



Aug. 2026, ISSUE 03

LIT MAG

CABBAGE PATCH

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We started this whole crazy idea as a group of three. By July, Alexandra said she has a life and a job and some responsibilities. This month, Key left for the same reason. I apparently have no life and probably no shame.

I even started a Substack recently. Not something I am particularly proud of or not proud of. It's just a thing that I did. And it was an interesting experience.

I was never tech-savvy and never really got along with social networks, so maybe it's obvious to you, but for me it was a surprise. You can block a person you dislike. You don't need to prove they did something wrong; you just click a button and that's it.

And another thing surprised me: you can delete your messages. So you say something and then act as if you never did.

"Real life doesn't work like that," is what I wanted to say, but it is real life too. A very unusual one, at least to me—awfully efficient, but definitely real.

So forgive my bout of sentimentality, but it's just one of those things that makes me pause, like the smell of cabbage in Mom's sauerkraut shchi. Whether the cabbage in shchi is the same kind that grows on this patch is not for me to decide, but at least I tried.

Ksenia S.

**"A man died and a part of the world died with him. A corner of the universe collapsed. For a man was not just a body; he was a focal point of thought and memory, a unique gatherer of the universe's meaning. When he was gone, that meaning tore away."
Clifford Simak**



Content Warning for the issue

This issue of Cabbage Patch includes themes of death and terminal illness, animal distress and death, threats of violence and weapons, homelessness and youth exploitation, grief, mental strain, and existential dread. Please read at your own discretion.

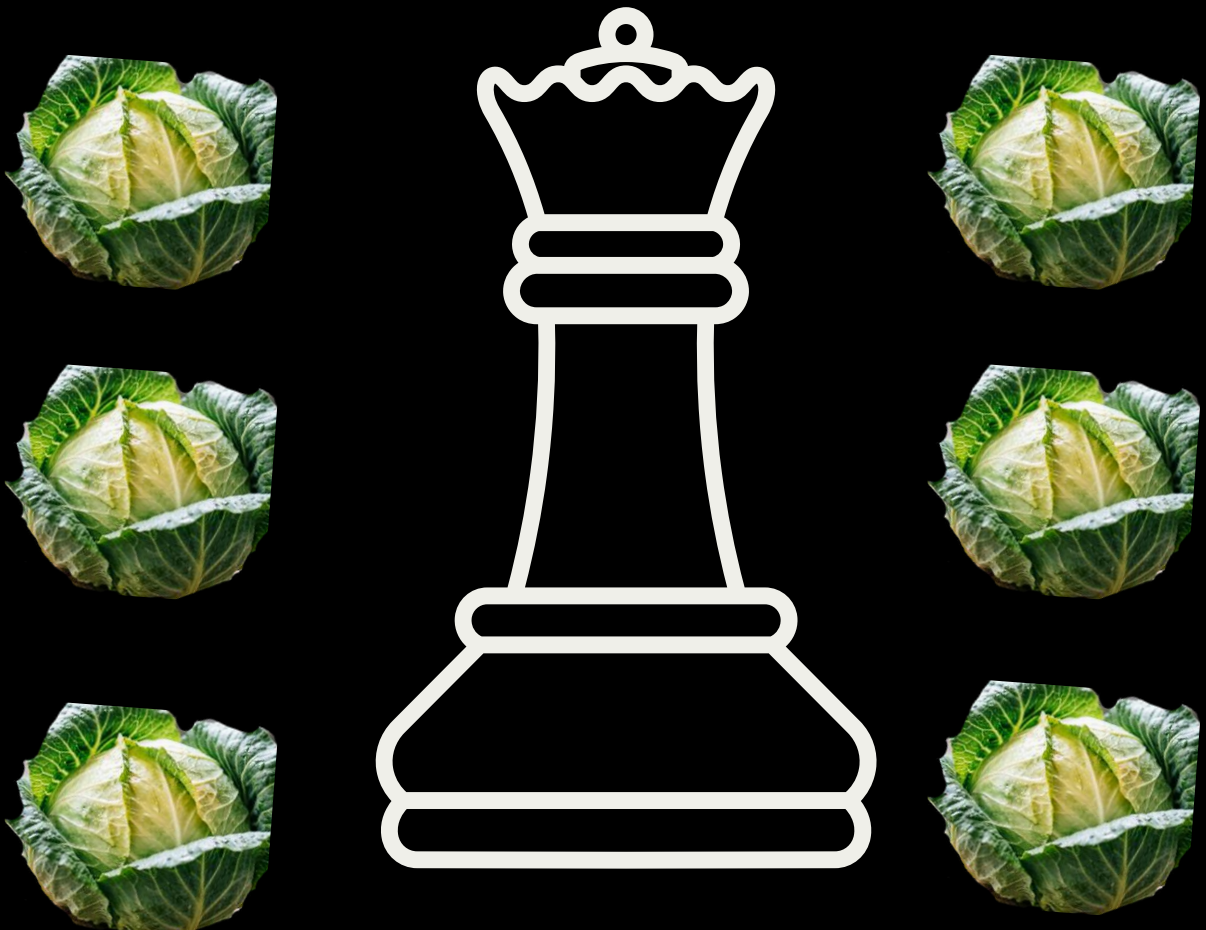
Ksenia S.



Queen In a Damned World

by Cithara Patra

Day after day, I go through every hour
Breathing, living, surviving on rotten ground
Cries from the corner, begging me for my attention
or a little change to get through the night
They all look up to me like I'm the queen
who has the power to grant their every wish
yet all I can spare is my attention and plenty of change
to get them into the next day



I scroll through screen after screen
filling my head with disasters around me
My hands tremble as I tap on the keys,
send in aid that may not make it on time
Images of people I've never met
will haunt me every night before I sleep
Their faces etched in my memory
as I wake up in a comfortable room
a room that many wish they could be in now

The little I do can never be enough
I'm living like a queen in a damned world
I'll have enough to get by but will anyone else?
I'll have enough to live but will anyone else?
I'm royalty without very much to my name
and every little bit I do to help doesn't help much
It soothes the pain for a second and I go back
to my normal routine of living like a queen
trying to rule over a damned land
knowing very well my little contribution
will never heal anyone and will never
fix the broken and beaten world

Cithara Patra currently lives in NC. They've written for a few literary journals including Poetries in English, Instant Noodles, and 50 Word Stories. In their spare time, they travel, solve logic puzzles, and check out local restaurants.





photography by editor of Cabbage Patch

Encounter at Lake Allowance

by Mark Wolters

So I'm sittin' on this stump next to a beautiful, crystal-clear lake, and the lake is called Lake Allowance. Many a man drowned in that thing. They say there's something there that pulls a man under and don't let him up, like what happens to so many innocent creatures.

But anyway, I was sittin' on that stump overlookin' the lake surrounded by maples, oaks, and pines, and takin' in the cool breeze out of the west, mindin' my own business like I always do, maybe hopin' to catch some lady swimmin' when she wasn't s'posed to, or maybe catch a guy and gal skinny dippin' cause I'm always on the lookout for that, you know. Those youngsters forget other people come into the woods too, not just them lookin' to get some action away from their parents and friends. I can't tell you how many times my treks through the woods have found me some couple lying on a blanket in the middle of removin' clothing or in the middle of full action. It's crazy when you think about it, but most them youngsters don't think about it. They just goin' with the feelin', you know.

So anyway, here I am, sittin' on the stump, mindin' my own business, when this guy comes trudgin' through the trail in the woods, same blamed trail I walked to get where I was sittin' and usually I would've paid him no mind, but there was something different about this fella that sent a shiver in my body I hoped he didn't observe. He was at least six feet ten, had a scruffy beard that hung down four-five inches off his face, and his eyes, they was tiny and really close together, like they seemed to want to join forces or somethin'. He wore blue-jean denim all over the place except for a leather vest that seemed to have been chewed by some varmint or somethin'.

