

Front Porch Review



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A Thought I Had While Swimming in Kimbe Bay
- George Payne

what use is the proper
use of human beings

to chase after each other
like children do dragonflies

to devote ourselves to each other
like carved idols on a totem pole

to unlock each other's mysteries
like keys forged in an abandoned foundry

to be extreme with each other
like we see on television

to be tornados in each other's path
like those who grip the tail of a monster

or is it to swim with each other, in immense
blackness, as if we are eels bobbing in the reefs

A Virtual Walk on a Rainy Morning
- Alan Cohen

In early
To look about
To limber up
In this bright, mercurial, new
Interior landscape
Wet and gleaming after rain

Thunder, fog, and hail all vanished
The body's storms
The mind's
All anger, fear, desire
Melted in this sudden thaw
More surprised than this virtual walker

Looking out
Looking in
Breathing
Stretching
Laughing
Surrendering foibles

Innocent and curious
As a child
Discovering his world
A bird
A flower
Growing, flying

Sunlight
Just as it is outside
Where today there is only rain

Now, This Is Iowa!

- S. Keyron McDermott





Autumn in the Wings
- David James

Twigs' lush medium is converting to
calligraphy, the dismissal of leaves
to launch its winter forewarning. Laden
with late acorns, squirrels *chuck-chuck* meaningless
memos, counter-balance full bellies, tails
unfurled. I am embracing – keepsaking –
the unscrolling calendar, harvesting
days tossed my way, the prodigious burden
of nows. Hunters will bruise this calm soon, but
until then it's choirs of jays, cranes, and crows.

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Autumn

- Nancy Smith Harris

Minnie smacked the chain link fence with the power of Manny Machado; the dull clang of her chrome cane striking galvanized steel wire like a raging death knell. She swung, again and again; something beyond the Pine Street pit bull's growl fueled her fury.

The dog glared, red gums glistening. His guttural tone climbed and plunged, cycling through a short raspy scale. He lunged for the cane – she stabbed the fence now with the other end, goading, keeping him fired up with rage. Her heart now pounding, each beat an explosion. In her ears she heard the roar of rushing blood.

A whistle from the shadowed porch, and he turned, skulked away.

That, Minnie knew, staggering around the corner leaning hard into the cane, mopping her forehead with a tissue limp as old skin, is what death is like: a mean dog, trailing a body over a lifetime. A nurse for forty years, she'd stalked death when it came slinking around ICU beds, when it pounced on fading hearts, on plunging blood pressure. Oh, how she'd fought that mangy skulking beast then, believing in her own abundant and powerful presence to fend the cur off.

People gave up far too quickly. Because death was the ultimate victor, people took its every gesture, its every bark and bite, as a win for death. They couldn't know, unless they'd watched it as often as she had, that death was often merely testing a body's mettle, measuring an opponent's strength and resolve, in preparation for some future, final drama. Death wanted to get to know you before snatching you away. Death enjoyed the chase as much as it thrived on the denouement.

Only in recent years, only now that the animal circled her own bed sometimes in the world between dream and consciousness did Minnie raise herself on her elbows in the dark and ask the ragged hunched shape in the shadows, "When? Now?"

Had there been a specific moment in time, she asked herself, now dodging a teenager on a skateboard, when she'd begun to lose her defiance? No, she said under her breath, shaking her head; the thought of surrender had only begun to creep in after years of pitying glances from grocery store clerks, of fright in the eyes of passers-by. They were scared off by her visible mortality. They could not see that she was just like them. Tiny blips of time separated her departure from theirs.

"What happens," she tried to tell Marilyn Samson once over coffee at Hilda's Diner, "is we begin to act like dying people because everyone who looks at us sees our physical infirmity, our proximity to the end. If only they could see past our wrinkles and tremors."

She thinks too deeply about these things, Marilyn observed silently at the time; she needs to take a yoga class. She should have an occasional glass of red wine in the morning and watch a robin weave her nest in that Japanese maple spreading its crown over her front lawn.

Minnie registered Marilyn's complacent smile with irritation, picturing her friend in powdered wig and satin bodice, fanning herself in the box of an opera house, trilling eighteenth century feminine laughter, a comic aria weaving its way to her from a stage below like some intoxicating incense. Marilyn thought life was a comedy. Had Marilyn ever been subjected to insult? Minnie glared at her friend's clear blue eyes, her stylish Size 8 in raw silk.

No. No teenager had ever shouted "lard ass" at Marilyn as he breezed by in his daddy's car; Marilyn had never been mocked by a gang of hospital morgue orderlies who loaded a gurney with towering heaps of dirty linens, covered them with a sheet, and fashioned one visible toe from a hot dog – a tag tied to that toe reading, "Nurse Minnie."

Minnie heaved herself down the broad sidewalk and up the three steps to the town hall. She grabbed the door handle with such force that its old metal parts clattered in the quiet air, shaking three crows from the vine-draped lattice overhead. Inside, she disappeared into the shadows of the elevator, chilled by a memory of recent entrapment, thinking of a coffin, deep and silent.

As she passed the Public Works Department on the second floor, Minnie's pantyhose lost its grasp of her ample waist and slid to the tight crevice just north of two boulder-shaped knees, taking her briefs along. The pantyhose, a bold but necessary measure, was meant to warm her in the cooling Autumn air. Minnie stopped and glanced over her round shoulder. Measuring the distance back to the ladies' room, she resumed forward motion.

The failing undergarments were only the latest debacle in a string of indignities, the many private humiliations suffered now, now that her sphincter muscles had grown lax, now that hair, gray and stubborn, sprouted daily from strange new places. Each day brought new raised spots of rough, darkened flesh, moles the size of mushroom caps, popping up on face, neck, breast, or belly. She halted, listening to her heart knocking about, before resuming the course.

In the conference room, Marilyn sat, bright and smiling, among gray companions. She winked at Minnie, who settled into the oversized swivel chair closest to the doorway, the seat reserved for Minnie unable to navigate the narrow perimeter between conference table and wall.

On the table, one sandwich, neatly sliced in two, lay before most of the ladies – except for Janet, a girl from Georgia, who favored fried chicken. Each meal was coupled with a tiny flowered paper cup. Janet, the town manager's assistant, circled the table with a plastic pitcher, filling each cup with water.

Breathless, Minnie caught Hope Conigliaro's blank stare. Only a week earlier, at Ristorante Arrivaderci, where the volunteers gathered regularly to celebrate birthdays, Hope had arrived with no purse, no wallet, nothing but a copy of *Memento Mori* stuffed in the pocket of her red leather blazer.

"Isn't this book club week?" Hope had asked, cataracts darting from one shriveled face to the other as their waiter hovered with a menu.

In the end, they'd pitched in, covering the cost of Hope's meatball sandwich and two Merlots.

"Someone should speak to her ...," Minnie had whispered to Marilyn that afternoon as they tossed twenties into tray at the end of the meal, "her head's turning to mush. It's just a matter of discipline. Working crosswords, watching PBS – you've *got* to exercise those brain cells...that's *key*."

Marilyn, who was herself under suspicion for choosing to read novels while ignoring the ringing phones at town hall, smiled vaguely.

"I think she only needs a calendar," she replied in her soft, throaty voice.

"Minnie! Minnie!" Hope crooned, "Have some!" Shimmery gold loops twanged on Hope's arm as she shoved a paper plate of crescent-shaped biscotti toward Minnie. Her red nails, like painted chicken claws, gleamed beneath the lights. For many years now, Minnie had noticed that Hope was tripling the Amaretto in her twice-baked cookies.

"After lunch, Hope," she said neutrally, extracting her own sandwich from the depths of her paper sack, unwrapping it with extreme care. It was the Hopes of the world who gave them all a bad name.

Hope turned to her insulated lunch box. Her wobbly face tightened with distress. "Oh my," she said, shifting the box on its side for all to see. It was empty. Hope looked anxiously

across the table at Minnie's two neat halves of stacked ham pressed between toasted slices of sourdough. Minnie pulled her sandwich in closer and lowered her gaze.

"Here you go, Hope," Janet said, pushing a golden crusted drumstick down the table in a boat of aluminum foil.

Minnie tightened her thin lips.

"Thank you, doll," Hope said to Janet, "I'll bring you more biscotti next week."

"Next month, Hope – not next week," Minnie said.

"Oh, yeah."

The elephant in the room, thought Janet, watching Minnie, because it was very much like having an elephant in the room in every sense of the expression: Minnie Rogers, big, gray, lumbering, an oversized reminder of what happens when life turns the corner and begins its downward slump. She couldn't look at Minnie without wondering how in the world they would ever get her into a casket, how many it would take to carry her to the grave.

She glanced at the clock over the doorway. The town manager was late. Janet found these gatherings tedious, but there they were, spelled out in the job description, along with taking minutes at council meetings, keeping track of boards and commissions, and directing preparations for the annual ice cream social at Fromer Park: "meet with town volunteers on a regular basis." She'd looked forward to the volunteer lunches at first, believing these women would tell compelling stories from their past or exchange favorite recipes – grandmotherly gestures. But it wasn't to be. Instead, they seemed to disappear into themselves, turning inside out in a disturbing way. Only Marilyn Samson, beautiful and serene, turned outward the way a blossom unfurls, looking beyond herself on to the larger world.

