



# 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,

Communities are the foundations of all art. Because art is mostly preoccupied with being a fundamentally human expression of the unknowable and unutterable, it can only truly exist in a meaningful way when it is observed. This is true whether artists attempt to communicate with themselves, their environment, but much more often (I would argue) with a community of fellow humans capable of interpreting the lines, curves, sounds, and colors as symbols reifying those experiences foundational to being human that the artist strives to create.

When we create art for a community, it is then an attempt to communicate with members of that community to honor that which came before and create new attempts for recognition, acknowledgment, mutual experience, and other such pillars of humanity. We are casting our deepest, mostly closely held ideas into a form that can only hope to approximate all that we wish it could be. Doing so is a courageous act of vulnerability that must be met with the invitation to belong it deserves rather than the reactions we often see from the loudest voices to challenge, exploit, or silence the very real people of our communities. Art requires our communion with community.

-Scott A. McDonald, Editor

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# **The Kindness of Strangers**

By Richard Lartz

She steps out of the car that has rolled to a halt and looks around her in frustration. The surrounding landscape is little more than telephone poles following the road to the horizon and a veritable sea of golden grasses as far as the eye can see. No signs indicating where the next town or stop is and, without a map, not much of an inclination to how far that may be. She pulls out her phone only to find it's dead, just like the car.

"Great and here I am in the middle of nowhere. What am I going to do now?" she defeatedly says to herself aloud as the wind whistles by. As she ponders her situation and surveys the area around her, she notices a glint in the direction she came from. Watching it for a bit it seems to brighten, and a vehicle begins to come into view. Delighted to even see another traveler along this long and dusty road, concern creeps into her mind as well. As it approaches, the object becomes clearer...an old model truck with faded red paint and a weathered chrome grill on its front.

The truck slows as it approaches and pulls over to the side of the road, just behind her inoperable car. She can see the red paint is faded, the white band that goes the length of it is peeling with rust in places, the tarnished old grill on the front has an empty spot where the 'Ford' logo used to be, and it is thoroughly covered in road dust, possibly ages worth of it. The door opens with a creak and an older man emerges from inside. He has on a pair of reflective aviator sunglasses, his hair is crewcut and gray with a few stray dark brown hairs remaining, and a thick but well-kept beard. Despite the warm weather of the day the man has on a blue and gray flannel shirt and a pair of old dingy blue jeans; his work boots clomp as he walks on the aged apron of the asphalt road.

"Having some trouble miss?" the man asks as he approaches.

"Yeah. I'm not sure what happened. My car just sort of slowed down and died and wouldn't restart afterwards." The young woman replies, trying to keep her distance but be friendly, as she has no idea who this man is or his intentions.

"Was it doing anything odd beforehand?" he asks as he continues to

approach, his hands in his pockets.

“The lights were acting funny, it seemed like they were dimming a bit...I don’t know why they would do that.” She then reaches for her phone, almost reactively, but then remembers it is dead and thinks better of mentioning that to the stranger.

“Can you pop the hood? I’ll take a look for ya quick.”

Without thinking much of it, she does as the man asks and he makes his way around to the front of the car and peers inside. She can see the reflection of the engine compartment in his sunglasses as he looks over the vehicle.

“Did you smell anything burning or anything like that? Did any lights come on in your dashboard?”

“Not that I can think of,” she replies “I was driving along and the lights started to dim and then it just kind of stopped? I’m sorry I don’t know much about cars, so it’s hard for me to say.”

“Hmmm...” he muses as he looks about under the hood, “So your lights dimmed, and it just slowed to a stop, eh? I’m going to guess it is probably your alternator that has given out. Not the worst fix, kind of expensive for parts, but you could get it fixed up in town which is about another 20 or so minutes down the road.”

She feels a little better knowing what may be wrong and that there is a town nearby but is still concerned if she should mention her inoperable phone or ask for a ride. She doesn’t know this man, why he stopped, or what his intentions may be...out here on a windswept road. She starts anxiously thinking of the cost of a tow truck and how that may not be in her current budget, let alone the cost of a new alternator. At the same time, she’s trying to think how long of a walk that would be too. The older man closes the hood and dusts off his hands. He takes a quick look around and grimaces.

“Well this ain’t the best place to be without a working alternator. Do you have a means to contact anyone? I know the number of the tow service in town.”

“I...don’t,” she replies hesitantly, “... and I don’t really have a lot of

money either.”

The man’s eyebrows raise a bit, he looks back and up the road, scratches his head for a moment and looks back to the young woman and says, “Well, I’m going into town and can at least drop ya off at the service station if ya want. I have an appointment to get to otherwise I’d try to do a little more. C’mon. Hop on in.” he finishes and turns back to his truck.

The young woman hesitates for a moment about getting into a stranger’s vehicle but then takes a hard look at her surroundings. Harmony then goes back to her nonfunctional car and retrieves a few items, not the least of which being her phone charger, and stuffs them in her purse. She wonders again if this is a good idea, to take a ride from a stranger on a road she has never been on. A flurry of unsavory outcomes rattles in her mind, as well as a lot of advice she has been given in her life too. All of this bounces around her head in a small amount of time and she concludes she doesn't have a lot of options, so she'll take a risk on the kindness of strangers.

Her mind made up, she closes the door to the car and walks back to the man’s truck. She has to push in the button of the handle really hard to get it to open, and the door swings open with a squeaky creaking sound of old metal on old metal. The inside has the faint but distinct smell of burnt motor oil and stale cigarettes. The once red plastic of the truck’s interior has faded to an almost bleached pink color with a fine coat of road dust clinging to its top. The aged bench seat has several holes in former seams that have come undone and bits of the stuffing or springs poke through except for in the center where a shaggy white dog lies curled up on what looks like one of those comfy Mexican blankets. From the center console a distended ashtray hangs, overstuffed with old cigarette butts.

She pulls herself in and sits down, careful not to disturb the sleeping dog as the man gets into the driver’s side. “Don’t you worry about Jenny now. She has gotten on in years; she won’t harm ya, too tired. Hell...she’s mostly blind due to cataracts.” he says trying to allay the young woman’s concern. “Can I pet her?” she asks back kind of meekly.

“Oh sure,” he says from behind the aviator sunglasses, “She ain’t ornery or nothin’, sweetest dog you’ll ever know.” He then gives the key a turn and after a short sputter the old truck roars to life; he shifts into drive on the

steering column and the truck pulls onto the road. She glances in the grimy rearview mirror at her car as it slowly disappears behind them.

“You mind if I smoke?” she asks after a few minutes of silence while reaching into her purse for what remains of the pack and her lighter.

“I don’t mind. Just make sure ya roll the window down.” he replies, his gaze fixed on the road ahead of them. Lighting up a cigarette, she turns the crank of the window to lower it which takes some effort as it is stiff from lack of use. She gazes out the window for a while, watching the golden grasslands pass by as they travel down the road and then around the interior of the cab. She thinks to herself how it reminds her of a few times she went for a ride with her grandfather when she was young, how she thought his truck was just a mess, but she doesn’t feel like that now. To her this vehicle feels lived in, a part of someone’s life.

She reaches over and gently pets the dog’s shaggy fur. No grumbles, no noises, the dog just lays there and quietly breathes as she pets it. The man reaches above the visor on his side and pulls out some rectangle thing with two circles in it and pushes it into a narrow slot in the console.

Within a few seconds some fast music starts playing through old static sounding speakers. “What’s that?” she asks, pointing to the same spot.

“What? That’s a tape player. You know, cassette tapes? One of my favorite bands too. Minor Threat. You ever hear of ‘em?” he asks back, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Can’t say I have. Not what I expected either.” she replies with a little laugh, gazing back out the window while still petting the dog with her left hand, cigarette in the right hand, and half dangled out the window.

“Yeah, most folks think people only listen to country tunes out here. Old punks like me just keep our heads down and our opinion of country music to ourselves.” he chuckles.

“Really? You...a punk? I can’t imagine that.” the young woman replies, still lazily taking drags from her cigarette and flicking the ashes out the open window. The shaggy dog lifts her head briefly and gives the young woman’s hand a gentle lick.

“Seems Jenny likes you,” the man says, “What’s your name if you don’t



mind me askin’?”

“Harmony,” she replies, “What’s your name sir...if you don’t mind me askin’ back.”

“Harold, but you can call me Harry.”

“Nice to meet you Harry and Jenny.”

“Nice to meet you too Harmony. So whatcha doin’ out this way? If you don’t mind me askin’.”

“You know Harry, girl meets boy, girl falls in love with boy, boy turns out to be...not so great so...girl leaves. You know what I mean?”

He turns his attention away from the road for a moment and looks at her. She only sees her own expression in the reflective surface of his sunglasses, it's an expression of exhaustion and tiredness that she didn't know she wore so prominently on her face. He gives a solemn nod of his head and turns his attention back to the road, “Yeah, I know how that can be.”

She lights another cigarette and continues to glance back and forth from the golden fields off to the side and the seemingly never ending blacktop in front of them. Her mind drifts back to that boy—promises made and promises broken. She recalls how arguments replaced joy, how tears and shouting replaced love and affection. Setting those thoughts aside, she notices the road dust has even coated the inside of the truck’s windshield and thinks she sees what looks like fingerprints left there.

She curiously reaches toward them and the man abruptly snaps at her, “Don’t touch that!” Harmony instantly recoils, not expecting that response about some dust on the inside of a windshield.

“I’m sorry I just...” she starts apologetically.

“Don’t be,” he interjects, “If anything I’m sorry I snapped. Just please leave that be please.” The tape ends, he ejects it and flips it over to the other side with some song about ‘not wanting to hear it’ coming on.

“Do you mind if I ask why?” she asks Harry after a few moments, “I don’t wanna pry or anything, just curious is all.”

He stays silent for a moment and pets the slumbering dog briefly before answering, “They’re my wife’s toe prints. Anne liked to put her feet on the dash and this one day she left those toe marks there. I actually got a bit

miffed then about it. Silly thing for me to do really. After Anne got diagnosed with cancer, I just couldn't bring myself to clean them away, and after she passed...I just couldn't, you know? It's like she's still riding with me whenever I go for a drive."

As he spoke his face stayed turned towards the road, for a moment she thought she saw a small tear running down his cheek. "Now it's just me and Jenny but that may change too I suppose." Harmony's heart sinks and a few moments pass without either saying anything, the music still playing through the aged and blown speakers of the truck.

"Why would you say that?" Harmony asked quietly after a pause.

Harry answered, "Well...I'm taking Jenny to the vet today. She's been having trouble getting up and down from her bed and...I just don't wanna see her suffer. So, we'll see what the vet can maybe help with and if not... well I guess I'll be driving home alone later." he finishes, choking back emotion on the last sentence. Harmony didn't know what to say. She gave the shaggy white dog another gentle petting and Jenny raised her head for a moment and gently licked Harmony's hand again in response.

"Do you have more music to listen to?" she asks to try and break the sad silence that had descended on the cab of the old truck.

"Yeah...over in the glove box there I have some more cassette tapes. Go ahead and take a look." Harmony opens the old glove box and finds a small trove of old cassette tapes, a few names of which she recognizes from her dad's music.

"How about this one?" she asks, holding up one of them.

Harry turns and looks, and a grin spreads across his face, "That's a great one! Go ahead and put it in." With a few presses and clicks Judas Priest's "British Steel" starts playing and the sounds of 'Breaking the Law' belts on through the antiquated speakers. The two sing along as they continue traveling down the road, the mood in the cab changing from heavy and forlorn to those of a happier and unforgotten past.

Not long after, signs start to appear on the side of the road letting the occupants know that the town they're driving to is coming up. "I really appreciate your help Harry," Harmony says, her voice audible over the

fading sounds of Judas Priest, "I really don't know what I would've done if you hadn't come along."

He glances over at her briefly, a smile emerging from his thick beard, "You're quite welcome Harmony. It was nice to have some company on this trip so...thank you for riding along and for having good taste in music!" he chuckles.

Both smiling, the truck pulls into the lot of the small local service station and parks around back. Harry puts the truck into park and points out to her an old wrecker truck parked nearby. "That's Cassandra's tow truck right there. She's probably inside shootin' the breeze with young Bill, the clerk. She should be able to help ya out and if she gives ya too much guff about paying and such...you just let her know she can take it up with me, okay? She owes me a favor or two."

"You don't have to do that." Harmony replies.

"I know what I don't have to do, but hey, you were great company on the road, Jenny sure took a liking to you...and she knows good people, so don't you worry about it."

Harmony opens the door and gets out, "C'mon...there's gotta be somethin' I can do. You're really helping me out." Harmony pleads while standing with the door open.

"Okay, okay...if you insist. I was gonna stop here on my way back for a sixer of Old Style, if you wanna get that for me, then we can call it even." She tilts her head and smiles back at him, "Really? That's all you want?" she asks.

"I'm a man of simple wants." Harry replies with a smile, "I'll wait out here for a few but I'm gonna have to get going to Jenny's appointment soon."

Harmony nods and walks from the truck into the small convenience store.

The modest interior smelled of road dust and bleach, as if the floors were recently cleaned. She sees a young dark-haired man at the counter talking to a middle-aged woman in a blue work shirt with red hair in a bun.

