

# Front Porch Review

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A Fox Becoming  
- Chila Woychik

As children, we used to sneak quarters and dimes and nickels out of Dad's blue coin collection booklets, buy a pack of cigarettes for thirty-five cents at the little store around the corner (and tell them Dad sent us), then ride our bikes down to the cemetery in our small town, sit on a gravestone and smoke, careful to duck out of sight before the rare passing car spotted us. I must have been ten or twelve, my brother two years younger, both of us acting grown up and imitating Father who smoked, before he quit years later. We were sly, but our deviousness rarely went beyond that. I don't think our parents ever found out about our smoking escapades. But of course, they'll read this now and know what we did. Maybe ask for reparation for those stolen coins, with interest. We're too old to punish with a time-out or by missing dessert. No, but what they'll do is laugh over being so absorbed in living that they were oblivious to the fact that their children slipped away and engaged in such forbidden activity.

Fox holes line the steep summer ditches of eastern Iowa, and at least one fox has been causing mischief. Five chickens lost in two weeks here where Subdued Nature meets its rougher cousin Wild. I can hear the mama fox telling her young ones in fox-speak: "Dinner's up! And it's chicken again!" I'm surprised I didn't see the mounds of feathers earlier; three in a back pasture I rarely visit. But a pile of bright white feathers finally appeared where I could easily spot it from the house. When I went to investigate, the chickens were cackling loudly, and a few were dancing skittishly on top of a Jeep. Then I saw a long fluffy red tail disappear around a corner of the house. I followed it, lost it, and eventually saw the dirt mound – its entrance across the road. It was covered with white feathers. I set up a lawn chair within easy viewing distance, and watched. Two kits came out of the hole and frolicked, their hunger satiated, their spirits buoyed. (Do foxes put barbecue sauce on their chicken?) I went back to the house and grabbed my camera, shot photos and short videos of the *Vulpes vulpes* family prancing around the burrow and in the farmyard beyond, in a wild and worshipful foxtrot to the god of happy fox tummies. Mama fox lay in the tall grass nearby. The rest of my flock now clucks behind sturdy concrete walls and wooden doors. And we've yet to figure out how to outfox a fox other than secure its prey inside a predator-proof enclosure.

Clayton B. Seagers wrote in 1944, "The red fox is the best-loved and most hated, praised, berated, wisest, dumbest, smelliest, daintiest, thinnest, sleekest, most flea-bitten and most controversial creature ever to occupy the ardent attention of hound, hunter, trapper and henner owner in this nation." Add scheming, ingenious, and indomitable, and he has it about right. The male fox will conjoin with the female, then about two months later the vixen gives birth, and both parents do what we all do when survival is on the line for us or our family: find, struggle, supply.

It's been three full weeks. Like one of my favorite *Far Side* comic titles, my "chickens are restless." The sprawling area cordoned off for them easily accommodates the dozen birds left, but what's scratching around in thick pine bedding compared to fresh green grass, bugs, and a sun beating down on shiny feathers? The barn was made for sheep, once fed a hundred in its three rows of double-sided troughs. My farmer and I configured nearly a third of that into a chicken housing complex. Six nests on one side and nine on another. The roosting poles are long and staggered so each hen has room to spread out without feeling crowded by her neighbors. I added a tough netting to the top of the plywood walls to prevent animals from climbing over; even our two barn cats can't manage to wrangle their way in. There are four nice-sized windows,

a screen on the top half of the split wooden door, and thick airy netting on another side. It's a paradise meant to protect fowl from all things cunning in heaven and earth, Horatio.

So I spoke to a neighbor about foxes. "They're even showing up in town," she said, "in record numbers." One ran along the road in front of her house about a week previous, she told me, then it ran back in the other direction. Shortly after, a smaller one half the size, a kit, she assumed, followed the same path. Another neighbor lost a few chickens in the same timeframe as mine. "Think they'll leave anytime soon?" I asked her. "Can't happen soon enough."

Canis Minor is a small star system in the northern night sky. It contains the seventh largest visible star, Procyon. The Greeks associated this constellation with their mythological Teumessian Fox, an animal eventually turned to stone by Zeus. The ancient Egyptians saw it as the jackal god, Anubis. Unlike its brighter, larger, and more obvious brother Canis Major, the small dog, the fox, is subtle and delusive, a little "dimmer."

I think about rivers here because the river outside my truck window is wild but tamed, held within boundaries. Unlike a river, a feral fox doesn't follow the lays of the land, but goes where it pleases, takes what it wants. How do you put a boundary around a den that may stretch seventy-five feet and have several exits? How do you tell the fox, "No, no! Bad fox!" like you might a domesticated dog, and make it hear you, make it hang its head and feel at least a measure of shame at the scolding?

To exist in this life, we'll be caged by duty and hounded by disappointment. Corralled and tamed, or simply observed for suitability. Ultimately, we're declared a disposable foe or cute friend, or maybe, if we're lucky, a usable ally.

I bring in handfuls of fresh green clover with its purple succulent blossoms every day my twelve fowl remain prisoners. It's the least I can do. Feeding only grains and water to these chickens must feel like the bread and water treatment for the incarcerated of old. But these are good gals, laying green and brown eggs, tasty good, which I collect regularly. I've even supplied them with two large tubs of dirt from our own land, dirt they're used to, to fluff in or peck at or scratch in. To search for bugs in. This isn't punishment; I tell them; this is love; this is me keeping you safe. I'm not sure a chicken's brain can comprehend that, but if a hen named Jokgu can peck out the basic notes of "America the Beautiful" on *America's Got Talent*, then maybe they do.

Every day isn't like these perfect 70-degree hours lacking wind or rain or movement of any kind, any stirring from above or below. These days remind me of something just out of reach, something I long for. I think we're born probing; we want answers; we crave a certain degree of shock, wires hooked to our heart and temples, close encounters with something perilous, something dimly lighting an evening sky, but not so bright as to blind. We try to drag the stars down, want to turn them over in our hands to discover their secrets, want to catch what will make us happy or fulfilled or just plain full, at least for a while. We seek what we need, want, even at the risk of losing something else, of pushing beyond boundaries, or worse, being caught and made to pay for our audacity. Calculating and slick is what we ultimately become to make life work.



Cascades  
- Flo Hayes





Absence  
- Jason Melvin

It's the last breath of dusk outside  
but in here we enter darkness.  
Any light is scarce, direct.  
The shadows are overdrawn.  
Each child, lounged on the sectional,  
angel faces, haloed in artificial light  
emanating from devices in their tiny hands.  
This house has never learned silence  
but at the moment, absent of voices,  
just tiny noises from the lights in their hands  
and your wife with a spoon  
beating cookie batter in the kitchen.

Your daughter says *My Dad*  
and I find myself looking in the shadows,  
craning my neck to search around corners  
as if she's not speaking in the past tense.  
But it's nice to hear her speak of you  
in a voice unsaturated with sadness.  
Your missing presence from these rooms  
has me feeling like a stranger.  
I don't know your wife without you.  
You look out at me from a frame  
but the walls feel foreign now,  
in your absence.

Behind the Haze of the Heat  
- Kevin M. Scott

In the still, thick summer air  
crows call to each other  
from the trees,  
voices like monkeys, wild birds of paradise,  
simulacra of a tropical jungle,  
reality slips away  
and fantasy bubbles up,  
popping at the surface,  
the air green and yellow,  
ants abound on the forest floor,  
millions of minuscule steps  
like distant rain drops  
pattering the leaves,  
spider webs weave through branches  
and catch light  
in beaded pearls,  
humidity collects around my eyes  
but even with the weight  
of salty sweat  
nothing falls to the ground,  
breath forces its way into my lungs  
and hovers under my nose,  
the pools of water  
are long gone,  
I fade in with the light  
and the glimpses of life  
and I too feel I will  
evaporate soon,  
a rock shifts under foot,  
tumbles down the path,  
resounding bass rattles  
through my ribs  
and grips my chest,  
muffled eternal echo,  
folds in on itself,  
dissipates like fog,  
the crows' infinite chatter  
freezes,  
a breeze lifts lazily off the ground,  
slow, silent minutes,  
lie down.



Best Laid Plans  
- Adam Restinow

Having toiled from sun to sun, Ed rocked back so that the top of his chair touched the barn door. “Well, now, Kenny, you listen to me! Your sister won’t be around much longer. Small town like this ain’t gonna strangle the life out of that tornado. And any day now your mom and me gonna put this farm up for sale. Reckon we’ll get enough to buy a small place in San Diego. She always dreamed of living by the ocean. Anyway, just lettin’ you know, son. You need to start planning your future.” Ed, in a checkered denim shirt and Levi’s, moved the tobacco he was chewing to the other cheek, spat, snapped his black suspenders with assurance.

