



Prairie Ink

A Literary Journal



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“There is a way to see inside by looking directly through to seed or marrow.”

-Joan Halifax

From the Editor

Dear Readers,

So, what was it? Four? Five years ago? Time flies when having fun. I have always enjoyed putting together publications of other people's writing and, sometimes, even my own; sadly, I haven't really written for a long time, but sometimes, sometimes, one is inspired by others to give something from the soul, so I suppose it is time once again to give from my own.

When Scott asked me to help him with *Prairie Ink*, I either agreed out of nostalgia or the desire to keep my job because I had been working in Guatemala for a decade and didn't think anyone in the United States would ever hire me or, perhaps, it was a little of both. I have fond, somewhat ancient, memories of spending late nights in the lab as a young college student getting *The Beaver Tale* into the printers, and nothing is more thrilling than the final push to publication, allowing us hopeful fools who want to put our ideas out there for other people to read to fulfil our dreams. But, anyways, I agreed, so here I am on my birthday typing this so another publication can be submitted to the printer at the last moment, like so many before; however, they always get done. And, get done well.

In this 17th edition of *Prairie Ink Journal*, I am proud to present the motley crew of talented artists that have agreed to bless our pages, and our minds, with their wonderful souls, that, honestly, are really our own.

Buy the ticket, take the ride. There is a way to see inside.

-Justin Brown, Editor

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Sugar Windows

By Irene Hunter

Part 1

"I'm so sorry, Aranya." said Remi softly. "You and Val don't deserve this."

"How much time do I have left?" asked Aranya, numbly.

The healer hesitated, "Six months."

"Six months. Val's inheritance birthday is in the spring."

"I'm sorry. I know you wanted to be there for her."

"No—I *need* to be there. If I'm not, our aunt and uncle will steal her money." The money she and her sister had worked so hard to save. Year after year. "I know witnesses usually support the birthday celebrants, but technically they *can* remove their support."

"My father told me of that happening only three times in the last two hundred years and the last one was a hundred and twenty-five years ago."

"They will say she can't be trusted because she had that breakdown last year from stressing about school, and that the money should be given to them; her only living relatives. They always spend everything they can get their dirty hands on. You know that."

"I do know what they are like. So does everyone else. The town elders could deny them witness rights if you spoke with them."

"I already have. They can't. Only living relatives supersedes everything else." Silence.

"There is a remedy I can give. It may give you a few more weeks."

"I don't need weeks. I need months! Three months!"

“I don't know what else to say, Aranya.”

“Please, Remi. Valerie needs me!”

“The cost will be horrible.”

“I will do anything! Tell me!”

Remi squeezed her eyes closed as she fought between helping Aranya help her sister and knowing the cost of that help.

“I took an oath to do no harm. To help people. Not every healer does. There are those that also deal in medicines that have darker origins.”

“You are helping Valerie! I need a name. Who do you know, Remi?”

“Her name is Amari.”

Part 2

Amari's shop was on the top floor of an ornate brick building. Remi said that she lived on the ground floor so she could keep an eye on her remedies. They were that dangerous to the untrained. Aranya expected a dealer of such darkness to be buried deep in the forest. With hearth smoke that floated among the branches.

Along one side of the building was a sign that pointed to the first steps of a staircase that wrapped around the building. The stairs were designed so they could fold up and deny access to the shop above. Stopping at the first step, Aranya took a deep breath. Whatever the cost, Valerie was worth it.

As she opened the door, its black paint absorbing all light, she was surprised again. Aranya expected a dark and cluttered hole, but light streamed in through the southern wall of full length windows. The glass stretched between brick pillars. The east and west walls were lined with shelves of neatly labeled glass, wood, and stone bottles and vials. Down the middle of the room were

open topped bins that held crystals, roots, and what looked like red sand. A large wooden counter stretched along the remaining side. Behind it was a young woman who looked to be Aranya's age. Her dark gray dress was covered in a rust colored canvas apron. Her dark hair, pulled back in a low bun, revealed dark gray eyes.

She must be Amari. Remi hadn't said anything about assistants.

The woman glanced in Aranya's direction. "Hello, how can I help you?"

"Um, I'm not sure how to...I just...my sister..."

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Amari's question cut across Aranya's rambling.

Aranya nodded gratefully.

Amari reached under the wooden counter and pulled out two cups and a teapot. After ladling boiling water from a large vat behind her, she added a ball of spices. While they were waiting for the tea to steep, Amari brought Aranya a stool and placed it on her side of the counter. Never good at small talk, Aranya continued to stare at the contents of the shop.

"Not meeting your standards, hmm?"

"What? No! It's very nice, it's just..."

"You were expecting a cottage in the forest full of dusty bottles and books with cracked spines in languages no one speaks anymore?"

"Well, yes."

"That sounds nice, but the profits tend to be better when customers don't have to fight off the local wildlife to find me."

As she poured the tea, Amari assured Aranya that they wouldn't be disturbed; she had raised the stairs so no one else could enter. Aranya closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"I'm sick."

"I'm sorry to hear that. How long?"

"Six months."

"That's not long."

"No, it's not. Especially considering my sister's birthday is in the spring. Her inheritance birthday."

"You don't have any other family to witness for her on her behalf."

"That's the problem. We do. An aunt and uncle. All they will do is advise the treasury to give it all to them. She'll be completely caught off guard because she doesn't know what they are really like." Aranya's frustration resurfaced and caused her to return her cup to the saucer so forcefully that half of the tea sloshed out onto the counter.

"Why don't you tell her what they are really like?" Amari replied calmly as she reached beneath the counter for a towel.

"I have. She doesn't believe me because they've only shown her their charming side."

"I see."

"The only way she has complete control of her money is for me to be there with her on her birthday. Remi said you will help me."

"I *can* help you, but whether I will or not has not been decided."

"Why wouldn't you help me? I'm giving you money. You deal in dark healing. Remi said you didn't take the oath. Not exactly the paragon of morality!" Aranya's frustration and stress raised her voice.

"While it is true I did not take the oath, it wasn't so that I could intentionally hurt people. I believe some darker methods, when

used in the right way, can also be beneficial without the disastrous side effects. More research is needed to find a better method. That is why I didn't take the oath. It allows me to do that research.”

“How do people know 'doing research' isn't just a line and you're not just going to steal all their money?”

“When people come to me for the dark healing, they are usually out of options and less concerned with such things. They believe the results are worth the possibility of losing a few coins.”

Amari was right. Aranya was out of options and would give all of her money, and more, to save her sister.

“That still doesn't answer the question as to why you are considering *not* helping me.”

“As I said before, while I do dispense dark healing, I don't wish to hurt people. I have found better methods for several dark healing remedies, but this one, the one you need is not one of them.”

“I don't care. I have to save my sister.”

“You may...once you hear the side effects. The remedy is made from a certain flower.”

“Which flower?”

“That is privileged information.”

“Why?”

“Just like chefs do not make public the recipe of their signature dish, I do not share mine.”

“What are the side effects?” Aranya asked shortly.

“When taken incorrectly, it is very addictive.” Her tone suggested she thought Aranya couldn't handle taking this particular treatment.

“How addictive?” Aranya's displeasure at Amari's condescension clipped her words.

“You would sell your sister's soul to get more.”

“I can follow instructions.”

“You say that now, but once you feel the effects it will be hard to not give in to the desire to take more. Are you sure you can't just talk to your sister again?”

“No, this is the only way. I have spoken with Valerie multiple times and Remi's treatment will not give me enough time. I can do it. I *must* do it. If it means my sister won't be under the thumb of my aunt and uncle, I will do whatever it takes.”

Aranya's conviction must have been enough to convince Amari, because she sighed in resignation and nodded. Decision made, Amari began collecting ingredients. Aranya recognized all of the ingredients, except one of the dozen containers that Amari placed on the wooden counter. Some of the ingredients were used in her work at the confectionery and the rest were kept for minor ailments such as headaches and sore muscles in many households. She assumed that the twelfth powder was from the flower Amari had mentioned earlier.

Precisely measured amounts were placed in tiny bowls next to a monstrous mortar and pestle. Slowly, Amari individually crushed all twelve ingredients and placed them on a rimmed plate as if they were numbers on a clock. Then, she used what looked like a tiny broom to sweep them into the center and blend them until there was a mound of light brown powder. This powder was funneled into a wooden container. After screwing on the lid, Amari tied a tiny spoon to the neck of the container.

“You must dissolve one flat spoonful of this mixture in a cup of hot water daily. Do not add more, or your chances of becoming

addicted increase exponentially, and you'll run out.”

“Can't you make more?”

“The longer you consume this, the higher the likeliness that you will be unable to stop.”

“What does that matter?”

“It will become all you will think about. All you will care about. Even more than your sister. You will be alive, but you won't be living.”

Amari looked as if she would change her mind and not give Aranya the remedy, unless she showed the proper respect for the consequences.

“Amari, I know I seem desperate to you. I am. That desperation means I will do everything in my power to use this remedy correctly so I can witness for my sister. The thought of her under the control of our aunt and uncle makes me physically ill.”

As Aranya turned to leave, she heard Amari call out,
“Remember, dark healing changes you, addicted or not.”

Aranya walked down the staircase with the container in her pocket and a slight lightening of her step. She would survive this dark healing and live until her sister's birthday. Everything would be alright. It didn't matter if she wasn't around to enjoy her sister's freedom as long as she had it.

As soon as Aranya walked into the apartment she shared with Valerie, she heard her voice.

“What did Remi say? Are you alright?”

And then, when Valerie walked into the joint kitchen and living area from her bedroom and saw Aranya placing bags on the counter she scolded, “Aranya, why did you go shopping?! I can do that—you need to rest!”

"I'm fine, Val. I'm fine. It is just a cold trying to make its way into my lungs. I'm supposed to make tea with this every day until I feel better."

"That doesn't sound too bad, I suppose. But still! Sit and relax, I can make supper." said Val brightly as she emptied out the bags of food.

"No. Sit." Valerie added after Aranya made as if to pick up the bundle of carrots.

With a sigh, Aranya pulled out a stool and sat. Valerie smiled to herself, pleased that she had made Aranya listen to her, for once.

Since she didn't know how Amari's tea would affect her, Aranya decided to make the first cup the next morning after Val had left for school. Nerves made her hands shake as she poured steaming water into her favorite cup. In a tea infuser, she placed one flattened scoop of the powder. It had a curious spicy scent. Dropping the ball into her cup, she set it in the middle of the counter and went to retrieve her book from her nightstand. She opened the book at the marker, but her eyes refused to absorb the words. Shoving the book further onto the counter she stood and began gathering the breakfast dishes. The dishwater and her tea turned cool as she stared out the window. Curling a lip as the tepid tea flowed across her tongue, Aranya waited for something to happen.

Nothing. Still nothing. Had Amari lied to her? Did this powder actually do anything? Then, right below her ribs, she felt it. A pull. As if her entire body was collapsing in on itself. Just when she thought she would collapse, a rush of power exploded outward.

The strength she felt.

Intoxicating.

Part 3

Over the next few months, Aranya felt almost like herself before she was sick. Her breathing was better and her joints didn't ache. She had so much energy. Humming as she made Valerie's favorite hard candy at work, she even felt a small spark of hope. This could work. She could save her sister. The only dark spot that Aranya noticed, but refused to accept, was that earlier and earlier in the day she began looking forward to the next morning because the next morning meant the next cup of tea.

One morning, Aranya was in a rush and didn't level off the scoop. Distracted with gathering some papers for work, she had not realized it until she had sprinkled it into the boiling water. Not wanting to waste any of the precious remedy, she drank the entire cup. Just as every morning, that point in her stomach contracted until she almost collapsed, but the explosion of power this time was tenfold.

Aranya just sat stunned, unable to move.

The next morning, that extra jolt of power from the few extra grains was justified because there was so much to plan for, the birthday celebration and...after. She needed the extra energy to get it all done. For a brief moment, Aranya let herself sit with the realization that one day she would not be here to look out for her sister. With a shake of her head, Aranya didn't let herself think about that part of her future again. All of her energy must be spent on planning Val's future, she couldn't waste any of it on allowing herself to confront her own feelings.

The following day, it was going to be an extra busy day at work. The extra grains were once more justified. And the next and the next and the next.

Soon Aranya stopped finding reasons. The pile of extra powder

grew taller and taller—and taller.

Deep down, she knew this was why Amari was so insistent with the dosage—and why she was so hesitant giving her the remedy in the first place. Deep down, she knew she had crossed that line. Deep down, she knew she was addicted.

The thing with all that power was that, while her hunger for it increased, her ability to care about what was actually happening drained away, like water seeping into dry sand.

One day, Valerie forgot a notebook for school and ran back to get it. She found Aranya making her daily cup of tea.

“You're still drinking that? You told me a few weeks after you started it that you were feeling better and that you had stopped. Why are you still taking it? Why are you lying to me?!”

“I didn't lie. I did stop taking it. This feels like before. A cold that is trying to worm its way into my lungs. I'm trying to be proactive and treat it before the symptoms worsen.”

As the words left her mouth, the ice of the lie grew in Aranya's heart. Valerie deserved the truth. She deserved the conversation. She deserved the chance to say goodbye. Aranya's fear of the sadness and pain on Valerie's face, when she learned that her sister was dying, wouldn't let her give her sister what she deserved. The truth that Valerie deserved was that Aranya got scared of her need for the powder and she had stopped taking it. She had been determined to force herself to survive on willpower alone. She had lasted for three days, but her body wouldn't let her sleep without its warm and spicy taste flowing across her tongue.

“Alright.” said Val. The look on her face told Aranya that she would have to be more careful.

Six weeks before Valerie's birthday, Aranya woke up to a dull

ache in her chest that made it difficult to breathe. Hurriedly, she drank her tea and only relaxed when the ache went away.

A month before Valerie's birthday, Aranya scraped the last scoop of powder from the container. Amari had to give her more. There was no way she would take everything away from Valerie, who was innocent in all of this, when Aranya was so close to granting her freedom.

After work, Aranya climbed the wooden staircase and pushed open the door. A shadow turned. A familiar shape. A familiar face.

"Aranya." The disappointment in Amari's voice told Aranya everything.

"I need more. Not much. Just enough for a few weeks."

"Are you putting just one, leveled, spoonful in your tea just once a day, like I instructed?"

"...Yes, of course."

"Then you shouldn't be here. You should still have enough to last until your sister's birthday."

"I agree, but I knocked the bottle over last week and it spilled out. More of it disappeared into my rug than I thought. So just a quarter cup more will be enough to make up the difference."

"Remember what I told you about refills?"

"I know, I know, but I thought you would make an exception."

