

Firefly Magazine

VI



A Journal of Luminous Writing



Water Walker | *Anna Denisch*

Table of Contents

Water Walker | Anna Denisch.....2

Poetry

Foxes | Seth Jani.....5
The Only Door | Ed Hack.....6
Pathways | Emilie Lindemann.....7
Remnants | Gary Beck.....9
On Magic & Reality | Buffy Worsham.....10
Block 25 | Chella Courington.....11
At the End of Summer | Seth Jani.....13
Valley Forge | Ben Nardolilli.....14
Night in June | Sandy Coomer.....15
Life Becomes a Poem | Diana Raab.....16
One Friend | Ed Hack.....17

Flash Fiction

The Nut Insurrection | Paul Lewellan.....19

Short Stories

It's a Boy! | Tim Hanson.....24
Marathoner | Jane Hertenstein.....32
Bear Among the Dogs | Scott Archer Jones.....37

The Artists

POETRY



Featured Poem

FOXES | *Seth Jani*

Your cold feet
Are famous
For always running
Down along the hedgerows
At the first sign of winter,
The first brittle air,
The first snug chilling
Of the heart.
They're famous
For finding
The first snow
Out in the world
When it sets down
Lightly,
A quiet hallelujah
In the whitened trees.

THE ONLY DOOR | *Ed Hack*

The wind has business with the trees. The stream's
inhabited by paradox, and sky
is blank as blue can be. Right now in dream
she's nowhere, but she's home. The truth's a lie
compared to what she feels. A saw winds up,
then dies, starts up--I hear the cut--then dies.
The saw's a certain kind of truth that shuts
the door on doubt. In dreams I fear to fly--
I do not trust what others urge. My wings,
I know, will fail. No flight will rescue me.
The leaves lean towards the sun. The day will bring
me everything, if only I can see.
I doubt I will, for doubt's the only door
I know that opens onto more and more.

PATHWAYS | *Emilie Lindemann*

i.

You imagine a navigation system for artists

of the lightning bug variety.

Blue and purple pegs lined up on a Lite Brite screen,

Black paper punctured

with constellations.

ii.

You weave threads from trapeze bar wire hangers in dark closets.

The baby is always crawling towards technicolor

shoes.

When every peg falls out of the Lite Brite

You're left with empty sockets, traces, residue.

Drool on the carpeting.

The baby is teething again.

iii.

Outside, it's firefly dark.

We look

through frosted car windows.

We swim

in teal skies shot through with pink, yellow light.

iv.

Through pathways of the mind,
zipping indigo.

My midnight bluebird.

At sunrise, through the blue curtain, patch of sky
Portal of cerulean light
beyond horizontal silo,
my little blue heart beating, blinking on the screen.

REMNANTS | Gary Beck

Old women haunt city streets
shrunken in woolen overcoats
from a more hopeful era,
shuffle along
invisible to passersby,
too weary to wonder
who stole tomorrows.

ON MAGIC & REALITY | *Buffy Worsham*

I was born in a realm too far from your home
Not in distance but in any other measurement of reality
Times have changed. But my skin still leaks crimson fires
Burning sage smudges in abalone shells
My magic won't work, still, I walk beside you
Invisible but equal in prospect
You pray I only play with seafoam
When my burning eyes cry for another's gaze.

BLOCK 25 | *Chella Courington*

Noriko
her mother
her father
lived
next to an apple orchard
he pruned
picking yellow fruit
to store in the cellar
so the skin would turn
sweet red.

The oldest Issei man
at Manzanar
(younger than his daughter today)
he was given no work
left to himself
as his wife made rounds
using rations to plan menus
for the suffering.

Noriko's father hiked the creeks.
Not anyone believed the old man
could escape the wire.
He carried home branches of myrtle.
Noriko watched him sit for hours
carve boughs into lamps & table legs.

One time a night heron emerged
from his hands
short neck & short legs.
Her father placed him at the wire
to wait for the morning sun.

AT THE END OF SUMMER | *Seth Jani*

Again, these changes
Moving in the slowness
And clarity of fall.

The streets shuttering their doors
To the sudden shifts in wind.

Finding one's place amongst all
The grievances and joys
At the end of summer

Is like closing a small book
On the café table
And lifting one's head

To watch the migrant birds.

VALLEY FORGE | *Ben Nardolilli*

Petit, a poet comes down
From the hill,
Calls it a mountain

Says he saw
Unknown soldiers going out
To fight for a dead lady

I know he saw nothing
The mills keep
The hills dark

Dark enough to make
A poet want
To climb them in the first place.

NIGHT IN JUNE | *Sandy Coomer*

That night in June,
the wind charged with a threat of storms,
we sat on the steps, our shoulders
once in a while brushing against each other.
We spoke of important things –
stones and the chorus of shadows
as fireflies emptied the dark.
You said you loved somebody once
like you thought it would surprise me
and I said I'm afraid of drowning
and tornados taunt me in dreams.
The things we shared were not expected –
patches of blue fog
and the deep unwinding of mercies,
and once
an awakening that scared us into silence.
We could have sat there for hours,
maybe we did,
but rain moved in from the west,
unburdened the clouds and veiled us in myth.
The part of us that reached toward the edges
left me unsettled and lonely.
If I knew what to confess,
I would have told you all of it –
the nothing and the almost,
as the wet grass blew wild in the wind.