Harmony goes back to the coolers, finds a six pack of Old Style and walks up to the front. "Careful what ya wish for Bill," she hears the woman

say to the clerk, "Excitement ain't all it's cracked up to be, let alone for the sake of it to cure your boredom."

"I suppose," the young man replies, "but nothin' much happens round here, and it just gets a bit mind numbing" he trails off noticing Harmony approaching the counter. "Good afternoon miss, is that all for ya today?"

"This and a pack of smokes please." she replies, "I also need a tow truck, my car broke down a few miles east of here."

"I can help ya there," the woman pipes up, "Name's Cassandra, and I got the wrecker out back...we can tow ya here to town and get ya fixed up."

"What's your brand ma'am?" the clerk interrupts after ringing up the beer. "Marb reds, shorts please." Harmony answers and the clerk turns back to the wall of cigarette packs to find them.

"Do you got a flat or...?" the wrecker driver asks.

"Alternator I guess?" Harmony answers as the clerk puts her smokes on the counter, rings it all up and gives her a total.

"Oh, Mike at the shop should be able to get ya goin' again before sunset." Cassandra says absently scratching under her chin, "Someone give ya a ride here then?"

"Yeah," Harmony answers with a smile, "The beer's for him. Nice guy." "I don't see too many folks buyin' Old Style these days," Billy the clerk volunteers.

"Yeah, that was old Harry's beer of choice." Cassandra says with a solemn shake of her head. Harmony, somewhat confused by their choice of words, decides to listen rather than volunteer who gave her a ride to town.

"Yeah..." Billy the clerk agrees, "He stopped in here that night of the accident, got his usual beer, and he looked...just so damn sad. I guess he had to put his dog down that day. My cousin said he was probably drinkin' on the way home which is why he ended up in that ditch and all...too bad." Harmony's mind is instantly a whirl of confusion and sadness, wondering and hoping they're not referring to the very man who had given her a ride. "Hey now, I'm gonna tell you now your cousin don't know shit Billy. Harry would never drink and drive. All those years he ran that bar in town, he never let anyone go home like that, would give them a ride himself. He'd

even refuse to drive his wife Anne around with an open container and she was the center of his universe. So, keep that gossipy shit to yourself.”

Billy, taken aback, replies, “Hey...I liked Harry too. I just said what my cousin said.”

“Well your cousin wasn’t there Bill, I was. Had to pull that old Ford of his out the ditch too. We also found that sixer...unopened. Poor guy, didn’t even get to have a last beer.”

Harmony, still listening in disbelief, finally says, “I’ll be right back.” She tries not to bolt out the door and around the back of the service station. Her mind trying to process what she just heard, wondering if she hallucinated the whole thing, “But then how the hell did I get here?” she says to herself aloud just before she turns the corner. To her surprise the truck is still parked there, engine running, with Harry sitting inside, his arm dangling out the window with Judas Priest still playing inside the truck. She almost can’t believe her eyes but can’t help but feel relieved and approaches with the six-pack of beer in hand and a smile on her face.

“Hey,” Harry says as she approaches turning the music in the truck down, “I was wonderin’ if you were gonna come back. I gotta get to that appointment soon.”

“Sorry” Harmony stammers through her smile, “I talked to the tow truck lady and got your beer. Here ya go!” she says and hands it to him.

“Thank you much!” he says and goes to stow it in the cab.

“Hey Harry...” she starts wondering what to ask or say or if she should even say anything or what could even be said back to her, “Let’s have a beer.” is what comes out of her mouth instead.

“I’m sorry Harmony, but I never drink and drive...adamantly against it in fact.” he says with a serious look on his face, “Wouldn’t even let my wife bring an open beer in the truck.” he finishes with a chuckle.

“C’mon Harry just this once? Just one.” she replies. He takes the reflective aviator glasses off and she sees a more careworn face with two soft and caring green eyes.

“I appreciate it Harmony, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.” he replies. “C’mon Harry. You helped me out, and probably a lot of others, just one. We can have a toast.” Harmony insists.

“A toast?” he chuckles, “What would we toast to?”

“How about to Anne and Jenny?” she replies enthusiastically. She sees the emotion wash over his face and his eyes become wet.

“Hmmm...okay. Just this once and just for the toast, okay?” Harry quietly answers. He takes a beer from the ring and hands it to Harmony.

They pop their beers at the same time and tap the rims of the cans together, “To Anne and Jenny,” Harmony says and Harry smiles back at her, his eyes still wet.

“To Anne and Jenny, the two best ladies I’ve ever known...well you’re pretty great too” he finishes, nodding at Harmony. He takes a long drink from the beer, and when he takes it from his lips he looks back at the can in his hand with surprise and says, “Damn...you know...it’s almost like I haven’t had a beer in forever. How about that huh? Might have been just what I needed.”

“Well you never know what you might need until it shows up.” Harmony volunteers.

“I suppose you’re right,” Harry smiles and takes another swig. “Damn that’s good. I’d think it’s been years or something since I had one. Thank you, Harmony, and best of luck to you.” The two tap cans again, Harmony trying to hold in what feels like a tidal wave of emotions of sadness, happiness, and gratitude all at once, and she smiles back at him.

“Thank you Harry...for everything. Safe travels to you!” she finishes raising her beer.

“Anytime! I always believed in the kindness of strangers.” Harry finishes, hands her his empty beer can and puts his sunglasses back on.

“Well, I better get to gettin’,” he says and shifts the truck into reverse. The truck backs up and Harry waves one last time with a smile at Harmony before the truck pulls around the building and out of sight.



The End

# **Puddles**

By Andréa Vegter

The youth went down a road one night  
Far off the path, way out of sight  
Down the nefarious Snapping Willow Lane  
Dismissing urban legends as inane

Just a load of nonsense, fluff and stuff  
The youth whistled loud as he fixed his cuff  
Entertainment he was seeking  
The gathered rain he was leaping

Piddle puddle patter, the rain did splatter.

Preoccupied, he missed the speaking  
Mild shivers as the wind was weeping  
Stalking eyes appreciating his form  
Opportunity to strike in coming storm

Tracking motions, his every step  
Until he paused, out of breath  
Trees abnormally overgrown  
Tripping over root, unaware of bone

Piddle puddle patter, his clothes in tatters.

Branches extending, reaching, creaking  
The youth turns, horror shrieking  
Poised, waiting for the thunder clap  
In a moment, silence...Snap!

Snapping willows block the moon  
Waiting for a meat-sack boon  
Shriveled body unto the heaping  
Life force from the reaping

Piddle puddle patter, the blood did splatter.

# **The Braided Woman**

By Anne Schiller

I knew that I should not be here, carrying my grief into this public space. An iron sculptor opens his studio for this event, a showcase of local bluegrass bands. I attend by invitation of the bass player, a caring friend who takes pity on me, and coaxes me from the safety of my home. I am a broken recluse in a social gathering, carefully hiding behind a gargoyle in a dark corner. I do not belong here, among happy people. My anxiety runs high, and my eyes search the studio for a stiff drink. Suddenly, the echoing clip-clop of heavy heels interrupts my search for alcohol. A woman in black boots and fringed jacket enters the studio. She and her crippled man cross in front of my hiding space. A woman dressed too bold for a small, conservative town. A woman dressed too flamboyant for her age, over 50 years. I can't stop watching her.

Even the eyes of my dark-corner gargoyle follow her as she guides her crumpled man through the winged, welded creatures. The cold draft of the winter day follows her and catches the attention of the crowd of thirty-some attendees. I read their thoughts as they glare and then quickly look away. They dismiss her as odd and not worth their time.

I do not dismiss her. I want to learn more about her spirit and soul. What brought her out today—a bitter day in January. Her shy and uneasy body language does not match her attire. She apologizes to those near her as she situates her partner's oxygen tank and takes a seat. She appears vulnerable and unprotected. Her man, disabled and disheveled, seems to be nothing more than a burden. He fails to protect her, yet she tenderly holds his hand across the table. I understand the comfort in having a companion, regardless of the incompetence. I understand the union, for I hold the hand of fear and angst.

The woman does not speak in words. Yet, she screams loudly in her attire, and fearfully in her gestures. Her over-the-knee boots crawl up her legs to mid-thigh where they grip tight blue jeans. Thick layers of green eye shadow and white eye liner create a plastic coating to disguise her age. Under fake eye lashes that flutter with quick movement, her darting eyes guard her. She nervously scans the room for hazards that may do her harm. Her masquerade



is clever, but it does not fool me. No one escapes the specter of a shattered soul.

The deep, dense smell of smoke and perfume waft from her table to mine. The haze confuses my senses as does her very being. She moves as a self-conscious wall flower yet flaunts the clothing of a hooker. Long sleeves of black lace touch wide bracelets. I stop my roving stare to rest on those bracelets. Bracelets that hide scars. Scars that hide wounds. Wounds that hide hurt. My heart knows hers. My soul beats the same mournful sound as hers.

She tosses her long, straw-blond hair, crimped into a curly frizz, and a shock of pink catches my eye. My stare follows three tiny braids of hot pink plastic woven into the straw-blond mess. Each braid of three strands. Strands created from sorrow, agony, and loss.

I name her Braided Woman.

Her braids of lost dreams and hopes are secured by a pink strand of grief. At the end of her braids, the pink turns blood red. The sight of red blood muddles my mind. I watch the red ooze and drip from the end of her braids. I close my eyes tight, blocking the vision of bleeding wounds forming in my brain.

In the effort to avoid the blood, I look down at my drink. I am grateful for the complimentary bar and I generously tip the bartender. Reality and fantasy swirl together in my glass, as the contorted sculptures of teeth and claws whisper to me. I know her secrets. She hides her secrets in a brave way. I hide mine as a coward. I take the easy road into a blurry existence where alcohol numbs pain and fills the void.

Braided Woman.

If I could become her, I would not need the comfort of her needy man. I would toss him aside, and strut into the room, my clothes flowing with tiny beads and sequins. The crowd would not look away, they would follow me with intrigue. Is she a mystic or a witch, they would wonder. They would be afraid to approach me. No one would dare to ask about my past, my origin, or about my secret scars. I would not reveal the broken glass and twisted car. I would not speak of how I watched the red blood that I gave my sons at birth, drip from their young bodies as life flowed out of them. My secret would stay hidden—I lived, but I did not survive.

I know the mystery behind the Braided Woman, I see past her faux covering. I see the deep gash in her soul that drips blood from her pink plastic braids. I see her truth in the smokey whiskey curling around crystal squares of ice in my glass. My hand trembles as I touch the wide bracelet on my wrist. I take a long swallow of the whiskey. The amber liquid pulls me into a syrupy world of denial. My illusion halts, as the black lace of my sleeve catches a rough edge of the bracelet. I untangle the lace and notice the dried blood stain of near past. The stain marks my gray and empty soul. The Braided Woman and I both struggle to protect our souls.

My bass player friend croons a haunting tune of a civil war soldier. As I listen to the lyrics, my drunken head clears for a moment. I notice Braided Woman as she pushes back her chair to stand. She cannot hide from the crowd as she rises, revealing her height, perhaps 5'9". The heel of her boot catches the table leg. The table tips, sending her drink to a crash of ice and vodka on the floor. Exposure. Her dreaded fate—all eyes on her. People cluck their tongues and shake their heads. Her clumsiness is now the center of attention. She drops to her knees, picking at glass and ice.

The bartender rushes to the mess on the floor and begins sopping up the liquid with a bar rag. I reach down to help Braided Woman with the pieces of glass. Our hands touch, and in my blurred vision I see two hands, two wide bracelets, and two black lace sleeves. The blur clears—only one hand, one wide bracelet, one black lace sleeve. The bartender says, “oh hon, you cut your hand.” I see my blood, mixing with the blood dripping from Braided Woman’s pink braid. My tangled brain grows tired of its battle with delirium.

I succumb to the inevitable. The bloodied hand of the Braided Woman unites with mine. I no longer struggle to maintain sanity over illusion. Perhaps she is me, or perhaps I am her.

# **Circus Sam**

By Luke Beling

I moved to a new school in the eighth grade. Dad thought we needed a fresh start after mom died. It took my classmates one week to devise a nickname for me—one week of observing my zinc-painted face.

"You're just missing the green hair and juggling balls, Circus Sam!"

The first day Dad put the sunscreen on my face, I tried to wash it off before the morning bell, but the stuff was so thick I only made it worse, smearing it all down my neck. Then, when Dad picked me up after school, he quickly applied another coat, saying, "Looks like we didn't use enough this morning!"

Making it through the school day wasn't half as bad as the after-school pick-up. There weren't teachers on the curb, so I'd have to wait for Dad never less than forty-five minutes, and sometimes until dark.

Everybody stared, pointed, and laughed at me. Even the kids too shy to speak would look at me like I was from another planet, making sure they were at least ten feet away. Dad was always drunk or close to drunk when he picked me up, always with the same excuse, "Sorry, Sam, that business meeting ran later than I thought."

We moved to a new town a week after Mom's funeral. The doctors found what they first called a "sunspot" on her shoulder. Six months later, that spot had grown into melanoma and spread to other parts of her body. She didn't have long after that.