After fifty-five years of growing corn and soybeans, nurturing cows, enduring Illinois weather and tending to the needs and wants of his wife Abby, Ed resolved that paradise was most any place but here. Naiveté was one of Ed’s evident virtues. Indeed, Ed had spent too much time in the noonday sun, his arthritis was remarkably bad and being fifty pounds overweight on a 5’6” frame portended misery. And yet, he laughed. There wasn’t a day when Ed didn’t laugh. “Most people spend their days whining,” he often said at the dinner table. “World would be a better place if they laughed instead.”

Abby would always reply, “Amen.”

Kenny, squatting and scratching lines in a cow patty, stood, towering over Ed like an oak over a scrub pine. Some folks crossed the street when they saw Kenny approaching. Some nodded and wiped their hands on their jeans after he’d passed them by. Nobody, but nobody, said anything to him – wasn’t a smart thing to do; saying the wrong thing, and you were never sure what the wrong thing was, could result in a lot of pain. If Kenny had been bitten by a horse fly that morning, a simple “Howdy” could land you in the ER.

However, Kenny, born and raised a Baptist, was not intentionally mean spirited. For example, he always made his bed upon arising so he could tell Abby over breakfast, “Well, I got one thing done today.” He was proud of his milking ability. Admittedly he was not as quick and precise as the illegals Ed used at harvest time, but he respected their determination to do a good job. Then, too, Kenny, aged thirty-one, while not lusted over by the minimal female population (most left town after high school without suffering the pangs of pregnancy) was often discussed in Susan’s Stylish Salon and Spa. His sister Martha worked there as a stylist and frequently recommended him as someone to consider should the urge to mate become a compulsion. For his part, Kenny regarded women as necessary and useful; he tended to blush at pictures and talk of a sexual nature. When he was six and asked how calves came to be, Ed told him the facts of life; Kenny found the process uninspiring.

Because he struggled academically throughout all of his schooling, most folks suspected that Kenny couldn’t walk his way out of a railroad tunnel - deciding which light to head toward would put him to sleep. The truth is Kenny was sly. How sly? When he was sixteen, he started thinking about his future, about what he’d do without his family. Didn’t want to live in town, working for that pissant Norbert at the Ace Hardware. Decided back then he needed to be independent. Wanted to be an adult who could take care of himself, someone people would point to and say, ‘Now, there’s a successful man.’

Acknowledging that college was beyond his grasp, Kenny compensated with size and strength. Let it be known that for a fair price he would raise barns, uproot tree stumps and build

rock fences. The invites poured in. And though he loved his parents, slept under their roof, there when needed, he kept his financial self to himself. Ed and Abby approved. “Make hay while the sun shines,” was one of Abby’s favorite sayings. She also believed every Adam needed an Eve and would say at least once a week, “The good Lord made us to go forth and multiply, Kenny. Time you held up your end of the deal.”

“Aw, Ma, I ain’t ready for that. You’re the only woman I want in my life.” Abby always smiled at that but never wavered in her conviction.

When Kenny stood before Ed and said in a steady, unemotional voice, “I got a plan,” well, Ed blinked and rocked forward.

“Oh, and what might that be?”

“First off, I plan on owning this farm. Heard you talkin’ about sellin’ it with Ma a while ago so I wasn’t surprised by what you just said. Had my eye on this place for some time. Reckoned you’d get weary of everything one day. Looks like that day has come.”

Ed was stunned, and then he laughed. “That’s the longest speech you ever made in your life. Didn’t know you were such an orator. But I got a question, Mr. Owner. Where you gonna get the money to buy this place? You ain’t exactly Solomon in all his glory.”

“Heavy work like I do has a hefty price tag and requires a hefty body. Knew that going in so I’m glad Ma fed me well and that you were a good teacher. Made sure that if and when I owned this land, town folk wouldn’t take advantage of me – so, look at me. Ain’t no one gonna mess with someone who walks and talks and looks like he owns the air he and they breathe. ‘Course I ain’t anything like that but that’s what I wanted people to think.”

Ed stammered, “What you say is true. But it don’t have to be that way.”

“Once I’m on my own, I’ll show folks my other side. But never spent a dollar I didn’t have to. So, I got a bit, more than a bit, saved up. And while I ain’t what you’d call a social butterfly, I made sure I made a friend of Mr. Ryder, the loan officer at Chase. There isn’t a tree on his land I haven’t pruned or a bush I didn’t plant. When he wanted the gravel road leading up to his house asphalted, my bid was the lowest. I taught his son how to throw a football and his daughter how to ride a horse. He knows he can count on me. Which is why he agreed to loan me enough money to buy this place when the time came.”

Ed stood. “The Lord works in mysterious ways.” He stretched up his arms and placed his hands on Kenny’s shoulders. “Never would have guessed, never. You are the servant who pleased his master by takin’ care of hisself.”

Kenny smiled. He’d been afraid that his father would resent his calculated duplicity. “I want you to charge me a fair price, somewhere a little above market value. Don’t want folks thinkin’ I took advantage of my parents.” They shook hands.

Ed asked, “But whatcha gonna do with the land? I don’t believe you got any great attachment to being a slave to animals and plants.”

“That’s the second part of my plan.”

Unlike his parents Kenny was technologically astute. Through the twists and turns of social media he was aware of dietary trends such as vegetarianism, farm-to-table meals and sustainable gardening. Ed’s farm, a scant fifty acres, was unprofitable nostalgia. The day after taking possession, he sold the livestock. In the days which followed he and his illegals plowed



under the corn stubble and divided the property, excluding the house and barn, into five-acre plots. Once these were properly fenced against marauding deer, his marketing campaign began.

The posters he stapled to telephone poles and “encouraged” store owners to display in their windows read:

**Do God’s work  
Grow your own fruits and vegetables  
Bond with our rich Illinois soil**

**Lease five acres from Kenny  
Reasonable terms**

**You know where to find me**

The first to sign up was Pastor Tom Morvain, a close friend of the family and a strong advocate of self-reliance. Abby called him a healer, Ed said he gave good sermons. Kenny recognized his influence on the community and gave him a 15% discount. Sure enough, others, mostly people at one with Nature, secured leases. And it came to pass that Kenny prospered. Met the needs of his clients. Turned the barn into a locker room complete with his and her washrooms. Installed floodlights so folks could work at night after their day jobs. Even charged the wire fences surrounding the plots with a small electric shock to keep away the hungriest of raccoons. Fees rose accordingly but no one minded. After all, they were all God’s children doing God’s work, or so they said.

During this growth period dutiful son Kenny never missed a Sunday call to his parents. Related the latest about various sexual misbehaviors, always mentioned net profits, assured them the church was still standing and was well-attended, and promised Abby that he was anxious to meet the perfect woman. He lied; he wasn’t anxious at all. Ed made sure to tell Kenny that he was proud of son’s success.

Six months passed. Martha had moved to Chicago, opened her own salon, married an optometrist and was pregnant. Ed and Abby couldn’t afford San Diego and re-settled in Sacramento. Dreams, being what they are, don’t guarantee the ocean. But Abby was content; before leaving she had planted the mustard seed of Kenny’s salvation; his destiny was in good Baptist hands.

With one exception. Kenny’s lessees planted typical crops: strawberries, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, beets and so forth. A few tried blueberry bushes but soon surrendered the land to soybeans when maintenance cost became prohibitive. That exception was the pastor. Kenny had never seen the pastor actually work his land and so wasn’t surprised when Gloria Morvain, the daughter, knocked on his door one day. Said her dad had just transferred the lease to her and wanted to see which plot he had blessed her with. Being the pastor’s daughter Gloria would be expected to use the word blessed.

That being said, Gloria was regarded as the town’s foremost feminist. No one knew what that actually meant but she had once been seen at Walmart in shorts and braless so the label

stuck. Presumed to be demure and devout, her neon lipstick and lavender eye shadow were tolerated but not condoned. The few men she dumped after one or two dates would all remark on her slim body, sparkly eyes and manicured hands. They didn't much like that she read current controversial authors, was vocal about politics and didn't know shit about pickup trucks.