"Good afternoon, ladies," Maureen Scully, the slim blonde town manager, a woman in her late fifties with the linear silhouette of a young girl, slid into her chair at the head of the table. She peeled the foil cap from a small container of plain yogurt and broke the milky surface with a plastic spoon.

With an eye on Maureen's spoon, Minnie devoured a chunk of bread and ham. Only yesterday, Minnie had been scouring a copy of *Bon Appetite* in the library when she heard the mayor one aisle over whispering, "I don't know why you feel you must sugarcoat everything, Maureen...sometimes it seems as though you consider us just more of your dotty volunteers."

Dotty! That is what the mayor had said.

"They're not *my* dotty volunteers, Tom," Maureen had hissed back, "Remember? It was your council, under your direction that brought them in. Something about better relations with the senior community, as I recall."

Boiling in the heat of that recollection, Minnie glowered at Maureen, who only studied a paper in front of her.

"I thought we'd start today with a report on Country Fair Day," Maureen began, "it looks as though we brought in more money than last year..."

"Oh, the lines!" Minnie exclaimed, brushing a tumble of crumbs from her mountainous chest, "*too* long. I waited nearly ten minutes for a snow cone..."

"They ran out of drink tickets," Hope gasped, "I felt faint – it was like that awful hot day last year, that Sunday in August. Bruno and I sat at the back of the church near the door, praying for a breeze."

"Thought I'd die of heat stroke standing in line," Minnie lamented, her dramatic eyes now closed in awful concentration.

Not to be outdone, Hope interjected, "My legs stuck to the church pew. I worried my skin

would rip off if I tried to stand up. I said to Bruno, ‘Bruno, go wet your hankie in the holy water and bring it back here so I can slide it under my thighs’,” Hope moaned, shaking her head.

“My heart started racing. It was just like the day I got stuck in the elevator at the U. S. Bank Building. Horrible, horrible. Sat on the floor in the dark with my head between my knees for two hours. Took three paramedics to get me up...” Minnie opened her frankest, blue eyes.

“It was the same day that my cousin Frankie died in Buffalo. I remember we got home from church, and the phone was ringing. Bruno, said, ‘Honey, it’s Viv.’ It was my sister, Vivian, calling...poor Frankie. I think he died of...” Hope searched the ceiling for the name of Frankie’s disease.

“...they put me on a gurney, and the thing collapsed under me, fell clear to the ground. Thought they’d broken my back.” Minnie’s eyes grew round.

Janet rose and left the room, pitcher in hand.

Maureen cleared her throat, but no one noticed.

“...hemorrhoids...I think it was hemorrhoids he died of.”

“No one dies of hemorrhoids, Hope.” Annoyed that Hope had turned the discussion away from the disaster that was Country Fair Day, Minnie bit into her sandwich once more.

“Well it was something with ‘oid’ in it.”

Maureen stirred her yogurt dismally, ignoring the animated discussion of hemorrhoids that followed. She glanced at her watch and searched the swath of sky visible through the window. Rain showers, early for the season, had been forecast. Plastic bonnets wrapping gray heads, confused stares hovering over steering wheels, dented fenders, stalled traffic, these were the images that offered themselves. What was the town’s liability, she wondered, if one of them caused a calamity on the road?

“Maureen, the Mayor’s on the phone for you.”

Janet stood in the doorway with the refilled water pitcher.

Maureen excused herself and motioned Janet into the hall, handing her the list of topics she’d prepared for discussion. “Country Fair Day,” at the top, had been crossed out.

“Can you take over in there? I have a feeling this is going to be a long conversation.”

Maureen disappeared into her office and closed the door. She’d only just returned from a meeting with the mayor, an insufferable man whose term would stretch on for another year.

It didn’t help matters that the mayor held Maureen’s English degree against her, believing the town needed the direction of a professional, someone who’d studied public administration. But that sort of degree was not even offered when Maureen had gone to college; besides, what self-respecting finance guru would put up with the constant parade of strange and cranky characters demanding her time and attention?

She sat at her desk and picked up the receiver.

In the conference room, Janet crumpled the list of topics Maureen had handed her, dropping it into the wastebasket. She circled the table of chattering ladies, refilling the little paper cups with water, and placed the pitcher on the credenza beneath the window overlooking the street below.

The librarians had fashioned scarecrows, dressing them as goblins and witches, and secured them to the light posts, reminding her of the turning season and the way the air had changed in the past couple of weeks, to something with a snap in it, something brittle and crisp.

A time of year that Janet usually found exciting, ushering in Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, left her uninspired now, now that instead of zipping a warm jacket up the tiny

torso of a child she found herself playing substitute nanny to this room full of desperately old women. When, she wondered, would it be time to give up? At what point would she and Mike be mistaken for a child's grandparents, making them foolish among the back-to-school crowd? In the street below, a tank-like black car, huge as a bus, glided to the curb.

In her office, Maureen palmed the mouthpiece of her phone, whispering a word that would have made her mother turn white with shame.

"I had a thought, Mo," the mayor said, "Could you run a couple of numbers for me? Replace the street crew with a landscape service and outsource the heavy maintenance to a contractor. Let's see what we could save..."

This kid, this investment banker who looked like he didn't yet grow facial hair, continued to meddle in personnel matters. He continued to ignore her recommendations, leading the rest of the council away from her. The town manager stared through the window. On the street, a young woman in ponytail and spandex was leaning in past the open door of her Cadillac Escalade, coaxing a little boy out of the back seat.

Recently Maureen had noticed that the town was full of these young women with small children, further proof of her advancing age. With a kind of mournful longing, she remembered when her own children were small, when she and the women filling the street were the same age. Frightened, she thought: am I too old for this? Should I retire?

"Look up the Robert Frost poem about what the afternoon knows and the morning only suspects," she scrawled hastily in her opened, paisley-covered notebook, before taking down the mayor's instructions as he droned on.

In the conference room, Marilyn Samson appeared at Janet's side, peering down into the street where the little boy now stood on the sidewalk, his chin in his chest, bunched fists tight at his side. His mother crouched before him, whispering in his ear.

"Isn't it odd," Marilyn said in a voice so quiet Janet had to strain to hear over the heated on-going hemorrhoidal discussion in the background, "that mothers drive their tiny charges about in those huge transporters?" Marilyn turned her light-filled eyes on Janet.

This, she thought, studying Marilyn's radiant smile, was the way to be at eighty. Janet had been to the Samson home for a Christmas party last year. She recalled a tiny galley kitchen, its sink filled with dishes, pots and pans, ignored as guests crowded into the living room around a tree sagging beneath its tinsel, listening to Marilyn rumble through Rachmaninoff's arpeggios on a grand piano, her head bowed over the keyboard, her hands traveling the range of ivory in a furious, passionate race. Bookshelves hugged the walls bearing volumes of Mailer, de Beauvoir, Stein, Hemingway, and not a single, solitary insipid pastel figurine or *Chicken Soup for the Soul* title.

Growling and screaming broke out on the sidewalk below. The faces of the women at the conference table froze, their mouths sprung open, each sat paralyzed, each imagining her own version of some debacle on the street.

The pit bull from Pine Street had flattened the little boy against the concrete. The mother, on the dog's back, pried at the animal's rock-hard shoulders with small, ineffectual hands.

"Minnie, honey," Marilyn turned away from the window, "someone needs a nurse."

Minnie swiveled away from the table and stuck her legs out.

"Get my shoes off!" She barked, dragging her skirt hem up jellied thighs, baring the fallen undergarments, "get me outta these!"

Hope scrambled around the end of the table, dropping to her knees, pulling off one shoe,

then the other. Janet and Marilyn each took a leg, unpeeling the hose-shrouded panties, sliding both garments over Minnie's bulky ankles.

Minnie thundered to her feet, down the hall, thumped down the back stairs, and barreled out to the sidewalk where a small crowd had gathered. Two young women pulled at the sobbing mother's waist, trying to pry her from the animal whose teeth gripped the boy's tiny arm between the wrist and elbow.

Breaking through the throng, Minnie dropped to the ground and jammed her fist between the animal's jaws. The boy's arm was released, and his mother pulled him from beneath the vicious dog. Minnie shoved her arm down the animal's throat until the pit bull gagged and slunk away, slobbering into a rosebush bordering the sidewalk.

"...and let's look at negotiating a cap on healthcare at the next go-round with the union," the Mayor continued.

Maureen, distracted by the tremor of voices in the street below, turned to the window. There was Minnie Rogers, barefoot, on her knees, with her arm halfway down the throat of a pit bull. Maureen dropped the phone and dashed from the room.

On the sidewalk, a police officer collared the dazed animal and pulled him into the backseat of the black-and-white at the curb while a second officer ushered the boy's mother, the boy in her arms, into the backseat of his vehicle, and sped off beneath frantic flashing lights.