Dad's initial response was heavy drinking. Then he stopped shaving, making his bed, doing the laundry, and washing the dishes. Some nights, maybe five a month, he'd ask me to sit down and have dinner with him. He'd try to cook something special, like steaks on the grill or the chicken and mushroom dish Mom used to make, but inevitably, something would burn, and I'd have to throw a frozen pizza in the microwave.

The dinners we'd eat together almost always ended with Dad in tears, slurring, "How's that bottle of sunscreen looking? Do we need more? I hope you're wearing a hat and sitting away from the window, right?"

I'd nod, "I'm okay. I promise."

"You've got your mother's skin, Sam. And she wasn't damn well okay!"

He'd proceed to inspect my body. "What the hell's that?"

"What?" I'd say, tracking his eyes.

"Is that a sunspot?"

I'd flick off a piece of food or show him it was just an innocent freckle.

At the end of my first week of school, a ninth-grade teacher, Mr. Stone, announced during our assembly that he'd be starting after-school tennis lessons, which I saw as an easy escape from the dreaded after-school wait for Dad.

I rushed to the stage once Mr. Stone had finished giving the announcement.

"I'd like to sign up, please."

He scratched his black stubbled chin, examining my clown-white face. Tilting my shoulders back and straightening my neck, I tried to make myself look athletic.

"You ever played before?"

"Yes." I lied.

"Get a signature from your parent, and bring a water bottle, non-marking shoes, and sun..." He paused, moving his eyes between my cheeks. He then handed me a piece of paper, which I folded and placed in my shirt pocket.

Dad was supposed to make BBQ ribs that night, but stayed in his room with the door locked. I tried knocking but couldn't bang my fist hard enough to make a sound louder than his TV. I smiled when I opened the filing cabinet, remembering Mom's meticulous and organized manner. I grabbed an insurance form and scanned it for Dad's signature. It was relatively easy to copy, more or less a heart-shaped squiggle. I saw a photo when I returned the document to the folder. It was their wedding day. They were kissing, heads turned away from the camera. I stared at the photo, noting every detail: mom's white flower-laced dress, dad's black tuxedo with a blue bow tie, and their eyes, open and looking at each other as though they were the last two people in the world.

After school the next day, a few other kids and I sat waiting for Mr. Stone under an umbrella on white plastic chairs. When he arrived, he asked for our

consent forms. I felt a little nervous when I handed it to him, but he didn't look twice, stuffing it into his tan briefcase.

"Everybody needs to put a little sunscreen on before we head out there. And don't be shy. You can never apply too much on a day like this."

I felt the stares, but nobody laughed. We followed Mr. Stone onto the court.

"Alright, two easy laps around the outside of the lines. No cheating!"

There were five of us—two boys I recognized from my grade and two girls a little older. When we'd finished our laps, we formed a semi-circle in front of Mr. Stone and followed his instructions in a stretching routine.

"I want each of you to tell me your name and one thing you want to get from these classes."

One of the boys stopped touching his toes, standing straight.

"Now, I didn't say to stop stretching, though, you hear," Mr. Stone said, his palms flat on the cement.

"I'm John, and I'm not that good at anything, so I decided to try tennis."

Mr. Stone immediately stood up, approached John, and shook his hand.

"I'm glad you're here, John."

"My name's Nicole. My grandma was an excellent tennis player. She died last year."

I felt my heart beating faster as each kid shared their name and reason for attending. We were on our backs stretching our hamstrings when it came to my turn.

"My name's Sam. I'm new, and I, uh, I really like tennis."

"We're glad you're here, Sam. Aren't we?"

I couldn't see Mr. Stone's face as he spoke because my eyes were closed, blinded by the sun, but I felt the warmth of his voice.

"Aren't we?" He said again a little more sternly.

The other kids all responded, "Yes, welcome. Welcome, Sam."

It was the first time I'd heard my new peers call me by my name without putting *circus* before it.

None of us had rackets, so after stretching and introducing ourselves, we picked a racket from the pile next to the net post.

"Not that one, Sam. That's an inch or two too small for you."

"Oh yeah, of course," I said, not looking at Mr. Stone.

I then suspected he realized I'd never played before, but it didn't seem to matter to him.

"Here, this one's perfect for you."

Mr. Stone handed me a green racket with a soft, brown leather grip.

We formed a line at what Mr. Stone called the baseline. He showed us how to hit a forehand and a backhand, then gave us two attempts at each shot before we circled to the back of the line. None of us got more than a quarter of our attempts within the lines that day, but whenever we did, Mr. Stone sprang to his feet, removing his sunglasses, and cheered with his two fists raised above his head. His energy and vigor quickly became contagious, and we started copying him whenever one of us succeeded.

During the last five minutes of practice, we collected all the balls we'd hit over the fence, which must have been at least half of Mr. Stone's basket. I lingered behind the other kids as they left the court. Mr. Stone was zipping his bag and collecting his rackets when I squeezed some sunscreen out of his bottle and quickly lathered it all over my face.

He must have seen me walking away when he shouted, "Goodbye, Sam. You did good today, kid."

I had my back turned to him. I raised my hand and began jogging towards the pick-up area. I waited fifteen minutes before Dad arrived.

When I got into the car, Dad's eyes narrowed.

"What have you been doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been sweating? God, Sam, don't tell me you've been out in the sun."

I stared out the window. "You've been drinking."

My heart began racing when I saw Mr. Stone approaching. I could tell he'd recognized me.

"They're about to close the gate. Drive!" I shouted, avoiding eye contact with Mr. Stone, tugging on the steering wheel in Dad's hands.

We started moving.

"Relax! They're not going to lock us in!"

In the rearview mirror, I saw Mr. Stone turn around.

"I just want to get home."

"Now, don't lie to me. What were you doing out in the sun?"

"It was just a quick game of tag with some new friends, and most of it was under that big willow tree."

Dad grabbed my hand and glanced at my face. "Well, it looks like your face is still nicely covered."

We came to a stop at a red light. Dad leaned forward in his seat, turning his body towards me. "I'm glad you're making friends, Sam. I know this hasn't been easy for you. Once we get into the fall, we can ease back on the sunscreen."

He put his hand on my knee. "I haven't been there for you. I know. It's just..."

The light turned green.

"It's okay, Dad," I said. "I'm okay."

The next day at lunch, a boy tapped me on the shoulder. It was John.

"You coming to tennis?"

I smiled, "Yes, you?"

"Of course! Mind if I sit with you for lunch?"

"Please." I said.

I liked that John didn't ask me about the sunscreen on my face. We shared a packet of chips. Moments before the bell rang, a few boys started heckling us. "Look! It's Circus Sam and Jackass John! You boys need a little privacy to make out?!"

"Don't pay them any attention."

John stood up and began walking away. I didn't move at first.

"C'mon, Sam." John stopped, waiting for me.

I packed my lunch box into my backpack and then walked with him back to the classroom.

When I exited my classroom at the end of the day, John was waiting for me in the hallway. We walked to the tennis court together, guessing how many shots we'd make, admitting that we hoped to see Mr. Stone as animated as the day before.

Stepping down the long flight of stairs, I paid attention to how the court lay in relation to the road surrounding it. There was no way that Dad would see me if he drove by. The court was sunken, almost shielded in by the school grounds.

We hit a few less balls over the fence by the end of the second day's practice. Mr. Stone stopped us early and sat us down in the shady, grassy area outside the court.

"Tennis is a lot like life. You can't win every point. You're not going to make every shot. The best players know how to lose. They know how to respond and get back up again."

I pretended to look for something in my backpack while the other kids left, including John, who offered to wait for me multiple times. Then, just as Mr. Stone began to wrap the chain-lock around the tennis court entrance door. I dabbed a big clunk of sunscreen into my hand. I didn't look back or hear him say goodbye as I hurried from the court to the after-school pick-up spot. Within only a few yards, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Was that your dad who picked you up yesterday, Sam?"

Mr. Stone lifted his hand and began walking a little ahead of me, craning his neck slightly to look me in the eyes.

"Yes," I said, meeting his gaze.

"Is he normally that late to pick you up?"

"Not always," I lied.

I set my bag down and found a place to sit under the big willow tree.

"I'll wait with you until he comes." Mr. Stone sat down next to me.

"Oh no, that's okay, Mr. Stone. I'm okay. Don't worry about it, please." I stood up and started looking out towards the road. "I bet he'll be here any minute now."



Just then, I saw Dad's blue station wagon pull up to the light.

"Look, he's here."

I started walking towards the curb, but instead of turning right, Dad went straight, passing my school.

"Dad!" I yelled, but he couldn't hear me.

"Come!" Mr. Stone shouted, "We'll catch up to him."

I hesitated, watching Mr. Stone get into his red truck.

"C'mon, Sam! I'll get you to him."

I jumped in the truck, and Mr. Stone sped out of the parking lot. We could see Dad in the distance, stopped at a red light. We needed to be faster to catch him. The light turned green. Dad went right, then a took a quick left into a plaza where he parked.

"There! He went in there," I shouted.

Mr. Stone's face seemed to change. He looked as though he'd just heard something sad. "Yes, I see that."

We parked next to Dad's station wagon. Mr. Stone put his hand on my shoulder before unclipping his seatbelt. "You wait here. Let me go get him."

"No, I'm okay from here. Thanks for the ride, Mr. Stone!"

I jumped out of the truck and sprinted toward the only building in the lot.

"Sam, wait!" Mr. Stone shouted.

I ignored him, hoping he'd drive away.

A big sign on the green-painted door read, "Jimmy's Hideaway Bar." I felt my heart speed up as I opened the door.

The bar was empty, except for Dad, the barman, and a guy with tattoos playing pool in the corner.

"Dad," I whispered.

Only the barman was looking at me. He tapped Dad on the shoulder. Dad lifted his head from his resting position on his hands, "What is it, Jim?"

"Your son." The barman pointed at me.

As Dad turned around to see me, I heard the green door open.

"Sam, what are you doing here?"

I noticed an empty shot glasses on the counter in front of him.

"You were supposed to pick him up half an hour ago."

Mr. Stone stepped in front of me, blocking my view.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Sam's tennis coach."

"Tennis?" Dad climbed off the stool.

"Mr. Stone, wait." I tried to shove ahead, but Dad was already in Mr. Stone's face.

"Your son's showing a little promise out there."

As Dad edged past him, Mr. Stone bumped against an empty pool table.

Dad looked at me with sharp threatening eyes. "Get in the car! Now!"

I didn't hesitate, sprinting out of the bar. I noticed the time on the dashboard when I entered the station wagon. Twenty minutes later, Dad walked out of the bar, crying.

"He said they've been calling you Circus Sam." His eyes were red, and a steady stream of tears flowed.

"I just don't know how to carry on without her, Sam."

I didn't look up at Dad, but I could feel his eyes on me.

"I miss her, too." I finally said, feeling a thickness in my throat.

When I lifted my eyes to look at him, his head was flat against the steering wheel. I put my hand on his.

"Give me another chance, Sam."

I leaned over and wrapped my arms around his back.

Dad lifted off the steering wheel. I began crying as he hugged me.

"I love you, Sam."

"I love you too."

As we reversed out of the parking lot, I asked, "What did Mr. Stone say to you in there?"

He shifted the gear into park. "That I'll lose you before the 9th grade if I continue on like this."

I moved to the front of my seat. "So, I can keep playing tennis?"

"On one condition." Dad pulled his white wide-brimmed bucket hat from under the seat and placed it on my head. I studied myself in the sun-visor mirror. I looked dorky, but anything beat a face full of sunscreen.

"Only at practice," I said.

Dad nodded, extending his hand towards me.

When I shook Dad's hand, he squeezed and pulled me into his chest. We stayed like that for a few minutes, more tears dropping on my head. Then I looked up at him, smiling.

"I guess Cricket-Hat Sam's a lot better than Circus Sam!"



**Cool Drink of Water** by Mary Ellen Schinstock

## **Life on the Cell Block**

By Eric Smith

In the shadow of the iron bars, we march, we tread  
Day's a prison, night's a chain, and hope's just a thread  
Concrete walls, and silence deep, keepin' dreams at bay,  
But we sing to find the strength to face another day.

Oh, life on the cell block, where the cold winds blow,  
We keep our hearts unbroken, let the courage show.  
In the rhythm of the shackles, in the echo of the cell,  
We find our spirits rising, in this living hell.

Sunrise don't mean freedom, it's just another start,  
Our lives are in the ledger, inked with broken heart.  
But together we find solace, through the clang and grind,  
In the unity of struggle, solace we can find.

Oh, life on the cell block, where the cold winds blow,  
We keep our hearts unbroken, let the resilience show.  
In the rhythm of the shackles, in the echo of the cell,  
We find our spirits rising, in this living hell.

## **For When You Want to Wake Up**

By Paige Mink

Everyone has a song in their throat and a painting in their forefront.  
They dance in their dreams and wake believing they know no rhythm.  
A love so great it splits seams,  
Or perhaps buried so deeply, it sheds no light.

But it's there.

Eyes with hazed visions and mouths with nothing but a craving,  
A fire in the soul quenched by the most radical elements,  
Bound by nothing but themselves.

To be and to experience and to feel:

To better know yourself,

To better love yourself,

And to better love those around you.

With this, I can't imagine walking through life and doing anything less than thriving.