"No, no exceptions."

"I've made it this far and Val's birthday is so close."

"I'm sorry Aranya, but your clumsiness does not mean I should change my policies."

"Fine," replied Aranya shortly. Amari just looked at her with the same disappointment she had on her face when Aranya walked in

the shop, but with an additional dash of pity.

In an alley across the street from Amari's shop, Aranya paced frantically. What could she do? She needed more of that powder. There was still a whole month left. Stealing more, even though she was loathe to consider it, wouldn't work since Amari lived beneath the shop. Even if she wasn't working, she would hear someone breaking in upstairs. In any case, even if Aranya did break into the shop, Amari would know it was her.

Hours passed. Shadows began creeping up the alley's brick walls. Aranya kept searching for other options. Then, Amari walked down the stairs with a basket and a small pair of scissors in her hand. Ingredients! Of course she would have to gather supplies. Not everything she used could be found at the market. Maybe one of the ingredients would be the flower for the remedy.

Quickly, but not too quickly, Aranya followed Amari down the street that ran in front of her shop and across the Fox River bridge. As Amari disappeared into the forest on the other side of the river, the full moon rose from the canopy. Blindingly bright, it glinted off the scissors and was the only way Aranya could follow Amari. Her dark cloak blended in with the shadows between the trees. A tendril of wind slid through the branches like a cold whisper ruffling the edges of Amari's cloak.

Aranya shivered as the forest tore at her skirt and hair and hands.

Suddenly, a field of spires rose in front of them. Gravestones. Rising like skeletal fingers in the moonlight. They had reached the first of the city's three cemeteries. On some of the graves grew ethereal white flowers called skull stone columbine. At each clump, Amari snipped off a single flower and placed it gently in her basket.

Once Amari was on the other side of a clump of trees Aranya

stepped from a tree's shadow and approached the first gravestone with flowers. A light aroma wafted from the flowers as she moved them aside to read the inscription. This grave belonged to a child. So did the next, and the next...and the next.

There wasn't a single skull stone columbine growing on a grave of anyone over twelve.

As quickly as possible, Aranya picked every flower she came across until her arms could hold no more. Arriving home, she hid the bundle of flowers in the back of her closet before hurrying off to the market to buy the remaining ingredients. Luckily, the festival was this week, so the market was open past its usual hours. If Amari wouldn't make her more powder, then she would do it herself.

Valerie spent that night at a friend's house to study for an exam at the end of the week. Aranya took the gift of solitude and attempted to make Amari's remedy. After speed-drying the columbine, Aranya crushed various combinations of the flower's elements. It turned out the powder that most closely resembled Amari's twelfth ingredient was the entire flower. Sweeping them all together, until they formed an identical mountain of light brown, took longer as Aranya's shaking hand kept knocking clouds of ingredients back to the edge of, or off, the plate.

Finally, it was ready.

Heaping an extra-large scoopful into an infuser, Aranya dropped it so hastily into the cup that steaming drops landed across her pallid skin. Gulping down the burning liquid, she waited for the pull under her ribs. Five minutes later, she was still waiting. Going over the list of ingredients in her head, she was certain she had identified and remembered them all correctly. The flower in the graveyard had to be the mystery ingredient. What was she

missing?

Intending to again plead her case to Amari or steal the jar of dried and crushed flowers if that failed, Aranya made her way to the shop the next morning. On the way, she came across some children who were playing with a jump rope. One of them tripped on the rope and badly skinned their knee. Aranya thought nothing of it until a familiar light scent filled the air. It smelled exactly like skull stone columbine. Aranya looked around for the white flower. Passing by the injured child to peer in the alley beyond Aranya noticed the scent grew stronger. It could only be one thing.

Blood.

Blood? Why did a child's blood smell like cemetery flowers? And why hadn't she noticed it before? This wasn't the first time Aranya had been around an injured child. Unable to walk away, Aranya reached into her pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Once the bleeding stopped, Aranya held out her hand. The child placed it back in her hand, uncertain.

"But it's dirty, miss."

"Not your business," Aranya replied brusquely and hurried back home. As soon as the flower's scent reached her nose, Aranya had an idea. She didn't know if it would work or if it was just her desperation spiraling out of control.

Refilling her teapot, she set it on the stove to heat and then paced nervously up and down their short counter. Finally, the steam was rising. Aranya poured the water over the blood soaked handkerchief, turning it a pale red. Removing the square of fabric, she squeezed the residual liquid back into the cup. As the steam softly touched her face, Aranya dared to hope that her idea would work.

At the first sip, the taste of blood was obliterated by the rising

tsunami of power deep inside her. There was no sensation of collapsing in on herself; just power. Pure all-consuming power. Aranya hadn't felt this full of life even before she was sick. Having learned her lesson about running out, she put the rest of the blood tea in a jar and hid it in her closet next to the flowers.

Expecting to wake up the next morning, ready for another sip, Aranya was surprised that she felt as alive and strong as she had right after taking her first sip of the blood tea. There was not a lessening in the power. For the next three days this did not change. On the morning of the fourth day, she took another sip, and her strength came back to her full force.

Part 4

Two weeks before Valerie's birthday, Aranya was running out of blood tea. Nothing she had tried with the skull stone flowers had worked. There must be something that Amari did to the flower powder of which she was unaware.

For all the power the blood tea made her feel, it also filled her with revulsion. The blood of children? Could there be a worse power source?

Despite the feelings of horror, Aranya found herself spending more and more time at the square in the middle of town, where children often gathered to play, hoping that one of them would bleed—as awful as that sounded. She also used her connections at the confectionery where she worked to befriend several regular customers in the hopes that, if they injured themselves playing in the square outside the shop, they would come to her for help so that she could surreptitiously steal their blood as she treated them.

While no one came to her because they were injured, she was the first one they came to when one of their friends, Freddie, had

gone into the woods to find sticks for their game and not returned. Aranya suggested they speak with Freddie's parents about what had happened; maybe he had had to go home. They said Freddie didn't have any parents and that he lived at the orphanage. The old lady who was in charge didn't care what happened to the children, only that the town paid her to take them in—money she used for vodka. If a few went missing, that meant less mouths to feed. It didn't matter to her; she was paid the same. Three children or thirty.

Her shift was ending anyway, so she told the children she would help them look for their friend. In the back of her mind, her need for more blood was also lurking. She tried to push it away, but different scenarios of how Freddie might have injured himself in the forest kept filling her thoughts. The farther they walked into the forest, the quieter it became as the trees and ferns dampened their voices.

When Aranya found Freddie, she could no longer hear the voices of the other children, but her need for blood was overpowering. Freddie had fallen down the muddy bank of the stream and had cut his head open on a boulder. Like most head wounds, he was bleeding profusely. Aranya bent down to hand him her handkerchief, but he fainted before he could grab it.

Crying as she did so, Aranya emptied out her water flask from her midday meal into the dirt and pressed the opening against the side of Freddie's head to catch any seeping blood. Before she was done, Freddie began to regain consciousness. Aranya was no longer in control. Her need grabbed Freddie by the shoulders and bashed his head against the boulder. Just as he went still, the other children found her.

Apparently, her crying was louder than she realized.

Carrying his body, as she entered the square, Aranya was still crying. Not from sadness, but from hatred for herself. She had killed an innocent child! A large crowd of people surrounded her.

Some took Freddie from her arms and walked in the direction of the mortuary. Others spoke calmly to her and brought her to the hotel across from the candy shop. They removed her clothes and helped her wash in a warm bath.

As the water cooled, Aranya felt drained. Not only from all the crying, but the shock of what she had done. Despite this, she picked up her water flask and shook it. Freddie's blood sloshed inside. Aranya clutched it to her chest and took a deep breath as tension began to leave her body. Grabbing the clean clothes that had been left for her, Aranya made her way back to her apartment. As she left the hotel, several people tried to stop her, but she said she just needed to be at home, and they let her go.

Aranya clutched the flask to her chest as her back slid down their closed apartment door. She hit the floor and her forehead dropped onto her bent knees and her fingers slid down to dig into her skirts hard enough to bruise the skin of her thighs beneath. The shock at what she had done to Freddie had disappeared and was replaced with hate. Hate that she hadn't tried to speak with her sister one more time before finding Amari. Hate that she had given in so easily to the blood's embrace. The tea was bad enough, but how could she face her sister again knowing that she was only here because she drank the blood of children?

Slowly, Aranya dragged herself upright. Despite all of her self-loathing she knew that it would be nothing compared to the total revulsion she would feel if she did all of these unforgivable things and then gave up now. If she gave up now it would have been better for her to have been dead three months ago.

Part 5

Aranya drained the last warm and spicy drops of tea, made with Freddie's blood, as Val returned. Putting down her bag, Val came over and ripped the cup from Aranya's hand. Lifting it to her nose, Val's eyes narrowed.

"More tea?"

"I..."

"Don't tell me you have a cold again. What did Amari give you?"

"I didn't get his from Amari."

"Where did it come from then?"

"Don't worry about it. It's fine."

"It's not fine. Whatever this is you've been hiding it. This is not what fine looks like. I should have said something sooner, but I just couldn't believe that my sister would lie to me about something so important. What won't you tell me?!"

"It's not your problem."

"Of course it's my problem! You're my sister." Valerie's eyes darkened in suspicion. "Were you ever really sick or was that a lie too?"

"Of course I am sick!"

"What do you mean *am* sick? What is happening, Aranya? Talk to me, please."

Like water surging over a dam, Aranya's guilt poured out the entire story. Her sickness. Amari's remedy. The skull stone columbine. Everything. Tears of regret and self-loathing choked Aranya, but she forced the words out. This was her one chance to explain. The relief of her sister finally knowing overwhelmed Aranya and she fell to the floor again grasping at her sister's skirts

in a desperate plea for forgiveness.

“Freddie tripped in the forest and hit his head on a boulder. That's what you told the everyone.” Valerie said in a horrified whisper. The realization of what her sister had become sliding over Valerie's face like a mask. She pulled her hands away from Aranya's grasping fingers and took a step back, turning her body as if preparing to run.

“He did. Just not hard enough to kill him. I did that.”

“Why?! Why would you kill a child?” Valerie screamed, her voice breaking on the last word as her breath quickened. She kept shaking her head, as she took two more steps back, as if trying to dispel the reality that Aranya had forced on her from her mind.

“I told you,” Aranya pleaded, “I tried to make Amari's powder, and it didn't work. This is the only thing that does.”

With her back against the front door and tears streaming down her face Valerie squeezed her eyes shut saying emphatically “I love you, Aranya, but I would rather have you die than killing children!” Aranya watched as Valerie's hands slid to massage her chest as if trying to calm her breathing. She could see that she was losing her sister, but she couldn't let her go. Not after everything. “But...you need me!”

“Not like this, I don't.”

“For the inheritance birthday.”

“You did this for money?!” Revulsion dripping from every word.

“No, I did this for you. So you can keep your money, and Aunt and Uncle won't steal it.”

“That again? They won't steal my money. They love me.”

“They just want you to think that, so you will ask them to be your witness, if I'm not there.”

"They know you're sick?"

"No, I'm just taking precautions."

Valerie ran from the room. The sounds of her vomiting echoed in the otherwise silent apartment. Aranya slammed her fists on the floor in frustration, her body crumpling in defeat. Why couldn't Valerie understand that Aranya was doing all of this for her? Even though she was leaving all of her money to Valerie that didn't mean that Valerie wasn't entitled to what was hers as well. Val returned looking pale and shaky.

"You need to leave. Now."

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"That is not my problem. I will not live with a murderer." Aranya watched in horror as any remaining love drained from Valerie's face and was left with cold scorn. She had irrevocably lost her sister. "Because you are my sister and I loved you once, I will give you a day's head start before I tell everyone what you did."

Aranya packed a bag and headed into the forest. There was an abandoned cottage that Aranya had discovered a few years ago just down the stream bank from where she had found Freddie. Ever since she had drunk the first cup of blood tea Aranya had known she could never go back.

Not to Amari's powder.

Not to dying.

After all, children went missing in the forest all the time. And Aranya hadn't met one yet that didn't like candy.

Part 6

After a few weeks, everyone stopped searching for Aranya. Other crimes took precedence. After all, Freddie was an orphan—no distraught parents were demanding answers.

Years passed, and witness statements became stories, which became legends. There was always one rebellious child who ignored their parents' warnings about the dangers lurking in the forest. Every once in a while, a child would escape Aranya's traps of hidden nets and overflowing bowls of candy.

Since they were usually lost when they found it, they couldn't recall the cottage's location. The few survivors' remarks were how the townsfolk learned that the cottage was decorated with candy. Soon children were daring each other to find the hidden candy cottage. Extra points if they brought back candy, and bragging rights for life if they saw the woman who lived there.

The End

The Third Gift

By M.A. Gilmore

Be careful what you wish for, O Balthasar,
Darkest of the Wise Ones, as you present
Your gift; its scent masks both pain and death.

Good Balthasar, be careful what you promise;
The sweetest words of hope turn sour
One hundred days after elections.

The tower not yet struck, nor bubble burst,
A man who shared your state but not
Your time presumed his word made good;

In dust-fouled pot—as motored wagons,
Memory laden, ferried weary faithful West;
Golden sun-scorched scars upon their fortune.



Badlands by Julie Peterson

Why Moss Grows on the North Side of Trees

(a story of two friends)

By M.A. Gilmore

In Granddad's words: "Nothing in this world is as valuable as a best friend. If you are married to yours, then you are the luckiest man on Earth; if not, well, then you have some looking around to do. In the meantime, you'd best have someone with whom to swap stories. It doesn't matter if they are true; a true friend will always have your back."

This is a story that was told me by my grandfar, who was told him by his grandfar, and so on, afar back; the true story of why moss grows on the north side of trees.

"A long time ago, before there were any men, before the Tuatha disappeared, the wise ones came down and walked the earth and communed with the animals and plants growin' there. They taught them to speak, so as to continue teaching them, to be kind to each other and not be arrogant or spiteful.

"As it happened, there was a fair-sized *criann* in the center of the island, where all the families of the *fhoraioise* were gathered, each to their kind, giving food and shelter to animals, the birds, the deer, the foxes and the hares, alike; and the forest floor was alive with the meanest of them, the beetles and the worms and all.

"In the center of the copse was a large rock, where many of these would collect themselves to get out of the wet earth, where they could listen to the trees converse—it being the highest place they could reach. It was there that Caonach and his family lived; with his sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and cousins, where they had all been for so long as anyone could remember.

And Caonach and his family were numerous and proud; their feet were firmly set on the rock their home, and none could dislodge them. They had the highest place in the *criann*—to hear them tell of it.

