

COLLATERAL

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POETRY

Water

Jonathan Endurance

I said *water*, & imagined an archipelago,
a water-bruised islands sinking their feet
into water.

& I thought of you, cold-struck
in the middle of the Mediterranean,
wobbling waves hounding the rudder
of your boat the way the fist grapples
a neck in anger.

The wave slashed its mouth wide open enough
to swallow the wings of wailings.
The water, cold & salty, arrowed into the depth
of your mouth like fishhook.

You fist-gripped the boat's rudder,
pleaded the waves lullaby themselves
to sleep, prayed the holed coracle
be still as silence.

When I said *water*, I meant the darksome fist
of cloud forging a downpour. I meant
hands, sinking, lifting themselves up in the air
to signal a struggle. I meant memory.
I meant you, a shadow, slumping
into the dark.

Wildfire

Jonathan Endurance

I put a knife to the cord that leads to silence,
which means my tongue's got a wildfire for a name.

In this room, I am mourning your loss, so I bit
the flesh of an apple the way a knife begins a war.

Somewhere, I watch an eagle snatch a chick from
its mother. I imagine the earth as brutal as a claw.

I imagine its jaw cracking open like a door
to swallow you whole.

In this coffin, your body is an ellipsis, a hyphen
arrowing into beyond.

In the pages of this poem, I am gathering
the shards of your memory bit by bit. See it this way:

A hand crowning grief with a name. Which means
I bestow upon it a body for identity. So when I say *Pa*,

the body of these words sashays in this page,
as if to say *here I am, come get me*.

Here are my palms filled with blood. Because the body
could be anything it wants, I bury my face into them,

let them drown me like a stillborn. On the hospital bed,
I mistook your breath for a whirlwind. When you said

*son, come sit by my side, let me feel the warmth
of your palms* There is no death as brutal as silence

how it holds me by my hand and walk me into
a country of grief. It reminds me that a body can also

be a sinking ship, a knife sharpened only by cutting.

Jonathan Endurance holds a B.A. in English and Literature. His unpublished poem "Ashes" won the UNESCO Sponsored Prize for the 14th edition of Castello di Duino Poetry Competition, ITALY (2018). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Rattle*, *Into the Void* (We Are Antifa Anthology), *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, and elsewhere.

Empty

Justin Evans

“Someone died, and then the universe seemed larger”
—Marvin Bell

As if the absence of a person could make the universe more bearable, something more desirable, something to look forward to in the mornings while you drink your coffee and read the paper like a black hole in reverse, growing exponentially larger from each crease of an unfolding reality. Of course that’s not it at all. You know it’s the emptiness, the solitude, the ability to take a deep breath but not the desire—the inability to exhale. But then again, just like the golden spiral proving all beauty found in this world is a matter of proportion, there is epiphany derived from the strange world of fractal geometry and the elephant-like empty space that was once someone you knew:

To Love the Dead Is Easy

Justin Evans

They are the last to inconvenience us
prattling on about the neighbor with his
noisy dogs. They are never late for dinner,
never arrive empty-handed. When memory
is all that is left to us, theirs is never
the raised hand objecting to our version
of history. When we want to gently slip into
the soft folds of sleep they rarely make
things difficult. Yes, the dead are
easy to love, and we don't do enough to
thank them for their good manners.

“‘Empty’ was born out of efforts for what I hope will be my next book, a discussion of how the event of death is treated within a small community and within the individual. I wanted to address the absurdity of trying to limit or pigeonhole the way people grieve loss in their lives. In ‘To Love the Dead is Easy’ I was salvaging a poem-gone-wrong, or one that obviously does not fit the tone of what I want my book to be. They were written very close together and I think the second poem was blessed with all of the sarcasm I could not use in the first.” —Justin Evans

Justin Evans was born and raised in Utah. After serving in the Army, he returned to Utah where he studied history and English. He currently lives in rural Nevada with his artist wife and their sons, where he teaches at the local high school. His most recent books are *Cross Country* (WordTech, 2019) which he wrote with the poet Jeff Newberry, and *All the Brilliant Ideas I've Ever Had* (Aldrich Books, 2020). Recent poems have appeared in *diode* and *San Pedro River Review*. In early 2022, Justin was granted an Artist Fellowship from the Nevada Arts Council.

How Spring Almost Came That Year

Clare Goulet

... [] *has intelligence that commanders have received
orders to proceed* (Feb 20, 2022)

While waiting
for the ancient city to be bombed that weekend we went
to the market, the women here and in Kyiv, Odesa, sun
glinting off the seaport there and here on the Atlantic, all of us unslept,
farmers hauling the last crates of winter potato and leek, smoked
fish and blood-wrapped meats as we moved, processional, past laid tables
of pastries and pickled pear, past the stacked pale wheels of cheese. The sky that day
only blue and here they'd run out of button mushrooms. I hold a heavy
sack of carrots close to my chest while, there, Kateryna Matsuka with sleek
grey hair and very red lipstick also chooses carrots, her machine gun careless
across her body. A dozen brown eggs, each of us checking
rows of delicate shells uncracked, *neushkodzhenny*. unhurt, their word
for being still *intact*. One strong coffee each, the packed café
there; here an early crowd also jostles in the scream
of the espresso machine, thick rich grounds like having your face pressed
into dirt. In a small, lit square in the rectangle of my mobile I watch a violinist
play Vivaldi on Maidan cobbles where no machines roll over the ground. I count four
people there, listening to the violin with me. That afternoon we left the city, driving west
on Highway 103 to Jericho Road, tar breaking into rubble for the last mile, escaping
this tense, endless week. A house hides in birch woods—leave the car and the roar
fills your ears like shouts from a distant stadium, thaw, inevitable stream
swollen, unstoppable, breaking ice, limbs, everything in its path. Inside:
my host pours hot water over old roses, windows facing east, blank sky, bare mud,
three china cups held in our laps and the talk is the news and the news
waits. Day here, night there, we know what comes; only the bounding
oblivious dog with his orange ball lunges, and my daughter throws
the ball and the dog brings it hopeful back, and she throws the ball, again
he brings it back. And our cups rattle only a little here and there
and again she throws it—

And that was that. The café and the market
and the farmer and the stall
and the tea and the child
and the dog, and the ball.

“This piece was written quickly on Saturday Feb 19, 2022, that weekend of terrible
waiting, in so many places, for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; everything felt urgent
and strange. I sent this piece out of my hands to *Collateral* the next day, Feb 20,
deliberately fast, before Putin’s cold, deranged speech of Mon Feb 21 and his

declaration of open war Feb 24. Quickly, as I didn't know if I would remember what the waiting felt like, once war started. (I can't.)" —Clare Goulet

A Québécois-British hybrid raised in Nova Scotia, **Clare Goulet** has published creative nonfiction, short and longform poetry, fiction, and hybrid forms for journals in Canada and abroad—recently “Crane Path” in *The Ilanot Review* and a chapter on Bringham's poems for *Listening for the Heartbeat of Being* (MQUP)—as well as reviews, author interviews, research on metaphor and polyphony. She has edited for *The Fiddlehead*, Brick Books, Nimbus, and Gaspereau Press, co-edited *Lyric Ecology* (Cormorant) on the work of Jan Zwicky, and teaches in Halifax, Canada.

Once Upon a Time

Shakiba Hashemi

My mother read me bedtime stories at night.
As the moon passed over the blanket of sky
and the clouds gently parted,
I sat on my bed,
in communion with the stars.
She read stories with happy endings:
Aladdin and the Magic Lamp,
The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods
and The Little Prince visiting asteroids.
Then she said a prayer
for me to sleep well,
for war to end
and for my dad
to come home soon.
She kissed my trembling eyelids
as I puckered my lips
to stop the words “don’t go”
from bursting out.
She said good night
and turned off the light.
My hands unfolded like sacred psalms
in the dark.

“This poem was inspired by the memories of my childhood growing up in Iran during the Iraq and Iran war. ‘Once Upon a Time’ tells the timeless story of children whose lives are forever changed due to the atrocities of war.” —Shakiba Hashemi

Shakiba Hashemi is an Iranian-American poet, painter and teacher living in Southern California. She is a bilingual poet, and writes in English and Farsi. She holds a BFA in Drawing and Painting from Laguna College of Art and Design. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Ibbetson Street Magazine*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Cream City Review*, *The Summerset Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *3rd Wednesday*, and the New York Quarterly Anthology *Without a Doubt: Poems Illuminating Faith*.

Landing

Lee Peterson

for Dan Murphy

There was the time I came by train
to Montclair from the city, to your family's
grand house, in the dark. Loss hanging
in the wide spaces between bodies, the wide
rooms. Your mother's cold beauty. Her pearls.
You left the last mourners to drive me back
to the station, in boxers, a beer between your
thighs. The red Porsche speeding along
broad, silent streets. The engine's soft hum,
a violent precision. That same winter we sat
in my parents' apartment, in a state of want.
We made small talk in the kitchen. The charged
air hung, hovering awkward above the Mexican tile.
When it was good between us, there were
the slanted walls of your off-campus apartment.
Your futon on the floor. February's white
sky flat through the unshaded windows.
The tumbling of our bodies in their blind,
radiant youth. I read you Hopkins under blankets
afterward, laughed at the way you threw me around.
You said, "You like it." And I did.
Years passed and we'd fallen out of touch.
I heard you'd become a journalist. I married
someone else. He'd left. Boarding a flight
to Frankfurt, one summer night en route to
Srebrenica, to sleep in a murdered boy's room
a decade after a genocide, I saw you
walking in my direction. Those brown curls.
Pug nose. That strut. A wink in your eyes.
On board, a row to yourself, you asked
did I want to join you. And I did. Once we reached
35,000 feet, our bodies pressed close across
the armrest. The air was rough all seven hours.
I drank to take my mind off the turbulence.
You held my hand, loosely. Told me about your work
for the Monitor, about corkscrew descents
into Kabul airport. The planes' tight turns—
so no big guns got lucky. About your sister's suicide
the year before, about your villa digs in Cairo.
The dinner service complete. The cabin lights low.
I pretended to sleep along your muscled arm,
pretended to ignore your fingers tracing

my corduroyed thigh. Somewhere over the Atlantic
I ached to move closer, to breach the metal bar
between us. But didn't. Wanting/not wanting to cross
that line, wanting to return home to the man I loved
and not be made a liar. Justine tells me you settled
someplace green and growing, with a woman
who brought you back from war, from the things
you'll never tell. Someone who keeps you near.
But on that day in July, in Frankfurt, a cathedral of glass
and white framed our final parting. The two of us
like model figures, dwarfed under the domed architecture,
the attendant airspace. Our feet squared, facing off
on the wide blue carpet. At least that's how I remember it.
My flight to Sarajevo about to board. The pulse of want
so strong between us still—circled, turned, found
no clear place to land.

“In Newark Airport on my way to attend a ten-year commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide, I ran into an ex-boyfriend, Dan Murphy, at the gate. At the time, he was living in the Middle East and covering the war in Iraq as a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor.” —Lee Peterson

Lee Peterson's first collection of poems, *Rooms and Fields: Dramatic Monologues from the War in Bosnia* (Kent State University Press), is a post-conflict examination of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Her forthcoming collection, *In the Hall of North American Mammals* (Cider Press Review), focuses on life and light coming in, on mothering a girl child in a precarious world, on how we navigate love, fear, risk, and hope.

Still Life With Red Bull's Head, Paris, 1938

Diana Pinckney

after Picasso

The bull from Guernica returns, this time red
with blood and the eyes of one who has seen

families murdered in their village markets.
He has fought in Spain's bull-rings, been pierced

by picadors, has raged at taunts from men
flashing capes red as his wounds. Crowds scream

for death, his or the matador's, depending on the day,
the mood. Now, Picasso has impaled the head on a spike

that rests on green and gray blocks. The background
painted blue as the sky on a sunny day at the Arena.