But that's not what really surprised me at all, no way. He had a pistol. Not just any ordinary pistol either. This was the biggest, hugest, darnedest pistol I ever saw, and I've seen a few pistols in my day, I'll tell you what. So I'm gawkin' at this pistol and I'm even more impressed with the holster 'cause you'd think a pistol that big wouldn't have a holster made unless it was fixed by someone who made that gun in the first place.

Let me tell you about that gun. It was silvery-gray with a brown handle, and it was at least four feet in length! The barrel was a good twenty-four inches in diameter and the bullet holder was nearly three feet in diameter. I thought to myself, how could a man hold on to that sucker and even fire, the trigger bein' thicker'n two fingers and longer'n a ruler. I tell ya, my eyes about popped out of my head lookin' at that thing.

It wasn't until I realized I'd been starin' a real long time before I reckoned I'd better look at the man carryin' that thing, 'cause sometimes people get a little upset when you stare at 'em for a long time. So I said to myself, Yollie, you look that man square in the eye and say hello or somethin' nice, you know?

Well, that's when the fella looked at me with his tiny eyes, took off his hat to reveal a particularly shiny bald head with a bizarre birthmark that I swear looked like the numbers 666.

Now I ain't no superstitious guy or anything and I don't take no heed to that big ole book, much to my mama's dismay, but I know what I read when I was a boy and I know what I used to believe. And all that came back to me when I saw that birthmark. I could feel my hands start to sweat and my heart to commence a poundin' way faster than was natural. I could almost taste the fear in the back of my throat, kind of a bile flavor to it and I had to spit right there.

"You think my gun is pretty interesting don't you," the bald man's gravelly voice growled putting on his hat with a quick swipe.

I didn't know what to say to this guy. I had to catch my breath to make sure I didn't pass out or anything, you know. It was so frightenin' to me to see this 666 and a gun so big there's was simply no way a man could carry it let alone shoot it.

I nodded my head.

"Let me tell you something, mister sitting on the stump," he said slower than anyone should talk. "I can draw this mighty weapon faster than anyone with a regular sized gun can and that's not all."

It suddenly occurred to me that guy sure sounds like a city-slicker and shouldn't be out in the woods like this next to Lake Allowance, particularly when the lake is as smooth as crystalline glass right now.

"You want to see me draw, don't you?" the man challenged.

I stared at his tiny little demon eyes for a while and then I wiped the sweat from my hands on my shirt and then I wiped my brow a couple times and breathed a huge breath.

“Can’t say I would,” I said as casually as I could. “You got a name.”

“Esau,” the man said with almost a croak in his voice. “Hate it. Should have been named Seth or some other early Hebrew name. My parents stuck me with Esau.”

“Well Esau,” I said. “I reckon you’ll be showing me your draw whether I wanna see it or not.”

You see, I knew the kind of character he was. I knew he was only gonna be satisfied if he got to draw and shoot that monstrosity in front of me. His ego was larger’n that gun, I tell you for sure. Guys like that, well they act like they’re all confident, but deep down they got the fear.

You know, the fear? It’s that nagging thing that controls their every decision. What they do and what they don’t do. It’s kind of like an alcoholic really. An alky, he don’t make any decision lest it’s based on fear. Fear that he can’t get enough and fear that when he does get enough, he gonna forget what he did the night before. Maybe killed someone drivin’ blinder’n a bat or got the

violent streak in ‘im and raped and killed his girlfriend or somethin’. But it’s all fear. And this Esau, he got fear written all over his little eyes with that 666 on his head buried underneath that ridiculous cowboy hat.

“You know, you’re right about that,” Esau said and drew. er / page 3

How he grabbed that gun out of that holster the way he did I still can’t tell you to this day. My word, which ain’t worth too much when it comes right down to it, this fella drew so fast it made my head swim. I’ve seen those gun shows on TV, those idiots that have these contests about who’s fastest and who’s got the best aim, and who’s got the biggest ego and such. You know the type.

By the way, they all got the fear too when it comes right down to it. They don’t act like they do ‘cause they swagger like a bunch of drunken midgets walkin’ down an alley at three in the AM after a few too many snorts, but they got the fear, I’d wager my house on that.

While I stared, tongue near hangin’ out, I looked at that smug, satisfied look on his face and knew there was no man or woman alive who could draw like that.

“You’s as fast as lightnin’!” I said to him in genuine awe. I knew he liked that. I could feel his smugness grow ten times ego at that. “But how’s your aim?”

Now before I tell you what he said, I got to tell you this. I know I was expectin’ him to shoot some tiny object like an acorn off a tree from twenty paces or somethin’, and for some reason, even though I knew that barrel was as wide as it was, I was still expectin’ a normal size bullet to come out of that gun. My head couldn’t wrap around a concept of a bullet that thick, you know. Just simply couldn’t, but here was this thick gun, this four-foot-long monstrosity and a guy who could wield it like it was a pepper shaker.

Well, his eyes got real big, or at least as big as they could considerin' how tiny those demon eyes were. And it looked like little fire showed in those irises. I'm talkin' a literal flame that if you'd a touched it, it woulda burnt your little finger or somethin'. I regretted askin' him about his aim after that.

"You got some sort of death wish, man?" Esau said.

"No sir," I said. "Just a might curious about your aim with that weapon."

It suddenly occurred to me he never asked me my name. In some ways I'm kinda glad he didn't 'cause I didn't need no ego boostin' maniac with an oversized pistol suddenly decidin' he didn't like the sound of "Yollie" and then decide to off me right then and there. That's when I knew I was dealin' with a man whose ego was bigger'n Texas and who's fear was bigger'n Alaska.

"You may watch and learn, man," he said so quietly I almost asked him to repeat himself.

Well, he drew and fired. The sound from that gun, well I expected this explosion like what you get if you was watchin' those guys who blast granite with dynamite. But no, there was this little "pop" sound like what you hear on those Nintendo video games, where Mario is jumpin' all over the place on the ship, trying to avoid those black bullets. And what came out of that gun, I swear

to you on my very heart and head, was a big ol' black bullet, two foot in diameter, and it had a big old evil grin on it, like what you see on those Mario video games.

What really shook me, and this is where I know you're not gonna believe me, and that's okay, 'cause if someone told me the same thing, I'd not believe 'im either, that bullet, instead of shootin' out of there at the velocity of sound, it came out slow and seemed to float in the air on a straight course to whatever he was aimin' at. Turns out he *was* aimin' at an acorn, and I could see that bullet head right for that oak tree and I watched it touch that little acorn and I watched that little acorn fall to the ground after that bullet touched it. But the black, evil grinnin' bullet kept right on a goin'.

There was this ancient white pine sittin' twenty yards after the acorn fell and that bullet hit that tree and did not slow down one bit as slow as it was goin'. That mighty tree cracked and groaned and spit off splinters twenty yards or more, and that sucker started falling. I thought we'd better get out of the way before that thing falls on us and makes us regret trekkin' in the woods, but it fell to the side and crashed on the forest floor.

But that bullet, he kept goin' at the same speed toward the edge of the lake.

"That thing ever gonna stop?" I asked lookin' at Esau straight in those demon eyes.

"I can't say one way or the other," he said without any feelin' at all. "I've never seen one stop before so I can't really tell you."

"Then what happens?"

“All I know is that anyone who touches it when it’s in flight, doesn’t last very long.”

“Well, can someone jump on it like in the video games and make it fall or somethin’?” I said unable to disguise the concern and fear in my voice.