LIFE BECOMES A POEM | *Diana Raab*

In death's black silence
a profound numbness ensues
no water, breathes stop.

ONE FRIEND | *Ed Hack*

One friend, the only loving friend I've had,
is so long gone I stretch my memory
to find his face, to hear his laugh, that mad
light on a bridge we walked when we were free
and ignorant as dirt. What could we know,
so new to life, one destined to be dead
in bitter snow? What could we ever know,
as innocent as bone can be or bread
as sweet as oven's gift? We walked for miles.
We talked right from our bones. And, Lord, we drank
the wine that told the truth, that reconciled
our silences and made us be as frank
as truth we stumbled towards. He's dead long years.
I watched him die. I watched him disappear.

FLASH FICTION



Featured Flash

The Nut Insurrection | *Paul Lewellan*

"I love nuts on my ice cream," Betty Nielsen said. She was 93 years old with long gray hair that was braided and pinned firmly in place. Now, at the end of lunch in the main dining room, she confessed, "I really wish I could have nuts."

"Sorry, dear. We don't have any nuts," said Yvonne, the pencil-thin young aide. She patted Betty on the shoulder in a comforting gesture that struck Hank Willard as patronizing.

"Excuse me," he said as Yvonne walked away. Hank said it louder. "Excuse me."

She kept walking. Frustrated and uncertain, he raised his hand.

This was Hank's third day at Oakwood Village, a retirement community a few miles down the road from the condo where he and his late wife Helen had lived for the last two decades. On his first day in his independent living apartment, Hank had been informed that if he needed anything during dinner—coffee, more tartar sauce, or ice cream for dessert—all he had to do was raise his hand.

Hank kept his hand up and soon a different aide appeared, an athletic-looking Nordic male named Eric. "How can I assist you?"

Hank pointed to Betty. "My new friend needs some nuts for her ice cream." Betty looked up from her plate in a panic. She hated to make waves. There were rules.

Erik smiled the same smile as Yvonne. "We're all out of nuts. Sorry." He reached out as if to pat Hank on the shoulder, but thought better of it.

Hank removed his glasses from his plaid Eddie Bauer shirt pocket, turned in his chair, and pointed to the counter adjacent to the buffet line. "Yesterday there were assorted toppings for our ice cream, including a container of nuts."

"Wednesday and Sunday are sundae bar days," Erik said, as if that were an answer. "Today is Thursday." Erik saw another hand go up, but before he could respond, Hank's hand shot up again.

"What happened to those nuts?" he asked Eric.

"Any food set out has to be thrown away after lunch because it might be contaminated." Hank's hand shot up.

"But where did those nuts come from? This is a large institution. It must buy in bulk."

"I don't do food prep." Again Hank raised his hand. "Let me get my supervisor," Erik finally said.

The supervisor turned out to be Connie Cosgrove, a pleasant, though harried nutritionist and overseer of the dining hall aides.

Hank quickly recapped his conversation with Erik. "So, where did the nuts on the sundae bar come from?"

"We store them in gallon bags with Ziploc seals. The prep staff takes out only enough for the sundae bar. They leave the rest in the bag to keep them fresher."

Connie was in her mid-fifties, younger by several decades than the average resident of Oakdale. She was polite, but impatient.

"So, you're not out of nuts. You just didn't set out the nuts."

"It's not Wednesday...."

"Or Sunday," Hank added. "But Betty isn't asking for the sundae bar. She just wants nuts for her ice cream."

"We can't do that," Connie said firmly.

"Of course you can." Betty and several others at the table looked up, listening intently. "When I asked for Tabasco yesterday, someone got it. I can't imagine the nuts are kept more than a few feet from the Tabasco sauce."

"Mr. Willard, you don't understand. My staff can't do that. If we got nuts for Betty, we'd have to get nuts for everyone."

"And...?"

Connie was taken aback. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Why would that be a problem? Are dozens clamoring for nuts? Do you fear insurrection if you give in to Betty's demands?"

"I wasn't demanding nuts," Betty said firmly. "But I would like some for my ice cream."

Hank stood up with his water glass and clanked on its side with a spoon. "Can I get your attention please?" He clanked a couple more times as he noticed Connie's face turning scarlet. "Your attention please!" When the room turned silent, he spoke up loud enough to be heard back by the stone fireplace. "Are there any nut lovers in the room?"

People seemed confused by the question.

Connie hissed under her breath, "Mr. Willard, you're making a scene."

Hank forged on. "Are there any people here who would like some peanuts for their ice cream?"

"It's not Wednesday," someone call out.

"But if I could secure some, right now, who would be interested?" Hank counted eight hands. "Let me see what I can do," he told them.

He turned to Connie. "So, what's it going to be?"

"Is this really the way you want to play it?" Connie asked him. "Your third day on campus? I should write you up. There are rules and consequences."