An artist's brushes and palette separate the bull
from a lone white candle. Does it burn for the artist,

the bombed children? Or the bull himself,
witness to war. And all man can do to man.

“‘Still Life With Red Bull's Head, Paris, 1938,’ in my opinion goes to the very heart of Picasso and his association/identification with the bull. The bulls in the Spanish areas of his childhood, youth, and on through old age. The bull appears in numerous works of Picasso's art. His famous Guernica is only one example. The bull's head painting was done in 1938, a year after the German bombing of the small town of Guernica. And so the bull sees all in Picasso's eyes.” —Diana Pinckney

Diana Pinckney's work has appeared in *Green Mountains Review*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Arroyo*, *RHINO*, *Cave Wall*, *NC Literary Review*, *Nine Mile Magazine*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *The Ekphrastic Review* and other journals and anthologies. She has led workshops for the N.C. Poetry Society, the Charlotte Writer's Club, the S.C. Writer's Network and Charlotte Literary Center for the Arts. Author of 5 collections of poetry, including *The Beast and The Innocent* (2015), Pinckney is the winner of The 2010 *EKPHRASIS Magazine Prize*, *Atlanta Review's* 2012 *International Poetry Prize*, and the *Press 53 Prime Number* 2018 Award. She is currently at work on a series of about the art of Picasso and Edward Hopper. In addition, Pinckney has a new book coming out in late spring, which is a collection of poems about her daughter, who was an artist.

Redemption Arc

Adrian S. Potter

My dad served in the Army for more than twenty years.
He wrote the lyrics to his blues throughout two wars, long
enough for him to stop lip-syncing someone else's songs.

And when he went to bars, he could say *Crown and Coke*
until the words rotted inside his mouth like a sweet tooth
and they'd still pour him another. During those two decades

and change, he had one wife, briefly. After that, he had another,
and later my mother, and then came me, his unexpected son.
We all asked him to be better than he was. But things never work

that way. You can't expect a live grenade to never explode.
And if he's back stateside from Vietnam and eleven years later
still hollers out *Charlie's coming let's fucking move* in his sleep,

then he can identify the ghost of an enemy lurking in flashbacks
but cannot recognize one staring back at him from the mirror,
or detect the slow leak deflating his punctured confidence.

My father's favorite war story was silence—so many narratives
started then abruptly ended. A pregnant pause followed by
fierce eye contact with his only child and a gruff *ain't no place*

for a black man in a white man's army. As if that statement
exonerated him from the shouting, insults, and intimidation,
the friendly fire in our household. Often I wished he would talk

about the war, open the reservoir, allow the pain to flow out.
I would have cleaned up the mess afterwards, like all the broken
plates and jostled furniture of his tirades. But things never work

that way. You can't expect a live grenade to never explode.
We both liked to ask for what we knew we would never get—
closure—elusive as an apology from a bitter soldier.

“My father survived the Korean and Vietnam Wars but paid a steep price with his compromised health. We didn't get along well during my childhood, but now I recognize that was partly due to PTSD. He died before I turned twenty, and we never hashed out our differences before he passed. This poem represents estimated attempt #392 of using poetry as catharsis—trying to decipher the code of how his mental health issues from war slowly became my unwanted inheritance.” —Adrian S. Potter

Adrian S. Potter, the winner of the 2022 Lumiere Review Prose Award, writes poetry and prose in Minnesota when he's not busy silently judging your beer selection and record collection. He is the author of the poetry collection *Everything Wrong Feels Right* (Portage Press). Adrian's words have appeared in the *North American Review*, *The Maine Review*, *Roads & Bridges*, *The Comstock Review*, and *Obsidian*. Visit him online at <http://adrianspotter.com/>.

In my dreams I call

Tatiana Retivov

In my dreams I call
Or try to call you
On some ancient phone
To tell you that
Your vote counted!
The scoundrel is gone.

But I cannot ever
Connect or reach you.
On the screen
An ancient telex
Streams endlessly.
Its cursor—a quixotic

Knight errant. Yesterday
Navalny was given 9 years.
And I tried again to call.
It was an old Motorola,
Not yet smart, its push buttons
Stubbornly slow to deliver.

Lines of text scroll
Aimlessly in search
Of a recipient. I try again
To tell you that Le Putain
Has run amok in his
Underground bunker.

But to no avail, you
Are not to be disturbed.
The silence is numbing.
Still, we connect, muted
We play tag with
Each other in my dreams.

Meanwhile, I am part
Of the exodus, cats and
Dogs torn asunder. Our home
Under risk of bombardment.
Your resting place threatened
As well, as all of Europe.

Tatiana Retivov received a B.A. in English Literature from the University of Montana and an M.A. in Slavic Languages and Literature from the University of Michigan. She has lived in Kyiv, Ukraine since 1994, where she runs an Art & Literature Salon and a small publishing press, www.kayalabooks.com, that publishes prose, poetry, and non-fiction in Ukraine.

A Small Branch of the Arms Race Scratches Her Face

Reneé M. Schell

what happens

when a young child says
“thirsty” or invents
a word for the dry tongue?

her arms spindly tools

her mouth falls open
arrival armor
alleviate allelujah

a mother fingers the hair along her daughter’s forehead

hears the incantation
*No parasites, no cholera,
no typhoid, no Hepatitis A*

water as prisoner

guard it like gold
the telltale rifle
sand burns between toes

her mouth makes

the opening
for the word water
as weapon

O weapon tree,

branch of the military
lift your arms
reach for the sky

they will practice on the child

reaching for water
make the target flow
over dry sand

the bullets causing

ever widening ripples.

“A Small Branch of the Arms Race Scratches Her Face’ had its start with a photograph from a back issue of *National Geographic*. I was struck by the image of two women in chadors and a girl in a desert region with armed soldiers near a large body of water. To me, it looked like the soldiers were guarding the water. Around the same

time, I was reading the novel *Memory of Water* by Emmi Itäranta, which imagines a world where fresh drinking water is controlled by the authorities. These two experiences catalyzed the writing of the poem.” —Renée M. Schell

Renée M. Schell's poetry appears in *New Verse News*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Literary Mama*, *Naugatuck River Review*, and other journals. In 2015 she was lead editor for the anthology *(AFTER)life: Poems and Stories of the Dead*. She holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University and teaches second grade at a Title I school in San José, California. Her debut poetry collection, *Overtones*, was published in March 2022 by Tourane Poetry Press.

The Drawer

Ingrid L. Taylor

Get up
even if you don't feel like it
make your bed
pay special attention to the wrinkles and folds
take time to smooth the edges

Go to the drawer
take out the knife
the one you use to cut open packages
the one with the orange handle
that's easy to find

Take hold of it
see your wrists sliced
not horizontally, but the right way
lengthwise
down the arm
opening palm to elbow like a highway
scarlet with possibility

Imagine this
but don't do it
turn away from the drawer
avert your eyes
take a deep breath.

Now take your dog for a walk

See how he finds joy
in what others have thrown away
the whiff of burger grease in an empty paper bag
a lost sock, flattened and mud streaked.

See how he lifts his leg
to mark his place in the world.

When you return home
find a pen and a piece of paper
no, not that drawer—
the other one.

Make a list of what you love
pickup trucks
fresh cut hay

pancakes drenched in syrup
the first thirty minutes of a road trip
your lover at your side
and nothing but hopeful miles between
you and the sunrise.

Remember to add your name to the list.

Do this every day
even when you don't feel like it.

“I’m a former U.S. Air Force public health officer, and this poem is about the ongoing trauma brought on by PTSD—how it is a daily battle to fend off the urge to destroy oneself. It’s also about how one can never return to that same sense of belonging in the world that existed before the trauma. But, ultimately, the poem offers hope that, although it seems one’s world has irrevocably changed due to PTSD, it is possible to find a new place within it.” —Ingrid L. Taylor

Ingrid L. Taylor is a poet, essayist, and veterinarian whose poems have most recently appeared in the *Southwest Review*, *Ocotillo Review*, *Black Bough Poetry*, and others. She received *Punt Volat Journal’s* Annual Poetry Award in 2021, is a Pushcart nominee, and was a featured poet in the Horror Writers Association’s *Annual Poetry Showcase*, vol. 8. Her nonfiction has appeared in *HuffPost*, *Sentient Media*, and *Feminist Food Journal*. She has been awarded support for her writing from the Playa Artist Residency, the Horror Writers Association, and Gemini Ink. Find out more about her work at ingridltaylor.com.

fear of reprisal

Christina Vega

Imagine it.

Stationed / missing / back to Texas / “found in a field at Ft. Hood”

How many families didn’t have the privilege of imagination this year,
their babies / “dismembered” / news stories.

“Last seen at the motor pool” / “bludgeoned with a hammer”
“beaten so badly officials had to” / “homemade body vault”

Lives become dice thrown into the air / as in, Ciudad Juarez. or
a response to threats expressed in childhood.

Which side of the table is the wrong one?

I could have been “dragged out of a nearby lake” / “another missing woman”

Instead & still, I disassociate / become “unfounded claims of sexual assault”
language so passive it dribbles off the page.

I think about them, those missing women,
when I lay in bed on cold mornings under a clean comforter.

They have become open reports

“body encased in concrete” / “independent investigation”

I am told, “address the sergeant major as soon as you enter”
& I’m back, I’m fumbling / a warning expressed in the locker room.

“car found with all his belongings still inside”
“he then shot himself dead”

& I have to shake myself back into the present.

My orders changed. I am safely distanced / “unresponsive”

I knew what was waiting for me.

I “thrust into the national spotlight”

I whisper their names before my baby wakes.

Vanessa Guillen / Gregory Morales / Mejhor Morta / Elder Fernandez.

I imagine who they could have become,
what they didn’t say for “fear of reprisal”

& whose responsibility is it to counter

“where appropriate, we intend to seek justice”

If this is justice / “dismembered”

If this is due process / “found hanging in a tree after reporting sexual abuse”

Let me go back and absorb the risk.

Let us put them to rest, our children / bring them home.

“As a veteran and a mother, I cannot express how scared I am, and was while serving in the military, of the constant threat of violence to my body—and to the bodies of my loved ones—not by enemy combatants, but by the violence instilled in our warrior class here in the U.S. As a nation, we make demands of soldiers to practice and imagine violence, unapologetically and without question and incessantly, yet we do not equip them with the tools they need to release that violence or tension or turmoil in controlled or healthy ways when not on the battlefield. Consequently, our military bases are hotbeds for domestic violence, abuse, and murder by and against soldiers and their families. This poem represents my fear, past and present, for those residing at Ft. Hood, TX, one of the most dangerous military bases in our country. It is also a lament for those soldiers who died at Ft. Hood by the hands of fellow soldiers and accomplices. Please do not forget for one moment that Vanessa Guillen, Gregory Morales, Mejhor Morta and Elder Fernandez were all someone’s baby.”
—Christina Vega

Christina Vega (they/them) is a Queer Chicana poet from New Mexico. They’re the publisher at Blue Cactus Press, a hybrid publisher making books that serve as community resources by Queer and BIPOC authors. Christina believes we have the power to reshape our communities with principles of Emergent Strategy, transformative justice, and collective laboring of love. They believe revolution starts at home. Christina self-published their debut poetry collection, *Still Clutching Maps*, in 2017. Their poetry has appeared in *Creative Colloquy*, *Frontera Vol. 3: estados silvestres // natural states*, *International Poetry Review*, *Papeachu Issue 3*, *Timberline Review*, *WA129+*, and *Milk Gallery*. Christina’s journalism has appeared in *City Arts*, *Grit City Magazine*, *Hilltop Action Journal*, *OLY ARTS*, *The Ranger*, *VOICE Magazine* and *Weekly Volcano*. Follow Christina on Twitter @bluecactuspress and Instagram @ccthemighty.

