

**JOURNEYS
THROUGH CHAOS:
an Anthology to
Bring us Together**

THE WRITERS' MILL JOURNAL VOLUME 8

**a collection of writing
from a very challenging year**

published 2020

Copyrights 2020 by the authors unless otherwise stated.

ISBN-13:

First print version, November 2020

First e-version, November 2020

Compiled and formatted by Sheila Deeth

Edited by Catherin Violante, Jean Harkin, Judy Beaston, Matthew
McAyeal, Robin Layne, and Sheila Deeth

Cover image by Erik Nebel

Cover design by Pati Burraston

The Writers' Mill is a group of Writers Helping Writers, based in Portland, Oregon. We run monthly online writing contests and meet monthly to hear speakers, critique each other's writing, and encourage each other. Meetings are held every third Sunday of the month, at present over Zoom, but at the Cedar Mill Library in more ordinary times:

12505 NW Cornell Rd #13, Portland, OR 97229

Besides this volume, we have produced several other anthologies, available from amazon.com. Find out more at portlandwritersmill.org.

All rights reserved. Except for very brief quotes in reviews, reproduction or utilization of this work in any form, by means now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the specific author. All situations, characters and concepts are the sole invention of the authors.

*From chaos and challenges past, to politics, fire, plague,
relationships, loss, and our challenged environment,
we will travel with confidence
and finish with positive expectation
of trials and solutions yet to come,
and with the sincerest hope that you will enjoy the read.
Thank you for spending this time with us.*

Contents

Highs and Lows of Writing by Zita Podany	1
The New Normal by Matthew McAyeal	2
Was There Ever a Time Like This? by Jessie Collins	6
Farmgirl Meets Mafia by Robert Mixon.....	9
Ghost Riders by David Fryer.....	12
The End is Near by Matthew McAyeal.....	15
The Fall of an Empire by Jean Harkin.....	23
Blue State or Blue State of Mind by RJ Russell	24
Everyday Events by Joanne DeHaan	27
No Time for Pollyanna by Jean Harkin	30
With Apologies to Shakespeare, Gloucester and Clarence by Sheila Deeth	31
No Stopping Us Now by Judy Beaston	32
I Hold These Burning Truths Self-evident by Sheila Deeth	33
Bonfires of Insanity by Jean Harkin.....	35
Reset by Robin Layne	36
Don't Poke the Tiger by Sheila Deeth	38
Kaylee's Plague by Matthew McAyeal	39
Cleanliness is Next to Godliness— and also is the New Normal? by RJ Russell	42
Not Social (haiku) by Robin Layne	45
Coming Together on ZOOM by Zita Podany	46
The Challenge of Teaching Music Online by Joe Mendez.....	48
Words I Never Want to Hear Again by Karin Krafft	51
I Want It by Joanne DeHaan	55
Consequence of Growing Up by Mindy Black.....	57
Seasons of Time by Zita Podany	60
I Saw That Fat by Tamara Anne Fowler	62
Chagall Lovers by Catherin Violante	63
The Morning by Robin Layne	64
It's All Coming Together by Sheila Deeth	68

Pressing His Suit by Jessie Collins	69
Desperately Seeking by Haylee Ergenekan.....	70
Butter Caper by Judy Beaston.....	71
Choose Your Own Adventure by David Fryer	73
The Dog Did Not Eat My Homework by Zita Podany	76
Kitkit and the Fireworks by Sheila Deeth.....	78
A Storm of Slobber by David Fryer.....	81
Stormy Weather by Jessie Collins	83
Mania Mountain and the Valley of the Shadow by Robin Layne ...	85
Where There’s Smoke... by Glennis McNeal.....	89
Age is Just a Number—Until it’s Not by Karin Krafft	92
Life Story by Jessie Collins.....	94
My One Semester of Villainy by RJ Russell	96
Kissed by Lamplight by Robert Mixon.....	99
The Trees Are Talking by Peter Letts	101
The Tree Shaman by RJ Russell	110
Matches by Robin Layne	117
Fire! by Jessie Collins	118
Facts Lost in the Retellings by Zita Podany.....	119
What to Leave Behind by Mindy Black	122
The Fire Lily by Lisa Maria Braun	123
“I’m Dying” by Catherin Violante.....	124
He Came in Cold by Zita Podany	125
Welcoming Lilly by Robin Layne	130
Last Day by Sheila Deeth.....	134
Journey by Catherin Violante.....	135
A Raven’s Quest by Judy Beaston	136
Escape from the Forbidden City	
to the Flaming Cliffs in the Gobi Desert by Robert Mixon	139
Global Warming by Sheila Deeth.....	143
The Closing Chorus by Jean Harkin	145
The Harvest by Catherin Violante	146
Kansas in My Mind by Jean Harkin	147
Respect, Integrity, Truth by Judy Beaston	148
Mountains and Valleys of Life by Jessie Collins	149

Meet the Authors

- Judy Beaston gleans inspiration in the natural world as well as from reality's complicated experiences found all around us. Her poetry and short stories can be found in previous *Writers' Mill Journals*, the *Loch Raven Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and other fiction anthologies.
- Mindy Black teaches art classes in Portland, Oregon, where she lives with her husband, daughter, and their sweet, crazy dog, Bela Lugosi. In her free time, she enjoys reading classic novels, creating mixed media paintings, attending live theater and musical performances, and practicing Tai Chi. She is a lifelong lover of the arts, devoted diary keeper, and occasional writer and artist of all the things that weigh on her heart.
- Lisa Maria Braun grew up in Michigan, cut her teeth in California, and is adulting in Oregon while working on what comes next. Water will be involved.
- Jessie Collins 92-year-old long-distance member of the Writers' Mill, lives in England, and is fast becoming expert with Zoom.
- Sheila Deeth Author, editor, formatter, Writers' Mill leader, and Jessie's daughter. Find out more at sheiladeeth.com
- Joanne DeHaan after attending the Writers' Mill for several years, has started seeing something to write about in most everyday events. She thanks the group for awakening her writing interest.
- Haylee Ergenekan Homeschool Teacher. Pacific Northwest Boy Mom with a passion for perfection.

Tamara Anne Fowler started writing for *Cat Fancy*, *Dog Fancy* and was a stringer for *Life Magazine* and had a monthly column on Hollywood in *Daka*, *Greetings From Babylon*, and has written several pieces for *LA Reader*, *Actors And Others For Animals*, *Pixie Project* and *House Of Dreams*. She has been a successful professional editor of both articles and books since 2011. She lives in the glitz and glamour of the Nevada desert with her cats, Armani, Max Factor and Spicey'D, who are also her editors.

David Fryer is an author and tennis player from Portland, where he lives with his daughter, dog, and cat.

Jean Harkin is the author of *Night in Alcatraz and Other Uncanny Tales*. Her stories have been published in anthologies *Strongly Worded Women* (2018) and *Itty Bitty Writing Space* (2019), and she contributes annually to *The Writers' Mill Journal*. Jean's blog appears at www.goodreads.com/jeanatwritersmill

Karin Krafft retired, mother and grandmother, spends three days a week with Nora (five) and Jonny (two)—and tries to write in between.

Robin Layne has loved writing since she was a small child, and now edits professionally under the name Robin Layne Enterprises (writingthatsings.com). She has been part of the Writers' Mill since 2016, when she contributed stories, poems, and illustrations to *Volume 5*.

Peter Letts	transitioned from post-graduate work in the mathematics of quantum mechanics to extracting information from data produced by specialized computer hardware in several places around the world. Now retired, he is enjoying the chance to give free rein to his imagination.
Matthew McAyeal	writes mainly historical fiction, fantasy, and comedy. In 2008, two screenplays he wrote were semi-finalists in the Screenplay Festival.
Glennis McNeal	is a former journalist working on <i>Suck it up, yank it out, get over it: a memoir</i> .
Joe Mendez	Author and music teacher
Robert Mixon	is a past associate editor of <i>Sage Literary Magazine</i> . His published poems and essays have been featured in <i>Sage Magazine</i> and in the <i>NSS News</i> (National Speleological Society)
Zita Podany	Speaker and Author of <i>Images of America:Vanport</i> , Available for speaking engagements. Net+, A+, NCRC certified
RJ Russell	is a freelance writer who is currently working on a YA novel. When not writing, she loves to spend time with her family; walk her dog, Lucy; and play with the family cat, Pumpkin.
Catherin Violante	is a novelist, published short story author, and poet. A retired teacher, she is at home in Beaverton, Oregon with her seven dogs. She's a member of the Writers' Mill in Portland, and of 9 Bridges, with work appearing in <i>The Writers' Mill Journal</i> volumes 2 and 4, and <i>Cirque Magazine</i> .

And Meet the Cover Artists

Erik Nebel

Erik Nebel's first book of comics was published in 2014 by Yeti Press. *Best American Comics 2015* and *Best American Comics 2019* included Erik's work and, most recently, Erik completed a graphic novel adaptation of Tolstoy's novel, *WAR AND PEACE*.

Pati Burraston

says she doesn't need a bio, but we all want her to know we're grateful that she's in our group.

Highs and Lows of Writing by Zita Podany



i

A story of a thousand words
begins with that one word,
that one sentence,
that one paragraph,
that twisting plot,
that makes words flow
seamlessly from the mind
in a conscious steady stream of thought.
Filling up volumes of erudite prose
to grab attention and accolades.
To enlighten all who read
with clarity and prodigious style.
Ahh, those first words.
The start of a new journey
to the pinnacle of success.
So why am I so stuck here
in the lowly valleys of despair?
Not one word dotting my page
only a blank screen
blinking back at me.

The New Normal by Matthew McAyeal



ii

Long, long ago, in days when heroes of the Trojan War still walked this earth, terror came to the island of Crete. It came in the form of mysterious sea peoples who attacked and raided the coastal cities. After their beloved city of Malia was sacked for a second time, a desperate group of Minoan refugees began heading to higher ground.

“Where are we going?” asked a small boy named Kikeru.

“To the peak sanctuary of Karfi,” explained Ideaa, his mother. “We’ll be safe from the sea peoples there.”

“But where did the sea peoples come from in the first place?” he wanted to know.

“No one knows. Some say they became marauders after they were displaced by earthquakes.”

“I heard it was a great drought in Anatolia,” said Kikeru’s father, a merchant named Yishharu.

“I heard it was plague,” said Didikase, another merchant.

“I heard that a god with no name struck Egypt with ten plagues,” said a third merchant, Nashuja.

Kikeru was puzzled by the notion of a god with no name. In whose name did the worshippers of that god pray? Of course, the Minoans had no such issues with their gods.

“We shall pray and sacrifice to Britomartis,” said Ariadne, Malia’s head priestess, after they reached Karfi. “As goddess of mountains and sailors, she is certain to protect us up here and deliver us from this scourge of sea peoples!”

“Will—will we be up here for long?” asked a little girl named Europa, nervously remembering the terrifying sea peoples who had attacked and burned her home the previous night.

“Of course not, dear,” replied Kitane, her mother. “The Greek fleet will wipe out these pirates soon enough. You should just think of this as a little adventure.”

And so they settled in to what they all assumed would be a temporary shelter, living more roughly than they had in their grand city with its palaces and frescoes.

As days turned into weeks, Malia’s merchants gradually and reluctantly took up new careers as farmers and shepherds. It was especially difficult work when they could only occasionally venture into the lowlands and valleys to tend to crops and livestock. Some refused to take up such work, sure that life would be returned to normal before harvesting time anyway.

Then weeks became months, bringing a winter that was especially cold and windy up in the mountains. And yet, there was still no Greek fleet.

“I don’t understand why the Greeks have forsaken us,” said Nashuja. “Is this how they repay us after our King Idomeneus fought for them at Troy?”

“Forget the Greeks!” said Yishharu. “Where are the Egyptian and Hittite fleets? They rely on us for their wine and olive oil, but we never see them anymore either. What’s going on?”

Whatever was going on, the Minoan refugees at Karfi never learned, for their coast continued to be dominated by pillaging sea

peoples and no one else. As months became years, young Kikeru entered manhood. He became engaged to Europa.

"I've been thinking about our old lives," he said to her one day. "If we ever do go back, I can't wait to watch bull-leaping again. What are you planning to do when we return?"

Europa sighed. "I would like for us to be married in Malia."

"Are you sure you want to wait that long?" asked Kikeru. "Many couples our age are getting married now."

"I know," she said, "but I want to get married properly in a real temple. Couldn't we wait just a few more years? I'm sure the sea peoples will be gone by then."

"They were supposed to be gone years ago," Kikeru pointed out.

"Yes, but surely, it'll be soon by now!"

Kikeru turned to look out at the sea, the sea from which their maritime civilization had retreated. "I always thought that I would grow up to be a merchant like my father," he said finally, "but now I wonder if that will even happen."

"I know what you mean," said Europa. "As a child, I wanted to become a priestess, but I certainly don't anymore."

The reason she certainly didn't anymore was that the people were increasingly turning against the priestesses. Their rituals did not seem to be working. Not only did the sea peoples persist, harvests were poor and getting poorer, and the priestesses sacrificed animals that could have been used to feed starving people. One dark, overcast day, the people's frustration with the priestesses came to a head.

"Why does Britomartis fail us?" Yishharu demanded to know.

"I—I don't know," said Ariadne. "We pray and sacrifice to her every day, but it doesn't seem to be enough. I think she must be very angry at us. Perhaps she requires a human sacrifice."

"Yes..." said Didikase, drawing a sword, "...yours!"

"You—you can't sacrifice *me*! I am your head priestess, y-your link to our beloved patron goddess!"

“You don’t seem to be doing a very good job of linking to her,” said Didikase. “It almost makes me wonder if Britomartis even exists.”

“That’s blasphemy!” Ariadne gasped. “You mustn’t speak that way or all the gods will make life very difficult for us!”

“Well, that would make for a change!” Didikase retorted.

For a moment, Ariadne seemed to consider raising her ceremonial labrys in defense, but then she cast it aside. “Strike down a holy priestess, and you will never see the end of the gods’ wrath!”

Didikase only hesitated for a moment before he did strike her down. The other priestesses were less martyrly-inclined and tried to fend off the angry mob with their ceremonial labryses, but they were killed just as easily.

With the death of the priestesses, it became impossible to conduct formal weddings at all. Kikeru and Europa simply moved in together without any ceremony. They labored as farmers, using primitive tools for there was no more imported tin and copper with which to make bronze. They gave birth to a new generation, who would be raised knowing only life at Karfi. As more and more years passed by, the last scribes and merchants died off. Their skills no longer needed or taught, their deaths also marked the death of the written word.

Kikeru and Europa never did live to see their people leave Karfi. Instead, the people were still holed up in the mountains when Kikeru and Europa died of old age. Their children and their children’s children did not live to see it either. The generation that did leave the mountains didn’t even remember why the lowlands and valleys were supposed to be so dangerous. Slowly and cautiously, they reclaimed them, surprised to discover no apparent danger.

By that time, they were, of course, no longer a sophisticated civilization of seafaring merchants. They had become simple, illiterate farmers and shepherds for whom the world that existed before their exile was but an oral myth. Their old cities were now unfamiliar, mysterious ruins. It would still be centuries more before advanced civilization returned to the island of Crete.

Was There Ever a Time Like This? by Jessie Collins



iii

We are living in strange times at present, and many people think that this is the most difficult time the world has known. I have been thinking about my history lessons from long ago and realizing that, through the years, there must have been many times when people have felt as we do now.