**Untitled Photo** by Elena Lara Sandoval

# Of Earth, and Moon, and Why Chickens Lay Eggs

By M. A. Gilmore

*Granddad Godsey was an Irishman, in every way except geography.*

*Having been born on the plains of Kansas, he had never set foot on the soil that nurtured his grandfather, or his grandfather's grandfather, before him.*

*And yet, the kinship and heritage he held were striking: from the way he stood, a six-foot, four-inch tower over his garden; his manner, in which all strangers were friends he hadn't yet met; the jaunty angle of his sloucher, low over his left eye; and his "gift of the tongue."*

*It was in the stories he would tell, when he did make it halfway across the state to visit me in my youthful ignorance. Every question I asked of him precipitated a tale, and near the end, the answer—were I sharp enough to divine it.*

*During one such visit, near time for my first year of school, we were together, eating breakfast alone in the restaurant, for my granddad was an early riser. We would eat, as Granddad ordered, eggs over easy on wheat toast, three, maybe four, strips of bacon and a side of hash browns. It was his ritual, and I, impressionable to his adult world, would mirror his fare.*

*After breakfast, we would load up and drive east along the lonely stretch of 160 highway. "Chasing the sun up," he called it, and when the first rim of gold was visible on the reddened western Kansas horizon, we would return to my still, sleep-ridden house—except for Grammy, who always anticipated our arrival.*

*They would load up, back out, and wave, and I would be left to ponder over the latest story, and of how soon there would be another.*

*So there we were, and I—wishing what time we had left would hold still, maybe an hour, maybe just a few minutes—posed my question:*

*"Granddad, do you know why chickens lay eggs?" I thought the immensity of the question would, of course, extend the tale.*

*"Well, you know already what others will tell you," he said. "But, I'll elect to tell you what my granddad told me, and that's an old, old story."*

*I settled back, relieved. Older meant longer, to Granddad. Two "olds" were worth another 30 minutes, at least.*

Chickens have been laying eggs for a long time. To know why, you have to go back to the first days, before the blight, before the English, before the Tuatha, before men.

*“But aren’t there chickens, everywhere?” I broke in, knowing I wouldn’t get a chance when Granddad got wound up.*

*“Sure, and there are now,” Granddad said, with a sly wink. “But, don’t you know, all the best chickens come from Ireland.”*

*Sure. The best of everything was from Ireland, to my five-year-old mind. I already knew, as him that’s told it; Grandad’s family had stowed away to escape the blight, arriving in Kentucky. Granddad’s granddad left Harlan County bound for California with a wagon, a wife and a four-foot trunk full of broad-leaf tobacco, broke down in the middle of the plains near what was to become the town of Harlan, and ...well, that’s another story.*

Back in those days, Ireland wasn’t Ireland. It was basically a rock, with a few trees, the grass and some deer and sheep and birds on. In the center of the island was a great stone house, where Dagda and Anu lived, with Anu’s sister, Cerridwen.

Back then, there was nothing, but Anu and her sister needed nothing, for magic was as mean as bread to them. When they wanted or needed anything, they made it, and so they lived, free and close to the vest.

After a while, though, the sisters thought it was too quiet; so, they made a son, Belenus, so that Dagda wouldn’t be lonely when he tripped up to light the stars. They made daughters Eriu, in the image of Anu, tall, doe-eyed and raven-haired; Bridgid, red-haired, passionate, and in a temper; dark Morrigan, who commanded the rain; and Rhiannon, flaxen-haired and fair, whose breath was wind.

And they all lived together, with Eriu, close to hearth, and Belenus, the traveler, who walked and talked with the trees, and the animals, and the birds, once each day, from east to west, then home to sleep. And they were happy.

But, after a time, the first men came to land from the south, bringing rude songs, and ruder manners; and their weapons, and tools to carve the soil and break the rock. For a while, they kept to the south, but soon, they heard from the animals and birds, of a glorious maiden living with her family in a stone



house up north.

For Cerridwen, it seems, carried a horrible curse: she was the most beautiful of the lot, with long, white tresses, tall and winsome; her breath was life and her smile was music.

She had one green eye and one grey as smoke. It was said that one wide look from her grey eye, from under its long, white lashes, brought love.

And so, the leader of the men, called Ulrich because he was biggest, broadest and belched loudest, decided it was time he took a wife. He was used to taking things, and a wife would be no different, and besides, what could a houseful of women do against his army?

Even though he could have any other woman in the village with a raise of his hand, he took a party and headed up north. An earlier scout had told him that there was a man living among the women, but left each day and was gone, and back at dusk.

Ulrich's plan, like the man, was crude and simple: he would set close to the house, but not too close, wait for the man to leave, then go in. He would grab the maid and be done, and none the wiser.

The next morning, sure as frost, Belenus left the house; when his head disappeared beyond the dun, Ulrich and his men crept in and grabbed Cerridwen, with the rest of the house still in slumber.

Eriu, whose job was to ready the table for breakfast, rose first; finding Cerridwen's bed all tussled and herself absent, she set to keening, for she was humble, and she feared the worst always. The noise woke the balance, and after a search, it was decided, true enough, that Ulrich's men must have Cerridwen.

Bridgid, of course, was set hard and fast; she was out for Ulrich at the moment. Dagda, who had been called back early, and Belenus, who was as bright as he was painted, said no, let's wait, and see what they want with Cerridwen.

So Anu, collecting herself, was dispatched to the south to set discourse.

Back at the village, meanwhile, Ulrich's escapade was not all well-received. Nuada, the most willful and wiliest woman of the camp, had gotten into her head that she, and no one else, could have Ulrich; least of all, some local girl. In truth, she and Ulrich had already discovered, through previous encounter,



that they were made for each other, but Ulrich, being a man, was easily distracted.

So that when Ulrich and his party returned, Nuada put forth a plan to discredit the maid, for she also knew that Ulrich, crude though he was, was still a man, with pride.

All the while, Anu drew nearer, and all the while, Nuada's insinuations to Ulrich grew crueler, until, at last, she delivered the blow:

"And what guarantee, dear Ulrich, do you have of Cerridwen's faithfulness?" she crooned, after a sixth flagon of mead had disappeared past, and the seventh, down the man's beard. "She can trap any man in her gaze. Where be thee then? Alas, she has! Look there at Hugh, he's already smitten. Is his bed any softer than thine?"

"ENOUGH!" Ulrich roared, the mead playing its part in Nuada's cruel purpose. "If I alone can't have her, none shall!"

Ulrich went to the terrified maid, swung back, and caved in Cerridwen's beautiful countenance in one. In that terrible moment, with Ulrich weaving above the body in rage, Anu arrived on the scene.

All she could see, all she would see, was her sister's wondrous grey eye, still magic in its mangled socket.

"YE HAVE DONE YOUR WORST, AND LAST!" Anu howled. "Ye animals, that dare call thineselves men! It is done, and cannot be undone," she sobbed, gathering up. "So be it. Here ye are, and here ye'll stay, and let this be my curse upon thee!"

"All while ye be here, let ye be suborned, by any curraugh or cauldron that passes," Anu wailed. "Let your roofs fall, your hearths crack and your crops wither and rot, and your woman wail, and your children – they will beg to leave, and never be happy, until they are quit of thee!"

Anu took her walking staff, and smote the campfire, causing the sparks to fly into her fury. As they did, they took form, and wings, and became the Faeadhre, the fairy folk, whose main purpose is to give taunt to men.

"Harm the least of these, and ye'll ken their wrath," Anu said. "They are my children, as much as I have, and I will watch over them, and they will prevail in any contest."

*Granddad stopped and looked at his watch. Five forty-five. "Fifteen minutes*

*to sunup,” he said.*

*It was an impossible choice: chasing the sun or hearing the end. Either way, time was now my enemy. “You can’t stop now, not in the middle,” I wailed. “That can’t be the end, and besides, what about the chickens?”*

*“Tempus fugit,” Granddad said. “We’ll miss the sun.” He was being gloriously exasperating, totally Granddad, and I loved him for it.*

*“Can’t we not, just this once?” I pleaded. “One time.”*

*Granddad sighed, and then I sighed in relief, as he began again.*

Well, you might think that Anu had cooked any Irishman then in Ireland, for certain, and Bridgid wanted the heads and hands of the lot, for the night’s dinner.

Morrigan and Rhiannon, they’d set to lament, and the rain was pouring, and the wind was blowing. The mood was dark, and the night cold, and the rain froze, and became snow.

Belenus, who had missed the whole thing, was the most sorrowful, and vowed never again to leave the house.

Dagda, himself, had skipped out lighting the stars. His face, lit as it was by the hearth, the only light in the house, was saddened, but contemplative. He was, after all, their father and house lord.

“Belenus, son, that I cannot let be done,” Dagda said. “Your place is your path; the animals, the birds, the flowers and the trees, they would miss thee, and mourn thee.”

“What’s done is done, by all, and cannot be undone,” he continued. “But yet, it may go softer. We will mourn and then move. Our place is no longer here, with men. But they will know us, in their fashion, and our ways. So let it be.”

Belenus, at his father’s suggestion, was allowed to divert his travel, so that he could leave later, and arrive home earlier. His path was low, and short, and quick, and passed by the birds, the trees, and the animals.

The flowers went first, in their sorrow, dropping their petals, and then the trees, losing their shaggy green topcoats. The birds, distraught, set off to find their friend, flying south to the men’s camps; the deer shed their antlers, and other forest folk cried themselves to sleep.

Morrigan's tears were gathered, in the great river, the Shannon, so that all men would know that what was once whole could thence be divided. And Rhiannon's warm breath grew cold in bitterness.

And Cerridwen's beautiful eye, that Ulrich had spared, was taken by Dagda up to his place in the heavens. It was magical, and immortal, and its power was great over men. That's why, at night, men are snared, and held, in Cerridwen's full gaze, then in the daylight, they are released.

*Granddad sat back and reached for the breakfast ticket.*

*"No, no, that's not all," I said. You have to finish it, please," I begged, fearful that I might never get my answer.*

Well, they mourned, for a time, then left for a house Dagda had made beyond the stars. Belenus resumed his regular walk, but his sorrow for his aunt was great. He could only manage a short while. Then he took to shorter trips, until he regained his composure, and was back again.

*"But the curse!" "That can't be it," I said. "And what about the chickens?"*

*"I give you credit for listening," Granddad said.*

Dagda couldn't let all men suffer for what two had done, and he couldn't go against his wife. So he softened the curse, a little.

But only a little. The fairies were made to watch over men, to keep them straight, but even fairies can't resist a practical joke or two.

*"And the chickens?"*

That's the best part. Anu was allowed to transform Ulrich and Nuada as punishment. Ulrich still vents his anger, by the way, every morning, at the sun. And Nuada, well, eggshells are hard, but brittle. They were made that way by Anu on purpose, for spite. With each egg, Nuada is reminded that the best plans, the best defenses, can be cracked and broken. By other animals, and men. Just like Anu's house.

*"So eggs are punishment?" I asked, in wonderment.*

*"Not for us. For us, they're breakfast," said Granddad, waving his fork. "Dig in."*

*As we were getting into Granddad's long, golden Galaxy station wagon, I looked down the highway, to the east. The sun was already in full view, heading up the summer sky.*

*"Good morning, Belenus," I said, and Granddad grinned, gunning the engine.*

*We won't be chasing you today, I thought.*

*Next time.*

# **Why I Write**

By Alexa Overman

Dear Reader,

Writing is a difficult process. There were so many times I just wanted to give up. I never thought I would be able to finish writing the rough draft of my first book, but I did. And editing is just as hard. However, through the process of writing, I figured out why I write. And the reason why I write is also the reason that I can never give up on writing.

The main reason I write is for myself. I write for the little girl inside me who needed books to escape from the outside world. Books and stories were my safe haven, and I hope the books I write will be the same for you.

I write for the girl inside me who felt voiceless and unheard. Somewhere along the way, I discovered writing. I discovered that even if nobody else heard my words, at least the words were out in the world. I discovered that words and writing were a way to be heard, a place where I wasn't voiceless. I discovered that I could create my own world to hide in.

I write for myself.

I also write for you. I write for the wounded boys and girls around the world, myself included. I write for those who were abandoned and rejected. I write for the ones with scars, whether they be physical or invisible wounds on our heart. I write for those who had to grow up too quickly. Who had to shoulder burdens, who saw things that no one should ever see.

I hope that as you read about creatures that are angels or demons or dragons or any nonhuman individual, that when you peel that back, their emotions and experiences are very human. Human with special abilities, unique looks, and flaws, just like you, my dear reader. I hope you see yourselves in my writings.

I hope that in my books, you see hurt individuals come together, overcome demons both literal and inner, and bring out the good in this world. I hope you realize that you can do the same.

I write for you.

We live in a dark world, but at the same time, there is so much light. And I

hope my writings reflect that. I hope that through my writings, you find light in a dark world. I hope you find hope, love, and peace even if it's only for a moment. I hope you realize you're not alone. You're not the only one hurting.

I hope that when you read my books, you can see the magic in this world. For there is so much magic in this world. The world is full of beauty, love, tragedy, and so much more. Never stop seeing the magic.

I write to bring light into the darkness.

I write for you, and I write for me. I write because stories, books, and authors have saved me in my darkest places. So, I hope that mine will do the same for you.

That is why I write.