Pramila Venkateswaran's work has appeared in many poetry journals in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and India, such as *Ariel*, *Calyx*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Long Island Quarterly*. Her latest book is *The Singer of Alleppey* (Shanti Arts, 2018).

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Accra, and the Dream of Returning

Genara Necos

We step through the narrow doorway, leaving the dank entrails of Elmina Castle, going out into the afternoon sunshine. The Portuguese built the castle in Elmina, Ghana, about 100 miles from Accra, in 1482. For centuries enslaved men and women were kept chained in its cramped dungeons before passing through the “Door of No Return” to begin the arduous journey across the Atlantic. Many perished; my ancestors survived.

Sadness can cause dislocation. Was I really here? A young woman brushes by me, iPhone in the air; Kente trimmed bracelets swivel on her delicate brown wrists. Blue waters, luminous skies, coconut trees—all in the vicinity of the castle—this scenic vision of their homeland is the last my ancestors saw. No wonder we are filled with longing for home. The young people around me are exchanging Instagram handles, making plans to keep their interest in Ghana and their newly formed bond alive. The sun seeps into my pores. I am here.

Some have compared our visits to the dungeons of Elmina Castle to people of Jewish heritage visiting concentration camps. The place of great suffering can be a source of deep strength to the descendants of the survivors. The kindest man I ever knew, my great uncle Simon, sent money from his meager wages to Marcus Garvey’s repatriation to Africa project. Political machinations shattered Mr. Garvey’s dream of returning. My uncle died of diabetic complications in a hospital in Santo Domingo; I wonder if he thought about this dream deferred at the end. I made it to Elmina for both of them.

At a restaurant in Osu, Accra, artificial red roses surround the words “Akwaaba, the Bukka Restaurant welcomes you during the Year of Return.” I join Margaret, a petite, youthful doctor from Texas, and her son Jordan, a handsome, reticent young man, for a meal outdoors. The server places fish stew, yams, and spicy plantains on the table. Seated next to us, two beautifully dressed African American women chatter away. At another table, a young man explains his plan to build bridges—through film—between young people in Washington DC and Accra to a young Ghanaian woman. His voice is calm and measured; she’s focused on her salad. Then he says he had an eye injury that kept him in a Baltimore hospital for weeks, and he almost didn’t make it to Accra. She drops her fork and leans forward for a close look at his eye.

Jordan is on break from attending a Historically Black University. Maybe at this stage, he doesn’t relish traveling with his mom. My 25-year-old son is profoundly autistic; our last international trip was to my hometown in the Dominican Republic when he was nine. Maybe I should envy Margaret and Jordan, but I don’t. I learned a long time ago not to compare my experiences with mothers of neurotypical children. Jordan breaks his silence to share that one of his missions in Ghana is to find the perfect Ashanti stool.

Margaret, Jordan, the African Americans at the other tables, the men and women who toured the dungeon in Elmina with me, came to Ghana in December 2019, during the proclaimed “Year of Return.” Ghana’s tourism industry gave 2019 this name ostensibly to remember the 400th anniversary of the first shipment of enslaved men and women from the Gold Coast to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. Ghana has promised that all of us descendants of enslaved men and women in the

diaspora could return to live there if we wished. An outsized promise that would take time and energy to deliver on.

Small business owners sell postcards replicating Ablade Glover's paintings, bottles of natural honey, and Selena Beg designer pocketbooks at the "Made in Ghana" street fair on Oxford Street. Tourists buy. On a typical day on this street, men selling belts, shoes, old radios; children selling Ghanaian chocolate; women with boiled and fried delicacies in bundles on their heads; they swirl about, earning a living. These traders are all part of Ghana's informal sector that makes up too high a percentage of the country's employable population. I suspect that diminishing the number of individuals dependent on this informal sector for employment is the political reason behind the "Year of Return." Ghana wants to attract American investors.

Never mind my suspicions of the Ghanaian government's motives. Days later, walking into Elle Lokko, a boutique known for its supply of Osei Duro fashion—clothing using traditional Ghanaian textiles—I recognize my cousins Juliana and Pilar in the faces of women I've never seen before. In the days that follow, whether meeting new members at the Accra Ridge Church, strolling Labadi Beach, listening to music at the Zen Garden, or weaving through the whirlwind of Mokola Market, I am possessed by a strong sense of well-being and belonging. If not for my son in New York, I would extend my visit. It's no wonder Dr. W. E. Dubois, who left the US for Ghana, wrote:

Yet Ghana shows its might and power
Not in its color or its flower
But in its wondrous breadth of soul
Its joy of life.

"Wondrous breadth of soul" indeed; I feel more at home in Accra than I have in the Dominican Republic, where I was born.

Before we leave Ghana, Jordan accomplishes his mission. Margaret sends me a picture of his Ashanti stool, solid wood with the Sankofa symbol on the seat: a golden bird with a beak reaching backward and feet forward. Ghanaians translate Sankofa from the Akan language as "Go back and pick what's meaningful from your past and bring it forward for your benefit in the present." For me, that meant the strength I felt growing within me at Elmina Castle, the hope that rose when I saw the vibrant, young descendants of the men and women who survived the horrors of that dungeon.

*

I arrive in New York on Christmas Eve, throughout the holidays and beyond, particularly during the lockdown that began in March; Ghana's "Wondrous Breadth of Soul" haunts me. I fantasize about returning to stay. But Ghana suspended flights into the country in March 2020.

One evening in May, my dreaming abruptly turns into concrete planning. My friend Dennis calls—since I stopped watching the news, overwhelmed with the impact of the pandemic on New York—he often gives me updates. "I didn't sleep last night; they kept showing that awful video," he said.

"What awful video?" I ask; this is how I learn that a policeman has set his knee to George Floyd's neck and murdered him.

Dennis has nephews, cousins, and in-laws in the police force; he is a no-nonsense carpenter who lived through the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland. If he is disturbed by the video, I know I can never see it.

In the ensuing nights, I wake up in chills that turn to sweat, but I reason that this may be a product of the pandemic. I test negative for COVID-19, but the symptoms persist. Fear is irrational. I become distraught, picturing my son having a run-in with the police. During the lockdown, no one at his residence is allowed out, and no one can visit. A confrontation with the police is unlikely. But my irrational fear is because I cannot see him—and have not seen him for more than two months—the most prolonged separation in our lives.

Every day I watch videos of the African diaspora returning to various countries on the African continent, a desire sparked in some by the barbarism of the Floyd tragedy. All over the US, cities are burning in protest. Soraya, my friend from Los Angeles, calls. She remembers the riots of 1992.

“I haven’t seen the video,” I tell her.

“I saw it, and I am furious,” Soraya says.

“I want to go to Ghana, get my son out of here.”

“Ghana sounds like a perfectly lovely place to live,” she muses.

My friend Kelly, a fierce civil rights activist, calls, anxious and afraid that her black friends are angry at her. No, I have no resentment towards her. Unlike Soraya, she says she does not want me to leave for Ghana.

Julia in Atlanta tells me about the two College students the police pulled out of a car, breaking one of their arms, during a night of tumultuous protest. She wonders out loud where the Jon Lewis of today is. I say that perhaps he has not emerged because no one thought we would be fighting this same battle over and over again. I discuss my desire to flee with Julia, Soraya, and Kelly, who are white, but I don't with Margaret or other black women. I don't want to set them on the same anxious path about their sons. But which one of us isn't distressed about her son? I persuade myself that my anxiety won't end until my son and I are in a place with a “Wondrous Breadth of Soul.”

Driving from Costco, I mention to Dennis my anxiety about the police; it's a month since the Floyd murder and time has assuaged his initial outrage. “If kids were more respectful to the police, these things wouldn't happen.”

A vision of the two young people in Atlanta, the young man with the cast on his arm, flashes before my eyes. “What about the twelve-year-old boy they shot?” I ask, referring to a previous murder.

“Kids should be taught to respect,” he says. I scream into the car's rooftop, a series of epithets I don't recall ever uttering to anyone.

“Don't you ever call me again,” is the last thing I say when we arrive at my complex. I mean it. I understand the desire to set houses on fire. After a series of calls from him, Dennis and I reconcile,

but I know I have to leave New York. Enraged and embittered, I, too, can't breathe. A week later, I learn that my shortness of breath is a symptom of acid reflux.

In her biography of Church Vaughn, Lisa A. Lindsay¹ tells the story of a free man of color who departed, along with several skilled, literate free people of color, from South Carolina to Liberia. Vaughn was distraught about the turn of events in mid-19th century South Carolina after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 (the Act). Signed by President Fillmore, the Act endangered free people of color, as anyone could accuse them of being fugitives and reduce them to a life of enslavement.

Church Vaughn and his cohorts departed from America; however, these "reverse immigrants" arrived at a Liberia full of challenges: an inhospitable terrain, disease that decimated the "settlers," and a sometimes hostile indigenous population. Church Vaughn left Liberia and found the success he had not known in the United States, in Yorubaland.

I would not be facing pestilence or a hostile indigenous population, despite the Western media's depiction of Africa, by moving to Accra. But there would be other, albeit less daunting challenges for a mother of a 25-year-old with autism. The irony of leaving America out of anxiety for my son was that he was the best argument for staying. The spirit in me said, "leap, and the net will follow." But a vision of the past flashed before my eyes: my son at 15, during a meltdown I could not de-escalate; the police arrived, handcuffed him, and escorted us to Mount Sinai emergency room. Encased in a glass room, he flapped his arms incessantly while leaping into the air until a psychiatrist prescribed Seroquel.

Soon after the incident at Mount Sinai, I placed him in a community residential program for young men with behavioral challenges. It took a combination of empathic and well-trained residential associates, teachers, therapists, an extraordinary social worker, and a cocktail of medications to transform him into a young man who sat with me on visits, completing simple puzzles. My son no longer has the extreme aggression that sent us to the emergency room, but he still needs comprehensive care that may not be available in Ghana. Instead of leaping and hoping for a net, I settle for researching an answer.

My research on services for individuals with disabilities in Ghana leads me to a pioneering mother who founded a school out of the necessity of addressing her daughter's needs. Salome Francois founded New Horizons Special School (New Horizon)² officially, Ghana's first school for individuals with a range of disabilities. She founded the school in the early 70s, primarily so that her own developmentally challenged daughter could receive an education with other children.

Today New Horizon offers a variety of instructional services and therapies for children from 6 to 18; at 18, the students move on to a vocational program with 32 students. There are other programs in Accra, but none with room for adults. Was I ready to be a founding pioneer for adults with disabilities in Accra? How would my son fare without a structured program while we waited to integrate him into a new community?

¹ Lisa A. Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A 19th Century Odyssey from America to Africa*

² *Women of Distinction, Ghana Journey to the Top*, Amoah, Rowena, Cornelia, pages 175-179.

In the meantime, people are stretching to be kind to each other all around me in the Bronx. My neighbors ask that we order out to help the restaurant industry; there are notices of people offering to deliver food to the elderly in the building link online; friends donate to food banks. Black Lives Matter signs sprout up on manicured lawns. These actions are also reflective of New York and America.

My mother, who left the Dominican Republic to give her children a better life in the United States, used to say, “no hay mal que para bien no llegue,” that is, “there is no evil that does not bring about some good.” This proverb proves to be my Sankofa—my return to the wisdom of my ancestors to benefit my present life. Perhaps these heinous tragedies, the deaths of Floyd and too many others, instead of making us flee, can force us to participate in creating a different story. A story where we honor Jon Lewis’ legacy by no longer having to ask, “where is the Jon Lewis of today?”

Notes:

Cornelia Rowena Amoah, *Women of Distinction, Ghana: Journey to the Top*, 175-179

Lisa A. Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A 19th Century Odyssey from America to Africa*

W.E.B. Du Bois, “Ghana Calls”

Genara Cristina Necos is a civil rights attorney practicing in New York City. She has conducted bilingual workshops on gender, race, and disability discrimination in the Tri-State Area, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.