Minnie sprawled on the cement, its chill stinging her thighs, its rough texture scraping her bare behind. Her chest heaved, her face shining with sweat. Hope and Marilyn beamed down at her, then Maureen and Janet appeared, each taking a side, hoisting Minnie to her feet.

Minnie swiveled her head, taking in the faces. There were loving hands on her back, a spatter of applause, a few cat whistles. Was it a dream, she wondered? Her reddened, punctured arm began to throb, her skirt hem lifted and a breeze crept up her legs, chilling her privates. She shook off the hands gripping her arms but both Maureen and Janet continued to stand engulfed in Minnie's shadow, looking up into that lined face as if seeing it for the first time.

The crowd fragmented, moving off in all directions.

"Shall we finish our lunch?" Marilyn asked, taking Minnie's hand.

"Hemorrhagic stroke!" Hope, exclaimed, linking arms with Minnie, "that's what got Frankie!"

"Hope," Minnie said, moving steadily down the sidewalk to the back door of the town hall, "hemorrhagic stroke doesn't have 'oid' in it."

"Oh, yeah."

"Let's have some biscotti," Minnie replied. Not as calming as a shot with a beer chaser, but it would have to do.

Baggage
- Sara Sarna

She talks to herself,
I think.
There is no one I can see.
Above scruffy canvas shoes
toothpick legs extend
to shorts, then summer top
covered by unzipped hoodie.
Drenched in ninety degree sweat
I marvel at her disregard
for heat.
The handle of a rolling suitcase
fills one hand,
wheels objecting
to straight lines.
In her other hand
a tire.

She walks the middle of the road,
the one above the embankment
descending to the Pasadena Freeway,
chain link fence to hold it back
lest delusions of grandeur
coax it into interstate traffic.

I have questions.
Why the tire?
Why the suitcase?
Why the middle of the road?

With more strength
than size warrants
she flings the tire
over the fence.
I lose sight of it in the tangle
of growth on the hill.

On she walks,
like the tire never was,
like the middle of the road
is her beaten path,
like we all tow baggage.

Buyer Beware?
- Lois Greene Stone

Have you been manipulated by the sing-song chant, "You get what you pay for?" This trite expression is a money-extracting message, and there is no function key to depress to erase it.

In the garment business, circa 1940's and '50's, American-made women's clothing with a high price tag had wider hems, deeper seams, plaid patterns perfectly matched, overcast stitches on raw edges, linings, hand-done buttonholes. Now, 'designer' frocks put together in exotic-sounding foreign lands are finished with skinny, machine-interlocking stitched hems, curling elastic waistbands, pinked skimpy seams, and fabrics (such as acetate) that any chemistry student can tell are inferior.

People assume that added cost creates a superior product, but women who really want quality clothing might sew their own items. Designer labels proclaim 'dollars spent', not workmanship.

Goodwill Industries, decades ago, was able to benefit from consumers' reasoning that both visible labels and spending more assures better-made items. It was unsuccessfully trying to sell pre-worn jeans for 49¢ a pair. So, Goodwill put a Goodies label on each rear pocket of these second-hand pants, elevated the price to \$3.95, and sales increased.

The cosmetic industry sells hope and fairy godmothers. No matter that an occasional magazine article reminds readers that lipstick is largely castor oil and costs little to make and place in plastic tubes. How many women linger at a department store's high-priced lipstick counter convincing themselves that dollars buy beauty? A major business newspaper once reported that foreign women exchange literally two days wages on inflated-priced mascara assuming cost and quality are compatible.

When some shop for food and then price-compare supermarket private labels with national brands, there's often doubt about the quality of cheaper store items; we forget that major companies have big advertising expenses.

Expos have noted facials offer mostly psychological benefit, yet, country wide, complexion businesses have accelerated. 'You get what you pay for' centers charge to deep clean, aerate, and so forth, promoting expensive products. Pampering is done, and those benefits are emotionally uplifting, but people want to believe otherwise. How come no one questions all the wrinkled or freckled skin that is still on all those who go regularly for facials? Why don't costly cosmetics make us gorgeous?

Remember when a major American car company's V8 engines were unmasked as other than what was advertised for its specific autos? Since snob appeal on the OUTSIDE mattered more than production line deception, those cars continued to sell.

'the best one ever made', 'finest construction', 'choice workmanship'...why are we so gullible!

An a-la-carte baked potato wrapped 'in shiny silver foil' is probably the same one covered in what we commonly call aluminum foil and included with dinner. A chef salad at a five-star place may still be a chef salad at a specialty stand in a lower rent district.

Shoes, pretending to look like leather, are often man-made material throughout. Status from writing on the insole has gone the route of jeans: little tags sewn outside name-drop. Better yet, women buy the expensive high heels with the red soles which scream four-figure price for merely one pair. Plastic soles and heels, even transparent and trendy, are a poor substitute for leather or non-skid rubber. But they must be good; the outlay of money is high.

We've been passing this phrase on as if it were a legend that must be transmitted to each generation. As intelligent consumers, isn't it time we refused to be seduced by Madison Avenue hype?

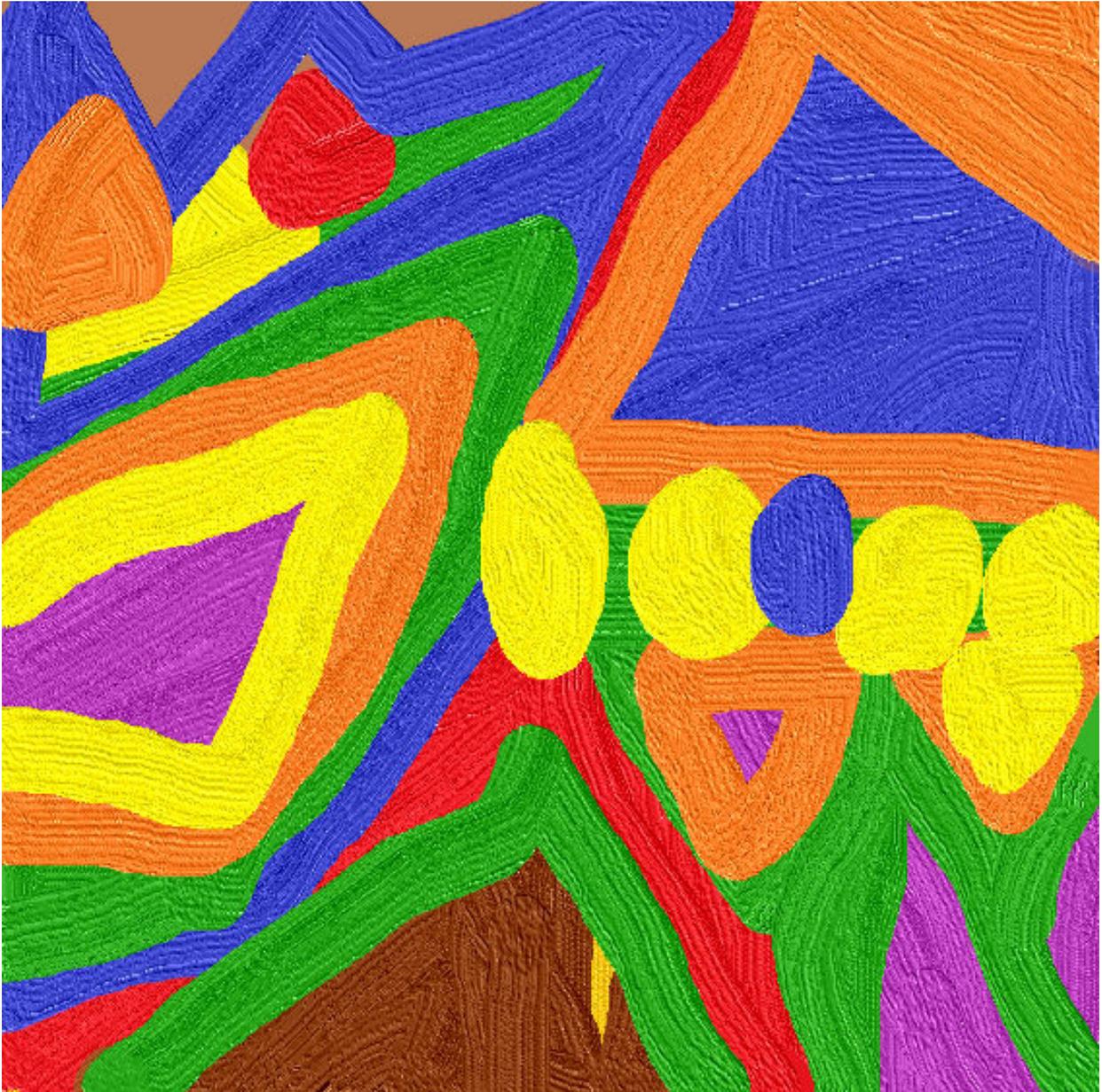
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Color Commentary

- J. Hannah Goldberg



Lost files



Candy corn castles

I Count the Decades in Appliances
- Donna Davis

Ten years or less — it started
with the stove in Mom's kitchen,
a new gas cooking range,
rainbow lights on its front panel.
Grandpa boiled coffee in a glass pot,
filled his cup and broke a raw egg,
stirring yellow circles into black liquid.