Yours Truly,

The Author



**Kansas Wonderland** by Bonita Oliva

# Quietus

By Andréa Vegter

By the lake, in twilight's hue  
I sit and watch the water's view  
A stone cast out, a simple throw  
Ripples spread, soft and slow

Grief is like the ripples made  
Starting strong, but then they fade  
A sudden loss, a stone's harsh splash  
Waves of sorrow as memories clash

The trees, they sway with gentle grace  
A tender touch, a soft embrace  
In this cocoon of shaded green  
I weave my sorrow, grief unseen

Circles widen, touching the shore  
Echoes felt forevermore  
Each day without you feels so wrong  
A life without your love, so long

If I could turn back fleeting time  
Rewrite the stars, adjust the rhyme  
I'd hold you close, erase the pain  
And never let you go again

I wish upon the evening star  
That you weren't gone, but here, not far  
To hear you laugh, to see your smile  
To walk beside you for a while

In dreams, I find you once again  
We talk and laugh, as we did then

I wish with all my broken soul  
That time return you to me whole

In memories, your voice is near  
A whispered song, so pure, so clear  
Though tears may fall, and shadows stay  
On this bench, I find my way

The world moves on, a bustling tide  
Yet here I sit, no need to hide  
With every breath, the pain recedes  
A quietus for my heart that bleeds

Each ripple tells a silent tale  
Of love once bright, now grown pale  
In each wave, a memory lives  
The pain it takes, the peace it gives

By the water, I remain  
Watching ripples, feeling pain  
Grief's embrace, though harsh and cold  
Gently softens, a heart consoled

A quietus falls, serene and still  
A balm for wounds no time can heal  
The echoes of a love now gone  
In silent moments, they linger on

In the stillness, I find grace  
Grief's ripples form a tender place  
A testament to love's deep mark  
In the ripples of my heart.

# Hiraeth

By Andréa Vegter

Home I thought I had with you,  
a place of safety from the blues.

Home keeps you dry and keeps you sane,  
blocks out the rain and saves you pain.

But what are words you can read between,  
just pretty little words on the screen.

Your actions show and the screen does crack,  
as your petty lies stab me in the back.

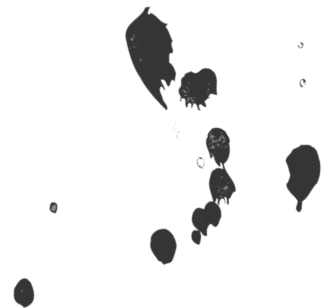
Then the rain drips down on me,  
as I struggle not to cry and scream.

That longing for one to call my own,  
the yearning to be their home.

Exploding as I rush outside,  
for I'm not stupid, I have pride.

And while I stand in the rain,  
alone once more.

I'd rather be out here soaked,  
then drowning behind your door.



# **Breaking Barriers**

By Lessley Sanchez

In 1989, my father at the age of 17 came to the United States with nothing but the clothes on his back. He did this to escape the corrupt country of Mexico and to create a better life for him and his future family. Being able to escape and start over is not easy. Coming here, he did not know what to expect. He did not know English and had to change the lifestyle he was used to overnight. Several years later, he met my mother, and then they got married and had me. Growing up, I have always had so much pressure to do my best. Getting a higher education as a first-generation Hispanic American student came with the struggle of having multiple identities and an overwhelming sense of independence. Because of this, I developed a strong work ethic at a youthful age that has helped me succeed through this process.

I have always felt accountable for all my responsibilities, even if I had no control over them. This includes always having to set a proper example for my younger sister, so that she grows up to be successful. Although I cannot force her to do anything, I try my best to set an example of what being successful looks like so she can follow it. But with all this pressure, I have found myself having to balance the responsibilities of going to school, working a job, and taking care of my little sister, which is often overwhelming. Having such elevated expectations to succeed led to me feeling stressed and burnt-out because of the pressure and high hopes my parents put on me to do better. Recently, I was trying to juggle five online courses while also working a full-time job as a bank teller. I was earning money to help pay for college, but I was falling behind. While working 40+ hours a week, 9-5 every day, going home to eat, and doing normal things like laundry and keeping the house clean, I found myself only having a couple of hours to do homework before I needed to sleep and do it all over again.

This situation led me to being independent growing up, making me feel like I have multiple identities. I was forced to be the perfect daughter my parents wanted me to be in front of them and a bank teller at work that had no room for mistakes because people's money was at stake, a profoundly



serious job. I felt like I had no room to be “me” except for in front of my friends, which I rarely got to see because of my tight schedule. I also realized that I did not have the same guidance and support others around me had. My coworker grew up fortunate enough that she did not have to work and was able to solely focus on her schoolwork, not a fulltime job or her siblings. I had to adapt to find common ground where I did not have to pretend. With this I also had to learn to understand that I would never get the same support many my age received, but this only made me want to try harder to prove to myself that if there is a will, there is a way.

Trying to fit in with both the American social norms and the Hispanic social norms caused me not to have clear communication skills. I could not really tell the truth to my parents about how school was going because the truth was that I was struggling. I would not communicate it directly to them to help maintain the harmony of our relationships. The less they knew the less stress they could give me. I could not express myself clearly in a way that would not confuse them. Where Hispanics tend to paint the picture of a situation into something “prettier,” Americans are more straightforward and clearer. My classmates and friends would not understand why it was so important that I do my best, or why I would have to lie to my parents about how I was doing academically. Because of this I was able to learn to adapt to situations more easily. A common stereotype that Hispanics fulfill and that is teen pregnancy. Understanding these differences has helped me add to my understanding of humanity, and I have the ability to pull strengths from both cultures and use them to my advantage in my day-to-day life.

The struggles I had as a first-generation child in an immigrant family has profoundly shaped my perspective on life. Developing a strong work ethic at an early age helped me promote my independence, learning that nothing in life is given, it is earned. I was forced onto a path that no one else in my family had walked while always being pressured to be the best with no room for mistakes. While difficult, this trial led to my own personal growth and my commitment to making a difference for future generations.

## Duet

By Julie Stielstra

The giant rooster was new. Standing in steely glory next to the sign for the Sunrise Care Home, it was nearly as tall as Dan. He stopped to admire it, a witty assembly of scrap metal and scavenged parts: an upturned red-bristled scrub brush for the comb, the crowing beak formed by the open blades of garden shears, a shaggy fall of mane in lengths of sash chain and tailfeathers of twisted tin ribbon. Dan gave it a friendly pat, making the breast feathers jingle, and went inside to see Gran.

She was sitting up in bed, doing the crossword. She looked up, and Dan waited the extra beat or two it took now before the smile broke across her face.

“Danny! What a surprise! Sit down, sit down,” she said. He always called the day before, to say he was coming up. Usually she remembered. He noticed the walker folded next to the bed—that was new, too.

“That bionic hip not good enough now?” he asked.

She made a face. “That one is just fine—it’s the other one I can’t trust now,” she said. “When I go, Jack Reuben can use me and that walker for spare parts to make a hen for that rooster out front.”

“That rooster is impressive.”

“You should see the vulture,” Gran said. “He’s funnier. The director thought it was too morbid to put out front of a care home though. Look, you can see him out the window.” Outside, next to the gazebo, stood the vulture: the broad black blade of a coal shovel, with a bald, beaky face made of a ball hitch and a narrow trowel tucked into its shoulders. Dan chuckled. Clever.

“You remember Jack Reuben?” Gran said.

“Mr. Reuben? Sure—didn’t he used to come by in the evenings?”

Dan’s parents had parted when he was ten, and it had come as a relief. There had been too many nights, huddled alone with his pajama top stretched over his knees, listening to the tight, angry voices floating up through the heat register. One time he’d even paged through the phone book listings for marriage counselors, but slipped the book hopelessly back on the shelf. After that, when his father came around to take him, it was usually to Gran’s house

in Chillicothe, where he left him and went off to do whatever he normally did.

Gran taught him to play cribbage. The two of them sat on the front porch of the old house, with identical glasses of iced ginger ale with a splash of strawberry syrup, golden red and sweet, only Gran's might have a dash from a heavy square bottle from the cabinet over the refrigerator. With the radio on the windowsill murmuring a Cardinals game, they counted out their fifteen-two, fifteen-four, and sometimes Jack Reuben would lounge by on the sidewalk, sit on the top step, and ask what the score was.

"Cribbage or the ball game?" Gran would ask tartly.

It had occurred to Dan to wonder if Mr. Reuben, you know, liked Gran. It seemed fitting as they were both old. Granddad had died of cancer in his prostate, and then the cancer gene set itself up in Dan's own father's lung a few years ago. It was quick and ugly.

"Jack Reuben. Huh. Once upon a time, I thought he might have fancied you," Dan said.

"Not likely. Lifelong bachelor. He's here now—Parkinson's, something like that? He took to making those birds after he retired, and brought a couple of them with him. He can't do anything big like that any more, that's for sure. You should go say hello to him—he'd remember you."

"Didn't he teach shop or something?"

"Yep. Wood shop, metal shop, whatever."

Dan had taken shop, too, like all the boys did. He was terrible at it. Terrible. He'd have liked to make handsome, useful things, to be able to help his mother fix things at home. But the nails bent, the saw blade went awry, nothing fit together no matter how carefully he measured. He liked to read better anyway. He even liked to study, to take tests and get them back with a red A and the teacher's "Good job!" scribbled across. There was a scholarship to the university in Columbia, and then law school, and then a job with the county, reading contracts. All day long, he read and parsed and lined out and signed off, and felt himself lucky. His mother lived in Florida now, remarried happily to a man who prided himself on his martinis and his wife. With his father, Gran's only child, gone, Dan and his grandmother knotted up the threads of their family. He helped her move into Sunrise after she broke that hip. The sale of the old house had pained him. He figured he'd buy a house

himself one of these days, and had even looked at a few, but he compared them all to Gran's house and nothing else felt right.

Gran said, "So, speaking of fancies, what about you, anyway? You're thirty-four, time's a-wasting. Bring her along here, I'll be nice to her." Her eyes glimmered large behind her glasses. Dan didn't answer right away.

There had really been only one girl of any duration. She was pretty, bright, nice. She reminded him when his thick, curling hair needed cutting, picked out new frames for his glasses, bought him interesting shirts and was hurt when he kept wearing the same white or blue button-downs. He'd had to make himself work at his end of things, and when she understood that, she left.

"Actually, there is someone," he said.

"Aha! About time. What's her name?"

"His name is Javier."

This time the silence was hers.

"Ha-veer? What kind of name is that?"

"His family is from Cuba. He was born in Miami."

"Hm. And...and how did you meet this Javier?"

"He found you the song."

The song. He didn't remember how the conversation had come around to it, but one evening on the phone she was trying to recall something about a record her husband had liked to listen to, when Dan's father was small. It was opera, she knew that for sure, but she had no idea which opera it was from. It was two men singing together, and she was pretty sure it wasn't in German. She just remembered it was so beautiful, the way their voices ran together and apart and back together again, and it seemed sad. The one singer, he had a name like Jessie? Jessie Berlin? Something like that.

Dan knew even less about opera than she did. He called the county law librarian, a font of miscellaneous knowledge who knew where to look for whatever she didn't know.

"I know this is a weird question," he told her. "It's for my grandmother."

"Call this guy," she said, giving him a name and number. "He's the fine arts librarian at the university. He's a great guy, and I bet he can find it. Tell him I

said hello.”

So he called this Javier and told him what he knew, that he’d like to find a recording of this song for Gran.

“What a nice idea,” said the librarian. “And I think....Let me see what I can find, and I’ll call you back.”

He called the next morning, with triumph in his voice.

“I’m pretty sure I got it, but I threw in a couple other male duets, just in case. I burned a CD for you. I can send it to you, or you could come by and pick it up?”

Dan went and got it. After work, walking across campus among the drifts of students, he felt impossibly old and stuck his tie in his pocket. Javier grinned when he said what he’d come for. Maybe forty, shaved head, wiry, in jeans and a T-shirt stretched out at the neck. A comfortable-looking guy, Dan thought.

“OK, I’m betting it’s the first one—Bizet’s Pearl Fishers duet, and the tenor is Jussi Bjorling. Makes me cry every time I hear it. And she wasn’t so far off on the name, was she? I may always think of him as Jessie Berlin from now on,” Javier said. “Do me a favor, give me a call when she listens to it. Let me know if we got it right. Here, hang on...” He lifted a white milk-glass chicken off its nest on his desk and thumbed up a business card. His handshake was warm and dry.

At home, Dan slid the disc into the player and clicked Play. He sat on the couch, a monstrous leather thing he had thought was cool ten years ago. It began softly, a few long chords, then a light, liquid man’s voice rising and plaintive. A quiet melody filtered through, then a phrase from a lower voice.

“Pretty,” Dan thought. He pressed up the volume. The tenor’s voice began to climb, anguished and tense. A pause, and another man’s deeper voice suddenly joined and something caught in Dan’s chest. Their voices braided together, one rising, the other falling, falling away, then rejoining. There was just the sound of their beautiful voices combining. Dan sat with his elbows fixed to his knees. His breath came rough, tears were dropping off his chin into the horrible apartment shag carpet, and he had absolutely no idea why.

He mailed the CD to Gran with just a note: “Thought you might like this.”

She called a week later, laughing and crying.