Wars have devastated the lives of those who have fought and those who have waited at home, wondering if they would ever see their loved ones again. In times long ago there were no means of communication except by word of mouth, and the agony of suspense must have been terrible.

Not only wars, but serious outbreaks of illness have brought fear and misery into many lives. I look back into history now, to the Great Plague, which raged throughout London and the surrounding areas during the years 1665/66. No hospitals in those days, doctors with very little knowledge, and no sanitation made for a time of sheer terror as the plague spread literally from door to door. Town criers

roamed the streets, calling out to people to mark their door with a large red cross if there was infection in the house. Every night there were men dragging carts through the streets, shouting, "Bring out your dead!" Bodies would be wrapped in sacking and lifted onto the carts. Then they would be trundled away to any open space big enough for deep pits to be dug. With no ceremony, the bodies were cast into these pits.

A very poignant memory of the plague can be found in a village called Eyam, in the Peak District of England, far away from London. There was no sickness there until a traveler arrived and was taken ill. Those brave souls met with the priest and decided together that they would shut off their village from all outside contact and keep the infection within, so that it wouldn't spread to other places around. They were successful in that, but most of the villagers were infected and died. Visitors to the area now can walk amongst little cottages where notice boards have been erected, giving names and ages of those who died there, many of them young children. How's that for strange times?

Another terrible infection spread through many countries during the period from February 1918 to April 1920, during which time nearly one third of the population of the world were infected. Apparently, it came in four waves, and it became known as Spanish Flu. This name came about because World War I was still in progress at the beginning of the pandemic, and leaders of countries at war suppressed the news to avoid causing panic. Spain was neutral and newspapers were allowed to publish there. I don't think there were any cases in Spain at the start, but, because the news was first heard of in that country's newspapers, many people believed that the infection had begun there. This was certainly another strange time.

Two World Wars in the last century caused havoc and much misery amongst many nations. In my mother's family, during World War I, Grandma saw her husband, three sons, and a daughter all go to war. One son died as a result of injuries sustained in battle, and another

son was a prisoner of war in German hands. Grandma was one of many women for whom the times were very strange. My father didn't wait to be called up but volunteered at age 17, pretending to be 18. He fought in the trenches and had some dreadful experiences. In World War II, the man who became my husband was taken prisoner by the Japanese. I remember the sadness in that family and, of course, in many other families when everyone around them was celebrating victory in Europe and cheering that the war was over. They had to wait for another three months before war in the Far East came to an end, and many more young men and women had lost their lives by then.

Now we are struggling with Covid-19, and the times feel very strange, but let us not forget that there have been many such times in the past, and there could well be other such times in the future. The best we can do is to ask for God's help and go forward in His strength to face whatever comes. Even in the strangest times, God is always with us.



Farmgirl Meets Mafia by Robert Mixon



v

The petite, well-scrubbed but professional, newly-minted social worker wends her way along the streets of Chicago to a classic brownstone townhouse. This is her first welfare check, working for social services. The “L” elevated train has just transported her to this South Side neighborhood. It has been quite a journey across time, culture, and space to arrive at this doorstep. An ominous feeling of anticipation and some worry creeps into her feelings, but determination leads her on.

Rosalie was born in Maysville, Missouri around 1908, growing up in nearby Weatherby on a farm in this tiny township of eighty souls. Yes, her mother was a schoolmarm teaching in an iconic, round, one-roomed schoolhouse, as had generations of teachers before her. She was such a pretty young girl, graduating at her own pace from this schoolhouse by the age of sixteen, and she couldn’t wait to get off the farm. Off to Park College she went, enjoying her escape from feeding chickens, pigs, horses, cows, and, really, all manner of critters big and small.

After graduating with honors from Park College, Rosalie decided to attend the University of Chicago in what was the big city to her. While she waited in line to register at the University of Chicago School of Social Work, a handsome, bright young man snuck up behind her, and dutifully copied down all her class schedules. Miraculously he just seemed to show up sitting in these same classes. After all, was he not the same man who later waded through four feet of snow to get a marriage license for the two of them?

Soon Rosalie's gaze lands on a 2800 square foot, two-flat, brownstone house on Prairie Avenue. The staircase of this beautiful home has an immensely wide stairway, leading to a recessed landing and a huge, handmade doorway surrounded by two tall, magnificent, stained-glass sidelights. On top of short, brownstone walls, two wide Grecian Urns stand with colorful bouquets of flowers brightening up the scene.

A bit puzzled, she rechecks the address. "It is correct," she mutters to herself.

A well-dressed man, wearing a topcoat and a jauntily cocked gray fedora, answers the door. *A well-cut gentleman indeed*, she thinks. "Good afternoon, Miss," he intones. "We have been expecting you."

Rosalie looks around at the entry hall with its sumptuous furnishings and makes some notes in her book with a fountain pen. She goes into the sitting room to finish her report. She stands up and says, "I am sorry to report that your income is too high to qualify for public assistance."

The man under the fedora hat replies, "You talkin' to me? Do you know who you are talkin' to?" This gentleman has, after all, received nothing but great paybacks from local ward aldermen who gladly look the other way when he sells alcohol, and many other vices too. Who is this woman?

Much to her credit, she does not correct the man for using "who" instead of "whom." She cagily eyes a Thompson submachine gun, affectionately known as a "Chicago typewriter," sitting in the corner,

and quickly assesses her responses. After all, unreported income is just that, in her mind, and income just the same.

Watching her make voluminous records, the man says, “In my business we don’t take notes.”

Well maybe not, except with that “Chicago typewriter” in the corner some might say.

“You know you had better put us in for our welfare money or...”

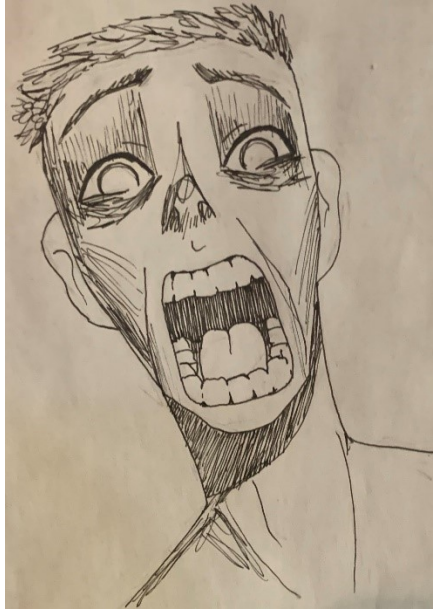
She interrupts. “You don’t want ME or our agency coming back to your place.” Spinning on her heels and seeing herself out the door, she retraces her journey back to the agency and onward to her home.

Years later, Rosalie traveled to yet another culture, initiating the development of a school of social work in Pahlavi University, Shiraz, Iran. Fullbrights provided that connection between faraway cultures. Wearing a scarf covering her head, or as she preferred to call it her “mini chador,” she went with her husband to the Shiraz bank in order to set up a joint checking account, which was, of course, unheard of.

They drank a lot of tea, but bankers weren’t quite ready to bridge that gap just yet. Time will tell. Time will tell.



Ghost Riders by David Fryer



vii

Rain was coming down as mist as we stood in the graveyard, the only light coming from the empty windows of a decrepit mental hospital adjacent the plot. I had a copper dousing rod in each hand, and my partner, Nadia, was eyeing the blinking lights of her hand-held ghost-meter critically.

“It’s green,” she said. We stopped about ten feet from a clump of tourists at a grassy spot with some scattered cypress trees nearby, heavy with Spanish moss. The lights had been red until we reached near the end of the plot. “What should we ask?”

I thought about the standard, yes or no, ghost questions—“Are you a child?” “Were you murdered?”—and decided to start out on the lighter side: “Are you content?”

Sure enough, the copper bars in my hands swung inward convincingly.

After a pregnant pause and with hesitation, my Russian companion asked, “Is there an afterlife?”

The copper rods were swiveling to answer, when we were interrupted by pounding footsteps and high-pitched screams.

This was the end of our tour that had started on a bus, in a heavy downpour, at the edge of New Orleans French Quarter, the night before Mardi Gras. Of the excursions we had signed up for so far—baby farm alligator wrestling, Bourbon Street beads, and hot sauce dodging—this “Ghost Riders” tour had me worried. I have a runaway imagination at times, and I wasn’t comfortable screaming in terror in front of Nadia, or myself for that matter.

Our tour guide, Byron, was black and attractive, with finely-tuned ghost-story-telling instincts. He had greeted us with grisly true stories about unfortunate, local souls who had met their end in very public and disturbing ways, as recently as the night before! Then he proceeded to show us how to spot a ghost. In this case, they show up distinctly in his iPhone camera shots as light blue, blurry, digital artifacts, or “spirit globes.” I never figured out how he was able to casually get this shape to appear consistently in his photo album. Ending his narrative, he took a seat behind the wheel and mentioned, “This tour is BYOB.” To which the bottle-carrying ladies in the back of the bus whispered hungrily, “Yah, bring your own Byron.”

New Orleans has a bustling ghost tour industry for several reasons, but primarily because of their unique graveyard design (coffins are nearly all above ground) and the population’s historic propensity to contract yellow fever. This since-vanquished plague has the unfortunate side effect of rendering a good fraction of the surviving patients unconscious, to the point of being buried alive. Combined with a pervasive voodoo religion, promoted by the resident African population, the milieu leads to plenty of graveyard excitement for visiting tourists.

Our first stop was a nearby “free” graveyard, the Saint Louis Cemetery. There are several “pay” graveyards that entrepreneurial

Louisianans have monetized for tourists, but Ghost Riders are budget minded.

We had been to the cemetery earlier that day on a biking tour. Even so, the atmosphere on this second visit was electric. Nearly the same stories were told by Byron that our bike tour guide had repeated, but the fact that we were, at the same time, actively searching for signs of the supernatural brought even trivial details to significance. An otherwise ordinary, brown and white cat, paralleling our group, was enough to set off intense speculation on spirit connections.

And so it went. Two more cemeteries and a pub stop later, Byron parked within a crowd of other tour-buses at the Charity Hospital Cemetery and presented us with pairs of copper rods and boxy handheld electronic devices, whose design was directly copied from *Ghostbusters* movies. "If the rods cross in front of you, the spirit's answer is a YES. But if the rods move outward, you're getting a NO answer," Byron told us confidently.

"Is there an afterlife?" Nadia repeated.

The dousing rods remained frozen in front of me, the ghost apparently deciding this question didn't need an answer. The green lights faded to red, and Byron started rounding up the rest of the group. We returned to the bus, arm in arm, and enjoyed the bus ride back into town. It was hard not to feel a little bit of youth creep into you, after experiencing a Ghost Rider tour. After all, you are looking at the world anew, by virtue of a completely different emphasis (for me).

We never figured out who was screaming in the background during our ghost interrogation, but we were told it was a man. Apparently, I am not alone. A reasonably large fraction of the male population is easily frightened by ghost stories. Hopefully his date took this into account.

The End is Near by Matthew McAyeal

Upstate New York, 1843

When Nathaniel Bennett got home, he was happy to see his eighteen-year-old daughter Sarah at her spinning wheel. It always pleased him to see her doing appropriate womanly things as opposed to reading those books that he thought might be leading her astray. It gave him some hope that maybe her soul wasn't doomed. His greatest fear was that he would go to heaven only to find that she had gone the other way. If that happened, he would gladly trade places with her, but he knew it didn't work that way.

"Sarah, you've heard of William Miller?" he said after the conclusion of their customary greetings.

"Yeah, he's the fanatic who thinks the world is about to end," answered Sarah, not taking her eyes off her work.

"What makes you so sure he's a fanatic?" asked Nathaniel, perhaps a little too forcefully. He hadn't meant to jump to William Miller's defense, but Sarah had set him off by using the dismissive tone she always used when talking about that which she called "superstition." While she had never used that tone of voice against the Bible, her usage of it still gave him the uncomfortable feeling that she was slipping away from him and into the fires of eternal damnation.

"Father, please!" said Sarah. "We have a good church, a respectable church. Please don't go out on a limb and drag me into some irregular cult!"

"Out on a limb?" asked Nathaniel, his anger rising. "You mean like how Martin Luther went out on a limb when he challenged the Catholic Church? Or like how Saul of Tarsus went out on a limb when he embraced Christ and became Saint Paul?"

"You know I don't mean it like that," said Sarah.

“Well, why not? William Miller could be the next Martin Luther for all you know! All I’m saying is that we should hear the Millerites out before we dismiss their leader as a madman.”

Sarah sighed as she brought her spinning wheel to a stop. “There are a lot of religious cults around here. Should we investigate all their claims?”

“Well, I just met with Mrs. Hamilton, and it turns out she’s a Millerite.”

“Mrs. Hamilton!” Sarah repeated. “That’s who you’re taking religious advice from? Everyone knows she’s the most irrational person in town!”

“You should not talk that way about a woman who has lost her only child!” said Nathaniel sharply.

“Father,” said Sarah, standing up, “can you not see how the Millerites have taken advantage of her grief? Obviously, they’ve gained her support by promising her that she will soon be reunited with her son. Don’t let them manipulate you the same way.”

What Sarah was saying did make some sense. But how could he admit that he, a grown man, was just as vulnerable to that kind of emotional manipulation as an irrational woman like Mrs. Hamilton? Even worse, how could he admit that it was another woman, a young maiden no less, who pointed it out to him? Clearly, he could not!

“I know you’ve been very unhappy since Ma died,” Sarah continued. “I can’t think why. I miss her too, but I think you overlook how much the Lord has blessed us. Our lives are good, Pa, and I don’t see why anything should have to change really quickly.”

“I don’t see why anything should have to change really quickly” had long been Sarah’s response to any suggestion that she should be getting married soon. That just about did it!

“No one wants the world to end, least of all a woman as fragile as Mrs. Hamilton!” Nathaniel declared. “I will hear what the Millerites have to say and judge it for myself! And a young lady like you should be thinking of marriage!”

Sarah sighed again. “Why couldn’t you have come back here enamored with the Shakers? At least then I wouldn’t have to be concerned about marriage anymore!”

“What do you mean by that?” Nathaniel asked sharply. “Are you saucing me?”

“N-no, Pa,” said Sarah.

Sarah Bennett didn’t think she had exactly lied. While she had meant her comment in jest, it was largely true that she wouldn’t mind the Shaker way of life. Being something of a recluse, she wouldn’t care for all that public dancing, but she would be perfectly happy being celibate. If she wasn’t already a committed Episcopalian, the conversion would just about be worth it.

“When *are* you planning to get married?” Nathaniel demanded to know. “You realize that the longer you put it off, the less choice you will have.”

“Can we talk about this some other time?” Sarah suggested, as she usually did when this unwanted topic arose.

“No, we’re talking about this *now!*”

Sarah sighed. She had tried to delay all talk of marriage for a long, long time. It wasn’t that she especially dreaded being married, which she imagined would involve roughly the same chores that she already did in her current life with her father. She just liked her quiet life of reading books and thinking about what she read while she worked, and she didn’t want it to be disrupted by the hassle of courtship—today, for example, she’d been reading a fascinating new book about Japan, that mysterious land to which almost all travel had been forbidden for over two hundred years. She’d always known that she couldn’t put off marriage forever, but she’d hoped that she could for at least a little while longer. No more. Now, the storm had come.