"It was a simple request. You're the one who made it an issue. Of course, if you'd like to evict me from independent living because I led a nut rebellion, I'm sure the Board would be happy to refund my \$200,000 buy-in and first month's fees."

Hank turned back to the diners. "Keep your hands up, and I'll bring your nuts personally, starting with my friend Betty here. And on the comment cards available by the salad bar, be sure to thank the staff for relaxing the nut regulations." There was scattered applause. He turned to Connie. "That's the way I want to play it."

SHORT STORIES



Featured Short

"IT'S A BOY!" | *Tim Hanson*

Mama's stomach rose slowly, stayed there a moment, and then descended. From the doorway, Tommy studied each movement, watching for irregularities. At present, Mama had maintained an average of twenty-two breaths per minute, a healthy number considering her years of cigarette abuse. Despite the result, however, Tommy would again recommend adopting a smoking reduction plan in the morning.

At night, Tommy didn't have much to do, and the hours were long. He feigned sleep around 9:30 (varying the times slightly to provide the illusion of randomness), but after Mama had tucked him in and fallen asleep, the night was his, to monitor Mama's health, to ensure all doors and windows remained safely secured, and to complete any chores Mama hadn't accomplished that day. Around five, he would return to his bed to recharge, close his eyes, and wait for Mama to stir him from sleep. Sometimes, Tommy would consider waking Mama before she could wake him, if only to disturb the routine and provide a better sense of realism; however, Mama was a creature of habit, and Tommy, more than anyone, understood that, so he abided the schedule and played his role accordingly.

A loud grunt broke the silence, and Mama kicked her feet under the covers. Tommy waited, watched, and concluded it to be a bad dream, logging the irregularity for future analysis. For a moment, Tommy considered patting Mama's shoulder, the way she did when Tommy feigned sadness, but decided the role reversal would only frighten and upset her.

So Tommy was a good little boy and waited for morning.

* * *

On Tuesdays, Mama prepared him scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast.

“Anything exciting happening at school today?” Mama said, flipping an egg.

Tommy, with five scenarios prewritten for this standard question, chose the one that befitted Mama’s mood today. “Not really,” he said. “We have story time, and then we’re playing with the parachute in gym.”

Mama smiled, but Tommy noted the false curvature of her upper lip and the wet film covering her eyes. Mama had been crying again, most likely with her cell phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other. This behavior had escalated drastically during the last month, a stark contrast to the joy Mama had exhibited six months earlier when she had first seen Tommy at the store, seated upon the highest shelf. Tommy knew drawing Mama’s attention to this observation would only upset her further, so he pressed on with his story, tweaking it slightly to exploit her penchant for nostalgia: “Mrs. Johnson is going to talk about animals today, for when we visit the farm next week.”

Mama perked up. “Oh, the farm! Is it that time again already?”

“September the twenty-second.”

Mama placed a freshly scrambled egg, two slices of bacon, and a piece of lightly browned toast before Tommy. He considered the meal, looked up at Mama, and smiled.

“Tommy, do you remember,” Mama began, wiping her hands on the front of her apron, a yellowed relic from decades before, “when we went to the apple orchard with your father?”

“Of course, Mama.”

“I was thinking about that the other night,” she said, lighting a cigarette. “We picked more granny smiths and golden delicious than I’ve ever seen.” (The golden delicious had been picked clean long before they had arrived, as home movies indicated, but Tommy did not interject this correction.) “And then your

father bit into one and saw a worm! Oh, the look on his face!" Mama let out a hearty laugh that quickly turned into a savage cough.

Tommy frowned and waited for Mama's fit to conclude. "Mama," he said, when all was silent, "you need to consider a smoking reduction plan—"

"No!" Mama growled, throwing her cigarette into the sink. "I told you, Tommy, you're not supposed to do that."

"Last night, your breaths per minute varied between—"

"I don't care about my breaths per minute!" she screamed. "You're not to say things like that, Tommy. I'm the mother here, not you."

"Of course, Mama. But your health and wellness are my top priority—"

"Never you mind my health and wellness," she said. Tommy had upset Mama, and he noted his failure for future analysis. "Now, you listen to me, Tommy," Mama said, kneeling beside him. "I don't want to you telling me about my breaths per minute, or my caloric intake, or my smoking frequency. I just want you to be a good little boy, and tell me about your day, and do what all good little boys do. And that's *all*. You understand?"

Tommy said nothing. Mama's health was a paramount concern, one that could not be erased. To appease her, though, he nodded, and she smiled. "That's my boy," she said, and returned to the counter to prepare her lunch. "I wish I could go to the apple orchard with you, Tommy, but Mr. Caruthers needs me at the store that day."

"That's okay, Mama," Tommy said, again not correcting the error. "I know you'd like to. I know you love me."

The watery film covering her eyes now let loose two streamlets of tears, and Tommy once more noted his failure. "I do, Tommy," she said. "I love you with all my heart."

"I love you, too, Mama."

Before Mama left for work, she cleared Tommy's plate from the table, depositing a scrambled egg, two slices of bacon, and a piece of lightly browned toast into the garbage.