In *March* magazine, she recently published a short cultural piece about longing for West Africa during the pandemic. She wrote the essay “Accra and the Dream of Returning” to reflect on the emotional and physical pain she and many others endured in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. The essay is a testament to the tragic incident, reminding us that acting to make a difference may be a better option than fleeing.

Genara is currently working on a book of braided essays about women in her family and their inter-generational immigration experiences when moving from St. Kitts to the Dominican Republic, Curacao, and the USA.

She is the mother of a charming young man on the autism spectrum. She lives in the Bronx, where she grew up.

FICTION

Sudoku Xmas

Susan McKenna

The family portrait was a little beat up. The crinkled corners of the Polaroid had pulled away from the backing, and small creases cut across the fading figures. The mother sat front and center, the five children flanking her. No father: he, of course, was behind the camera.

That was Christmas 1990. Kuwait had become a household word. The nightly news covered stories about American hostages used as human shields and premature babies left to die after Iraqi soldiers raided hospitals. Libby McGill's family waited for her father to be deployed.

Colonel McGill had recently been transferred to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and the family now lived in Oakwood, a small affluent city just outside of Dayton, Ohio. Eleven-year-old Libby dreaded returning to school after the Christmas break. Most of all she dreaded questions about her presents.

The first day back, the popular girls showed off their Gap sweaters and Calvin Klein shifts with belted safari jackets from Banana Republic. *Let's see what you got* became the phrase of the day as students greeted each other. Nike Airs appeared here and there, unused for walking, let alone running, since most students were dropped off, several in chauffeured limousines. Tans from trips to Hawaii and the Caribbean shone on preadolescent faces. New walkmans were on display, most in leather cases, one tiny cassette player sheathed in bright red metal.

"Settle down," said Mrs. Broccoli. Her real name was Mrs. Brockman, but a bunch of sixth-graders could not resist the obvious nickname. "Put those things away. We'll start the year with a quiz."

As Libby answered questions about *Lord of the Flies* (Why did the other boys select Piggy? Why didn't he fight back?), she wished she had something to show for herself: if not a whole new outfit, at least a Swatch watch on her wrist or new shoes like the other girls. Finished within ten of the allotted thirty minutes, she wrote a math equation at the bottom of the lined paper sheet:

$$2x - (3 + 22/2) = 10$$

She penciled in the answer— $X = 12$ —without doing any calculations, and then sat still as her mind flew out the window and landed in a tree, the cold on her skin, the sun on her face. She wasn't sure where the 12 had come from: she had simply felt it shine as naturally as the sun.

In her class for gifted students back in Massachusetts, Libby had discovered that when she looked at equations, the answers would emerge. She'd take a breath and let her mind travel.

"Time's up," said Mrs. Broccoli as she collected quizzes. She grimaced at Libby's paper. "What's this mess? I've told you, points off for doodling."

Libby kept her head down. It was as though there were two Libbys. The one in the classroom in Ohio, miserable, the only new student in the school that year, the only kid from a military family tossed in with so many rich kids. Then there was the other Libby, the one outside with the roaming mind.

*

The week before Christmas break, three of the nastier girls had followed her home at lunchtime. She heard them gaining on her. She couldn't turn around, couldn't speed up her pace; her feet refused to respond. As the girls drew close, she kept her eyes on the sidewalk.

They pulled at her waist-length red curls—"Giddy up, Ginger"—and pushed her books into the muddy snow—"Pick 'em up, nerd." Her math puzzles landed face down. Penciled answers disappeared into the melting mess along with the cheap newsprint they rested on.

"Titty-Litty. Titty-Litty." Libby wore two sweaters under her coat, like a protective suit of armor to camouflage her newly developed breasts. The most popular girl, the one with the sleek blonde hair, seized her by the shoulder, tearing the lining of her coat sleeve. "Where'd you buy that?" Libby's wool coat with the brown velvet collar, graced with a Lord & Taylor label, had been purchased from an upscale consignment shop in whatever city they had traveled through on the way to the family's next posting. It was the same every time they transferred, never knowing what to expect, never knowing if she'd fit in. She always kept her head down.

One of the girls picked up a small rock and threw it, hitting her on her shoulder blade. Libby didn't know what to do. Her body wanted to run, but her feet were frozen in place. Her hair was drenched with sweat under the velvet collar. No one had ever thrown a rock at her before.

She spun around; another rock hit her in the chest. Something trickled down her back. Was it perspiration or was she bleeding? She could no longer feel her hands and feet. The sound of panting—was it hers?—blocked out voices as the girls' faces seemed to recede into distant blurs, even as their hands came into focus, reaching, grabbing, pawing. Other-Libby beckoned from a tall tree, but Ohio-Libby's feet remained glued to the ground. The girls held her by the arms, shoving her along, forcing her down a street in the opposite direction from her house. "Eyes front, you stupid soldier," one said. Another shouted, "Don't show your ugly face around here again." One more called out, "Keep in line, stinky." And the last epithet, "Spaz."

The smell of singed wool suddenly permeated the cold air. Looking over her shoulder from what felt like a great distance, she saw the blonde ringleader light a match on a crumpled matchbook and throw it at her back. Libby planted one foot in front of the other, and then finally took off running. As she fled, she heard the crackle of pebbles landing at her heels, like an echo of the gunfire at her father's shooting practice. A stone flew past her cheek, hissing like a wayward bullet.

She struggled to comprehend: why would anyone do those things to her? Every time they moved, she became the two Libbys—the popular girl back in Massachusetts with the long legs and the red curls looping down her back; the Libby in the new place with the bushy hair, the outdated thrift-shop clothes, and the answers to all the teacher's questions.

She ran home, books clutched at her chest to keep her breasts from bouncing. The mansions rolled past her, like flat façades against the sky. Other-Libby would have run faster, but Ohio-Libby was trapped in this nightmare. A cut on her cheek stung in the cold. Her belly cramped. Was she going to throw up? She shivered, the smell of burnt wool and fresh blood commingling in her nostrils.

“We all have to put up with these things,” her mother said after pulling Libby’s confession out from between her hiccupping sobs. As a military wife, Mary Beth was glad they no longer had to live on the base. Still, she’d had her own experience with the mothers of the neighborhood, who twittered about their maids and laundry delivery services, fully aware that Mary Beth knew nothing of these luxuries.

“Why is your hair all wet? And what’s that on your face? Go wash up now. Lunch is almost ready.”

Libby stared into the mirror by the window. Ugly. Stupid. Stinky. Spaz. Tendrils of light sparkled on her wet eyelashes, and the sun reached out and cradled her body.

Libby pulled up her sweaters and shirt. In the mirrored reflection, she watched what appeared to be someone’s else’s hand retracing the grooves of the numbers she had carved into her belly the night before. A bird outside pecked at the giant copper beech she hugged each day before she left for school. A car drove by playing a song by the Beatles, something about Mother Mary. In the kitchen below, her mother spoke to one of the little girls, “There, there, sweetheart. One more bite and we’ll have Jell-O.”

As an adult, Libby would misremember that day, telling herself that her mother had let her stay home that afternoon. They would have watched old movies, eaten popcorn with extra butter, and poured Tab over crushed ice with lime garnishes. But it didn’t happen that way.

It would not have been possible, given that her little sisters would have been clamoring for their afternoon snack.

Instead, Mary Beth told Libby, “I’ll call the teacher and tell her you’ll be late. We’ll drive you back to school after lunch.”

When she walked in, Mrs. Broccoli hissed: “Tattletale.”

*

Under the tree that year, there was a large package with Libby’s name on the tag. More than anything, Libby had wanted a white Benetton shirt. She had imagined returning from break wearing that shirt, the one with white pearl buttons, inside of which black dots were centered like miniature spy cameras. She reached for her gift.

“Open stockings first, Libby.” Tom, the oldest child by one year, and the only son, followed the family ritual of passing out the stockings that dressed the fireplace.

Libby’s father stood to take his part in the holiday morning regime. “On your feet soldiers. Take formation. Tom, organize rank and file.” The five children, dressed in red flannel pajamas and nighties, stood in a straggly line. “Attention.”

William Wilfred McGill, the son of an alcoholic coal miner, had joined ROTC so he could afford college and escape the poverty he was born into. After being injured during the invasion of Panama, he’d been promoted to Colonel, the entrée to fulfilling his desire to offer upward mobility to his five children and give his wife Mary Beth access to a finer life.

Wearing his red pjs, sipping his first martini of the day, the Colonel, as he was known to all, stood tall and proud in front of his progeny, his troops. “Salute your commanding officer.” Tom and Libby pantomimed a hand salute, while the three little girls squirmed and giggled. “At ease, soldiers. Now drop and give me five.”

“That’s enough, Bill,” Mary Beth interjected. “Let the children open their stockings.”

Tangerines and chocolates, toothbrushes and sugar-free gum, ballpoint pens and spiral notepads filled each faded red stocking to the brim with one important item nesting at the bottom. The three little girls found Barbie dolls, previously used, poking their impossibly arched feet through the stocking toes. For Tom, a not quite vintage Eagle Scout compass in a worn green case. At the bottom of her holiday stash, Libby discovered a book of advanced Sudoku puzzles along with a box of pencils, a new metal sharpener, and a giant pink eraser.

“I found it at the Base Thrift Shop,” her mother said. “It’s from Japan, but numbers are universal so you can play in English.”

“It better be English,” the Colonel interjected. “We didn’t win that war for nothin’.” He leaned back in his overstuffed chair, legs crossed on the matching ottoman.

“Sudoku can be quite advanced. I wanted to find you a challenge,” Mary Beth continued.

“My girl will blast those puzzles right out of the book,” the Colonel added.

Libby had started playing math games in third grade when she was grounded during recess by the teacher who did not know what to do with the hyperactive girl who convinced the boys to stuff paper towels down the staff toilet until it overflowed. The girl who became bored with rudimentary games of pattern-building until Mary Beth brought home the first batch of gridded puzzles. While the Sudoku craze would not hit the United States for at least another decade, servicemen stationed overseas returned with puzzle books with some of the answers penciled in.

Libby began the tedious yet familiar task of erasing another player’s system. She envisioned the hand of a lonely enlisted man ordering the numbers. Tiny pink crumbs from the eraser sprinkled over her nightgown with *Don’t Tease Me!* embroidered on the front bib pocket that partially covered her new breasts. The warm red flannel also hid last night’s not-yet-scabbed-over incisions.

Sometimes her eraser tore the gray-tinged newsprint, and Libby’s numbers would fall through the slashes. She penciled them in through the shredded paper over the tracings of answers on the page beneath, the thin layers of newsprint like a palimpsest bearing the vestiges of ancient effacings, messages from warriors past.

“Is the Sudoku soldier dead?” she asked.

“Nobody is going to die,” the Colonel said. Topping off his martini, he glanced over at the hall closet where his gear bag hung, waiting for deployment to the Gulf. Each month, there was a bag drag, an inspection of the G.I.-green duffel’s contents—extra uniforms, toiletries, and chemical war gear, including a gas mask.

When it finally came time for Libby to open her large package, she knew right away, lifting it, that it was all wrong, that it wasn't a box from Benetton, filled with that cherished white shirt wrapped in tissue paper. It was far too heavy. Instead, she found an old-fashioned hard-sided suitcase. Scratches crisscrossed the distressed leather, forming crevices like the cuts on her belly.

She remembered the popular girls mocking her wool coat. She remembered the old Tudor-style mansions moving by as though on a conveyor belt as she ran. The unhealed incisions from the night before stuck to her nightgown. She watched her fingers pick through the flannel at the crusted blood, looking for comfort since none was to be found in the unwanted present. What would the girls have said had they known what waited for Libby under the tree? Ugly. Stupid. Stinky. Spaz.

She looked out the window where Other-Libby waited, the Libby whose clothes were okay, the Libby whose thinking was appreciated.