“I am your father,” Nathaniel continued, “and I say the time has come for you to choose a husband!”

“Why do I even need to get married if the world is ending?” asked Sarah.

"I don't know yet that it is ending," he replied. "But in the meantime, you should be preparing for marriage." He then walked over and picked up her book on Japan. "You seem awfully attached to these books," he said. "Perhaps you've forgotten the First Commandment, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.'"

"I don't *worship* them," said Sarah, feeling a little nervous as she always did whenever her father became concerned about all her reading. The fact that he was now walking in the direction of the fireplace was particularly troubling to her. Was he about to burn her new book? Surely not! He had never done anything like that before, nor even threatened to. But after a long pause...

"I wonder if you'd be better off if I just threw this into the fire," he said eventually.

"Father, no!" she declared, running to stand between him and the fireplace. "Remember Ma's last words? She wanted me to keep reading so that I could attract an intelligent husband."

"But you haven't been attracting intelligent suitors, have you?" Nathaniel replied. "Instead, you've been entirely focused on your books. Everyone told me I didn't want a bluestocking for a daughter, but I stupidly insisted on holding to your mother's dying words."

"I'm honored that you think I'm worthy of the Blue Stockings Society," said Sarah.

"If you think impertinence will convince me these books are good for you, you are quite wrong!" he answered, raising his arm as though to toss the book into the fire.

"I'll get married!" she said quickly. "I promise I'll choose a husband within the year! I'll still be under twenty then; that's not too old!"

Nathaniel's expression softened a little, but he still didn't lower his arm. "Perhaps I should burn this book anyway," he said, "to free you from the distraction."

"What if I met an intelligent gentleman who wished to read such a book?" Sarah suggested. "He would be most disappointed that I no longer had it."

Nathaniel seemed to consider that. He didn't look fully convinced, but he let her book fall safely to the floor anyway. Sarah wanted to dive for it to make sure it was undamaged but knew that would only reinforce her father's idea that she worshipped her books. For a long moment, neither of them spoke or moved.

"You know I am not seeking to torment you," Nathaniel finally said, "but this is really important. I am your only family, and I'm not going to be around forever. You must have a young man who'll support you when I'm gone."

"I know," said Sarah. Being an intelligent young woman, she knew as well as anyone how the world worked. She just wished the inevitable could have been delayed for a little while longer.

"So, it's one year," he said. "And if you have not chosen a husband by then, I will choose for you."

Sarah thought about that. She wasn't entirely averse to an arranged marriage, actually. She was a practical young woman who didn't believe in such fanciful notions as true love. Her only expectations for her future husband were that he not be horrible and that he allow her to continue reading her books. Perhaps a random selection would meet those simple requirements and save her the hassle of courtship. Certainly, her father wouldn't select someone horrible, at least not on purpose. But he just might select someone who didn't approve of her reading. In any case, she might as well make the best selection she could in the time that she had allotted for herself.

When Nathaniel set off to hear out the local Millerites, Sarah finally got her chance to retrieve her book on Japan from the floor. She dusted it off and put it away. She ought to return to her spinning wheel now, but she couldn't. She was too shaken.

It wasn't only marriage that weighed heavily on her mind. She was worried that her father would return to her a converted Millerite. Perhaps it would get her out of marriage for a while, but she'd much rather deal with choosing a husband, which she'd eventually have to

do anyway, than with living alongside a father who believed the world was ending. She tried to tell herself that it wouldn't happen. Her father had always been rather superstitious, but surely, he wouldn't drag her into William Miller's bizarre cult.

But whether it be marriage, Millerism, or even both, she knew this storm had only begun.

As Nathaniel headed for the Millerite camp meeting outside town, he wondered if he had taken a hard enough line with his daughter. The problem was that he didn't like seeing her unhappy, and he did want to honor his wife's dying words. He needed to remember that there were more important things to be concerned about, namely whether Sarah would be taken care of after he was gone and whether her soul would make it to heaven. He had to be willing to sacrifice her temporary happiness to achieve those ends, and he was certain Virginia would agree.

But surely, that had all been taken care of now that Sarah had agreed to choose a husband within the year. Of course, it would be harder for Nathaniel to manage without Sarah around, but he knew it would be for the best. Perhaps if she wasn't already on the righteous path, her husband would put her there. Certainly, Nathaniel wouldn't allow her to marry anyone who appeared to be corrupt or ungodly, and he didn't think Sarah was the type to elope.

Nathaniel was still trying to convince himself that Sarah's future was assured as he neared the camp meeting. The people there were singing hymns, just like at the church he attended with Sarah. He didn't know what he had expected from these Millerites, but somehow, it wasn't that. When he reached them, he saw the local Millerite leader, Obadiah Sargent, taking the pulpit. Nathaniel quietly joined the crowd, who were watching their leader with rapt attention.

"It pleases me to see that there are many new faces here today," Sargent told them. "Perhaps some of you didn't expect to come here.

Perhaps you believed the stories they tell about us in the newspapers. Perhaps you're surprised to see that we're not wearing those 'ascension robes' and standing on rooftops, as they like to portray us in their cartoons. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint anyone who came to gawk, but we're not freaks. We're just ordinary Christians, who, like all Christians, believe that there will be a Second Coming.

"Ask yourself why our opponents mock us. They could challenge our theology, but they prefer to portray us as lunatics. Why is that? Could it be they don't want to believe that Christ will return quite so soon? Could it be that they are afraid to face their Maker?"

Nathaniel could only think of Sarah and of how readily she had dismissed the Millerite faith. Was that a bad sign? It did seem like this Obadiah Sargent was confirming Nathaniel's worst fears about his daughter and without having even met her. But maybe he was just giving Sargent's opinion too much weight.

"What is our theology?" Sargent asked. "Do we worship William Miller? Do we regard him as a god? We do not! He is a humble servant before the Lord, as are we all. No, we get our peek at the future from *this* book!" he declared, holding the Bible up in the air. "It says in Daniel 8:14, 'Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.' These divine words were spoken to the prophet Daniel two thousand and three hundred years ago, and a prophetic day is one year. Brothers and sisters, we are living in our last year on earth!

"I realize it must sound incredible, but I ask you, if you do not believe that Christ will return by March 21, 1844, in accordance with Biblical prophecy, then when *do* you think He returns? In the year 2000? The year 3000? No doubt it will be some time safely beyond *your* lifetime. But it's been more than 1,800 years already. How much longer do you think it could really be? Or do you say He won't come now because you don't really believe in a Second Coming at all?"

Nathaniel had to admit that was a good point. The Second Coming had to come at some point, and he certainly didn't have any better

idea for when it ought to occur. Maybe it would happen in 1844. He'd certainly like to hear Sarah explain why it *couldn't* happen then. After all, if she didn't believe in the Second Coming, how could she call herself a Christian?

"Like Noah before the flood," Sargent was now saying, "we live in sinful times. It is a time in which many of our young women labor in satanic textile mills instead of the bosom of the home. This has never been seen before in history!"

Suddenly, Nathaniel felt enormously relieved to know that Sarah had never worked outside the home. Perhaps she wasn't so far gone after all? In any case, he would certainly keep it that way.

Sargent continued, "It is a time in which the President of the United States was not elected by the people, but rather ascended, like a monarch, upon the death of his predecessor. And over in the Hudson Valley, our government is now siding with Dutch patroons over the American citizens fighting with manly firmness to end their feudal bondage. The dream of our founders is dead, but fear not, we shall soon be reigned over by the world's only rightful monarch, Jesus Christ, and you'd better be on His side when the trumpets sound!"

It heartened Nathaniel to hear that Obadiah Sargent saw the decline of their country as clearly as he did. Maybe these Millerites really were onto something.

Nathaniel did not leave the camp meeting a converted Millerite, but he did leave it feeling certain that Sarah had been too quick to dismiss them as an irregular cult. He wasn't sure if he believed their prediction about the end of the world, but it was clear enough to him that they were good, ordinary Christians, and that he had made the right choice when he decided to hear them out.

Furthermore, the Millerites had indeed given him a peek at the future. Sooner or later, quite possibly sooner, Christ would return, and Nathaniel's mission was clear: he had to make sure that Sarah would be on the Lord's side when those trumpets sounded.

The Fall of an Empire by Jean Harkin

The nation fell divided
In half times many:
White vs. colors, blues against
Reds, rainbow arches vs. straight,
Love against hate, workers and
Billionaires, truth vs. lies fanned by
A cult the emperor called great.

The planet trolled the heavens,
Heating up as it turned.
Nations on its surface were along for
A ride, and the empire caught fire.
The emperor's face churned livid,
His tweets grew inflamed, as he
Blamed the ones who sounded the alarm.

A stealthy killer waited to
Finish chaos ignited by the
Flailing One's ploy for greatness.
Came the sole invader
Scaling the empire's defenses—
Corona the Loner trumped the emperor
As he screamed curses at the fates.

It was the end of a dream,
The fall of an empire
From sea to shining sea. And
As it imploded to ashes,
The emperor tweeted and taunted
His rage against truth, justice,
And the way of a dream.

*"Foreign terrorists could not kill America. But America can still kill itself."
Quote from Leonard Pitts Jr., The Miami Herald, May 17, 2020.*

Blue State or Blue State of Mind by RJ Russell

A piece the author wrote in May of 2019 that seems very relevant today and certainly presents a few challenges that many Portlanders (probably more now, with Covid-19) are facing:

I parked my car in front of my favorite loading zone—right in front of the Pine Street Market in beautiful downtown Portland, Oregon. It's a great place to people-watch (a writer's duty and obligation to their readers) as well as to contemplate one's happy thoughts. I was waiting in my car for a couple of friends to finish their workday. It's legal to park in the loading zone after 7:00pm; it was 6:55pm so I was safe from the ubiquitous meter-maids of Portland. Let's see—should I read the news on my mobile or just watch the world go by? I chose to watch the world go by.

The multiuse building that has become Pine Street Market (PSM) is an interesting hybrid of the old food courts found in the indoor malls of yesteryear and the gentrified buildings of today; it is a place where offices or living quarters are found upstairs, while kitschy businesses thrive on the ground floors of these hybrids. The first floor of the PSM building is dedicated to food and drink—it is a veritable cornucopia of everything from gourmet coffees to the perfect rama-noodle bowl. Hipsters can hang out after work, grab a chocolate martini or a beer, and have a day's-end chat with their friends at the "Whiz Bang Bar." Millennials with their children, toddlers, and baby strollers in tow share a pizza from one vendor, and, if dessert is on the menu, there are always the magical ice cream concoctions found at the "Salt and Straw."

The geographical location of this multipurpose building provides people-watching fodder of another type as well, for here, at the corner of Pine Street and Second Street, I see the never-ending intersection of the so-called "haves and have-nots." Just a stone's throw away from the PSM building are a couple of homeless shelters

and shelters the homeless have created themselves on the sidewalks that lead to the food and beverage nirvana that is the Pine Street Market. Strewn across Portlandia's landscape are the disenfranchised for whom there is no respite from cold nor heat, hunger nor thirst. They do not stop to ponder, "What shall I drink today, a cafe espresso or a dirty martini?" Nay, they have more immediate concerns such as, "Is it okay to leave my beige blanket and other sparse possessions unattended while I search for a public restroom?"

Ten steps away from the truck loading zone, where I was parked, was a modest-sized bag of possessions resting atop a nicely-folded, beige, furry blanket. The blanket was strategically placed directly across the entrance to the PSM; however, it was cleverly placed not to block the sidewalk or the entrance itself. Close enough to get the attention of the passersby, this homeless individual was perhaps hoping for a few pieces of coin to augment his paltry coffers. Maybe tonight would be the night when he could enjoy a bag of freshly made French-fries that wasn't fished out of a dumpster located behind the building...

As I contemplated this socioeconomic juxtaposition of humanity on parade, I noticed a homeless fellow getting awfully interested in that beige blanket that had been left unattended for a while. I watched him watch pedestrians. He even turned around to look at me, to look at what I was doing. Was I watching him? Not necessarily since I continued my observations on the sly. I made a mental note of his ruddy face, bulbous nose, and his squinty blue eyes. The years had not been kind to him, yet his clothes were not dreadful. His pants looked relatively clean and appeared intact. The shirt he wore was a faded yellow-striped, short-sleeved affair, and there were no stains or holes anywhere on his clothing. I gathered he must have access to a washing machine. Perhaps he had a bed at the Portland Rescue Mission, one of the aforementioned homeless shelters located a few blocks away.

Quicker than “Jack Be Nimble” he grabbed the beige blanket and stuffed it into a handy, opaque-blue, plastic bag he had in his possession. He sprinted past the Pine Street Market. From my rearview mirror I could see him turn left at the corner of Second Street onto Pine Street, where he was last seen heading eastbound towards the Willamette River. Was he headed to the places where trolls such as he congregate underneath the bridges of Portland? On any given day, you can see these disenfranchised tribes sleeping in tents. Or sleeping on a beige blanket that once belonged to someone else.

As for me, I now have at-the-ready a sturdy black backpack which contains a freshly-washed red blanket, a nice black coat with a fuzzy silver-grey lining, and an unopened pack of men’s socks. The coat is soft and warm, and you can remove the lining on warmer days. The backpack remains in the trunk of my car to this day. Perhaps in my travels across Portland, I will spot the homeless soul who was robbed and bequeath to him a black backpack with some urban survival items.

Epilogue

I never found the homeless man who was robbed. After obtaining a description of him from my friends, I searched for him whenever I found myself in downtown Portland. My friends tell me no one has seen him hanging around Pine Street Market since he was robbed. The backpack sat in our car trunk for about nine weeks. Eventually, I donated the backpack to a homeless shelter. Maybe the man who was robbed will find his way there, and, by happenstance and the Grace of Karma, he will be given the backpack containing those survival items for the mean streets of Portland.

Everyday Events by Joanne DeHaan

It's amazing to me how everyday events have opened my eyes to my inner feelings about racism. I have proudly announced that I am not prejudiced, that I accept everyone, regardless of skin color. And my recent trip to the hair salon reinforced that opinion.

Wearing my mask and covered with a plastic cape, I was eager for my haircut. In this strange time, the Covid-19 pandemic, hair salons had been closed for too many weeks to suit me.

The stylist made small talk. This time it wasn't "How's your family?" "Any vacations planned?" or "What are you doing this summer?" Instead she asked, "How are you dealing with this Covid thing?"

"Okay, I guess. Every once in a while, we take a drive somewhere."

"Any place special?"

"No, just any place to get out of the house and feel a little bit normal again."

"I know what you mean. I was sure glad when I was able to open the salon again. It was really hard just sitting at home."

"We did drive to the beach a while back. But the difficult part was finding bathrooms that were open."

"Yes, you have to consider that. You can't just pop into a fast-food restaurant anymore," she agreed.

Then I told her about our son and daughter-in-law's recent trip. They had followed their GPS to take a shortcut from one town to another. They ended up driving 25 miles of unpaved road through wilderness. I assured her that our son had not been worried because, when he was growing up, we used to take him tent camping and hiking in the forest. He even went backpacking with friends. He was used to gravel roads.

But our daughter-in-law told me that she was very glad she'd used the facilities before they started out, because there weren't any on that route. And I related that our daughter-in-law was appalled when

I told her that she didn't really need *facilities* if she's in that kind of wilderness and no one else is around.