* * *

During the day, while Mama was at work, Tommy sat in his room, analyzing data and recharging. In the beginning, he had spent his days viewing Mama's home movie collection and sifting through the vast catalogues of family pictures. "It's all in here," Mama had said the day she brought him home from the store, beaming as she uncovered box after box in her bedroom closet. "This is our whole life together, Tommy. Remember: That's your name now. *Tommy*. You should watch the movies, first, Tommy. Start with these and then move onto the bottom ones—" Tommy had interjected here, saying he could copy them to DVDs and store them on an external hard drive, if she would like. "Oh, please don't trouble yourself, Tommy," she had said, her smile starting to wane. "Um...and don't use that techno babble, please. Just...just watch the tapes and take note and be a good little boy, okay?"

So he did.

However, now he had watched all the tapes and seen all the pictures. He had performed a personality analysis based upon Mama's reactions in the movies to various events and people, and he had highlighted key video clips based upon Mama's frequency of recall in conversation. With these operations performed, Tommy had nothing left to do, except wait, process, and recharge for the evening's activities.

* * *

At night, they sat on the couch and watched TV.

Old reruns of eighties sitcoms were playing, the nightly lineup Mama planned her evening around. "How was school today?" Mama asked at the commercial break. "Did Mrs. Johnson talk about the apple orchard?"

Tommy watched Mama carefully. "Yes," he said, noting her glassy eyes once more. "She did. We learned about all different kinds of apples."

"That's wonderful, honey. Tell me all about it."

The night stretched on like that. Several times, Mama removed her cell phone, and shoved it back into her pocket when she saw a blank menu screen

staring back at her. Tommy knew she was looking for missed calls and messages; he also knew the likelihood of such contact was extremely low. "My birthday's coming up soon," Tommy said suddenly. "October the second. I loved going to Toy World last year. May we go again this year, Mama?"

Mama's frown broke into a teary smile, so wide it had to be painful. "Of course, my baby boy. Do you want a GI Joe? Or how about a new board game? We could play when I got home from work—oh, it would be so much fun!"

"I'd be happy with either, Mama. Any toy at all would—"

On the TV, an obnoxious voice blared: "It's a boy!"

Mama's eyes widened, and her head whipped toward the screen.

"Are you tired of being a single child with no one to talk to? Well, you're in luck! Because we have a new brother just for you!" the voice boomed, as a five-year-old boy, with skin synthetically crafted to appear and feel like flesh and hairs woven to have split ends and imperfections, ran to another boy, who hugged him around the neck. "Miracle Child will provide hours of entertainment for children of all ages. And mommies and daddies will love Miracle Child, too, as it monitors their children's health, social skills, and safety."

A young woman appeared onscreen, smiled, and placed her hands on her hips. "You mean, it's a babysitter, too?"

"That's right! Miracle Child is the perfect new member for your family—"

"Turn it off," Mama said, almost shrieking. "Turn it off now!"

Before Mama could finish, though, Tommy had already changed the channel to something more peaceful, an outdoor setting with mountains and running water and tranquil music playing, but Mama was pacing, digging her hands into her pocket and grabbing her phone and checking it once more. The welcome screen with no notifications of any kind greeted her once again, so she sent it sailing across the room, where it collided with an end table and bounced purposelessly away.

"I love you, Mama," Tommy offered, but Mama was hurrying up the stairs toward her room to slam the door.

* * *

On her bed, Mama wept, the long, guttural wails Tommy had anticipated when he monitored Mama's eyes that morning. Without making a sound, Tommy opened the door a sliver and watched Mama cry. When the tears softened, her hand sought the cell phone in her pocket; however, it still lay in the living room, and its absence brought forth another series of sobs that turned to the painful chokes of a veteran smoker.

"Mama?" Tommy said, opening the door.

Mama drew back toward the headboard, placed a hand on her chest, and finished her coughing spell. "Tommy," she said at last. "I didn't hear you—you mustn't frighten Mama."

"You should call him."

Mama's glassy eyes widened and considered the boy with a combination of horror and rage. "What—what did you say?"

"Your cell phone lies next to the end table. I could retrieve it for you, Mama, if you wish." Tommy took a step forward, concluding a conversation shared in the light rather than spoken from the darkness of the hall would prove more favorable. "Your smoking frequency has escalated drastically the last three weeks, and your crying has increased, as well, much more so than when compared to when you bought me. I fear your behavior is self-destructive and indicative of depression, and perhaps confronting its source would prove—"

"What did I tell you?" Mama cried. She sprang from the bed and approached the boy, who remained calm and unmoving before the doorway. "You're not to talk that techno babble to me. Good boys mind their Mamas, and you're not minding yours—"

"Your health is a prime directive, Mama, one I can neither ignore nor erase. Talking with your son might help—"

Mama shook the words from Tommy's mouth, her hands digging deeply into his shoulders. "YOU are my SON!" she cried, her fingers ripping into the synthetic skin. "I *am* talking to my son. I'm talking to my son right now—I *told* you

that! Didn't they program you damned things to obey? I'm sick of things not working!" That final word devolved into a savage grunt, and Mama pushed the boy toward the doorway. Tommy flew backward and hit the wall outside with a loud thud, shaking a picture frame hanging above, which housed the image of Mama when she was younger, smiling next to her son.