Kenny knew Gloria by reputation. Knew she had a sense of humor but also knew, as the saying goes, she didn't suffer fools gladly. And if there's was one thing Kenny took pride in, it was not being a fool. "Happy to show you your land. Filled with weeds right now but won't take much to get it producing. Got a golf cart outside. Let's take a ride."

Gloria, her eyes level with Kenny's chest, looked up and smiled. She almost said but didn't, "Where else would a golf cart be? In your bathroom?" Instead, she said, "Thanks. I appreciate you taking the time."

Minutes later Gloria was looking at five acres of dandelions, sunflowers, thistle, corn stalks, milkweed and Monarch butterflies. "Who can I hire to clear this?"

"John Rustern does a good job. Others have used him and been satisfied. I'll give you his number."

"That would be great. I'll see if he can do it tomorrow or the next day. I'd like to get started as soon as possible." They shook hands, her grip a little stronger than Kenny expected.

The land cleared, a week later a van with a woman and a man, both in their thirties and both muscular, stopped at Kenny's house. The side of the van bore the message *GoodEarth.com*. As the driver, the woman, lowered her window, Kenny emerged. "Morning, guys. What can I do for you?"

"Got a delivery and set-up for Gloria Morvain. She told us to come here and that you'd show us her spot."

"Give me a minute then follow me. Not far."

Fortunately Gloria's plot was at the edge of the acreage, and the van could park alongside. Curious, Kenny watched while the pair unloaded and uncrated large sections of translucent Plexiglas rimmed in aluminum. Each piece was hinged so it could be interlocked, a true jigsaw puzzle. "What the hell is that?"

The woman grunted and said, "Gonna be a greenhouse when we're done settin' it up. Latest thing in gardenin', especially for city folk with a little bit of extra land. Let's 'em plant year-round. Even comes with a wooden floor so your shoes don't get muddy. Deluxe ones come with solar panels to provide electricity. Not somethin' I'd fancy. But I guess some folks like to pretend they got green thumbs when all they really got is money they don't know what to do with. Takes all kinds."

Incredulity washed over Kenny. Under the terms of the lease, a person could plant whatever he or she wanted. He never imagined that someone would put a structure on the land. He guessed it was OK as long as the crop didn't harm neighboring plots. As the sun set, the woman approached Kenny and said, "That's it for today. We'll be back in four weeks with the generator and all the other stuff you need for a greenhouse."

"Generator?"

"Yeah. You need a gas generator to keep the lights, heater and sprinkler system working. Miss Moravian ordered an extra-silent one; didn't want to disturb any sleeping animals. Like I told you, takes all kinds. Nice to know that someone cares about sleeping animals. One good

thing about greenhouses is that you can grow just about anything. Stuff folks around here never even heard of. Anyway, have a nice day.”

At home Kenny remained dazed. What, he thought, is she growing? What if it’s some sort of tropical vine that will take over the other plots? A drop of fear formed on his tongue and slowly glided down his throat and into his stomach. The aftertaste gave him a headache,

After a breakfast of oatmeal and bacon, he should have called first. When Pastor Tom opened the front door and Kenny blurted that he had to talk to Gloria, he learned that she was taking a shower and then a brief nap. Eight mile runs on dusty, rutted rural roads are challenging and exhilarating but wearying.

“Come, sit,” Tom said. “Have lunch with me. Tell me about Ed and Abby. How are they? Still in good health I hope.” He guided Kenny into the kitchen, even pulled out a chair for him. It was almost as if his arrival had been anticipated. The stage was set, and everyone knew their lines.

Kenny relaxed. He’d sat at this table many times in his youth, whenever Abby and Tom discussed some good deed for the church. He knew what to say when Tom asked what kind of mustard Kenny wanted on his ham sandwich. “Horseradish, same as always.” That, some dill pickles, and a glass of iced tea were placed before him. “Folks are just fine. Made some friends. Dad is learning how to play golf; now that has to be somethin’ to see. Mom, of course, continues to be a religious fanatic; just jokin’, Tom.”

Tom smiled. “Gloria was impressed with your operation. Said it had great potential. Thanked me for giving her what she wanted for her birthday. She knew I couldn’t grow anything but weeds but she was sure she could grow something of value. Wish I had her self-confidence when I was her age.”

Swallowing his last bite, Kenny asked, “You know what she plans on growin’ there?”

“Not really. She said it was going to be special. But you can ask her yourself; I hear her on the stairs.”

Kenny twisted in his chair and blinked. He saw a red carpet running from the bottom of the curved stairway to the chair beside him. Treading that carpet like a model, one foot precisely in front of the other, was an alabaster-clean Gloria wearing a simple black dress, black shoes and no jewelry other than a silver crucifix attached to a silver necklace. He blinked once more. He heard the Mormon Tabernacle Choir bestowing its talents on these deluded Baptists by providing background music: the Hallelujah chorus from Handel’s *Messiah*. Kenny became a study in awe.

As she took her seat, Gloria casually touched Kenny’s shoulder and said, “Welcome.”

The touch broke the spell, the carpet became linoleum, and the Choir rose into the clouds over Utah. Kenny did manage to say, “Nice outfit.”

“Why, thank you.” Gloria was not offended. She knew from talking to others that Kenny and eloquence were strangers to one another. “Nice of you to visit.”

Kenny was also a stranger to diplomacy and the art of conversation. Rather than discuss the high cost of fuel oil or the economic impact of a potential drought or even the probability of the state legislature discussing gun control, Kenny leaned forward, both hands flat on the table, and asked, “Whatcha gonna plant?”

Tom also leaned forward, curious. Gloria nodded slowly. “Well, well, right to the point, like an arrow to the heart.” Kenny was oblivious to the sarcasm. “I did a little market research,

wanted to provide people with something they really needed. Lot of the old folks I met didn't really care about fruits and vegetables, which is a shame. What they did care about was the pain they were always in."

Kenny and Tom nodded in unison. They understood pain.

"So, I decided I would grow marijuana."

"Marijuana!" Kenny was stunned. "No way! I'm not gettin' arrested for bein' a drug dealer."

Tom joined in. "Gloria, this is one of your little jokes. As you often tell me, we're not modern, we don't get it."

"Now just calm down, the both of you." She reached out and placed a hand on each of theirs. To Kenny her hand was a cooling embrace, to Tom it was a reminder of family unity. "It is not illegal to grow marijuana. And I'm not going to sell it. I'm going to give away small amounts to those who are suffering."

Tom asked, "I'm not happy about this, Gloria. Doesn't seem Christian. Where did you learn how to grow marijuana?"

Gloria tensed at the rebuke. "Helping people in pain seems Christian to me, dad. Unless you believe people are born to suffer, sinners that we are. Right? We only get as much pain as God believes we can handle. Also, right?" She breathed. "Learned how on You-Tube. Ordered the greenhouse on Amazon." She removed her hand from Tom's but kept her connection with Kenny.

Tom stood and spoke his righteous self. "I don't need a sermon on Christianity from my daughter. And we are all sinners, suffering spiritual pain. Bringing drugs into our community will not ease that pain. But, Kenny, it's your property, your decision. The Bible, the words of Jesus, will be your guide. I'm going for a walk. I'll pray for you and for my errant daughter."

There was absolute silence for the next two minutes, the silence which follows someone's last breath, and then there was a sob followed by a whimper followed by a sigh. Say what you want about Kenny, about his drive for success, about his occasionally brutish behavior, he was not above an act of kindness. He clasped Gloria's hand in his and spoke simply and plainly. "Not right what your dad said. You're doin' somethin' you believe in. Folks might not agree with you, and that's their right, but I believe you have to try. Far as I'm concerned you can plant marijuana; hell, you can plant anything your greenhouse can handle. Whatever you decide, I'm by your side."

Gloria stared at him, made an assessment. "Thank you. Friendship is a priceless coin."

The next day being Sunday Kenny called his parents. Ed was golfing so he had ample time to describe the previous scene. "Mom, it was embarrassing to see Gloria treated like a child. Grown woman should be able to do somethin' worthwhile."

Abby responded. "Now, Kenny, you may not like this but Gloria and her ideas don't fit in that town. Don't fit in our, your, farm. Growin' up she was a worry to her parents, and, after her mother died of a heart attack, Pastor Tom could hardly breathe from chasin' her from one foolish thing to another. Gloria always wanted new. Not saying she wasn't respectful or decent, she was those things as well as intelligent. But her intellect gets in the way of common sense. Know she doesn't mean it, but just the way she talks, all them big words, puts people off. She's not our kind. Best you not get associated with her. What would people think?"