My hair stylist stopped her snipping and smiled. "When I was a kid, we used to go camping where there weren't any facilities at all. Dad would just take the four-wheel drive and drive cross-country to this fishing hole he knew on the reservation." With one hand on the back of my chair and a far-away look of remembrance, she described how he set up camp with a tent, cooking area, and porta-potty.

I watched her in the mirror as she resumed my haircut. She was attractive with soft brown eyes. I had never considered her skin color unusual; some people tan easier than others. But, putting two and two together, I asked, "Are you Indian?"

"Yes," she said, "my grandfather was full Indian. My dad was half. And I'm a quarter. Mom's parents came from Norway. They did not approve of my dad and disowned my parents when they got married. But after I was born, things healed a bit."

"Did you feel other prejudice? Not just from your grandparents?"

"Let me tell you," she said. "I remember one time I invited kids from school to my birthday party. One girl wanted to come. But her mom told her that she couldn't come into my house because I was Indian. I was too young to get it. But my mom was sure mad."

"People can be so cruel," I conceded.

"Yeah, just think. That's how prejudice gets spread. It's handed down from parent to child. That mother was teaching her daughter that it was wrong to associate with Indians."

"Somehow, we need to get that stopped," I agreed. "I wish there was an easy answer. My dad was terribly prejudiced. I don't remember what changed my mind. Maybe it was in Sunday School where we sang, *Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.*"

"We didn't live on the reservation or in town, just out in the country. In town, we were looked down on. There's plenty of discrimination there, even now. And it goes both ways. When I went to the reservation to register as an Indian, they seemed to be

prejudiced against me because I wasn't Indian enough!" she lamented.

For several weeks, I was quite self-assured that I was not part of the racism problem, and I wished those who were would shape up. But then, this happened.

Driving to the grocery store, I noticed a young blonde woman walking toward the store carrying an empty shopping bag. I made a mental note that if I saw her in the store, I would offer her a ride back home.

I didn't see her in the store but looked for her as I left. Instead, I caught a glimpse of a dark-skinned person wearing a jacket and baggy pants, struggling to carry two heavy bags. I reasoned that I couldn't stop because there were cars parked where I would need to pull over. And, besides, I didn't know if the person was a man or woman.

As I drove on, I realized that I had made a racist decision. That I had feared picking up a dark-skinned person. And I was ashamed when I recounted the incident to my husband. Then I remembered that, during this Covid epidemic, I had not yet had, and didn't intend to have any other person in my car. My husband and I are in a vulnerable group and are being careful about exposure. So, in this example, I felt exonerated.

It made me realize, though, that I am prejudiced, emotionally if not intellectually. It helps me understand how some police officers decide to use their weapons. Police officers are, after all, just members of society, same as you and me.

Speaking of which, how would you have reacted in these circumstances? Do you have emotional prejudice that wars with your mindset? How will you and I overcome it?

No Time for Pollyanna by Jean Harkin

"It will work out," she said.

"It will all be fine."

She smiled,

Though wondering why

Her mail had not come that day.

Someone wants to cripple

Our postal service in time

For Election Day vote-by-mail.

Guess who doesn't choose to lose

(Orange) face and face defeat!

"I can't believe

A story so dire," she said.

"And besides, the polls

Will stay open 'til eight.

It will all work out so right."

Will voters risk their

Lives in packed-close lines

To cast their votes, even to save

Democracy, so hard to hold—

As Benjamin Franklin once foretold?

"Don't worry," she said.

"Our American system is strong.

And the virus will be gone

Away by Election Day.

It will all work out. It will all be fine."

With Apologies to Shakespeare, Gloucester and Clarence by Sheila Deeth



viii

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer, if the son of 'flu,
In all its clouds that loom upon our house,
Were to deep bosom of the ocean sent.
Now are our chins bound with victorious cloths;
Our bruis'd arms raised up for the vaccine's prick;
But stern alarm's ignored for merry tweets
While dreadful marches do highlight the trick
Grim-visaged war hath loosed on peaceful front;
For now, instead of 'fessing dark misdeeds
We fright the souls of false adversaries,
And caper nimbly through our city's streets
To the lascivious pleasing of a fool.
This winter's ill remains still cruelly bent
To strut before all wanton seasons' nymphs
Deformed, unfinish'd, broken, discontent. Still
Summer comes.

No Stopping Us Now by Judy Beaton

After midnight
before morning sun rises
crisis counts seem lowest,
darkness hides our sorrows,
even shadows creep in silence.
Forget weight of yesterday
garroting our serenity
hung over too many limbs,
instead let sleep rock you gently, while you
journey through fabled lands.
Knead tight muscles
layered like seasons
mulched into dense denial and pain.
Nod your head without hesitation,
of course, you agree, denial led us here
pain just might guide us out
quickly—oh we hope quickly!
Rancor slows the pace,
sabotages steps undertaken,
turmoil both lowers and raises stakes,
upsets status quo—yes, at last,
victory seems possible!
Warriors all, we seek a new morning light.
Xylographs printed and posted,
yellow labels claim truth: Black Lives Matter
Zealous to the core, no stopping us now.

I Hold These Burning Truths Self-evident

by Sheila Deeth



ix

I believe black lives matter. No, that doesn't make me a baby-killer or anti-family (really?) as somebody claimed on Facebook.

I believe LGBTQ lives matter. And I'm not an atheist as someone else insisted.

I believe the Bible matters. That means I read it and pray it; I don't use it to beat up my neighbors or prop up my photograph.

I believe immigrants matter. That doesn't make me un-American. The judge who welcomed me to citizenship told me immigrants matter.

I believe refugees matter. And I'm not a lawbreaker.

I believe the homeless matter, and the hungry, and those evicted because they're sick or they've lost their jobs and can't pay the rent.

I believe the physical health of the community and all its members matters, regardless of wealth and good fortune.

I believe wearing masks can save lives. I'm not drinking the kool-aid; I'm respecting the scientists who've spent their lives learning about epidemics.

I believe the earth matters, and it's warming. We knew the West Coast climate fires were coming, and among all the explanations and attempts at blame, we know the warming earth remains as primary cause. We sat back and argued when climate scientists warned us of the danger. So tornadoes become more numerous and hurricanes more fearsome and frequent, and oceans rise, it snows in summer, and still the earth is warming. But none of this means I can't read or won't listen—just that I choose to read and listen to those who have studied more than I.

I believe the Portland demonstrations would have been less riotous if not incited by DC interference. But no, despite my Facebook commenter's accusation, I'm not a rioter.

I believe in the right to free speech, but not the right to brandish a gun (or a paint-gun, or a knife, or teargas, or fireworks, or...) while speaking.

I believe we have a right to be heard, but not to terrorize our neighbors while being heard.

I believe we have a right to speak, and a responsibility to listen. Those whose rights have not been trampled bear the greater responsibility.

And I believe, one day, we may learn to "love our neighbors as ourselves," which includes refugee, immigrant, black, Christian, atheist, LGBTQ, scientist, rich, poor... neighbors made homeless by fire or sickness or economic disaster... neighbors near and far...

I believe all lives matter.

Do you?

Bonfires of Insanity by Jean Harkin

Patriots waving Trump flags
Invade the capital city.
“Death to progressives and liberals,”
They shout and fire their guns.

Wayward winds howl in protest,
Sweeping canyon walls and river valleys.
Sparks are kindled into raging fires;
Infernos circle towns and forests.

Fevers of hate, Trump-kindled,
Fuel the flame in city centers.
As neighborhoods, once friendly,
Reel from heat and smoke.

Homes are gone, towns smolder in ash;
Families flee and cry for loved ones lost.
Pets and wildlife hungry, thirsty, dazed,
While a faint sun pales in haze.

And why? Is this our punishment for
Hate and stupidity, ignorance to signs
Of leadership awry and science defamed?
Or do gods seek to save us for a brighter day?

Reset by Robin Layne

When God pushes the Reset button
And the world starts again
I hope
I pray
The miracles we need desperately
Will fall from His hands
Into open hearts
Emptied by suffering and strangeness
And questions
For it is only the empty
Who can be filled
With things we never dream could be.

In this topsy-turvy time
When the poor have sudden money
Or doubt it will come their way
Or hope in hope that it will
Checks drop like scattered raindrops
Into mailboxes, and bank accounts
Have longer numbers like magic.
For so long
I never wanted to be rich,
Didn't want to be responsible
For numbers I couldn't keep track of.
Then I said to God,
If you want me to be, I'll accept it...
And now *this!*
Money is hollow
When you can't go out with friends to eat
And celebrate good fortune.
I pray to buy the things I need
And help people who really can use it.

Like so many, I spend most days alone.
I build dreams
With hard work from an old chair
And tire of sitting while my feet swell,
Contemplate walks to nowhere
On streets free of sidewalks
Or noisy with traffic
Where I meet people who like to be apart from me,
Who consider it kindness when I go out of my way
To avoid them.

When the world starts again
I am forgetting what I even imagine
It will be like.
Will it be like freshness after a storm?
Will too many people be gone?
Or will we know? Will we still be in the dark
Our ears filled with poison of right versus left
And each being evil to the other
Each fighting still, like all through the plague?
Will the world start again
Or will it just go on the same as always?
It may depend on the perspective
Of faith. Someone described long ago
What would happen now.
He said that after the plague
Millions would come
To trust the only One
Who can push the Reset button.
Who will have eyes to see it?

(I heard David Wilkerson prophesied a worldwide pandemic that would close businesses, restaurants, bars, and churches and that it would be followed by a huge worldwide spiritual revival. Some sources say he never foretold this.)

Don't Poke the Tiger by Sheila Deeth

All I complain about is smoke
While others lose their lives, their homes, their hope.
We woke the tiger. Hear him roar.



Kaylee's Plague by Matthew McAyeal



xi

Not many people could say one of their favorite memories took place in the rain, but six-year-old Kaylee could. On that wonderful day, she ran through the park, laughing with glee as she jumped in every puddle that she could find. Mom and Dad were not angry that she was getting her clothes wet. They were happy too. They were all happy. Kaylee would think a lot about this memory in the unhappier days that followed.

It all started with those serious TV people. While Kaylee used the TV to watch fun movies like *Cinderella*, *Frozen*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, Mom and Dad used it to watch serious people talk seriously about serious things. These people used a lot of serious words like “President Trump,” “Congress,” and “impeachment.” Kaylee did not know what these words meant, and she did not care to know as she was sure the answers would be boring. She did not understand why her parents liked to watch the TV people when they could be watching Queen Elsa singing “Let It Go” instead, but that was just what adults were like.

One day, the TV people started saying a new word: “coronavirus.” Kaylee didn’t give it any thought. It was just another serious word from the serious world of the serious TV people. Besides, the serious things the TV people talked about had never affected her life before, so why should this? Or at least that’s what she thought until, in this case, it did.

“Kaylee, I have something important to tell you,” said Mom. “You aren’t going to be going to Kindergarten for a while.”

“Why?” asked Kaylee, only partially listening as she was more interested in playing with her *My Little Pony* toys.

“The coronavirus is making so many people sick that they’re closing all the schools,” said Mom.

Kaylee’s eyes went wide. She was familiar with people, even the teacher, staying home from school if they were sick, but had no idea that there was a point at which they’d close the school entirely because too many people were sick. Perhaps this wouldn’t be a bad thing for her. Kaylee would miss her friends, of course, but at least she would get a break from having to learn about those complicated letters and numbers, right?

But no, it turned out she was expected to carry on all that difficult work at home. Even worse, she was no longer allowed to go on playdates.

“But can’t I go to Zoe’s house?” she pleaded. “Zoe never gets sick!”

It didn’t matter. She was only allowed to play with Zoe through the computer screen now. It was also the only way in which she was allowed to talk to Grandma, whom they used to visit every Saturday in her nursing home. In fact, Kaylee wasn’t allowed to leave the house much at all anymore, and it was making her stir-crazy!

At the same time, they were suddenly running low on many things, namely food, soap, and toilet paper. Mom and Dad didn’t take Kaylee with them when they went shopping anymore, but she saw images of empty store shelves on the TV.

“Those damn hoarders!” said Dad. “If I meet one of those human pigs who hoarded everything and only left scraps for the rest of us, I’m going to violate social distancing with my fist!”

Kaylee imagined pigs, walking on two legs and wearing human clothes, coming into the stores and buying everything. Why did she have to be kept inside when interesting things like this were happening? And most frustratingly, the TV coverage never seemed to show the “human pigs.” Kaylee supposed that they just didn’t get them on video.

Her parents were not only mad at these mysterious pigs, who apparently showed up at the same time as the coronavirus. They were also angry at some of the serious people who appeared on the TV. Kaylee didn’t care about that, of course. It was just adults being adults. She was, however, concerned and a little scared by the fact that her parents were increasingly angry at each other.

“We can’t afford all this anymore,” said Dad, “not now that the Chinese virus has cost me my job!”

“You shouldn’t call it that,” said Mom. “It’s racist.”

“How’s it racist?” he asked hotly. “It started in China, didn’t it?”

“Yes, but you don’t need to talk about it like *that!*”

“Oh, so it’s racist to notice things now, is it?”

So, it seemed this coronavirus began in China. The only thing Kaylee knew about China was that it was where *Mulan* took place. Kaylee hoped *Mulan* was okay.

Kaylee now spent a lot of time staring out her window. It was a beautiful day, perfect for going to the park, but they didn’t go to the park anymore. It was now considered too dangerous. It didn’t seem possible that they could be in such danger while in such nice, peaceful surroundings.

Looking out at that sunny weather, Kaylee longed to go back to that rainy day in the park. Back then, her parents weren’t so angry, they weren’t running low on anything, and the serious words of the serious TV people stayed in their serious world where they belonged.

Cleanliness is Next to Godliness— and also is the New Normal? by RJ Russell



xii

In early 2019, well before Covid-19 became a dreaded global pandemic and a household term, a video of Naomi Campbell cleaning her airplane seat and wearing a mask and gloves surfaced and was shared online. The video went viral. It made the rounds because this behavior felt extreme at the time and seemed to border on a very public display of OCD. Or if you ever watched Monk (the detective who was hyper-phobic about germs), it seemed, well, Monk-like.

Today, of course, no one would question Naomi about this behavior or anyone else who deigns to do their own clean-up job before occupying a seat that was moments before occupied by someone else. And even though planes are cleaned before boarding occurs and before the jet whisks off to a new destination, everyone also knows that time is money and the cleaning crew has mere minutes to clean the plane and exit in order to allow for timely passenger boarding and takeoff. Germs could be lurking in every nook and cranny the cleaning crew missed.

Which brings me to my next point: what is the “new normal” versus the “old normal” when it comes to things like hygiene, safety,

and everyday behavior? Sometimes when I am out in public, I find myself constantly veering to the left or the right to avoid getting closer than six feet to anyone. And there are times when I am doing this—thinking I am being a conscientious citizen, respectful of others—that I get “the look.” Weird stares or furrowed brows, as if my behavior were inappropriate, eccentric, or over-the-top. Is it, though? I mean, we are talking about a matter of life and death, aren’t we? If I zig when I should have zagged and get too close to someone, might I contract the disease inadvertently and bring it home? What if that person sneezes at an inopportune time and it travels beyond six feet? Medical experts have said that these droplets from a sneeze or a cough (or even someone laughing) can travel upwards of fifteen to twenty feet. Can one be too careful in this present-day environment?

