottom of my class.

One day at lunch we were playing football and I was on Dennis and Sean's team. All we ever did was pass the ball so I said to Dennis "why don't we run?" He thought I meant I quarterback sneak, which we did all the time because Dennis was one of the fastest kids in the class, but I was talking about a handoff. It was the first handoff ever and it was my idea. We did a delay so all the defense had gone downfield to cover the receivers, and then Dennis gave the ball to me and I ran. Everyone was so confused that they just stopped and looked at me as I ran in for a touchdown. Then the bell rang and we went back to class.

At the end of the first quarter, grades were sent home to my parents. Dad didn't seem to care that much. He never got good grades and he ended up as a lawyer. Mom was really mad at how bad mine were. The next week we had parent-teacher conferences. Dad was at work so he couldn't go see Mr. Paulson, but mom went in and talked to him for over an hour. I was waiting outside and all I could think of was all the bad things they must have been saying. When Mr. Paulson and my mom came out of the room they were laughing, and they shook hands, and then mom took me home. We even had pizza for dinner that night. Dad hated pizza so we didn't have it that much, but mom went out to Villa Anna Maria and picked up a pie for dinner. She didn't seem to be mad or anything, and she told me that Mr. Paulson now understood the situation and that I'd be getting extra help from now on. The high school had a program where good students who wanted to do volunteer work could help out students in elementary school

who were a little behind. Every Tuesday and Thursday from three to four I would be tutored by one of these high school kids. Mr. Paulson would also give me some special attention to make sure I wasn't lost.

So the year went on. Mr. Paulson was always checking up on my work and making sure I stayed up with the rest of the class. Every Tuesday and Thursday I stayed after for extra help. There were two or three other kids who stayed after for help from the high school students, and there was one high school kid for each of us. I worked with... what was his name? Tony? Ted. It was Ted. Smart guy. He was a senior that year, and the next year he went to Princeton. That's why I went to Princeton, I think. I wanted to be just like Ted and if Ted went to Princeton I wanted to go to Princeton too. He was smart, and the captain of the basketball team in high school. He used to roll up his jeans, and then I started to. I still do, see?

William pointed down to his pants with the cuffs rolled up.

Ted was so cool. He knew everything. And he helped me with my work. He made me understand things that we were doing in class. Sometimes when we were done with my work before the hour was up we would play hangman. It's the game where you have to guess at the letters in a word and you have to figure out the word before a hanging man is drawn on the blackboard. For every wrong guess, you draw an arm or a leg or something on the board. Working with Ted helped a lot. My grades started to go up and I did better on tests. Also, Mr. Paulson had a policy where if he made a mistake on grading your test and didn't take off as many points as he was supposed to, you got to keep those points and he wouldn't take off if he found out his mistake. I started noticing that he was making a lot of mistakes on grading my tests. Sometimes he would add his minuses wrong, or give me more partial credit than he would give someone else. A few times he even marked one of my answers right when it was wrong. I didn't complain though, and my grades kept getting better and better. Fifth grade was supposed to be hard but it wasn't that hard. I was figuring it out and it wasn't that hard. I was even doing better than some of the smart kids on some tests.

One day, Thursday I think, Mr. Paulson gave us some hard math problems for homework, and I knew I was going to need Ted's help with them. I waited after class with the other kids for the high schoolers to show up, but when they did Ted wasn't with them. One of the other high school kids, a girl, Sarah I think her name was, told me that Ted was sick, he wouldn't be coming, and that I could go home. She asked if I wanted her to take me to the principal's office so I could call home for a ride, but I told her that I always walked home. I got all my books together and left the building. Out on the playground, there were some kids playing football, and on the days that I didn't have tutoring I normally stayed and played with them, but I knew I had to get to work on the math. Fractions. They were fractions problems and I always had trouble with fractions, so I knew I needed to go straight home and start working if I wanted to get them done on my own without any help.

When I got home mom wasn't there. The car was in the driveway but mom wasn't there. Mom was always home when I got back from school. This was the first time I'd ever gotten home and

found that she was out. But I knew she wasn't expecting me home for another hour, and since the car was there I figured she was probably just down the block talking to a neighbor. I went into the dining room, tossed my backpack on the table, and took out my books. I began right away with the fractions. I had some geography and writing to do, but I knew the fractions were the hardest, so I began with those. I had done a few problems and then I heard some noises upstairs. I had never heard those noises before, and I wasn't sure what it was. I was a pretty paranoid child; I'll give you that much. When I heard the noise I thought there was a burglar in the house. I ran into the kitchen and I hid under the table and I waited. I waited and waited and nobody came downstairs and the noise continued. Finally I decided I would sneak up on the burglar. I would go into the den, get my baseball bat, and go upstairs. I knew I was young and I was scared but that's what I decided to do.

I went into the den and I got my bat. Slowly, so slowly, I crept up the stairs. The stairs kept creaking and I was trying to be so quiet so the burglar wouldn't hear me. I got to the top of the stairs and the noise was coming from mommy's room. I had my bat clenched tight in both hands. So tight. I was holding my bat and I was ready to swing it into that burglar and he'd be knocked unconscious and then I'd dial 911 and I'd be a hero. I'd be a hero.

I flung open the door and I jumped into the room and there was mommy on top of him. She was on top of him, and I was standing there, looking at them. Mommy immediately grabbed a blanket to cover herself, and she pushed me out of the room and closed the door. She left me outside and she went back in. Then she came out again wearing dad's bathrobe. She told me we needed to talk and she took me into my room and sat me down on my bed. She started talking and I saw Mr. Paulson walk out of mom's room with just his jeans on, and no shoes or shirt and he went downstairs and mom was wearing dad's bathrobe. I heard the door open and then close and I knew Mr. Paulson had left.

'Mommy loves you, William. I want to see you do the best you can. I want to see you be successful. Don't you want to be successful? You need good grades, William. Next year the school starts tracking for math and science. All the smart kids will be in the same class and move at a faster pace than the other students. And the year after that they separate the kids for English and history. The year after that they separate into advanced classes for a foreign language. If you slip behind now you'll never be able to get into the advanced classes. If you aren't in the advanced classes you won't be able to get into a good college and then you won't have a good job. I did this for you, William. I love you. Mommy loves you, dear. Your grades weren't good enough to get into the advanced math and science classes next year. You need to get good grades from Mr. Paulson this year. You needed help and I gave it to you. I helped you because I love you, William. Don't you understand? You need to get good grades. Everything depends on it.'

That's what she told me. And if mom said it, it had to be true. The next day I went back to school and I studied and I studied and I got good grades and I got into all the advanced classes, and I did all the extra credit and I carried all the heavy textbooks...

"That's good William. You've done a good job. I think we'll stop here today."

Oh. Alright, Dr. Jennings.

“Good. We’ll pick up here tomorrow.”

“OK, Dr. Jennings. Nice to meet you, Dr. Brown.”

“Nice to meet you too, William,” replied Dr. Brown.

Two men walked over to William and escorted him out of the room. Dr. Jennings, the older of the two doctors, made a few notes a pad.

“We made some progress there. That was definitely some progress,” said Dr. Jennings.

“What happened to him, to William?” asked Dr. Brown

“Sophomore year at Princeton he was taking a course in some kind of advanced multi-variable calculus. Very advanced, almost graduate school level. The teacher called him up to the board to solve a problem, and he couldn’t do it. He stared at it and stared at it and couldn’t figure it out. The teacher told him not to worry, that another student would get a chance to try it, but William wouldn’t leave the board, wouldn’t let the other student try. The teacher put his hand on William’s shoulder to try to get him to leave, and William punched him in the face. Knocked him out cold, actually. They called security and William was still just standing at the board, staring at the problem. He couldn’t do it. Security tried to remove him, and William attacked them too. There was plenty of security though, and they dragged him away from that board kicking and screaming. That was two years ago.”

“What’s the diagnosis?” Dr. Brown asked.

Dr. Jennings looked down at his notes, took off his reading glasses and put them in his lab-coat pocket, and began to chuckle to himself. “He hates his mother.”

Nemesis

By Mandy Ruthnum

Faith had no intention of breaking the teacher's leg, at first.

Mrs. Greening wrote her name on the whiteboard on the first day of school while Faith examined her from the back row. There was no wedding ring. Faith's eyes traveled up, from black two-inch heels, to bare muscular calves, to the loose comfortable skirt and peasant-style blouse. Mrs. Greening turned sideways, and Faith could just see the edge of her white bra through the opening in the front of the blouse.

The sixth graders ended up in a portable classroom that year. They baked and sweated in their metal oven in the hot September sunshine. Mrs. Greening refused to open the doors of the portable in case the feral school cat came in. Two of the children cried as they were so uncomfortably hot. One day, Jessica almost fainted. Faith had loved Jessica since Grade 4 and ground her teeth as she watched Amy run to get water for her. Mrs. Greening didn't give a shit. Apparently her cat allergy trumped the risk of death by dehydration. At recess, the children burst out of the portable like astronauts exiting a shuttle. The schoolyard was a large L-shape of green grass with a sandbox, swings, monkey bars and a border of West Coast forest on two sides.

Casey, a yellow and white cat with no fixed address, slept in an overturned stump in a swampy part of the woods next to the school. She had one decent ear left. She hunted birds and mice for food. Sometimes a kid brought a can of Fancy Feast or tuna for her. She wandered around at recess, craving the touch of sticky sweaty little hands, surprisingly, for a cat. She sidled into the portable one day, and was dispatched with a kick from Mrs. Greening. The children hated their teacher passionately, in the way children can unite strongly against a common enemy.

"For the third time, Faith, sit down and get your math done now".

With great deliberation, Faith picked up her water bottle and emptied a liter onto the ground. The puddle expanded beneath two rows of desks. Several kids picked up their feet. Mrs. Greening's face was suffused with rage. Faith always enjoyed this moment of suspense, after she made a "bad choice", and the curtain rose on drama.

"Go to the principal's office!"

Faith sauntered away, grinning to herself. She returned to the portable after the other kids had gone outside for recess. She had completed her penance of listening to the principal yammer on about respect and obedience for ten minutes. It was strangely similar to Dad's sermons in church on Sundays. Pastor Randy. An aptly-named man.

Mrs. Greening grabbed Faith by the throat and pushed her against the wall of the portable, away from the windows. She had a sheen of sweat on her upper lip, and the beginnings of a mustache. She smelled like sardines with an overlay of cheap rose perfume.