Mom replaced the old stove.
Grandpa's coffee went with it.
I know that I am running out of time,
the next decade or even less.
But this knowledge is a gift.
I have watched years flee in steel frames
plastic dials, enamel handles.

And now I think, *I'm almost through.*
How many left? Two stoves near the end,
a refrigerator or dishwasher away?
Will the next one push me to the finish line?
I sigh and embrace certainty,
turn the burner on,
break an egg into the pan.

In Praise of a Walk: Catherine Creek
- Jackie McManus

The creek runs hectic here, reminding me of everything I've left undone. *Hurry, you are running out of time*, it says. I follow the rock-strewn ground through an oak and pine savanna where the old jeep road gains height before it turns into a goat trail.

A wide plank extends from bank to bank where the creek is deep and still: half of me afraid I will slip into the stone-cold water; the other half remembering a school field trip where two fathers killed a quiet rattlesnake, its body wrapped around itself

just off the path. In their dreams, they are champions of women and children. Decades later my grandchildren play here, the stream a murmur, their laughter, birds. Today, rain and clouds make the air feel like a low vowel. I am trying

not to live in the past but have more past than future now; the infinity I once felt has fled. I breathe hard up this hill that never used to slow my pace. Now I look around at the deep green outcrop of everything. Fascicles of

purple grass widows soon to bloom in this vernal wet place that, come summer, will be dry and hard and hot. On the plateau, the surprise of a runnel courses through mounds of basalt, its sound a hundred prayer bells, small chimes in a slight wind,

spoons tapping on a dinner glass. I see another path, its merciful slope, its forgiving asphalt curves. This path is a long-scrambled sentence and I walk inside its circumference, carrying its fractured meaning until the paths end.

In Summer
- Joseph Helminski

The landscape stretches on itself
green specked in fading August.
Last month was the hottest ever
and the tomatoes spill plump from their pots.
Evidence of the senses:
everything is as it should be
here in a long-ago orchard
where a few trees still fruit,
false aphorisms
to persuade anyone that weather
is just peaches free in windfall.

It is not that important

- Ira Darmohrai

it is not that important for me how old you are
the length and colour of your hair
the price of your sweater and how many pairs of shoes you have.
tell me about the brightest moments of your life
about bedtime rituals from childhood
what gives you goosebumps
and how often do you make tea when you are sad
give me your hand
let me help you feel what I feel.
show me who you are
and don't hide behind your own fears.
tell me why do you keep this silence
and why do you cover your mouth not to show this sudden gladness
because you are afraid of being judged
stay silent if you want
look at me with this long penetrating look
let me enjoy you
I want to observe your face changing
when you talk about something really precious
to hear this thrilling kind of variation
to see the radiance of your eyes
and then
let me come home
and say
I am home
kiss my eyelashes

Zambia Up Close and Personal

- Joseph Glaser





ST ERNEST ORPHANAGE FEEDING PROGRAM

	07:00 HRS	10:00 HRS	12:00 - 13:00 HRS	16:00 HRS	18:30 - 19:30 HRS
MON	TEA + BREAD	FRUITS + SWEETS	NSHIMA + BEANS + VEGGIES	REFRESH MENTS	NSHIMA + CABBAGE
TUES	MEAL RICE MIXED WITH PEANUT BUTTER	FRUITS + SWEETS	NSHIMA + FISH (FRIED) + VEGGIES	REFRESH MENTS	NSHIMA + BEEF + VEGGIES
WED	PORRIDGE + MILK	FRUITS + SWEETS	NSHIMA + TRADITIONAL DISH	REFRESH MENTS	NSHIMA + FISH (BOILED) + VEGGIES
THURS	TEA + BREAD	FRUITS + SWEETS	NSHIMA + KAPENTA + VEGGIES	REFRESH MENTS	NSHIMA + TRADITIONAL DISH
FRI	RICE + POTATOES	FRUITS + SWEETS	NSHIMA + BEEF + VEGGIES	REFRESH MENTS	NSHIMA + BEANS + VEGGIES
SAT	MEAL RICE + MILK	FRUITS + SWEETS	NSHIMA + BEANS + VEGGIES	REFRESH MENTS	NSHIMA + CHICKEN + VEGGIES
SUN	TEA + BREAD	FRUITS + SWEETS	NSHIMA + CHICKEN	REFRESH MENTS	NSHIMA + BOILED FISH + VEGGIES

Let's go fall in love or something
- Reagan Sosebee

Let's fire up the motorcycle and go for a ride
Or have ourselves a picnic
Take the boat out and find a new fishing hole
Nestled beneath an oak tree canopy
Let's discover a spot somewhere deep in the woods
That nobody knows about and make it our own
Pick a few flowers and get a little lost
And take our time finding our way back to nothing
Let's go for a walk and tell funny stories
Hold hands and smile and look at the stars
Let's jump in the car and drive with no purpose
Pull over at a river and go skinny dippin'
Let's dress up in our Sunday bests
And buy whatever we want
At a restaurant we can't afford
Let's stumble upon a park
And swing on the swings
Ride the see-saws and laugh like children
Carve our names into the wooden picnic table
And describe what we think the clouds look like
Let's feed the ducks and count the train cars
And kiss in the rain with our eyes closed
Let's forget about everything we're supposed to be doing
Let's go fall in love or something

Lottery

- Heather M. Browne

There's a dark side of ripples
stretching right below the light
not where it wants to be
a shade shy of a sparkle
and too far over the edge

Everything wants to be chosen
your mouth
a numbered bingo ball
or jack trapped in his box
his arms folded unable to reach

Dragonfly feet land flat on glass
their abdomen balanced and stable
No need to cross rough waters
no dividing of the Red Sea
for those not chosen

I say my prayers
cross my fingers
get distracted wishing on stars
or cracking open stale cookies
looking for my fortune
Destiny sometimes comes on paper scraps.

Pleading for the purple gumball
winning the lottery
or you to finally pull out your hand
from your jean pocket
realizing all I've ever wanted
is you
grabbing that gold ring
and asking me for mine

Mermaid
- Phil Huffy

She lingers where the screen house may have been
and peers out at the lake, unchanged and still.
There in the August heat, supposing when
she splashed across and back with strength and skill.

Her younger self was supple, smooth and calm,
a sculpted beauty, powerful and trim,
who found the sunshine's company a balm
and thought the crossing but a pleasant swim.

Though years have not addressed the lake and shore,
the rustic camp thereby has not well fared.
The screen house isn't present anymore
and a tired fence slopes downward, unrepaired.

The mermaid now departs this hallowed place
but recollects the water's soft embrace.

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night soon
- David Fitch

how much darker it seems
in the sun's late-year slant,
when the shadows advance
like crows going slow motion

crude, plainly seeing
the trees' far sides back-lit
while the meadow behind them
is still glowing golden,

when

left and right of tall objects —
the round telephone poles
suddenly reed-thin
but high up full-fat

as if the cold rises
and teeters, then eats
colors for dinner,
to leave just the black bones.

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Open
- David Bachmann

An open hand
can do so much,
can soothe the pain
with just a touch.

An open heart
can seek to mend
the feelings hurt
when words offend.

An open mind
is best of all,
can see the truth
tear down a wall.

Ordinary Things
- Glenda Barrett

A cancer survivor, I now know
not to pass over the simple things
in life like: three baby sparrows
learning to fly like tiny airplanes
needing emergency landings, yet,
they manage to level out and stay
airborne. A large spiderweb on
a forest trail clings to the branches
of a mountain laurel, the precise,
intricate work of one lone spider.
Moss, not dark green, but aqua
colored partially covers a large
decayed log in the forest. A full
moon on a starry night causes me
to imagine visions of human faces
with emotions in its shadows. A tiny,
yellow flower grows out of a crack
in a sidewalk. Cars drive by, wait
in line at the drive-through, never
glancing down at the small miracle
within a foot of them. Thoreau said,
It's not what you look at that matters.
It's what you see.

Secret Life

- Kira Marie McCullough

They call her Walker Woman. Every day, she pushes her walker around the property, an oddity among the other tenants, who are young and flushed red-tan by the sun. When she's not bent over her walker, you'll see that she is a tall and skinny figure with fine-spun hair that sticks out everywhere, never moving in the prairie winds. You might say it looks as crispy-stiff as cotton candy sawing up out of a paper cone on a cold day at the carnival.

Walker Woman doesn't wear make-up. She doesn't care to slap blues and charcoals and pinks all over her face to satisfy your eyes; she doesn't care if you can't reconcile the harsh contrast between her bile-colored skin and pink-white hair.