“Think?” Kenny tried to maintain civility but couldn’t. “I could care less about what people think! Remember that part in the Bible about let him who is without sin cast the first stone? Remember that, Mom? Drop your stone. Gloria is a good person doing a good thing. Ask yourself, what good thing have you done lately?”

“Son, son, I don’t mean to rile you so. I love you; I truly do. I just have problems loving someone who is doin’ the Devil’s work.”

“The Bible tells us a lot of things that we guess at; you and I have been taught that no one can know the mind of God. So, I’m gonna’ focus on the part that says love your neighbor as yourself while you pay attention to the part that says stand behind me, Satan. Good bye, Mom. Say Hi to Dad.”

In the days following that conversation, Kenny and Gloria traveled the path marked Console Me onto the road called Talk to Me and were now on the street named Accept Me. When the van arrived Kenny and Gloria were an audience of two watching a magic act of sleight of hand. Within an hour the generator was running and all equipment was functional. They laughed when they were too close to a sprinkler head when it came alive. “This is fantastic,” Kenny exclaimed. “When do you start planting?”

“I have to drive to Chicago for the proper seeds and soil. Three hours at most. Care to come along?” Gloria wasn’t looking at Kenny when she said this but her hands tightened into fists and her breast heaved.

“Least I can do.” As suggested, Kenny wouldn’t get a gold medal for his responses to verbal cues but he did give an acceptable, though mediocre, answer. On the positive side, he then patted Gloria on the shoulder and said, “Parents be damned. Let’s make it happen.”

The next morning they were on the way to Chicago, on the Love, Honor and Obey Highway. Took them a day and night to get to the city, primal instinct and a convenient motel hindering their progress. Upon their return, Kenny resolved to be steadfast when he called Ed and Abby to announce his engagement and his hope that they would attend the wedding in the Fall. Pragmatic Gloria had already told her father and received his blessing as she knew he would, Baptist ministers being naturally joyful when a child chooses God’s plan.

“Now don’t worry, Kenny. You’re a success. They’ll rejoice and be glad,” Gloria told him. And the fact is, they did rejoice. And they were glad.

But then a strange thing happened. As Kenny was about to hang up, Gloria, who was listening in, said, “Oh, Kenny, let me talk to Abby for a minute. Why don’t you make us some sandwiches; I’ll take a Coke with mine.” After Kenny left the bedroom, Gloria closed the door, walked into the closet and shut that door behind her.

Positive she could not be heard, Gloria spoke in a whisper, a whisper only women can hear and understand. “Abby, bless you. I can’t thank my dad and you enough for all that both of you said and did. Kenny passed every test, and everything went exactly as we planned.”

Face Time  
- Joseph Glaser











Blazer  
- Kat Coolahan

I drive a short distance  
to a town from my youth  
too full of ghosts  
to visit much for enjoyment.  
I am here to retrieve an inheritance:  
a straw hat adorned with pheasant feathers  
that sits on the porch of my uncle's home.  
He is at work at the firehouse,  
behind a locked door  
his dog belts out large, gulping barks.  
More discarded remnants  
are tied up in white trash bags,  
they smell of my grandmother.  
Even before my hands undo the knots  
a sweetness hits high in my nose  
not like a flower, but bone-dry hay,  
baking its pleasant aroma in the hot sun.  
There are undertones of cigarette smoke,  
Jean Nate, the brackish air  
of her waterfront home on a blackwater river.

I came only for that hat,  
perhaps a few linens,  
but now I am excavating a piece  
of her clothing, three years, three summers  
after she left our world.  
I slip on a corduroy blazer,  
beige, deep brown buttons of wood,  
in the sweltering stickiness of August,  
pause overdressed, to inspect  
the glass reflection in the storm door.  
*Does it fit?*  
The blazer envelops a black t-shirt,  
dips down to partially cover ocean  
blue running shorts.  
Clothed half in formality,  
but fully in the memory  
of her deep-water love,  
I cannot discern  
which of us is smiling back.

Buffalo Gal  
- Bob McAfee

won't you come out tonight,  
dance by the light of the moon  
wear the red dress you made  
on the old foot-treadle Singer machine  
from a red cotton yard you brought  
by wagon all the way from Kankakee

won't you come out tonight swinging  
those cello hips, pigtails flying,  
you will be scandalous,  
turkey trot and hesitation waltz,  
fiddler on a mission, banjo picker's fingers  
never leave his hands, guitar boy all astrum

won't you come out tonight the barn spins  
into midnight you rise above it all whirling  
swirling hurricane, spirits high as bathtub gin,  
ragtime dancing, doo-dah, doo-dah  
lock arms and do-si-do  
glimpses of your ankles and your knees

won't you come out tonight bring grandma  
and the children, everybody washed in the old tub  
whether they need it or not,  
papa wears his new Stetson and the store-bought shirt  
eight women do the quadrille, swapping partners,  
real men can't be bothered

won't you come out tonight looking to court and spark,  
Tex, cleaned up pretty good, spent two bits  
for a shave, a haircut and a hot bath  
at the barbershop, handsome rooster,  
does a buck and wing, one arm raised, one foot  
in the air, followed by a heel-click of his shiny boots

won't you come out tonight, kick up a soft shoe,  
the chores will wait until tomorrow's rise,  
the crops are in and the fall has arrived,  
come allemande left, promenade right,  
two-step me out in the Coeur d'Alene night,  
come dance by the light of the ragamuff moon.

Clay People Live and Breathe  
- Wally P.



False Spring  
- Mark J. Mitchell

*For JJ*

She works hard, a lone child trapped behind glass,  
watching hummingbirds dance out of reach.  
Not tempted, but tormented, bent to her task  
like a clockwork child, stored behind cold glass.  
She feels like an exhibit no one asks  
to view. She wants blossoms and light to teach  
her hidden child how to break through the hard glass  
on her watch. Hummingbirds dance out of reach.



Father  
- Vikram Masson

I remember summers. He's plopped in  
his folding chair, painting the  
bee balm with its cloud of butterflies,  
the basket-of-gold rimming

the shrubs, the coral bell spires of green  
and purple flowers. Drops of sweat  
trickle down from his neck and jowls  
and constellate his back. Oil paint

has smudged on his hands – hands that will  
soon quiver so that all his  
sharp lines become impressionistic.  
Then he will start to forget:

anniversaries, birthdays, the year  
he came to America, until  
he cannot plumb from his depths  
a scrap scrawled with his son's name.

Yesterday, my mother called and said,  
*All gone, doesn't know my face.*  
*He thinks he is aboard a train to*  
*Delhi, and all his dead friends –*

*Raja Singh, Binny, that scoundrel*  
*Mohan are drinking whisky*  
*and jesting with him. As if the man*  
*can hear their bloody voices.*

*He can hear them mummy, I say.*  
They are as real as the willows  
shrouding your garden, those pesky cicadas  
that bore through summer mulch,

the streaks of paint on the veranda  
where he proudly sets his easel.

Feeding Birds in a Park Near the Hospital  
- David Harper

A cluster of brown finches  
skitter beneath  
timid leaves,  
watching me  
with wary eyes,  
pecking at my bread,  
unsure  
if I am God.

Last night  
I lit a candle  
with timid hands,  
then skittered home  
to wait  
with wary eyes,  
hopeful  
but unsure.