"Listen, I'm not like other teachers." She smiled, and I noticed that one of her canine teeth jutted sharply outward. "I won't put up with your bullshit. Nobody will believe this happened. Nobody will listen to you if you say anything because of who you are. Get your act together or you'll be sorry."

A genuine threat, to be sure. The game was on.

Faith enlisted the aid of Warren, an open-mouthed boy who operated solely with his reptilian brain. Warren did small-time bad things, like putting honey into a kid's hair and chortling with glee, or ripping someone's art project into tiny pieces for no apparent reason. He worshipped Faith like a goddess.

"Our goal", she told Warren, "is to drive her crazy so she'll leave and never come back." Warren nodded solemnly, chewing on a piece of fruit leather. There was greyish plaque stuck between his teeth. He'd been wearing the same dirty black track pants for the last four days.

The following Tuesday, Mrs. Greening left the classroom during morning recess. She usually hunkered down at her desk for that short break, marking papers with a cup of cold Timmy's at her elbow. Warren and Faith crept quietly into the empty portable and took a look around to make sure they were alone. Faith nodded at Warren and he went into the tiny bathroom beside the coatroom, took off his pants, and promptly shat a log into his underwear. One of Warren's few talents was the ability to shit at will. He delicately removed his underwear, wrapping it carefully around the shit. He pulled his pants back on while Faith guarded the door.

Faith pointed and her minion dropped the package right in the middle of Mrs. Greening's desk. They went back outside to wait for the end of recess and raced to the other side of the playground. Jessica and Amy were jumping rope. Faith watched Jessica's long honey-blond curls bounce up and down, and that dimple in her left cheek. Faith couldn't help smiling.

Warren and Faith were greeted by a chorus of omg what is that smell? who shit their pants? when they came back inside. The girls shrieked dramatically and pinched their noses. Mrs. Greening's high-heels sounded on the metal stairs and all at once she loomed in the doorway. As the stench hit, her whole face wrinkled with disgust. She walked slowly between the desks, ignoring the hullabaloo, and finally came to stand at her own desk. She stared down at the log of shit lying on the blue cotton underwear. She nodded once and pursed her lips.

"I want all the boys to line up against one wall," she said.

There were about twelve boys in the class and they looked at each other, confused. Warren flushed deeply. Faith wore her best-confused expression.

Mechanically the boys formed a line against the whiteboard, while the girls settled in at their desks to enjoy the show. The outside door was left open.

"I want all of you to show me the elastic of your underwear, so I can see that you are in fact wearing underwear," Mrs. Greening said in a dangerously calm voice.

One by one, each kid hooked a thumb into the elastic waistband of his underwear and hiked it up high so Mrs. Greening could see. Warren was second-last in line.

"Show me your underwear, Warren," she said.

Warren looked at the floor.

"Get out of my sight!" Mrs. Greening bellowed, "Principal's office!"

Warren didn't look at anybody as he left the portable. Later that day, Warren's mother arrived in the classroom to gather his schoolbag and things while he waited outside in the car. She exchanged a couple of words with a stony Mrs. Greening. Warren never came back. He never, ever came back.

That night, Faith waited hungrily at the table for the macaroni casserole her mom had made. Mom and Dad sat down. The three of them held hands around the table while Dad said grace. It had been six months since Randall Junior had left home. The story Dad told the congregation was that Randall was serving the faith in Africa, but in fact, he had knocked up his girlfriend Salima and the two of them were living in sin in Toronto. Mom and Dad had told the story of his African service so often, they almost believed it. Nobody had heard from Randall during all of that time. Faith missed him fiercely. Now she had nobody to roll her eyes at during Dad's sermons on Sunday.

At school, Faith waited and watched. One cold November morning, Mrs. Greening left her car door unlocked. At recess, Faith grabbed Casey and stuffed her into the car. Casey yowled and mewed but nobody heard her. Over the course of the day, she peed in the car, scratched her claws across the upholstery and rubbed her hairy flanks over the seats. At a quarter past three, Faith waited behind a tree across the yard to spy. Mrs. Greening let fly a string of expletives as she opened the car door and a streak of yellow and white shot past her, scratching a hole in her black pantyhose. Tentatively, Mrs. Greening peered inside and recoiled as the smell of cat piss hit her.

Mrs. Greening started riding a bicycle to school every day. She wore a navy-blue Spandex suit as she cycled and changed in the staff room when she got to school.

"Great way to stay in shape, Anne!" called out jovial Mr. Benoit from the parking lot. "Well, it's just temporary," she called back, "my car was invaded by a pest, and I tried to get it detailed but I can't get the stink out. I'll trade it in."

Faith bit her lip to suppress a laugh as she eavesdropped around the corner.

Mr. Benoit walked over to Mrs. Greening as she secured her bike to the rack.

"How are you getting your mother to the doctor without a car?", he asked.

"Luckily, her doctor does home visits, so we've been ok so far," Mrs. Greening replied. "She's on a waitlist for a care home now. Her dementia is at the point where she doesn't even recognize me half the time. She screams a lot and is up at night."

Mr. Benoit made a clucking sound and shook his shaggy head.

"God knows how you do it, Anne." She shrugged her shoulders and gave him a wry one-sided smile. "I heard your husband left last month," Mr. Benoit went on, "listen, Jan and I have been wanting to have you over for dinner for a while. How about Friday night? You can bring your mother."

Three days later there was a commotion near the edge of the yard at lunchtime. Two of the first graders were screaming. The playground supervisor looked up from her phone and ran over. Casey was dead. Faith pushed through the crowd to see for herself. She lay on her side next to the stump, an empty tuna can beside her. Her eyes were open, staring glassily at the cloudy grey sky. The whites of her eyes had turned yellow. Her face was curiously bloated and there was a puddle of vomit beside her head. Faith reached out to touch her. Casey was cold and stiff.

Mrs. Greening expressed her deepest sympathies to the class. "I know you all loved Casey," she said, "but this is one of those things that happens in life sometimes...life is so temporary. We have to make the best of the time we have together, right?" Her smile was truly frightening. Art class that day was Casey-based. The children were asked to write a poem, draw a picture, and exorcise their emotions regarding the death of the school cat.

"How did he die?", Alexa asked.

"Who knows?", replied Mrs. Greening, "Cats are more fragile than you think. I mean, even a few Tylenol can kill a cat."

She indicated the bottle of Tylenol sitting on the edge of her desk, looked directly at Faith and raised her perfectly sculpted brows. The rest of the kids started working on their art projects. All Faith could hear was the sound of the shovel hitting half-frozen earth as the janitor buried Casey.

Later that day, Faith sat in the kitchen, watching her mother. Cathy stood at the kitchen counter, chopping cauliflower into chunks fit for the food processor. Once again she was on a low carb diet trying to lose the 75 pounds she had not so mysteriously gained over the last ten years. Grains were verboten and cauliflower rice was de rigueur. Cathy washed her hands and wiped them on her apron. She poured a glass of milk for Faith, mixed in a spoonful of chocolate syrup and gave her a couple of chocolate chip cookies out of a package. Faith dunked and ate. She didn't mention Casey. Mom didn't need to think about a dead cat. Dad smelled like perfume when he came home late from his church meetings, and Randall Junior was in Toronto about to

become a father at seventeen. Keeping secrets had become a full-time job for Mom. And cauliflower rice wouldn't be as comforting as salt and vinegar potato chips.

The kitchen table was covered with a slab of glass. Cathy had stuck many pictures of Faith and Randall Junior underneath. Faith's glass left a ring of condensation on Randall's smiling grade eleven face. She wiped it away with her palm.

"Any word from Randall, Mom?"

"No honey. He is so busy serving in Africa. I'm sure he'll contact us when he has a chance. Don't worry. Say a prayer for him when you miss him." She reached out and squeezed Faith's hand. Faith squeezed back and smiled at her Mom.

Two weeks later, Faith stopped at a construction site on the way home and picked up two large bricks. With difficulty, she lugged them home in her backpack. The next morning, she told her mother she had to leave early to work on a book report. Cathy kissed Faith on the forehead and sent her off for the day. It was still dark outside. Faith biked with the bricks wrapped in a towel in the backpack so they wouldn't bruise her bony spine and ribs like they had the day before. She placed the bricks squarely in the middle of the bike path, spaced a foot apart. Hopefully, Mrs. Greening would be looking up, not down, as she pedaled along. Faith arrived at school early, her backpack now deliciously light and empty. She sat on the steps of the portable reading a Far Side comic book until the schoolyard came alive with voices and the rolling creak of swings.

Jessica walked up to Faith. She could smell the lavender soap on her, the sweet candy breath. "Can you come to my birthday party?" Jessica asked. She handed Faith a pink-edged card. "It's a sleepover." Faith's heart was beating quickly. She had lost the ability to speak, and could only nod and smile. Jessica suddenly turned and ran towards Amy who was climbing out of her dad's Honda.

The starting bell sounded. There was no sign of Mrs. Greening. The children started whispering and eventually, the volume turned up to a dull roar. The vice-principal came in and gave the kids some math worksheets to do. Faith's palms were sweaty. She couldn't focus on the page. A knock sounded at the portable door, and the principal shuffled in. He squinted at the children, adjusted his glasses, and announced, "Mrs. Greening, unfortunately, fell off her bicycle this morning on the way to school. She broke her leg. Her femur-bone," he added awkwardly. "She won't be coming back to school for a couple of months at least. She's in the emergency room now."

There were a few gasps from the class, and a murmur of noise rose to a crescendo and died down rapidly. Faith felt a deep peace inside. It was the feeling of the first day of summer vacation when only good things await you. Mrs. Greening never came back to the class that year. The grade six class was taken over by Mr. Richard, a teacher who appeared to be the human version of a potato, but much kinder and smarter. Faith started hanging out with Jessica and Amy in the schoolyard a couple of times a week after the birthday sleepover. They talked about which

actors were hot and how they wanted to wear lipstick but their moms wouldn't let them. Jessica wanted to be a doctor when she grew up.

Grade seven started well. Faith found she was looking forward to school now that Jessica was her friend. In October, Faith came home to find her funeral clothes laid out on her bed.

“What's this, Mom?”, she asked. “Who died?”

“Aw, sweetie”, said Cathy, “your dad has been asked to do a funeral for Mrs. Thompson who died earlier this week. The thing is there aren't many people attending, so your dad asked us to come too, for support”.