"It's very good quality. Expensive. Real leather." Mary Beth stroked the suitcase. "I found it at the Base Christmas sale."

Libby wondered what the suitcase had cost; she wished the money had been spent on what she actually wanted.

"For you to take to college someday." Mary Beth waited for her daughter's response.

Inside one of the pockets, Libby discovered a grocery list: *ribs, Fritos, pint of Jack Playboy, Camels non filter.*

Another dead serviceman. "I told you I wanted that Benetton shirt," Libby blurted out.

"That shirt would be a waste of money." Mary Beth turned away. "The suitcase, you can use for the rest of your life. Besides, fitted clothing doesn't suit you."

Libby knew her mother was referring to her new breasts. Titty-Litty.

"I hate it!" Libby was on her feet. "What am I supposed to do? Hang it in the hall closet next to Daddy's duffel?"

"That's enough." The Colonel was on his feet too. "Your mother works hard to find nice things. You'd better shape up or ship out, girl."

"I hate you!" Libby yelled as she ran up the stairs. "I hope you die in that damn war."

Her father's voice followed her up the stairs, shouting that she disgusted him, that he was going to teach her a lesson. Her mother kept murmuring it was Christmas. The little girls were crying. Tom was silent.

Libby plopped on the upper bunk in the room she shared with her sisters. She opened her newly erased Sudoku and closed her eyes. She had already developed systems for the gridded puzzles. At

first the techniques had been analytic; she'd ordered the numbers in matrices. By the time she had reached the medium level, though, the numbers seemed to move on their own.

She opened her eyes and let the figures glide.

As she worked the more difficult puzzles, the numbers took on personalities. The ones and the sevens were light and happy, the sixes dour and dingy. Libby imagined costumes: the sevens draped in Isadora Duncan flowing scarves, the sixes in Olde Sturbridge Village colonial garb. Her favorite was the nine. He wore a uniform, with medals and ribbons pinned above his left breast pocket. The number nine, was he the dead soldier? Was he the one who filled in the blank squares at night, not knowing he'd never return home? Was he the brave Sergeant 9 who held her hand when her father said she was disgusting?

Lying on her back, she unscrewed the blade from her pencil sharpener and pulled up her nightie. The blade moved carefully and deliberately, and then, with a quick slice of the tip, brave Sergeant 9 made the cut.

She pulled her nightgown down over the fresh lines beading with blood. She kept her eyes focused on the magical moving numbers and forgot about the stoning. Forgot that she disgusted her father. Even as the contours of her body blurred, she prepared to join Other-Libby beckoning from Beech Tree, but Sudoku Grid tethered her to the earth.

Arms cradling the Sudoku book, her body curled into a fetal position facing the wall, Libby sensed her family coming in and out of the room. Her mother was first: "Fifteen more minutes. That's it." Years later, Libby wished Mary Beth had acknowledged that she was already solving the problems in the new advanced puzzle book. "Think about the name," her mother would have said, pointing to the Japanese characters for *Sudoku*. "It means most unique, like you, my smart girl." Instead, her mother pleaded, "Please, Libby, I can't take any more sadness. Please come downstairs."

The Colonel arrived next. "You're too pretty to be so fresh to your mother. I'll be havin' you court-martialed. If it weren't Christmas, you'd be gettin' a tunin'." The Colonel had stopped spanking Libby when she reached puberty. She could tell he was uncomfortable around her. Probably because of Titty-Litty. They'd always been pals. She used to work her math puzzles every night at a special little table in his study. Lately, he'd been telling her to do her homework in the dining room with her brother.

She looked out the window at Beech Tree, who waited for her hug each morning and protected her on the way home. Except for the day of the stoning when his leaves were on the ground and the tree was as exposed as Libby. "Everybody at school hates me."

"When I went to college," her father said, "I waited tables at a frat house. They picked on me too. Those types, they never like the smart ones."

*

Libby's first math test at the Ohio school had come back with a red "F" slashed across the top of the page. "I'll see you after class," Principal Harmon, who taught advanced math, said.

The next day, Libby sat between her parents in the waiting room. She overheard the principal: "These military kids, always causing trouble."

"You mean those Air Force brats?" asked a second voice. What was Mrs. Broccoli doing in the principal's office?

"The other kids don't like her," Mrs. Broccoli continued. "Keeps raising her hand. She never lets anyone else have a chance to answer."

Libby whispered, "None of the others raise their hands."

"Shhh," Mary Beth said.

Once they were all inside, Principal Harmon began: "We don't tolerate cheaters. I don't know what you got away with back East, but you're in Ohio now."

Mrs. Broccoli added, "We've seen this before with your type. Only the best families send their boys and girls to our school."

Mary Beth stiffened in her slightly outdated Chanel suit.

"There ain't nothin' wrong with that test," the Colonel pronounced.

"Anyone can see she didn't do the work," Mr. Harmon said. "She must have copied."

"She doesn't need to do those fancy figurings out. Let her take the test in front of you. Let you see what she can do." Colonel McGill may not have gone to an exclusive school, but he knew how to defend his troops.

"She'll have to do the calculations. She probably memorized the answers."

They made her demonstrate. Libby drew each number tediously, pressing so hard she broke the pencil tip and had to stop and pull out her sharpener. The taste of Campbell's Tomato Soup rose in her throat. Please, she thought, don't let me throw up in front of these people. Someone seemed to be there, observing, telling her to sit up straight and keep on going. She felt the answers in her body, and watched her hand move, solving each equation step by step.

At the end, Principal Harmon sat still. Mrs. Broccoli was silent, for once. Then the Principal said, "She'll never be able to do Trig and Calculus if she doesn't learn the basics."

"I know how to do calculus. I've already started on physics," Libby blurted out. Her teacher in Massachusetts had arranged for Libby to audit classes at a local community college.

"Someone needs to teach her manners," Mrs. Broccoli continued. "You're not doing her any favors letting her think she's the smartest person in every room."

Mary Beth said quietly, "Maybe she is."

When her mother spoke up, Libby was shocked. Could there be two Mary Beths? Her stomach ached as pain shot up and across her back and maneuvered down her arms into her icy-cold fingers. Keep going, the unseen voice repeated.

The Colonel stood up. “Time to go. Either discharge her or give her a medal. But don’t clip her wings for knowing more than her teachers.”

Driving home, her father said, “Libby, you’re an original. Don’t let that flock of sheep get to you.”

Mary Beth added, “It’s only the second week of school and you’re already in the principal’s office. You need to learn how not to attract attention.”

That night she began the cutting.

*

Gripping her Sudoku with sweaty hands, Libby returned to the bedroom and her father’s voice. “Show respect to your commanding officers. Now put that puzzle book away. And make sure you redact the answers at the back. We never cheat in this family. We follow orders.”

Tom was the last to arrive. “Don’t be stupid, Libby,” he said. “Do what I do. Keep your real self inside. Be who they want you to be on the outside. And don’t ruin Christmas.”

Don’t you know, Tom, she thought, but didn’t say out loud. Don’t you know Sudoku is where I live my real life? When the numbers fell into place, her body would relax into the same feeling she had when she touched herself at night, tension building and releasing as the numbers found structure. Her mind would still as she floated away, far from the scoldings of her parents and the taunts of her classmates. Far from the crisscrossing lines on her belly.

Downstairs, the Colonel posed his family for the annual Christmas portrait: “Ten-Hut. Arms at sides. Eyes front. Libby, fall into place. Tom, don’t slouch.”

Mary Beth was seated on her throne, a Queen Anne wingback with slivered stripes of red and gold that set off her green velvet robe. The five children surrounded their mother, Libby and Tom standing on either side, the three little girls kneeling in front.

Over thirty years later, this will be the picture Libby will show her therapist.

It was taken the last Christmas before Libby would skip two grades and enter high school, leaving Tom behind. The last before Libby would go punk, dyeing her red hair a lacquered maroon black. The last before Libby would get suspended for slamming the fingers of one of her bullies in a locker door. The last before the Colonel would be deployed.

“How do you feel about this picture?” the therapist will ask.

“Look how Mary Beth’s trying to get the Colonel’s attention. Notice how oblivious the little girls are. Tom seems scared. The Colonel’s taking the picture, needless to say.”

“What about you?” the therapist will persist.

“I was in trouble.”

“‘Sudoku Xmas’ is a fictionalized account of growing up under the command of Colonel William McKenna of the United States Air Force. Our parents wanted us to attend the top schools in whatever region they transferred to, and we five siblings had childhood experiences distinct from other military “brats”—we never lived on base. Ours was an interstitial existence, never fitting into the affluent cities we lived in, yet not having friendships with other military children who might have understood our peripatetic experiences.” —Susan McKenna

Dr. Susan E. McKenna taught visual studies, queer theory, and popular culture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for many years, and holds advanced degrees in communication, film studies, and photographic installation. While her theoretical and visual training informs every word she writes, it is in literary fiction that she has found her true calling.

There It Is

Burt Rashbaum

His parents and sisters were thrilled to have him home. When he couldn't sleep, he'd walk the neighborhood for hours. One day he got in his car and headed west. He drove until he had nowhere else to go because he'd hit the coast and found himself in San Francisco.

He slept in his car for a while. He begged for change. He remembered hunger.

One time he was by the water, watching the boats, when some older dude tried to chat him up. He had no interest, but the guy wouldn't leave him alone and eventually hired him for his little boat repair shop. The dude didn't ask him his name, just said, "You good with your hands?" and he said sure, so the dude said, I could use a good pair of hands in my shop.

His boss left him alone during work. He didn't do drugs, barely tolerated alcohol, and had no desire to talk about his problems. His best friend had died in his arms, half his body blown to bits. He'd tried to save another, it'd been too late. He worked hard, ate fast food, and slept without dreaming, which was better than all the nights with the horrors exploding in his brain. But every day he thought, this isn't working, this isn't right.

He couldn't remember how to have a conversation. What could he say to anyone that made any sense?

That's when he'd come up with his plan. His boss had asked him what he was working on. He said he had a small side project, he'd pay for the materials, and his boss had said, "Let me know if you need any help."

He'd built a small dinghy with a sail, but he'd bring some oars, and a hatchet. He planned to wait for a slightly windy day, take the boat out, head into the Pacific, and when he got enough distance between him and the city, he'd bust it up. Sink into the ocean. Finally be done.

Today was the day. Already hours out into the ocean, he tried not to think too much, because he'd seen death too often and much too close, and he knew there was no time to hesitate. Once he chopped into his boat—he had no life jacket—he was committed.

The water was calm but his boat started rocking. He saw a huge dark mass under the water. He thought it was an algae bloom, dark as death under the waves, then it rose to the surface and it was a fucking whale. He expected it to upturn his boat and do his work for him. It broke the surface and he thought, okay, he's gonna ram me, flip me over. But it glided alongside him and he saw its eye and it looked right at him.

"Get outta here!" he yelled, tried to slap at the creature with an oar, and then he laughed to himself. Yeah, right.

He continued west, hoping the beast would just head off into some other direction. He wanted to be left alone to carry out his plan.

But it didn't.

At some point it disappeared but before he could think another thought it appeared again—it had just gone under his boat, deep, and then came back to his port side. He ignored it, and kept going, but it stayed with him.

He saw it head way out ahead—it breached, and he saw how huge it was. His boat felt like a teacup. He was sure it was taking off but it circled back and came up alongside him again. He couldn't sink with this whale here. He wasn't sure why, but he knew he couldn't.

He started talking to it. Listen, he said, I have a plan, I put a lot of work into this, this is how it has to go, understand?

Not that he thought the whale would answer. He talked and talked, but the damn thing wouldn't leave him alone.

Maybe he was delirious, because at some point he thought, this isn't normal. He swore the whale was trying to tell him something.