"Tommy!"

She rushed toward the boy lying motionless in the hallway and hugged him tightly; Tommy returned the hug, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Your health is my greatest concern, Mama—"

"I'm sorry," she wept. "I'm so sorry."

"You need to call him," Tommy said, listening to Mama's wheezing cries. "I fear your behaviors will only get worse unless you make contact. It's been six months since you last talked to him. You can't use me to—"

"You're such a good boy," Mama moaned. "Why did that have to change, Tommy? Why did things have to change?" And then, between savage coughs: "When you were little, you used to need me. You used to ask me for help, and I could solve any problem."

Tommy concluded anything more said would simply be ignored, so he allowed Mama to cry and he held her until the tears finally passed.

"Never leave me, Tommy," she said, and looked deeply into the boy's glass eyes. "You stay with me. And we'll watch old TV shows, and play games, and go to the apple orchard. Just like before, okay? It'll be just like before and we won't breathe a word of what happened tonight."

Tommy said nothing at first. And then: "Of course, Mama."

* * *

He closed the bathroom door so the noise wouldn't wake Mama from sleep.

In her arms, Tommy had listened to the sound of each breath, and he had noted the irregularities of her breathing and the frequency of her nightmares, as she thrashed against his body and her arms enclosed him with greater ferocity.

Both her mental and physical health would continue to deteriorate as long as this behavior continued, and within a microsecond, Tommy had concluded what he needed to do.

Before filling the bathtub, Tommy had retrieved Mama's cell phone from the living room and had placed it on her nightstand. In perfect cursive, he had written Mama a note, with a simple directive: "Call him now. You cannot move forward if you're always looking backward." Mama's stock in aphorisms would bring great weight to a phrase Tommy ultimately considered trite and cliché, and it would be the most effective message he could relay before she found him the next morning.

The water moved ever slowly toward the brim. Tommy had decided not to turn the knob all the way, as the sound of rushing water might wake Mama. Instead, it rose inch by excruciating inch, until Tommy determined it deep enough to serve its purpose. He twisted the knob back into place and stared at his watery abyss. Love existed merely as a definition within Tommy's mind, an outline of a concept that would help him better understand the behavior of those around him, but now he concluded, seconds before descending into his grave, that he understood its power and appeal more than he had at the outset.

Stepping into the warm bath, Tommy heard a siren start blaring inside his head; self-destruction was forbidden, but his need to ensure Mama's health overrode any survival protocols. Sinking further into the water, a surge of energy flowed through his tiny body, and the world devolved into shifting colors, urgent warnings, and total failures. In those last moments, files were corrupted and then lost, but a single video clip, set to repeat, played atop the chaos: an image of Mama and Tommy enjoying a picnic, while Daddy filmed them from afar. It was the image that followed Tommy into the darkness, as the tiny flame that churned within dimmed and then vanished altogether.

MARATHONER | *Jane Hertenstein*

It was the fall he was running 50 miles a week. In the morning he would get up in the pre-dawn dark and step into his shorts. Those nylon shorts felt like the hand of the devil on his ass, so cold and so clammy, but he always wore them, knowing that after the first mile he'd warm up. He pulled his grey Northwestern sweatshirt on over the T-shirt he'd slept in. Katie would still be asleep on her side of the bed. Before slipping out the front door, he laced up a pair of Adidas, the goosepimples on his hard thighs standing out like Braille. The sun still not up yet.

In the tiled lobby of their building his sneakers squeaked on the just mopped floor. Good morning, Mr. Carper, Fen the doorman would whisper. No matter how many times Henry had told him to call him Henry, Fen would still address him as Mr. Carper. Going for a run, Mr. Carper? Yes, a short one Fen, only about 8 miles. Fen shook his head, as if in wonderment of *only!* Soon his shift would be over and he'd go home to bed. Have fun, Mr. Carper. Thanks, Fen, and he'd push open the door to the street.

Quiet is an anomaly in the busy inner city. Even without the hum from the Drive there was the sound of the wind rustling leaves and scattering trash across the empty street. Birds in the treetops were slowly waking up. Soon their furtive chirps would be drowned out by rush hour traffic.

He didn't believe in stretching; it wrecked havoc on cold muscles. He'd start out jogging and all that that word implied—a slovenly rousing of his bones. His body often reminded him that only fifteen minutes ago it had been horizontal before abruptly awakened. The frosty air was a shock to his lungs as he sought to adjust his breathing, bring it under control, into a rhythm. Soon the puff-puff of vapor rising from inside of him began to subside, just as the first edges of light were softening the corners of the bank and electronics shop at the Sheridan intersection.

This was the hard part: getting started. Katie couldn't imagine getting out of bed so early. Why do you do it! You don't have to! The whole principle behind the

effort evaded her. He continued down the sidewalk pumping his arms to get warm, beginning to lose himself in thought. He could see her laying there warm under the blanket, only the pale skin of her shoulders showing, her mussed hair sticking to her cheek. Katie prone, without distraction or a to-do list, supine, in a state of slumber, her face relaxed and her forehead unfurrowed. At her most essential, and it was this thought that spurred him on, caused him to pick up his knees and run.