Faith sighed but obediently put on her black tights, black velvet skirt and white blouse with the little red flower buttons. She felt completely unlike herself in this particular outfit. She slipped on her black leather Mary Janes and went outside. Cathy was waiting in the van, dressed in a somber small print flowered dress and burgundy cardigan. Faith climbed into the front seat. They drove along in silence for a while, and then Cathy switched on the radio. It was set to a station for Christian children's music. “Read your Bible, read your Bible” sounded monotonously from the car speakers until Mom flipped the channel. Now they were listening to Alanis Morissette and Faith wished desperately for silence.

They arrived at the church and walked into the lobby. There was a display set up in the entrance with pictures of the dead lady Marjorie Thompson at various stages of her life. Laughing in forties-style clothing, looking into the distance in side-profile at the beach, older now and standing behind an old man in a wheelchair with her hands on his shoulders. Faith prepared herself to be immensely bored for a period of time.

Her mom stayed back for a moment to sign the guest book as Faith walked into the main church and find a pew. It was mostly empty, only about four or five people waited patiently for the service to start. With surprise, she saw Mr. Benoit and gave him a wave. Faith saw a tall woman standing at the front leaning close to her father to say something into his ear. He guided her towards a seat in the front pew and as she turned around, Faith realized with a shock that it was Mrs. Greening.

Mrs. Greening looked down the central aisle and saw Faith standing there. Her heels clicked slowly down the intervening distance. She walked normally, just as she did before. The injury had healed well.

“Faith”, she said, “I'm so glad you came. This means a lot to me.”

“Mrs. Greening, I'm sorry about your mom.” Faith answered like a robot in the social niceties setting. She wanted to turn and run.

Harp music seeped from the church speaker, signaling the service was about to begin. Mrs. Greening went to her seat in the front pew and Faith went to sit with her mother. They held hands. Faith watched Mrs. Greening.

Pastor Randy was quoting John 14.

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. And you know the way to where I am going.”

Mrs. Greening used a Kleenex once during the service and got up to say a few words about her mother and thanked everyone for attending. The burial was to be private and there were no sandwiches or tea afterward. Faith wanted to jump out of her skin until she got home and changed back into her t-shirt and sweat pants.

“That poor woman”, murmured her mother as they sat together in the living room watching Wheel of Fortune. “She really has nobody now.”

The phone rang. Faith got up to answer it, but there was only silence, then a hang-up.

A month later, Faith was sitting under the outside stairs at recess to escape the pouring rain. Jessica and Amy had umbrellas. They walked over slowly together. Their faces looked strained. Jessica spoke first.

“Faith, we have something really hard to tell you.”

“What?”

“Our moms are saying we can’t play with you anymore.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s because of your dad.”

“What about my dad?” Jessica and Amy looked at each other, red-faced.

“You mean, you haven’t heard?”

“No,” said Faith, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Jessica took Faith’s hand in hers.

“Faith, your dad was caught having an affair with Mrs. Greening.”

“What the hell?”

“There was a tape on the internet. It was posted two days ago. It’s called Pastor Randy gets randy.”

Faith felt nauseous. Jessica and Amy were looking at her with such pity and kindness. She turned away and went into the school. Thankfully the girls’ bathroom was empty. She went into one of the cubicles and leaned her face against the cold metal wall. She felt a sense of unreality. The bile was rising in her throat and she vomited into the toilet. Gasping, she went to the sink afterward and washed her face and mouth. She looked into the mirror and saw her own very white face staring back at her.

That evening, her mom was chirping away in the kitchen even more happily than usual. She had baked peanut butter cookies from scratch for Faith. She knew her mother would never talk about what had happened. Instead, she would focus on the upcoming exciting move as the family had been asked to serve in another community across the country. After all, they had God’s work to do.

Reborn (and Battle Scars)

By Jennifer Schneider

I started journaling while stationed overseas. I penned haikus. Short, tiny bits of text. Daily snapshots in a world with no electricity. Perfect to fill our short, tiny bits of free time. I hid my work. Later, after Ron found my notebook, I shared. At night. When we should have been sleeping.

I thought Ron, a fellow soldier, would laugh. All 6 feet, 5 inches of him stood still. Staring at the words on the yellowing lined pages. Instead, he cried. I watched. Frozen, first in fear, then disbelief. Ron's eyes welled as he faced me. Silence. Turns out we all feel. Even those who act like nothing scares them.

My writing was hopeful back then. Now, it's an outlet for darkness. "Let it out. Don't hold back", Sally (my therapist) urges. I comply. Once a soldier, always a soldier. Sometimes I wish it were harder.

11:12 AM: I use the same journal. Deep brown, worn leather. Frayed at the corners. I flip through, reading some recent poems.

Born and raised stateside.
Homies. Fought hard. Overseas.
Strangers with no home.

Proud war veterans
Lost limbs. Haunted dreams. Ignored.
No degrees. No jobs.

11:24 AM: Being out of work is rough. That's why I'm back in school. VA benefits pay for my courses. Online. From my kitchen. Nobody sees my battle wounds.

When I was overseas, I'd write home. Over time, my letters got shorter. Then stopped. Words hurt. Waiting for responses even worse. Now, trying to erase all I've seen, I've lost my ability to write. Gone, like my former self.

"Write what you feel", Sally advises. "Others understand."

I try.

11:47 AM: My first assignment wants a bio. I start drafting.

11:48 AM: "Hi, I'm Dom". Awful. "Hey, my name is Dominique Joseph and no, I don't like DJ." Worse. "Hello class, I'm Dominique, a Vet from Missouri."

I keep trying.

The clock's minute hand completes two full circles. When did everything become so hard?

1:52 PM: I try everything. Coffee doesn't help. Springsteen on and the dial turned to the maximum only takes me back to a foreign land.

"Born in the U.S.A."*... most days I feel like a stranger in my "hometown jam"* . In my own body.

2:48 PM: A smoke outside gets me thinking. Just as dangerous as not. Maybe the doubters are right. My dog is more consistently productive than I am. Ah, Daisy. Needs a walk and food.

4:22 PM: Back at my kitchen table. Cold coffee and two more clock rotations. For my efforts?

Nothing.

4:28 PM: Same story. Different place. "Nowhere to run. Nowhere to go" roars*. Spontaneous laughter. Drunk on caffeine, something clicks in my broken mind. Starting with nothing, I have nothing to lose. Cliché? Yep. Freeing? Oh, yeah.

4:30 PM: I start typing:

"Hi everyone. I'm Dominique (but call me Dom). Life hasn't been easy. I figured I might as well share, as I really don't know how not to. My past is as much a part of me as my present. I've made mistakes but learned from them. I've served. Our country. Other ways, too. I've lost everything. I frazzle easily. My patience is gone. I struggle with trust. Despite everything, I'm still here. It's a message, I'm sure. Going for my B.A in Human Services. I'm gonna give back and share what I've learned. For lost friends, like Ron. The bills, too. I need work. My life – no more cover-ups. Thanks for reading."

4:42 PM: I pause. Glanced at the clock. Woah. Ten minutes and over one-hundred words. My story. I clicked submit and my words reappeared in the classroom portal. I feel giddy and hopeful.

4:49 PM: A quick dance with my tiny pug. She's my hero and I'm hers. Then, back to the books. Ready to tackle my next assignment.

4:59 PM: Elation is short-lived. Always.

No book. No readings. Another obstacle. Damn flashbacks don't help, either.

Four steps. Stop. Smell air.
Burnt rubber. Bacon. Bodies.
Jumbled thoughts. Need help.

5:00 PM: At my last session, Sally reminded me to reach out. Ask instructors my questions. I try. Via email. This instructor's name is Ashley.

5:02 PM: Email sent. "Ashley - Hey, it's Dom. I need some help."

5:16 PM: Nothing yet. Maybe it didn't go through. "I'm one of your students. I'd really like a reply."

5:54 PM: Losing my cool. "Ashley, what the heck is going on here, and why am I always assigned women instructors?"

6:58 PM: One more. "FedEx screwed up. The app scheduled delivery for 5:00. They left a note on my door at 3:00. I was walking Daisy. I have no book."

10:15 PM: "Nvm my last email, the truck just left."

11:00 PM: "Ma'am. I'm flippin' mad. I ordered a new copy of our text. They sent a used copy. I'm afraid of germs. Can't touch it. It's going back."

11:16 PM: "My head's tired from the stress. I'm calling it a day."

12:22 AM: "I can't sleep. Darn PTSD. I'm sorry about what I said. I know it was wrong. I'm working to manage my emotions. Now, they manage me. Please bear with me. And please accept my apology."

12:40 AM: "I know you don't need another email, but the bookstore is sending me a new copy. Maybe there's hope for me, after all. I'm going to take this as a positive sign. Goodnight."

9:00 AM: Ashley hadn't logged on since 5:00 PM the day before. Coffee brewed. The computer powered up. Log-in accepted. Emails loaded.

Easy, quick replies. Ashley confirmed receipt of a late submission. A yes to a student seeking a summer internship. Several questions about a project topic. One needed an extension.

Then, a whole bunch from one address, a new student. Teaching courses on criminal justice, Ashley was no stranger to emotionally charged discussions. Ashley scanned the emails, debating how to respond. Ultimately, Ashley saw an apology and, with that, inadvertently let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. Another human facing demons no one should have to battle.

Ashley started typing.

9:14 AM: “Dom - Thanks for reaching out. Good news on the book delivery. There are things in life both of us can’t change, it seems. I’m here to help. Best, Ashley”

Ashley paused, then typed once more

9:16 AM EST: “Dom - one more thing. Have you seen Gone With The Wind? As Scarlett O’Hara said, probably referencing Ashley Wilkes, “After all, tomorrow is another day.” Let’s make it the best we can. Ashley”

9:20 AM: Hey, Teach. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I do what I do sometimes. I’m trying. I really am. Sometimes, my memories get the best of me. This class, this program – it’s my second chance. Going for another proud battle scar. My “another day”. Reborn. Right here. In the U.S.A. Online version. I don’t want to mess it up. Thanks again. And Ashley, you’ve got a cool name.

Dom

*Bruce Springsteen, Born in the U.S.A.

When the Butterflies Stirred

by Charlotte Williams

I sat on the desk in our room. The bright yellow curtains were pulled back, pillars of fading light falling over my round, youthful face, a sheen of sweat speckling my skin. I wasn't used to the temperature in France. Even in the evening, it was too hot for comfort.

Robert was playing football with his friends by the coaches, parked in the shade of the sports academy we were staying in. I'd never seen such old buildings. The stone was bleached grey under the scorching sun, gargoyles balanced on the rooftop. Two long blocks in an L shape formed the main dormitories, while my friends and I were placed in two circular buildings tucked away into the treeline of the surrounding woods.