“Don’t know,” Esau said taking his hat off, smiling a big ol’ toothy grin and laughing a little to himself. “Most people that have touched it don’t think to jump on it, you know.”

It was then that I realized I was talkin’ to a genuine sociopath, and I needed to find an excuse to get out there. But before I could he sort of looks at me and then he looks at the bullet still moving in its slow-motion path toward the other side of the lake. By now it had plowed into the bank of the lake, and it looked like a drill winding its way into the earth. I peered at the hole as long as I could and I thought to myself, later I gotta check that hole out and see where it leads. I swear the hole was big enough for me to crawl through.

But before I could finish that thought, a huge gush of reddish water came bursting through the hole and spillin’ into the lake. I thought it could only be two things, a lot of iron in the water or a lot of pollution from somewhere. It seemed unlikely it could be pollution because I imagined that bullet had to slow down considerably and the nearest factory to the lake is ten miles or so. But what do I know, right?

“You want to see if you can dodge my next bullet?” Esau asked with a sneer in his voice that seemed forced but quite effective.

“I’m obliged to tell you I have to go home and see how my dog is doin’,” I told him truthfully. “I come out here to take a look at nature and gather my thoughts, but I really should be gettin’ along now. My dog, she ain’t feelin’ so well. She’s kinda old and has some problem with her heart, so I wanna make sure she’s doin’ alright. I suspect she’s gonna die soon and I don’t like that idea much, but we all know we got to go sometime, right?”

“Ah come on!” Esau said, demon eyes on fire, almost like flames were shootin’ out them pupils now. “You know I can draw fast, but you saw how fast the bullet goes.”

“I told you I’m done and I gotta go,” I said. “You know, you didn’t even ask me my name.”

And I took off a runnin’ as fast as I could down that trail. I heard the pop of his pistol and when I turned around, I noticed the darned bullet was comin’ down the path after me. It was about three feet off the ground, movin’ about five miles an hour I s’pose and I thought, well, I’ll wait till it gets close and then I’ll try and jump on it like Mario would to see if that darn thing will stop.

It got closer and closer, and I kept waitin’ and waitin’. Soon it was so close that I could almost smell the gun powder, which probably was from the enormous amount of smoke comin’ from

that gun. I could hear Esau laughing so hard that I thought sure the guy was gonna have a paroxysm, fall to the ground, grab his chest and cough and cry and then die slowly. Instead,

I saw him take a peek at me while I was waitin’ for the bullet to come close enough to jump on.

Now I tell you what, I'm not as young as I used to be, and I simply didn't know if I'd be able to get on top of that thing being three feet in the air and two feet thick. I climbed up a tree, steadied myself on a branch and decided I would jump a second before it got under where I was standin'.

I have to say that if it weren't for the fact that some sociopath took a shot at me, the slow-movin' bullet would have been quite hilarious. Just like the other bullet, this one had a big evil grin on it that looked as if it were getting ready to chomp on some leg and devour it laughin' all the while. It would have been funny in a way.

So anyway, I got ready to jump. Right before it got under the branch I was on, I jumped on that thing, and wouldn't you know that bullet stopped right there, dropped to the ground and disappeared. How in the world does something like that happen, I wonder? I could hear Esau stop laughing after his bullet stopped moving. It was then that I decided it was time to really go see my dog. She was getting on in age and with the incentive of a mad man comin' after me, these old legs of mine were able to move a lot faster than they would have otherwise.

The rage comin' from Esau was apparent in the deep throated scream he emitted, and I tell you, I was happy I wasn't a fat slob like I used to be when I was in my forties. All that exercise I'd been doin' over the last few years paid off as I ran as fast as I could to my jeep at the beginning of the trail.

Is'pose I ran a good two miles before I reached it, and it was quite amazin' how old Esau was able to keep a pretty good pace because of the giant pistol at his side, but he could, and I got a little worried until I remembered that his bullets didn't go much faster than a slow runner. Like me.

The last I heard Esau he was a-screamin' his fool head off louder'n a high school girl getting there her first time. When I started the jeep, I slammed my foot on the gas forgettin' to put her in gear so I dang near wrecked the thing. But then I shoved her in gear, and I nearly crashed into a tree, almost smashed another vehicle that I s'pose belonged to Esau and then hit the main road like a racecar driver nearin' the finish line. It's unlikely that I'll ever go and be such a voyeur again, me an old man like that trekkin' in the woods. Gotta go see my dog.



In 2024, Mark's work appeared in Down in the Dirt, Brief Wilderness, Rundelania!, Straylight and The Main Street Rag. He earned his first payment for a story in 2008 thanks to The Tabard Inn. He was paid \$1.00. Last year his work appeared in Waxing and Waning, Macabre, Johnny America, Literary Heist, Mobius, The Journal of Expressive Writing, October Hill, BlazeVOX, Fresh Words, Ginosko, Wilderness House, Blue Villa, Rundelania!, Pattern Recognition, Discretionary Love, Behemoth Magazine and Mucky Mondays. He lives in Sartell, Minnesota with his wife, two sons, and two beagles. He teaches 5th and 6th grade elementary.



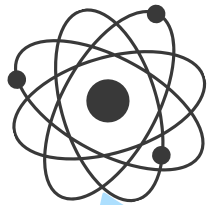
photography by editor of Cabbage Patch



The Good Apple

by Caroline Huckleba

Reunited with the atoms of this world.
The wind touched my skin again.
Rain seeped into my hair.
They say never let good love go.
But how good is the apple
if every fruit around it has already gone bad?
The rot melted onto my tongue.
Did you love me,
or did you want to consume my core?
Good apples can't resist
a sweet, stinging honeybee.
Your white-knuckled grip loosened.
You wanted to wrestle the gods
of my darkest days,
while I only wanted someone
who knew when to put the fruit down
before it spoiled us both.
Now the rain finds me again.
The wind remembers my name.
I am back among the atoms,
still bruised,
still edible,
still growing toward the tree.



Caroline Huckeba is a writer and master's student based in Dallas, Texas. She holds a B.S. in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing from the University of Texas at Dallas, where she studied narrative, mental health, and the spaces where psychology and storytelling overlap. Her creative work has been published in Blood+Honey, Minetta Review, Tap Into Poetry, Eunoia Review, and Rappahannock Review, and she was featured in the June/July issue of Indie Pathways Magazine. Her screenplay *Can A Parent Give You Their Sad Face?* was nominated for Best Original Screenplay at the Art Is Alive Film Festival (2025). She is a Summer 2026 Mentee in Girls Write Now's Collaboratory program and served as a prose reader for Iron Oak Editions, having previously read for West Trade Review.

Caroline can be found on Instagram

²³
@caroline.huckeba.





photography by editor of Cabbage Patch



Vacancy

by Collins.C.Opareaocha

The laundromat is located between
a payday lender
A pharmacy with a boarded-up window and a boarded up
pharmacy.

The television mounted
in the corner
has also been sharing the same gloomy news
for three hours.

A man is folding clothes
with military precision.



A teenager charges his mobile phone
from an outlet close to the vending machine.

Handbills with “no more rent” are being read to a woman
like scripture.

The dryers turn.

The dryers turn.

The dryers turn.

Outside,
A high quality apartment building
climbs up yet another floor into the air.

Nobody looks up.

Everybody already knows
for whom that building is for.

*Collins.C.Opareaocha is a writer and poet. He
lives and writes in Turkey.*

*His work has appeared or forthcoming in
Empyrean literary magazine, Abstract
Magazine, Dualiterary Magazine and elsewhere,
Merion West magazine, Pink Ochre Literary
Magazine, Still Point: Poetry & Culture, Homeplace
Magazine and elsewhere*

<https://linktr.ee/Collins.C.Oparaocha>



Today I Am Sad by S.K. Levine

Today I am sad.