By the time he got onto the asphalt path down at the lakefront the sun was starting to peek over the horizon and spread out like a broken egg yolk over the grey water. As often is the case in late fall and winter, there appears to be steam rising up off the lake. He pretends he's in a science fiction movie or a disaster film, running from zombies, the undead, people of the night. There is just enough darkness to keep them alive—but soon their time will be up. He stretches out his legs. On the cement barriers banking the lake he has to be careful, watch for empty bottles and shattered glass left by the night people, and try not to step in the gaping cracks where the cement has crumbled. Sweat formed on his forehead and he wiped it off with his sweatshirt sleeve. Still he kept his cap on. Ninety percent of one's body heat escapes through the top of the head. Like water mixing with the cool air and releasing wispy vapors. It has taken all summer for the lake to warm up, to reach a reasonable temperature where it doesn't feel like needles being driven under the skin, and now it's so late in the season, no one cares to swim anymore. The irony is not lost on the runner.

He and Katie were talking about having kids. God! What would that do to his schedule? He imagined sleepless nights walking a crying baby back and forth in the tiny studio off from the one bedroom. Of course they'd have to move, find a bigger apartment. He could feel his chest tightening, his breathing strain. He forced himself to think about something else.

The undead. He'd stayed up late watching a stupid movie where Charleston Heston fought off unseen creatures wanting to eat his flesh. He fell asleep in front of the TV. Running does that to a person. Makes them bone-tired

shortly after dinner, after taking out the trash and drying the dishes. He and Katie needed to make some changes, make more time for their sex life. He chuckled to himself and sucked in some air. Or they wouldn't have to worry about birth control, having kids, or walking colicky babies. Again his heart constricted.

There was a curve where he rounded a beach house shaped like a steamboat and dipped into shadows, especially murky and foreboding after the November time change. A cold fear shot through him. It was here, if anywhere, he'd get mugged, stabbed, robbed of his door key stuffed into a tiny flap inside his shorts. It was always here, at the curve, every time, he would touch the metal, oblong and notched. Within seconds he would pass out of the darkness and suddenly emerge into brighter, clearer light, assured of life and his key.

The rushing wind filled his ears and made his eyes water. Water splayed the rocks, like machine gun fire, one round after another hitting the cement barriers and shooting spray upward. He ran through the mist. It felt good on his bare head. He ran now with his sock cap clenched in his fist. More than ever he felt alive and dialed in to a frequency only he could pick up.

He had labs today with his freshmen and sophomores. And lunch duty. He hated standing around in the lunchroom. He never got a chance to properly eat his own lunch, but had to wolf it down so that he could devote his full attention to catching kids who miss the trashcan and reminding them to stack their plates and dump their liquids into the yukka bucket instead of the garbage. A robot could do the job, yet after an hour of lunch duty he was exhausted, more beat than if he'd done a ten-miler. He turned around on the path, to head home.

The wind was at his back, always welcomed. Katie should be up by now and moving between her open drawers and the bathroom, the shower and the bed where she sits and brushes the bottom of her feet before rolling up her stockings. She had a habit of brushing imaginary crumbs off her feet. He smiled. After dressing she'd stand by the coffee pot and impatiently remove the carafe and put her travel mug underneath to catch the flow. She'd leave the dregs for him to come back and wash down. He checked his watch. Even though he

started work before her she had a longer commute. Hopefully he'd get back in time to kiss her goodbye and slap her fanny. How she hated that.

He loved the view of the city going in this direction, the way it opened up before him, the new-day sun glinting off the steel and aluminum and mirrored in the thousands of windows. The wide expanse of lake and the endorphins went to his head making him lighter and faster. Always at this point he could relax—that is if one can be relaxed while at the same time exerting. The fair weather runners, the casual jogger, and the newbies without experience were just now joining the path, merging from street arteries and popping out from under viaducts where the Drive dissected the lakefront. His feet and head told him only five minutes more before his turn off. He picked up the pace, the lactic acid in his legs burning.

* * *

He emerged out of the short tunnel squinting, the morning sun eye-level, retina-rendering. All the curbs heading up onto the bike/running path have been eased to allow handicap-access. Yet, even that small incline winded him. He jogs, pushing against gravity and the forces of nature, and the effects of too much pasta. To his right the new soccer field is enveloped in a light fog. He can just make out the goalposts and trashcans, color-coded to indicate waste and recycle.

God his knees hurt. Was it the years of pounding or did he need new shoes? In the middle of the night when he pads his way to the bathroom, he walked like an old man, a rheumatoid Frankenstein. The first mile or two is devoted to motion, to keeping his momentum going, because if he stopped it was all over. More often than not he would acquiesce to a walk/run. Twenty-five years later and good intentions often get substituted for the real thing.

Low clouds hover above the roiling waters and truncate the tops of the downtown buildings. The jumble of cement barriers that used to trip him up have been replaced by a newer, more contoured lakefront. Nowadays people dispose

of their trash properly instead of leaving it to blow into the lake and drift over to Indiana or Michigan or anywhere else down wind.