Body Parts  
- T.L. Sullivan





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In Such a Polite Place  
- Antoni Ooto

all these arriving gulls  
rest on calm vacant waters,

keep busy  
where beach grasses frame

in the scent of pines  
and oaks standing proud  
their green reaching higher

holding time and history  
alight in their own glamour

as the sun warms  
the slow hills of the cove  
a morning walk begins

In Your Sunrise  
- Thomas Cannon

Remember when I lived  
on the porch of your mind  
embraced you before  
you took on the world  
took your shoes off  
upon your return

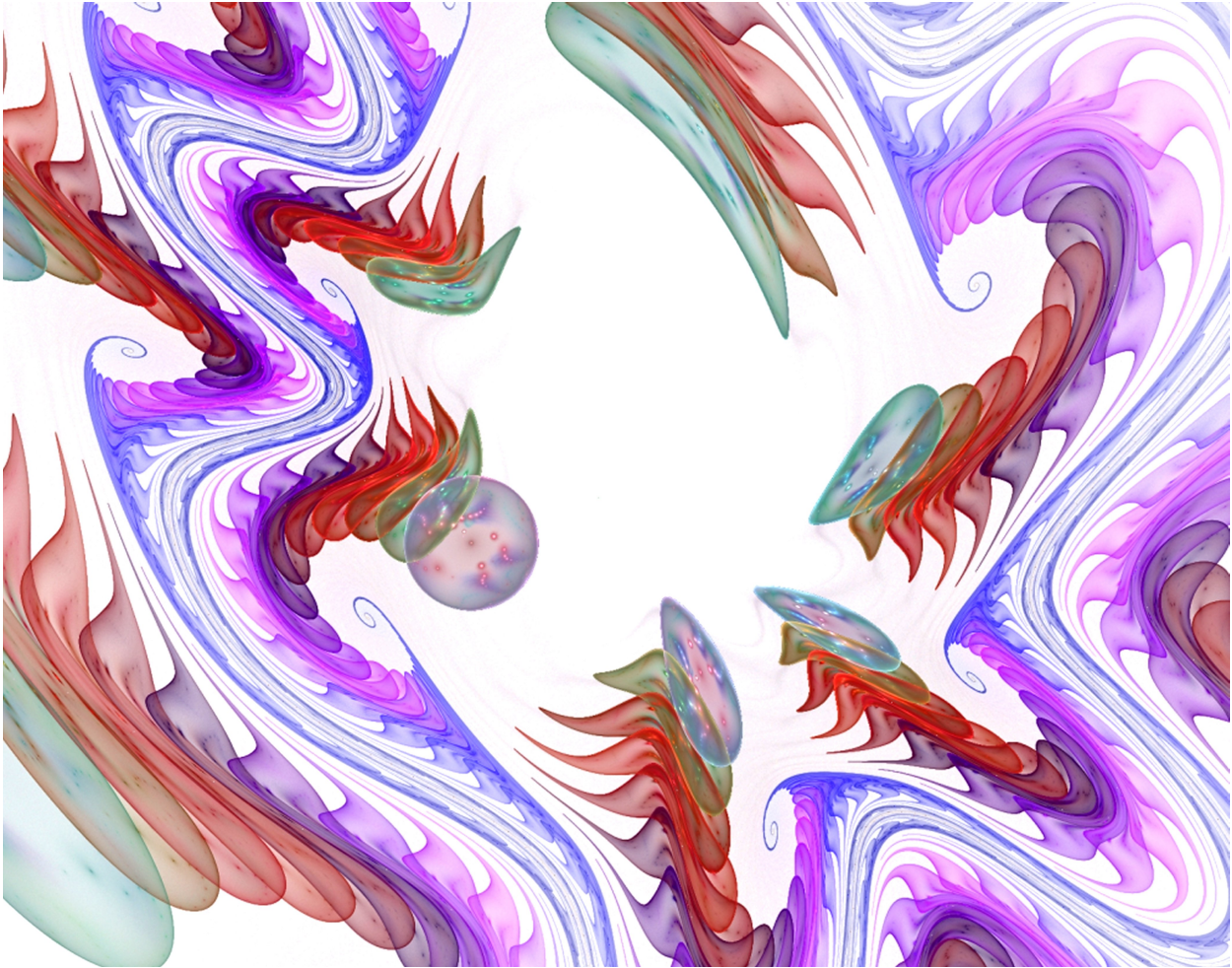
It's where I wanted to see  
life go by.  
The painted floor  
Cooled my cheek,  
In your sunrise  
I stood and stretched  
to see the last bit



# Kaleidoscopes

- Mike Stone





My Talisman  
- Judy DeCroce

next to me  
Louise – just across the bed bars

right here in the children's ward  
she didn't understand all those tests either

taking blood taking urine  
always taking something from us

but she knew Nancy Drew  
magic tricks and favorite board games

we'd scooch our beds close

little girls with time,

alone time, quiet time,  
too much time,

more time –  
till we didn't



Coming Ashore  
- Pat St. Pierre



On Stasis  
- Nathan Leslie

Garden hose water lacks  
A political agenda, a stance  
On the election, gun control.

It tastes just like you think it should,  
Like you remember it did,  
Still.

The tang of metal,  
The rainwater smell –  
The surprising sharpness

The garden hose water  
Still hisses in the same exact way.  
The seam between the hose and the spout  
Is ever tenuous, still.

When you spray the stream into the late Spring  
Air, it still catches the sun.  
Your arm still prickles, simplicity's code



## Senses

- Lois Greene Smith

What if a skunk didn't smell? Would we regard it as cute? Is a house pet an animal small enough for human hands to touch or cuddle? Why does a child's fish tank generally contain one goldfish or possibly a colorful betta fish?

Odors, size, even association with childhood affect us. For some Covid disease cases, losing the ability to taste/smell can be life-changing since scents familiar and linked to memories might be delightful, and the tongue's recognition of sweet/spicy adds to the pleasure of eating.

We've said deer are beautiful, vultures ugly, elephants substantial, apes playful in zoos, waddling penguins and ducks make us smile, zebra's white vs black unsolvable, swans graceful, Canadian geese messy. There presently is a cow-cuddling place in Watkins Glen, NY, where, for a fee, one may snuggle a cow for fifteen minutes at a time. Seems to be a need to relate whether with our eyes, ears, fingers, nose. But how do we 'relate' to words and symbols that keep changing with the decades?

Medical forms allow us to select the gender we 'feel' and not the obvious seen at birth. Male/female have different reproduction organs, different hormones that engage at puberty. Remember the single-cell amoeba from your first biology course... an organism that reproduces itself asexually? As a joke, would you put that down on paper? White or black stripes on a zebra: that's more of a puzzle than how one appears unclothed in a physician's office.

Social changes call for celebrations when we're interested in a person of the same sex, or both, and the negative term 'queer' is not demeaning anymore. Harvard University no longer looks at GPA and extra-curricular activities for enrollment but, as other universities that don't make headlines currently, selects for 'diversity'. It does not see that as a form of discrimination in itself. But Harvard is the elegant deer; had a college that we reference as a skunk done the same thing, would this have been noticed.

Old television scripts dealt with an idolized version of family life where "Father Knows Best" or "Happy Days"; just the titles seem like the goldfish bowl containing a tiny, shiny swimmer. Somehow my tiny, girlhood fish managed to jump out and die on the kitchen floor, and its ability to exit both baffled and upset me. Had I overfed, underfed, not touched the transparent container enough or too much? A possible drab little turtle was not a pleasure to observe.

"Everybody Loves Raymond" has changed to titles today as "Lucifer", "Who Killed Sara?", "Criminal Minds", "The Walking Dead". Disclaimers, in small print, note 'brutal violence, nudity' as our eyes more-quickly scan the cast of characters or mini synopsis of expected viewing; it seems socially correct to include either two women kissing or two men doing that to prove the production is with-the-times. Have producers considered we might rather see proverbial penguins rather than laughing hyenas for two hours before bedtime? Dialogue must contain a four-letter word, once considered offensive, and constantly repeated just in case the audience didn't see how progressive the program actually is. It doesn't seem to matter that overuse might be the messy geese and diminish the character's credibility; what network wants to be the 'rare bird'?

If we desensitize our smell enough, would a skunk have an odor?

# Intruding on the Grand Tetons

- Len Kazmer



Shattering the Mirror  
- Peycho Kanev

The sky is so old I could almost  
hear it groan

Earth's bleeding through its holes

I have nothing to give to a child  
born in a basket who must save  
the world or watch it burn

All right, I'll let the moon rise  
but nothing more

In this hushed house  
the distance  
between us is  
more inconceivable  
than the one  
promised by the universe

The shadows in the corners play indecent games

Who should be blamed

for all the hunger  
in the world as I eat  
my last piece of stale bread  
with rancid butter  
in this room full of sunny silence  
and the pipe running across the ceiling  
looks so promising

Little fly on the windowsill please don't let me be alone  
Just stay with me

I wind the clock slowly  
and everything changes

That goes for the seasons and that goes  
for time per se  
a little speck of dust floating in the air  
and then disappearing within my breath

Where you go and where I am

But today is a good day to feel  
the presence of the universe or just  
this thin ray of sunshine crawling through  
the blinds and warming up the whole  
hand just a few seconds before I...  
start to live again.

Abandoned in Kansas  
- Michael Lee Johnson





Smokey the Therapy Cat  
- Andrew Miller

Last week Jeff Streeter and I rode to the clam flats in his Ford Model T to scatter Patricia's ashes. We arrived before sunrise, her favorite time of day. Jeff stayed with the car, one foot on the running board, while I trudged along the shore toward the Deer Isle Bridge. Patricia's ashes, light gray, gritty like coarse sand, slid through my fingers. She wanted to become the stuff of soft-shelled clams and intertidal worms.