I want to sit on the porch with my lover and I want the weather to make me feel the way it did when I was young.

I want to feel the wind in my hair and smell the seasons change.

I want to sit on the porch and sing my favorite songs.
I want to feel the music so strongly that it makes my heart ache.

I want to watch our dogs run in the yard and our kids play on the swingset you built.

I want to be so full of gratitude for this life we have that it almost hurts,

And I want to spend my days without worrying whether you feel like that too.

I want to go inside and eat dinner at a table with five full chairs.

To feel our house vibrate as it echoes with laughter.
I want to worry if our neighbors are disturbed by our joy.

Hell, I almost want them to be.

I want to put our kids to bed together, and
I want to head back outside with you and dance.
I want to catch fireflies.

I want to play cards, and talk about nothing and everything and
anything.

I want to end the day in a bed lying next to you and I want to wake
up to you still lying there.

I want every day to feel at least the slightest bit I
like this.

God damn it, I want it so bad.

Before I can't run to catch fireflies anymore.

Before I forget my favorite songs.

But tonight I lie again in bed alone.

One without dogs and fireflies and music and laughter and love.

S.K. Levine is a writer based in Chicago, IL. Many moons ago, she found herself as a business copywriter. Her work appeared in Forbes, Entrepreneur, and Fortune Magazine. This is her debut poem.





photography by editor of Cabbage Patch

Bootsy by Gregory Smith

The elevator door opened on the third floor and out strolled Bootsy. The gray feline with the baby blue eyes made a sharp left and headed down the long hall. Several residents were gathered across from the nurse's station, having their afternoon smoke in the lounge area. "Hit the Road, Jack" by Ray Charles played over the intercom.

"I wonder which room Bootsy is headed for now?" growled Vince.

"I hope not my room," replied Liz, "I like my roommate."

"I'll bet you a cigarette he goes into old man Thomas' room," Hank said. "He's the next one."

Sure enough, Bootsy stopped at Room 306, hesitated for a moment, then entered the room.

"See? I was right!" Hank boasted. "Somebody owes me a cigarette."

"I never took that bet," Liz replied. "Poor Chester."

Bootsy jumped on Mr. Thomas' bed, nimbly walking from the foot of the bed and curling up in a ball by the sleeping old man's side.

Less than two hours later, Chester Thomas was dead, his long battle with Alzheimer's Disease mercifully coming to an end.

"Another winner by Bootsy," a nurse commented.

Georgia Sanders was the Activities Director at Restless Heart Convalescent and Rehabilitation Center. She found Bootsy investigating the trash cans outside of the employee entrance one morning before work. No collar. No identification. Georgia got a saucer of milk from the Dietary department. Bootsy lapped up the milk in no time.

“Poor little thing was hungry,” Georgia surmised.

Bootsy tried following Georgia into the facility until she shooed the kitten away. “Go home!” she ordered. “Go home where you belong!”

The next morning Bootsy was back. This time Georgia asked for a little bit of tuna fish from Dietary. The hungry cat wolfed down the whole can. Poor thing was starving. Once again, the feline attempted to follow Georgia inside without success.

It was pouring rain that Wednesday morning, yet Bootsy was camped out again, waiting for Georgia. She didn’t have the heart to leave the little creature in the rain, so she borrowed a towel from Laundry and snuck the cat into the nursing home. The intent was to get the cat warm and dry, feed it, then put it

back outside after the rain. Surely, it belonged to someone in the neighborhood. The kitten probably was let outside to prowl at night but expected back in the morning.

“Cute little thing,” she said adoringly, hoping in her heart that the kitten needed a home. Surely, that was why she kept hanging around the employee entrance of the nursing home. Don’t get too attached, Georgia warned herself. It would’ve been so easy to fall in love with such a fuzzy little creature. Since it rained all morning, the kitten remained in the warmth of the Activities Room. Then a little after nine a.m., the daily stand-up department head meeting commenced downstairs in the Administrator’s office. Georgia took a gamble by addressing the Administrator.

“Mrs. Clover, what do you think of the idea of a facility pet?” she asked.

“Oh, I love dogs!” the administrator said. “Great idea! I’ve always said that we need a therapy dog. What kind of dog are you thinking about? A smaller breed, something they can hold, pet, and play with...”

“Well...,” stammered Georgia.

“I saw a story on the local news not long ago about a three-legged therapy dog that visits hospitals in Philly. It was extremely heartwarming...”

“Well, I was thinking more about a cat....”

“A CAT? I’m deathly afraid of cats,” Mrs. Clover gasped, her eyes bulging. “I have *ailurophobia*.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mrs. Clover,” sympathized Georgia. “I can’t take spicy foods either.”

“No!” the administrator corrected. “Ailurophobia is the fear of cats!”

“Even small ones?” Georgia asked. “I was just thinking a kitten would be easy to take care of. Just change the litter box and make sure it has milk and cat food. A soft, cuddly fluff ball of fur! You know, many of our residents’ owned kitties at one time. I know they would be thrilled.”

As Mrs. Clover struggled with her decision, Georgia decided that groveling might work.

“Please?”

“Well, I don’t know,” the boss mumbled, crinkling her nose in that funny way of hers whenever she was in deep thought.

“The kitty will never come near you, I’ll assure you of that!” Georgia promised.

“Well...” the administrator mumbled.

“I’ll take full responsibility.”

“Let me think about it”

It was a start.

Once the administrator gave her reluctant approval, Georgia started to set up headquarters in the Activities Room. She spread the word that there was a new facility pet.

“Come on down! Get off your unit and visit our new kitty for a while!” she announced over the intercom system.

It worked- the kitty was a huge hit.

For many residents, visiting Bootsy brought back fond memories of old times. It also gave them a new purpose. Liz, who claimed to “always have a litter of cats around,” began saving a few morsels of her lunch for the cat. In fact, feeding Bootsy scraps became a daily ritual.

The name “Bootsy” was a group decision based on the cat’s four white paws. No one knew if the kitten even had a name, so Bootsy it was.

Bootsy the cat was swiftly becoming a fixture at the nursing home. For the most part, Bootsy stayed near his comfy bed, lounging most of the day. But you know what they say about curiosity and cats, and soon the cat began to explore the halls, prowling the rooms and even getting on and off the elevators. Before anyone knew it, Bootsy was acting like the place was his. And then it happened.

The staff noticed how Bootsy would visit the sicker residents, especially those confined to bed. Bootsy seemed unusually compassionate, knowing which residents were too sick to get out of bed. Many were lonely and needed company, consolation and comfort, so the feline would come to them. How Bootsy knew where to find the sicker residents was anyone's guess. A pattern soon emerged. When a resident died the nurses began to connect the dots. Wasn't Bootsy visiting earlier? Often staff would find the cat snuggled next to the deceased resident. Bootsy only seemed to pay a special, personal visit to those residents about to die.

It became so much of a "coincidence" that Nursing began to keep score. For example...

Mrs. Smith passed away this morning. Was Bootsy there? Yep, Bootsy was present. Mr. Jones succumbed to cancer overnight. Yep, Bootsy had visited just a few hours before the gentleman was pronounced. And so, the odd trend continued.

The doctors on staff could not explain it. What did the cat know that they didn't? Did the resident emit some sort of odor from dying cells in the body when death was near, which the cat picked up on? Was Bootsy attracted to the heating pads, often used to keep dying patients warm?