The drivers shouted at them to move away in case they smashed a window. Robert and his friends didn't care. Laughter rang through the air as they darted back and forth in their teams, goals hastily constructed out of water bottles and balled-up jumpers.

It was our first proper trip since starting secondary school. Three-hundred Year Seven students had crossed the English Channel on a ferry four days prior, each excited for what the week ahead held. Some were looking forward to seeing the Bayeux Tapestry, while others couldn't contain their joy at visiting Mont-Saint-Michel. Others were just happy to be away from home.

I didn't care where I was so long as he was there too.

By the end of the week, I'd have asked him to be my boyfriend.

"Do you like him?" Grace asked from her perch on my bed. "You know, do you really like him?"

I kept my back to my friends. The color of my rosy cheeks didn't show in the reflection on the glass. "I think so."

"Does he like you?" Emily ran a brush through her hair, working out the tangles that had formed while we were on the beach earlier.

I shrugged. "I don't know...maybe."

Sophie stopped packing her bag, came up behind me, and peered over my shoulder. "Have you even spoken to him?"

"A little."

We didn't need words, though. Our connection was stronger than that. We'd never had more than a handful of conversations during classes. We were put in a group together in Drama for

several weeks. It was the only subject I hated. Before our group was due to perform, I approached Miss Dowling. It was difficult to breathe, I felt sick, my body flushed with heat. It was hard to contain my tears.

“I can’t do it,” I said, pulling her to the side while everyone else practiced. “I’m too scared. Please don’t make me do it.”

She showed me no sympathy. “Sometimes you have to do things in life you that don’t want to do. You are going to perform, Charlotte. I don’t care how afraid you are.”

Tears flowed freely. The black curtains were drawn around the room, the lights went down, and the spotlight went up. I was blinded by its brightness. It was a blessing in disguise because I couldn’t see the rest of the class watching me. Frozen with fear, all I could do was cry. My lines disintegrated from my memory.

Robert managed to improvise, his personality bursting across the stage, captivating our audience’s attention. Everyone forgot about me. Drama was his best subject; he just had a talent for it.

Another time, in Geography, we’d been put in a group of four, tasked to make a poster on mountain ranges. I offered to do some illustrations. He complimented me on them.

We were in the same French class and were assigned seats next to each other. I’d show him the answers to any questions we didn’t know. I eventually got moved to the other side of the classroom because I wasn’t paying enough attention to the teacher.

I’d never spoken to a boy that much before. It was like a thousand butterflies were contained in my stomach whenever I was around him, their wings beating frantically inside me. It wasn’t just that, but also the looks that drew me in. Sometimes I’d catch him staring at me while we were working... Perhaps he was only looking because I stared at him so much.

It didn’t matter. There was something there. I knew it.

“We go back home tomorrow,” Grace reminded me. “You said you were going to ask him out before we left. You don’t have much time.”

I rested my cheek against the warm glass. A butterfly fluttered past. “I was thinking of doing it at the disco later.”

“That might work,” Emily said, chucking the hairbrush onto my white pillow.

“It could be really nice,” Grace agreed.

I knew it would be nice; I’d planned it all out in my head. The disco was being held in a small hall in the woods just up from our accommodation. It was going to be perfect. Flashing lights

illuminate the darkness, people dancing to the blaring music as I seek Robert out in the crowd. His eyes widen when he sees me standing there in a dress, or maybe some make-up.

“Can we go and talk somewhere private?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says.

We go outside, walking away from the hall a little, but not too far in case the teachers come searching for us. We sit on a fallen tree as fireflies dance through the air, swirling around us like falling stars. The wind filters through the branches, the leaves whispering sweet melodies. An owl hoots overhead.

“I don’t know if you know, but…” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I really like you.”

Silence lingers between us for a while. I can’t look at him. The breeze caresses my cheeks, the coolness embracing me as my heart thunders in my chest.

“Say something,” I whisper, unable to wait any longer.

“I like you too,” he says. Our eyes finally meet as he takes my hand. “I… I think I love you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Then we lean in, our lips parting, growing closer and closer until…

“Well.” Grace glanced at her purple watch. “We ought to get ready. We’re supposed to be there at eight.”

Grace and I arrived later than everyone else. In a state of pure excitement, I’d misjudged my step and fallen down a flight of stairs while speaking to Miss Edwards, the head French teacher. She instructed me to see the first-aider.

Mr. Durram walked us up to the hall. He’d been enjoying a few drinks outside of our accommodation, a small group of teaching assistants gathered around on fold-out picnic chairs, but we pestered them until he agreed. Night had just settled, and neither of us knew where we were going.

I peered past the trees, scanning my surroundings in search of the perfect place to have my conversation with Robert. Everything blurred at the edges, the growing darkness contorting the landscape through a shadowed veil. A creature loomed through the thicket on my left.

“Oh my god,” I said, my heart tightening as though it was gripped in a vice. “Is that… Is that a bear?”

“What?” Mr. Durram stopped.

“There!” I pointed.

He sighed. “Charlotte, it’s a shrub. They don’t have bears in France. Where are your glasses?”

“Oh, I forgot them,” I lied. I’d left my glasses behind intentionally; they made me ugly. I wanted to look as pretty as possible when I spoke to Robert.

Perhaps you should have worn them. At this rate, you won’t even be able to see him among the crowd.

“Did you forget your common sense as well?” Grace said, covering her mouth to try and hide her amusement.

“I’m nervous.” I elbowed her in the side.

Mr. Durram carried on walking. “What’s there to be nervous about?”

“Oh, nothing,” I mumbled, my head lowered.

Grace couldn’t contain herself. “She’s going to ask out a boy,” she said with a giggle.

“Oooh,” Mr Durram cooed. “Which boy?”

I glared at Grace, shaking my head. Don’t you dare.

“He’s in our tutor group,” Grace said.

Mr. Durram scratched his chin, his jawline coated with stubble. “The ginger one?”

“No.”

“The loud one?”

“Nope.”

“The tall one?”

“You’re close.”

“The small one?”

“That’s enough,” I said. “We’re not going to tell you, so you’ll just have to wait and see.”

The trees around us parted, the path winding up to the grey building at the top of the hill, broken branches and showers of leaves covering the roof. Yellow lights flickered through the frosted glass. An echo of voices drifted through the entrance: the heavy oak door was propped open with a small wooden wedge.

Mr. Durram shoved his hands into his jean pockets. “Well, I’ll leave you guys here, unless you’d like me to escort you both inside.” His lips twitched. “Can you see it, Char? It’s just up there. You won’t get lost, will you?”

“Piss off.” I linked arms with Grace, hauling her up the trail. “I’m not blind.”

“Have a good night, girls,” he called after us. “Oh, and Char?”

I glanced over my shoulder.

“Good luck, yeah?”

“Thank you.” I waved. “Try not to get eaten by any bears on your way back.”

After he’d disappeared into the shadows, Grace turned to me, dropping her voice to a whisper. “He’s so handsome. Don’t you think he’s handsome?”

I grimaced. “God, no. He’s like thirty-something.” My eyes widened. “You don’t fancy him, do you?”

It was Grace’s turn to blush.

We were bickering about how weird her attraction to our teaching assistant was when we entered the hall. I stopped in my tracks, half-blinded by the bright, fluorescent bulbs. Everyone stared at us. There were no colourful lights, no music, no dancing. The students were divided into five groups; one was larger than the rest, the pupils sat with their backs against three of the four walls.

“I thought you said this was going to be a disco,” I said under my breath.

“I thought it was!” Grace glanced around. “Well, that’s what Emma told me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why did you believe Emma? She’s a certified liar. She told Jessica that she had five black Labradors, but Ella went to her house, and saw she had two Golden Retrievers and a chocolate Labrador.”

Miss Edwards walked over, her long black hair falling out of its bun. “I didn’t think we’d see you this evening, girls.” She glanced at my swollen thumb. “It’s nice of you to join us.”

“Where’s the disco?” Grace asked.

Some of the boys near us snickered. “Disco? What are we, in Year Six?”

Grace crossed her arms over her chest. “You can laugh, Colin, but at least I’m not crying about it like you did when you lost a game of musical statues at leaving disco last year.”

His face turned bright red as laughter exploded around him. “Why’d you have to bring that up?”

They’d always had a difficult relationship. I’d been there when they got married on the amphitheater in Year Four, the red canopy suspended above reflecting their love for one another. They swapped Haribo rings and promised to keep them forever. Grace’s lasted two weeks. Colin ate his before the bell rang at the end of the day.

That was the first crack in their relationship. On a Friday afternoon, Colin hosted a game of Deal or No Deal in the classroom, using the lockers as the boxes. I always wanted to be picked as a contestant, but I was never one of the lucky ones. We had to call him ‘Noel Edmonds’ during the game. Grace was his glamorous assistant, and we had to call her ‘Mrs. Noel’. Even the teachers loved it.

During one game, Grace stood up, ready for her cue. He told her to sit back down; she wasn’t part of it that day. It wasn’t long after that that they announced their divorce.

“Enough,” Miss Edwards said, shifting uncomfortably on her feet. “There’s no disco. I think someone made up a silly little rumour, although there’s no harm done. We’re just playing games. You don’t have to join in if you don’t want to.”

We spied our friends by the wall opposite us. I noticed that Robert was in a group partaking in the activities. I didn’t want him to see me running; I was extremely conscious of my weight.

“I think we’ll give it a miss,” I said.

Miss Edwards nodded. “Perhaps that’s best.” Her eyes lingered on my hand. “We don’t want any more accidents today.”

We crossed the room as the groups started playing handball, and joined our friends.

My sister prodded my thumb with her light blue Nintendo stylus. “What did they say?” Emily asked.

My lip turned downwards like I’d bitten into something sour. “Mr. West put some ice on it, but he doesn’t think it’s broken.” I held up the digit in question. “How can you even tell? It’s like an egg. It’s definitely broken.”

Emily nodded. “Aren’t they going to do anything?”

I shook my head. “Mr. West said that we’ll be back in England soon, but they’re taking Mia to the hospital right now because she twisted her ankle playing volleyball.”

“They could’ve taken you with her,” Sophie said. The others agreed.

“They didn’t have enough spare teachers to go with me, apparently.”

“Which is a huge lie,” Grace said. “All of the teaching assistants are outside our block drinking beer.”