Yeah, this is nuts. The big cow-like eye looked at him, then it took off and breached again, then doubled back, circled his boat, went under, came to the surface, eyed him again. Then he thought, this is more than nuts, because he was getting a message that he didn't ask for and had no desire to respond to.

This is my world, it was telling him. I'm loving this, I belong here. I was born here, I live here, I'll die here. You have to go back. No matter what happens. That's where you belong, where you were born, where you've lived, where you'll die.

Once he thought this is what the whale was telling him, the message didn't stop. When the beast met his eyes, he was convinced it was telling him this again, and again.

Then he was crying. He screamed. He argued with the whale, then he put the oars in the skiff and sat. He bobbed and floated while the whale patiently drifted with him under gray skies on this cold day.

He thought maybe it was protecting him.

You have to go back, he thought it said. I belong here. You don't.

He took an oar, slowly turned the skiff around, took the other oar, put it in place, started rowing. The whale stayed with him for a while, but then the sail caught a breeze and he picked up speed. The whale veered off, lifted its huge tail, and slapped the water, spraying him, soaking him.

Then it was gone.

It would take hours to get back, but once he started he knew he'd make it.

When he saw the city in the distance he thought, there it is. There's my life.

“I work part-time, post-retirement, at a rare wonder: a hand-carved carousel called ‘The Carousel of Happiness’ in my small town of Nederland. [This carousel](#) was carved by a Vietnam vet who I am honored to call a friend. It took him 26 years to carve. There’ve been countless articles about him, a documentary (*Carving Joy*), newspaper stories, interviews, TV news features, and two books, one mine (*Of the Carousel*), the other a history of the carousel (*Don’t Delay Joy*). He’s told the story of his carving, and of his life, many times. But only once, in an article in the Southwest Airlines in-flight magazine, did he ever talk about the whale, and how it sort of saved his life. He never mentioned it again. I asked his permission, when I was writing a collection of flash fiction that I called a novel, if I could write that story, since it was his, not mine. He said yes.” —Burt Rashbaum

Burt Rashbaum’s publications are *Of the Carousel* (The Poet’s Press, 2019), and *Blue Pedals* (Editura Pim, 2015). His writing has appeared in *XY Files* (Sherman Asher Publishing, 1997), *The Cento* (Red Hen Press, 2011), *Art in the Time of Covid-19* (San Fedele Press, 2020), *Meet Cute Press #2*, *Caesura* (2021), *A 21st Century Plague: Poetry from a Pandemic* (University Professors Press, 2021), *Typeslash Review* (2021), *American Writers Review: Turmoil and Recovery* (San Fedele Press, 2021), and *The Antonym* (2022).

True or False: Bears Like Surprises

Kristen Leigh Schwarz

Jane is alive in the Heart Bar Campground, the first night of a weekend camping trip. She is here in her tent with—on top of—Nelson, whom she's known for three days more than one month.

They met at a dog park, though neither of them owns a dog. Jane had come with her friend and her friend's golden, Nelson had come with his sister and her husky. He had relocated to San Diego to complete Navy SWCC training but had been spending weekends in Los Angeles with his sister and her family. The dogs became friends, and then Jane and Nelson spent the next 48 hours together in her apartment. After that, he switched from spending weekends with his sister to spending them with Jane.

Last weekend, they were hiking the short but steep path through Fern Dell and up to the observatory when he got the call that he was being loaned to the Army, deployed to an Afghan combat zone as a weapons tech. Voluntold. They had already made plans to go camping.

So, here she is, and here he is, on their first trip together, and there is so much that she doesn't know about him. But when he comes and passes out while she's still on top of him, she knows him well enough to understand that—her head brushing the top of the tent, his mouth snoring open—he is lost to her. From the first hours of their meeting, dogless people surrounded by other people's dogs and then suddenly alone in her apartment, they had entered a perfect storm of sex. It was the constant around which they'd accelerated all other intimacy, around which they'd built a shared reality.

She stares at moonlit nylon, nose threatening to run, shoulders caving toward the earth. Then she pulls on her shirt and performs an awkward dismount. She leaves the condom on him, shrugging to herself.

The world has gone limp too, all the sounds of daytime replaced by the feather-soft monotones of owls hooting to each other across the tall meadow grass. She claws on sweatpants, cold hardening her feet, and shoves her legs into her sleeping bag.

Then the owls clam up, and the world goes dead quiet.

*

Jane, living, sits inside the Heart Bar Campground bathroom the following morning, perched on the edge of the pit toilet, the mouth of the volcano—Mount Putridius—coughing down into the space between her knees. Her throat erupts with brine. Her cold, nascent when they hit the road yesterday, is now thickly mature. As she wipes her nose, she can feel the proximity of all the spiders on the ceiling above her, the eyes times eight.

She can also feel Nelson, though he can't see her. He is just outside, reading all the signs tacked to the campground bulletin board. Their coupling is recent enough that she still has that double vision whenever he is around—her view from within and his view, theorized, of her from without. It is always strongest during sex: look good for him, perform well, but also feel good, let go, connect. It

is vertiginous, the difference in visions, but also it is trancelike, drawing her far from herself in moments before plunging her back in.

“Who says true to this?” Nelson calls through the thin walls. “What kind of person?” She is learning that he is the kind of person to say things to her without context.

She stands and uses the toe of a shoe to drop the lid of the toilet with a clack. The wave of sulfur and ammonia follow her past the threshold into the blinding mountain day.

Nelson looks up at her from reading. More and more, since he received his ship date, he looks at her—at everyone and everything, at this bulletin board—imploringly. He points.

“Look at this.”

She walks over. A bunch of signs in larger fonts warn against fireworks and rattlesnakes. Tacked among them, the subject of his pointing, is a list of questions under the heading “The Bear Quiz—Test Your Knowledge.”

His recently buzz-cut head is velvety in the sunlight. She reaches a hand tentatively, touching the damp circle of shirt over his lower back, then leans in to read. It’s a true or false quiz, questions and answers separated by a drawing of a bear and her cub on a boulder.

“Question seven,” he says, rocking from foot to foot. A body always preparing to move.

She skips down. *True or false: Bears like surprises.*

“Who says ‘Yes, I think bears like surprises?’” he says.

“Oh, well...” She finds the answer. “I think it’s just there so they can tell you this part, to make noise when you hike. Shuffle your feet and talk loudly. It’s there for the answer.”

“But why ask the question at all when it’s such a dumb question?”

“I don’t—because then it doesn’t fit the format of a True or False quiz, I guess? Then it’s just one of these other signs telling you what to do. Watch for snakes, don’t shoot off fireworks, talk loudly when you hike.” Be observant, don’t be an asshole, but be a little bit of an asshole, enough to make yourself known. Hiking and dating advice. “This way you feel like you’re participating.”

“But no one is getting this wrong. It defeats the purpose of having it on a quiz.”

“You have some strong feelings on this bear quiz.”

“I just don’t like fake choices.” He shoves his hands in his pockets, then turns away toward the direction of their campsite. Her hand slides from his back. He stops, remembering, and offers her an elbow.

Jane, still alive, attempts to keep up with Nelson as they hike fast down the road outside the campground, past the horse camps, and through a break in the barbed wire fence. The camp host had described it to them from the dark recesses of her RV, a tiny dog sitting on a clipboard in her lap.

Already at ten a.m. it is 95 degrees, and the weight of the altitude has gathered into a fist in her sinuses. They scuttle over a dry riverbed, then back up the side of the San Gorgonio Mountain.

Nelson hikes like he is being chased. She grows familiar with the back of his head, the rolls of skin where his neck meets his skull, indistinct until his haircut three days ago. It's a weird but beautiful topography.

Below them is the wide grass meadow that separates the mountain from the campground. Near the path, grayscale butterflies peel off the rough pine trunks and blue jays squawk from the branches. No bears or snakes, no need for announcing themselves. Jane is forced to look down at her feet to keep up, dodging stones and tamping down glittering shards of mountain mica into the trail dust.

"Pretty," she says. Nelson glances over his shoulder and she points to the trail. "It's like unicorn dirt," she says.

For a moment, the double vision consolidates, and she sees only herself from his point of view. It is unflattering.

"True or false," he says, turning back. "It only sparkles when you move."

When she starts to fall behind, lungs aching, she calls out, "Can we take a water break?"

He fights his own momentum and comes to a stop, stepping off the trail and onto a large boulder overlooking the valley. She climbs up next to him and pulls out her water bottle. She takes a swig, then blows her nose. Far off is the low whoosh of cars on the highway, inescapable in Southern California.

"When I was little," she says, fighting with the altitude to finish her sentence, "I would go out and wait for the school bus and I would hear that whoosh noise, and I didn't know it was the five freeway. I thought it was wind. But I never felt the wind, right? So then I imagined somewhere nearby there was a windy canyon. But the wind noise was so constant, I imagined it must be trapped, you know, unable to move on. So then I pictured a canyon shaped like a donut, and I would picture going there someday and dropping a balloon or a plastic bag or something into the canyon and watching it race around on the wind in this big circle." She turns away from him and coughs.

Nelson is silent for a long time, staring at the opposite mountain reining in the campground. She isn't certain he's heard her. She both wants and doesn't want him to hear her.

Finally, without glancing over, he says, "Were you sad when you found out it was just the freeway and not a donut canyon?"

“I guess, a little. I don’t think I ever fully believed in it. It was just the image I could think of to describe what I heard. Did you—ever do that as a kid? Come up with elaborate explanations of things before you knew their real reasons? Like origin myths, or—”

“Hell, all the time. You still have to do it with people. Try to figure out why they act the way they act, what they’ll do next. Good for poker, and terrorists.”

“Do you have me figured out?”

“I don’t want to figure you out.” He shakes his head at the meadow.

“Ouch, dude.”

“No.” He reaches over and reels her in, holstering her against his right hip. “You know. It would be easier. You know.”

She sniffs, blows her nose, then tilts her head up at him. His intensity attracts her, but in some moments it seems to curdle without warning into impatience, and then she finds herself locked up, like this, staring into his eyes, unsure whether they are actually sharing the same reality, unsure how to proceed.

He kisses her forehead and herds her back to the trail.

*

Jane, tired but vital, eggs on the fire as night descends. The campground is full of RVs running generators, another incessant hum. Around them, the animal shifts are changing. The coyotes let out a round of yipping from the far side of the meadow, triggering a wave of crying in the campground’s baby population. Bats flap frantically above them like drowning swimmers. Everything feels restless and uncertain, as if it is the first nightfall on earth, as if this didn’t just happen last night.

Beside her, in a matching camp chair, Nelson bounces his knee and swigs bourbon from a canteen. Jane pokes at the logs with a stick. She lets the fire seduce her, the glowing embers shimmering like water pushed against glass, migrating waves of electric red current, a consuming motion.

“Hand me that.” He motions to her empty water bottle. He pours some of his bourbon into it and passes it back to her. “To your health.”

“To yours,” she says, feeling the words on the floor of her stomach.

“Thought we might see a rattlesnake or a bear out there today,” he says. “The signs got me all hyped.”

“Have you seen either before?”

“I saw a dead rattlesnake once. Otherwise they were all in a zoo.” He zips up his jacket. “What about you?”

She nods and takes a sip, letting the bourbon coat her throat. “One time, when I was six, I went to my neighbor Kelly Boorstin’s house to watch *Beetlejuice*. She was the same age as me and seriously the most accident-prone person I’ve ever known. Only person I ever knew who needed stitches from falling in the shower.”

“I almost did that once. Too much tequila.”

She smiles tightlipped into the fire. “She split her forehead open riding a Radio Flyer off the front porch one time. Handle flew back and just beaned her. I didn’t see it happen but it sounded epic. Anyway, I came over to watch *Beetlejuice*, which she swore was rated triple R. So I’m already completely terrified and the movie hasn’t even started yet, then ten minutes in, the car accident and the sandworms happen and I just flip out. Ah! This shit is too scary! And whenever I was at Kelly’s and I didn’t like something about my situation, I would just run home, like, no explanation. So I stand up. Ah! And run out the front door without saying anything to Kelly, and just as I’m about to take a step down off her porch, I look and there’s two baby rattlesnakes coiled up together in the sun on her porch step.”