Her face and hands, the only parts poking out of her jacket, are yellow-brown from the sun and age. Her skin appears no softer than a piece of old leather, and her countenance no softer than the river rocks tumbled around the flower beds outside her apartment. Mostly, she is a study in grays. She wears a dingy windbreaker over a T-shirt and faded silver-white jeans that she hitches up with an old plastic belt. In the right kind of light, she looks ethereally cloudy, from the dark circles under her eyes to the dirty tennis shoes on her feet. But inside, she doesn't feel gray.

Most can't see the little spark of breathless excitement that's lit up in the middle of her chest, but she feels it, a stelliferous kind of invisible joy, when she looks at the stars.

Most nights you'll find her along the edge of the blacktop road, near the empty field with the For Sale sign in it. She's leaning on her walker, but her body straightens like a rocket. She's curving upwards, waiting. Her head falls back, and her dark eyes have turned an orchid-shade of lavender-blue, mirroring the bowl of planets and stars that's shaken upside down and spilling out all over her.

If the moon had eyes, it would see a face wrinkled by fifty years of smoking cigarettes — a face turned to pinches and creases and crevices. Like moon craters. If you happened to be driving by, you might see the flash of her lighter at the end of cupped hands. And your headlights would burst sudden-like on the silver, four-wheeled walker. Her grown children will tell you she refuses a motorized contraption. Too many moving parts, she says. Motors and knobs and things that might break when you're in an inconvenient place, like along the side of the road at midnight. They'll also tell you that for entertainment, instead of getting a curly permanent hairdo at the beauty shop or playing Bingo with other old people, she smokes cigarettes.

In the early mornings, no matter the weather, she leaves her apartment and pushes her walker down the road leading to the convenience store at the corner. She picks up a pack of cigarettes, a box of Twinkies, and serves herself a Styrofoam cup of black coffee. No sugar, she says. It's bad for you.

The clerk and everybody know her by her real name. The delivery guy, Gary, is carrying in boxes of food and crates of sodas, stocking shelves with cans of Spaghettios and Vienna sausages and motor oil, when he sees her and says hi and waves.

After breakfast and again around 3:00, she meets the couple in the van who park on the blacktop road. They call it their mobile smoking parlor because they live on a non-smoking property, and the management will evict you if they catch you with a cigarette in your mouth. The white van is outfitted with a radio and a decent air-conditioner that keeps them from sweating through the hot summers. When the weather is nice, they stand outside the van and

smoke and watch the traffic on the Loop, which is parallel to the blacktop road and on the other side of the grassy field with the For Sale sign. They look at the livestock trucks carrying cattle for slaughter, and the mail trucks carrying packages, and the cars carrying people, and the school buses carrying kids. Walker Woman waves, hoping a child will smile and wave back. If they look up at all, they don't wave; they stare slack-jawed, vacant-eyed at the gray woman with the cigarette and the walker.

"Too many meds," says the mobile-smoking parlor man one day.

"Waddya mean?" asks Walker Woman.

"They keep 'em drugged up, those kids," says the man. "They's got sum kinder disease, or t'uther. That's why they don' smile at ya when yer wave."

Walker Woman tastes the sweet, musky tobacco in her throat and blows it out slowly. She squints at the yellow school bus. She stares at it as it rolls away down the Loop. Moves away on purpose, going somewhere, anywhere, but where she is standing. It disappears, and she doesn't say it or put it in words, but she feels that ache of loneliness that reminds her that it's disappearing like everything else in her life.

The only thing she could count on were the stars. Although they moved, too, depending on the season or the sky. But they always came back around, bright and predictable and smiling. Her mother loved stars. She had wanted to name her daughter Star, but changed her mind at the last minute and put Stella on the birth certificate. Stella Walker. After all, she said, it means "star."

When she was old enough, Stella got to stay up all night with her mother in the backyard and watch the night sky. Her mother had said, "If you wish upon the right one, your wish will come true."

Stella couldn't remember ever wishing to be old; she never had a dream of pushing a walker around a rundown apartment complex where nobody knows her real name, a noisy place where everybody calls her Walker Woman and casts pity-eyes at her. She thinks she must not have wished upon the right stars

It is early Spring, and the night is cool. The school buses are parked, and only a few travelers race along the Loop. Walker Woman is alone. She stands by the edge of the road, looking at the Big Dipper as it points to the Spring constellation of Leo. She is tracking the shapes with her eyes, counting the stars, and her lips are moving.

Even though her one-bedroom apartment is half a mile away, high up on the third floor overlooking the walls of the next apartment, she has the strange feeling that where she is right now — this is really home, somehow. Not the couch, as comfortably saggy as it is, or the swift goldfish in the bowl on the kitchen table, or the rabbit-ear TV crackling and fuzzy. None of it matters. Even her cigarettes don't matter. She hasn't touched one since she began her vigil on this Spring night on the black top between the apartment complex and the convenience store, right at the edge of the field that sprouts weeds and grass intermingled.

And she is gazing up until her neck throbs with the agony-stretch, and her eyes are watery as the sky. She is remembering her mother's words: "*Stars are beautiful enough to break your heart.*" She feels something in her chest, or maybe it is her throat. A tight squeeze and then a release. There it is, again.

She thinks, I don't want to die with all the good wishes still inside of me. She lets go of

the walker and lifts her hands slowly towards the luminous heavens. She takes short breaths. She smells the fresh-cut grass and dandelions and green weeds. She sees the blazing tail of a comet arcing towards the horizon, effulgent and bright, but to her eyes, hazy and dim.

She exhales. Inhales. Feels the heavy fullness in her chest, rising and falling with every breath. She thinks of her mother and remembers the prayer her mother had taught her, "*If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take....*"

She squints at the brightest star. She wishes that her secret life would last forever.

So, Why Isn't a Rose Called Petunia?
- Lois Greene Stone

It read: "Dear Ms. Stone...buys First N.A. Serial Rights; enclose s.a.s.e. for the possible return of your ms."

As I stamped and addressed a manilla envelope, I began thinking about abbreviations and the then-adopted 1970's, newest homograph in our already difficult language. N.A. (North American) and s.a.s.e. (self-addressed-stamped-envelope) seemed satisfactory as symbols for words. Ms., though, is Miz or manuscript depending upon whether or not it is a proper noun. Has it then made Mrs. improper as a noun or a name? Am I to have an identity only if the grammar is correct?

For me, Ms. is impersonal; I am someone's wife... a role which I willingly accepted and one I rather enjoy. I try to carry my husband's name with dignity for he selected me to legally use it. Yes, I do use my maiden name as a middle name. My deceased father had no sons; I feel his name will openly continue through me until I die. Also, what I am and grew to be as a person began with Miss Greene. Because of my girlhood, I developed into the woman titled Mrs. Stone.

Being married is not easy. The amount of energy, tact, patience, and affection I constantly expend is 'work' in its exact definition. Maintaining a sense-of-humor and flexibility requires emotional fortitude. Forgiveness after angry words is always an accomplishment.

After years of leaning and being leaned on, reproducing, respecting, learning to receive and return, I dislike the somewhat asexual symbol Ms. I really don't want to be mistaken for a document depending upon one's knowledge of orthography.

My emancipation is a mental state. Liberated and loved link as well as liberated and lonely. Morally, legally, emotionally, and physically I am Mrs., and passivity is not a prerequisite for using that title. The Miss in me is not inert. Quite possibly I accept the Mrs. because I outgrew the Miss... and no one ever mistook the latter for a pile of papers.

"Dear Sir: Enclosed with ms. is an s.a.s.e. Please address further correspondence re ms. to Mrs."

Ms. 2020. My computer's word-processor's dictionary defines it this way: "abbreviation (1) manuscript. (2) Mississippi. (3) multiple sclerosis." When I click on Google's dictionary, that site's second choice for Ms. says. "unlike Miss or Mrs., it does not depend upon or indicate her marital status". Nothing has changed since the 1970's! I'm not 'neutral' nor need an 'alternative'.

Feminists claim men have no 'neutral' title so one would know if any are married or single, so why should women? Okay. I understand preference and that, for some, Mrs. is not demeaning. Allow that without hostility. I do have degrees I could put after my name, but I'm not offended by the married-awareness. Did just by using Ms. before a woman's name, in the 1970's or everything now produce change regarding equal pay for equal job, or such?

We define our educational status with Ph.D; R.N.; C.P.A.; M.D.; D.D.S.; M.A.; C.F.O., for example. Would our social system allow placing marital status after legal names when writing that out? Ah. John Doe, BA, MA, MBA," Mr".

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Tattered Nation
- Emily-Sue Sloane

Yesterday, I heard a hawk's warning call
high and to my left,
but couldn't spot the feathered Paul Revere
cloaked in winter's barest camouflage.

The ground tilted.
Nowhere to park my grief
at the unraveling.
Anyway, what did I think the life expectancy
would be
of fabric
woven from ideals and solemn oaths?

Today, I see the trees still hug the sky.
I hear the crows call out coordinates
for their next meeting.
Cold grips my gloved hands.
The smell of snow is in the air.
All of that's normal on the cusp of February.
Still, I can't deny the taste of fear
rising against tomorrow.