“How did you find it? How did you know which one it was?” she cried.

“Oh, I met this librarian who figured it out,” he said.

He called Javier. “You got it. She was so excited. Thank you.”

“Did you listen to it?” Javier asked.

“Yes. Yes, I did. And I see what you mean. About making you cry. But it was weird – I don’t know what the story is, I don’t know who these guys are, or what they’re singing about or what the words mean—I don’t think I even know what language it’s in, for Christ’s sake....”

“French,” said Javier, laughing. “They’re two friends, who meet after a long time...”

“No,” said Dan suddenly. “Don’t tell me. I don’t think I want to know.” There was a pause on the phone.

“You’re right,” said Javier. “You’ll never have that experience again, hearing it for the first time.”

“Look, I owe you a drink or something,” said Dan. “You’ve made an old lady very happy and made me look good in the process.” Javier invited him over for dinner instead.

Javier lived on the top floor of an old house. Glossy golden wood on the floors, around the windows, around the doorways; a big deep sofa with a carpet-covered chest to put your feet and wineglass on. Pictures on the walls (the angelic dark-haired boy in a robe singing open-mouthed was Javier; an eerily clumsy oil painting of a limp cross-eyed puppet that he paid a buck for at a garage sale); and a leaded glass cabinet housing a bird’s nest, a deer antler, a china horse, and a tiny skeleton figure reading a book. On the sofa lazed two big yellow cats known as The Orange Brothers, Tangelo and Seville.

“They were born in the culvert across the street,” Javier told him. “My landlord’s wife rescued the mom, and I took the boys.”

He handed Dan a large knife and a glass of wine. “We’re having my Papi’s paella. Get chopping.”

There were onions and peppers and garlic and mushrooms and rice and beer, and shrimp to peel and devein and mussels and squid to rinse, and saffron to explain (Dan had never heard of it). Dan had never eaten anything so good in his life, and who knew you could spend an entire evening just making food and talking and eating and drinking and cleaning up. Tangelo vomited a stolen shrimp shell on the rug. Javier and Dan looked at each other and burst out laughing. Javier put down his wineglass and got out the gallon jug of special-enzyme pet cleaning fluid.

The night Dan went over with their favored pizza after an endless day in the office feeling exhausted and chilled, Javier took one look at his clammy face and laid a cool hand on his forehead. He gave him three aspirin and a mug of tea liberally laced with Jack Daniels and sent him to bed. Dan dozed, dreamed, and woke, unsure where he was, then felt Javier sleeping warm and heavy beside him. He untangled his foot from beneath one of the Orange Brothers, found a cool spot on the pillow, and fell asleep again. In the morning, he woke to the smell of coffee and buttered toast. Being sick became irrelevant.

Javier went to Washington, D.C. for a conference. Dan stayed at his place and looked after the Orange Brothers. He called Gran and asked her how she made that strawberry syrup. He put his feet up on the railing of Javier's back porch with a Gran-style drink. He watered the geraniums ("All porches must have geraniums," Javier said, "it's a rule."), fed the cats and read. He drove over to Kansas City to pick Javier up at the airport, and when he saw him swinging and smiling down the concourse toward him, it scared Dan a little how glad he was to see him. Javier slung an arm around his neck, bumped his forehead against Dan's, and said, "Next time, you should come along. Here, look, I brought you a trilobite from the Natural History Museum." Dan said, "Yup. Next time we'll do that."

Javier had heard some job gossip. The director of the research library at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City might be retiring.

"Boy, that would be a job!" he said. "Terrific museum. All art, all

the time. No more business students whining about their English papers.”

“No more T-shirts at work, either,” Dan pointed out. “You might even have to buy a suit.”

“You can pick one out for me. And I’ll get us both great ties from the gift shop.”

“Something wrong with the ties I have?” Dan said. Javier laughed, slapped him fondly, and asked if he remembered where he’d parked this time.

Ninety miles later, Dan said, “So you want to move to Kansas City.” Javier looked over at him, then down.

“Daniel. I’m sorry,” he said. “Nothing may come of it. She may not retire. I may not get the job. I may not take it. Hell, I may not even apply. I’ve been at Mizzou for almost ten years. Sometimes it makes it easier to put up with the crap when you can imagine other ways out. And, you know, KC’s pretty nice. I bet they even need lawyers there.”

That was two weeks ago. They left it there.

There was a tap at Gran’s door. A very young woman in sneakers and tight black pants came in.

“Hey, Mrs. Thornton!” Her voice was high and breathy. “Time for you know what!”

“Give me strength,” Gran groaned.

“That’s right! That’s just what we’re going to do, give you strength! Now, here’s your walker, sit up now, sweetie, there you go...” Gran rolled her eyes.

“Physical therapy,” she said to Dan. “This is Missy. She makes me do it. It won’t take long. Go get some coffee or something.” Gran stumped out the door while Missy cheered.

Dan considered brooding in the chair. But he got up and went looking for Jack Reuben.

Jack was in his room, his wheelchair pulled up close to a large table. He looked blankly at Dan, and said, “Yes?” The word came out thicker and slower than one simple word should.



“Mr. Reuben, you remember Ruth Thornton’s grandson, Dan?”

The old man nodded. “Sure. Nice kid. Bright kid.” He looked hard at Dan, then a little ripple flickered around his eyes. “That you, Danny?” He held out a hand that shook as though he were waving it to dry without a towel. It made Dan happy to be remembered that way. He enclosed the tremulous hand in both his own.

“Hey, I like your birds,” said Dan. “That rooster is quite something.”

“Only doing small stuff now. They won’t let me solder unless somebody’s with me. Funny, though, left hand works fine.”

The tabletop was strewn with forks, knives, spoons, coat hangers, files, pliers, nuts, bolts, washers, screws, scraps of window screen, garden tools and bits of hardware Dan didn’t know the names of. Jack picked up the soldering iron in his left hand and poised it quietly there.

“You supervise,” said Jack. He began to fidget oddments together, touching and shifting them lightly.

“I remember you coming by our house. And me and Gran playing cards?”

“And drinking that ginger ale,” said Jack. “Your Gran fixed a mean one.”

“She says you’re still an old bachelor.” Dan found himself harboring hopes of a sweet old-age romance at Sunrise Care, for his Gran and this nice old guy.

“Just never found...the right one. Here.” He handed Dan a thick old white china cup, like they still used at Pat’s Diner downtown. The handle was gone and the mounting of it buffed smooth. Inside the cup sat a strange little bird made of silverware. Two spoon bowls cupped together formed its body. A bent fork curved up from the join into a neck, and the tines were bent and splayed into a goofy topknot. A tiny pair of nail scissors was twisted and fastened to the fork head, the round handles becoming a pair of wide eyes, and the blades opened into a beak. Dan lifted the little bird out of his egg-cup and laughed.

"This is as good as the rooster," he said.

"Take it," Jack said. "I got lots of them. Give it to your girlfriend. Take another one for yourself."

"No girlfriend," said Dan. "But I have a friend who'd get a kick out of it."

Jack Reuben looked up at him. "Give it to him, then. Straight from the artist. Souvenir of your visit to Sunrise Care." Dan laughed and thanked him. Jack set the soldering iron down carefully. "Unplug that, will you." He rubbed his eyes, the hand trembling ferociously.

"It was just Chillicothe," he said. It was difficult for him to get the name of the town out of his mouth. "Couldn't find the right one. Hope you find yours." He was clearly tired. "Tell the aide. Need to lie down."

"It was good to see you," said Dan. He shook the old man's hand gently. "I'll get someone."

"Got your chicken?" Dan smiled and held it up.

Gran was back in her room, in the chair, with a lidded cup of ice water. Dan held a finger to his lips and fiddled in his jacket pocket. It wasn't Jack Daniels, but the plastic pocket-shot of bourbon was only a buck at the gas station cash register. He tore the packet open and emptied it into her ice. They grinned at each other, and her smile went deeper when she sipped.

"Bless your heart," she whispered. "I have one more question about you and this Javier." She swallowed her bourbon.

"Is he Cardinals or Royals?"

He had no idea. It had never come up. "Cardinals," he said. "He wouldn't dare otherwise. Look what Jack Reuben gave me." Gran looked at the chick in its egg cup and began to laugh.

"It looks like you," she said.

It was true. Javier said the same thing when he gave it to him.

# Mowing

By Becky Gillette

You learn a lot about people by watching how they mow their yard.

After I left grade school and began the process of becoming an adult – before I started high school – Dad decided that I needed to learn how to mow the yard. Apparently, there were a great many rules and regulations to this event and, if I was going to become a productive member of society, I needed to learn at least the basics.

I didn't need to learn the full scope of responsibility for this, as any female worth her salt transferred this responsibility to her husband when she got married (preferably soon after high school graduation). Somehow, I got the impression that the greatest asset to having a perfectly mown lawn was a "Y" chromosome.

Whenever I looked at the neighborhood, it was always the men who were out checking the lawns for stray twigs or trash that had found its way into the yard. They were the ones steering the lawn mowers in an almost synchronized dance across the green grasses. They would smile and wave at each other, commenting on the weather and the need for fertilizer applications when they happened to meet at the edge of their own territory.

I learned that you mow once a week (usually on the weekend, when you could take your time) and you mow in straight lines, except when going around Mom's flower beds and the trees. This was so you could make sure that the entire lawn was the same height and there were no areas where the grass was allowed to instigate any rebellions in growth.

When I first started taking lessons in mowing, we didn't worry too much about mower maintenance. Dad had the muscle-powered push mower that was to be steered religiously across both the front and back yards. The only maintenance those mowers needed was "blade sharpening." This seemed to be a secret rite performed late at night and was not to be disclosed to anyone with two "X" chromosomes. Every time I asked about this process, I was told not to worry about it, Dad would take care of that.

For a brief time, I developed muscular arms from pushing that mower.

It didn't take long, however for Dad to switch from "macho mower" to "status mower" by buying a gas-powered mower. The muscle tone of the neighborhood slowly dropped as the neighbors all followed suit and the original push mowers were relegated to the garage. Now, when we talk of "push mowers" we talk of the gas- or electric-powered mowers that we push as opposed to the riding mowers. There isn't nearly as much muscle involved.

With the new mower came deeper lessons in mower maintenance. Dad demonstrated how to syphon gas from the car to the mower but, after taking one look at my face, he got a red plastic gas can. I was taught how to fill the gas tank (which came in handy when I started driving) and I was taught to check the oil. Adding oil was not considered necessary as Dad took care of that (presumably at night while honing mower blades).

Once I got my own house, things started to change. When I first mowed the grass on a weekday, I almost wanted to wear dark glasses, a hat, and a coat so that no one would recognize that I was breaking one of the first rules of mowing. For some reason, I couldn't mow my lawn on the mandated day of the week, so I ended up mowing on the first free day I had. I didn't want the neighbors to think I was slacking in the lawn mowing department. One of the nice things, however, was that there were a growing number of women out mowing their yards and they didn't seem quite as stern in their protocols.

As I grew older and didn't have as much stamina, I made more changes. I still try to mow the whole yard every week, but I now mow a section at a time so that it can take five days to mow the whole yard. I discovered that straight lines aren't necessarily needed and, in fact, sometimes mowing in circles gets the job done just as well and can add architectural interest. I also learned that there's a lot more to lawnmower maintenance than just adding gasoline or oil or even sharpening the blades! The best thing I've learned is that the "Y" chromosome isn't always necessary for a perfectly groomed yard. It's been several years since Dad passed away, but I still feel tempted to wear a disguise, so he won't notice that I'm breaking so many of his rules!

## Picking Up School

By Anne Schiller

With a happy bark, I jump right into Mommy's Highlander. Mommy says to hurry because we have to get there early, or "that bitch in the big-assed Yukon" will get our spot. I don't really know what that means, but I can tell you one thing, I don't ever want to be "that bitch in a big-assed Yukon". Mommy does not like that.

We park at the grade school, and Mommy rolls the window all the way down so I can stick my head out really far. Some days, a squirrel runs across the lawn. When I see that squirrel, I bark my head off. I want that squirrel to know that a fierce Schnauzer is on to him, and that I could tear his legs off in a quick minute. When the squirrel hears my threat, he runs from the school yard and across the street. He thinks he can fool me—heck no. I jump all around in that car, to the side window, the back window, and make a big fuss until that squirrel is out of sight.

With the squirrel detection resolved, I perch on the console while Mommy and I wait until a pack of two-leggeds come out of the building. Oh, the smells! There are hundreds of different smells. I smell really hard for Tyson. He is the little two-legged that we pick up. As soon as I smell Tyson, I stick my head way up and let out a big howl. Mommy says, "shush," but I think she likes that I can smell him before she can see him. Tyson briefly stops at the window before getting in the Highlander. I hop off the console to greet him. Tyson smells like bubble gum, chicken nuggets, and apple juice. Tyson's cousin, Cole, comes to the car window and he rubs his face all over mine. I nuzzle into him. Cole smells like guinea pig and kittens. Several little boys pet me and I lick their faces like crazy – I love the days when they have had pizza for lunch.

When we leave the school, Cole says to Mommy, "Bye, Aunt Ruth." Mommy always smiles when Cole says that, and I can hear her heart beat a little faster. These boys are Mommy's "nephews," and as close as I can tell, this is much like pack-mates.