Some folks have chosen to throw caution to the wind and party like it’s 1999: They wear no masks when they go to bars, go to nightclubs, raves, and family gatherings. They are tossing all caution to the wind. Sadly, in more times than I care to count, we find that these actions have had dire consequences not only for the carefree risk-takers, but for their families, their parents, and their grandparents. People have sent their kids off to camp, to provide their children with some sense of normalcy, outdoor fun, and the experience of a group activity. No doubt the parents were thinking their kids were safe, only to find out half the camp contracted the disease, and now everyone at camp would have to be quarantined. In trying to be pre-Covid-normal, all of these scenarios have proven to be dangerous, and in some cases, deadly.

Perhaps there is no going back to the life we knew before March of 2020. At least for now, people should stop trying to return to the good old days until a vetted vaccine can be distributed and all of us are inoculated. But in the meantime, I guess the new normal is buying spiffy cleaning products, lots of hand-sanitizers and hand-washing soap, Lysol, and 99% alcohol and hoping for the best.

I don't think I have ever spent as much time in the cleaning products aisle of stores reading labels and checking to see what the percentage level of antibacterial agents is in any given product I buy. Sometimes I just want to start screaming, "Enough, already," as I am standing there in the middle of the aisle, desperately trying to finish with my shopping chores. The people shopping around me probably wouldn't find that too normal, though...

So what is the new normal? Constant cleaning, scrubbing, and sanitizing? Constant vigilance, never letting your guard down when in public? Is the new normal focusing on gardening, going for long walks, and reading about places that you long to travel to and see for yourself, but know you never will?

It's hard to find time to live when you're worried about whether or not you bought the right cleanser with the right percentage of antibacterial solution within its brightly-colored packaging. It's hard to find time to be creative when you are reminded of a rising death toll every day. It's hard to smile or laugh or even remember what it felt like to be carefree.

Yet life goes on: The days are getting shorter now and we are fast-approaching Fall. And no doubt we will all do our best to put on a happy face for family birthdays and upcoming holidays. We won't see far-away family, but we will Skype or Zoom or call and send our best wishes and our love. We will soldier on, armed with our cleansers and our bacteria-fighting cleaning agents. And maybe, somewhere in this giddy pace of cleaning and staying home, we will steel away any feelings of doubt or sadness; we will "keep calm and carry on," and we will find a path forward to happier days ahead, where everyone can breathe a sigh of relief. And none of us will be wearing a mask when we do so.

Not Social (haiku) by Robin Layne

From six feet away
We keep back as we were ordered
But why can't you smile?



Coming Together on ZOOM by Zita Podany



xiv

We're having a meeting,
Yes we are.
Over ZOOM
tomorrow night.

All the invitations
have been emailed out.
Hope they all come
for a great turnout.

It's our new way
of coming together.
Through the ether
so we can see each other.

Tomorrow is now today
and yesterday seems like a dream.
Here we sit tonight
staring at our screen.

One by one they all log in.
"Can you hear me now?"
They all begin
as people log in and out.

They appear for a while.
The chorus continues,
“Can you see me now?”
as faces appear and disappear.

At last the meeting starts
as we all talk at once.
Feedback from microphones
scratching at our hearts.

Dogs barking,
children screaming,
“Mom, where are you?”
They need her now, this very evening.

Three frozen faces,
two watery voices.
I think she said,
“We’re trading places.”

I can’t be sure
about what I heard.
I see several thumbs up
so it must be true.

I type into the chat
“Trading places?”
A reply appears,
“Her kids are getting braces.”

Words and lips out of synch.
Distorted heads on wacky backgrounds.
Yes, we’re having a meeting,
over Zoom tonight.

The Challenge of Teaching Music Online by Joe Mendez



xv

Back in mid-March when the United States was hit with the Wuhan virus, I, like many others, thought that the virus would come and go within a few days—at the most a couple of weeks. In mid-March I only taught piano for the first two weeks, and then everything was shut down. I called up several of the parents of my students and asked them if they would feel safe if I continued to give in-person lessons starting in April. Every single parent told me that, for the safety of their children and me, they would rather wait until May and see what happens. I had no choice but to honor their wishes and wait until May, but most importantly I had to wait and trust on the Lord.

When I lose income, it's not always easy for me to trust and obey and wait. Sometimes I'm good at it, and sometimes I'm not so good at it. Lucky for me, my wife knows how to set aside a little money each month from our income for bills and for emergencies. We were

blessed because even though we had less coming in, the emergency money from the month before, that my wife had set aside, enabled us to pay our bills on time with no problem for April. Thank you, Jesus.

But now May was coming. What happens if I can't go back to teaching beginning May 1st?

During April, our small group leader suggested we have our Bible study on something called "Zoom," since we could no longer meet in person. I had no idea what "Zoom" was. I'd heard of Skype, but never used it. So, I asked if he could help me download whatever I needed to be able to join in. He did. And now we are "Zooming."

What do you think is more embarrassing: the fact that I know nothing about how the internet or Zoom works, or that my two students that are *five-years-olds* know more than I do about technology? In fact, they are the ones who suggested I have my lessons on Zoom. Imagine that! I thought Zoom meant that you go fast like in a car or on a fast ride at the carnival.

So I am really thankful that our small group leader suggested doing our Bible Study on Zoom!

Near the end of April, after calling all the parents of my students about possibly doing lessons on Zoom, about two-thirds said yes. I don't know if you have ever experienced this, but sometimes during my Zoom classes the screen will freeze up and the sound of my voice, or the sound of my student's voice, will start to break up. After a few seconds, I have to ask my student if they're in the swimming pool underwater playing their piano, because that's what it sounds like. We both laugh, but after it happens several times during the lesson it's no longer funny; it's just annoying and frustrating.

My question to this stupid computer is: how can this be called progress when I'm the instructor of the class and I'm not in class? Did Casper the friendly ghost suddenly sign in as the substitute teacher and take over my class? I do not want to go back to my *five-year-old* students and ask them for help with Zoom.

I know that none of you high-tech gurus out there ever have any problems with Zoom like I do, but it's frustrating, and, after about fifteen minutes of trying to fight with an invisible Zoom-person or machine, it's no longer funny.

Sometimes I will receive a notice that my student is waiting in the Zoom room, and now I'm all excited and thrilled that my student has made it in. Then the computer will ask me if I will admit the student and I click "yes," and I wait... and I wait... and I wait... and nothing! Nothing! Then I receive a call from the parent of my student, and they tell me that their child has been waiting in the Zoom room for about ten minutes.

So, I explain to them that I will get out of the Zoom room and let them get in first, and then I will re-enter the room. We agree and we say our good-byes. I get out and wait a few seconds, then I re-enter the Zoom room—I call it the "black hole" room. This is because once you get in it's like a big black hole where you can't see your way around, and the more I try to get out, the deeper I get into areas that I am less familiar with, and now I'm more frustrated than I was before, and I've wasted more time trying to get out of an area where I never wanted to be in the first place. Instead of a thirty-minute lesson it is now a twenty-five-minute lesson! If my lessons are back to back, then my second lesson and every lesson after that will be late.

Someone once told me that this is progress. Well, if this is progress then I'd rather go back to the dinosaur days, or before, and just live in a cave. I'm thinking, how hard could it be to write all your thoughts down in pictures? If you make a mistake, then just find another rock.

Words I Never Want to Hear Again by Karin Krafft

I was dozing off on the couch when my cell phone startled me. Who would call at such an hour? When I looked at my watch, I realized it wasn't that late actually; just dark and overcast.

"Hi Grandma," a cheerful voice at the other end said. "Can I come over? I have something important to talk to you about."

"Of course, Josh, you know you are always welcome."

"Cool, see you in about half an hour."

What could be so important? On a Saturday evening? Was he in trouble? Why wasn't he talking to his parents? I really hoped he wasn't going to be a father...

Almost to the minute, thirty minutes later, I heard my grandson's familiar enthusiastic knocking on the front door.

"Where's Mom?" I enquired.

"Mom?" Josh responded sheepishly. "You *do* remember that I got my driver's license, don't you?"

I didn't remember, but replied, "Of course I remember. I'm not that old yet."

"So, what's the problem?" I asked, as he made himself comfortable on the couch. "Are you in any kind of trouble?"

"Trouble?" he responded, as he threw his head back, laughing. "You're just like Mom. Going to worst-case scenario immediately."

"Sorry," I said. "I guess we tend to be a bit overprotective."

It wasn't that I wasn't delighted to see him; it was just a bit out of the ordinary for him to simply pop by on a Saturday evening, by himself.

Taking a sip of my now cold coffee, I waited for him to start talking, feeling very smug that he felt comfortable talking to his old grandmother. I had raised him well, or at least contributed...

"So, Grandma, we have this history project at school, and we have to pick a year to write about. I picked 2020. It had to be a year far enough in the past that our parents would not really remember

much. But you remember, don't you? You're always saying you hope there won't be another 2020."

"Very true. What do you want to know?"

"My friend Eric found a piece of paper when he was going through stuff in his grandma's attic and I'd like to talk to you about it."

My first thought was *Why is Eric going through his grandma's stuff?* But of course, that was none of my business.

"Show me," I said, as Josh took a folded yellow document from his pocket.

Unfolding the paper, I felt that familiar, uncomfortable knot in my stomach.

"Words I never ever want to hear again—2020 Pandemic lingo.

- Coronavirus
- Covid-19
- Bats
- Social distancing
- Six feet
- Flattening the curve
- Pandemic
- Stay at Home Order
- The 20-second rule
- Toilet paper
- Hoarding
- Masks
- The Orange Man"

"You're awfully quiet, Grandma. Do any of these ring a bell? If they do, I'd love to hear your opinion. Did any of these affect you in any way?"

"What is it you always say, Josh? Oh yes, 'You can say that again.'"

"Great! I knew you'd be able to help."

I sighed and began. "It all started at the end of 2019, when we started hearing about people in Wuhan, China, getting extremely sick

and dying at an alarming rate. They called this virus ‘The Coronavirus,’ Covid-19.”

“I heard it was caused by people eating bats. Gross,” Josh injected.

“That was the official story. Of course, there were a lot of conspiracy theories. The virus spread all over the world and killed millions before the medical community developed a vaccine.”

“What kind of conspiracy theories?”

“Some people believed that the Chinese had released it on purpose, or a science experiment had gone wrong. There was never any proof of that, though. After a while it was classified as a pandemic because it spread so fast and globally.”

“So, what happened?”

“Well, at first, not much. We were told to stay home as much as possible and only leave the house for work, shopping, and exercise. Most stores, except grocery stores and pharmacies, were closed. Restaurants were closed. Movie theaters were closed. We were told that people over sixty were at risk, so they had to stay home and became very isolated.”

“Wow, so what did you do?”

“Your Grandpa and I both worked from home while taking care of your mom and your uncle. Believe me, it wasn’t easy. We had to do your great-grandma’s shopping, because she was over sixty. We didn’t see her for many months, and she became very depressed.”

“That’s so sad,” Josh said.

“Yes, it was.” I replied, wiping a tear from my eyes.

“I heard that you had to stay six feet away from everybody, is that true?” Josh continued.

“Yes, that was the social distancing. If we left the house, we had to stay six feet away from people. When going for walks, if we saw someone coming towards us, it was almost like a game of who would cross the street to not encounter anyone.”

“That’s weird.” Josh said. “But kind of cool.”

It may sound cool to a seventeen-year-old, but I remember the panic I felt when I saw another person coming towards me. What if they had the virus? What if they coughed when I walked past them?

“What about the ‘Stay at Home’ order? The history books said that caused quite a stir.”

“Yes. The Governor said we needed to flatten the curve to save lives. That meant that we needed to slow down the spread of the virus. If people stayed home, they would not spread the virus. As usual, some people didn’t like this, because they believed their freedom was taken away. There were large demonstrations all over the country. It was a very strange time indeed.”

“Why didn’t someone order them to stay home. Like, the President?”

“That is a very good question, Josh.”

Josh continued, “What was the deal with the toilet paper? I heard that shops were out of it for months. Is that really true?”

“Yes, unfortunately it is. People went completely nuts hoarding toilet paper. Some shops were out of it for weeks, and when they eventually got it, they had to ration it.”

“That’s really crazy. Did people hoard other things too?”

“Yes, hand-sanitizer and soap disappeared from the stores really fast. Lysol and other disinfectants were sold out. People who couldn’t find sanitizers panicked. However, we were also told that the most important thing to do was to wash our hands for twenty seconds anytime you basically touched anything.”

“Is it true that you had to wear masks when you went outside?”

“If we were in places where we might encounter anyone, yes, we were supposed to wear masks. But this was a big controversy, because the President didn’t believe in wearing a mask.”

“Thanks for all the info, Grandma, I really appreciate it. I only have one more question. Who is ‘The Orange Man?’ Was somebody selling oranges?”

“Not exactly,” I replied. But that’s a story for another day.

I Want It by Joanne DeHaan

When I need an ingredient for my cooking, I go to the store and buy it. My pantry and fridge are well stocked. I even have a couple boxes of canned food that I put away for use in the event of an earthquake. That was the most logical reason for an emergency in Oregon. In fact, I had participated with six other women in our neighborhood to set up community meetings and bring in speakers to inform people how to prepare for the aftermath of an earthquake.

But no one had expected anything like the shutdown for the Covid-19 pandemic. Suddenly everyone was in need of lots of toilet paper. Toilet paper! It didn't take but a few days, and there wasn't any toilet paper on the shelves. Well, we didn't need any right then. I had already stashed a six-pack of rolls in our emergency box. And, as it happened to be, we had run out of toilet paper about a week earlier. My husband picked some up when he had stopped at a store, but it wasn't the kind that I liked. So when I did my weekly shopping, I bought the kind I liked. When everyone else was busy grabbing all the toilet paper they could find, I just smirked that I didn't need any. At least not then.

But there were a few food items that I would have liked to have. And I didn't feel safe going to the store to buy them. "People over 65 and those with underlying conditions are especially vulnerable," yelled the media. I stayed home and worried about how I'd get what I *needed*.

Our neighbor and our daughter offered to pick up food for us. "Going to the store," they'd say, "what can I get for you?" It was great. We set up a special table in the garage for exchanges. They would drop off the milk and pick up the money I had left for them. I usually left a treat, too—rhubarb cake or chocolate chip cookies.

There came a time when I needed several items and didn't feel comfortable asking them to do major shopping for me. Our daughter found out that Fred Meyer was waiving their pick-up fee. I went online and started ordering food. And so did many other people. It

seems that everyone was staying home and ordering their groceries. Fred Meyer was overwhelmed with orders. An order placed one week, couldn't be picked up until the next. I had to plan ahead.

I had been regularly baking bread in my bread machine and bought bread flour and other ingredients in the bulk-food section at Winco. But when the pandemic hit, and information on how the virus passed from one person to another was sketchy, Winco removed all the items from the bulk section. They didn't want to be responsible for spreading the virus. I just wanted what I needed. But I couldn't buy it in the small quantities that I was used to. I called other stores and found some items only available in five- and ten-pound sacks.

And, to make matters worse, more people were baking. When so many businesses closed, their employees were finding themselves at home with not enough to do. Many of them took up bread baking. And they depleted the supply of bread flour. I asked my daughter to look for it anytime she went to a store. I ordered it, but often it wasn't available when my order was filled.

Eventually, I donned a mask and shopped on my own and found the ingredients I needed. But it was a lot of work, hurrying from one store to another. And now, to make sure that I have what I want when I want it, I buy extra. I re-stock when I still have an ample supply of what I consider the essentials. And yes, I have extra toilet paper, too. This Covid-19 shutdown has taught me to not take things for granted.