“Caonach, too, was proud—being short and stocky and sporting a scraggly beard; his feet were the biggest and the best and he held the highest place on the rock.

“One day, however, he noticed a small shoot growin’ near the rock—too close for his taste—and so he called out: ‘You there, beware! I am Caonach Hy Creig, king of the Mountain! Don’t grow too close, or I and my feet will stamp ye down!’

“The shoot, bein’ young and impressionable, listened to Caonach and believed, and in the belief, said not a word.

“This went on for a time, with Caonach shoutin’ taunts; until one day near Beltaine, the sapling finished puttin’ on his hoary green *coata mohra*, and looked him in the eye—havin’ grown tall enough to fully address his adversary. ‘I am Darach, Prionsa an Ghleanna; and who are you, *briste gairid*, to address me so?’ the sapling said. ‘Look high! These are my family, my sisters and brothers, who stay Morrigan’s wet slap, and Rhiannon’s hard embrace! Step down off yer perch and make good yer boast!’

“Caonach, who had never set foot from his rock, was surely chastised; without the rock to back him up, he saw that Darach had grown to be a tower, sure. So he changed his tack, and in his best, soft voice, he ventured: ‘My apologies, dear prince, for assaulting your stature. It’s just that I can’t deny my place, it bein’ the highest one in the forest.’

“Darach, who had now grown old enough to hear the whispers of his kin ‘round him, took stock of the squat form sittin’ solid on his craggy throne. Realizing that Caonach would never fly from his

own hatchin' bed, he would set his tone to *solas anama* in hopes for future discourse. 'Your throne is indeed a high one, O Caonach Hy Creig, but it is not the highest. Can you not hear? My family converses with the Wise Ones, who walk the sky; they pass and tell their secrets, for we are the Ardwinna, the Guardians. Listen, and believe.'

"Caonach, for once, opened his ears and closed his mouth. He listened as Darach spoke, and heard the murmurs, though he be too low to make out their sense. And so, the two then made a pact; each day, the pair conversed, and in the conversation, put their hostilities behind them. Darach would regale the tales from above, and Caonach below, and soon they were fast friends.

"Their families, however, were not impressed. For long and long in the copse, high had kept to high, and low to low, and the growing friendship between the two was never a favorite hearth-tale. On the rock, Caonach would hear: 'We have not moved, our feet are large! What do ye want wi' tales of the sky? Soon, yer Darach will outgrow ye, and where will ye be then?' Darach, meanwhile, heard the same: 'You are Darach na Criann! What time ye waste, with that—that rock dweller! Your head should be held high, for soon you will meet Belanus, see his face, and shake his hand! Forsake this nonsense on the floor—Lo! Belanus comes!'

"Sure an' enough, a tall, bearded stranger was approaching the copse from the east. He was dressed all in gold that reflected the light off his shining countenance—his eyes were bright with the ancient knowledge, and his smile was music. Soon, he was standin' right above Darach, who meekly offered up his hand. In that moment, all was forgotten save th' meetin'—for Darach, it was only the warm smile and the gentle touch that mattered.

"The moment passed and was gone. Belanus turned and

resumed his walk to the west, and soon disappeared over the dun. Darach, impressed, turned his head to the west, but the golden god would not turn back; Darach would have to wait until he passed again.

“His composure regained, Darach shivered with excitement. He must tell Caonach what he had seen, and done. Each day hence, the golden face approached and the hand was extended; and each day, he would relate the sight to his friend.

“But Caonach, who knew only the rock, grew more sullen with each telling. In the darkness of the forest floor, his jealousy grew. His thoughts about the rock and his kin grew as dark as his surroundings, and his pride became disdain. ‘I grow tired of this place, this *gaeol*,’ he thought. ‘If only I were taller, I could see Belanus for myself, and maybe shake his hand!’ He hatched a plan; he would stretch his face up and his feet down—surely, that would be enough.

“The next day, Caonach waited for the god to approach. He then stretched his face up and stomped his feet down. But, instead of going up, he felt himself falling; his overlarge feet had smashed the rock, tumbling he and his family, in the main, to the ground.

In his fright, he wailed up to his friend: ‘O Darach, help me! I want to see, too! Please, help me up!’

“Darach, who had seen and heard, reached down and placed his friend upon his shoulder so that he, too, could reach. But when Caonach saw the face, and touched the hand, he was overcome; the shame of his desire, his jealousy, his wantonness, was more than he could bear. He turned away his burning eyes, burning down to his very being, and shrank away.

“The shame spilled out of his eyes and wet his face; confessing all to his stalwart friend in lament: ‘O Darach, what have I done? I

canna stay here; I canna go back; me lintel is cracked and th' hearth is dust. I've disgraced meself and thrown me kin to th' groun'! What must I do?'

"Darach, still filled with the golden touch, turned a kind ear to the stocky friend shriveled and keenin' on his shoulder. "Why Caonach, what're ye about? Are we not friends? Were we not once kin together, there on the forest floor? My hearth and my home are yours! There's room aplenty on my back; high enough to see, low enough to touch the ground, secure enough for feet even as large as your own—clamber down and look well, *diuthchara!*'

"Caonach hung his head, and climbed down, settin' his feet on the broad, rough back of Darach—true enough, high enough to see, low to the ground, and there he stayed. Sure, and there was room enough for his aunts and uncles and cousins, and the rest of them, all upon the back of Darach.

"And so, King Darach (for king now he was, having grown so broad as to span the breadth of the copse) set a discourse with the others in the *criann*, so as to deal with the balance of Caonach's displaced kin. After a time, there was not one bare back in the copse, nor one of Caonach's line without bark shoes.

"For those of Darach's line proved as wise as he: comin' to learn that no manner of knowledge was not worth knowin', nor discourse unfruitful; whether it be as it would from the sky, or lower than the lowest fallen leaf.

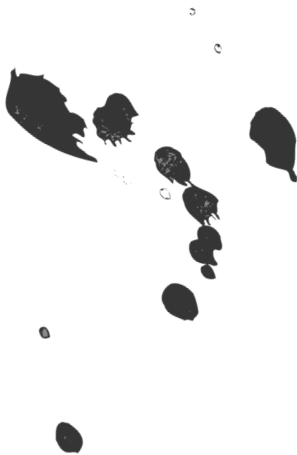
"Each day, Darach would meet the sun god as he passed, and shake his hand. At night, he would flirt with Rhiannon and accept her warm caresses. He would chide Morrigan, as well, when she spoke too loud, and threaten to drench the forest floor.

"Caonach, meanwhile, would throw down daily insults to the animals on the forest floor from his perch high upon the great

oaken back and proclaim his right as the King's highest counselor.

"In between, the two friends would boast of the other and trade stories; Darach of the sky, and Caonach of the ground. Caonach would occasionally grow bold and wander further up, but never, ever, never, again high enough to see the sun god's face. His shame from that fateful day was great, and borne by all.

"Darach would watch Caonach in his antics, and laugh silently at his stubbornness—for who, in truth, can fault the nature of a friend? But, bein' King, and wise and true as well, he would never mention it.



The Shining Dream

By Kate Fiala

Arriving at my High School reunion, unlike my usual dread of things like this, I am filled with energy. I feel like I am radiating it. As I go through the check-in, everyone is so positive to see me as if I am a movie star. When I get into the room, everyone seems to react to me as if I am the most fascinating person they have ever encountered.

People, who in high school didn't have the time of day for me and looked down their noses at me, are positively giddy to meet me again and talk to me. The men find me stunning and the women think I am brilliant.

What is going on? Not that I am complaining or anything, but it feels amazing. Out of no where I realize I have been given a gift. Not sure who gave it to me, but I realize that it is a gift I can give away.

My old friend Nora approaches me. She was not very popular in high school either and still looks like she is hiding under a bushel. Spontaneously, I give the gift to Nora. Now everyone is being positive to her, hanging on her every word, asking her to dance, and regarding her with great fascination and awe.

I am not jealous of this. I still have the positive vibe about me, and when I see how people respond to her, I am so happy I could cry. The focus is all on Nora. She is beaming with happiness and gratitude. She has no idea where the gift came from but is thoroughly enjoying it. Soon, she looks around and sees one of her other friends and decides to give the gift away. The gift makes the rounds of the reunion with everyone getting a chance to feel like the God's gift that they are.

As everyone leaves that night, no one is drunk or high; they are

all simply buzzing with happiness. All depart with a bit of the gift inside them. I hear someone express what all were feeling: "I had no idea I went to school with such a group of amazing people."

We all have this wonderful gift. We just need to pull it out from under the bushel basket and let it shine to pass the reflection on to others.

Shine On.



Blooming Wagon by Mary Ellen Shinstock

Prayer for Girls Who Never Got Apologies

By Tatum Tipp

May your silence be sacred, not mistaken for surrender.

May the ache in your chest not endure any longer.

When you fight alone, know you can call upon your sisters.

May every biting truth you have swallowed down become a constellation on your tongue, sharp and shining, so the next time someone tries to dim you, they blister instead.

May your kindness never be mistaken for weakness, again.

May your softness never fade; you are not a doormat; do not let them think that.

May you find peace, not in shallow graves you have dug, but in a wild garden of you.

Do not let them tell you who you can and cannot blossom into.

And if they try to write your name, in guilt or shame—and they will—let your words be louder than their lies.

Amen.

I Told My Mother

By Tatum Tipp

I told my mother about the way you
Looked at me in eighth hour
Quickly, then away—
Like you weren't supposed to
But couldn't help it.

I told her how you handed me
Half your brownie
With a simple "here,"
Like it was natural to share with me.

I told her how you made sure
I never was left out of the group,
How I never had to wonder
If I belonged.

I told my baby sister she'd love you,
And she does.

She asks me to point you out
Before we leave the house,
So she can wave
And say your name,
Like she's known you all her life.

She said you should be my boyfriend
Because that's how often I spoke of you.

I didn't tell her you already felt like something close.

I told my mother
About the time you showed me
How to make a fist,
Not to fight,
But so I wouldn't hurt myself if I ever did.

It wasn't serious.
Just our teasing as we always did,
But you still looked at my hands like they mattered,
And that made me think.

I told my mother
Because you made it so easy to believe
That you felt something too.

The little things you did?

They were louder than what you didn't do.

You let me hold on
Every smile,
Every glance,
And you knew.

You knew what you were doing to me.
You let me think that you loved me.

You would find me in a crowd, and I'd find you.
Our fingers brushed together, and I'd think of grasping your hand,
While wondering why you didn't grab mine.

You knew what it meant when I said,
I like talking to you.

You replied,
I like talking to you, too.

Then, we moved past the subject.

You never said it outright until I asked,
And that's the part that stings.

You kept it so real, to the point where I never doubted your affections for me.

I gave you a place in my heart,
A little list filled with the details I knew about you.

I had gifts planned out.
Birthday
Christmas
Valentine's Day
Every occasion I could think of.

So, yes,
I told my mother.

The Fisherman's Talisman

By Anne Schiller

Jessup Clarke was not one to buy into the nonsense of superstition. However, his stoic stance changed with a series of events that began on a cold, rainy night in late October.

Jessup flipped the six odd coins through his arthritic fingers by the dim light of his wood-burning stove. The power outage did not phase Jessup, for at the age of 80 years, he had weathered many Kansas storms. Angry rain drops pelted the cabin's tin roof like coarse sand being thrown from a road grader. No worries on the part of Jessup. He built this three-room cabin to withstand the forces of nature—propane fueled appliances supplemented the wood burning stove. Jessup preferred an environment not reliant on electricity.

The soft scent of wood-burning smoke wafted through the cabin as Jessup's thoughts turned to his wife, Maureen. Maureen, now deceased for two years, loved the quiet of a power outage. Passing the hours of a power outage in their two-story farmhouse, she often told stories from her Irish heritage. Tales of leprechauns and the Banshee danced with the night shadows as she spun the fables with an Irish brogue. Jessup loved the lilt of her voice as she told the stories, but he had no use for believing in good luck charms or evil spells.

Jessup thrived in his life with Maureen and farming the ground passed to him through three generations. Then, in a firm decision just 6 months after burying Maureen he abandoned it all. The section in Russell County no longer served any purpose for Jessup. After cultivating the farm for 50 years, raising cattle, and selling produce, he auctioned it all to the highest bidder. He salvaged only

enough household goods to furnish the 20' X 30' space he now calls home. A close eleven miles from Wilson Lake, Jessup and his aged chocolate Labrador, Duke, now spend the days fishing. Fishing—the only passion left in Jessup's life, and the key to the six foreign coins clinking in his hand.

Jessup spotted the coins on the lakeshore earlier that day. The coins, placed in a circle on the red sand, caught his eye and he could not resist picking them up. Jessup's interest in old coins began in his childhood when his father showed him a coin collection that had been passed down from his grandfather. Jessup's father kept the coins in a soft leather pouch with a drawstring. As an adolescent, Jessup spent hours studying the German coins from his heritage, Spanish coins from an uncle who traveled the world, and solid silver USA dimes that were no longer in circulation. To this day, Jessup did not forgive his younger brother for selling them to a pawn shop after their father died. When Jessup spied the six coins on the lakeshore, he noted that they were unlike anything he had seen or read about. He was unable to identify their country of origin, but they certainly were not of the USA.

He carried them home in the pocket of his fishing vest. Sitting now in the flickering light of the fire, Jessup examined the coins. Each coin, slightly larger than a quarter, consisted of an outer ring of copper and a center of dull nickel. The imprint of a fish on one side, and a shield emblem on the other. The shield emblem was divided into quadrants, and within each of the quadrants was an imprint. A heart, an anchor, a boat, and a crescent moon were stamped in the quadrants. Jessup carefully lined the coins in a row on the wooden table he had built from scrap barn wood. From the tidy row, Jessup analyzed the coins further, to determine if they were identical as if made in a factory, or were they only

similar, perhaps crafted by hand. Jessup, of an engineering mindset, was not able to pursue a college degree due to lack of financing and his commitment to the family farm. However, his lack of an engineering degree did not deter his mind from working as an engineer's brain. He studied the material and design of the coins in an effort to determine both their place of origin and the timeframe of their production. Jessup left the coins in the precise row for further study tomorrow.

The cabin was designed with an open room that was living room, kitchen and dining area all in one. A heavy wool rug of green and blue defined the dining area. The rug, a family heirloom from Maureen's Irish family, connected a memory of one of her stories. He recalled a tale of good luck if a fisherman finds coins while fishing. The fisherman would toss the found coins in with the net and an abundance of fish would grace his boat. Jessup smiled at the memory of Maureen. His faint smile turned into a yawn, tired and ready for sleep, Jessup tossed a fat log on the fire to last the next several hours. Duke stretched in front of the fire on his fluffy blanket—soaking the heat into his aged joints.