The Day Turns Dark
- M.J. Iuppa

Against the train's rain-slicked window, I
press my temple to the cool glass & close

my eyes to imagine the landscape of rooftops
& treetops passing in the blur of weather where

my thoughts turn into galaxies, swirling like glitter,
like dust in sun — spheres that only the cat's eye

discerns; and, I study this dust, anointing every seat,
table, tablet & apple as it spins through the car

like a spell — as if that apple were the one star shy
of Neptune, waiting to be noticed for its fiery tail

that will become tomorrow's lightning — only, if
the train were to stop short & I open my eyes.

The Dinner
- Jim Krehbiel

Irene refers to “that day” as the day her entire life changed. It turned on a dime, from carefree and untethered, to one of restrictions and timetables. Barb remembers an unencumbered, freeness to her mother’s voice. Now, though, she listens to her mother calling her father down for dinner and hears the strain and urgency peppered through it. Anyone who didn’t know would have thought it had been Irene’s, not Lee’s, diagnosis.

Barb’s father takes his injection before dinner in the bathroom. The one in the morning, always at the kitchen table. His routine still has a familiarity. The hunting for a spot soft enough to take the needle. Sometimes in one of his thighs or his stomach. When Barb was younger, she thought she’d never get used to it. She used to watch her father out of the corner of her eye pretending it was normal, but always looked away at the last second, just before the needle pierced his skin. She remembers it feeling like everyone’s life had been turned upside down. Everyone’s except Lee’s.

Four perfectly browned pork chops, one minus the fat which Irene has trimmed off, sit on the kitchen counter next to a small glass bowl of mashed potatoes and an empty cut glass serving dish. Irene stands in front of the open refrigerator door.

Barb walks into the kitchen and over to the sink to wash her hands. “What are you looking for?”

She sees her mother’s slumped shoulders, hears an audible sigh. “I ... I’m not sure.” She closes the door and mumbles something under her breath Barb can’t make out.

“You’ll remember once we sit down. Isn’t that always the way?” Barb walks over to her mother and rubs her back. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No ... no, I think everything is ready. I wish your brother would hurry up and get here.” Irene glances over at the timer with the little yellow smiling face on the front. “Check the table and make sure I haven’t forgotten anything,” she says brushing a lock of hair from Barb’s forehead.

“Sure.”

The dining room table looks as it had for every family dinner. The freshly-pressed white linen table cloth with a border of blue forget-me-nots that Irene had embroidered years ago, matching napkins, and the same Noritake dinner dishes, gold trimmed. A little metal scale sits next her father’s plate. Barb picks up one of the two spoons sitting next to her plate and slips it into her pants pocket.

Irene pops her head into the dining room. “Your brother isn’t here yet. Should we call?” She looks over her shoulder at the timer as if it were a time bomb about to go off.

“He knows,” Barb says. “He’ll be here.” It had been drummed into them immediately afterwards. From that day, the day her mother insisted her life had changed, dinner would be promptly at 6:30. Not a minute earlier or later. There’d been no longer any choice.

Robert’s Gremlin rattles into the driveway, and Irene scurries to the front door. Barb seizes the moment to put the extra spoon back. She grabs a knife and places it on the dining room table next to her spoon.

“You’re almost late.” Irene holds the screen door open.

“I still have a couple of minutes.” Robert glances at his watch. “Don’t I get a hug?”

Irene leans in for a quick pat on the back. “Now call your father. It’s time.” She bee-lines back into the kitchen.

“No need to call! I’m here.” Lee walks into the foyer still dressed from work in navy blue pin-striped dress pants, a crisply starched white shirt and a burgundy tie.

Inwardly, Barb chuckles. Things never change. She knows her mother still carefully chooses her husband’s attire each day. If left up to him, he’d walk out the door in madras pants, a striped shirt and a plaid sports coat.

“Now everyone sit!” Irene calls from the kitchen, the urgency heightened. “It’s time.” Her announcement is accompanied by a cheerful little ding coming from the yellow smiling face.

Everyone takes their assigned seats, Lee at the head of the table, Irene at the other end, facing him. Robert and Barb sit on each side. They pass platters of bland pork chops, potatoes and green beans around. There are no sauces anymore. Nothing is seasoned.

Lee cuts a third of one of the pork chops off and returns it to the platter. He places the remainder on his little scale and everyone watches the metal needle rise until it stops at precisely three ounces. Lee smiles and Irene nods. From down the hall, a corrosive yowl erupts from the guest bathroom.

Robert jerks his head towards the hallway. “Don’t tell me. She’s back again?”

“It’s only for a week this time,” Irene says. “Marsha returns on ... is it next Wednesday or Thursday?”

“Thursday,” Lee says.

As everyone digs in, Lee cuts. Each piece of pork the same size, every green bean exactly in half. Barb remembers them, over the years, laughing at his “preparation.” By the time he’d start, everyone else was half finished.

“I hate that cat,” Robert says, scooping up a blob of mashed potatoes with a green bean. He sucks it into his mouth like an over-cooked piece of pasta. “She’s evil.”

Barb is pretty sure her mother hates Lin-Soo, too. A few years ago, Irene tried to pet their neighbor’s cat but Lin-Soo turned abruptly and sunk her teeth in Irene’s hand. Six stitches and Irene couldn’t pick anything up for a week.

There’s another cry of anguish and then claws, frantic on the bathroom door.

“I’ll go let her out. Poor thing isn’t happy at all,” Lee gets up from the table to free Lin-Soo from her prison.

“How’d she get in there?” Barb asks.

“I put her there,” Irene says. “She makes me nervous. I don’t trust Siamese.”

Lee returns with Lin-Soo trotting behind him. He sits, and she stops to rub her lips against the coffee table, end tables and sofa. Irene winces.

“Why can’t Mrs. Adelman just leave the cat at home and have someone stop in to feed it?” Robert smothers his pork chop in salt.

“You know Mrs. Adelman,” Lee says. “She loves Lin-Soo. Besides, it’s fine she stays with us for the week. Isn’t that right, honey?” She half-nods. “Really, she’s no trouble at all.”

Lin-Soo wanders over to within a few feet of the dining room table, puffs out her tail, arches her back and hisses. No one reacts. They simply pause for a second and go back to their dinners.

Lee clears his throat. “So now,” he says. “Where should go for vacation this summer? It’ll probably be our last as a family with Barb taking that job in Mexico. What exactly is it again?”

“It’s in Teotihuacan ... southern Mexico, remember? It’s one of the most famous digs in the country.” Barb sighs. “But I’ve told you about this. Doesn’t anyone ever listen to me?”

“We try not to,” Robert says with that same half-grin, half-sneer Barb should be used to.

“I wasn’t asking you Mr. Community College.”

He looks at Barb’s Harvard sweatshirt. “Whatever, Miss Wanna-be.”

She doesn’t give her little brother the satisfaction of knowing he’s struck a nerve and goes back to her meal. Besides, she *was* at least wait-listed at Radcliffe. That counts for something.

Lin-Soo wanders into the dining room. Everyone except Lee pulls their legs in closer giving her a wide berth. She weaves her way around the table’s legs and rubs up against Lee’s shins. “So how about Barbados?” Lee asks. “We always wanted to go there. Didn’t we, honey?”

Irene’s eyes pinch as if struggling to see into the past. “Did we?” She nudges a green bean with her fork.

“Sure we did,” Lee says. “We’ve always wanted to go. Remember?”

Barb tries to signal her father with her foot but instead accidentally kicks Lin-Soo. Lin-Soo emits a phlegm-laden Satanic hiss.

“You okay?” Lee reaches down and strokes Lin-Soo’s back. “Poor little thing.”

“I thought we’d decided on Primmerhoff in Germany,” Barb says.

“Yes, yes ... that would be nice.” Irene’s eyes light up. She suddenly sits up straighter, like she used to. “We could visit my family.”

“I thought we’d do that the following year.” Lee leans down and pets Lin-Soo again, then adjusts his tie. “Besides I’m sure the kids would rather do Barbados. You and I can do Germany alone, together ... another time.”

“I wouldn’t mind meeting our relatives,” Barb says.

“I’d rather lie on the beach,” Robert mumbles, as he makes a little mashed potato well and dumps a pat of butter into it.

“No, I think we owe this trip to mother.” Barb hears the insistence in her voice. “I don’t think we should wait.”

“Yeah, by then she might not remember ...”

The clanking of knives and forks halt. Barb glares at her brother. Her mind whirls trying to come up with something to fill the silence. Lee looks down at the cat, then his plate. Robert is suddenly consumed with spelling out the word, *evil*, with his green beans.

Irene lifts her head to Barb. “What did he say?”

“Nothing, he was just babbling to himself.” Barb places her hand on her mother’s arm and glances over the table. “Everything is delicious.”

Robert and Lee chime in together. “Yes, yes ... very good.” To Barb, their compliment rings hollow, like it’s offered more out of obligation than anything else.

Lin-Soo jumps up on Lee’s lap. He slides his chair back.