Another incident baffled the medical staff: two people shared Room 108- One woman was extremely ill from end stage Emphysema; her roommate was at the facility for rehab and therapy after a broken hip. When Bootsy paid a visit to 108 one afternoon, the first- floor nurses were sure the demise of the Emphysema patient was at hand. So much so that they called the family, in case they wanted to visit to say their final farewells. Instead, Bootsy cuddled with the rehab resident, Mrs. Findley. She stroked the cat's silky fur and gushed, "Listen to it purr!" Well, not everyone can hit a home run, thought the nurses. After a lengthy visit, the cat scampered out of 108 and boarded the next elevator heading upstairs.

When a nursing assistant checked on room 108 before shift change, she found the patient unresponsive in bed. She had died in her sleep from an undiagnosed heart embolism.

Somehow the local papers caught wind of the unusual circumstances at Restless Heart Nursing Center. A reporter came out to interview Georgia and Mrs. Clover. The cat, to no one's surprise, did not comment.

At first Mrs. Clover thought this extra media attention might prove to be beneficial to the facility. She could envision "Cat Gives Comfort to Dying Residents" headlines. But there was also trepidation within the walls of the nursing home.

The residents themselves stopped visiting Bootsy, not wanting to become too attached for fear of Bootsy following them upstairs. Many still adored sweet Bootsy, thinking the pattern of death was merely coincidence or bad luck. After all, why would a precious little kitty have anything to do with anyone dying?

The apprehension continued the following week.

The therapy room was always busy on weekday mornings with residents exercising, walking laps around the room, or relearning basic grooming skills. One morning in strolled Bootsy. He stopped at the door, peering inside at all the hustle and bustle of a typically hectic morning, looking for a particular resident. When he spotted Mrs. Fairview, the cat slowly sauntered across the therapy room to the woman.

All eyes followed him. A hushed silence filled the air. Where would he stop?

“Bootsy!” she cried. ‘We meet again! How was your breakfast? What do you have to tell me, sweet boy?’

Bootsy replied with a soft meow. The young therapists nervously smiled.

Nah, not Mrs. Fairview, they all thought. She’s scheduled to go *home* tomorrow.

Mrs. Fairview was discharged, as planned, the next day. After a month of intense therapy, she had accomplished all her goals. The staff let out a big sigh of relief when she walked out the door.

Bootsy missed the boat on this one. Thankfully, Mrs. Fairview made it home, safe and sound. It wasn’t until a week later when one of the nurses found her obituary in the local newspaper.

Mrs. Freda Fairview. *Died suddenly at home. Funeral arrangements pending.*

More articles appeared in the newspapers. The headlines this time weren't so kind:

"Angel of Death in Local Nursing Home."

"Bootsy, the Furry Grim Reaper."

"When Bootsy Comes to Call."

Referrals started slowing down. Money was lost every day a bed remained empty. Mrs. Clover and her bosses at corporate weren't so pleased anymore. A cat was costing the corporation tons of money.

On Friday morning Mrs. Clover called Georgia down to her office, shutting the door behind her.

"We need to get rid of the cat," the Administrator stated. "Like *NOW!* I'm getting pressure from the resident's families and from corporate. I knew I never should've allowed a cat into the facility."

"But look at it in a positive way," Georgia began. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about this."

Georgia had an interesting perspective on the Bootsy mystery: Maybe Bootsy wasn't the harbinger of death after all. Maybe Bootsy was a furry little guardian of the afterlife. Maybe he was making sure no one left this world alone. Maybe Bootsy was an angel in disguise, helping the lonely transition in a calm, soothing, loving way. "Positive?" Mrs. Clover snapped. "What's positive about *dying*?"

"Well, anyone can die at any time," reasoned Georgia. "Bootsy is there, offering comfort when they need comfort the most."

"The cat must go!" she said, holding her ground.

"The residents are going to miss Bootsy," Georgia sighed.

"We'll get a parrot," Mrs. Clover said firmly. "I'll give it until the end of the day. The residents will get over it." Georgia silently vowed to make sure that when it was time for Bootsy to depart to that Great Kitty Litter Box in the Sky, he wouldn't be alone either. That's when she officially adopted Bootsy.

Later that afternoon Mrs. Clover was returning to her office after conducting a tour with a perspective family. She thought nothing of leaving her office door open for fifteen minutes. As she walked into her office there, perched on a pile of scattered papers on top of her desk, was Bootsy. He greeted the boss with hissing, apparently extremely unhappy that he had lost his position at the home.

“BOOTSY!!!!!!” she screamed. “Now, there’s a good kitty! Get off my desk! Shoo!!”

Bootsy, now growling, made stern eye contact with the boss. Who would back down first?

“Bootsy, it’s either you or me,” said the administrator, turning pale with fright. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to leave my office now...”

The growling turned into very intense meowing, almost as if Bootsy was trying to speak, standing his ground, his sharp claws digging into the desk. It was high noon and there was a stand-off in the administrator’s office.

The Business Office staff heard the screams and came running. “Get it out! Get it out!” yelled Mrs. Clover.

The screaming only made Bootsy even more agitated, especially when Mrs. Clover grabbed a flyswatter and frantically began to flail at the feline. Bootsy hissed, batting at the flyswatter. Then with a loud screech, the cat jumped straight up in the air, back arched, gray fur standing on end.

Then, in a fit of rage, Bootsy jumped at the boss, landing on her fine tweed suit jacket, before being pried off by the business office staff. The cat scampered out of the office to the lobby, the elevator door magically opening at the precise time. Bootsy was whisked upstairs with a perplexed visitor.

That's when Mrs. Clover grabbed her chest and keeled over, face first into the papers on her desk, succumbing to a massive heart attack.

Bootsy had struck again.

In total, Bootsy provided comfort to over one hundred dying residents. His job done well, Bootsy enjoyed spending more time with Georgia after they were forced to retire. In fact, they both lived long and prosperous lives, keeping each other company for many years.

Meanwhile, Restless Heart hired a new administrator, and things got back to normal pretty quickly. A new policy was adopted: *Absolutely No Pets Allowed!*

Bootsy may have been put out to pasture, but his legacy would live on.



Gregory Smith is a retired medical social worker. He is the author of 43 short stories, 30 of which have been or will be published. His uplifting memoir, titled *Stronger Than Bone*, was just published by Compassiviste Publishing. Greg is active on social media, including Facebook, X, Blue Sky, Instagram and TikTok. He enjoys reading, watching sports and classic movies and listening to oldies music in his free time.

<https://www.amazon.com/Stronger-Than-Bone-Unbreakable-Brittle-ebook/dp/B0FRNPJCRX>

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photography by editor of Cabbage Patch

Selected poems by Michael Chin



SAMSON

That night, Tijuana, I felt old
timers' pain when I left the arena
a hand to the aching base of my spine,
a new frailty, a chill, exposed
scalp.

I didn't put my hair on the line
so much as get told to lose it
on a promoter's whim.

A rite of humiliation
that reverberated across generations.

My angel brought the baseball cap
to hide beneath, to offer cover to say,
you still choose what the people see.

She said, you are still strong,
and I knew I would be again.

THE KINDS OF DREAMS PEOPLE DON'T WAKE FROM

When my hair was bleached
blond I'd wake some mornings to find it streaked red.
I dreamed of razor blades and exposed
turnbuckles and cement floors.
The glory of it all.

When my hair was long,
Grace washed it for me.
Grace rubbed the throb out of my shoulders.
Grace whispered sweet nothing
is going to change.

The card's always subject to change
her mind dreaming too far ahead to run
her down, to fight my way to her.
So, I dream of the past—
a moment:

Lying on the mat after the crowd cleared out, Grace's
hand in mine.
Squint your eyes, she says.
And the arena lights look
like stars. She smells like dewy grass and dandelions
and forever.