Sophie played with her hair, unwrapping her braid, then winding the strands back together. “At least you can speak to Robert now that you’re not going to the hospital.”

“Shh!” I looked at the girls next to us, making sure they hadn’t heard. “I don’t know if I will.”

Emily looked up from her Nintendo, her Animal Crossing character standing by the river, waiting for a fish to take the bait. “I knew you’d bottle it.”

“I’m not bottling anything. This isn’t exactly how I imagined the evening would play out,” I said.

“Well, the night is still young,” Grace said. “You’ll find the right opportunity, and it’ll be perfect. You’ll see.”

The butterflies fluttered faster and faster in my stomach as the hours passed by. I couldn’t see Robert. People’s features blurred together, their defined edges smudged by my poor vision.

Those of us on the outskirts of the hall were outcasts; the teams consisted of the popular people. It was as if an invisible wall divided us. Even though we were only eleven, there was already an established hierarchy, a social standing set in stone by some deity none of us knew.

They played handball, benchball, and dodgeball. The rest of us talked. Sam put three Britney Spears songs on his Walkman, which we sang along until one of the popular girls complained that we had ‘no taste’. Her friends kicked up a fuss, and we had to turn the music off. Sam argued that we had to listen to a hundred pairs of feet thundering through the hall. We decided to huddle around in a circle, with the phone in the center, the songs contained within a ring of friends.

At ten o’clock, Miss Edwards announced that it was time to head back to our accommodation for the night. We’d be expected in bed by eleven-thirty, half an hour later than usual. I guessed that, as it was our last night in Normandy, they were feeling generous.

It was now or never.

We began filing out of the hall. My sister dropped her Nintendo stylus, and it took us ages to find it. I kept looking around, waiting for Robert to pass by. Only a handful of students remained; he wasn't one of them.

“What are you going to say to him?” Grace asked as we headed back down the path, our arms linked, beams of torchlight marking our way.

“I don't know,” I said. “I think I'm just going to be honest with him. I'll say that I've liked him for a really long time, and I can't keep my feelings in any longer. I hope he feels the same.” “He will,” Grace reassured me. “I've seen the way he looks at you during lessons. Besides, what's not to like?”

“Right.” I squeezed her hand, reassuring myself rather than her, then let go. “Wish me luck!”

“Good luck,” my friends said.

Hurrying down the path, I darted past other students, searching for his face among the masses. Some people shot me odd looks or asked if I was okay. I felt sick. Those butterflies in my stomach were churning up a hurricane with their wings. I'd never felt so nervous before.

The torchlight faded behind me, an orange lamp emitting a dull glow at the end of the path, the lights illuminating the sports academy polluting the sky. I couldn't see any stars.

I heard his voice in front of me.

It took a second for my vision to adjust. I blinked, making sure my eyes hadn't deceived me.

He was holding hands with Amelia. They slowed down as he took off his hoodie, and gave it to her. Their friends gathered around, cooing sweet words, telling them how happy they were. They looked like the perfect couple, they said. They knew it was going to happen on the trip, because they had all heard how much he liked her.

I froze. The butterflies turned to stone, dropping in the pit of my stomach with thuds so loud I could hear them ringing in my ears.

“Kiss her,” their friends urged. “Go on, kiss her!”

He gave her a peck on the lips. Everyone cheered with excitement.

Grace, Emily, and Sophie caught up with me. I didn't need to explain why I was rooted to the spot, or why tears filled my eyes; they saw everything.

It was a silly dream anyway, imagining that we could be together. He was popular, funny, smart, and athletic. She was popular, funny, smart, and athletic. I was unpopular, too quiet to make any

sort of impression on anyone, too shy to ever say anything to those who intimidated me; that was everyone. I wasn't athletic. I liked food, and it showed. I wasn't particularly smart.

If I was smart, I would've thought things through. I would've known that it was never meant to be.

"Oh, Charlotte," Grace said, wrapping her arms around me. "I'm so sorry." "Did you know?" I asked them, eyes wide as I pleaded for the truth.

"No," they said. "We had no idea."

I walked out of the woods in silence. They kept telling me how sorry they were, how they thought we'd work well together, how I hadn't misread any of the signs. They linked their arms with mine.

"Do you want to stay out here for a little while?" Sophie asked. "It's our last night here, after all. Don't let this ruin it."

I shook my head. "I have some last-minute things to pack," I lied, "but I'll come back out when I'm done, I promise."

Grace offered me a small, sad smile. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"I'll be fine," I said. "You guys stay out here. It's our last night, after all. Don't let me ruin it."

I headed back into our dormitory, trying to slip past the teaching assistants still gathered on the grass, a handful of chairs left unoccupied. Mr. Durrum spotted me. He called me over, a half-empty bottle of beer in his hand.

"Well?" He took a sip. "Why aren't you with your boyfriend?"

I wrapped my arms around myself. "He's not my boyfriend."

"You didn't ask him?"

"No."

He tapped his silver ring engraved with a Celtic symbol against the dark glass. "Why not? Go and ask him now."

"I was going to ask him, but he's already asked someone else."

Mr. Durrum peered into the distance. "Ah, right. Yep, I can see them." He took another swig. "There are more important things than relationships. You have your whole life ahead of you. You'll forget this ever happened in a year or two."

“I hope you’re right.”

“Don’t dwell on it too much, Char. You’re better than that.”

“I’ll try not to.”

He didn’t know it, but that was who I was by nature. An overthinker. Someone who dwelled on things far more than anybody ever should.

I disappeared inside, ascending up the winding staircase that, only a few hours ago, I’d fallen down and, contrary to Mr. West’s expert opinion, had resulted in me breaking my thumb. I focused on the pain, trying not to think of my utter humiliation.

Instead of going into my room, I went out onto the bridge that connected the two circular buildings we stayed in. The cool air kissed my cheeks. An owl hooted in the trees behind me. I rested my elbows on the railings, watching my fellow pupils down below.

My friends were speaking to other people, chatting away about the trip, wondering what we’d be doing in the morning before heading back to the ferry. Someone pulled a timetable out of their pocket. They showed each other photos they’d taken, promising to send them over messenger once we were home.

Everyone was united in their excitement of returning back to the UK, to their loved ones. Nobody wanted to go back to school. For the first time since moving to secondary school, when we were all in the same scary boat, everyone seemed equal. I couldn’t differentiate between faces. Everyone was just human.

I felt like an outcast more than ever.

I didn’t know it at the time, but it foreshadowed events still to come. I’d end up feeling more and more like an outsider, especially after the bullying started, and I’d eventually drop out of school. My friends would no longer be my friends. I’d become completely isolated from the only world I’d ever known. My self-confidence, as well as my mental health, would be left in tatters. I’d have to start again, have to build my life back together piece by piece, dealing with the effect these people had on me for the rest of my life.

I didn’t know it at the time.

I felt a twinge of sadness in my stomach, seeing them all so happy, enjoying the last evening of the trip. I stayed out there for a while, my distant presence entirely unnoticed, watching over them as though I was a ghost.

When everyone started heading back to their dorms, I slipped inside, and began packing my things.

I was ready to go home.

The Locker

By Maria Ostrowski

I dreaded the sight of my locker — a grayish-green metal rectangle with slats and a black combination lock. My best friend, “Ely,” and I used to meet there a couple times a day and pass notes. But she wasn’t there this morning. I knew she wouldn’t be; knew she would never meet me at the locker again. She had been killed in a car accident the week before. Still, on my first back to school, an irrational part of me expected to see her — wearing an oversized punk-rock t-shirt, wide-leg jeans and a ladylike smile; her blonde hair, loose and long. How could she expect me to finish senior year without her?

Since her death, I had been out of school for a week, but I lost all sense of time. It could have been minutes or months, it didn’t matter — nothing felt real. Though all around me, I probably heard bodies muscling to lockers, fumbling with jackets and backpacks. Legs moving with the shuffling sound of denim, sneakers squeaking on the hall floor and fluorescent light shining from open classroom doors. But none of that would have registered, blurring like a time-lapse video. On that first day back, I imagine there was nothing but the locker and me.

Ely and I had shared this locker. We weren’t supposed to — it was against school policy — but we shared everything, and we thought it was a stupid rule. My locker was on the main floor near all the classrooms and hers had been in a remote hallway downstairs. She didn’t want to be late for class and risk detention. So, we broke the rules.

We had so much stuff in it. I don’t remember what exactly — nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps books, papers, items of clothing; an apple. On the inside door, we likely displayed bumper stickers, bearing the names of punk bands, like certificates that stated: we survived shows in the mosh-pit, crowd-surfing days of the 1990s.

Someone had cleaned out our locker. School officials, maybe. Her mom? How they found out that we shared one, I don’t remember. Maybe I told someone. At any rate, I knew it was done. I had journaled about going to the school over the weekend when it was quiet and the halls were empty. Why I was there, I didn’t say. Maybe I didn’t even know. But I knew this —

“I am afraid of school on Monday. I am truly afraid.” I wrote in my journal.

Returning to school meant facing the reality that she died. No more notes or laughs to get through the day, no more hunkering in the English department’s book closet to talk during silent study hall; meeting places — abandoned. And I would have to face this on my own every day. No one could save me from grief, and I was terrified. What if I broke down? What if everyone looked at me like my grief was a disease? No one could stop any of this. No one could save me.

Ely’s death crushed everything I thought I knew about security and love; God and life. Suddenly, nothing was guaranteed, not even tomorrow. I was terrified and angry and heartbroken that she

died and left me in this new world where everything looked the same on the surface, but it wasn't — it was darker with grief and the knowledge that life ends.

Looking back at my 17-year-old-self, I was not a girl anymore, but a young woman standing at a precipice and considering the dive back into everyday life. I realized I had no idea what courage meant. I thought I did, but until I was forced to stand on my own without my best friend's support — I hadn't a clue.

Before Ely's death, I never felt the need to hide; never worried about what anyone thought of me. Friends since childhood, we always had each other's back. I felt confident and happy to be my authentic self because I always knew there was someone in my corner who believed in me. And I believed in her.

Yet, on that first day back to class I don't think I believed in much of anything as I stared at our locker. I can see myself standing there as if it were a scene in a movie. In the panicked seconds before the bell, I imagine I heard the slam of neighboring lockers, zippers and the pound of books falling into bags. The day was beginning — but if I opened the locker, I had to face that first shock of having to go on with things like school without her. That I was not dead, too.

Then, with a rush, I just did it. I spun the lock, opened the rattling door and braved the gaping, empty hole. Me without her.