“Do you have to let her up?” Barb asks. “I mean, we’re trying to eat here.”

“She’s not hurting anything.” Lee turns her around so she’s facing the table and strokes her back. “Now, what about Barbados? Is everyone in?” He massages the side of Lin-Soo’s head, scratches the back of her neck.

“I don’t know why you’re so bent on Barbados.” Barb finishes the last of her meal and slides her plate away.

“I know why,” Irene says, not looking up from her dinner. “It’s her house there, right?” She looks across the table at Lee.

Robert pulls his head from his plate. “What house?”

“Marsha’s,” Irene says.

“Nobody told me she had a house there.”

“Mrs. Alderman doesn’t talk about it much,” Lee says. “You know, people asking for favors. Besides she’s not the kind of person to flaunt that type of thing. She’s really very ...”

Everyone’s eyes are on Lee. Barb notices the flush creeping up from her father’s Windsor knot. She sees the puckering in his cheek. He tugs the neck of his shirt, then cinches his tie tighter. Lin-Soo has drifted off to sleep on her father’s lap.

“How did you know about the house?” Lee asks.

” I’m not deaf,” is all Irene says. She takes her napkin from her lap, folds it in thirds and places it on the table. “Well?”

Barb knows her father’s tendencies well. The squint, the way he chews on the inside of his cheek when cornered. He clears his throat again, like all the other times.

“Marsha must have mentioned it to you in passing,” he says cupping Lin-Soo’s chin. She stretches her front paws out and purrs. “She plans on selling it next year ... says we can use it if we want, free. This might be our last chance.”

“Last chance,” Irene murmurs apparently to herself. Barb isn’t sure if it’s a commentary or simply her mother mindlessly repeating little phrases.

“If everyone’s done, I’ll clear the dishes.” Irene starts to get up.

“No, let me do that. You stay put.” Barb collects and stacks the dishes. Lin-Soo lifts her head at the clatter, then pushes up against Lee’s stomach and falls back asleep.

Barb stands at the kitchen counter looking at them. They look essentially the same. Both have perfectly browned crusts, the juice from the apples bubbling up. Lee’s is much smaller, though. A single serving pie. Over the years, her mother had perfected it. First it was sodium cyclamate, later aspartame. In those first few months, her mother was in the kitchen at all hours, experimenting, baking little pies and cookies, comparing them with the real thing, trying to duplicate the taste. Barb remembers her mother handing her a cookie or piece of cake. “Does it taste real? Can you tell the difference?”

All through dessert, Lee utters the usual compliments. “Mm ... mm, this sure is good.” He’s said it from the day Irene discovered the right combinations of artificial sweeteners. And as if scripted, he finishes, stands up and gives Irene a cursory little peck on the top of her head, then disappears upstairs. By the time the table is cleared, Robert is out in the driveway, lying on his back half-way under his car in search of what’s rattling. Barb follows her mother into the kitchen to help with the dishes.

The dish towel in Barb’s hand is another one of Irene’s creations. Barb remembers it from her childhood. A pale blue terry-cloth material with the words Embrace All of Life’s Treasures embroidered on it. Barb can’t believe it’s the same towel. She remembers telling her mother when she was a teenager that it looked too nice to dry dishes with. After a while the blue would fade, the stitching would come loose. Irene said it was like anything else in life. Everything has a timeline, then gets discarded.

With her yellow latex gloves pulled up to her elbows, Irene turns the faucet on to scalding. She seems mesmerized by the dish detergent bubbles as the sink fills up.

Through the kitchen window, Barb looks at her brother’s feet sticking out from under his car. “Is this the same rattle from a few months ago?”

“He’s already taken it to a mechanic, and they can’t find what’s causing it.” Irene carefully slips each plate into the water. They disappear beneath the suds. “He’s just prolonging the inevitable.”

“He should get new one.”

"New isn't always the answer," Irene says. The street lights flicker, then burst on. Irene tilts her head towards Lee's footsteps growing louder as he comes down stairs. "He's off to check on her house." She pulls a plate from the suds and swooshes the bristly side of the sponge over it.

From the foyer, "Okay, I'm going to make sure everything is okay at Marsha's."

"Why bother?" Barb calls back. "We can see her house from here."

"Need to turn some lights on, close the blinds," he says. "You know, make it look like someone is home. Right, honey?" Irene does not respond. "Okay, I'll be back in" The front door shuts before he's finished his sentence.

He stops at Robert's feet, now dressed in plaid polyester pants, but wearing the same white starched work shirt. Through the cracked open kitchen window, Barb hears him talking to her brother, asking if he's found the problem. Lee glances at Irene standing at the sink, lifts his hand to her like he hasn't forgotten about her and then turns to cross the street.

"Do you ever dream of a different life?" Barb asks. Her question surprises her - the forwardness of it. The implication.

Her mother hands Barb a plate to dry. "No. Why would I?"

"I don't know," Barb says. When she was a little girl, her mother used to reminisce about her college days, and then later about her job on Wall Street. She remembers her mother's tone, the optimism and joy in just starting out, being single, the freedom to make your own decisions and follow your passions. Barb hasn't heard that tone in years. "No regrets?"

"I have two beautiful children. Why would I have regrets?"

"But what if ..."

"Life is full of 'what ifs,'" Irene interrupts. She appears to be watching Lee as he fumbles with the key to Marsha's front door. "They're not always what people end up wanting ... or, I should say, needing." She pauses. "Everyone has to pay in some way or another." Irene stops washing for a second, wipes a few drops of water from the countertop, then turns and looks out the window again. In a voice softened, as if meant for herself, Irene adds, "Besides, there comes a point when things that were, aren't, any longer."

The front hall light in Marsha's house comes on. Lee appears in the picture window of the study. He walks over to the mini bar, pours himself a drink, then sits down in her brown leather recliner and kicks off his loafers off.

Barb isn't sure if her mother notices or not. If she knows. If she's known.

He picks up the powder blue slim-line phone next to the recliner and starts to dial, but then stops, gets up and twists the blinds closed until there are only slivers of light peeking through.

"Here's the last one," Irene says as she hands the gold-trimmed plate to Barb. "Oh ... and thank you for not saying anything."

"Saying anything?" Barb dries and then places the plate in the cupboard.

"About the spoon."

Barb follows her mother over to the dining room slider where Lin-Soo has been scratching for the last few minutes. Irene starts to open it.

"I thought she was an indoor cat," Barb says.

"What if? What if there's something wonderful out there to be discovered?" Irene opens the slider, and Lin-Soo steps cautiously over the threshold, her body slinking along the ground. "Okay, there you go, now. Be free!"

Lake Superior Light Show

- Len Kazmer







The Summons
- Lisa Bledsoe

When you are tired and depleted
and have drifted away from the center
of your own spirit

from the strength of your ancestors
the wind over the river
and the green light of the oak
by the kitchen door

Then you must go.

Leave behind your sensible jacket,
the weight of separation,
dread, and bitter certainties.

Leave behind your old choices,
and the wreckage heaped
and hated under the floorboards
of your soul.

The heron will wait by the pond
in a perfection of stillness.

Wild blackberries will droop and glisten
in the late-slanting sun.

Crows will witness your passage
without judgment.

If you ask why
this will lift and gently
carry you back to the breath
of your heart

I cannot tell you.

I only know you must answer
the summons.

When the fear flowing
through your means and marrow
is at flood stage
and your small bone creatures

are in danger
of being swept away

Then you must go.

Leave behind your sturdy boots
and all the people and recitations
you use as shield and armor.

Let your muscular compassion for yourself
for the ones who hurt and disappoint you
for the place that burdens and blesses you
break open the clogged stream
and sweep the weeds and sticks clear.

The window of the sky
will swing wide again.

Muscadines will grow golden
and gravid with seed.

Bees will swarm
and those left behind will
raise a new queen.

If you ask why
the way of growth is
sometimes also a loss

why the habit of the earth
is to flood and freeze
and soundlessly begin again

I cannot tell you.

I only know you must answer
the summons.

Those Old Steps
- Sarah Kirby

Will you walk with me
to those old steps?
Cracked and broken,
stripped of depth. In
concrete crumbles.

We used to sit here.
Bare feet moments.
Clanking ice in humid
breeze, sweet verbena
just in bloom. Royal purple
knighting Spring.
Laughing nothings,
as young girls do.

I can see your smile, your
necklace bell, dangling
memories in porch swing wind.
Sycamore shadowed afternoons.
I feel your rhythm
trace the earth.
Will you stay with me a while?

What I Have Faith In
- George Payne

The bending of starlight
and my next breath, given
unto me as the heart is given
unto the chest. Or how the summer
moon is given unto the Comanche
warrior. And I have faith in you
kissing me, under violets and lady's
slipper, in the wild gardens of Acadia,
where dancing butterflies dare to land.

What's in Your Mirror? - Deborah Avendor

How often have you made five or six wardrobe changes before going on a date or getting ready for work? How many times have you stood in front of the mirror, uttering words like, "No! No! Hmmm? Possibly? Definitely not!" And my favorite, "Hell, no," before adding another outfit to a mountainous pile of clothes.