INTO GRACE

The steel cage door slams and the skirt of Grace's dress
waves a sparkling aquamarine.

Tonight, I'll trade punches and choreographed steps
with a giant and scale these mesh walls to bleed
high above the huddled masses
chanting my name.

Everyone looks smaller
from twenty feet in the air.

I'll raise my hand,
flash the I love you sign
and they'll think it's for all of them,
for the love of the fight.

I feel every pound of my body, sweat slick, heavy
weighs the crown of expectations.

I feel myself grow light
headed, forehead hot and pouring crimson.
These people are waiting for me
to jump.

Grace, are you ready
for the leap?

Her dress, a sequined blur,
it had might as well be an ocean.
What are great heights over great waters for
but to dive in?



*Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and currently lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. He's the author of seven full-length books, including his novel, *My Grandfather's an Immigrant*, and *So is Yours* (Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2021) and his latest short story collection *This Year's Ghost* (JackLeg Press, 2025). His short work has previously appeared in journals including *Bat City Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Pinch*, *Passages North*, and *The Normal School*. Find him online at miketchin.com.*

FLIGHTLESS BIRD

By Marnie Olson

I'm not a penguin.

I'm also not a steamer duck, an ostrich, emu, weka, kiwi, kakapo, rhea or cassowary. Or Galapagos cormorant... aka the flightless cormorant, if you prefer an obvious moniker.

So, I am not, technically a flightless bird, but I am... currently, flightless.

I used to fly. I can't figure out what's going on, but my legs aren't working right. I think, if I could get a running start, I could take off.

I could rise up, feel the wind in my feathers, the hard muscular push of my wings as I carried myself off this cold pavement. Flying looks hard if you can't do it. Humans have dreams about it. It's on their list of "If I could have one superpower, it would be..." things.

I've been trying for hours to take flight, and I can't. I'm afraid. Trapped. Exhausted. How did I get in here? A parking garage. It's bleak, and I can't remember what led me here. A French fry maybe. I do love a cold, dirty French fry when I can score one.

Then, I see her, watching me. My first instinct is not to trust. But she's looking at me in a way that... I don't know. She's looking at me as if I am a mirror, as if I am some version of her. She's following me, gasping. Is she crying?

Then, she leaves. I continue my struggle. I cannot fly away. She's back, holding something shiny. Oooh! I do like shiny things! She's walking toward me, and I want to run away, but my legs... aren't working right.

"Hey," she says. "I want to help. But I have to get close."

She steps closer. I'm wary. I try to look as shifty and ominous as possible. Some people think crows are creepy. If I had my murder with me, she'd be scared. *We come in a murder!!!*

That's scary, lady. My god, what are you doing??

I'm stuck. I can't take another step. She comes toward me with the shiny object.

There is a snipping sound, and then, I am free! My legs are free. But I'm too tired to fly now. I hobble out of the garage into the carpeted lobby.

"You're free, Mr. Crow. Oh, I don't know if you're a dude. If I've misgendered you, I'm sorry. But you can fly away now."

I flap my wings, make it up onto a metal handrail. I see a glass door in front of me, leading to the outside world.

"I'll open the door for you," she says.

It's the middle of the night. The lobby of this office building is deserted. She has a key to the lobby and to an office on the third floor. There's no reason for anyone to be here this late, no reason to find a crow with twine tangled around his legs, no reason to run up three flights and open the office to look for scissors, run back down, chase him and step on the dangling string to keep him close so that she can clip the twine and set him free. There's no reason for any of this.

The lobby door opens. I leave. At last. Fresh air. The night. It's spring in Los Angeles, temperate days and chilly nights. I stand on the sidewalk, stretching my wings, letting the moonlight land on the little white specks on my black feathers. She wonders if something is on me... paint? Or was I born this way? Do crows get grey feathers, like she will someday get grey hair? She seems stressed. Sad. Maybe she'll go grey soon.

As tired as I am, I feel the pull of the night air, the flush of strength returning to my wings. My legs still hurt, but I won't need them long. I will take off. Fly. When I'm ready to land, I'll take a deep breath, and by then, my landing gear – my legs – might feel better.

She's crying as I take off, flightless bird nevermore.

She returns to the third floor, enters the office. The cleaning people have left for the night, which is why her friend said it was okay to use her therapy office, after hours.

It's cozy. There is a couch, which is comfortable. But she prefers the chair. It's plush, leans back. It is a womb.

She can curl up in it with pillows and blankets while the watery fountain trickles her to sleep. It was a hard day, but she saved a crow's life. That counts for something.

She sets the alarm on her phone for seven a.m. That gives her time to pop in the restroom, brush her teeth, pee, splash water on her face and leave the building before it comes to life. Before people ask questions, or wonder why someone is here this early, carrying her toothbrush. If she hurries, she can walk to the coffee shop on the corner before the 8 a.m. parking meter starts running and she gets a ticket she can't afford.

The morning is bright. She's sad every day, but today, she can at least be happy she saved a crow's... He is in the middle of the street. Flattened. Completely flattened. The shiny black feathers with white specks pressed into the pavement, glaring in the morning sun.

She drops her overnight bag to the sidewalk, crumples into it.

Sobs.

She's never cried this hard for a person who died.

But this crow. This crow was the only good thing she's done. Her life is a fucking mess. She has failed, and failed and failed.

But she spent two hours chasing down this bird, giving him back his legs, his wings. His FLIGHT.

“Did I set you free just so you could die in the street?”

You set me free. That’s the story I tell.

She made it worse. He could have stayed in the garage. Maybe someone decent and kind would have found him, taken him to a bird sanctuary. Not just cut the goddamned twine off his legs and sent him, exhausted, disoriented, into the night to collapse in the street and be run over.

She sobs on the way to her car, where she’s living for now. She has many kind friends who offer her beds, couches, showers, their offices between midnight and seven a.m., but technically her car is her home. Her only flight from one place to the next.

She failed this crow. Like she’s failed at earning a living, paying the rent, living the stupid fake American Dream.

But you didn’t fail me. The last thing I ever did was fly.

The last thing I remember is kindness.





Marnie Olson is a writer, actor, and co-creator of the web series, Namaste, Bitches. She authored the novel Grateful, a psychological thriller. She co-wrote Sophomoric, which won Best Feature Screenplay at the Portland Comedy Film Festival. She lives in Los Angeles, unencumbered by progeny or partner.



photography by editor of Cabbage Patch

AT-ONE-MENT ABSTENTION [ii]

by Gerard Sarnat

i.haiku [recurrent un/a/musing loop during long day of Yom
Kippur fasting, prayer, repentance: passion pit]

the Sixties when still
had drive-in movies — hat trick
scored three straight weekends

*for you not-sports-fans: three successes of the same kind,
especially consecutive ones
within a limited period (e.g., in ice hockey or soccer, scoring
three goals in a game by one player)



ii.Fasting Silverback Peruses Book of Jonah

Four slim chapters
read erev Yom Kippur,
THUNDERCLAPPED

I am trying to hold onto
our lightning rod's wonder.
Lox 'n bagel Goldilocks rules

my grouchy head as earth's belly in breadbasket
slouches toward hell unlocked in a whale's blowhole.
Will all of us turn away from Lot's Biblical shofar callings?