The wall clock chimed at 5:00 a.m. The return of power kicked on the refrigerator with a hum, and the bright light from Jessup's bedside lamp rudely awakened him. In the foggy state of early morning brain, Jessup recalled his dream of last night. A disturbing image of a fierce storm and Maureen walking in the rain through gnarled trees. She was wearing a long black dress and turned her face to Jessup, her eyes wide with fright. Jessup rubbed his eyes and dismissed the dream. There would be much to do today for storm clean up.

Knock, knock, knock, three short raps on the door jostled Jessup's thoughts back to his cabin. Jessup unlocked the heavy

wood front door and his long-time friend, Calvin, stomped his rain boots on the porch and tromped into the cabin. Calvin shared Jessup's love of fishing and Jessup was happy to find the slice of ten acres adjacent to his fishing buddy. Calvin and his wife, Jane, had also retired from farming and now lived a simple life of raising chickens and goats.

"Sun isn't even up—you're out early, Calvin," remarked Jessup without the formality of hello.

"Couldn't sleep—that storm kept me up all night, and Jane was fussing about this morning resetting clocks and checking for window leaks. So I left."

"How did you do in that storm last night?" Calvin asked nonchalantly.

"Just fine. Here, Duke, go on out" Jessup opened the door as Duke slowly made his way to the yard.

Jessup started the coffee in his 15-year-old Mr. Coffee drip pot and then started making his way toward the wood box to select another log for the fire.

"Do you have any half and half?" Calvin asked as he made himself at home in Jessup's kitchen area. "Hey, what are these?" Calvin asked, pointing to the table as he passed by.

"Found 'em at the lake yesterday," Jessup stated as he looked back at the table where he lined up the coins last night.

Calvin was leaning over the table, picking the top coin from a stack of coins. Calvin carefully pinched his thumb and index finger to remove the top coin and held it close to his face. "These are weird looking," remarked Calvin.

Still feeling a bit of brain fog from the storm disrupting his sleep, Jessup glanced at the coins and was about to remark about them,

but Duke let out a yelp at the door, demanding Jessup's attention. Jessup opened the door for the dog and a chill swept through the cabin. With the chill came a musky odor. The odd odor swirled with the aroma of the fresh brewed coffee, creating its own presence in the cabin. As Duke walked in, Jessup noticed that the dog was hobbling as he made his way toward his blanket, his back legs stiff and his head hung low.

Clank, crash.

"What'd ya do?" Jessup's thoughts about Duke were interrupted. He turned to Calvin who was picking up pieces of a ceramic cup that had fallen to the floor.

"I was looking for sugar for my coffee, I was moving the cups and I accidentally bumped one and it fell." Calvin tossed the pieces into the trash can.

"Sugar's here," Jessup muttered as he stepped to the counter and pulled a canister from behind the paper towel holder.

"Want to go fishing tomorrow?" Calvin asked, ignoring Jessup's distracted mood.

Jessup grunted, "Sure".

Duke was now pacing circles around Jessup's recliner. Jessup worried about the age of his dog, his faithful companion now that Maureen had passed. Duke had become more than a pet to Jessup and Maureen. The dog filled a void in the family unit after their only son left home to build his teaching career in Denver. With the loss of Maureen, Duke was Jessup's sole companion.

"River water from the rain should bring the bass in," Calvin said as he poured steaming coffee into a heavy brown ceramic mug he selected after breaking the cup.

"I'll swing by early tomorrow, we can take your boat." Calvin

casually took the mug of coffee with him without even asking. Jessup had come to accept Calvin's manner of stepping beyond social graces. Calvin left Jessup's cabin and pattered away in his old pickup.

Jessup moved slowly through the chores of the storm clean up. Age layered with grief. Grief layered with lack of sleep. He thought of the stacked coins and Calvin picking up the top coin. Jessup was certain he left them in a neat row. Jessup shook head, and his mind turned to back to the tasks at hand.

Duke lethargically followed Jessup as he moved about the yard. The dog walked with a newly developed limp in his hind legs. Jessup watched the dog and wished Maureen were still here to mix up an Irish poultice to help ease Duke's pain.

Jessup continued storm repairs throughout the day. The storm's wind had caused the door on the chicken coop to spring from its hinges. Jessup fashioned a temporary fix with wire until his next trip to town when he could purchase new hinges. A piece of tin tore loose from his shed and he nailed it back to protect the wood underneath. Jessup wrapped up the day by gathering downed branches and putting them in a burn pile. He would burn the pile on a wind-still day in the spring.

That night, Jessup's joints ached and nightmares haunted his sleep. He dreamt of fish with coins in their mouth and Maureen catching the fish with her hands. She recklessly scooped up the fish, rapidly throwing them back into the lake. Her eyes wide with an eagerness to get rid of the fish, treating them like an infestation of rats.

In the morning, the cabin felt colder than usual. Duke scratched and tore at his blanket, and was not much interested in the food in his bowl. Jessup felt a bit feverish in spite of the chill in the cabin.

He tossed a lighted match on the teepee of logs in the wood burning stove. The flames caught quickly and threw orange and red sparks across the glass window of the stove. "Perhaps the warmth of the fire will help to settle Duke," thought Jessup.

He gathered his fishing gear, preparing to fish with Calvin that day. Jessup reached for the keys to his truck, and his hand froze midway in his reach. The coins, now arranged in a circle, seemed to taunt Jessup. He counted the coins, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Confusion entered Jessup's brain. Seven coins, didn't he count six coins when he found them? A slight blur of rainbow color entered his peripheral vision and Jessup felt sick to his stomach.

Three short knocks at the door. The rainbow cleared from his vision and Jessup took a deep breath to clear this head.

"You ready to go, let's take your boat out, it's going to be good fishing today." Calvin talked and walked through the front door simultaneously.

"Um, yea, ok, I'll get the boat keys." Jessup shoved all thoughts aside, including the coins and his wonder of the fever and nausea he was feeling.

Fishing proved to be excellent. They dropped anchor by the river mouth, and quickly both men caught their limit and tossed excess fish back in the lake. All sorts of bass, wide mouth, small mouth, and stripers all seemed to magically attach themselves to the fishing hooks of Jessup and Calvin.

"I told you the fishin' would be good today," Calvin teased Jessup.

Jessup looked at the fish in the well of the boat, "Look at this, all of these fish have been caught before and thrown back. Look, every single one of them has lost an eye by the snag of a hook."

“Hmmm, that is weird, but who cares, we made a great catch today, I told you we would!” Calvin replied as he pulled a wide mouth bass into the boat.

The men finished fishing and pulled in their poles. Jessup started the boat and the two fishing buddies returned to the dock, loaded the boat and headed home. That afternoon, Jessup set up about cleaning his share of the fish. He wasn't at all hungry and decided to package all the fish and freeze them for later. As he stacked the fish in the freezer compartment of his refrigerator, Jessup thought of the dream with Maureen and the fish, and then about the coins, he was certain he found six coins, not seven.

That evening, Jessup opened the door to let the dog out before bedtime. A quarter moon hung in the East. A smudge of rusty-orange encircled the moon and cast red streaks across the hazy sky. Clouds crept in front of the moon, smearing the color of dry rust and old blood across the night sky. Coyotes howled in the distance. Duke suddenly threw back his head and howled with the coyotes. A shudder ran through Jessup's chest. Duke had never howled before. Jessup called Duke and both dog and man quickly retreated inside the cabin. Jessup remembered Maureen speaking of “blood on the moon” and to have caution of this bad omen. Jessup quickly dismissed the thought, knowing he brought Duke in for fear of coyotes, not because of superstition.

As the night wore on, Duke's agitated behavior intensified. He growled at Jessup and laid by the door, eyes glaring in a way Jessup had not seen before.

A feverish feeling and nausea sent Jessup to bed. He was too sick to pay much attention to Duke, and Jessup fell into a restless sleep. Again, nightmares haunted him. Maureen was spewing fish coins from her mouth, and fish were flying about her head. She

was frail with deep hollow eyes that looked at Jessup in a cold and distant way.

In his dream state, Jessup was confused, a feeling which was foreign to his rational mind. Flashes of the odd coins, Duke being out-of-sorts, and he himself sick in bed, flipped through the nightmare like scenes from a thriller movie.

The shrill chime of his cell phone woke Jessup. Jane, Calvin's wife, spoke hurriedly with deep concern in her voice. "Calvin had a heart attack last night. We are in Hays at the hospital. He is in surgery now—open heart surgery."

Jessup felt woozy and weak. "I can be there in a couple of hours."

Jane replied, "No, no, the kids are here and we are just waiting for the doctor's report. But could you please check on the farm—the chickens, feed the goats and the dog."

"Ya, sure, I will do that," Jessup responded. He ended the call with a preoccupied, "Oh, and please keep me updated." The residual of the dream, mixed with the news of Calvin, muddled Jessup's brain.

Jessup brewed coffee and noted the coins on the table as he picked up his travel mug. Eight coins, now in a neat and tidy row. A rainbow of color floated before his eyes. "Must be part of this fever," mused Jessup, annoyed with the colors passing his vision and the coins that kept multiplying. He headed to the door, coffee in hand, and Duke bolted out the door. Typically, the dog jumped at the opportunity for a ride in Jessup's truck, but today the old dog charged toward the fields. Something was wrong, but Jessup's feet were too heavy to chase after a crazed dog. The dashboard blurred and the rainbow appeared again as a haze. Jessup fumbled with the truck keys, and after a few minutes, he was able

to put the truck in motion and set out to check on Calvin's nearby farm.

Jessup went about tending Calvin's chores. Since childhood he had checked on farm animals, and his instincts guided him through Calvin's yard, although in a slower-than-usual pace. He made sure the chickens had food and water and opened the little sliding door of their coop to allow them to wander about the fence.

In a Jessup scooped feed into a bucket and carried it to the goats, making sure their water tank was full as he passed by it. Calvin's border collie, Honey, came bounding from the shed. Jessup topped off her food and water and thought of Duke. He thought about the coins and the dreams. Deep colors blocked his vision for a moment as he opened the shed to put away the feed bucket. Pain stabbed his forehead and nausea hit his stomach. Those damned coins, Jessup knew they were the cause. Calvin's heart attack, the dizzying rainbow, and Duke's troubled behavior—all brought about since he carried the coins to his cabin.

After finishing at Calvin's farm, Jessup drove back to his cabin. He couldn't shake the ominous feeling that came over him. In the short drive, he made a plan. As Jessup pulled into his driveway, he saw Duke. The dog stood over a dead chicken. Jessup cautiously approached Duke, never having known his dog to kill anything. Duke lifted his head, and thick drool dripped from his blood-stained muzzle. Jessup could smell the madness on Duke's warm breath. A small amount of foam began to form at the corners of the dog's mouth. Jessup grabbed Duke by the collar and the dog went limp and complied as Jessup walked to the shed. Jessup's steps were slow and laborious, and Duke lumbered beside him, his tongue hanging out, panting and laboring for breath.

Jessup opened the shed door—Duke balked at the shed door,

resisting Jessup and pulling hard on his collar. Jessup kept hold of Duke while the dog thrashed about, growling and snarling. Duke's bloodshot eyes threatened Jessup, ready to attack. With a firm thrust, Jessup forced Duke inside the shed. Jessup clicked the padlock, locking it tight on the door handle. Duke howled and scratched at the door.

Back inside the cabin, Jessup looked at the coins on the table—he counted, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Eight coins still in the neat and tidy row as they were when he left the cabin. Jessup yelled at the coins, “you mock me and taunt me, you stupid coins!” Jessup, now angry with himself for giving the coins a reality of their own, scooped them off the table into his hand. With the other hand he grabbed an old silver tin from the shelf by the coffee mugs. Jessup was not sure how he came to possess the tarnished box with a leather strap and broken latch, but he kept it knowing it would be useful one day.

He gathered the eight coins and put them in the tin. He removed the leather strap and threaded a thin wire through the metal loop on the lid of the box and then through the slot on the bottom of the box where a latch had once been. Jessup twisted the wire a few times, securing the lid. He then tucked the tin box up on a shelf by the sink, with a plan to end the nightmares the next day. Jessup went into his yard and proceeded to care for his chickens and split logs for his wood-burning stove. Intermittent howls from Duke in the shed distracted Jessup and brought waves of nausea through his gut.

That night, Jessup's fever overtook his mind. The rainbow blur was almost constant now. He covered his head with a pillow to block Duke's cries from the shed. The cries, first as mournful whines, later turned into desperate howling and angry barking. As

he held the pillow tight over his ears, Jessup feared the doomsday that would come if he did not enact his plan early in the morning. Jessup's sleep was deranged. He saw Maureen walking through the cabin in a long black dress, torn and muddy at the hem. Maureen went to the tin box in the kitchen, picked it up, and stretched her hand toward Jessup. Maureen let forth a wicked witch laugh as she pushed the tin box close to Jessup's face. The box was open, and the twisted wire Jessup used to secure the box, hung in a limp curl from her index finger. Fish, fish everywhere, swimming along the floor and crawling up the walls. Jessup, in a full sweat, threw back the blanket to reveal his bedsheet covered with coins. Duke's howls swirled through the cabin, blending with the rainbow that now filled cabin and snuffed out the fire in the woodburning stove.

The cold of the cabin woke Jessup before sun-up. His body, racked with chills and flu-like aches, resisted his effort to get out of bed. Jessup forced his way out of bed and fumbled his arms into his heavy bathrobe. With a groan, he pushed his feet into worn slippers. The cabin was now frigid and a cloudy haze hung in the air. Jessup struggled to check the flue, and found it was functioning just fine. "Is this haze in the air or in my brain," Jessup mumbled aloud. He then became keenly aware that there was only silence from the shed, no cries from Duke. With aching fingers, Jessup loaded wood into the stove and struck a match to start the fire.

Jessup shuffled his throbbing feet toward the kitchen area to make coffee. As he approached the counter, he drew a sharp breath at what he saw. The tin box, lid wide open, coins spilled onto the counter and floor. Jessup's head began to spin and fingers of ice slid down his spine. With a trembling hand he picked up the coins, one by one, from the counter, and counted—one,

two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Jessup almost vomited at the site he saw next, three more coins on the floor. His head pounded and the haze in the cabin thickened, now a solid wall of rainbow colors. The wall cleared a bit, and Jessup forced his shaking hand to pick up the coins. He dropped the three coins from the floor into the tin box to join the other eight he picked up from the counter. Eleven coins. The fish emblems danced and taunted Jessup, enjoying the trick they played on him. Jessup's plan became urgent. He shed the bathrobe and grabbed his hunting coat, throwing it over his sleep shirt and pajama pants. He pulled off the slippers and put on his work boots without tying the laces.