Patricia loved this section of the Maine coast, and we strolled it often – ankle-deep in gray mud, weaving around boulders, across water-slicked slabs of granite, rockweed popping under our feet. It had been a quick three weeks from cancer diagnosis to a double handful of her ashes in a silver-colored cardboard box. We had been together thirty-six years.

After that morning, life in the spruce forest settled into a dreary dullness, leaden and gray. I spent much of the day sitting on the front deck, a cup of cold coffee at my side. Gloom sustained me. It gave me an excuse to turn down dinner invitations, to skip get-togethers with friends. I even ignored the garden, stood by while the zucchini turned woody, green beans dried on the vine.

Now it was just me and Smokey, our male Maine Coon cat. Three years earlier, Patricia and I adopted him from the Ark Animal Shelter near Cherryfield. I hadn't known much about this breed but learned quickly that Smokey had a personality somewhere between a dog and a four-year-old boy. When he spotted me outside, he'd race toward me, jump up nearly to my waist, then run along behind. Or he'd crouch behind a bush until I was close, then spring out and tackle me. The Ark people asked for a \$50 donation, but Patricia gave them \$100. She felt guilty because we promised he'd never go outside, which of course was a lie.

Jeff reappeared a few days after I scattered the ashes. Usually he called first, but this time he just showed up. Patricia and I met Jeff at a book signing twenty years ago. After the event, she dropped her scarf in the parking lot. Jeff picked it up and chased after us. It isn't often that one is pursued by a Model T, its driver waving a red scarf. We learned that when Jeff was sixteen, he purchased the T from its original owner for \$100, money earned delivering papers. Patricia was immediately enchanted. If he'd asked, she'd have gone off with him that evening. The next week he invited us for a ride, and we continued doing that every so often when the weather was good. We'd cruise into Blue Hill, stop in at the wine and cheese shop, then have lobster rolls at a drive-in restaurant. Sometimes we just cruised the side roads that wove along the coast.

Today he drove the Volvo, which meant he had something on his mind. I brewed a fresh pot of coffee and we sat on the deck. For a long time we sat in silence. Smokey stalked a grasshopper.

Eyes still on the cat, Jeff set his cup down. "Alex...have you ever thought of enrolling Smokey in a Pet Therapy Program?"

"Since when does Smokey need therapy?"

"It not for him, it's for kids. You take him to the hospital – visit children waiting for surgery, recovering from an accident, getting cancer treatment..."

Smokey crept toward the grasshopper. His belly fur scraped the grass.

"Isn't that for dogs?" I pictured a Pomeranian or Welsh Corgi racing up to a kid, licking his hand, anxious to be petted, begging for a treat. But a cat?

Jeff reminded me of the time that Patricia and I put on a ventriloquist act for his ten-year-

old nephew. Randy had just broken his leg and was in a deep funk because he couldn't sail or play baseball. His recovery started that afternoon in our living room when I made Smokey talk.

Smokey: "Randy, how come you're walking around with those sticks?"

Randy: "I fell out of an apple tree and broke my leg."

Smokey: "How were the apples – any good?"

And so on. It was obvious that Randy was more comfortable talking to Smokey than to adults.

When my grandfather was a kid, he saw a ventriloquist act with a dog instead of a dummy. That gave him the idea of putting on comedy shows using live animals. From then on, his pets always talked. I picked up the idea from him. After Patricia and I got together, she joined in.

One of our cats: "Who's going to feed me?"

Patricia: "There's food in your dish, go look."

One of our cats: "I'm sick of that old Turkey Fixin's in Giblet Gravy; it's cold and crusty. I want Salmon Florentine."

Patricia: "Since when do cats know about fancy salmon dishes?" She'd scrape his old food into the garbage and open a new can. "There, Salmon Florentine and Garden Greens in a Delicate Sauce – hope you're satisfied."

After eating, "I'm not being well-cared for."

Patricia: "Oh, come on."

We did this often, taking turns being Smokey's voice. But Smokey quit talking when Patricia was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Jeff broke into my thoughts. "Take Smokey to the hospital and do your act with kids. Sing songs, read stories –"

Smokey pounced on the grasshopper. He had it pinned, then, in a flurry of beating wings, it broke free and buzzed into tall grass. Smokey reared up on his hind legs and gave chase.

Jeff didn't press the issue. After he left, I did a little research on pet therapy programs. The animals had to be healthy and up-to-date on all their shots. Most were dogs, but they did take cats. They all had to wear a vest and walk on a leash –Jeff hadn't mentioned that detail. Smokey never wore a vest and had never walked on a leash.

"Smokey, what do you think about being a therapist?"

Suddenly, Smokey started to talk.

"For kids?" he said. "Sounds like dog's work."

"They take cats."

"What if I catch a disease?"

"You can't catch human diseases. Besides, kids might be recovering from an accident, getting ready for an operation."

He rolled over onto his back, stretched out his fore and hind legs and began to purr. I rubbed his belly.

"I miss Patricia," he said.

"So do I, Big Boy. It was so sudden." I picked him up and squeezed. He squirmed out of my arms, dropped to the floor.

"Quit squishing me. I don't like being force-purred."

"All right, all right."

He jumped onto the couch. "Maybe..." he licked his right forepaw twice, "maybe that therapy stuff wouldn't be so bad after all."

Later that afternoon, Jeff called, asked if I had thought more about pet therapy.

"Yes," I said. "Smokey wants to do it. How do we start?"

"You have to sign him up at the Blue Hill Veterinary Clinic."

"Smokey doesn't like to travel. Can't we do this over the phone?"

"A vet has to check him out."

"There's nothing wrong with him."

"It's just a formality." I could hear him drumming his fingers on the table. "I'll drive you in the Model T. Afterwards, we'll have a picnic at Mariners Park."

His words clutched at my throat. This would be my first outing with Jeff in the Model T since we scattered Patricia's ashes. It would be just Jeff and me. No Patricia. He gave me no time to unpeel old memories. "Bring a bottle of wine; I'll take care of the rest. Your appointment is at eleven o'clock next Monday."

"Appointment?"

"You can't just walk into pet screening unannounced."

This was sounding like a big deal. I started to protest, but he interrupted me.

"I'll pick you up at ten. Tell Mr. Smokes to be on his best behavior."

Smokey dropped from the couch, ambled toward the front door and yowled. I held it open. He stopped partway across the threshold and sniffed the mat.

"Hurry up – going out or not?" What is it about cats? They rush into the house but must be coaxed out.

He glared up at me. "What happened to the frog I caught this morning?"

"You told me those things were no good – cold and clammy."

"I never said that."

"Hurry up, I don't have all day."

"Don't rush me – I'm sniffing."

I nudged him with my foot. "What do you want for dinner – some fancy salmon dish?"

"Let's go simple: Beef with Gravy."

If Smokey was going to be a therapist, he needed a vest and a leash. The nearest pet store was in Ellsworth, almost an hour away.

Several hours later, I returned with Smokey's new vest. Dark gray, sprinkled with multicolored stars, it was the fanciest one in the store. It was tough getting him into it. First, I stuffed his legs into a couple of holes in the front. Then I held him steady while snapping two flaps over his back. It was hate at first feel. But no matter how much he walked backward, writhed on the floor, or scrapped against door jams, he couldn't shuck it. When he calmed down, I attached the leash and carried him outside.

Once on the ground, he refused to follow; just sat back on his haunches and pouted.

"Come on, Smokey, you're supposed to walk beside me."

"I am not a dog."

For a long time, neither of us moved. Be patient, I thought. When he spotted a grasshopper, he jumped to his paws. For the next thirty minutes we zigged and zagged about the yard. Finally, I unsnapped the leash and took off his vest. Not bad. Lesson number one was a success.

We worked with the leash twice a day. He began to follow me, rather than the other way around. He still tended to wrap around tree trunks and get stuck under bushes. But I figured he'd do okay. At screening he'd only be on the leash for a few minutes. And, it was bound to be inside.

Monday morning dawned bright and clear. I stepped outside with a coffee cup in hand just as Smokey ran up the steps. A deer mouse dangled from his jaws. He stopped by the front door.

“You can’t take that inside!”

“Why not?”

“Is it dead?”