At some point I realized that I was one of those awful people that "want what they want, when they want it!" Oh my! I've been pointing fingers the wrong way. As they say, when you point at someone, with one finger, four fingers are pointing back at you. I was guilty of what I accused them of.

Consequence of Growing Up by Mindy Black

Sometimes I wonder how strange it would be for my own daughter to rise from sleep, leaving this life to drive with a lover down the highway all night, in the angry and determined recklessness of early light. Would I dream of her sinning in the sunny world of palm trees and ocean breezes? Would I ache for her doomed soul that would one day possibly plunge into the depths of hell? Would I disown her and talk cruelly of her to others, in order to gain their sympathy for myself?

What a dark time that would be! What a dark time it *was*. To be rejected by family was such a dark time. Not like the dark time now. At least now everyone in the whole world has their own version of what is happening to them because of the pandemic. Some people can even relate to other people's stories. And those similar stories are sometimes reaching them in real time. My story, so long ago, seemed to be only happening to me. Being young and all alone, with no one on my side, and with no one to share my story, made things seem even worse. My "crime" seemed to be that I had started growing up, questioning things, and wanting different things than what my parents wanted for me. This seems typical, but, when you are living it for the first time, it is actually very traumatic. And my parents' dreams for me may not be what you would expect. For example, I remember my mother encouraging me to go to a really expensive private Christian college that we could not afford "just for a few months until you meet a nice young man! There's no reason you have to actually finish school!"

So, I left. I already felt like I didn't belong there anyway. I couldn't remember the last time my parents had hugged me or said, "I love you." When had they encouraged my art or writing dreams, or said anything supportive or loving to me at all? Sometimes I wonder how dishearteningly we can act toward each other because of pride. Or fear. Or religion.

Would my own short-comings or biases break my own daughter's heart one day? This is what has been on my mind this summer. Of course, I've worried about the current events of the day, as well. Who hasn't? But this summer also marks a very unique time in my relationship with my daughter. While everything else in my life seems to have been put on hold or in limbo, nothing has stopped my daughter from growing up. My daughter is not quite a teen yet, but she is the same age that I was when I stopped receiving physical and verbal reassurances of love from my own parents. No hugs or compliments left for me at all around this age.

I see my daughter roll her eyes, or pull away, or spend countless hours with her door closed so she can Facetime with friends. These are things that all tweens start to do! I must have done things like this, too. Sometimes, my feelings are hurt, so I can see how my mother may have felt at times. But I also know that I never want my daughter to think I've stopped loving her! Although she'll need her independence, that shouldn't mean that we will lose everything between us. I read somewhere, once, that this is the time to begin "unknowing" your child, but I refuse to believe that this is the end of it. As a teenager, I still needed my parents to stay connected to me, even when I acted like I didn't.

My eyes close, and I feel a sigh escape because I can remember how that feels. I didn't want them making decisions for me, but I did need them to be there when I made bad ones or good ones for myself.

When we left in the early morning, it was dark, and I was afraid. The experience of being 2,000 miles away ended up full of adventures, but not the fun, exciting kind. I was hungry and homeless at times. I missed the family that I thought didn't want me. The boy I had run away with had become emotionally abusive to me. Those years I spent away from home will forever be stamped on my soul as a hurtful journey where I felt alone and abandoned. I should have had a place to come home to, a safe refuge. Warm arms to hold me and

tell me it's going to be okay. But my mother's fear and pride and religion kept me away. Even when I finally did return, I was never really home. No one ever even asked to hear my story.

Now I see my daughter changing, becoming more like me—defiant, independent, and willful. So how can I help but worry that I will soon become more like my own mother, a stranger to the ones I love and used to keep close to my heart? Am I wiser now than she was then? Did she not know and accept that some changes are good? Did she not know that growing up and learning to be yourself is a perfectly healthy thing? Did she not know these things?

My daughter fills my heart with so much joy and love that I cannot imagine a world without her in it. No matter what my daughter does, or becomes, or believes, I want to accept her and be there for her always. How could there be any other way? If I cannot accept the growth and change or development of my own child, then how can I expect the world to handle the growth and change of a generation? I just cannot lose hope like that in the world yet. And for me, the summer of 2020 has been all about trying to hold onto that hope of whatever comes next.

I look at my daughter, licking ketchup from her fingers, laughing at a joke that was just said at the dinner table. I look at my daughter, now locking arms with me, leaning in to sweetly whisper in my ear. I look at my extraordinary daughter, and I think: "This daughter, right here, in this moment, in every moment, no matter what happens, will keep me hopeful and will never leave this mother's heart!"

Seasons of Time by Zita Podany



xvi

As a child I frolicked and played.
Staring at fluffy white clouds
and shouting my name
to hear it echoing in the valley,
“The world is in front of you.”

As a teenager I burned that midnight oil.
Studying until daylight chirped its way
into my bedroom window.
Echoing a refrain, “Study now, play later.”

As a college student I indulged in stress.
Taking 18-credit hours of
math, science, and humanities.
Waking up from nightmares of
exams chasing me and knowledge failing me.
Hearing the echo, “Review and you will not fail.”

As a college graduate I finally found work.
Embarking on a serious career path
away from temporary jobs on dead-end streets.
I held that nose to the grindstone,
gratingly echoing, "Work hard to get ahead."

As I retired from work, I had time
to frolic and play to my heart's content.
Staring at fluffy gray clouds
and shouting my name
to hear it echo in the valley,
"The world is no longer in front of you."



I Saw That Fat by Tamara Anne Fowler



xviii

I saw that fat on children
Running naked, wild and free.

I saw that fat on women
I professed to never be.

In dressings rooms, locker rooms
I smiled thin with glee.

And then as I neared forty
I saw that fat on me.

Chagall Lovers by Catherin Violante



xix

My dreams are where
I feel you the most.
Unbridled fantasies
Of long dark hair and stolen kisses.
Like Chagall lovers
Floating above painted
Blue Cities and orange fields,
Traveling through whimsical moments and times.
Where we are forever young.

The Morning by Robin Layne



xx

Some bird's shrill tweeting woke Allan from a bizarre dream. He lifted his head. Colors blurred and spun before him. He dropped his head back on the pillow. Big mistake. He cried out in agony.

"Oh, no!" shouted a voice from somewhere behind him. Allan recognized the voice—*Ginger's!*—but couldn't figure why she was there. "Sorry I fell asleep!" Ginger cried. "Lord, please let him be okay!"

"What the—" Allan's head thumped like a sledgehammer. He was nauseated, and his mouth tasted bad. If only he were still dreaming!

"Allan," Ginger said, now right next to him. "Turn back onto your side. Face me, this way."

Allan lay still. Soft hands pulled at his bare torso and the blanket around him, and gently turned his poor head. His muscles ached, especially those that touched the hard surface beneath him. Was he on a *floor*? "What are you doing, Ginger?" he croaked.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed. "Just trying to keep you safe, in case you throw up again."

"Where am I? Why are *you* here?"

She lay next to him on the carpet—yes, it *was* the floor—facing him, and she brushed his long, light-brown hair off his face. As he gazed at her concerned face, framed by wavy, deep-red locks, his memory searched back beyond his fading dream. Her white gown had flowed to the church floor like billowing clouds as she floated down

the aisle toward him and the other members of his band sang “Hooked on You” by Bread. His jaw had dropped at the sight of his bride.

Now, smeared mascara accentuated dark circles under her green eyes.

Allan carefully reached up and pressed his forehead, trying to make his brain work better. He remembered sitting with Ginger’s father, talking, drinking fruity punch and bubbling champagne, wondering where his bride had gone, and being told her girlfriends from her hometown in Nevada would return her soon.

What happened next?

In spite of his pain, he reached out to touch her cheek. “Why are you saying you’re sorry?”

“I left you at the reception,” Ginger said with a sigh. He was glad her voice was soft now. “And thought you were fine when I got back. Had no idea you—well, I should have guessed.” Her full lips tightened into a line.

“Should have guessed I was drunk? It’s my fault. I was so nervous I didn’t eat, and the punch was so sweet I didn’t realize it had so much alcohol. But I should have known better! Ginger, I’m so sorry!”

He blinked more things into focus; he didn’t recognize the room. It had the sparse furniture of a hotel suite. But of course...

He searched his memories. Up popped one from during their engagement: Ginger admitting her father didn’t trust anyone who made a living “peddling God music” and that he suspected Allan was an irresponsible and shallow religious nut. Allan grimaced. His new father-in-law had arrived shortly before the wedding, and Allan could recall little of their conversation at the reception. He imagined himself fumbling and stumbling, telling off-color jokes, using words far beneath the reputation of the leader of a Christian band.

The press would eat this up. Just one misstep, and he’d surely lost all credibility. But even more than satisfying the public, he wanted to

win over his new in-laws. He ventured, "I must have made a total fool of myself in front of your parents."

She shook her head and smiled. "They were impressed with you—the way you talked about Gershwin, Tchaikovsky, and classical composers and musicians I never even heard of. Dad decided I made a great choice."

"I didn't tell him about my past?" he asked.

His bride wrapped her arms around him through the blanket. "Allan, he knows about *my* past. Yours was no worse."

Not long ago, before her conversion to Christ, Ginger had been a Vegas club dancer. And eleven years ago, he himself had been a teen heroin addict. God had found him at sixteen, and he had avoided drugs ever since. He also had dutifully stayed a virgin until marriage. But now he couldn't remember one moment of their first time together!

Allan groaned. All those years of waiting, and now this? Did she know? How could he make it up to her?

He reached up and touched her cascading hair, trying to be extra gentle, but his hand trembled, causing her deep-blue robe to slip open and reveal her ample cleavage and a negligee as white as her wedding dress.

Ginger blushed. "I'm starting everything fresh with you," she said. "No one in the past counts at all. I wish I'd waited, but God has given me a clean slate. I'm yours alone, Allan."

She was being so sweet to him! Allan's stomach knotted. How could he tell her he had forgotten the most important night of their life together? "I hope you're okay," he choked.

"*Me?* I've been worried about *you* all night. I must look a sight! Now that you're awake, will you be all right if I go clean my face and redo my mascara?"

"I didn't fall in love with mascara," he said. "Please, hold me some more. That is, if you can stand me."

"You only threw up once," she whispered. "But I need to get you more water."

"I *am* really thirsty, but how will I sit up?"

Ginger picked up an empty glass he hadn't noticed was above his pillow. She stood.

"Ginger, I don't deserve all this kindness. I don't deserve *you!*"

"Quit groveling." She walked toward the bathroom. "We all make mistakes."

"This was a huge one! What did I do last night?"

Ginger stopped and turned back. "What do you mean?"

"To you?" Allan's heart thumped. Had he mistreated her?

She squinted at him.

"*With* you?" he asked.

"You don't remember?"

Too embarrassed to even shake his head no, Allan carefully looked back at the bed. Its cover and sheets were rumped. But he saw only one pillow. He swallowed. "I—wanted last night to be very special, worth remembering. Was I clumsy? Did I—hurt you? Whatever I did must have been pretty bad, since you kicked me out of bed."

Her expression softened. "Oh, Allan, no! Back at the party, I couldn't tell you were drunk, but since we'd both had a few, Hank drove us here. After we got here, you started to undress. I went to change into this negligee and touch up my makeup... and when I came out, you were asleep on the floor. I woke you up a few times, but you weren't ready for me. I held you most of the night, making sure you didn't choke on your vomit, and gave you water. We didn't do a thing!"

Allan breathed a huge sigh. "You just made my day!"

"I'm sure you'll be all better by tonight," his wife said.

Allan nodded.

"Then we'll have a night to remember forever." Her eyes sparkled above her rosy cheeks. She turned and slipped into the bathroom.

Allan closed his eyes and let those words wash over him.

Perhaps it was his imagination, but with the good news, his head felt a little better.

It's All Coming Together by Sheila Deeth

It's all coming together now. That time when I saw myself in the water and you said it was just a reflection. You said I hadn't drowned, and I wasn't a water-nymph, and I didn't live in the forest. You said there was only one of me, not two—"Thank heavens," you said—and I lived with you and Daddy and my big sister in town. D'you remember that?

Then there was the time I looked in the mirror and I wasn't there. "Silly girl," you told me. "It's dark. Just switch the light on."

And then—d'you remember?—I looked outside the window and saw "me" looking in. And you laughed. Then I saw "me" walking away, under the yellow streetlamp, and you said it was somebody else. You never listened, did you?

But now it's all coming together. I've worked it out.

Big sister's grown up, Daddy's moved out—said I was too much trouble, didn't he?—and now it's just you and me... and "me" and "me." 'Cause I drove to the forest and the lake and I saw myself there, and I held my hand, and pulled me out. We drove back, me and I, and looked in the mirror and two more mes stepped out. Then, outside the window when the lights came on... I sent another one of my other mes to bring that wanderer back. There's so many of me.

So Mam, you'll have to make dinner for twenty tonight, and we're gonna have a ball!

Pressing His Suit by Jessie Collins



xxi

An airman, home after long imprisonment;
A girl whose schooldays were just done;
A struggle to fit into the home environment;
A friendship awakening a sense of fun...

A gap to be bridged—he thinks she'll find him old;
She's sure he won't see her "that way."
He was busy, home alone one day when she called;
Neither knew it would be their lucky day.

He left his work, bent over her, they kissed.
They clung together; foolish thoughts had passed.
So glad the precious moment wasn't missed;
A lifetime's happiness begun at last.

Desperately Seeking by Haylee Ergenekan



xxii

Senior man
Desperately seeking companion
Friend
Or kindred soul
During these strange times
Where the world and I don't fit in
Anymore
Conversation about anything
Everything
Beatles fan would be nice
But not required.
The nights are long
The days are too
My plants are tired of lending me an ear
Maybe a dance
In a world where we don't fit in
Anymore

Butter Caper by Judy Beaston

“Release. Drop it. Annie, look at me. You’re not looking at me. You can’t eat the butter stick!” Milton wagged his index finger at the golden retriever settled on the kitchen floor.

Annie sighed around the prize she’d collected from the kitchen counter. Fair game, it seemed to her. Milton shouldn’t leave butter sticks out in the open if he doesn’t want to share.

Meanwhile, Harper, Annie’s wary friend in fur, though purely feline in nature, hunkered beneath the kitchen table. No doubt, Annie knew, Harper hoped for a bit of butter herself!

“What are you yammering about in here, Milton?” Trish, Milton’s wife, sashayed into the kitchen, heading without pause for the coffee pot. “I thought you were making muffins for us this morning. Doesn’t look like you’ve even begun.”

Milton growled, which had the effect of causing Annie to look up, and he jumped on the moment. “Drop it, Annie. NOW!”

Trish laughed. “You’re hopeless, Milt!” Without skipping a beat, she walked over to Annie, knelt down, nuzzled Annie’s nose and whispered in her ear. “That’s a good girl, Annie. Let’s share this with Harper now.”

Annie’s tail thumped and thumped, but she refused to let go.

Trish settled back on her heels. “Huh. Well that’s a predicament.”

“Is that all you can say? The dog cannot eat that butter.”

“Well, you are certainly not going to be using it for the muffins today.”

“I could salvage some of it.”

“Milton! Get real!”