“Hooo.”

“So I flip out *again* and run back into the house, take Kelly and show her the snakes, who are just relaxing in the sun, having a nice afternoon, preventing my exodus like the fucking sandworms in the movie, and the whole time the *Beetlejuice* soundtrack is just blaring in the background.”

“What did you do?”

“We went upstairs to Kelly’s step dad who was in bed sick—actually, now, when I think about it, he was probably hung over. My mom told me later he had a drinking problem. Anyway, he looked like hell, all pale, eyes swollen up.”

“Kind of like you now.”

“Thanks. So Kelly’s step dad climbs out of bed, comes downstairs, walks out on the porch, and doesn’t even hesitate, just picks the two baby rattlesnakes up in his bare hands, carries them across the street, and throws them into the field, just chucks them. Then he barrels past us without saying anything and goes straight back to bed.”

“And then you went home?”

“No. I stayed and we finished the movie.”

He chuckles and takes another pull.

She chuckles too, then squints into the fire. “I honestly haven’t thought of that day or of Kelly in forever, like not as an adult. She moved away a year after that. I—funny. The story was always that she was really clumsy.”

He frowns. “Sounds like she was.”

“Yeah,” she nods vaguely, “Yeah.” But when Kelly’s step dad walked past them, back to bed, she could feel Kelly tremble next to her.

“It’s—that’s what I want,” Nelson says with sudden intensity. “Boom, snakes gone. Right, you see the thing, the danger, you don’t hesitate. I wanted to be a DBG, I wanted to do Swick because sure, you might not be the SEAL, you might not get the fucking books written about you, but you’re tactical. You’re the getaway driver. Efficient at solving problems and getting people out of danger. I want to be able to make a difference so quickly, so seamlessly, it’s like I was never even there. Like I’ve rewritten history without anyone noticing. Like that.”

“Like a spy.”

“Like someone who knows what he’s fucking doing and should therefore get to do it. What I don’t want is to stand around teaching a bunch of bored, sunburned, big-eared kids how to load .50cals.”

She frowns, trying to stay with him, feet on the trail, glitter in her eyes. “But, like, I don’t think Kelly’s step dad really knew the danger of picking up the snakes. That’s a crazy thing to do. Sure, he got rid of them, but he could’ve just called somebody. He could’ve waited.”

“Maybe in the moment he felt the danger to you and Kelly outweighed the danger to him,” he shrugs. “Maybe it was the only way he could think of to help. You wait around to do the right thing and then maybe it’s too late to do anything.” He studies the back of his hand. “I hate waiting.”

“I don’t think he was thinking about us, not really. I don’t think he was thinking at all.”

“Well,” he meets her gaze, his eyelashes exquisitely thick, “I guess we’ll never really know.”

The stars are out over the meadow. Here, among the trees and the humming RV generators, the amazing living Jane doesn’t know the path forward, only that she needs to find it.

“I’m voting Democrat,” she sputters to him, “so they’ll bring you back. Recall you. Like bad tires.”

He smiles, and it’s the gentlest thing she’s ever seen, and it makes her happy but also a little angry. It’s a smile that confirms their realities no longer touch.

“It doesn’t matter who’s president,” he says. “A year is a year. I signed a contract when I enlisted. That’s the format. Anyways, the generals decide everything. They decide, they tell the president, and the president doesn’t know anything else, so he says OK.”

He looks into the fire pit and runs his hands over his scalp, back to front, one after the other, an assembly line of hands. The full moon makes his hands blue. The embers make his chin orange. She scoots her chair closer to his, tries to rest her head on his shoulder.

“Sorry I’m sick,” she says. “Bad timing.”

“I got inoculated against Anthrax on Monday,” he says. “I’ll probably make it.”

“Wow. Metal.”

“And I’ll be on imminent danger pay while I’m there. \$250 extra a month.”

“To do what?”

“To put up with all the standing around, I guess.”

“\$250 extra a month doesn’t seem like much to be in an active combat zone.”

He leans away to look at her. She can feel his eyes on her forehead. “It—yeah,” he says, clearing his throat. “Bad timing.”

*

Jane, full of life, wakes in the night in the tent to a gravel-crunching noise and thinks Nelson must be walking back from the bathroom, thinks she remembers him getting up to go.

But the noise continues for too long. But the noise is inside the tent.

She rolls over and there, next to her, taking up the rest of the close space, is a bear.

He has ripped through the side of the tent, she sees now. Moon and starlight fall through the rip, highlighting the dense brown fur on the bear’s shoulders. He pauses his chewing—the crunching—and snuffles. Slowly, he cants his head to meet her gaze. She stares back, her mind white.

“You have laryngitis,” the bear says. “In case you were wondering. You are also ovulating. I am certain you did not know that. Humans somehow never know. It is a wonder you procreate. You are also free of cancer, congratulations. I can smell these things.”

“Where is Nelson?” she whispers, the question overwhelming all others.

“I ate him, over in the field.”

“What?”

“He sacrificed himself. Normally I do not eat people, but he was insistent. Take me, not her. That is what he said. I came back for your cough drops.” The bear sighs and the tent floods with menthol. “They were what I wanted, originally.”

She watches the bear’s features dissolve as her eyes tear up.

“Monster—”

“No.” He juts his snout at her. “No. I am not a monster. I am a bear. I eat when I am hungry. It is a part of my beariness. So go call the Maker of Bears terrible.” He rolls on his side to face her. “Leave my reputation out of it.”

She coughs once, a sob escaping her throat.

“Does it help you to know that he would have died anyway?” The bear offers after a moment. “I could smell the doom.”

“You can—”

“Smell kinds of fear, yes, kinds of impulses. They tell you about the chances a person has.”

“I didn’t ask to be sacrificed for.”

“Of course you did not ask.” The bear grunts, his claws glinting in emphasis. “What kind of question would that be?”

She doesn’t say anything.

The bear rolls onto his back, his fur brushing against her side. She can’t resist pressing her hand into the woolly warmth, once.

“What—what did you do with his body?” she asks.

“The inedible parts I disposed of neatly in the trash bin on the other side of the bathroom.”

“That trash bin is supposed to be bear-proof.”

“Well, guess what.”

“It isn’t.”

“It is not.”

They sit together in silence. She wonders if she should scream, or run. She has no double vision here, no idea what a bear would see.

“Now that I have some distance, I regret eating him,” the bear admits. “It is not my way. He was just so insistent, so doomed-smelling. It did not seem like a choice.” The bear glances at her sidelong. “What will the rangers do?”

“Um,” she pulls up the bear quiz in her mind. “They will go looking for the bear that ate him. They’ll kill any bear they find in the area and cut open their stomachs until they find you. And then they’ll kill you, too.”

“Could they not just move me somewhere?” He fiddles his claws, tiny ears circling like paddles.

“There’s nowhere left for them to move you to,” she says.

“How do you know? How do you know that there is nowhere left to move me to? You guys have not destroyed all of the Angeles National Forest, yet.”

“That’s what the bear quiz said. No relocations. You’ll just come back.”

“The what?”

“The bear quiz.”

“There is a *me* quiz?”

“Yes. It’s on the bulletin board, by the bathroom.”

The bear is quiet.

“Do you want to see the quiz?”

“I mean, I am curious,” he says. “You would be curious too.”

“Well, let’s go,” she says. “Maybe you’ll learn something about yourself.”

*

No one else is out near the bulletin board. Jane, alive and trudging alongside a bear through the Heart Bar Campground, swings her flashlight around, hoping it might rouse someone, anyone, within their RVs. She isn’t sure who to call out to, what to say. She doesn’t know if she’s in her reality, or Nelson’s, or the bear’s.

The bear ambles ahead of her to the bulletin board, then eases up on his hind legs.

“Shine your flashlight over here, I cannot see.”

She glances to the left. The bathroom is fifteen feet away.

“Here.” She walks up next to the bear and hefts the chunky yellow flashlight onto his shoulder. “You hold it, that way you can direct the light.”

“This is awkward.”

“No, just, move your head—there.”

The bear tilts his head and pins the flashlight in place. He looks like a teenager on the family phone.

“True or false... this is, I think, a contrived format for conveying information. The barest illusion of volition.” He snuffles, mutters, “Barest. The bear-est. Bearist illusion.”

“But what do you think of the information?” she asks, inching backward.

“I think it is impossible to get to know someone in this manner. To co-exist in the moment, maybe, to not annihilate each other. But to build understanding: no. And why does this quiz treat my love for toothpaste as bizarre when you designed it to taste good?”

She turns and bolts for the bathroom, lungs seizing, feels in the next moment the bear’s movement behind her, closer with each step as the light of her released flashlight whips into the trees above her, the forceful hot steam of his breath catching her neck. She reaches the bathroom door, hooks the handle and swings the door wide, darting into the thick darkness as something—his body—hits the door hard, slamming it behind her.

As she turns the lock, another heavy hit and a roar shake the entire building.

She yelps and jumps back into the darkness, banging her leg against the rim of the toilet.

Uneasy silence.

She coughs, gasping for air. The silence stretches on into a minute as she works her lungs back into form, closes the toilet lid against the smell.

Finally, the bear’s voice trails in through the vent.

“I—I am sorry about that just now. My instinct kicked in when you ran. It is done, I promise. I am calm. I am in control. Are you okay?”

“No,” she says.

“I will stay here with you.”

“Don’t.”

“I can help. I can be helpful.”

She can’t feel—can’t bring herself to feel—Nelson’s presence in the bin outside. “He’s gone,” she says, sitting on the closed toilet. “He’s really gone.”

“He was barely here to begin with.” A pause, then she can make out, “Barely, bearly. I am bearly here.”

“You should go,” she says. “The rangers are going to come find you.”

“Your fear is survivor fear,” the bear says. “Not the doomed kind. I can smell it.”

She brushes the ghost of a spider web from her ankle. “You should go,” she says, weaker. “Why can’t you just walk away? Why are you all so eager to die?”

“Everything living dies. If you plan for it, at least you know when. No surprises.”

“That’s stupid,” she mutters.

“Survivor fear smells corrosive, like your battery acid. I think it is the guilt. Doomed fear just smells like the body, but more. Rot begun early. These are the facts that should go on the quiz, really.”

“You should hide,” she tries one last time. “They’ll kill you.”

“I think I will stay,” the bear says.

“But they’ll kill you.”

“I think I will stay.”

Kristen Leigh Schwarz grew up in Newhall, California and holds an MFA from the University of California, Irvine. Her stories have appeared in *One Story*, *Santa Monica Review*, *American Literary Review*, and *St. Ann’s Review*, among others. She lives in Los Angeles.

V I S U A L A R T S F E A T U R E

INTERVIEW WITH SAIYARE REFAEI ARTIST & ACTIVIST

Saiyare Refaei (they/them/she/her) is a Chinese Iranian artist based in Tacoma, Washington. Their mediums mostly include community murals, printmaking and meticulous pointillism drawings. Saiyare strives to utilize art as a means of community building, education and healing. They enjoy working collaboratively and being a conduit to visualize the stories that need to be told in our communities.