“Of course.” He crouched down, turned his head sideways and began to chew. Bones cracked and crunched; it sounded like someone stepped on a strawberry box. When he stopped to swallow, I kicked the remains off the deck and nudged him through the door.

“Hey – I just got started.”

“Forget the mouse, your breakfast is ready.”

He dashed over to his food dish. After filling up on Roasted Chicken and Gravy, he jumped onto the window sill and began to wash his face. He stopped in mid-lick when he spotted the carrier. “Are we going somewhere?”

“This is Pet Therapy Screening Day – don’t you remember?”

“Oh...that.” He went back to licking.

“Jeff will be here at ten.”

“Are we still going on a picnic?”

“Yes, but you have to be screened first.”

“Did you pack my Roast Chicken Flavored Yummies?”

“Don’t I take good care of you?”

Smokey yawned. “Not as good as Patricia. She used to warm my food in the microwave. Salmon in a Rich Creamy Sauce is no good straight from the fridge.” Smokey settled into the bread loaf position, all four paws and tail tucked under. I spread an old towel on the bottom of his carrier and printed off an article on childhood diseases.

At ten o’clock we heard a rhythmic chug-chug-chug from the Perez Crossroad. Smokey stood and stretched, fixed his eyes on the driveway. When the Model T burst through the spruce trees, I stepped outside. Jeff waved, stopped with a metallic screech. “Is Smokey Smokey ready for his big day?”

He bounded up on the deck and gave me a quick hug. I told him we were ready, went inside and slipped the amateur therapist into his vest. He struggled when I pushed him into the carrier.

“How come I gotta wear the straight jacket and ride in this little jail?”

I tossed a couple of yummys into the carrier. “Here, and don’t mouth off like that when we get to the clinic.”

Jeff peered into the carrier. “He doesn’t look very happy.”

“He’ll be okay.”

I maneuvered the carrier into the back seat. The T shook with anticipation. Jeff released the emergency brake, advanced the hand throttle, and put us in low gear. We leaped forward. He shifted into high gear, and we careened onto the Perez Crossroad.

Jeff slowed as we approached a stop sign. “Is he OK – not too noisy, is it?”

“He’s fine.”

After we crept out of Deer Isle Village, I thought about Patricia. When the three of us rode, she and I took turns in the front seat. When she sat in front, I kept quiet. I liked to sit in the back and listen to the two of them talk.

I turned to the back seat. “Smokey, how do you plan to entertain the children?”

Smokey's ears were back, his claws deep into the towel. "I'll tell them about all the mice that live in our garden – how tasty they are."

I remembered the sound of bones crunching. "Don't be too graphic; that might frighten the kiddos."

"I'll talk about the wood pussy we saw last night."

"What?" Jeff turned to me. "What did he say?"

"He means a skunk."

Jeff frowned. "Mr. Smokes, you better clean up your language. That kind of talk won't sit well with parents."

Smokey said, "Make that, 'wood puddy.'"

Jeff stayed in the car while Smokey and I hustled into the clinic. The Pet Therapy Program Director met us in the waiting area and led us into her office. She dropped to her knees, peeked in at Smokey. His eyes were bright, his fur fully fluffed out. It had been chilly in the T. She pressed two fingers through the cage. Smokey gave them a couple of licks and began to purr.

"Well, my goodness." She dropped her hand on my shoulder for a second. She glanced at his medical records then dropped them on her desk. "Let's get this boy screened."

We followed her down a dark hallway and into a large room. Inside were more than a dozen chairs arranged in a circle, with an adult or child in each. When we entered, every head turned. The director motioned toward the chairs.

"Lead him around, let him greet the children."

Smokey and I were not expecting this. He was scrunched down in the back of his carrier, ears flattened. I dragged him out, towel clinging to his claws, and clicked on his leash. It was obvious he was not about to walk, so I set him down in front of two girls. Did he purr, rub against their ankles, beg to be picked up? No. He ignored them, strained on the leash, eyes fixed on the exit. There was nothing else to do but carry him around the room, stopping in front of each person. He shuddered and squirmed, forced his head under my arms. The adults, who were probably seasoned pet therapists, smiled. They were thinking: nice guy, attractive cat, but no therapy team.

"He seems a little shy," the Director said after we circled the room.

"He wasn't expecting so many people."

"Has he ever been around children?"

"Once."

She nodded, flashed a quick smile. "Try again next year." Her eyes narrowed. "He needs to get used to children if he is going to be in the program."

Smokey slunk into his carrier, dug his claws into the towel. I grabbed his records from the office and toted him back to the Model T.

Jeff stuck his head out the window. "Where's his diploma?"

I shook my head. "He failed." I set his carrier in the back and jumped onto the front seat.

"I told you that wood pussy story wouldn't fly."

I explained everything as we lurched out of the lot and made for Deer Isle. Jeff asked if that experience might have traumatized him. I told him that cats recover pretty quickly from situations like that.

"That wasn't much fun," Smokey said.

I put one hand on the carrier. "You were supposed to walk around the room, purr and be pleasant."



“That place was crawling with kids. And not one of them was sick.”

“That was a dry run,” I said. “You were supposed to show your stuff.”

An icy chill settled over us. All this talk about Pet Therapy had given me a boost. We never imagined Smokey wouldn’t cooperate. I looked over at Jeff, saw the disgruntled look on his face. He rubbed the back of his neck.

We passed the clam flats where Patricia’s ashes lay. This wouldn’t have happened if she’d been here. Patricia would have worked with Smokey more. She would have researched what the test entailed and prepared us. Jeff and I had just jumped in, assumed everything would be alright. I could feel his eyes on me. A few miles later, just outside Deer Isle Village, he said, “As my father used to say, ‘we’re not retreating, we’re charging in a new direction.’ It’s time for Plan B.”

We bumped fists. “Plan B?”

“I’ll explain after we open the wine.”

Just past the village of Deer Isle, we swerved onto Haystack Road. We shot past the entrance to Mariner’s Park.

“You missed the turn.”

“I found us a new place.”

I knew why we skipped Mariner’s Park. It was one of Patricia’s favorite spots. A few hundred yards down the road, we slowed, darted onto an overgrown two-track lane. We slid to a stop in front of a wide puddle. Two muddy tracks wound up the hill. A sagging barn slouched at the top.

Jeff revved the engine. “There’s an awesome view of the Reach at the top.”

“It looks slippery. We can’t make it.”

“Nonsense.” He depressed the shift pedal, slipping us into low gear. The T growled, reared up and splashed through the puddle. Left rear wheel churning, the car swaying from side to side, we charged. I bounced up and down, gripped the seat with one hand, reached around and steadied the carrier with the other. The car bucked and snorted, spewed a stream of mud from the left rear wheel, then the right rear wheel. Near the top, we slid off the tracks and whooshed through a berry thicket. As we came to a stop by the barn, Jeff smiled. “I believe we widened the approach.”

We spread out a blanket next to a fallen oak. Jeff had brought chicken sandwiches, two packages of cheese, and a box of rye crackers. I set out a can of mixed nuts, a bottle of red wine, and a bag of cherry tomatoes from the farmer’s market. I tethered Smokey to a branch, poured the wine.

Smokey sat up, licked his lips. “Where are my Roast Chicken Yummies?”

I tossed a handful onto a paper plate. When Jeff and I touched glasses, he said, “Here’s to Mr. Smokes, the almost Pet Therapist.” We each took a drink. He gazed up at the sky. “What a wonderful day.” The hillside, littered with maples, oaks, and pines, dropped away to a ribbon of black rocks and white surf. Sailboats dotted the water. He unwrapped the cheeses, opened the crackers and poured nuts onto a paper plate.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the Pet Therapy Program Director and how foolish we must have looked. I asked Jeff to tell me about plan B. He spread brie onto a cracker.

“You know I visit the Island Nursing Home, give folks rides in the T?”

“Sure, once we went together.”

Jeff stared at the label on the bottle. “I love a good Merlot.” He swirled his glass, watched

the legs creep upward. The sun was hot on my forehead, the Merlot warm in the back of my mouth. Jeff popped a tomato in his mouth, picked up a sandwich. "Plan B is you, me, and Mr. Smokes visiting folks at the Island Nursing Home."

I shook my head. "He flunked his test."

Jeff laughed. "The Island Nursing Home doesn't screen volunteers. You just show up. What say you, Smokey?" He raised his glass. "And, the old guys would love wood pussy stories."

Smokey glared at Jeff. "Will I have to walk around a room packed with old folks?"