Jessup thrust the coins into the pocket of the hunting coat. He plucked the truck keys from the hook by the door and hobbled to his truck. He could barely hoist his painful, weighted body into the driver's seat. Duke screamed from the shed—a high-pitch human-like scream that sounded as if the dog were being tortured.

Sand flew from his tires as he sped down the road, both arms draped over the steering wheel. He stomped the brakes and skidded to a stop at the spot where he had found the coins. He stumbled out of the truck and fell to all fours. The sun began to rise, turning Jessup's chills into fever. With stinging arms and legs Jessup crawled to the shoreline. The coins were now burning hot in his pocket, and Jessup thrust his hand deep and grabbed all eleven coins. He arranged the coins in a neat circle on the red sand.

The circle of coins finished, Jessup fell backwards and his body sprawled like a dead bird. Jessup blinked his eyes, how long had he been laying at the shoreline? The sun was high in the sky now, and Jessup's fuzzy brain could not remember when he got to the

lake. With all the energy he could muster, Jessup stood to make his way back to his truck. His work boots weighed heavy on his feet, forcing his toes to drag in the soft sand. Jessup sighed in relief when the truck's engine easily started.

As Jessup drove and neared the cabin, his fever subsided and he could once again think clearly. However, with the clarity of mind came the dread of his next task. Jessup knew the signs he saw in Duke the day before. He remembered a time as a boy, when their cattle dog tangled with a rabid badger. Thick strings of drool stuck to the badger's mouth and face, the dog only doing his job to guard the farmyard by attacking the badger. Jessup's father told him to go in the house. Jessup saw his father reach for the rifle in gun rack at the rear window of the pickup. Jessup never saw the dog again, and he never asked his father about what happened. Today, Jessup no longer a boy, had to act as a man.

Arriving at the cabin, Jessup gathered his .22 rifle from the knotty pine wall. As he approached the shed, he only heard silence. He slowly opened the door, with a sweaty hand on the rifle. A ray of sunlight lit the shed and shown on Duke's face. Duke lay on the floor, his head was resting heavily on his front paws. When the dog heard the shed open, he raised his head and pleaded for mercy with clear eyes. Duke's ears were limp and he made the whimper of a new-born puppy. He wagged his tail, welcoming Jessup to pat his head. Emotion choked his throat, and Jessup could only whisper, "Good boy, that's my boy." Jessup laid the rifle down and dropped to his knees, burying his face in the dog's neck. Tears of grief, sobs of relief, and years of repressed feelings gushed into Duke's fur.

After a long moment, Jessup rose to his feet, and Duke quickly followed suit. The dog trotted at Jessup's heels back to the cabin.

Jessup set a bowl of kibble on the floor and Duke chomped and licked the bowl clean. Tired from lack of sleep and drained with the relief from stress, Jessup called Duke to the bed with him. Jessup covered them both with the blue and green patchwork quilt Maureen had made. Jessup focused on the Catholic crucifix on the wall, the knotty pine now solid again. Together, the old man and his dog fell into a deep and restful sleep. A sleep free of dreams.

As night settled around the old man and his dog, a young man walked back from the lake shore when he saw something glitter in the starlight. It seemed to be coins arranged in a circle on the red sand. The young man set down his fishing pole and tackle box. Curiosity overcame him as he knelt down for a closer look. He began touching each coin, and one by one he counted them. The young man's inquisitive mind could not leave the coins. He picked up the coins, eleven in total, and dropped them into the pocket of his fishing vest.





Sunset in a Canyon by Julie Peterson

The Lamp

By Andréa Vegter

On a day like any other in the town of Dormet
Rode in Mr. Nickenbock, a stranger man you've never met.
He wore suit and cravat and doffed his hat
When bowing to the ladies and men when he sat.

But a trio of lads wouldn't shake his hand
Seeing the eligible ladies thought he was grand.
This didn't bother the man who kept his cool
He'd met others who thought him too pomp and a fool.

He shrugged it off and bowed over the hand of Miss Marie
He looked up mid-kiss to her hand and felt weak-kneed.
As he said in a low timbre voice, "I am pleased to meet you"
She blushed, giving a reply after a second or two.

"Why sir, I insist, the pleasure is mine"
Entranced they stood for a moment in time.
Before stepping back and you won't believe what was next
Poor Mister Nickenbock's heart near jumped from his chest.

For his horse nudged its head to the back of his thigh
And Mr. Nickenbock easily startles, his nerves quite high.
Miss Marie, being the finest, covered her smile in hand
While he sheepishly looked round, surveying the land.

So the people grew used to the man and his quirks
Spending time with Miss Marie while they began to court.
Enjoying her presence despite startles and scares.
One day, he sits outside with a sigh and stares
Wondering how he can be rid of feeling jumpy and scared.

Well that trio devised a plan of quick wit
And told the newcomer about the legend of Dormet.
"Far beyond the pretty leaves red and gold
Beyond the views where the sun shines bold.

As forests go, this one was pretty good
But for the sake of this tale, we focus on the wood.
That scarcely grows its leaves and is always cold
Home to something otherworldly and old.

You say you want to grow some might
Sick of jumping at the smallest slight.
Then to the old wood you must seek
The one who would take away your weak.

Seek out the devil and he'll make you brave
Or he may steal your soul and take you a slave.
Leaving you a ghostly specter haunt
While the rest we go on in life's merry jaunt."

"But before you go upon this quest
Give it a think before you lay your head to rest.
For you could be made to linger and prey
On poor souls who venture so far that way.

As you once did, hopeful before
Looking for a devil to plead and even the score."
And so the trio each smirked, having said enough
Seeing poor Mister Nickenbock gasp and gulp.

But he shook off the fear and gave a dry little laugh
Grabbing a lamp and matches, tilting his cap.
He marched up to his horse and rode out of camp
With nary a word nor even goodbye.
Following the well-worn path under the setting sky.

He journeyed until he came to a river and bridge all alone
That seemed to separate the safe and unknown.
He urged on his horse not to hesitate
Slowly crossing the bridge as the hour grew late.

Looking around, unsure how to bring a devil to him
Trying to whistle away the nerves settling in.
Pausing at the new road debating his plan and his lines
Until hearing a sound approach from behind.
The heavy hoof beat resounded deep in his soul

Had him trembling and chattering like a bag of old bones.
For he could feel something dark watching, ready to reach out
He talked himself down, trying to dispel his doubt.

Mister Nickenbock turned his horse and held up his lamp
His eyes showed white and his hands grew damp.
Dropping the lamp as he twisted and snapped the reins
Trying desperately to make it home again.

And that's the last that was heard of Mister Nickenbock
The people of Dormet have various ends to the shock.

The trio claims it was all good fun to get him lost
But they stayed home due to winter's first frost.
Miss Marie held out hope for her beau to return
As time passed, she moved on at the season's turn.

One thing said for sure when this tale is shared
The people believe Mister Nickenbock wasn't spared.
That the devil came upon him and took up his soul
Leaving him the stub of candle and lamp that he broke.

So head to the bridge near dead of night
And search for the lamp and its flickering light.
Listen to the wind whistle through the trees
And the whispers carried upon the breeze.

Should you happen to find the lamp, leave at once
For the shadow of Mister Nickenbock does hunt.
Return to your home post haste
Before the hair rises on your nape.

Before your heart quickly beats
and ice steals the strength from under your feet.
Hearing a whisper, faint in your ear,
"Too late, you're out of time, I fear."



Trenches

By Andréa Vegter

In no man's land, a wasteland vast, a broken, silent seam
Between two lines of enemy fire, a field of shattered dreams.
Ravaged by war and scarred by strife, there echoes cry
A hollowed field of desolate ground where countless soldiers die.

Pocked earth lies torn with cratered wounds from shell and blast
A haunted land of iron ruin, where none can hope to last.
Tangled wire twists through the dirt, a trap laid low and wide
A deadly net that catches men who try to cross or hide.

The stench of decay hangs thick and still, never clearing away
A grim reminder of lives once bright, now stolen by the day.
The fallen left on broken ground beneath the pale, cold moon
Forgotten by the world around, consumed by silence soon.

In trenches carved through clinging mud, where shadow holds its reign
Men huddle close in shaking ranks, to dull the weight of pain.
Their faces drawn, resigned with fear, their eyes too tired for sleep
In the endless dark, they wait for death, that crawls through mud so deep.

Through blood and earth, they move as one, compelled to stand and fight
Bound tight by duty that grips them through the night.
Their thoughts drift far to distant homes, away on distant shores
Now drowned beneath the endless roar of guns forevermore.

With every shell that rips the sky and tears the air apart
They cling to fading hope and steady every heart.
In trenches where all time is lost and moments blur and freeze
They pray for peace that never comes upon the coppery breeze.

Though the battle drags on, long and cruel, with no clear end in sight
They rise once more above the earth to meet the coming fight.
They peer across the broken field, their breath held tight and low
Awaiting signs of moving shapes they know will strike the blow.

Their weapons fixed on shifting forms that drift through smoke and fire
Each shot they send may end a life and feed the war's desire.
As bullets cut through flesh and bone in seconds, sharp and cold
Each fallen name becomes a ghost the earth will soon enfold.

No voice remains to mark the dead, no sound to break the night
Just wind that moves through shattered ground beneath the pale starlight.
A call returns, they charge again, into the endless fray
To win a fleeting moment's hope or lose it all away.

Two soldiers beneath the dimming dawn, side by side they lie
One falters breath unsteady as the other won't say goodbye.
A crimson bloom stains broken earth where both once stood as one
He lifts his friend, still whispering of home, not yet undone.

In drifting hush and ashen light, they fade from what is known
Two shadows turn from blood-soaked fields, how many make it home?



Barren Branches by Anne Schiller

Stolen Stars

By Andréa Vegter

The night was still.

Seren wandered through the meadow, the cool grass brushing against her ankles, drawn by a strange pull she couldn't explain. The silence of the night felt alive, charged with an energy. The stars hung low, heavy with their brilliance, as if the universe itself was leaning closer in anticipation.

Seren didn't notice at first—a shadow in the moonlight, perched on the edge of a hill. The figure stood silhouetted against the sky, their form ethereal, cloaked in something that seemed more mist than fabric. As Seren approached, the figure turned slowly, their movements deliberate, like the ticking of an unseen clock.

And in his hands, he held the stars.

Not all of them, but enough to make the heavens seem dimmer. Tiny orbs of light dancing in his hold, alive, pulsing, as though they carried the heartbeat of the cosmos. Their light shimmering, more precious than diamonds in his palms.

He didn't speak at first. The figure simply held out his hands toward Seren, his gaze locked with hers. The light of the stars caught in their eyes, casting them in hues of silver and gold, an invitation whispered in their silence.

"Take them," he said finally, his voice soft and rich, like the sound of wind moving through leaves.

"They belong to no one, yet to everyone. Tonight, they are yours."

Seren paused, noticing she had taken a few steps closer. She hesitated, unsure of the weight of this offer. Could she truly hold stars? Would something so precious burn her? How had this stranger taken them from the sky? And why?

“What do I do with them?” Seren asked, her voice barely discernible with the breeze.

His lips curved into a faint smile, enigmatic and haunting. “That is for you to decide. These are stolen stars, each one holds a secret magic—each one a wish, a dream, or a memory from another heart. To return them to the heavens is to restore their light to all. But to keep them...” His velvet voice trailed off as he turned away, not before Seren noticed the flicker of sadness crossing their face. “...To keep them is to hold their magic as your own, but their weight will change you,” he finished quietly.

Seren reaches out despite her hesitation, her fingers brushing his. She lets out a soft gasp as the stars touch her palms. The stars were warm, humming softly against her skin, as if alive. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe, as she felt the light wrapping around her like threads of silk, making her heart full. Snippets of whispers and images flitting before her eyes and ears, stories she couldn’t yet understand but now treasured. Seren opened her eyes, looking at the mysterious figure with wonder.

The figure stepped back, his form beginning to fade, blending into the shadows of the night. “Choose wisely,” he said once more, his voice barely audible. “For the stars do not forgive easily, and neither does the sky.”

Before she could speak, he was gone, leaving her alone beneath

the dimmed heavens. The stars in her hands pulsed brighter, as if urging her to decide. Seren stared down at her hands, watching the orbs flow around her fingers as she pondered. Should she let them return to the vast expanse above her? Should she dare to keep their magic, knowing it would bind her to something she still did not understand?

As the night deepened, Seren stood there, cradling the stolen stars, their light casting her face in a glow brighter than the moon. The weight of their brilliance settled into her heart as she began to travel down the hill, back to her home. Tucking the stars into the pocket of her dress, she sighed, feeling her heart beat a little slower. Seren blinked once, before shaking her head to dispel the lurking sadness as she continued on her way.

The stars slowly faded as the dawn approached. Pausing, she tilted her head and followed what she thought was a murmur. Traveling a small ways on the outside of town, she came across a young lady. Unaware of Seren's presence, the girl clutched a flower, eyes closed as she softly spoke her heart's desires. Seren gently cleared her throat, letting the girl know she was not alone anymore.

Looking up, the girl blushed, tossing the flower behind her. Seren looked at the girl, wondering if she was meant to meet her before she felt a small pulse in response. She shook her head, reaching over to pick up the discarded flower. Looking at the young woman, Seren tucked the flower behind her ear and spoke, "Nothing is too silly to wish for, especially when you wish with all your heart."

She looked at the woman, hoping she understood, pleased when

the lady responded with a soft smile. "Meet me in the meadow, far outside of town this evening," Seren asked, briefly touching the woman's shoulder before continuing on her way.

Seren continued on her way until soon she came upon a cemetery. Bowing her head in respect as she walked, Seren paused again, hearing the sound of a broken heart. Following the sniffles and sobs, she soon came upon a man, shoulders hunched with grief as he stood beside a fresh grave.

Seren felt a small pulse from her pocket, urging her to touch the man's shoulder, giving him silent comfort until he quieted. Looking up at her, he wiped a tear from his cheek before thanking her. She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze, "Memories are our way of keeping loved ones close... Meet me in the meadow outside of town this evening. "

Seren left the man, feeling a need to prepare for the evening, even though she knew not what would occur. She returned home, retrieving the stars from her pocket. Seren placed them in a bowl on her table, swirling her fingers around as she ate her meal, humming as she felt the stars energy flow through her. Changing into a white dress, she returned slowly to the hill, sitting beneath the tree to wait for the others she had met.