I heard that. I, Harper Lee Cat, wanted butter more than Annie, though I doubted Annie fully understood my desire. Still, if the butter

was no longer for the humans, surely Annie would be forced to share it with me!

I inched closer. Annie shuffled her body backward. No idea how she did that, but the contest was on!

I swiped at the bar in her mouth, making clear my intentions, setting up the rules for this treasure. After all, I, Harper Lee Cat, am the master and ruler of the animal kingdom. Smart, cool, calm, witty and, dang it all, that dog must share!

“No you don’t, Annie.” Milton reached out for the dog’s collar, but she continued to shuffle backward. “Grab her, Trish!”

Trish shrugged and stood up. “A losing battle. I say let them have it.”

“Then you can clean up after them.” Milton’s disgust came out like a roar, and Annie leapt to her feet, spun around, and ran through the doggy-door.

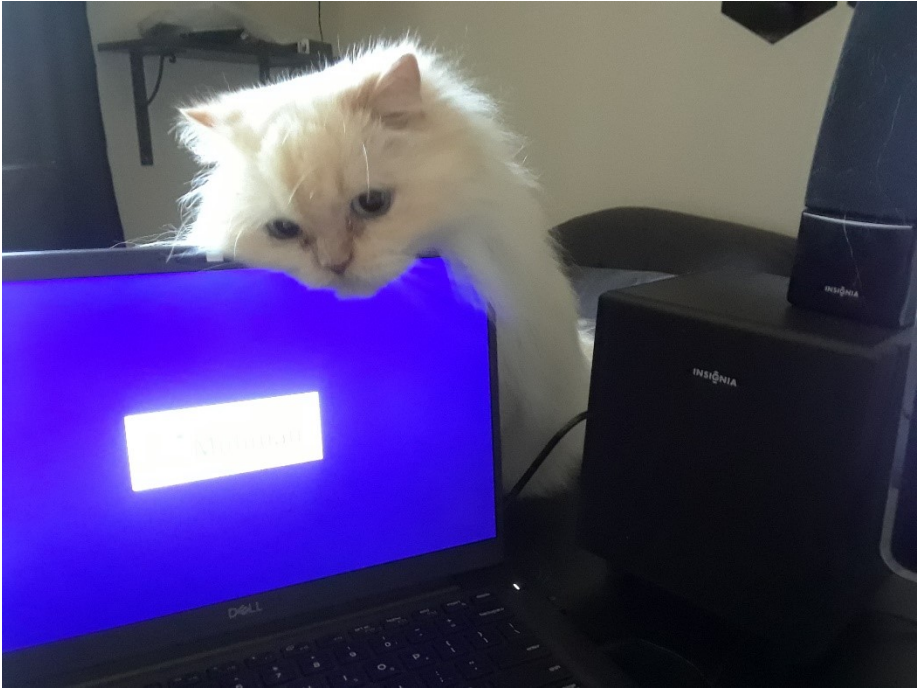
Harper was closer than a shadow right behind her.

Trish looked out the window. “I think they won, Milt.”

Milton sighed, put an arm around his wife. “I think you’re right.”

What a perfect day that was! Annie and I shared the best treasure ever, just the two of us. But oh what a bellyache followed our adventure. My desires for butter diminished but didn’t disappear. I waited maybe a day or two before aiming to convince my humans to slip me more—in small doses.

Choose Your Own Adventure by David Fryer



xxiii

In this adventure you are a grey, overweight cat, named Beetle, that is trying to survive quarantine with her owner. WARNING: Do not read this story straight through to the end. Choose one of the numbered options when asked, and follow the sequence to the end of the story. This way you can make your own story (many times)!

You hear your owner stirring and quickly leave his favorite chair in the living room to run up the stairs and throw yourself against his closed bedroom door. While he is probably doodling with his phone, you blindly stretch your front legs under the door frame as far as they will go. By flexing your paws, you can sometimes get him to drop some random object into your reach. Ah, not this time.

Then you hear him continue the morning routine, music, shower, dressing for another day in the home office. When will this

quarantine end? Finally, the bedroom door opens, and he trudges downstairs. You stay between zero and one steps in front during the trip, for maximum exposure in petting opportunities. No dice, but he almost trips on you, which should serve as a warning in the future.

He reaches his chair and sits, opening his laptop. You jump nimbly over the laptop and onto his lap for a nice pet. Bam! He growls and dumps you on the floor roughly. Seriously?

Do you...

Narrow your eyes disappointedly, sprint back upstairs and loudly use his bed frame as a scratching post? ***Go to path 1.***

Flop over on your side, regard the guy coolly and demonstrate the enormous size of your cat stomach? ***Go to path 2.***

Hop onto the breakfast table and attack the potted houseplant at its center? ***Go to path 3.***

Path 1

Satisfying scratching noises and claw-stretching sensations occur as you repeatedly grab at the bed frame with your front paws. This is really getting the frustrations of the morning out.

“Beetle! Cut it out!”

Oops, you went a little overboard. Time to return to the living room and see if your owner has mellowed. ***Go to the conclusion.***

Path 2

This is comfortable, also a nice ready position for petting. Wait a second, what is that underneath the couch there? A rubber band? You’re on it. Whoops, it just slipped out of your paws. Now where is it going? Slick little prey. The chase begins...

“Beetle! Cut it out!”

Fine. You crouch there attentively and inspect the growing mane of neck hair your owner is displaying under these quarantine conditions. ***Go to the conclusion.***

Path 3

It takes a couple of tries, but you make it up to the tabletop. What is this mountain of toilet paper roll packages? You clamber over them to the prize. It's a new potted plant. When will this guy ever learn? You crouch like a coiled spring and warm up your tail with a couple whipping motions.

With a long swipe you upset the little cactus plant right out of its plastic pot. Soil is flying everywhere. It is a satisfying chaos.

"Beetle! Cut it out!"

You withdraw your teeth from the plant after a couple shakes and return to the supposed boss of this place. ***Go to the conclusion.***

Conclusion

"Okay, fine, come here sweet sweetie."

You stare at him... What does he want?

"Come here."

Additional staring. Yes? What is it?

He finally starts waving his fingers as if they were... wait a second, is that a spider? Curious, you jump up on the arm of the "lazyboy." Fine, you can pet me. Time to let out a long purr. Ah, this is the life.

No! Too hard! Suddenly your claws are out, and you make your owner's thumb pay for the petting indiscretion.

"Ouch! That's it Beetle, get off."

Okey dokey, the balcony was looking pretty interesting anyway.

As you rest on the railing above the chirping birds, you're off to a good start; what will the rest of this season bring?

The Dog Did Not Eat My Homework by Zita Podany



xxiv

“Dear professor,” he wrote,
“the dog did not eat my homework.
My assignment will be late if that is OK,
as I explain my reason for the delay.
You see, it all started with my wife agreeing
to babysit our granddaughter, an adorable being.
Little did I know that pink bunny
clutched in her little chubby hands
would become my Waterloo this weekend.
A fuzzy stuffed bunny with an evil grin
flushed down the toilet by a cute little kid.
My granddaughter watched it swirl
as water filled to the brim of the toilet bowl.
A cascading waterfall it became
as water flowed everywhere,
down the hall, down the stairs, it went.
Lest she be swept away by tears and water
I waded over to my granddaughter.
With one hand I swooped her up
and handed her over to my wife.

Without a word, I sloshed to the bathroom
grimacing at the looming disaster.
The water kept flowing, now ankle deep.
As I splashed to my knees,
I gritted my teeth.
I grabbed the shut-off valve
and turned it, then turned it some more,
with a jerk; a sudden crack I heard.
The valve broke and water gushed
as a few expletives spewed out.
Down to the basement I padded,
searching for the shut-off wrench I wanted.
I found it but not before
dropping a hammer on my toe.
As I hopped around,
a box of nails flew all over the floor.
Bent on my mission to shut off that water
I staggered out the basement door
as a nail lodged painfully into my big toe.
Out on the sidewalk, a few more expletives flew.
With a twist and a nudge of the wrench
no more water to the house, hooray.
In my pain and glee I fell over,
the wrench catapulting into the windshield
of my neighbor's new Land Rover.
With the nail still biting my toe,
I hobbled to the neighbor's door.
The rake I left by the hedge the night before
hit my nose with a resounding blow.
The ambulance arrived about the same time as the plumber
my wife taking charge of the matter.
The doctors patched me up—I'm doing great.
But that is why my homework will be late."

Kitkit and the Fireworks by Sheila Deeth



xxv

One night, Kitkit heard a noise—a lot of noise in fact. It originated somewhere outside and seemed to be accompanied by a curious flash of light.

Kitkit, being a curious cat, decided to investigate the sound. She pushed her nose against the window that was sometimes a door, and was delighted to find the plastic sheeting pushed quite easily aside. Of course, the window wasn't meant to be a door at night, but a small cat should always take advantage of the opportunities she finds. And so, having heard and followed her noise—and her nose—Kitkit now stood to attention outside, her paws poised for flight, her toenails tripping up and down on the cold, cold surface of stone that stretched near the house, just before the sweet, green grass of freedom.

She stood, and she heard another noise, and she observed, with happy curiosity, a flash of colors like flowers that sprayed across the sky. She lifted her head to watch. How beautiful!

Meanwhile, inside the house, Little Joe gave a worried sort of yip and Big Fred howled. Their noise might possibly have been louder than any of the crackling crashes Kitkit was so happily listening to. It was certainly a much longer, more intrusive sort of sound.

The sky flashed brightly again, much to Kitkit's tail-tingling delight. Then a bird-like shriek tore through the air as vivid sky-colors whirled and disappeared. How very strange. But such fun!

Sounds flitted out from inside the house now—the whirl of the mouse-wheel spinning, the song of the caged bird, and the meowl of Cat, Kitkit's mother, singing feline scales of confusion. And the dogs, of course. Whatever was wrong with them all?

Another crash followed another shining light, and Kitkit sat back on her haunches to gaze up high. The sky was decorated all over with falling stars. They were really very pretty, and Kitkit thought she'd like to try to catch them. But leaping up on the fence didn't bring her any closer to the brightly-colored sparks. And running along the lids of backyard boxes simply added a resounding crash to the noises all around.

Another long, descending shriek was accompanied by separate flashes, each turning into myriad pinpricks (or birds—could they be birds?) and more flashes at the end. And more bangs. Kitkit started to dance. This chorus was fun!

Meanwhile Little Joe whimpered, and Big Fred howled. Such silly dogs.

The sky-lights were shiny and oh-so-very tempting, so Kitkit tried, again and again, to catch them as they fell. But the colors always disappeared before they reached the ground. Then more bright decorations—like Christmas, or like the human grandmother's knitting—replaced them in the sky, streaking, splattering, cracking, like broken glass and vases knocked from shelves, like dinner on the

barbeque, like the small child throwing paint at the wall, and the mother shouting “Stop that” in tones of utter horror, rather like the horror in Little Joe’s whimpers, which reminded Kitkit...

Maybe if she went back inside, the other animals would realize how truly fun this was. Such silly dogs. They were both howling now.

Kitkit pushed her way back through the flap, through the window that was sometimes a door. The frame clicked loudly closed behind her as she entered. Then Cat stopped her pacing to nibble on the kitten’s ear. Little Joe stopped whimpering and batted Kitkit’s tail with his paw. Big Fred stopped mid-howl, head raised foolishly to the inside version of sky, and mouth so quaveringly—so goofily—wide. The mouse stopped running. The bird stopped shrieking. And Kitkit tried so very hard—dancing her paws, and twisting and turning her ears, whiskers quivering with delight—to explain to them all that the noises were fun, the noise-makers pretty, and the outside sky a truly glorious delight.

She thought perhaps she’d lead them all out there, right now, and show them. But the flap stayed stubbornly closed to the pressing of her nose, and the window, it seemed, had magically ceased to be a door. So instead all the animals, all together, all calmed down, all waited for the noises to stop, and all settled in to sleep.

Well, all except for the mouse, which always seemed to get night and day mixed up.

And the bird, which chirruped too quickly for the dawn.

And Kitkit, whose mind was filled with too many memories of flickering sparks escaping across the expanse of the ceiling outside.

A Storm of Slobber by David Fryer

“Leave it, Spider!”

“Drop it, Spider!”

We tried command combinations with enthusiastic but ultimately futile doggedness. Each appeal an effort to encourage our heavy-breathing, 110-pound mastiff, Spider, to deliver the rubber blue-and-orange ball, called “Chuck-It!”

Spider had returned, displaying behavior similar to past recoveries of the Chuck-It during fetch games at the park. She sprinted back, briefly dropping the ball at one-half full-speed, then picking it up and circling us to finally stand three to five feet away, with the ball at her feet. At this point, if we reached for the ball, it would quickly disappear back into her giant jowls, now dripping with saliva. Then she would chew and coat it with another layer of slobber, before responding slowly to a new set of commands. We would stand in a hurricane of drool, as she shook her head vigorously but then crouched warily to grab the ball again if we reached out.

Apparently, Spider could not distinguish between playing keep-away in the house and playing fetch at the park. We have a consistency problem with training, but no lack of imagination.

Out of my daughter’s pocket appeared a second, identical blue-and-orange Chuck-It from PetSmart.

“Where’s your ball? Who’s got your ball?”

Suddenly interested, Spider took once last watery chew on the ball in her mouth and spat it out. Eyes filled with a look of wonder, she attentively squatted, ready for the throw.

The launching-stick-assisted Chuck-It soared out to the edge of the park, with Spider trailing its first impact by seconds. We giddily accessed the spittle-drowned ball and hid it, saliva included, in a coat pocket for her return.

We had nearly declared total lazy-dog-owner victory after ten iterations of this process, when we noticed the drawbacks. Besides the Chuck-It coating the inside of our pockets with dog-mouth

excretion, Spider had some tendencies to lose sight of the ball during flight. This happened about a quarter of the time. When only one ball was in play, she would persistently search the park for the ball. However, now that she knew a second magical ball existed, at the back of her dog mind she kept thinking *her* Chuck-It may just be sitting in our pockets. This led to extended search sessions that found her hunting all the way back to us and looking questioningly at the originators of the game.

At one point, we had to walk all the way out to the Chuck-It to point it out to her. Curiously the original was easier for her to spot, but who knows what goes on inside your pet's brain?

“Blah blah, Spider!”

“Blah blah, Spider!”

While it is nice to hear my name repeatedly at the park, I just can't get enough of this ball. It's like wolfing down my dinner without all the messy swallowing and belching.

And now for the best part... Oh ya, your hand is getting close to my ball isn't it? Not today. Back in my mouth baby, another couple chews of that sweet rubber.

I can't tease them all the time. As a reward, I like to share the wealth with a nice long saliva cleanse in their direction. I suspect they love it. Raising their human hand-paws to shield their faces.

“Blah blah blah ball? Blah blah blah ball?”

Wait a second, what is this? Did my ball just have a baby? Oh, I have to get a-hold of this one—color is a bit off, but these balls are definitely related.

There it goes! Paws don't fail me now.

Stormy Weather by Jessie Collins



xxvi

For the past three weeks I have been living through the longest period of continuously stormy weather that I can remember experiencing in my long life. It began when I was staying with my son in his upstairs apartment in the presbytery of his church. The apartment has a flat tin roof, and being awakened night after night from a deep sleep by the battering of heavy rain showers on that roof was wearying, to say the least.