Jeff set one hand on Smokey's back. "You meet one person at a time, in their rooms or on the porch." He spread more cheese, then continued, "You'll like old people. They're quiet, not like children." He bit down on the cracker.

My spirits began to lift. I took another drink of wine. Jeff's voice dropped an octave. "Mr. Smokes...want to give it a try?"

Smokey yawned, dropped his head to his forepaws. "I suppose." His eyes closed.

Jeff stopped chewing, frowned. "Hey, what kind of nuts are these?"

I looked at his plate. "You're eating Smokey's Roast Chicken Flavored Yummies. How are they?"

"Well goll-lee!" He spat a wad into his palm, tossed them into the weeds. Smokey's eyes snapped open. He scrambled to his paws, strained against the leash. "My yummys!"

I tossed a few fresh ones at him. He dug them out of the grass.

Jeff watched me pour more wine. "How are you doing?"

I had thought that riding with Jeff and going on a picnic without Patricia would be painful. But it wasn't. I thought about how Jeff had suggested Pet Therapy for us. He was a simple, straightforward guy. He took life at its own speed, never complained about much. Not playful; much like Smokey. But he had engineered a rehab program for me under the guise of Smokey entertaining sick kids. It would please Patricia to know that Smokey and I would go to the Island Nursing Home. She would smile at his star-speckled vest, be happy to know that he was entertaining the folks.

Guys don't hug other guys at times like this. Instead, I grabbed Smokey, pressed him tight against my chest. I looked at Jeff. "Did you know that Maine Coons are especially loud purrers?"

"No, I did not." He leaned the wine bottle up against a clump of grass. "But you better not squeeze him so hard."

When Smokey got restless, Jeff drove us back home. He helped us out, waved, then disappeared into the trees. Smokey scooted out of the carrier, raced over to a sandy spot in the driveway. He flopped down, rolled on his back, squirmed back and forth, paws in the air.

I pointed to a fur tuft at the edge of the driveway. "Where'd that come from?"

"What color is it?" He stopped rolling.

"Light brown, some white."

"Probably from a deer mouse." He sat up straight. "Or, it might have been a white-footed mouse." Twigs, dust, and dried leaves clung to his coat. "Is everybody still mad at me for flunking out of Pet Therapy School?" He whacked his tail on the gravel.

"Of course not."

"When do we go to the Old Folks House?"

"The Island Nursing Home."

"Whatever." He scampered toward me, eyes wide. Just like a dog. He hadn't done that

since Patricia died. I picked him up and scratched under his chin. He closed his eyes. I sat down on the steps, held him tight. He'd probably already forgotten all about therapy screening. He twisted sideways, snuggled his head between my knees, made low murmurs deep in his throat. When I rubbed his belly, he began to purr, long, deep rumbles that ended with a squeak. Smokey was ready for the Island Nursing Home. He would have plenty of stories to tell.

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Good Ol' Summertime  
- KJ Hannah Greenberg







Sunday Shy  
- Jeremy J. Sutton

Perch sun-bleached white oak  
alone on yellowing hill.  
Sway empty rope swing.  
Murmur and quiver leaves.  
Sit for supper sun.

Sigh wheeled wooden duck.  
Whimper to be upright.  
Pray to be pulled home  
or remembered by Polaroid  
before your paint faded and flaked.

Time is irrevocable.

When one vanishes,  
the other follows.

Beget tomorrow.

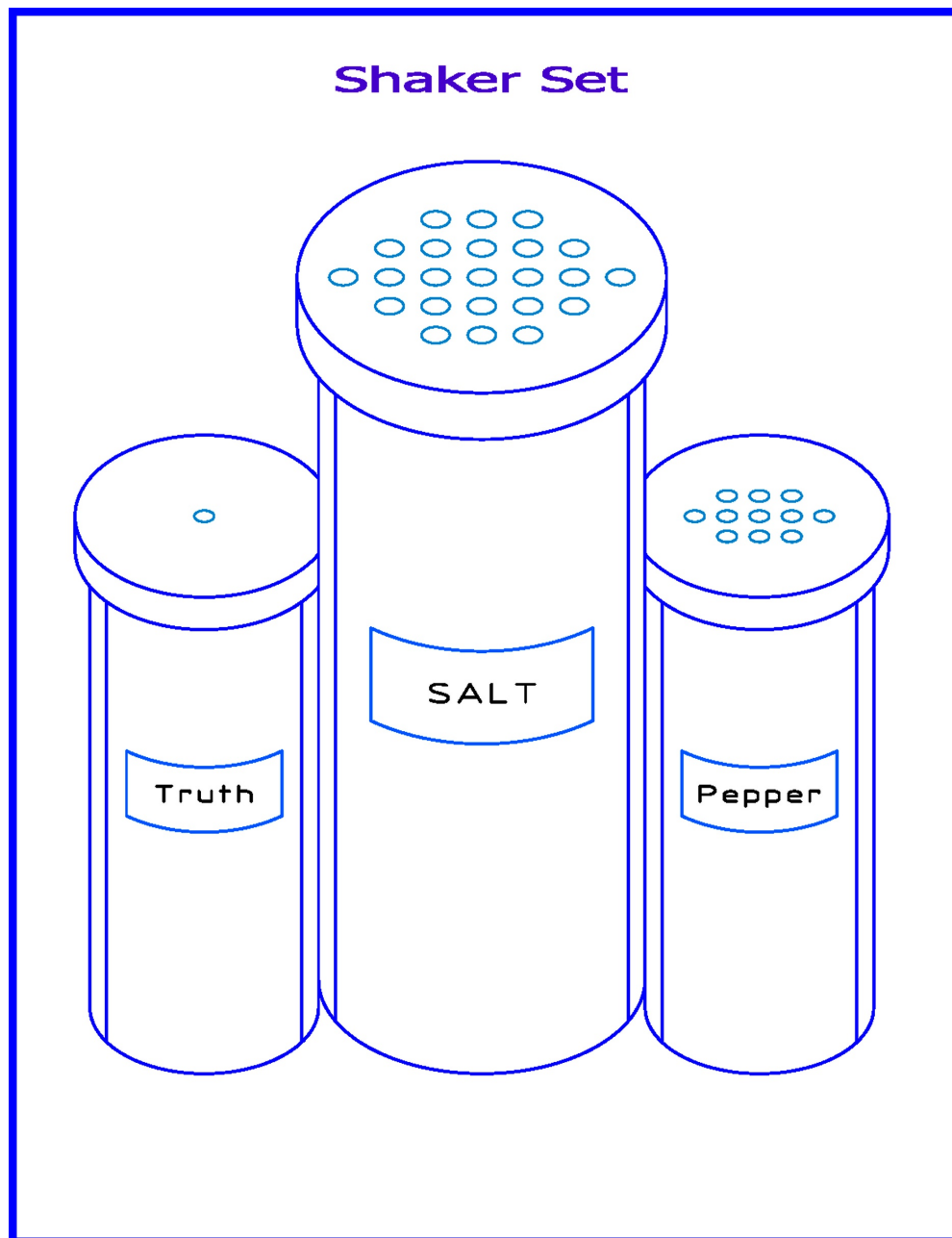
The Gathering  
- Mark Belair

Beyond a wrought iron fence,  
all gathered stood still  
as if attending  
a cemetery internment,  
which, in a sense,  
they were,  
as a seething mother  
broke from the playground  
dragging her darkly  
frowning child  
while all the parents  
and babysitters and kids  
held the troubled silence  
that follows  
having witnessed  
the slap or word  
that, crowning a callous history, goes  
one hurt too far; stood  
in shared lamentation  
of a neighborhood child's dead –  
transmuting to undead –  
childhood.

The Sturgeon  
- George Payne

The mechanics of suffering  
are not so daunting to understand  
it hurts for a while –  
gums and bellies pierced by  
an unseen passion... and then it is done  
the savory-sweet, cherry cough syrup scent  
of death dries and disappears, leaving  
only impressions in the ample depth of sand

Spices of Life  
- Denny E. Marshall



Upcycling  
- Jim Kraus

The last tear precedes  
a kind of acceptance, happiness, maybe.  
Wearing old clothes,

someone else's, brought home  
from the secondhand store  
to try on, alter, embroider,

retrofit or upcycle,  
each time a new identity,  
all of the same cloth.



## 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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Send submissions to [gphillips938@comcast.net](mailto:gphillips938@comcast.net) Send 1 prose piece, 1-5 poems, or 1-4 photos at a time. For prose or poetry, type or paste your submission into the body of the email message.

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