Why these utterings? Because no matter what the color or how chic the style, be it long or short, tailored or not, your mind may say, "Yes, darling. You look fabulous!" However, the reflection in the mirror, yes, your mirror, grossly differs from your opinion. And to many of us, the view of the mirror is the one that counts.

Have you ever asked yourself, "How can something made from combinations of glass, colored metallic, paint, and other inanimate compounds, have such a devastating effect on one's psyche?" Better yet, how can the reflective, end-result of these compounds leave some of the most beautiful and handsome, wealthy, and influential people in the world, cowering in front of it, and reverencing its opinion more than their own?

Each day men and women stand bare, in front of their mesmerizing speculum, to scrutinize arms, despise legs, cringe at stomachs, and become horrified once they have (literally) looked behind gazing at their full 360-degree panoramic body-view. Whether it is one's first look of the morning or last look at night, they either nod in approval. Laugh. Cry. Shriek in horror. Or simply say, f###k it...and walk away.

Although they rarely admit it, men, now more than ever, share the same feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem that have oppressed women for years. Add to this, selfies, facetime, webcams, and other visual forms of communication, then sprinkle a dating website or two (where a photo is needed), add to this, a dash of sexting or the deliberate display of one's naughty bits, mix them all, and you have the perfect recipe for low self-esteem, narcissism, or both. Then sit back and watch them bake into a well-done neurosis for a culture suffering from amour-propre (self-love) or lack of it.

To many, the mirror is either a daunting bearer of truth or a mind-altering deceiver that either fans the fire of low self-esteem or narcissism each time the insecure stand in front of it. Therefore, the question is, "Do mirrors perpetuate low self-esteem or induce narcissism? We have all heard the phrase, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?" The evil queen in Snow White spoke these words. Some say the mirror was the alter ego that exacted a heavy toll each time she gazed upon it. Did the queen suffer from low self-esteem? Quite possibly. Narcissism? Undoubtedly.

Let's not forget the Greek hunter, Narcissus, son of the river god Cephissus? Narcissus was so mesmerized by the beauty of his mirror-like reflection in the water that he could not bear to depart from it. What happened? In case you did not know, he died! His narcissistic love for himself would not allow him to turn away from his reflection for even a second. He neither ate nor slept and, therefore, perished.

The internet is full of articles that reference mirrors and self-esteem, such as Weight Loss and Mirrors, Men and Mirrors, Women and Mirrors, Narcissism, and Mirrors. There is even one entitled Try Eating in Front of the Mirror, Naked - by fitness expert Jill S. Brown.

Kjerstin Gruys, a 29-year-old Ph.D. student in sociology, documented a yearlong study of her avoidance of mirrors in her book *Mirror, Mirror Off the Wall*. Gruys candidly shares how the

avoidance of seeing her reflection was part of an experiment that she performed to influence others to stop focusing on external perfection. In 2012, Gruys interviewed with TV broadcaster, Robin Roberts, in a segment entitled 'The Mirror-Free Bride.' In it, Gruys confessed that she, like thousands of others, struggled with body image and overcoming an eating disorder and insecurities that plagued her since high school.

One could vehemently argue that the use of mirrors no more cause low self-esteem than rabbits can fly. On the other hand, some might say, "Self-esteem has never been predicated on what you see, but rather how you feel about yourself."

Every day hundreds of models and supermodels stroll, strut, and saunter up-and-down world-famous catwalks, fluttering like butterflies in a summer breeze. Though we may view them as some of the loveliest creatures that God has ever created, many of them suffer in silence with low self-esteem. Although many of them simulate the pretense of confidence on the outside, inside, they feel like two-tons of fun because they weigh 100 pounds or less. On the other side of the spectrum, those who grapple with narcissism may feel suicidal at the sight of a pimple.

One has to applaud singer Alicia Keys for standing firm, when the story, Alicia Keys Goes Makeup-Free to the 2016 BET Awards ran rampant over the internet. Keys committed to going bare. No, not nude - but make-up-less. I think that Ms. Keys said it best when she said, "I hope it's a revolution because I don't want to cover up anymore - not my face, not my mind, not my soul, not my thoughts, not my dreams, not my struggles, not my emotional growth. Nothing," Keys wrote in an essay for Lena Dunham's Lenny Letter, expounding on the various kinds of masks we wear for fear of not being accepted.

Mirrors can elongate, shorten, distort or simply, reflect what they see - the real you - whether you like it or not! How often have you heard someone say, "My arms look too big in this outfit?" Or the opposite, "Too small?" How many times have men stood in front of the mirror attempting to adjust their 'package' with the aid of a sock or two, so that it would look more prominent and hang just right? However, if they are narcissistic, even the use of a dozen socks may not be enough.

Are mirrors evil? Well, if you're looking at it from a narcissistic view, some may answer possibly, while others may say, definitely not - unless you are a novice at applying make-up for the first time without the aid of a mirror.

In her book, *The Woman in the Mirror*, Cynthia Bulik, Ph.D. and noted psychologist discusses how "many women-regardless of income, size, shape, ethnicity, and age-are uncomfortable in their skin." Dr. Bulik states that many of us fixate on our body image and try endless diets, implants, hair extensions, and new shoes, but it's never enough. She also addresses the fact that girls and women are still socialized to merge body esteem and self-esteem mistakenly. Body esteem refers to how you think and feel about your physical appearance: your size, shape, hair, and features. Self-esteem refers to how you think you feel about your personality, your role in relationships, your accomplishments, and everything that contributes to who you are as a person.

In times past, only the rich could afford to change the mirror images that they didn't like surgically. Are breasts too small? Enlarge them! Derriere too flat? Enhance it! Is nose too full? Redefine it! Face too saggy? Lift it!

That was then. These days, both men and women squirrel-away coin, as if saving for an Ivy League education, so they can be nipped, tucked, lifted, pulled, broken, and scraped for the perfect mirror image. One celebrity family of women has given butt enhancements an entirely new meaning.

In his book *How to Spot and Stop Narcissists*, Dr. Johnson gives ten telltale signs of a Narcissist. While most of us are guilty of some of the behaviors at one time or another, a pathological narcissist is someone who's in love with an idealized self-image which they project to avoid feeling (and being seen as) the real, disenfranchised, wounded self. Deep down, most pathological narcissists feel like the "ugly duckling," even if they painfully don't want to admit it.

Theories about low self-esteem or narcissism and the negative or positive effect that mirrors can have on those with these neuroses are almost as vast as the people who suffer from them. Though many women may desire the good looks of some Hollywood stars or some men, the body of a pro-athlete, most people are happy in their skin as long as they don't resemble Princess Fiona or Shrek.

Because of stereotyped versions of beauty, and because more and more tweens and teens between 12-18 years, identify with what the media defines as 'good looks,' many of the young are becoming introverted or sexually promiscuous. Moreover, the looking glass does not perpetuate these characteristics.

Whether the use of mirrors aids in perpetuating low self-esteem or narcissism is questionable at best, but without question is the fact that these neuroses are, fundamentally based, not on what one sees, but rather how one sees him or herself. Nevertheless, the question remains, "How can something made from combinations of glass, various metallic, paint, and other inanimate compounds have such a devastating effect on one's psyche?"

It shouldn't.

Guidelines

We publish thoughtful, provocative fiction, poetry, essays and visual arts.

Submissions are accepted year-round.

- If accepted, submissions may appear in any quarterly issue.
- Biographical information will be requested for accepted submissions.
- If your submission was previously published, please cite the reference.
- Simultaneous submissions should be accompanied by a statement stating so.
- If your work is accepted elsewhere prior to our evaluation, please notify us.
- All work must be original and in English.

We do not publish novel excerpts, memoirs, genre material, flash fiction (less than 1000 words), book reviews, erotica or works which rely upon explicit language or gratuitous violence.

Fiction can be up to 5000 words. It should be relevant to a general audience, compelling and thought provoking. Finally, it should contain a protagonist with a positive, articulated, universal goal (e.g., freedom from oppression) who actively struggles to achieve that goal, overcoming emotional obstacles in the process. We expect the protagonist's values and beliefs to be reflected in his or her behavior, which behavior initiates conflict with other characters. Ideally, the protagonist is motivated by a past wound which he or she attempts to heal. By story's end the protagonist learns something significant about human behavior.

Essays can be up to 5000 words. We do not publish essays which are life stories. We do publish essays which express perspectives about topics of general, timeless interest. That is, we are not interested in essays about current events but are interested in essays about the vagaries of human behavior.

We are interested in poems which contain vivid images, resonating voice, rich language, discernible rhythm and thoughtful messaging. An example of these attributes is Mary Oliver's *Wild Geese*.

Visual arts which elicit the comment, "How interesting!" are desired. Submit visual arts as **.jpg** files; do not send **.tif** or **.bmp** files. Accepted visuals may be reduced to fit the available space.

Mac users, please be sure that your files are readable by Windows 10.

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