The first time I ever drove a car, Ely was with me. We were 14 or 15 years old and up in Vermont at my great-uncle's lake house on North Hero Island. My dad thought it would be a good idea if I took "The Tank" out for a spin. That's what we nicknamed his old, white Audi — solid and loud. He was in the passenger seat. Ely sat in the back. She was calm; I was not. That's how it was with us.

I bucked and braked over the dirt roads, radio off. I remember it being a slow, bumpy ride. Nobody said much but me — probably melodramatic teenage exclamations about how we were all going to die with me at the steering wheel. When I declared we were done and stopped the car, my dad got out wearing a patient smile. He didn't say much.

Ely had smiled, too, and said —

"It's ok. But I thought you would have blasted the radio and gone a lot faster."

I never admitted this, but all melodramatic joking aside, I was afraid of crashing.

When we got our licenses, Ely and I drove around our rural New England town, down hilly, wooded roads with no houses or street lights. On these rides, I'm sure we talked about our

dreams as we were seniors with our lives ahead of us. I couldn't wait to get out of town, do the college thing and move to New York. I dreamed of working for a magazine and writing poetry at night. Sometimes, I talked about becoming an actress. She listened. She thought all my dreams were cool. Told me she'd come visit all the time. Because she didn't want to leave town. Ely wanted to stay and be a nail technician. I can still see her bending over her hands with a tiny brush, painting her nails black.

It was on one of these rides that we argued for the first and last time.

I had no idea where we were, but Ely was driving, and she knew where we were going. Looking straight ahead at the pale headlights in the darkness, she told me that she had decided to get back together with her boyfriend — the boyfriend she would be driving with on the night she died. Her choice troubled me as I didn't feel that he treated her well.

“I want you to be ok with this.”

“I'm never going to be ok with him. I will always be your friend, but you have to know that I'm never going to like him.”

We were quiet. It was dark. She was calm. I was not.

In the end, I gave her my support. I wanted her to be happy even if I couldn't understand, and I didn't, but there was nothing I could do. She knew where I stood. Now, I had to trust her.

I want you to be ok with this.

Shortly after that night, she crashed into a tree.

News of her death hit me like a shock wave. I remember every second from the moment Ely's mom called to the scream of horror that tore through me and obliterated my innocence.

And then — nothing. A blank. I lost the rest of the day and days after that. It was probably a mercy.

I wrote a poem for her, and I read it at her funeral service. Standing before a crowd in an airless room, I felt heat from bodies, but I saw no faces. The room and everything in it looked November yellow — the color of decay — and I was sweating. But I did it.

My mother was there, her presence like a cornerstone as I read my parting words to a girl who had been like a sister to me. A girl who had made angel ornaments for my mother for Christmas, still treasured. A girl who had gone on our family vacations, been kind to my younger brothers, knew my grandparents and cousins, and broke bread at our family table since childhood.

When I read the poem aloud, I felt like a ghost, watching myself — a small, young woman in gray-black corduroy whose voice seemed to echo from a cave. And at her graveside, I felt like a void.

There was no returning to life as it was after that. I had to start over. To begin again.

But I was afraid of crashing.

Blasting the radio, I drove past the lake. In the November dark, the water looked like a black hole and gnarled tree branches reached overhead. Everything looked menacing, and I could barely see the deserted road through my tears. I pulled over, chest heaving with sobs.

Why didn't I crash? I wondered. Surely, there had been wet leaves on the road. So, why didn't I slip and crash?

It was the night before my first day back to school, and I needed to get out, so I had taken a drive. I didn't feel brave getting behind the steering wheel. I was trying to run from feelings that now attacked me full force. I couldn't bear the thought of Ely's death or returning to school.

Back then, it was impossible for me to see that this first day back to school was an important day in my life — a beginning that took courage. All I saw was rubble. At 17, I associated courage with images of glory and heroic acts — the stuff you'd see in a Sylvester Stallone film — certainly not my tiny, teenage self, walking into her high school building.

“Do you want me to go in with you? I'll even sit with you in class if you need,” my mom had said as I sat in the passenger seat of her car, hesitating.

But I knew this was something I had to do on my own. So, I got out of the car and walked in the building on my own, trembling inside like a freshman all over again. I wondered who I was without Ely. Would people still like me; would I still like myself? Where was she? Would she ever come back? Please come back. I wished...and I looked for her at the locker.

When she wasn't there before lunch, I grieved. Startled and confused, it was disorienting looking for someone with your heart that your head knew was gone.

During class, I wondered — why bother? If Ely could die without warning, then I could, too. Any of us could. So, what was the point? I couldn't see that the point was simply to survive the day — to get back up and join the world; to walk with grief instead of running from it. If I did that — strength would come.

Still, in those early days, I felt the need to hide. I ate lunch a couple of times in the auditorium. Sitting on the stage among the heavy curtains, I found comfort in the wide quiet, the rows of empty seats and the long, dark aisles.

It was like a pause in the teenage chaos, the crowds of kids in the halls that she should have been among. I wasn't ready to accept her death or my new life. It wasn't fair. So, I often lost the present, reliving the last time I saw her — Friday after the final bell.

Standing at the locker, we had discussed our weekend plans. On Saturday, I was taking the SATs; Ely had a big date with her boyfriend that night, but we'd catch up later. We smiled.

Then — we closed the locker door and walked down the hall, giggling about some inside joke. The end. The end of a chapter in my life.

I want you to be ok with this.

But I wasn't. I kept thinking if I could just figure out my own link in the chain of events that led up to the accident, I could imagine the outcome would be different. So, I went over everything in my mind repeatedly, imagining — if only I had begged her to stay over that night, if only I'd said this or done that — Ely would still be alive, and I would not be walking in what felt like a strange, parallel universe.

After writing her letters in my journal, I would leave it open at night so she could read what I wrote. Truth be told, a part of me believed she could. Why not? If something as inconceivable as her unexpected death could happen, why couldn't she read my letters? This strange hope buoyed my spirit even though the rational side of me knew Ely was dead. Yet, in my imagination, she was still very alive and I pictured her often, remembering her laugh. And therein lay my strength to get through the day and whatever else lay ahead. Hope and imagination were my well of courage, and I would need them through the years as I discovered that grief was a lifelong companion.

For a long time, I often burst into sobs when alone, or I'd think of something I had to tell her and would dial her number only to hang up frantically with a lump in my throat. On walks or in school, I'd suddenly and irrationally expect to see Ely, only to feel my heart sink with the realization that she wasn't there. In disbelief, I went to the cemetery impulsively one winter evening. It was after a performance rehearsal, and I was still in costume. Others were in the car with me, but I just drove there, rather distraught. It was strange, but my friends were patient and kind. No one ever brought it up afterwards, and I never spoke about it.

Much has been written on grief and its stages, and relatives offered self-help books to read, but I didn't want to understand or rationalize grief. There seemed nothing logical about Ely's death, so why shouldn't grief feel like a supernatural force; like a monster eating me alive? And while I secretly feared my own grief at times, I felt that the pain was mine — a journey I had to bear and not something I could share very easily.

My mother was my rock. Whether I talked about my feelings or not, Ely had been like a part of our family and she just seemed to understand. I needed space and time to sort through this, and writing became my method of coping.

The strange thing was, though my heart was broken, it wasn't smashed to pieces like I feared. Looking through my journal from those days, in every entry, I remarked on the kindness of my fellow classmates, friends, and teachers. Beginning with that first day back after Ely's death, someone at school was kind to me. Those moments were like blinks of light — the quiet smiles of acknowledgment from kids I barely knew, the unwavering support and loyalty from my other friends, and the teachers that encouraged and mentored me in ways to express myself.

That I could find goodness even during dark days should have told me that I had the courage to get through this, but I didn't yet believe in the strength of my own heart.

A year after Ely's death, when I was a freshman in college, I had a dream in which Ely sat beside me in The Tank as the car floated down steep, twining roads lined by night-trees. Headlights glowed in the dark like halos, and Ely was warm light with her wavy gold hair and calm smile. But I was terrified, white-knuckling the steering wheel during each turn as the car headed toward a massive tree trunk. At the last second, the car made the turn and floated safely around the tree. And every time, Ely smiled and said, "See, you won't crash."

Over time, I waded slowly into acceptance and learned to walk with grief. There was no cure, only a relationship to mold so that grief became less a monster and more — a companion. For there was no escape in any form or anything that could be said or done to take it away, to make it stop, or even to lessen it. I found grief beyond common sense. It was a mystery, like death itself...and love. And as the years passed with the joys and sorrows of life, I would recall my dream of Ely with her message that I wouldn't crash, which I interpreted to mean that I should have faith in myself, and through whatever challenge I faced, so long as I lived, I should hope.

When would I learn that I had the courage to do this?

Two years ago, my parents offered me and my husband the opportunity to live as caretakers in the house where I grew up until we decided on a permanent residence. They had since moved and did not want the house to be vacant. It was good timing as, with the birth of my son, we were outgrowing our small house in the city where we lived. So, we sold our home and moved back to the neighborhood where Ely and I spent our girlhood. The town hadn't changed much and neither had the house. And I feared crashing into the past.

I wondered if I was strong enough to live in this town again; in the house where I experienced all the growing pains of childhood and adolescence. Could I live alongside the past and walk with who I used to be?

On our first day back, after everyone had gone, I looked out the window of my old bedroom. A thunderstorm rolled through the hills. I felt anxious about the change and living here, but the view was stunning. I had forgotten how beautiful the town was.

In the morning, I heard church bells tolling and the train echoing through the borough as it whistled through downtown. As spring progressed, I took my little one on walks to the park nearly every day. Joy filled me as I watched him playing and the beauty of the present captured my attention — the Victorian houses we passed and the flowers blooming everywhere.

Pushing the stroller along certain streets or playing with my son in the backyard, bittersweet childhood memories rose of Ely. Singing and giggling down hills, jumping Skip-its on the patio... These memories came up as a soft wave that walked with us, bringing always a smile and a pang. Then, they would fade, and I was here with my son, feeling a fullness I never expected.

Today, nearly twenty years after Ely's death, I Googled the definition of courage and read — “strength in the face of pain or grief.” With a Sharpie, I scribbled that phrase on the back of an envelope strewn on my desk — the accompanying Get Well Soon card hovering over the words.