Gerard Sarnat's a multiple prize winner plus Pushcart/Best of Net Award nominee who also has been invited to serve as judge for competitions. *Activism Through Poetry: How Gerard Sarnat Uses Verse as a Form of Protest* is a retrospective: His words have been widely published in four collections (*Homeless Chronicles: from Abraham to Burning Man, Disputes, 17s, Melting the Ice King*); included by *Raleigh Review, Paris Lit Up, Rattle, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Brooklyn Review, LA Review, Monterey Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Hong Kong Review, Cordite, Deronda Review, Buddhist Review, New York Times, The Write Launch, The Opiate, Poetry Lighthouse, Prolific Press: Three Line Poetry, Black Mountain College Press, Poetry Lighthouse, Anomaly, Songs of Eretz, London Arts-Based Research Centre, Israel Association of Writers in English, New York Great Cities/Pure Slush, The Nature of Our Times/Poets For Science, Hyperbolic Math-Poetry Review, Gravity of the Thing, Third Wednesday, Poetry Center of San Jose, Louisville/Mount Saint Mary's LA/ Saint Benedict/ Saint John's Universities, Oberlin, Slippery Rock, St. John's University, Northwestern, Yale, Pomona, Harvard, Missouri Baptist, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, Grinnell, Johns Hopkins, NYU, Brown, North Dakota, CUNY, McMaster, Maine, Oklahoma/British Columbia/Toronto/Malta/Chicago/Virginia/Alabama university presses* — and more. He's a Harvard College and Medical School-trained physician, Stanford professor, healthcare CEO. Currently, he's devoting energy and resources dealing with climate justice, serving on Climate Action Now's board. Sarnat's belonged to the longest-running U.S. Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue Group. Gerry's been married since 1969 and has three kids, seven grandsons — and looks forward to future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com





Success

by Steve S. Saroff

1st published in The Arlington Literary Journal, March, 2022

We met in the eleventh grade of high school, after I had come back from more than half a year on the road. I was wild then, not wanted at home or at school, and I had surprised and disappointed everyone by coming home. Spending seven months hitchhiking alone — crisscrossing the continent eight times — had given me, as a seventeen-year-old, too much experience. Nothing as terrible as the tales of Vietnam which the friends of my older brother had brought back a few years before, but my wanderings almost ruined me, and left me emptier than anyone should be. The nights in the cities; never having money; being offered food and money for sex; sleeping under bridges; being searched again and again by police; being beaten up; shoplifting food; working in fields in Idaho; sleeping on beaches in Oregon; watching thunderheads over the Canadian plains; standing in storms; standing in deserts; spending a week in a drunk-tank in El Paso; and, listening to the stories of freaks, drunks, the soldiers, the Christians, and all the strangers who gave me rides.

I came home because I needed something gentle after all of that.

Before running away, all my friends had been the rough ones in our school. Dope smoking football players and guys with slouched shoulders, afternoon jobs, and their own cars. They bragged about fights and about screwing, and they shared girls. In Joe Settons "Cabin," a shack built of stolen plywood in the woods near the interstate, they would meet with a girl named Hera every few days, and I was invited but never showed up. Even before leaving home, I was looking — really just hoping — for something more.

But I did come back for a while. I came back in November. School had already started, and I was only partly there. Every few days, I would hitchhike to the Blue Ridge Mountains and spend some nights in the woods. I would build fires and sit by them, next to their warmth and light. There was snow then in those hardwood forests, and when I would crawl into my sleeping bag, I dreamed of how someday I might not be alone. I dreamed that someday I could share these snowy forest places, these secret, beautiful places of the Shenandoah and the Monongahela.

My father had given up on me then, and out of that respect, I left him alone too. The school, though, was still trying. But the classes were more boring, and the guidance counselors and school shrink — both of which I had to see to be able to attend any classes at all— were more idiotic. As a habitual truant, they wanted to kick me out of school. Most problem kids, though, fit their stereotypes, either as violent or as completely withdrawn. But I was neither. There was one meeting after I had been gone for five days, having left on a Friday, and coming back on a Thursday, mid-morning, when the guidance counselor simply exploded.

"You want us to believe that you just spent five nights camping out by yourself?" she yelled.

I nodded 'Yes.'

"Were you taking drugs?" the shrink asked.

I shook my head, 'No.'

"Why should we let you keep going to school?" The counselor asked.

I shrugged.

"What do you do by yourself?"

I answered then, quietly, "Read. Think a bit."

Then one of them began to yell, saying that I could "Damn well," read and think in school, or at a job, but not in the woods.

But, still, they let me keep attending English, math, and Physics, the only classes that I would go to at all.

I could have told the truth: that I sat in those oak and hickory forests and thought about the stories that I had listened to, and about all the strange and frightening people I had met, and, mostly, I thought about what I would do next, where I could go.

It was one of those winter fires that helped me find her. In Mr. Bundy's afternoon physics class, she came in and sat next to me. I had always looked at her. I had always had her in my impossible dreams. She was frail, and I only understood her delicate look as beauty. I knew nothing about her, except that she seemed to belong to a group of people who didn't cross into the sort of people I spent time with.

As Mr. Bundy scrawled equations on the blackboard, she said, in a whisper, "You smell like smoke."

I looked at her, but she wasn't looking at me, so I didn't answer. Then she whispered, "You smell good."

This time, when I looked at her, she glanced up at me, and she smiled. I had absolutely no idea what to say, but we kept looking at each other, and I stammered, "I spent last night outside. Built a fire."

"Where outside?" She asked, still in a quiet whisper — looking down again into her notebook.

I glanced at Mr. Bundy, who was still busy at the blackboard. "I go into Shenandoah Park," I said, "They don't allow fires there, but I just go into the woods, away from the trails. I hitchhiked back here in the morning."

Then she asked, "Who did you go with?"

"By myself," I answered.

"That must be lonely," she said.

I didn't answer for a few minutes. We both pretend to be paying close attention to Mr. Bundy. Eight months before, I would have answered her with some shrug. Some tough guy "No," or "Not really." But I somehow knew that I had been given a chance to tell the truth. I had been in jail because I wouldn't give a judge my real name or age. I had blistered my hands in fields while other migrant workers laughed at my not having a pair of gloves. I had gone to sleep hungry and woken up hungry many, many times. So I told the truth.

"It is lonelier here," I said.

She looked at me and said, this time loud enough so that I could hear the music in her voice, "It is lonely here, isn't it?"

I didn't answer her.

The next day, I am in physics class, and she is there, and she sits next to me again. We don't say anything or even look at each other. Mr. Bundy starts lecturing, but I am listening to her sounds more closely — her breathing, the sound of her pencil, the rustling of her notebook. I am feeling outcast again, and more so because I have told her that I slept outside by a fire, and I am thinking that she was teasing me about my smelling good. I am thinking that she will have told her friends about how I am a freak. I am thinking that she will be like the counselors and the shrinks — them not understanding how I could choose to be alone.

I am failing every class and will not even come close to graduating, and there is no reason to keep coming to school at all, but I try right then to pay attention to Mr. Bundy. He is explaining circular momentum, but I have missed so many classes that his explanations are losing me. I give up there and then. I am deciding that I will leave. I am thinking that I will just stand up, walk out of the class, go and fill a pack, and this time not come back.

I am 6 feet 2 inches tall, and I weigh 170 pounds. I can run a mile in five minutes. I have read more books than most college graduates ever will. I have long hair tied back with a bandana. I know about stars and rocks. By listening to people, I am able to recognize the good ones from the others. I can sleep well on hard ground. I have eaten grouse that I have killed with stones, and I have feasted on Brown trout caught by the banks of Western rivers. But I do not recognize anything good in myself. I think that I am a failure because I am not a track athlete. I think that I am illiterate because I am failing my classes. I think I am ugly because I am so tall, an outcast because I have been on the street, and I feel that I am unlovable because I am only calm when I am alone. I'm seventeen.

But somehow, I made it through that class, and then the bell is ringing, and then she is standing up.

She hands me a note.

It's a sheet of notebook paper folded and refolded into a two-inch square. She says, "I wrote to you last night," and she turns and walks fast into the crowd, which is pushing its way out of the room.