As Mommy drives the car away from the grade school, I leap into

the back seat with Tyson and curl on his lap. Tyson talks a lot, I learn about Tech Deck bikes, Fortnite, and JBL Speakers. These are things that Mommy never talks about.

We leave the grade school to pick up Tyson's brother, Weston, at the middle school. The middle school pick up is a completely different routine than the grade school. These two-leggeds are bigger and they mil around a lot. Weston walks down the street until we see him and pull over. Weston gets in the back seat, and I hop all over him and he pets me a bit. He doesn't rub his face on mine, and he doesn't talk to me very much. The middle school boy smells like sweaty gym socks, Takis chips, and a baseball glove. I would really like it if he would bring that baseball glove out in the open one day. I would like to chew on it a bit. I have the sneaking suspicion that it would taste really good.

Every day, we drop the boys at their house. Both boys give me a little pat on the head and tell me good-bye. Mommy ALWAYS waits until both boys are in the house before we leave the driveway. She sends a text message to their mom letting her know that her boys are safely home. Mommy's eyes look misty and wet when she does this.

As much as I love "picking up the boys", I think Mommy loves it even more. There are many days when Mommy cries. On those days, she smells like old photograph albums, worn Mother's Day cards, and crinkled Bible pages. Mommy sheds tears that fall on my fur and tells me how sad she is that that her sons have died. She tells me that I would really have liked her sons. I remember one of them. He was around a bit when I was a baby. The other left this place before I was born. Not many people know how us four-leggeds understand the souls of those we love. I love Mommy and I know when she is sad, and I know when she is happy. She smells sweet and fresh when she is happy. She smells musty and stale when she is sad. Mommy always smells happy when we pick up at school.

Before the tragedy, Mommy used to smell like homemade vegetable soup and fresh linens. She hasn't smelled like that since that winter night just before Christmas. I was only nine months old then, but I already had the gift to understand Mommy's soul because I already

loved her. That night, Mommy was waiting for the boy I knew, Zach. Mommy had decorated the house for Christmas, and she had homemade vegetable soup simmering on the stove. She knew Zach would be hungry after his drive. She had all of Zach's favorite foods tucked away in the cupboards and refrigerator. She told me Zach would stay with us for five days and nights! Mommy said this would be the most time she has had with him since his brother died. Mommy sang songs as she put fresh linens on Zach's bed and cleaned his room.

Mommy waited and prayed for Zach that night. When the two policemen came to the door, Mommy smelled of fear and dread as she allowed them into our house. As soon as they said a few words, Mommy screamed. Everyone heard that loud scream as it shot through the door and down the streets. However, it was only I who saw inside her. A large gash opened in her heart, and all of her lifeblood gushed out. With my four-legged gift of sight, I watched as her soul immediately became a dark and empty chasm. And I knew. I knew Zach was not coming home for Christmas, or ever again. I did not know what to do, so I just crawled under the coffee table and stayed there for the next two days while strange people visited and talked in low whispers.

A year passed and Mommy never left the house, she cried all day and never slept at night. Then one day, she got the call about "picking up at school." I am thankful she agreed to pick up at school. When we do this, I hear Mommy's scarred heart beat soft and quiet. For a few moments, life-blood trickles through her veins and gives a dim light to her soul; and I am glad. However, after returning home from picking up at school, everything in Mommy goes dark again.

I think I will lay on Mommy's feet tonight when she sits in her chair and cries. I hope she knows that I love her and that I want her to feel warm and needed. I don't mind teardrops on my fur.

# **Journey to the Moon**

By Luke Beling

You get these dreams when you're young  
That everyone becomes exactly who they just want to be  
You watch a rocket into space  
One small step they say you think in a little while that might be me  
But then one day you wake up  
You feel you ain't enough if only you could do it again  
But there's an ache in your back  
The one your daddy had and you know that this life ain't a game

It's a sucker punch it's the lights gone out  
It's the feeling of your heart on a block of ice  
It's that bouncing check that you get  
When you ain't got enough in the bank to pay the rent

You're driving home in your car  
You jumped to make it start a cigarette burning in your mouth  
You tell yourself it ain't fair  
This world you've come to bear if only someone could help you out  
There's a man at the light  
He's holding up a sign it says I'm saving for a journey to the moon  
You slide your broken window down  
You show the man a smile you say hey brother do you have some room for two

It's a sucker punch it's the lights gone out  
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**Right Place at the Right Time** by Mollie McReynolds

## City Lights

By Luke Beling

Now no mistakes he smiles at me  
Pausing the gate to let me free  
As he lowers his other hand on the holster

My shirt don't fit my shoes too worn  
Where I used to live they've got a sex toy store  
and damn the air feels so much colder

Crippled here I disappear  
Just another face of wasted years  
Sweet city lights above show the way yeah  
If there's a street a road that leads  
To a bright and sprawling place for me  
Then let me hear you say I'll be okay yeah  
I'll be okay

There's a shelter house  
It ain't too far  
where they're dishing out white fish stock  
Or so said the boys back on the inside

I'll ask 'em nice you got some room  
Maybe a night maybe two  
Hey mister this is me doing the straight time

Crippled here I disappear  
Just another face of wasted years  
Sweet city lights above show the way yeah  
If there's a street a road that leads  
To a bright and sprawling place for me  
Then let me hear you say I'll be okay yeah  
I'll be okay

# **The Old Farm on North Road**

By Richard Lartz

It was a bright, sunshine-filled day when young Thomas Sprague arrived at the old farm on North Road. His dog Ranger sat eagerly in the passenger seat of the truck as they pulled up the overgrown dirt driveway. The two-story farmhouse's clapboard exterior is white with dark gray trim but much of the paint has started to peel. As he drives up, he can see no visible holes in the roof or any of the antiquated windows. The yards are a tangle of weeds and wildflowers, and a thick stand of trees wraps around the house and yards to separate them from the vast cornfields nearby. Following the drive around the back of the house, Thomas can see some of the outbuildings are in disrepair, but the barn looks to be in decent condition. Once near it, the barn towers over the house with its gambrel roof and fieldstone foundation, its red paint peeling in many places. Thomas can see that the pulley for hauling up bales of hay still dangles under the hay hood, not far from an ancient looking lightning rod. A weed-filled earthen ramp on the barn's west side leads up to double sliding doors for the hayloft.

Thomas parks the truck near the old woodpile, just a few yards from the steps leading up to the back door of the house. He shuts off the truck and sits there for a moment, the only sound being Ranger's panting as he looks out the window with anticipation of new smells. "I sure hope this was a good idea," he says out loud to himself as he takes a moment to think about the travails of the last year. Ranger turns around impatiently a few times and licks the young man's face, snapping him back to the present, "I know boy, you're excited. Let's go check this place out," he says as he exits the truck with his floppy-eared friend in tow. The American foxhound bounds off to start sniffing every inch of the new place. "Don't go too far now," Thomas calls after him as he walks around to the bed of the pick-up and lowers the tailgate with a creak and a thump.

In the bed of the truck sits a clasped steamer trunk, a duffle bag, and his large tool box, "All I really need I guess," he comments out loud as he begins removing the items and stacking them by the back door. He retrieves his keys from his front pocket and goes to unlock the door when he hears Ranger barking. Thomas turns around and sees the hound standing a few yards from the sliding doors of the barn, barking at the building. He walks over as Ranger continues to bark, getting closer he can see the dog's hackles are up. "Hey, hey boy...what's got you so riled up?" he asks as he gets

close, the dog stops barking and goes to his side letting out a whine. Thomas kneels and pets him, "What is it? You smell somethin' boy? Probably just some animals living in there huh?" He gets up and walks towards the doors and notices Ranger not following, "What has gotten into you Ranger?"

Thomas inspects the doors, no chains across them nor even a padlock. He pushes the left barn door open, it creaks and squeaks in its antiquated track as the daylight creeps across the old floor boards inside. Ranger gives another whine behind him and when Thomas turns around, the hound is still a few yards from the door. Thomas pushes the old door further open, letting in even more daylight, and can see the loft is empty except for an old hay bale or two and what looks like various animal droppings. "See Ranger, ya big coward, there ain't nothing there," the dog hesitantly walks up to him but still seems uneasy. "C'mon boy, let's get settled inside, and get some food. I bet that'll calm ya down." Thomas closes the old barn door and heads back to the house with Ranger in tow, his tail wagging happily.

A few weeks pass as Thomas and Ranger settle into the old farmhouse. Much of the house still has furniture in it draped in white sheets, long covered in dust. A few pictures hang on some of the walls but nothing that gives a clue to the former occupants, other than an appreciation for agrarian landscape art. The young man starts small, cleaning the kitchen and the living room, and making a place upstairs for him and Ranger to sleep. He manages to get the old tube television in the living room to work, but it can't tune into the new digital signals. Thomas makes a little room upstairs livable for him and Ranger, that isn't far from the upstairs bathroom and the staircase. Many of these days pass the same, he works on projects in or around the house and Ranger roams about the grounds but continues to avoid the barn.

A few times during these past days, while Ranger is out roaming the yards, Thomas could've sworn he'd heard what sounded like a couple arguing. He couldn't make out the words and when he'd go to try and find out where the sound was coming from, it would stop. At first, he brushed it off as just hearing things or even the wind carrying voices from somewhere nearby. After his messy and heart-wrenching divorce, and his descent into drug-use and then rehab...Thomas just chalked it up to residual trauma from what he had been through. To keep it at bay, he started doing all his projects with the radio on and blaring music. Not only did it seem to help motivate him, it also seemed to keep those events from happening.

Early one crisp fall morning, Thomas is abruptly awakened when Ranger races out

of the room barking. The young man rubs the sleep out of his eyes and gets up to see what the dog is barking at. Once he exits the bedroom, he sees Ranger at one of the windows that looks out over the front yard, road, and driveway. When Thomas gets there and looks out, he can see there is a thick fog covering the ground, like a great sea of swirling smoke. Ranger stops barking and begins to whine as Thomas looks through the window to see what the dog is barking at.

Suddenly, he notices a man in overalls and a flannel shirt walking down to the mailbox. "Whoa...who the hell is that?" he says to Ranger, the dog looking at him with a worried look. Thomas then sees the man open the box, look and stick his hands inside as if retrieving mail and then starts walking back to the house. "What the hell is going on? No one better be stealing my mail," Thomas says as he starts to walk back towards the staircase. He raced downstairs, with Ranger right behind him. The back screen door squeaked open and then loudly snapped shut. "C'mon boy," he says to the dog as they both run towards the kitchen. When they get to the kitchen, no one is there and the backdoor isn't even open.

Thomas goes out the backdoor with Ranger in tow, walking around the yard in his boxers. The morning dew on the grass clings to his bare feet as he strains to look around in the fog. He then walks down to the mailbox to inspect it, finding nothing but yesterday's mail inside. "We saw someone...right Ranger? People don't just vanish," he says to the dog as he stands for a moment at the end of the driveway. The dog looks up at him and continues to follow as Thomas does a quick check of the other out-buildings.

When he goes to check the barn, however, Ranger stops in his tracks. "What is it boy? Are you still afraid of this old barn?" Thomas walks up to the barn door and pushes it open. It makes the same creaking and squeaking sound as before, "I should oil these one of these days," Thomas says off-handedly to Ranger, who doesn't move from his spot a few yards away. Thomas looks into the dark depths of the barn's hayloft and sees what he saw previously, a few old bales of hay and little else.

"What's with you boy? There's nothing in here," he says as he closes the door again and starts to walk back to the house. "Let's take a trip to town today huh?" he says to Ranger whose tail starts wagging as they meander back towards the house, "We'll get some supplies, maybe see if any of the locals know anything about this old place."

Thomas goes inside and gets dressed, then loads up Ranger in the old Chevy pick-

up and drives into town. He gets a few things at the grocery store and stops at the local hardware store. Thomas picks up a few supplies for fixing the house up, gets a new ax to start working on the woodpile for winter, and asks the clerk if he knows anything about the old farm on North Road. "Can't say I know much there sir," the man responds after ringing up Thomas' purchases, "My pa would probably know more since he lived here his whole life. I just came back a few years ago to take over the store when his health started failing." Thomas thinks for a moment about mentioning what he witnessed in the morning, but then decides against it.

He loads the truck with his purchases and makes one more stop at Zeke's Hunting and Fishing Supplies. An older man with a thinning head of hair and a big bushy gray beard is behind the counter reading a newspaper when he enters "Good morning," he says without looking up from his paper. Thomas looks around the store for a bit but then goes to the counter to ask about some of the handguns in the case.

"Well, that 38 is a good bet if you're concerned about varmints or folks skulking around your property," the older man says, "There's a waiting period of seven days before you can pick it up."

Thomas nods and hands him the money for the handgun, "I don't suppose you've ever heard anything about the old farm on North Road, have you?" "The old Sprague place?" he asks as he counts out Thomas' change, "I know it's been empty for quite a while. Tell ya what, I'll ask my wife tonight. She's one hell of a gossip and seems to know everyone's business even before they do, and I'll let ya know what I find out when you return."