His mind awakens at the same curve and his heart still quickens at the mere thought of Katie. His Katie, bending over heavily, brushing her feet. The chemo took her hair and the cancer her left breast.

Last spring after her last round of treatment Katie scraped up the energy to attend Stacey's graduation. He cringed every time she threatened "over her dead body" when he suggested they take a pass. Stacey received a degree in Arts and Culture.

What the hell!

Henry slowed his pace (already close to a ten-minute mile) to focus on his form. The merest thought of Katie's prognosis or his daughter's improbable future stressed him out and made it difficult to breathe. Each time he tells himself he has to stop watching the news and spending so much time reading depressing political blogs. He paused on the path, weighing the idea of speed walking.

Suddenly a cyclist raced out of the mist and shouted, "On your left!" startling Henry and causing him to jump into the dew-laden grass.

Eyeglasses, then bi-focals, gel inserts, then orthotics (the cost of which rivaled replacing the tires on his car), kidney stones, and an umbilical hernia.

He started up again, drenched in sweat and humidity, trying to exhale the heaviness inside of him. He'd considered doing one of those 3-day events to raise money for a cure, running the miles instead of walking them, but the crowds would make it impossible. Better to just keep doing what he was doing.

He swung back around at the fourth lamppost after the Belmont Harbor Yacht Club. If lucky he'd get in three miles, get home in time to change, slug back bitter coffee, and kiss Katie goodbye before heading off to teach.

It's only a matter of putting one foot in front of another.

BEAR AMONG THE DOGS | *Scott Archer Jones*

I used to work for the Bear when he was young and strong. It hurts me to see him old and half-lame. But he's still the Bear. I was there in Archie's last year when he took on the gringo.

I talk about those times with Bear to anyone who will listen, but some of it is *mierda*. My wife, she say, "Old days fade and turn into *mentiras*." Now I live behind these thick glasses and work in a hardware store in Raton, and the Bear...he never figured that age would catch him. He planned to be young forever. Nowadays a big bushy white beard hangs on his chest, and his hair is white, too, and his back kills him most of the time. Bear, he is like the rest of us. He never saved a dime, so here he is at sixty-three still taking people from the city out to fish and sometimes to hunt. He lives in a single-wide he bought in 1972, lives there with his third wife Jennie, the only smart one he ever married. Or she married him.

That last time I saw him, before they took him away, I was in Archie's Beer Barn, like I said. Archie's real name is Celestino Archueleto and he runs this bar in a metal building out near Cimarron, mostly for us Latinos. Sometimes Bear would come by.

Bear, he's white and a guide in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Used to be one of the best. In the old days, we ranged all seasons and all country. We carried pale white men back into the mountains for their moment of glory, their *cuento de muerte*. Bear was part of the mountain – he knew where the animals would feed, where the fish would hide, where the turkeys, they would roost. He acted like a bear too – you could never tell what he was thinking by looking at him.

That day in Archie's, Bear wore what he always wore, a big dirty coat made out of an Indian blanket, with jeans and boots. Pushed back on his head he had

a sweated-out felt cowboy hat with a snakeskin band – a snake he killed himself, years ago. His big belly hung out and he shuffled along like his back hurt, but he had a wave and a hello for everyone. I had hunkered down with some of my friends in the corner, and Bear stopped to talk for a bit. He told us he was down to one truck and one tent.

En buenos tiempos, we kept a full camp, horses and a couple of jeeps. It was our job to pick the sportsmen up at the airport, set up their tents, feed them and pour liquor in them. It was our job to throw them up on the horses, take them to the animal, skin and slaughter the animal once it was dead. Nothing in this was a bad thing. Bear, he respected the animal and its death. Also, the kill by the sportsman – *en júbilo* for the hunter and good to see. Most of these rich white men, they wanted to be Bear's friend, so that was okay too. I was Bear's Mexican, there to cook and wrangle horses, but I'm pretty *agringado* myself, white enough to keep everyone comfortable. The big thing for me? I got to work in *la hermosa tierra de mundo*. Until Bear went broke.

Like an animal, Bear don't live in the past. So we visited about what he had coming up. Outside of coyotes near his *casa*, he hadn't shot anything in months – still, he thought he'd make an elk hunt in the Fall. He also thought he'd go fishing soon, and we made noises like we would go too. Then he clomped over to the bar to visit with Archie.

Archie's, it don't see many outsiders, but every once in a while, guys out on a road trip together pull up. They park their cars or their bikes or their RVs and they stroll in to soak up Archie's beer. This day, a bunch of Anglo guys out of Albuquerque had drove up in their Corvettes. They must have been in some kind of car club, a club based on how much they could spend on a toy with four big wheels and a cloth roof. They all chose tables way across the room from us and Archie waddled out from behind the bar to take their orders.

Things went fine for a while. There's always *un buen tipo* who can talk to anybody, and so it was this time. This nice guy in shorts and a big fat nose

wanders over and we visit for a while. He was retired, but he used to be in the concrete business, so we talked about that, about pouring foundations in the winter, about how far you can truck a wet load. He visited with Archie too and spoke to Bear. His buddies and him, they milled around for about an hour sloshing down the beer.