Night had just begun to chase away the last beams of sunlight as she saw two people enter the meadow. The young woman walked beside the older man, moving at his pace. Seren remained seated, rising when she could see them at the base of the hill. "Welcome," she called, holding her hands out to them. Each of them reached out, and as the three touched hands, Seren smiled softly, knowing they could feel the stars as she had.

"You have each been chosen for a special honor, based on what

lies in your heart." Seren turned to the young woman, cupping her hands together. "You were chosen for your heartfelt wish, made from love." Seren released the young woman's hands to hold her hand near her pocket. Several stars floated into her palm, humming with energy as they glowed. Carefully, Seren tilted her hand, letting the stars dance into the woman's palms. Placing her hands once more around the woman's, Seren whispered to her, "Now, wish once more for your heart's desire."

The woman looked at her and then down at the stars, a slight tremble flowing through her as she closed her eyes to wish. When she opened her eyes, Seren and the woman watched in awe as the stars hovered above their hands, pulsing and twirling before spinning in a circle, growing smaller and smaller as they grew brighter. When Seren thought she would have to close her eyes, the stars shot up into the sky, exploding before twinkling around the young woman. She smiled brightly, knowing her wish was granted.

Seren turned to the elderly man, who reached out to hold her hands. Seren held his hands together before reaching for a few more stars. Placing them in his hands, Seren whispered, "Now, think of your loved one." The man let out a shuddering breath and nodded once, thinking of the wife he lost. This time, the stars began to glow slowly, once more twirling around in their palms, a gentle brilliance as they merged together and separated. Joining together again, the stars pulsed, floating up as one before the man.

He stared transfixed as the stars began to play a memory, just for him. He let out a deep breath, Seren smiled as she felt the peace entering his body, calming his heart. The stars parted as the memory finished, and he stepped back, giving Seren a nod of thanks. The stars together began to return to the sky, the other

stars twinkling even more, as if in welcome of the return of their lost kin.

After a while, the young woman and the man left the meadow, leaving Seren with one more task. Though the stars had shown the man a personal memory, they had also shown Seren her memory of the mysterious figure from the night before. She turned to the tree, knowing he would appear if she thought of him. And so she did. Within seconds, the figure emerged from the shadows, his form swathed in darkness again. He looked at her and then the sky before speaking, "You chose."

Seren nodded, holding her hands out to him, "And now, so must you. " The figure tilted his head, confused. " Seren continued, "You warned me the stars and sky do not forgive easily... but it is your heart that does not forgive. You dream of forgiveness, and it is within reach, if you choose." She smiled and the figure noticed her inner glow, the stars' gift to Seren.

Drawn by her pull, feeling hope slowly filling him, he reached out, grasping hers tightly as if she may withdraw her offer. She nodded and closed her eyes, the stars traveling from her pocket, swirling over her body until they slid down her arms to their palms. The figure gasped, looking at Seren in awe as her body glowed as brightly as the stars. He squeezed her hands, not letting her leave his vision.

He felt the stars reaching into him, searching for his dream as he began to hope. The remaining stars began to pick up speed as the two lifted into the air, high enough they were surrounded by stars, stolen and free. All the stolen stars began to collect, spinning around them faster and faster until the night was blinded by starlight. Seren and the figure looked at one another, knowing this

was a rare phenomenon.

They held onto each other until they felt their feet touch the hillside once more. Once more, the sky flashed, each stolen star twinkling with gratitude. Seren and the figure laid on the hillside, watching as the sky seemed to expand, knowing that lives had changed this night.



By the Numbers

By Richard Lartz

After you first start to breathe,
A number for social security.

Another number becomes a tool
To track your progress inside school.

If you manage to stay alive
Another number so you can drive.

If you don't possess a cervix,
Another number for selective service.

If those numbers aren't of substance,
Then there's numbers for insurance.

Not to add upon your stress,
Another number for your address.

If a hoard of cash you want,
A number for a bank account.

Don't expect you'll escape it,
Numbers for your desirable credit.

The numbers will not ever slumber;
Now you have your employee number.

Don't expect to slip away;
Another number is your pay.

Other numbers made to assess
If you do your job the best.

So when life is good and makes some sense,
They'll fire you as excess expense.



Golden Habitat by Hannah Glass

The Fabel of the Three Knights

By Richard Lartz

Once upon a time, there were three knights traveling in a distant land. Longtime friends, the trio had been through thick and thin. Each knew the other like a brother, for, while not related, they were brothers in arms. The three knights were: Sir James the Jester, the son of a miller named Woolen; Sir George the Bold, the only child of a carpenter; and Sir Wilhelm of Blackbrook, the eldest son of his village's blacksmith. The trio were inseparable. In mischief and in valor, they were at each other's side and call.

One day they met a man wearing a dark cloak sitting in a dark corner of an inn. Sir James had started talking to him out of jest, joking such folk gave dangerous quests to unsuspecting would-be adventurers who got bored. The cloaked figure cackled maniacally at the suggestion and said, "Funny you say such a thing for I do indeed have a dangerous task that needs doing. You see... I have spent half my life on a quest for a certain treasure and have finally determined its location. Alas, time has robbed me of the vigor I need to achieve my aim, so instead I must offer a reward to those who would be trustworthy."

"What sort of reward?" Sir George the Bold asked, his interest piqued.

"Well... what I seek is but one object in a treasure trove. If you bring what I desire, not only can you have whatever else you find but I will give each of you one of these..." the dark cloaked figure then produced three large rubies.

"What is the object you want from this trove?" Sir Wilhelm asked as his companions stared at the rubies presented.

"Practically a trinket really," the dark cloaked figure answered

evasively. "An unassuming oil lamp. Nothing more. Just gently place it in this sack and bring it back here to me for your reward," and set the bag on the table in front of the three knights.

"What sort of dangers can your vigor not handle?" Sir James asked seriously, eyeing the promised reward and the provided bag skeptically.

"The entrance to the cave is in a cliff face that is difficult to scale near the edge of the nearby desert. There also may be a creature that has turned the cave into a lair," the dark cloaked figure answered. The figure looked about the room before continuing, "There is a puzzle to be solved to gain entrance to the treasure trove, and once you gain entrance, there is only one thing that is not to be touched... the cyclops' ruby. Anything else, except what I have asked you to retrieve, can be yours."

The three knights exchanged skeptical glances without a word. A silence hung in the air like a corpse on a gallows, until finally Sir George the Bold asked the cloaked figure, "Whose treasure is this? Will we be making enemies by doing your task?"

"The collector of this trove is long gone I can assure you. He and his forty thieves were hunted down and executed before they could enjoy their spoils," the cloaked one answered. "I learned of it through one of their widows... shortly before she joined her husband in death."

"Any clues to the puzzle?" Sir Wilhelm asked.

"No," the cloaked figure answered, "but I'm sure learned knights like yourselves can determine the solution."

"We shall perform your task and bring you the trinket you desire," Sir James stated confidently.

"Excellent!" the cloak figure replied and produced a roll of

parchment, placing it on the table in front of them. “Here’s a map to get you to the cliff. Remember to heed my warning of the cyclops!”

Before dawn, the three knights map in hand set out for the edge of the desert. The trio followed the landmarks eastward, past a small oasis and abandoned caravan camp and then past a long forgotten shrine to an equally long-forgotten shrine to an equally long-forgotten god of old. Its human-like hands held outward as if to accept a gift but its visage was crumbled by time.

As the first light of day emerged over the eastern horizon, the knights found the cliff the cloaked figure had spoken of. Over twenty feet up its sheer and treacherous surface, they could see the opening of a cave-and set to prepare their ropes and pitons for the climb. They removed their weighty knight garb, until only in their tunics with hauberks and tabards over it, each with a small simple bag for supplies, and taking only a sword and a dagger for protection. They then scaled the cliff carefully, taking time to check each handhold as they made their way upward. Sir George the Bold took the lead, with Sir Wilhelm following him and Sir James being last.

Quietly they reached the edge of the cave, and helped each other up. Sir James dusted himself off, a guttural growl emanated from the dark of the cavern. The light of late morning peeked into the opening of the cave but a few yards; the rest of its depths blotted out by darkness.

From the abyss before them a gravelly voice asked, “Who dares enter my lair? Who is fool enough to wish to be my breakfast?” Then, from the edge of shadow, emerged a large human head on the muscular body of a lion with a pair of large bat-like wings upon its back and a tail like that of a scorpion poised to strike.

“We seek only to gain entrance to the chamber within,” Sir Wilhelm said as the beast smiled wide, threateningly, displaying three rows of vicious teeth in its mouth.

“We don’t entreat with beasts!” Sir George exclaimed and drew his sword.

The creature charged forward, swiping its claws at Sir George, making him leap out of the way. Its toothy maw bit at Sir Wilhelm as its tail tried to strike Sir James who almost lost his footing at the cliff’s edge. Sir Wilhelm sidestepped and swung his sword at the tail of the mighty beast but it glanced off the hard exterior with a clang. Before it could return the attack, Sir George struck at its wings, slicing a tear in one of them, which caused the beast to cry out in rage. Sir James charged forward recklessly and tried to stab his sword into the beast’s body- only for it to knock the sword from his hand and him to the ground. It then pounced upon him, one of its mighty paws holding his right shoulder to the ground as its human face full of inhuman teeth bit ferociously at his face. Sir Wilhelm dropped his sword and tackled its tail, trying to hold back the raging monster from his brother beneath it. Sir George the Bold then landed a great blow with his blade upon the beast’s side, a burst of blood blasting forth and staining his tabard.

The creature howled out in desperate pain and leapt from atop Sir James toward the cave entrance. Turning towards the three knights, it growled, “Curses to thee three. I may be denied a breakfast, but each of you will get what is coming to you.” It then turned and leapt from the cliff, its wings carrying it off and away to where it would lick its wounds and find other prey. The three stood there for a moment and watched it fly away.

“What do you think it meant by that?” Sir James asked after he retrieved his sword and returned it to his scabbard.

“Who cares?” Sir George the Bold replied flatly. “As if I care what some beast in a cave has to say. We know why we’re here... now lets get to it.”

They each retrieved a torch from their bags and lit them. The glow illuminated the cavern, and they began to make their way deeper into the cave’s depths. The way forward twisted and turned, narrowing to where they had to squeeze through for a few yards, finally opening into a small room. At its opposite end, there was a face carved into the rock, which looked like one of the desert nomads. Flanked by a torch on each side, the face rested above a closed stone door like a sentinel at its watch. The trio approached cautiously and lit the torches on each side to brighten the area.

“What do we do now?” Sir James asked quizzically.

“Not sure. Must be some way to open this door,” Sir George replied thoughtfully.

“How may we pass?” Sir Wilhelm asked loudly and clearly, his query echoing through the chamber.

The eyes blinked, dust falling from the carved face as its bearded visage said to the three knights in a deep foreboding voice:

“I grow with every bit I get,
But never full or satisfied yet.
I’ll empty vaults, ruin kings,
And still demand the finest things.
What am I?”

The three stood there for a moment, thinking amongst themselves until finally Sir Wilhelm said, “I think I know the answer.”

“Well that makes one of us,” Sir James replied dejectedly. “I like jokes, not riddles.”

“You sure you know the answer, Wilhelm?” Sir George the Bold asked skeptically.

“Yes,” he replied confidently. Striding in front of the stone portal, he said, “The answer is greed.”

A smile spread across the stone face above the door, and the face replied, “Heed that warning.” It then reverted to its former appearance, and the door below it began to rise into the wall.

A glimmering light emerged from underneath the door as it rose before them. Through the opening, they could soon see a vast room lit by lamps. Upon the stone floor are piles and piles of gold coins. They see golden idols of old gods and calves placed upon these piles, boxes overflowing with jewels, and jewelry they had not seen the like of before. For a moment, they stood awestruck at the wealth before them, stunned by the sheer amount of it while thinking of how they could hope to even remove a fraction of it.

“How’d you know the answer?” Sir James asked as they started to enter the treasure room.

“Even the bravest of us only rarely has the courage for what he actually knows,” Sir Wilhelm replied.

“Save us from your quips Wilhelm,” Sir George retorted with irritation. “C’mon lets get some of these coins collected!”

The two knights knelt down, emptying the torches and extra pitons from their bags onto the stone floor before stuffing them with gold coins.

“Don’t you think we should find our objective first?” Sir Wilhelm asked as he cautiously walked further into the room, watching with dismay his brothers’ disregard for the portal guardian’s

warning. The two did not answer, preoccupied with stuffing coins into the bags they brought. He noticed that at the far end of the room was a large stone statue of a cyclops with a face contorted in rage. In its left hand, it held aloft a ruby the size of a man's head, and in its right hand, a large mace held as if about to strike. In front of it was a simple and aged wooden table with a lone and unassuming oil lamp sitting on it.

"Look," Sir Wilhelm called out as he made his way toward the statue, "It's the lamp we're to find."

The other two scrambled to their feet as if possessed and rushed towards it. Sir Wilhelm dashed toward it as well. The trio arrived at the table at once. A flurry of hands grasped and grabbed at the unassuming lamp, grunting like gluttonous pigs at their slop. The lamp shook loose from their clutching and a great billow of smoke rose from it. They stepped back in fear and awe as the smoke took the vague shape of a shirtless man with a bald head. The lower part of its body a wisp of smoke curling from the oil lamp, with two burning coals floating within it where eyes should be.

"My rightful slumber is interrupted but I can tell not which of you did," an otherworldly voice booming like thunder from the cloud as it loomed over them menacingly. "Therefore... I shall grant each of you a wish."

It hung there in the air above them, its smokey visage fierce and intimidating above its folded muscular arms. The three knights looked between themselves for a moment and then Sir George the Bold stepped forward.

"Grantor of wishes," he said, as he held his weighty bag of coins forward, "I wish for this bag of gold to never empty!"

The ominous cloud nodded its head and said, "Granted."

Sir James then stepped forward and said, "Grantor of wishes, I

wish to be always forgiven if I ask to be.”

The ominous cloud’s head tilted to the side for a moment before it nodded again and said, “Granted.”

Sir Wilhelm then stepped forward and said, “Grantor of wishes, I wish to never meet my demise because of my actions.”

The great billowing cloud’s burning eyes brighten for a moment. It looked taken aback by the request... but then nodded its head and said, “Granted.”

The vapor retreated back into the unassuming lamp, like smoke sucked into a pipe, leaving the three knights in the room surrounded by treasures. Sir Wilhelm took the lamp and put it in the sack the cloaked figure had given them.

The other two knights began to celebrate their victory for the day. Sir James stuffed a handful of jewels into his bag as Sir George the Bold turned his heavy bag of coins over, watching them fall endlessly onto the floor as he laughed with delight.