A few days go by and nothing out of the ordinary happens as the young man resumes his work on the old farmhouse. Thomas feels less on edge but he also purchases the gun was a good idea. In the meantime, he enjoys the cool nights and the crisp mornings of early fall. In the evening, he sits on the porch in an antique rocking chair, and enjoy the sound of the wind blowing through the changing leaves as Ranger lays next to him.

Thomas drives back into town to Zeke's to pick up his gun and see what the old man may have learned. He walks into the store and at first doesn't see anyone, the only sound is the running water of the aerators on the minnow tanks. Thomas hears a door open and close out of sight then sees the old man come around the corner of one of the aisles.

"Ah! You're back. Good to see ya," the aged man says as he slowly plods to his place behind the counter. "Sorry, I don't move as fast as I used to and apparently

can't be too far from the pisser either," he says with a laugh. "Got your gun right here," the man says as he reaches down to retrieve it, "Talked to my wife too about what you asked."

"Thank you for that sir," Thomas responds politely, "Did she know anything about the old place?"

"Not much I'm afraid, which is odd in and of itself. Said she heard there was some tragic scandal quite a few years ago, but the story differed. One was the wife left and the farmer left not long after. The other suggested foul play, but could be old gossip. You never know really. You might wanna see if they have some old newspapers at the county library, but I don't know how long they keep those. Wife also said that ever since then the place had been empty and the family just leased the land for farmin' to the Lubbock family." Thomas thanks the man for his efforts, returns to his truck and Ranger and then returns to the farm.

That night Thomas is awakened by the sound of a woman sobbing in the next room. A cold chill goes down his spine as Ranger growls with his hackles standing up on his back. Thomas lays there for a moment, hoping it is just the wind, and that he is just hearing things. Yet the sound continues. The weeping continues as he reaches to retrieve the handgun from inside the nightstand by his bed. He slowly and quietly takes it out, checking the chamber to make sure it is loaded before getting up. Ranger remains in his alert posture, growling in the direction of the sobbing. Thomas carefully rises to investigate. He steps out into the hallway, trying to avoid any ancient, squeaky boards. Ranger is right at his side but no longer growling. Just as Thomas reaches for the handle of the door, the sobbing stops. Confused, he cocks the revolver before turning the door handle. Thomas opens the door, turns on the light, and all that is inside is furniture draped in sheets and dust.

"You heard that...right Ranger?" Thomas asks the dog who just looks at him.

After that sleepless night, Thomas decides to give the grounds and house a thorough going over. He lifts every sheet he finds; he checks closets, goes through the derelict out-buildings, and even the old milking area in the lower part of the barn. He finds nothing but dust and cobwebs. Ranger is at his side the entire time—no growl, no whimper...even in the lower part of the barn.

"Maybe it was a dream," Thomas tells himself and Ranger, "There's no one here, there isn't even any signs anyone has been here but us buddy. Are we going crazy?"

The American Foxhound just looks up at him and cocks his head quizzically.

“Nah...you’re right. Jeez...what am I saying? You didn’t even answer me, Ranger. It’s okay boy, I’m pretty sure we’re not going crazy.” He reaches down and pets his four-legged friend, and they go on about the rest of their day without incident.

A few nights later, Thomas abruptly wakes up to Ranger barking at the window. As he quickly rubs the sleep from his eyes, he can hear what sounds like wood being chopped.

“What the hell?” Thomas utters as he rushes to the window to see what the dog is barking at. Peering down through the antiquated windowpane, he sees the same man in overalls and a flannel shirt at the old woodpile chopping wood. Without thinking, Thomas grabs the pistol from his nightstand and goes thumping down stairs with naught but his boxers and shoes on. Ranger is close at his heels when he gets to the door in the kitchen that leads to the backyard. Just before he opens the door...the chopping abruptly stops.

Thomas flings the backdoor open and then kicks open the screen door, ready for whatever he might see. He steps outside into the chill of the evening with the pistol and his trusty hound. Thomas strains to look around in the dim light of the half-moon. No one is there, but his brand-new ax is missing from the woodpile. He goes down the steps and into the yard, rapidly looking around but sees no one is there.

All of a sudden, a blood curdling scream comes from the barn. Thomas races toward the barn, Ranger bounding behind him and barking. As he gets closer, it looks like there is a light inside. Thomas quietly cocks the revolver, and takes a deep breath. He is hoping it is just his imagination running away with him again. Hoping it is just some moonlight shining into the old barn. Hoping against hope that horrid cry was just a coyote. Thomas grabs the barn door, the dog just behind him, and he opens the barn door and looks inside.

On the ground is an old lantern, and he sees a woman lying on the ground in a dress soaked in blood with his brand-new ax stuck in her chest. His heart leaps into his throat when he sees the man in overalls dangling from a rafter by his neck. His left foot twitches as he slowly swings back and forth.

Thomas turns and runs as fast as he can back to the house, locks himself and Ranger inside and then calls the police. They arrive twenty minutes later, and he goes with them to inspect the barn. There is nothing inside but his new ax laying on the ground where he saw the dead woman. After several probing questions...the police leave. Thomas then hastily packs his trunk, duffle bag, and Ranger into his truck and leaves, never to return to the old farm on North Road.



# **Cleansed by Muddy Water**

By Eric Smith

In the valley of despair, I wandered lost and low,  
My burdens heavy on my soul, nowhere left to go.  
But then I heard a whisper, a voice so pure and true,  
It said, "Come to the river, I'll make you brand new."

(Chorus)

Cleansed by muddy water, washed in grace divine,  
Sins forgiven, burdens lifted, now I'm free to shine.  
In the depths of mercy, I found my saving grace,  
Cleansed by muddy water, I've found my rightful place.

(Verse 2)

I walked into the water, my heart full of despair,  
The weight of all my failures, the burdens that I bear.  
But as I felt the current, washing over me,  
I felt a sweet surrender, and I knew I was set free.

(Chorus)

Cleansed by muddy water, washed in grace divine,  
Sins forgiven, burdens lifted, now I'm free to shine.  
In the depths of mercy, I found my saving grace,  
Cleansed by muddy water, I've found my rightful place.

(Outro)

Cleansed by muddy water, oh, what a wondrous sight,  
In the depths of mercy, I found my guiding light.  
So, I'll walk in faith and freedom, till the end of days,  
Cleansed by muddy water, my soul forever stays.

# **I Don't Want to Grow Up**

By Paige Mink

"Never get old" the elders would tell me. And I want to listen. Desperately.

I was too young to scrounge for hope, trying not to think of my predestined future of 9-5 labor, how I would ration my free time, and that I might soon join the repetitive empty conversations I overheard from my parents late at night.

They held no interest, no spark. I saw hamstrung versions of who people might have once been.

Preparing to be weaned from the luster of a child, and the knowledge, or lack of, that allows them to express without constraint.

One day, I will no longer play with Legos, or go on adventures in the bright places of my mind. Playing wolf games with the neighbors is already losing its appeal; what if this was it? The "way of things" is chiseling away at the color I once shone with. I will become like Them, a cut and paste. Work-driven and existing for...for what?

Here I am, watching as what was once thrilling is now dissonant, and I am to become another Ordinary.

*I can't let that happen*, I promise myself. I told myself I would stay young at heart forever, and never let my spark subside. I told myself many things.

I would never be scheduled so strictly, inundating myself as my mother often did. Long to-do lists and constant activity, I would drown in it.

Until, I realized that we choose what we do. Yes, I want to fill my free evening; because yes, I want to cook dinner with my friends. It would thrill me if you would come over for the weekend! I'll have the room clean when you arrive. I would love to participate in our club event, even if it cramps homework deadlines. I can't wait; it'll be so much fun!

...but I could never come to participate in small talk. Hollow conversations of pointless things like the weather. If that day came, it would be an utter betrayal of self....

Until, I realized how powerful the wind really blew, and how special the sky looked while it rained. To share such beauty with a stranger who experienced

it just the same and to talk about it with them like you're old friends. *Golden rays and pink smears. The sunset was beautiful last night, was it not? The air is comfortable on my skin and light in my lungs. It's a perfect autumn day, don't you agree?*

...but, *oh*, to be spending my evenings just sitting still and talking, when I could be going and doing and seeing so much more?

Until, I realized how valuable people are. How good it felt to be understood by a sister, to reacquaint with an old friend, and to hear your grandpa's laugh.

I used to hate what "growing up" stood for. I saw no appeal. Until, I grew up. And found that I am still me, no matter the age.



**Boots** by Mollie McReynolds

## Once Upon a Dream

By Mary Ellen Shinstock

Once upon a dream

(Last Night)

I kissed your face

And held you tight.

We laughed and talked

Of mundane things

Like children, rentals and

Bath tub rings.

We Lay together

Skin to skin

And I was the happiest

I'd ever been.

But then I awoke

And to my despair

Only my Chamocha

Was lying there.

The years stretch out

So dark and bleak

And I feel helpless,

Alone and weak.

I know you'd say,

"Please don't mope

I'll leave you with a Little hope

Someday we'll meet

In pastures green

Where wild flowers bloom

And robins sing.

On my Brownie

I'll be astride

Leading Honey

By my side.

And once again

We'll be together

Stirrup to stirrup

Leather to leather

With sunlight shining

On our face

We'll ride away

To a better Place"



**Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** by Mollie McReynolds

## **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](mailto:prairieink@bartonccc.edu).

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# Barton's Mission and Vision

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## Vision

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.

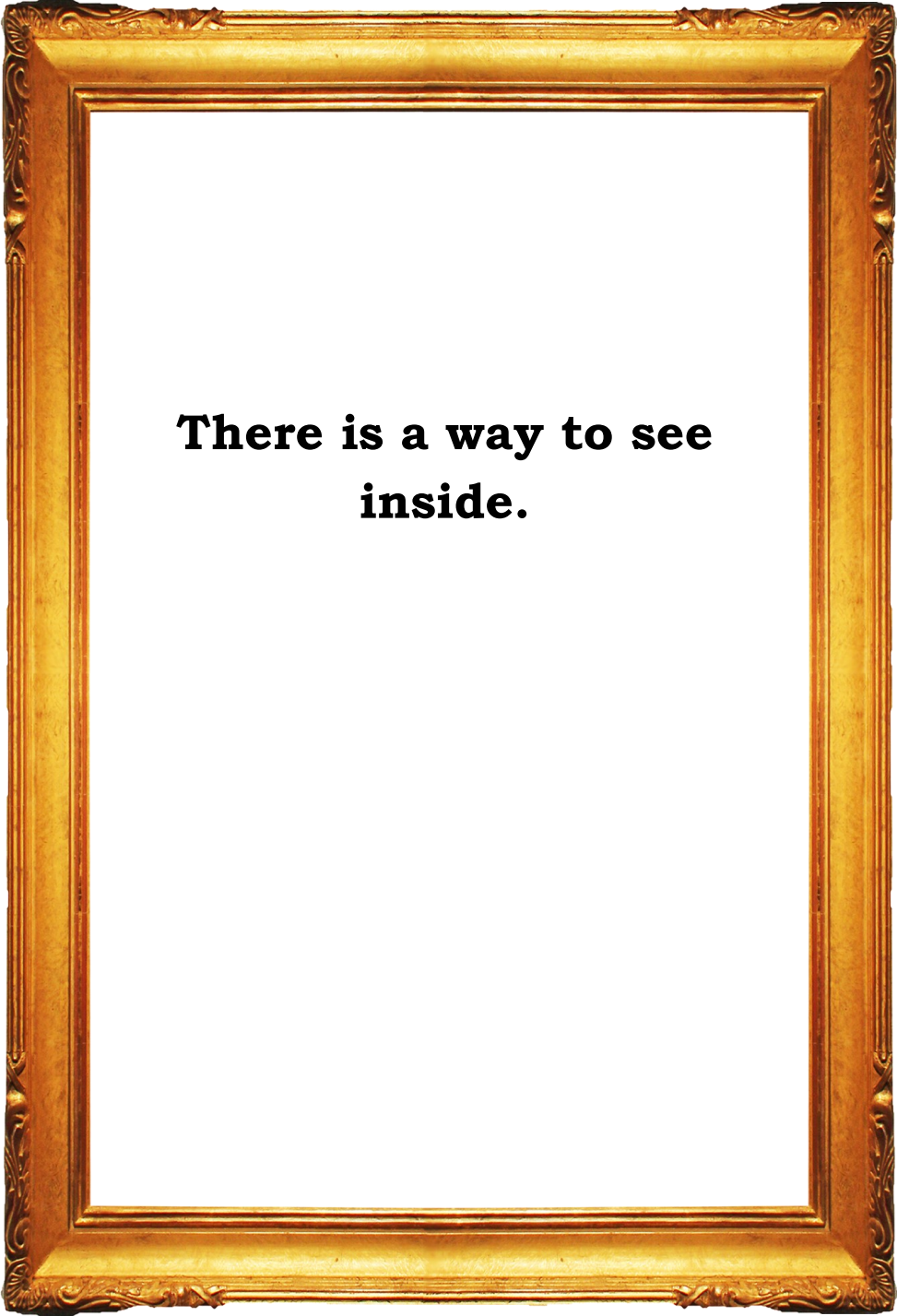
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1. Fundamental Skills
2. Work Preparedness
3. Academic Advancement
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5. Regional Workforce Needs
6. Barton Services and Regional Locations
7. Strategic Planning
8. Contingency Planning

## Core Priorities

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





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