But if there's a nice guy in a crowd, there's also someone ugly, who gets uglier when he drinks. These Corvette drivers had a loudmouth in a nylon jacket, dark hair slicked back from his face. He sat there wavin' his hands and talking up his opinions pretty *estridente*. It turns out he was *muncho importante*, and of course we wasn't. He had been in lots of great places, and this wasn't one of 'em. He drove a great car, and the folks around here, we drove rusty pieces of shit. He was right – we drive what we drive and we buy what we can afford – old men and old trucks.

So Mr. Slick Jacket trots up to the bar to order another round of beer and he talks to Bear while he's there. First he calls him Cowboy and then he calls him Old Man. Two other guys amble up and lean on the bar too, one beside Bear and the other near his friend, just to be close to *Hombre Muncho Importante*. Mr. Jacket, he asks Bear, "Do you know you look like Santa Claus with a ponytail?"

Bear takes all this real mild, just sits there on the bar stool. Then the stranger starts in on the White Thing. He says, "Do you actually drink with those dirty Mexicans in the corner?" Meaning *me y mi amigos*.

I thought Bear was an old man, past all this, but once an animal learns something, it must not forget. Bear jabbed out at this *pendejo*, fast like a snake – he slammed the heel of his hand into the guy's nose. Then he grabbed him by the back of the neck and threw *la cabeza del hombre* down onto the bar, *uno, dos, tres*. Bam bam bam! The guy folded up like a pile of clothes on the floor at Bear's feet. The other two Anglos, they closed up quick on Bear and he jumped to his feet. He spun on his toes to face the one and then to face the other.

A long time ago I seen a pack of dogs corner a bear up against a cliff, and it

looked just like this. Them hounds would charge in on the bear's back and he would spin around to try and catch them. This bear grabbed two or three *perros* and mauled them up quick. This was *casi lo mismo*, as Bear twisted from one to the other. He held them off with his *mal de ojo* and his stone face.

Archie had been caught sleeping, but he hustled out from behind the bar with a baseball bat in his hands. He sidled in between Bear and the other guys at the bar and waved that bat around saying, "Now – Now – Now." The whole crowd of Anglo guys all jerked up from their tables and come running over. The young ones turned all red-face-angry and the old ones grey-shook-up, but they added up to a pack. We Latinos, we nailed our *colillas* to the chair. Bear might have been my boss once, but brown skins don't have brawls with white skins and get away with it. I felt real bad about it, but I didn't do nothing dumb.

Archie stuck the bat out to let them know he'd handle things, not them. The friendly gringo we first talked to helped Mr. Jacket to his feet, got him a bar rag to hold on his face. We could all tell this loudmouth needed the medics – he had left a couple of his teeth stuck in the bar. If Mr. Jacket got hauled off to Emergency, there would be a police report. So Bear, he'd have to have a long talk with the Sheriff.

Bear stared at the bloody-faced man, and he smiled like the sun come up. He turns to Archie and says, "After you call the ambulance and the police, maybe I can call my wife? I bet you they send me to County for this one. Jennie will want to know where I am tonight."

That loudmouth, he got his *cuento de vergüenza*, beat up by an old man, and Bear got to feel young again. All of us in the corner, we was surprised. We had never known what Bear was thinking. All those years, him the Anglo and us the Mesicans. But somewhere in there he must have been thinking we Latinos were okay. Or at least we weren't the dogs. *Bueno*.

The Artists

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Gary Beck has 11 published chapbooks, 9 published poetry collections, 4 more accepted. He has 3 novels, 2 short story collections and 1 accepted for publication. He lives in NYC.

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Sandy Coomer is the author of *Continuum* (Finishing Line Press) and *The Presence of Absence* (Janice Keck Literary Award). She writes poetry and creates mixed media art in Brentwood, TN.

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Chella Courington is the author of four poetry and three flash fiction chapbooks. Her poetry and stories appear in numerous anthologies and journals including *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Nano Fiction*, and *The Collagist*. Her recent novella, *The Somewhat Sad Tale of the Pitcher and the Crow*, is available at Amazon.

Anna Denisch

Anna is a student by day and an artist by night. In all her spare time she still manages to get enough sleep to live.

Ed Hack

Ed Hack was a teacher; he's now a poet. He's been exploring the sonnet for close to three years, its demands for precision, intensity. He knows there's more to learn.

Tim Hanson

Tim Hanson lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his wonderful wife, Jenna. When not teaching high school English, he enjoys writing fiction and frequenting the local food scene.

Jane Hertenstein

Jane Hertenstein's current obsession is flash. She is the author of over 70 published stories, a combination of fiction, creative non-fiction, and blurred genre both micro and macro. In addition she has published a YA novel, *Beyond Paradise*, and a non-fiction project, *Orphan Girl: The Memoir of a Chicago Bag Lady*, which garnered national reviews. She is a 2x recipient of a grant from the Illinois Arts Council. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Hunger Mountain*, *Rosebud*,

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