“Ha! I’ll never be poor again!” Sir George the Bold exclaimed as he danced about, coins spilling from the enchanted sack.

Sir James then gazed at the massive ruby the statue the cyclops held aloft and then looked at his overflowing bag of jewels. He then dropped the bag as if its contents were refuse and strode toward the statue’s treasure. The sound from the jewels spilling on the floor grabbed the other two knights’ attention.

“What are you doing?” Sir Wilhelm asked, halfway between the cyclops and the door from which they entered the treasure room.

“Just testing my wish brother!” Sir James replied as he stepped onto the table and began to reach for the ruby. “Clever wish you made by the way Wilhelm! But mine will get me this treasure instead!” Sir James then snatched the head sized ruby from the

cyclops' left hand and leapt from the table, holding it aloft in triumph.

The cyclops stirred, its great eye blinking as it awakened, and let out a roar, "THIEF!" The door on the opposite side of the room began to slowly close, and Sir Wilhelm dashed for the exit.

Sir James stood confidently and defiantly in front of the angrily animated object and said, with a wide grin on his face, "Oh... I am sorry, please forgive my theft!" The statue, incapable of forgiveness, brought its mighty mace down on the cocky knight, smashing his head like a ripened melon and spraying his brains everywhere.

Sir George's eyes were instantly filled with fear as he began to run for the exit. The weight of his heavy, clinking bag of coins was slowing him down.

"Drop it you fool!" Sir Wilhelm pleaded near the exit, jamming his dagger into the groove of the closing door, desperately trying to stop its descent.

"Not on your life!" Sir George the Bold replied, trying to run faster, the heavy bag impeding his stride as the monstrous statue gained on him with its brain and blood stained mace. Nearing the door, he whirled the bag around and threw it through the opening. Sir George then dove for the doorway but landed only halfway through. Sir Wilhelm grabbed his arms and yanked him the rest of the way just as the stone door slammed shut.

"Thank you brother. You saved my life." Sir George breathed heavily while sitting on the cavern floor by the sealed door.

"It wouldn't have needed saving if either of you had heeded what our patron warned!" Sir Wilhelm replied angrily.

"REALLY?" Sir George shot back angrily, "Our brother is dead and entombed here and you're going to chastise me when I thank

you?!”

“If either of you would’ve listened instead of giving into your greed, our brother would be here with us instead of DEAD in there!”

“James brought it on himself, oh righteous one!” Sir George replied hotly. “He was never known for being reliable to his word, remember? Over promised regularly, took vows he’d break... not to mention being a liar.”

Sir Wilhelm shook his head at what his brother said. “And as usual... you justify an end that benefits you, despite the means. Do you not care our brother is dead?”

“I do, dear brother, but shall I lose sleep over his foolish choice? Hardly. You said yourself he didn’t heed the warning,” Sir George answered coldly and disdainfully.

“And you forgot what our redeemer said, ‘Take heed and beware covetousness, for one’s life does not rest on the abundance of that which one possesses.’” Sir Wilhelm replied coolly.

“Don’t quote scripture to me brother. You made a wish and took from the treasure the same as we did,” Sir George responded coolly, with an air of justification. “Now, we can sit here and argue and quote wisdom, or we can get moving and take to our patron the requested item.”

The two remaining knights then solemnly climbed back down the cliff to their waiting mounts and made their way back to the inn with Sir James’ horse, riderless, in tow. The cloaked figure made good on the reward, Sir Wilhelm receiving the ruby intended for Sir James. The two then departed and rejoined their brethren's army on its way to the sacred city.



Serenity by Mary Ellen Shinstock

Why Did the Meadowlark Sing This Morning?

By Amada Raymann

I'm sure I understand—but I'm also sure I don't.
I carry the world in my head, mountains and seas.
And in them—drops of water, specks of dirt.
Which I step over, swim by: they're not real to me
In the shadow of lily pads and sycamores.

The world in my head, and I am nothing!
Only a haunting to know and remember:
We all forget—in our time -
The dire nature of a simple thing.
All of us forget what it was like to be children,
To be something other than our needs:
And in our needs, entirety.

One Mirage and Then Another

By Ray Strunk

"It is no shame to have a dirty face- the shame comes when you keep it dirty."

— Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

July 17, 2014

I haven't smoked weed in like eight months now. When I keep my eyes open for too long, things start to get blurry. People turn into shapes, colors. They blend together. The colors fade. I still know it's people. I know I'm not alone. I'm never alone here. It's their faces I can't see. Their expressions.

It's kind of nice, really, not knowing. When I know, it's never good. Even if they're happy, smiling. I've seen enough to know that it doesn't last long. I like the not knowing.

Sometimes I close my eyes and I'm still in the backseat of the car. You hear stories about people getting robbed. How time slows down. How it plays out in front of you in slow motion like a movie. Like you know what's going to happen before it happens but your body isn't fast enough to catch up to your brain. I don't have a story like that. I don't really have a story at all. One minute I had my money and the next minute I didn't. One minute I had no black eye and the next minute I did. Then I bought a gun because I know that's what you do when you get robbed. You protect yourself. You protect your money.

I know I should open my eyes right now. I know what I'm going to see, who I'm going to see. I know what questions they're going to ask and I know what I'm going to say. I know they're all staring at me, waiting. I'm going to keep my eyes closed. It's their faces I

don't want to see. Their expressions. I like the not knowing.

"You knew the guns were going to be used in a murder. Did that give you any cause for concern?"

"Yes, but they were my friends, so I was going to do it for them."

"Even though it meant ending the lives of two innocent human beings?"

"Yes, sir."

August 24, 2013

Tyler says we should move to California. The weed is better out there. "If we want to do this shit for real, we've got to get out of Kansas." He says his real mom lives out there and we can stay with her. Apparently she used to sell, too, and she probably still has connections. He talks about his real mom a lot. That's what he calls her.

Tyler's been staying with me at my grandma's place the last few months since his parents kicked him out. He's still pissed about it. I don't see the big deal. I got kicked out. Lucas got kicked out. Half your friends have gotten kicked out. Shit happens, dude.

"It's different," he says. Like he's special. Like he was going to do something with his life other than get high.

He talks about the Air Force like it was his destiny and he talks about his parents like they took that away from him. Like he wasn't just going to find a way to screw it up on his own and end up right back here with me. Where he belongs.

If you ask me, getting kicked out was the best thing that ever happened to him. He's not the type of guy to make it in the military.

"You wouldn't last a week, bro. They drug test."

"You're just jealous." He says that a lot. Like he has something I

wish I had. Like we're not both sitting on the same couch smoking the same weed.

He's been like this since we were kids. Always making things about him.

We've been friends since we were eleven. The way I see it, we're more brothers than friends. You're supposed to like your friends. Get along with them. Brothers fight. You can hate your brother but you have to be there for him. You can punch your brother but nobody else can.

It's not like that with just friends.

Looking back, I don't think Tyler and I were ever friends. Always brothers. It's better that way because I never had a brother of my own growing up.

Tyler has a younger brother, Caleb.

A couple years ago he found out someone at school was messing with Caleb. Tyler called me after school and said I need to fight some kid named Alex. Make sure he knows he messed with the wrong people.

"Why can't you do it?"

"I can't get suspended, I've got wrestling. It's not like you like school anyway."

I said fuck it because that's what you do for your brothers. When I found Alex the next day, somebody must have told him I was coming because he had five other dudes with him. I barely got one punch in before they swarmed me. After the fight I tried to call Tyler but it went straight to voicemail.

We're going to San Diego next month.

September 28, 2013

I like to tell people that if I was six inches taller, I'd be in the

NBA. I never had the size, but I definitely had the energy, the aggression.

My middle school coach called me Young Sheed, after Rasheed Wallace. He holds the NBA record for most technical fouls. I saw a video where he got ejected from a game just for staring at the ref. No words, no hands, just a look. He had gotten into so many fights, intimidated so many refs, that all it took was a couple seconds of staring and he was tossed. That's the kind of reputation he built.

My high school career didn't last long. We were playing a game in Andover my freshman year when I went in for a steal and accidentally shoulder-checked the other player into the scorer's table. The other team's bench immediately surrounded me. I don't remember what happened next. I must've blacked out. That happens sometimes. After the game, Tyler told me it took four guys from the other team to pin me down. When I got into school the next day I felt like a celebrity. That's the kind of reputation I wanted.

This morning, Tyler and I were walking past the park when we heard someone yell from the basketball court.

"Yo, we need two more! You guys in?"

I looked at Tyler and he shrugged like, "why not?"

The dude put Tyler and I on different teams. On the first possession, I blew right past Tyler for an easy layup. Before I even had a chance to talk shit, he had me in a headlock. As I struggled to break his grip, he started laughing and whispered in my ear, "You stole my last Reese's."

That was a phrase we said a lot. A couple years ago we were hanging out at Tyler's house. At like midnight we rummaged through the pantry for snacks and I found a Reese's. Tyler ripped it

from my hand and ate it in one bite.

In an instant, Tyler's dad, David, appeared in the doorway. Like he was summoned. He was shirtless, as always. "Did one of you eat my Reese's?"

Tyler pointed at me, "It was Austin!"

Before I could say a word, David had me in a headlock.

Tyler's laughing must've woken up his mom, Stephanie, because we heard a yell from the doorway. "What the hell's going on down there?"

David loosened his grip and, looking at the floor like he was a little kid in trouble, quietly said, "He stole my last Reese's."

I don't think I've ever seen someone laugh as hard as Stephanie did that night. As hard as we all did. We still talk about it to this day. The Legend of The Last Reese's.

October 12, 2013

You hear people say they smoke to numb their feelings. To escape their realities; get out of their own heads. It's not like that for me. It's the opposite, I think. I smoke because I *want* to feel things. I just can't seem to get myself to give a shit. About anything.

I know how I'm supposed to feel and I've gotten pretty good at faking it. I knew when I got kicked out of school I was supposed to be mad, so I acted mad. I knew when my dad died I was supposed to be sad, so I made myself cry.

When I smoke there's just something more, I guess. I don't know what it is but shit starts to make sense. It's in the little things. The songs I listen to actually mean something. Conversations become important. I know that's not normal. My brain is probably fried. That's what Tyler says. Maybe if I never started smoking in the first

place, I could feel things like a normal person. I could be mad when I'm supposed to be mad, cry when I'm supposed to cry. I could get my shit together and say no for once. Start making decisions of my own.

Yesterday, I overheard Tyler and Alisha talking about getting revenge on Tyler's parents. The hotel room is tiny and it's not like they were trying to be quiet. They were talking like they wanted me to hear. Like they wanted to see how I would react.

Alisha is Tyler's birth mom. She got busted for selling weed when Tyler and Caleb were young. It was her third offense, so the judge took away her custody. That's when they went to live with David and Stephanie.

Alisha said they took Tyler and Caleb away from her. They stole her kids. Her blood. She said they've been brainwashing Caleb, feeding him bad things about her, and that's why he won't pick up when she calls. They've convinced him she's some kind of monster.

Tyler said his parents ruined his future. If it wasn't for them, he'd be in the Air Force. He'd be doing something with his life. They always liked Caleb more, he said. Gave him everything he wanted.

I could hear the anger in Tyler's voice but Alisha didn't sound mad at all. She was calm. Matter-of-fact. Like, this is what they did wrong and this is how we make them pay.

I stayed quiet. Let them talk. Sometimes people just need to say crazy shit to feel better. Like if they say it out loud, get it out in the world, then they won't have to do it. They can be free from it. It reminds me of the time I found out my ex cheated on me and I told her I wished she was dead. It might sound crazy but it felt good. Like by saying it, I created a world where she really was dead. I had that power. She had power over me when she cheated and I

took the power back with my words.

October 18, 2013

Money is running out quickly. I tried calling my grandma to ask for more but she won't pick up the phone. I know she has the money. She's like a thousand years old, what the hell is she saving for? You can't bring that shit to heaven.

October 28, 2013

"Hey Austin, I know how we can make some real money."

Tyler and I haven't talked in like a week. I gave him an ultimatum. Either you get a job and start paying for things or we've got to go back to Kansas. It felt nice, putting my foot down for once. Plus, I knew I had the upper hand since I was the one with the money.

"You know how David and Stephanie are loaded?" It was weird hearing Tyler call his parents by their first names.

I had no idea what David and Stephanie did for work. I'm not sure Tyler did either, honestly. I did know that their house was pretty nice. And David always seemed to be driving a new car every time I saw him.

"Well, Alisha said I'm probably in their will. Which means I would get a bunch of money. You know, if something happened to them."

"How much?"

"I don't know, but it's a lot."

We sat quietly for a moment. We both knew what that something was.

"Well, I guess there's only one way to find out."

We're going back to Kansas next week.

October 31, 2013

I was starting to enjoy the silence of the drive. Tyler and Alisha were both in the back, asleep. I could almost convince myself I was alone.

"You know, I almost took care of this years ago," I heard from the backseat.

"Took care of what?"

"David and Stephanie," Alisha sat up. "Last time I was in Kansas, I drove to their house. I sat in my car for an hour. All I had was a knife."

I could hear Tyler rustling awake.

"I was really about to do it," she continued. "But as I opened my car door, I saw Caleb through the front window. He was laughing. I slammed the door shut and sped away."

Everyone was silent for the rest of the drive.

November 1, 2013

"Should we tell him the plan?"

Alisha nudged Tyler with her elbow.

I wanted to say, "Go to Kansas. Make Austin drive the whole way. Make him pay for the motel. *That* plan?"

Maybe I was irritable because it was two in the morning and I had just driven all day. When we finally got to the motel, the heat was busted. It was freezing.

"We're going to be rich, bro," Tyler said.

"It's foolproof. We'll make it look like a robbery," Alisha said.

First, Tyler takes David and Stephanie out to dinner. Somewhere nice. Makes it seem like he wants to apologize. Get back in their good graces.

"I'm going to need to borrow some money for the dinner," he said.

"Of course you will," I rolled my eyes.

While they're at dinner, Alisha said that I will drive her to David and Stephanie's house. It won't be hard to get in. Tyler knows the garage code.

"When we get in, we ransack the place. Tear it apart. Break a window. Make it look legit," she said.

"We wait for David and Stephanie to get home," she continued. "Then I'll take care of them and you drive us away."

Something about the way she talked made me uneasy. She was calm. Emotionless.

"And what's in it for me?"

"We'll make sure you get paid. How does \$1,000 sound?"

A thousand fucking dollars? I spent more than double that on the hotel in San Diego alone.

"I'm out. I'm not doing it."