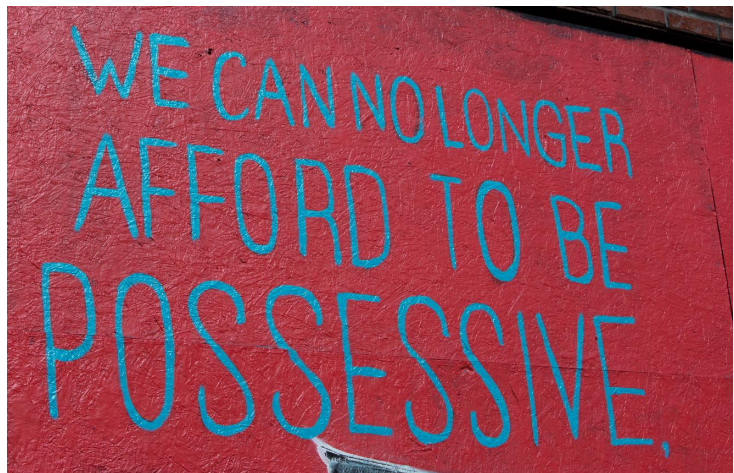
Collateral:

Saiyare, thank you for sharing your time and art with Collateral. Could you tell us a little about who you are as an artist?

Saiyare:

From the point I could stand as a toddler, I would spend hours scribbling away on a fun-sized easel. My mom recalls a moment when she came over to me intently drawing. Her inquiry about what I was drawing was returned with a teenage-like stare that said, *why are you bothering me, Mom?*

I'm a very reserved and observant person. I like to include people in spaces and take note of what is missing. Creating art has been a way of trying to



tell the stories I think need to be heard more in a community. What I may know as a pressing issue of a detention center or liquid gas facility in our backyard may not be as obvious to most of the nearby community. And every time I show up to community spaces and listen or witness what is happening to create art, capture photos, or share any words of reflection, art not only helps me process [those events] but strive to support local and international struggles. If painting a picture for someone to question a different way of being, to inform, to plant a seed for someone, then I see that creative endeavor as worth it.

Collateral:

In what medium do you create most often right now? What have you worked in before, and what would you like to try in the future?

Saiyare:



At the start of the pandemic, I was painting “rapid murals” to activate the boarded-up businesses in downtown Tacoma through [Spaceworks](#) and the [Downtown Tacoma Partnership](#). Since then, I have tried a couple letterpress projects through [Wayzgoose Tacoma](#). I tabled digitally drawn prints, postcards, greeting cards and stickers for the first-time last summer at a couple outdoor markets. I also collaborated on my first street mural on McKinley Avenue as part of the City of Tacoma’s storm drain campaign to better inform

community about what goes down the drain making its way into the Puget Sound waterways. And last year I also became a published poet with three poems featured in *We Need a Reckoning: Poetry, Essays, and Memoir by Women and Non-Binary People of Color*

During quarantine times I have been taking on more digital drawings. This medium of design has been a bit more socially distant and long-distance friendly way of collaborating to contribute to social movements with my fellow [Justseeds Artist Cooperative](#) artists (who reside all over the United States, Canada and Mexico). We continue to contribute to poster designs and graphics for national and international campaigns. Each year we also create a themed poster portfolio for subscribers of our Community Support Art (CSA) that helps raise funds for operational costs. Last year many artists contributed designs for a coloring book as well.

I might be forgetting something, but the last few years have been a lot of firsts. And I appreciate this opportunity to pause and recall what has happened. I hope to get to the point of having my own functioning printing space, maybe a personal website or store, and to work toward creating more functional art that aligns with more of my values. For example, last summer I tried growing and drying various flowers that can be utilized for making natural dyes. I would love to dive deeper into my own Persian and Chinese roots and make block prints using natural dyes instead of plastic-based inks. I used to draw meticulous pointillism portraits; I miss dedicating time to those as well.

Collateral:

Are there certain artists/pieces that have inspired your work or artistic process? (Also, the inverse of this question would be interesting: that you know of, is there a particular person or piece that has been influenced by your work as an artist?)

Saiyare:

I have been really inspired by so many of the artists in Justseeds. After I studied in Oaxaca, Mexico, for a semester in college, I learned about Justseeds Artists Cooperative. Seeing that there were many people creating radical art really shifted how I created and got me excited about making art again. It gave more of what I was creating purpose and meaning that it was lacking before. And I was better able to incorporate what I was learning in my courses and in community in the woodblock prints and screen-print images I was making.



(I don't know of anyone creating something that was inspired or influenced by my work. But I do recall a former student I knew coming across the 5 Stages Mural that was a collaboration with Tiffany Hammonds. She was so enamored by it that she told me she would often visit the wall to bring her some joy. And that meant a lot.)

Collateral:

How have your mural projects in Tacoma taken shape? How does the process begin?

Saiyare:



The first public mural project I worked on was the [Parkland Community Mural Project](#) my senior year of college. That was the first and most lengthy process, in part because I was learning with everyone as we went, and it turned into something much more intentionally centric to the Parkland community. Originally, the wall to be painted was inward facing to the Pacific Lutheran University campus. Then it was mentioned that PLU owned the Parkland

Post Office building and that could be a more outwardly facing mural for community members to enjoy. This then turned into a longer yet more meaningful process of gathering community feedback and making design revisions based on their thoughts and opinions.

Since that one in 2013-2014, many of the subsequent murals have been temporary through the Spaceworks Artscapes program. There have been many collaborations that are fairly site specific, such as the back of the People's Center in Tacoma to a wall on the inside of the library at Highline Community College. The mural on the back of the People's Center, for example, was a collaboration of artists of color with the lead artist, Christopher Jordan. As we were witnessing the gentrification of the Hilltop Neighborhood developing, it was important to center the history of the People's Center (previously called the Malcolm X Center) as well as the faces of many historically and presently pivotal Black people of Hilltop. The intentionality of what will reflect and resonate with the community had to be so present in those projects. That includes directly talking and working with community. For me, a pivotal starting point in most public projects includes asking the question, *what is the story that needs to be told?*

Collateral:

I'd like to know more about where you see immigrants, art, and artists in proximity to violent conflict. We've both worked with people detained in the Pacific Northwest; how do you see this area impacted (or not) by violent conflict? How has it changed or not changed?

Saiyare:

Tacoma is home to the Northwest ICE Processing Center (NWIPC), previously and still commonly referred to as the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC). This facility was relocated from and easily tripled in size from its prior location in Seattle to the tide flats (a highly industrial zone) in Tacoma.

Initially, the facility was detaining and deporting undocumented people residing as far north as Alaska and as far east as Montana. These days, ICE is sending the majority of the current occupants up from the southern border as a strategy of intentionally separating people where they don't have resources and community connections. Local advocates here have witnessed residents of the Tacoma area being transferred to detention facilities in Texas and Louisiana. The last couple of years, there have been instances when members of the Cambodian community detained in Tacoma were transferred to facilities on the east coast as well. There have also been instances when community members detained in NWDC became more public with their stories and were transferred to Texas as a way to divide them from the resources and connections they had built in Tacoma. And none of this accounts for the physical and psychological violence that occurs in the detention center, let alone the environmental hazards of being located in an industrial zone with poor air quality and potentially harmful water that causes people to break out in rashes and more.



When local artists speak out and share what's going on or try to best reflect the immigrant communities, with the uptick in white supremacists organizing, these public art pieces are being targeted for defacement and vandalism which have been classified as hate crimes.

Collateral:

How do you interpret healing in the arts? In your own art? Where do you see the impact of healing for immigrants?



Saiyare:

The process of art is healing because it's a way to tap into our thoughts and feelings, and release some of what our body would otherwise be holding. For people being detained, there are no social programs, so one outlet for them includes making crafts to pass the time. The supplies have to be mailed to them under certain specifications, and some people make art from folding wrappers or paper, or crocheting hats; these items have been gifted to community groups such as La Resistencia, who can sell them

to continue to support people detained. Creating helps people deal with boredom and sitting with so many of the compounded fears of being deported, not being able to support their loved ones, of catching Covid or another communicable disease, or even worsening existing chronic health issues that often go untreated when a person is detained.

And for those who don't create art, for the immigrant community, it is so nice to see one's culture reflected. In the United States we live in a society that upholds a dominant culture of valuing whiteness and assimilation. Reminders of one's home country or a reflection of one's culture is really cherished.

Collateral:

I've seen your work online, supported by your gratitude to the community around you. This made me think about the familiar assumption that art is a solo endeavor—that the arts are experienced as transactional between an individual and a group. What role does community (including its history) play in how you create?

Saiyare:

Community is essential. Creating community ensures that they will be best reflected in the art and their history will not be forgotten. Often it is community seeking artists to tell their stories. For me, community members have been some of my greatest teachers and mentors, not only in the process

of a project but in the way they emulate selflessness, compassion, and love for a place we all want to live and truly thrive in.

If I haven't done my work to know the community who is going to experience a public piece of art about them, then I haven't done my job as an artist.

Collateral:

I wondered if you could say more about the living nature of art. You have a temporary mural project up in Tacoma, and the word *temporary* makes me want to know what you think about art's lasting impact and message, particularly when it is directly creating awareness about ongoing crises.



Saiyare:

The “Reemerging in Healing” mural is intended to be a temporary. It was painted back in 2018 to reflect and visit the possibilities of how the detention center and the LNG fights share commonalities and also could do a great service of healing the land if they come together. Because the ownership of that building has changed, the mural has stayed up longer than anticipated, as Spaceworks is building a better relationship with the owner. However, for pieces like this, I wish the issues at the core of them were not still relevant. I want what people may call “activist art” to remain a marker in time. People should not be detained. The community should not be at risk if something catastrophic happens to the LNG facility.

A piece of temporary art may still be a lasting memory of someone, and that is beautiful. And now with various online platforms, these pieces can live on in the digital realm too. But the digital space can never measure up to the experience of passing a wall that makes you stop for the first time. Because in a way it is these moments of finding what you needed to see, hear, or learn can be healing and educational for us.

Collateral:

What are you working on now?

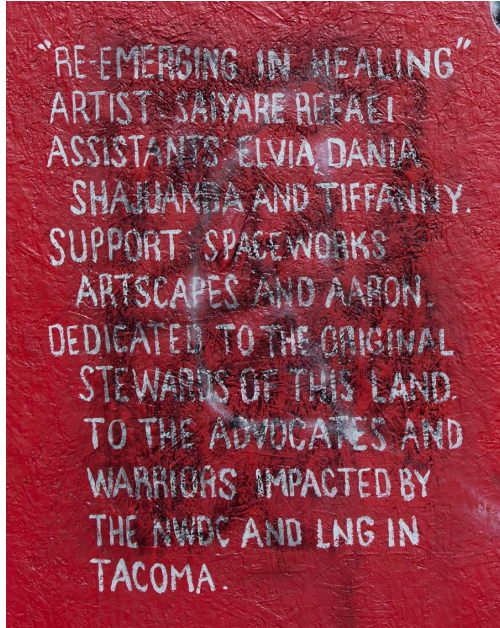
Saiyare:

Coming up, a few [Justseeds artists will be designing posters](#) to support the Pargamanan-Bintang Maria forestline community and [Rainforest Action Network \(RAN\)’s Keep Forests Standing Campaign](#). Justseeds will have more CSA posters printed this spring and I’m excited to collaborate with [Andrea Narno](#) on one of the CSA poster designs.

I’ll also be visiting Zygote Press in Cleveland, Ohio, this June 18th as a visiting artist. They are including me in their print and zine fair as well as having a printed hanky in the [Queer Ecology Hanky Project](#) show that is for sale. (For a portion of the day, I will be live printing a block too.)

Normally 90 some queer identified artists are featured in this printed hanky show. If any of your readers are in the Cleveland area, they are more than welcome to stop by and support all the amazing artists that will be present!

There will be a couple other local projects, but you'll have to stay tuned!



Collateral:

Where can readers learn more about your work?

Saiyare:

Readers can find more art, blog posts, and free graphics to download at [Justseeds | Saiyare Refaei](#). They can learn more about NWDC through La Resistencia's website [La Resistencia \(laresistencianw.org\)](#) and social media pages (for updates on what is happening inside the detention center) [@laresistencianw](#). And they can learn about the LNG in Tacoma by watching Native Daily Network's documentary *Ancestral Waters*.