I have just returned home after spending four days in the hospital due to a difficult hysterectomy. My uterus had been full of massive fibroid tumors that were causing pain, fatigue, hemorrhaging and anemia that adversely affected my quality of life. The fibroids caused grief — problems getting pregnant, miscarriages, and the complicated C section birth of my son that kept me in the hospital for a week. Truth be told, I feared for my life.

I had been anxious about the hysterectomy, too. And sad. It was the end — the closing of a chapter in my life — the ability to have more children. At every appointment before the surgery, the doctors quickly asked — are you ok with no more children? I knew they had to ask, even though my options were not promising. A hysterectomy was the best choice for my health and well-being.

“Yes,” I said. “I am ok with no more children.” And I was. I loved my son and was content with my family. Still, I felt a loss and I wondered, will I still feel like myself? Like a woman? Will intimacy with my husband change?

Now at home and trying to reconnect with my body — I recognized that this is another first day back. And though it took me twenty years to learn this, I found that's what courage is — a first day back. A lifting of one's head and putting one foot in front of the other. It has nothing to do with fearlessness and everything to do with heart and choosing life.

“Strength in the face of pain or grief.”

Glancing at the scribbled note to myself, I thought — I got this.

Salty Hands

By Bethany Votaw

The anticipation and excitement bubbled in the classroom. The smell of coffee from the mugs the teachers and parents held mixed with the smell of axe, a new potion recently discovered by a slew of seventh graders.

“Bethany, you're in Miss. Santo's group.” I nod, letting the excitement rise and fall in a single breath, I tried to hide my smile. I am in Robby's group. He is one of three guys taller than me in our class, and he made a comment about my hair last week. He talks to his friend, my friend too, Dax, and I join them, working hard to insert myself into the conversation about some video games. I don't have video games; I don't even have a tv. Well, we do have a TV, but it only plays movies. We don't watch movies much anymore. We don't do much anymore. Life turned to a routine of school, home, quiet time, dinner and bed.

I just stand awkwardly with the boys, wishing I had a girl in the group. There are other girls, but none I like. I don't think any like me either. I am an odd one out, an anomaly with the adults now, it's because of my brothers, and what they brought the small town. My family is now interesting. I am fiercely protective of my brothers; I have to be. My two little chocolate chunks that came home from Africa with my parents last summer, the completion to our family because apparently it wasn't enough before. They're the reason we don't watch movies anymore, the reason we don't do anything anymore, it's okay though, they need attention, the quiet for their naps. I understand.

Maybe that's why I am more excited about this field trip than anyone else. I miss the beach, it is only an hour away, but we didn't go once last summer, we used to go a couple of times a week. I can't wait to taste the salt on my tongue, poke the slimy creatures in the tide pools, and freeze my ankles in the cold pacific water. I shiver thinking about the cool autumn air that will chap my lips and turn my cheeks red.

The teachers are bustling about, checking off names and refilling coffee cups, taking last-minute trips to the bathroom. Old people always have to use the bathroom. The parent volunteers looking like the Mona Lisa, a distant smile plastered on their faces, half tired and half confused, wondering why they signed up for two hours on a bus with a bunch of seventh graders. I don't blame them, I hate bus rides too, I always need to sit in the front so I can look out the window. I didn't eat breakfast today just in case. I get sick sometimes, sometimes it just happens. A sour thought, a “what if” spiral can turn my stomach enough to create a flurry of flu like symptoms.

“Line up!” someone calls. We listen and like trained seal we fall into line, even though we know where the buses are. I am thankful for the directions, decisions I don't have to make. I am behind Robby, he smiles at me, a real smile, it makes its way to his eyes, he is excited too. I know he likes me, at least a little, that's what my sister said. She is in the classroom next to mine, my twin, we don't look like it though we are told we act like it. Maybe she just told me that so I would make a fool of myself in front of him. She wouldn't do that, probably.

The excited group is like a herd of young horses, prancing down the halls and squeezing in the bus, I find myself across from Robby. In the back of the bus. It just happened; it was honestly an accident, but I am suddenly more grateful for my empty stomach. I feel butterflies turning to bees, stinging my insides. I don't know why, it is not as if I am about to confess my "like" for Robby, I would never do that. I always wait for the guy to do that.

Each guy that has told me that they liked me- like like me- has been someone I had never given a second glance. Boys that thought making racecar noises counted as a talent and spent eight minutes spitting in a microphone at the talent show as proof.

"Sorry Travis" I told him, my tone sickly sweet to cover my annoyance, "I don't like you like that. You know I am just friends with everyone." It was true, I was known for being nice, but that's just because no one could read my thoughts, except for my sister. Travis took it well, at least he didn't cry, he was two heads shorter than me and acted like his size most of the time. I didn't even tell my sister about that one, not worth mentioning. She probably knew anyway.

I see her class board the bus behind us. She is with a group of girls, and I suddenly feel the need to search for a girl to talk to. I don't find any, and a parent volunteer sits next to me, cutting off any chance of conversation with Robby, not that we had said much at all, to begin with.

I pull out a book, suddenly desperate to avoid any conversation with the adult, the world grips me, unable to peel my eyes from the pages I succumb to the spell and drink in the words, letting my mind forget, just forget. The adults would ask about my new brothers, everyone knows about them, hard to miss considering they are the only black kids in town. I don't want to talk about it, not that I hate it or anything, they're innocent and precious, they're my favorite, but I am tired. So tired. The book is a better place to spend my time. The brothers will still be there when

I get back.

The bus pulls out, the chatter swells like the ocean tides we journey to see, soon the voices mellow, the rocking of the bus lulling some students into a calm state of sweet quiet, some even dozing, only to be interrupted by the smell of sour yoghurt and the retching of a student throwing up their breakfast

Except I didn't have breakfast, instead I am retching up putrid green bile, it coats my mouth in a nasty slime that only makes me wretch some more, my abdomen burns with each heave. I feel the eyes on me a hundred eyes staring at this show, the chaperone waddled up front to grab a bag, too late though, we all know it. Ten minutes of reading and ten minutes of driving was enough to create a poison in my stomach, poison splattered on the floor with a hard and wet sound. At least there weren't any chunks, just slime oozing in a puddle, shifting with the turns of the bus, making little rivers and streams of green and yellow. A map of my ides on the dirty floor.

My teacher comes back and she guides me to the front, plopping me in the front seat next to her and a bunch of other moms. I am surrounded by adults, but at least I have a window. I smile and nod at their questions. I can speak, but I don't want to. I never want to. I feel like a thousand blankets have covered me, they are being stuffed down my throat and into my lungs. I can still hear the horrified chatters from the back of the bus and the shushing my teacher gives them as she bends down, gloves in hand, and cleans up the green goo I left behind. My book was the other casualty, a prisoner of war, held hostage at the back of the bus.

My only relief is when we get off the yellow beast. I pretend it didn't happen, I wait for my group, the A team on the back of the bus I'm part of that team. The other class's bus rolls to a stop behind us and I wait to see my sister hop out. She is a firm fixture in the middle of the bus. Jordan wiggles her eyes at me, I shrug, and she finds her group. She knows something is strange, something had happened. That's what twins do, they ask if each other are okay, what they do with the information is purely environmental and conditional. She doesn't say anything, I am glad she can read my mind, I usually am.

I find my group, Robby walking out first, Britney in tow. He wears a hat, which makes my stomach flip. We aren't allowed to wear hats in school. I think about telling him, I don't, I already spent time with the adults upfront. I am not contagious, but I feel like I am like I could be, should be.

"You good?" he asks, adjusting his hat and it makes me want to throw up again, I smile showing my teeth but close my lips in an instant later. Would the green goo coat my teeth? Tinge them extra yellow? I feel yellow.

"I'm good." I say, "Probably something I ate," I lie. He laughs and so does Dax, who makes some comment about how he had food poisoning once. I feel the bile in my throat again, a lingering burn stark against the cool sea air.

We walk the trail, each student holding a notebook in order to make it look like we were taking notes. Students took their shoes off, leaving them in piles. I didn't, mostly because I knew the rocks by the tide pools were sharp, and because Robby and Britney didn't either. I see my sister's class in the distance. She has her shoes off. I suddenly want to leave my class, leave the A team, and join her, take my shoes off too, wade in the frozen water with her, kick sand in the wind. Instead my group makes our way to the tide pools. The slabs in the sand a foundation for the creatures we aim to find.

The tide is sucked out with force, and a mom explains how they timed the trip perfectly, making it here just in time for low tide. As if she had something to do with controlling the ocean. It was the moon or something, which makes no sense to me, I let the mystery of the water remain a being that controls itself. Never turn your back to the sea, she'll reach up and hug you in a wet and frigid embrace, pulling you back with her.

Britney screams and the boys flock to her, she points to a tidepool and at a small crab in it, “it tried to pinch me!” Dax kneels in the rocks, preparing to catch it. I roll my eyes, I think Robby catches it, good.

Jumping over wet spots and across rocks I make my way to the farthest reaches of the smattering of tide pools, I watch the ocean rush in and out, suddenly wishing I would be swept away with it. I feel a person approach, I can tell because their breathing goes against the wind.

“Would you be mad if I pushed you in?” Robby asks, and unexpected relief floods me, I expected a parent, ready to give me a “don't stray too far lecture.”

“I wouldn't be too mad,” I joke, but it's not a joke I realize, “but I'd pull you in after me.” It seemed to be the right thing to say, and he laughs.

“Okay,” he says, a smirk on his lips. I'm sure he thinks he's stronger than me, he probably is, but I am faster, and I swim like a mermaid, the water doesn't scare me, I wish he'd pushed me in.

He climbs up rocks, I follow, the cold edges grading against my palms, the sea air making my fingers numb and my hair big. He sits, and I sit next to him, thankful for this. I hate heights, but still, I find myself wanting to jump.

He reads my thoughts, “Ever get this I don't know, weird urge to jump?” I raise my eyebrows and he rushes on, “Not like I would actually do it, you know, but it's just my mind thinking that I could.”

I understand. I lean over the edge and the feeling of falling and my stomach dropping makes me pause. I could jump. It would be cold at first, but I would get used to it. I would quietly float away and hope that someone missed me. I am nothing but a speck of dust in the wind. I could probably jump, and the wind would carry me away before I even hit the water.

Britney and Dax reach the top too, climbing from the other side of the rock. Britney sits next to Robby. We talk about things, and we get stuck in a loop, repeating the word enough, enough, enough until it no longer sounds like a word. Some type of drug maybe. A dad catches us, snaps a picture and tells us to climb down, explaining that “the tide is coming in, you could get stuck up there!” It isn't but we climb down anyway.