"Well, we need someone to drive," Tyler said. I could hear the disappointment in his voice.

"What about Lucas? He's always asking people for money."

I used to buy weed from Lucas in high school. Before I started selling. He was popular. Last year he won homecoming king. Then, on the way home from the dance he got pulled over. Cops found weed in his car. Enough to bust him for selling. He spent a night in jail and everything. Huge fine. He's been broke ever since.

"Can we trust him?" Tyler asked.

"Lucas is just like me," I said. "He won't run his mouth or anything."

“Just like you? The guy who is too scared to drive?” Tyler scoffed.

“You guys need guns. I know where to get them,” I said. “I bought one after I got robbed, remember? The dude gave me a good deal. I’ll call him when we get into town.”

I saw a smile forming on Tyler’s face.

“When were you thinking?” I asked.

“I don’t want Caleb to be home when it happens,” Tyler said. “I looked at his wrestling schedule. He’ll be out of town for a tournament on the 15th. It’s a Friday.”

I thought about high school wrestling. The wrestlers had to weigh in at six in the morning on tournament days. They spent the whole week cutting weight. They were miserable. Tyler always complained about it.

After weighing in, they’d walk into the cafeteria and find David and Stephanie piling plates with pancakes, bacon, and eggs. Every time.

I was never on the wrestling team but they always remembered to save a plate for me.

November 15, 2013

There’s a spot outside of town where I go when I need to think.

It’s called Theorosa’s Bridge. People say it’s haunted.

In the 1800s, a young Native American woman had a baby with a white man. She named the baby Theorosa; it means God’s gift. At that time, it wasn’t okay for white people and non-white people to mix. They kicked her out of town. Called her a whore. She was so ashamed that she threw the baby off the bridge, drowning it. Then, overwhelmed with grief, she jumped off the bridge and drowned herself, too. Apparently her ghost still roams the creek, forever

looking for her lost baby.

I never understood that story. Why would she kill her own baby? It wasn't the baby's fault. She should have killed the baby's dad. He's the one that did her dirty. He was supposed to be there for her but he sold her out. That's how the world works, I guess. Some people cause all the problems while other people have to pay for it.

The bridge that people drive on today isn't even the real one. A lot of people don't know that. The real one burned down in the 70s, I think. If you climb down to the bank and walk along the creek, you can still find pieces of the original bridge. It's a good spot to go when you want to be alone. That's where I went when my mom kicked me out of the house.

After Tyler texted that he was on his way to meet his parents for dinner, I got in my car and started driving. I didn't think about where I was going; I just couldn't stand still. I needed to move. Soon, I found myself on the familiar dirt road. When I got to the bridge, I pulled my car over and turned the music all the way up.

I took the gun out of the glove box and turned it over in my lap. I'm always surprised at how heavy it feels. They make them seem so light in the movies.

When I hold the gun, I should feel strong. I should feel untouchable. But I feel like I'm in a movie. I'm watching myself on screen, playing a character that's hellbent on revenge. He holds the gun like he was born with it in his hand. Like it's an extension of his body. This is real to him.

I gripped the handle as tight as I could. My hands started shaking a bit. I pointed the gun across the creek at a tree and closed my eyes. My mind began to wander. I found myself thinking about my ex-girlfriend, my parents, Tyler, the guys that robbed me, the kids from school that liked to talk shit. Everyone that's hurt

me.

Right before I pulled the trigger, I found myself thinking about David and Stephanie. They never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it's just that they are the ones who had to pay for it.

I don't know if I even hit the tree. My ears started ringing. The weight of the gun was too much and it fell into the dirt. I picked it up and threw it into the creek. As I watched the splash, I thought about Theorosa. Maybe her mom was right. Maybe some people just aren't cut out for this world. Maybe that was her mom's way of saving her.

I was about to light a blunt when I got a call from Lucas. He was talking so fast I couldn't understand a word.

"Slow down, bro. I can't hear you."

"Alisha's freaking out. I think she's having a panic attack. She needs to smoke. You got anything?"

November 16, 2013

I didn't leave my bedroom all day. My phone was blowing up with texts but I just let it sit there and vibrate.

When I finally walked downstairs to get some food, I saw that my grandma was watching the news. They were talking about David and Stephanie.

Apparently Caleb found them in the car. He thought they were pranking him. One time, a few months ago, they called him in a panic. Told him he needed to hurry to the high school. He rushed out to his car, freaking out. David and Stephanie were waiting in the backseat with silly string. They were funny that way.

Last night, Caleb got home from his wrestling tournament and saw them. They weren't moving. Another one of their classic

pranks. He opened the car door, laughing. Then he saw the blood.

November 17, 2013

“I need something stronger. Do you have any dabs?”

I could see Alisha’s hand trembling. I reached under my bed and pulled out the tackle box. The one my dad gave me before he died. We used to go fishing together. Before he got sick. I always hated fishing. It was so boring, so quiet. Life is loud, he said. Embrace the silence.

“When you’re an adult, you’ll miss the quiet.”

There was a little bit of wax left, enough for maybe two or three hits. I handed it to Alisha.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

As she loaded the bong, she nudged Lucas with her elbow.

“Lucas did good. Lucas was great.”

Lucas smiled. Like it was something to be proud of. Like it was all worth it for a little bit of acknowledgement.

“They changed the garage code, so we had to break in through the kitchen window. I ran into the bedroom. Lucas rummaged through the living room. Made it look like a robbery.”

I looked over at Tyler. He was normally happy, energetic. Sometimes too energetic. David and Stephanie got him tested for ADHD in high school. Got him an adderall prescription. He never took the pills, said they made him feel like a robot. Tonight he was flat, like a stone. You could see it was him, you could recognize his face, but something inside him was gone. Like someone flipped a switch and turned on auto-pilot.

Alisha took a hit, coughed a couple times. She continued talking as she handed the bong to Lucas.

“We saw the car pull into the driveway and ran outside. I ran to the passenger’s side, where Stephanie was. Lucas was on the driver’s side. Stephanie rolled down the window and saw the gun. I heard her say, ‘Oh my god, Alisha.’ Then I closed my eyes and... pop.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Tyler wince.

“I slowly walked to the driver’s side. I could hear David whispering, ‘Baby, baby, are you alright?’ I pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The gun jammed. I freaked out and started pulling and pulling. Finally I heard another pop.”

Lucas blew out some smoke and quietly said, “It was crazy.”

Alisha spoke calmly. In the same matter-of-fact way she talked at the hotel. Like she was reading an instruction manual, not talking about killing people.

“What about David? I heard he might make it,” I asked.

“I went to see him in the hospital yesterday.” These were the first words Tyler spoke since he got here. “It’s not looking good.”

Lucas offered Tyler the bong. He waved him off.

“My aunt and uncle were there. I overheard them talking about the will. They said my parents left everything to Caleb.”

I was expecting to see anger in Tyler’s eyes but it wasn’t there.

“It was all for nothing,” he whispered.

“Fuck, man. Are you serious?” Lucas said.

Tyler looked at me. I could tell he was carefully deciding what to say next.

“If I get caught, I won’t mention your name. I promise. You don’t deserve to go down for this.”

November 18, 2013

I opened my phone to a text from Lucas.

“Did you see the news? Tyler and Alisha got arrested.”

I put my phone down and sat in silence. A minute later, another buzz.

“I never got the money.”

November 19, 2013

I woke up to my stomach growling. I guess I forgot to eat yesterday.

I walked downstairs to make a bowl of cereal. The TV was on, but my grandma wasn't in her chair. I glanced at the screen as I poured the milk.

“Third suspect arrested in double-homicide.” With a picture of Lucas.

They used his photo from the yearbook. On picture day, Tyler dared him to wear this stupid t-shirt that said ‘Awesome Possum’ with a drawing of a possum in sunglasses. He looked like an idiot.

I started laughing. And I didn't stop laughing.

I saw the lights flashing down the road. I kept laughing.

I heard the sirens getting closer and closer. I kept laughing and laughing.

July 16, 2014

Time has a funny way of putting things in perspective. You zoom out and shit that seemed so big, so important, loses its weight.

I've got nothing but time in here.

They made me talk to a therapist. He said I should start keeping a journal.

At first, I wrote about nothing: the basketball game I watched on

the little tv in the common area, what I had for dinner, stuff like that. After a couple days, I found myself writing about my dad. Our fishing trips. How I hated the silence but now I miss it. How he still exists in the brief moments of quiet; how I can find him in the stillness.

Last week, my lawyer told me I was being charged with capital murder.

“That could mean the death penalty.”

The words hung in the air for a moment and floated away. Like they had no weight.

Then he mentioned something about a plea deal; said I could get out of here in 25 years. All I had to do was testify. Tell my story.

It pissed me off at first. The thought that I would go down as a snitch; that I would turn my back on a brother. That’s not who I am.

“Well, think about it at least,” he said as he closed his briefcase.

I couldn’t fall asleep that night. So I pulled my journal out from under my bed.

For the first time, I started writing about Tyler. I wrote about Alisha, about David and Stephanie, about Theorosa’s Bridge and the gun. I wrote about loyalty and brotherhood.

I wrote about Caleb. About how he found his parents in the driveway. That’s what Tyler did to his real brother. His blood.

I wrote about getting robbed. How Tyler was the one that set up the sale. How he was the only one that knew where I kept my money. How his phone went straight to voicemail when I tried to call him that night.

I wrote about getting arrested. How the cop knocked over my

cereal when he grabbed me. How the handcuffs left marks on my wrists. I wrote about the promise Tyler made me just two days before.

I wrote about everything.

I'll be 45 years old by the time I get out of here. I don't know where I'll live. I don't know how I'll find a job, make money, friends. I don't know if I even care about any of that.

Tomorrow I'm going to tell my story.





Calm Waters Against Waves of Sky by Hannah Glass

Submission to Prairie Ink

We are a literary annual that welcomes drawings, paintings, photography, new media art, creative non-fiction, drama, fiction, graphic narratives, literary criticism, and poetry.

We serve as a vehicle for emerging writers who attend Barton Community College or reside in one of the seven counties within Barton's service region.

The editors of Prairie Ink encourage submissions from Barton students, alumni, and community members from Barton's seven-county service area: Barton, Pawnee, Rice, Rush, Ellsworth, Russel, Stafford; and from students enrolled at the Barton Fort Riley Campus and Grandview Plaza Outreach location.

To check out submission guidelines or to submit your work, please email the editors at prairieink@bartonccc.edu.

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Barton Community College will be a leading educational institution, recognized for being innovative and having outstanding people, programs, and services.

Mission

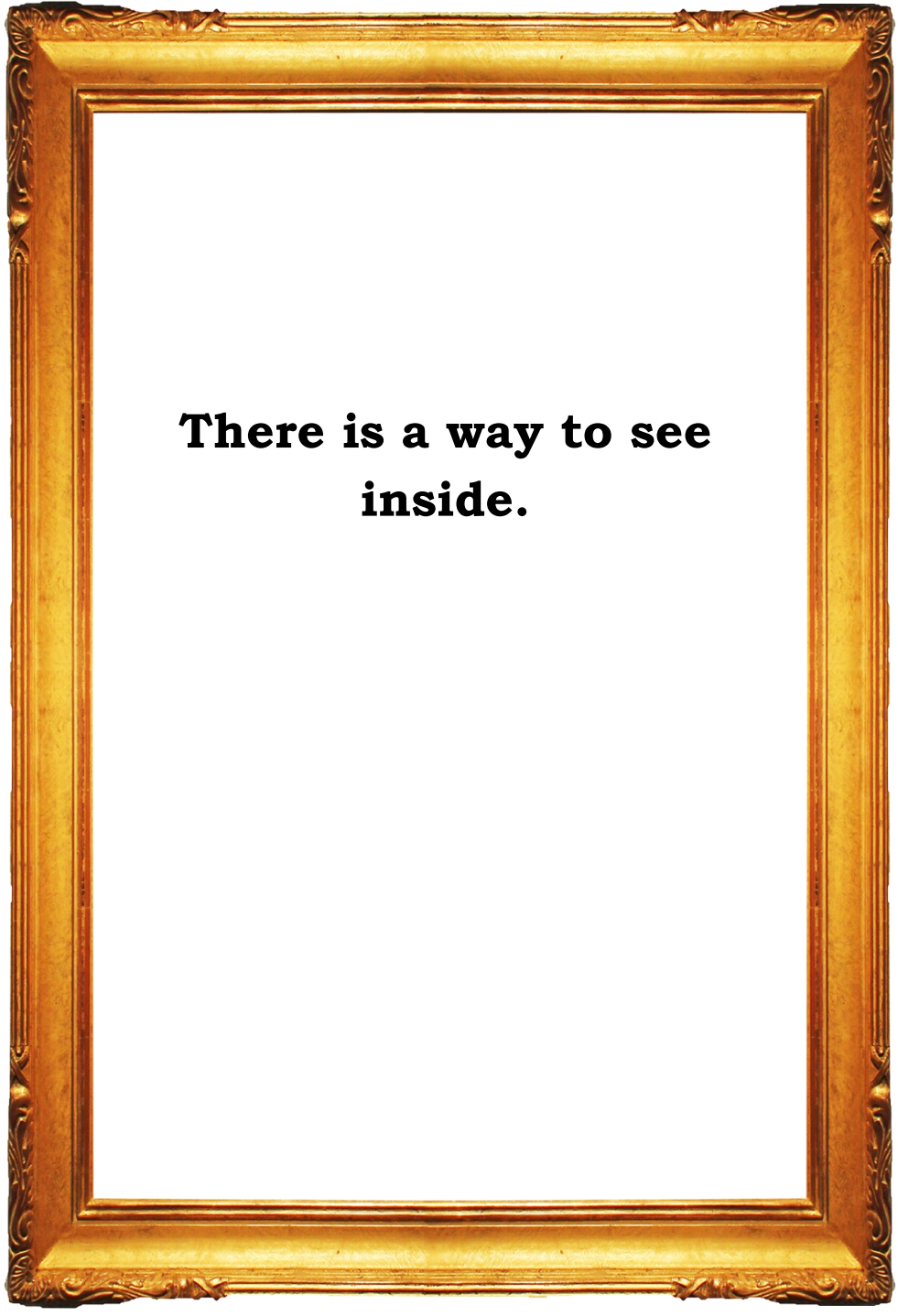
Barton offers exceptional and affordable learning opportunities supporting student, community, and employee needs.

ENDS

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7. Strategic Planning
8. Contingency Planning

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Drive Student Success
Cultivate Community Engagement
Optimize the Barton Experience
Emphasize Institutional Effectiveness



**There is a way to see
inside.**