I am still sitting. I've covered her note with my hand, and I am excited but lost. Finally, I get up and go into the hallway and outside. There are a few acres of trees next to the school — a place where kids go to smoke cigarettes or weed — and I go into these woods. I sit down out of sight from anyone. Then I unfold the note and read it.

She says that she wants to know me. She says everyone talks about me and wonders about me. She says I am beautiful. She says that she hopes that I will not laugh at her for writing to me. She apologizes for her spelling. She says I can just tear this note up and she will never bother me again. She says she is writing while in bed and hopes that I don't mind that she is thinking of me.

I hear the bell ringing for the next class, but I stay in the woods. I hug myself, sitting there with the cigarette butts and empty beer cans everywhere. I re-read the note again and again. One page of handwriting from a frail girl, and there is more salvation there than in the combined pages of every book I had ever read.

I stay in those littered woods, sitting against a White Oak, for most of the afternoon, far past the end of the school day, slowly writing her a one-page letter in return. Putting my words down slow. Listening to the sound of every sentence. But my words, in the end, were as simple and truthful as hers. I wrote to her saying I wanted to know her too. I wrote to her saying that I had always noticed her, and that I would not tear her letter up. I wrote to her saying that she was beautiful and that her eyes were gray like clouds.

That evening, I found her house. I looked up her address in the phone book. I ran there. Panting in the shadows and mostly hiding, I finally saw her at a 2nd story window, by herself, in a room which I had guessed correctly was hers. I threw a pebble up there, and she opened the window. She was smiling and I could see that she was happy.

"I wrote you a letter," I said.

"Do you want to come in?" She asked.

I said, "Can you come out?"

She said, "Let me check." Then she was gone and a minute later she was outside, and I had given her my letter, folded like hers, into a small square.

She said, "Can I read this now?"

"Yes," I said, "But I have to go," and just like that, I turned and started running. Running my five-minute miles, the two miles back to my father's house. I had been told stories about how to avoid Claymore mines. I had listened to graphic descriptions of sexual positions and perversions. I had listened to advice about God, advice about how to take drugs, advice about how to make money, and I had paid close attention to everything, but no one had ever told me how to deliver a love letter.

It didn't matter, though. What she had started with her folded note was such a good thing that neither of our inexperience was going to ruin it. Rather, it helped. Instead of talking, or even phone calls, or a "date," for the next two weeks, every day we traded folded letters in physics class.

Her letters to me were sometimes just a single paragraph. Once, just a word.

A Friday afternoon in April. At the start of the class, I had given her what I had written the night before. I had left my father's house and had run to her house. It was so late that no lights were on; the house was dark. I then walked two blocks away. I sat down on the curb, under a streetlight.

"2:00 a.m.," my letter started, "I am sitting under a streetlight on your street, writing to you. I ran to your house. The window of your room is dark. I like knowing that I am sitting here close to you as you sleep. Tomorrow, when you read this, will you laugh at me because I am lonely for you? Will you laugh because I want to hear your voice now? I am here on this street, and you are up there, in your room, in your dark room."

I gave her this folded note, and I saw her read it during class, but she does not look at me. Mr. Bundy lectures, and I hear her pencil taking notes. Then the bell is ringing, and she hands me a folded note, stands up, and walks fast away from me. I unfold her note. A plain sheet of notebook paper. Green ink. One word, with no capitalization, no adornments. Just the small word, "love."

Now I am reading her one-word letter. Now I am pushing through the crowded hallway. Now I am catching up to her, touching her for the first time, touching her shoulder. She turns to me, and she is crying. All around us are clumsy teenagers. Lockers are opening and then being slammed shut.

"What is wrong?" I ask.

"Wrong?" she says, brushing over her eyes with the back of her hand, "Oh Enzi, nothing is wrong. I'm just happy." Then she kisses me quickly, turns again, and nearly runs into her next class just as the bell is ringing.

I go outside. I go to those woods. Two hours sitting there until the final bell. Then I find her as she leaves the building. We walk back to her house together. She touches my hand. I touch hers. Our shoulders brush. Our hands touch again. She takes my hand. She holds it. I hold her hand. She holds my hand. She drops her books, and I don't understand. Then her arms are around me. My arms are at my sides. Then my arms are around her. We are laughing together.

I remember her bones. The bones under her skin. I remember her blood. The blood moving in her veins. I hear her breathing as she sleeps, me next to her. I am hiding with her in her room, waiting until her parents to go to sleep so I can leave her house quietly. I am running in the East Coast springtime along the concrete streets, with more happiness and more sorrow than any child should ever carry. We only had two months together. I have finally been kicked out of school, and she has told me what is wrong with her. By then, I understand her frailty. By then, I have told her everything about myself, and I have realized that without her, I will be like dust.

I wanted to show her the forest places. I wanted to take her with me to the deepest forests, to the West. She is sitting cross-legged on the grass in front of her house. It is early summer now, night. I have been working on a construction site. I come to her house every evening. I eat with her family. I am no longer so shy. But this day I did not come by until very late. She has told me things I could not understand, that have frightened me so much that the only thing I know how to do is to try to run away again.

You see, we were both so alone. That last night, that summer night, I ran to her house at three in the morning and threw small stones at the window. When she woke and looked down at me, she smiled, opened the window, and asked, "What are you doing?" I told her that I had to talk, that I could not sleep. She dressed and came outside. We sat on the grass, there next to the house, and I said that I was going to Montana and asked her again to come with me. Dark, with fireflies, and that Virginia humidity that made my shirt stick to my back, we sat together, quiet, and I waited for an answer, but it never came. Instead, she said she had to go back inside, and I walked her to the front door. She kissed me suddenly, her hand holding tightly to mine, then slipping away as she turned and opened the door. Inside, her father was in the near dark, sitting by a dim lamp. I remember how he looked at me and how he waved, but the door was closed before any of us could say anything.

Where I went was again a hard place. I sent her letters I wrote during lunch breaks in the string of labor jobs I ended up with. I sent her letters until one came back, a little less than a year after I had left, but it wasn't from her. It was a short note from her father, folded only once, telling me that I should not keep writing her since she was gone.

These silent years, these moods... I am in the clouds now, writing while on route to another passionless business meeting. Out this small window, there is a halo of light, the Glory rainbow that scientists tell us is caused by ice crystals, but which my heart tells me is her bright memory. If I could, I would go back to where we first met - that physics classroom - and I would hand her a carefully folded, carefully written note, with just these words, "I will stay."

I left home without finishing school. She tried to finish, but also did not make it. "Come with me," I said that night, "We will find clear rivers and forests and always be with each other." I said to her, "Come with me and you will be fine again. Doctors know nothing, come with me because we have so little time." Fool I was, coward too, because I left her alone when she should not have been alone.

I imagine her father holding her. I imagine him crying for all of us; her trapped in this place of rock and air, breathing out one last time, while I swung and sweated on some highway crew, pretending that at eighteen my body could work a magic that would reach two thousand miles back to hers and pull the illness from the bones.

I still look for her everywhere. In the city crowds, I sometimes see a face like hers, or, walking in a certain way, a girl with long, thin arms....But I find her most in solitary places: along the Blackfoot river in Autumn, a place she never saw, where red river rocks sparkle in the low water and dark trout pretend to be shadows.

I write these words with the same hand that wrote for her, the same hand that she held and touched that last moment as I was leaving, a door closing forever. Up here, in these clouds, five miles from anything solid, I beg a forgiveness and wonder who I would have become if I had different strength and had stayed with her to say goodbye. Some mistakes last forever, and we try forever to make up for them. The "success" that becomes our surface is only the thinnest of covers over deep, deep failure.



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