“Dare you to grab it!” Dax exclaims as we pass a giant pool. I see what he is gesturing to, a hermit crab. I hate crabs. I hate the idea of them pinching me. I reach in anyway. My sleeve gets wet, but I pull it out by the shell, it's flailing arms make me squirm, I set it on the rocks and we watch it run around, a group of kids and parents gather, looking at its strange movements. Robby has already left. I pull myself away from my crab and my attention to find him.

We spend hours searching for starfish, even a game of tag on the beach. Our hands brush as we reached for the same underwater creature, my cheeks flame and so do his, warm against the wind. Our hands linger together in the water before I pull away.

I find my sister, we eat lunch on the rocks, a reprieve from social interactions. The classes don't usually mix, the cliques and isolated groups preformed. We are the outliers, we always are, the representatives of each class. I am tall, she is short, I have blonde hair, she has brown, we are twins. We are the same but different. The barrage of questions about who is better at math or who can run faster is always exhausting. I am called the athletic one, she is named the pretty one. Why can't I be both? I force down the crust of my sandwich, she'll tell mom if I throw it to the seagulls. She does that, makes sure I do what I am supposed to, which is why separate classes creates slices of freedom in my life. I am surrounded by students, but I am also finally alone, but I still search my sister out, find her and am always relieved to be with her.

She tells me the funny stories that occurred on her own bus trip. Joel got the entire bus singing 99 bottles and the teachers only cut them off at 74 bottles. I omit my puking performance. She knows I am being weird; she knows I am tired, just so tired. She never asks why. The world is swallowing me, but she fills the space with talking and stories and I love her for it. We look at the water and I imagine seeing a whale and I feel myself falling, hoping to be swallowed up by the gaping mouth of the imaginary whale swimming to us.

I find my class, we draw shapes in the sand, some parents force us to write our notes down. I do, spending far too long on a mediocre drawing of starfish, my tidepool sketch a constellation of the night's sky. I look up to the gray clouds that shapeshift above us, the swirling patterns making ghosts that threaten to lure children away.

The hours at the beach come to an end, but I can't resist it and I sprint to the water, I only planned to rinse my hands off, wanting to lick the salt from them later, but the ocean is wild, and she rushes for me as I run to her, like lovers in a movie, she covers my feet, socks, and pants, I pretend not to care, but the cold makes my head pound and teeth hurt. People notice our collision, but they don't say anything, I think about walking out to the horizon, like a lost child finding her way home. I'd let the seafoam cover me, I'd become trapped in the tangles of the seaweed and they'd hold me under. Instead I let the water rush over my shoes again. A compromise.

I sit in the front of the bus again, my head down as each student trickles by. I see the shoes of Robby, Dax and Britney as they filter on past staring at my frozen feet, now blocks of ice. The trees whirl by us, the scent of pine making its way into the bus that now smells like decaying bird. I stare at the sand in my fingernails, willing each grain to stay forever. The winding and turning of the carved out road is broken by the sound of gravel and hissing.

“Bus is overheating.” the driver calls. “Could be a while.”

The trip is extended, and it brings both excitement and dread. I need a new battery. Minutes turns into an hour, then two. My sister's bus slows and stops, promising to take a message in a bottle to the bus barn, where they will return with another bus. I watch as my sister smiles and laughs with her friends as their bus shuffles out of the shoulder, leaving us marooned sailors behind. A lump clogs my throat. My eyes burn and I don't know why. I sniff the trees and stomp

out my cold feet, waking them up. We spread out on the gravel, watching the occasional car drive by. The rocky beach borders a forest, and I want to wander and get lost, maybe the bus will leave me.

“Ladies over here!” my teacher calls, and I line up, I missed the earlier conversation, too busy dreaming of a forest witch who will call me home. I imagine the bony tendrils of her fingers curling around my wrist, cooling my blood and luring me away. Is it luring if run to her?

“One at a time, walk down the bank and find a tree.” She laughs, shaking her head, but the dancing girls are serious, wide-eyed, and determined. The boys are far from view, hidden by the bus. The dance is contagious, I feel it too, tickles in my body. My turn comes and I find a tree, far back in the woods, and for a moment I pray the forest witch will come. I wait until the heavy air makes me shiver.

I squat like the crab I held earlier, my pants on the ground, my body choked by afternoon breeze, goosebumps prickle my skin. I with the cascade of pee and I feel warm, I feel it on my feet, on my legs, I see the river I made flow to my feet, to my hands, the small hill I squat on now a mountain runoff. The pulsing river is too strong to stop, and I sink into myself as my frozen feet thaw.

I shuffle up, wiping my hands on my fresh soaked jeans. No one will notice, no one will notice. I spit and wipe the pee into my jeans, even more, I pray that the smell of axe, salt, and dead fish will be enough. I smell my hands, no salt, something else. I mourn the lost opportunity to taste the salt and wipe them again on my pants. I reach the top, another girl goes running down, looking for her own personal tree. I curse the witch for not finding me.

I find Robby and Dax in the gravel, each with a stick, tic tac toe taking up their mind. I sit with them, crossing my legs in the dirt, they already start to drift to sleep, thankful for the momentary warmth on my icy legs. We play, I win and lose, they do too.

We sit against the wheels of the bus, surrounded by the smell of rubber, trees, and pee. Robby touches my goosebumps, which only give me more. We trace our hands in the dirt. He runs a finger against my hand, I imagine his fingers making trails in my hands covered in their dry urine. His fingers intertwined in mine.

Sun & Moon by Michel Weatherall

Reviewed by Mark Antony Rossi

The trip of transcendence reaches its zenith when demolishing a stereotype and replacing old tropes with new insight. Weatherall's poetry collection *Sun & Moon* is a candid examination of one's fears and fragilities magnified by a cancer diagnosis of a loved one. How perceptions in such circumstances change and often steer inward are explored with depth and erratic honesty. His poetry manages the instinctual edge to jolt the universe with rhyming verse built on solid literary schemes that remain fresh and urgent.

In *The Unknown*, a lament akin to the psalms of biblical past, the writer shouts to the heavens a cry bemoaning an impending artistic fate of neglect and indifference. *Sweet Silver Sister* pivots to mining favor and fantasy from the silver moon. The blending of classic rhyme stanzas and modern syntax makes this poem a personal favorite in the collection. With *The Binds of Normalcy* the philosophical personality emerges from the poet and starkly points out the boring restrictions inherent in social conformity. We learn the "freedom" promoted incongruency is a facsimile destined to morph into a stifling existence for a creative individual.

Many in life are faced with the supernatural irony of attaining a measure of wisdom through the trials of psychological duress. Writers are not immune to the tribulations of humanity; yet better equipped to absorb a larger share of naked truth. Sadly, we must face the tragic fact that Truth once stripped of practicality is incapable of setting everyone free. The greeting card morality of the unthinking is precisely why books like *Sun & Moon* are cesarean born into a turbulent world. The poet is tasked with provoking emotional intelligence by awakening the sleepy conscience of a community that often confuses the demands of security with the desires of liberty. Weatherall knows the difference. In those moments of melancholy, he never loses his core humanity but instead delivers to the reader a metaphorical picture of the lashes, lessons and long halls of Purgatory.

Contributors

Philp CK has been writing poetry and lyrics since he was twelve. By reading to his kids, he rediscovered his love for kids' literature and has since written a book and several short stories. One of them has been published and another one is about to (not counting this particular one!) You can follow him on Twitter at [@PhilipKavvadias](https://twitter.com/PhilipKavvadias).

Michele A. Hromada is a special education teacher and political blogger. Her work has appeared in Wild Violet, Sanskrit, Forge, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Tower Journal, and Gemini Magazine. You can find all of Michele's work on her website www.michelehromada.com.

David McVey lectures at New College Lanarkshire in Scotland. He has published over 120 short stories and a great deal of non-fiction that focuses on history and the outdoors. He enjoys hillwalking (ie hiking), visiting historic sites, reading, watching telly (ie TV), and supporting his home-town football (ie soccer) team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC.

Maria Ostrowski's recently completed novel, YET FROM THOSE FLAMES NO LIGHT, is a 2019 finalist for The Daphne Du Maurier award for excellence in suspense and mystery. Her essay, Lionheart — a piece that explores grief and fear, and her brother's battle with schizophrenia — was published in [Letting Go: An Anthology of Attempts](#). Currently, she is writing TRUST FALL, a coming-of-age novel, focusing on mental health. A toddler mom who enjoys finger-painting almost as much as her son, Maria lives in Connecticut with a husband who patiently accepts the chaos of a household run by a writer.

Follow her writing life on Instagram: [@the_roughdraft](https://www.instagram.com/the_roughdraft) and on her website: mariaostrowski.com.

John Power was born and raised in and around New York City, graduated from college in rural Virginia, lived and wrote for a year in Warsaw, Poland, and currently resides in Chicago. His short stories have been published in Cleaning Up Glitter, Hemingway Shorts Vol. 2, Thoughtful Dog Magazine, The Great Lakes Review, and the Journal of Legal Education. His most recent novel, "Participation", and an earlier "Toy With the Flame", are available on amazon.com. His first novel, "Golden Freedom", is available on lulu.com.

Mark Antony Rossi is a poet and author of several titles including Strength To Be Human. His poetry was nominated for the Best of the Net Literary Award 2019. He is also the Editor in Chief, Ariel Chart <http://arielchart.blogspot.com>

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Poetry Review, 42 Stories Anthology (forthcoming), Voices on the Move (forthcoming), Visual Verse, LSE Review of Books, and other literary and scholarly journals.

Bethany Votaw is from a small town in Oregon where she grew up the oldest of five. She spends her time working from home, writing and playing with her dog. She gets most of her ideas from her dreams, which explains her eclectic collection of pieces and strange imagery.

You can follow Bethany on Goodreads at the following link

<https://www.goodreads.com/goodreadscombethanyvotaw>

Charlotte Williams' writing is her life's essence. It's her bright, burning, blazing passion. Having a sister named Emily, she'd like to consider herself as a modern-day Bronte sister who didn't make the original cut. Williams is a University student studying Creative and Professional Writing at Exeter College. As a child, she would only watch The Lord of the Rings when Gollum was on-screen, but now it's her favorite work of fantasy. Her three favorite characters from the US The Office are Dwight, Mose, and Creed. She writes because there are too many stories in her head, and to stay sane, she needs to release them into the world.

You can follow Williams on Instagram: @char_m.w and @charlotte_m_williams