Then my son brought me back home to my ground floor apartment by the sea. Now, if I walk through to the residents' lounge, I can watch the waves crashing over onto the seafront. There are flowerbeds there which usually look really nice, especially in summer, but I am told that the force of the waves has washed both plants and soil out of the beds and spread it over the road. When will it end, I wonder?

This stormy weather makes me think of other storms of a different kind—the rough patches which we all experience at some points in our lives. Perhaps the hardest one, in my early years, was when my boyfriend and I wanted to become engaged. He was a Roman Catholic, and we were a Methodist family. My mother was horrified, but fortunately my father managed to calm the storm, and I didn't have to lose my family in order to marry the man I loved.

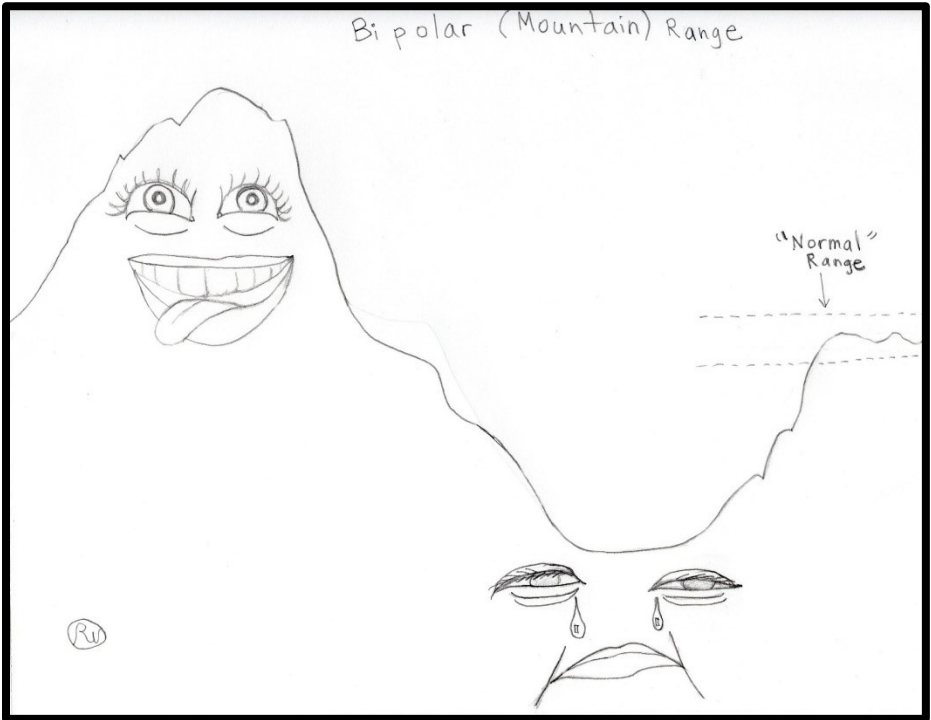
Different little storms broke out from time to time as we raised our family. I was walking through town one day, pushing the buggy in which sat my small daughter. She wanted to get out and walk, but this wasn't feasible in the crowded streets, so I said she would have to wait for a while. Since this didn't suit her at all, she waited until I was looking in a shop window and climbed out by herself—no seatbelts in those days! I began to put her back, but she wriggled free, lay down on the ground, and screamed in temper. I picked her up, smacked her bottom, and put her firmly where she belonged. She glared at me, gave a final “Waaa,” and then sat quietly; storm over.

My younger son's childhood was punctuated by little storms of varying kinds. One that comes to mind was a day when he had tried my patience to the limit, and he received a sharp scolding. He folded his little arms and marched to the door, shouting “I'm going out to find another Mummy!” I pointed out quietly that it was cold outside, and he would need to put on his coat and scarf. That took the wind out of his sails and we heard no more about the “other Mummy.”

Family life always included the odd storm, as it does for most people, but the worst storm of my life was the agony of grief when my dear husband passed away. I didn't know how I could weather that one, but help from family and friends, and above all, the help that came from my abiding faith in the love of God, eventually brought back my peace of mind.

Stormy weather indeed, of one kind and another, but God is always there. Praise His Name.

Mania Mountain and the Valley of the Shadow by Robin Layne



xxvii

Mountains

When I was young, I saw a 1968 comedy called *What's So Bad About Feeling Good?* In the movie, a toucan named Amigo carried a virus that made people lose their sorrows and embrace life for all the good it could offer. Amigo got near two gloomy people, and, discovering joy and beauty, they set about infecting the rest of New York City. Some people didn't like to watch others skip through the streets singing. Eventually, opponents of the happiness virus caught the toucan and operated on it, to prevent it from infecting people. The couple and their friends went back to being miserable. If I remember rightly, the plans of the killjoys went awry, and Amigo was still able to infect people with happiness. The couple went to the zoo and set the bird free.

What *is* so bad about feeling good? Usually nothing; it's great. Especially when it's not caused by some artificial means with dangerous side effects. Most of us would probably like to feel good all the time; it's part of our view of what Heaven would be like. But for a few of us, good feelings can be untrustworthy, even scary. Some of us have bipolar disorder, a topsy-turvy illness in which we are lucky if we recognize when the high is getting too high to be safe. In our sanest moments, we know that the emotional mountain can easily send us hurling full speed, without sleep, into overtalkativeness, irritability, racing thoughts, confusion, spending into debt, delusional thoughts, untypical promiscuity, reckless actions of *any* kind imaginable. This mountain is called mania, and when I'm on top of it, I often don't know I'm sick. My discernment between wisdom and folly is diminished along with my sense of right and wrong. Mania Mountain can be Hell disguised as Heaven.

Valleys

My mood can plummet from Mania Mountain to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I'm borrowing this term from Psalm 23, which describes a sheep walking through a dark canyon. Sometimes the dread in that canyon is more than a shadow; predators can lurk around any corner. Depression fills people with dread over everything. And for a person with bipolar disorder, depression isn't dependent on negative events; it might not be related to the death of a loved one, triggers of PTSD, or any other situational causes. I've suffered weeks and months with no energy or joy in doing anything. My thoughts have grown twisted until hope seemed lost forever. At times, I've fantasized about suicide. I've felt such painfully heightened emotional sensitivity that I compared myself to a soldier in Vietnam who was skinned alive and hung upside down. I wrote a poem about that. The difference between that poor soldier and me was that he begged to be shot and his comrades put him out of his misery, while I chose to stay alive through the torment because I believed that

without me, my little girl would be left to an even worse fate than mine.

Cycles

Many bipolar people have predictable mood cycles—for instance, a depression every winter and a mania every summer. My cycles have always been irregular, so I never know when my mood will go either way. There are warning signs others may observe, but the nature of the illness often keeps me blind, especially when I feel like I’m having the best day of my life. Hypomania, the milder high that often precedes a full-blown manic episode, makes me feel like someone infected by Amigo the toucan. But soon my illness may grow so unmanageable it requires hospitalization.

Diagnosis, Treatment, and Denial

I rose to Mania Mountain for the first time when I was 24. It lasted a few months. My illness wasn’t properly diagnosed for nine years. I have been hospitalized twice for manic episodes. Antipsychotics helped me think more clearly, but only time would ever calm my moods until, after the bipolar diagnosis, I started taking lithium, a mood stabilizing salt. That made *huge* differences. First, it cured daily anxiety attacks that had been so severe I’d leave my baby in her crib to take fifteen-minute walks to keep us both safe.

I have bipolar I, which means I get both full mania and depression. I spend a lot more time in the “normal” mood range than I do at either pole. That’s why some people who know me don’t believe I have a mental illness. I make perfect sense to them. I’m generally well-balanced and content, yet able to empathize with others when they hurt, especially if it’s a pain I’ve been through myself. Many who don’t know me well haven’t been around me when I’ve been stark raving mad. And if they read something I’ve written that touches the dark side of life, they don’t understand why I ever focus on negative subjects. Haven’t they ever been miserable themselves? Or is it that

they can't bear to face the times when they were? All I know is that these friends are not bipolar.

Some want me to believe that symptoms of mental illness will never happen to me again—as if believing that will make it true. I haven't received any signs from God or any other source that I've been totally healed, so I shrug off such advice, or fight it head-on when I have to, and continue to take my medicine. I also try to shrug off criticism for being fat, knowing it's a side effect of the medication that is near impossible to counteract, especially since I have physical limitations that make exercise difficult. It's not that I don't care about my health or appearance. It's that I would rather be fat than crazy.

Improvement

All that said, I see signs that my emotional health has improved over the years. It's been decades since I've been truly depressed. Sure, there have been times when I've felt bad because of some event or circumstance. That's not the same as the Valley of the Shadow of Death that used to overwhelm me for no known reason, stretching on for months. Mania has come a few times in the years since the depressions ceased, but with the help of mental health professionals and, I believe, with God's, the most recent times have been limited to hypomania. When I've managed to get the right medicine in time, I have nipped the whole thing in the bud by going back to a full night's sleep—crucial for my stability—and stayed well.

Recently, the medication I took only when I saw myself in danger of mania was changed to a small dose every night. I sleep more deeply now, with many dreams but little energy to write them down like I'd prefer. Now, just maybe, I won't have any more manias. Even if I do, I understand myself better than I used to. I know I will be back to my normal self in a while. And the normal range of ups and downs is good enough for me.

Where There's Smoke... by Glennis McNeal



xxviii

Near the end of fourth grade I came home from school and found my stepmother Carma bubbling with excitement, for once glad to see me. While I changed from my starchy rose-patterned school dress into wrinkly cotton shorts and shirt, she told me her plans. After six weeks at home she was ready to walk uptown and show off baby Jerry. Daddy would drive them home after he finished work.

Her brown eyes were shiny happy as she adjusted her gold clip-on earrings. She crouched down a little, burp cloth in hand.

“Please help me put this on my shoulder. I don’t want baby spit-up on my new blouse. I just finished sewing it this morning. Your father hasn’t seen it yet.” She smiled and lifted my tiny new brother and held him tight to her chest.

The new blouse was flame red. Shiny round buttons closed the front and held the cuffs in place. She hadn’t dressed up like this for a

long time. When she turned 21 last October, a month after my ninth birthday, she wore a tent-shaped top and not the tuck-in kind of blouse she showed off today.

As I adjusted the white flannel spit-up shield, I wondered why a six-block walk to town got her so excited. I walked that route every day on my way to school. It was mostly weedy lawns struggling to stay alive after a freezing Wyoming winter. Spring this year was feeble. Flowers were late to bud and the ground was still muddy in places. You had to be careful or you'd track it into the house and make Carma mad.

Today she was almost giddy with pleasure. "First I'll meet Lola for coffee at the Reesy Drug Store. You remember her, the plump lady who lives across the alley. We'll check for bargains at J.C. Penney, and then I'll visit with the office girls at the bottling plant until your father knocks off work there. All the girls want to see the baby," she said, like she was fulfilling their urgent wishes.

I didn't much care what she did. For once I would have time for myself—no fetching diapers, warming a bottle, folding up baby blankets. I had my own plans for the next few hours.

She gave me careful instructions as she left.

"The oven is set at 425 degrees, and meat is browning in the roasting pan. In half an hour, add a cup of water and put the lid on the pan. Turn the oven temperature to 325. I wrote all this down for you so you'll remember what to do."

She leaned toward me. I thought she was going to kiss me on the cheek. I tensed, not sure how to respond.

Instead of a kiss, she whispered in my ear. "My mother gave me the secret to a tender roast. The toughest cut of meat melts in your mouth if it's cooked the way she taught me. It will be perfect by supertime."

As soon as she left, I grabbed my library book, *The Bobbsey Twins' Toy Shop*. I was on a quest to be the first nine-year-old to read every book in the Carnegie Library, starting with the children's section.

Bobbsey Twins books were written by Laura Lee Hope. This was the latest one in the series. I was almost finished with the “H” authors.

Eager to start reading, I moved a kitchen chair close to the stove. From there I could keep an eye on the wall clock.

After I read for a while, my throat started to feel scratchy. I dabbed at my eyes when print on the page got blurry. I blinked several times before I squinted at the clock.

I couldn't believe what I saw. Two full hours had passed.

Heart racing, eyes watering, I grabbed raggedy brown potholders and opened the oven door. It was too late to add water. The roast was coal black, sizzling in burnt grease. Smoke rolled from the oven and darkened the air. Every kitchen surface was coated with oily grime. My throat burned, and I had a horrible taste in my mouth.

Daddy and Carma walked through the kitchen door, furious.

“My dinner is ruined,” Carma wailed as she ran from the room. She hurried baby Jerry outside to protect him from the smoke. I quivered when I saw Daddy's angry expression.

“My God, you're as bad as Marcella,” he said, spitting the words at me so loud the neighbors could hear. He gritted his teeth and flapped a dish towel, trying to clear the air.

Suddenly, I understood what no one had ever explained to me. Divorce was caused by bad cooking. The charred beef smell was sending me a message: I was too much like Marcella, my mama. I should never, ever, get married.

I knew I'd never be like Carma. For the first time I wasn't sure I wanted to be like my mama, either, with the power to make Daddy mad when she wasn't even here.

There had to be some way to be me, and me alone, but I didn't know what it was. I wouldn't find the answer in a library book. I would have to study every girl and woman I knew until I found someone to copy.

Age is Just a Number—Until it's Not by Karin Krafft



xxix

I am a widow, mother, and grandmother. And I am 64 years—
young. At least that's how I felt until some weeks into the year 2020.

Until around mid-February 2020 I considered myself a relatively
healthy, active person. Sure, I do have some minor issues, like wear
and tear on my body and bad seasonal allergies. But this was nothing
I worried about much. It is what it is. I was always of the belief that
age is just a number. If you act young, you stay young.

I watch my grandkids—Nora, aged five years, and Jonny, aged
fifteen months—three days a week while their parents are at work. I
like to take them for walks, go down the slide with them, jump off
curbs, and basically do whatever they do. We play hide and seek,
dance, and tag, and I have no problem keeping up with them. Our
motto is, we like to be silly.

I never considered myself old. I was often told at the playground that I was a cool grandmother. I am not going to lie; I did enjoy those comments. I believe that you are only as old as you feel, and in my mind, 64 is not old.

Well, that was until the coronavirus or Covid-19 hit the United States. From one day to the next I was considered old. Individuals over the age of 60 were advised to stay at home as much as possible. I was suddenly in a high-risk group because of my age. I did not like this one bit. Not at all.

“Age is just a number,” they say, and I feel just as healthy as I did a few weeks ago. I wholeheartedly support the idea of social distancing, and I have been implementing it for the last two weeks. My son and daughter-in-law have forbidden me and the other grandparents to go shopping. They do all the shopping for us, which we are very grateful for.

My grandchildren are now at home with their parents, who are working from home. We stay in contact via FaceTime. My five-year-old granddaughter is old enough to understand, but my grandson doesn’t understand. They are both thrilled to be home with their parents. I miss them dearly.

I had a phone consult with my doctor who said, “Yes, you are in the high-risk group because of your age.” Again, the age reference. I understand it, but on the other hand, I don’t feel old.

Suddenly I am allowed to go shopping during senior hours. I think this is a wonderful and very considerate measure, because the situation in many stores is crazy, and older people do need to be able to shop in peace and not be knocked over by someone running to the toilet paper aisle.

Now I am sitting at home, and all of a sudden I am starting to feel old. I spend my days going for long walks and doing some cleaning.

I am hoping this will be over soon, so that once again I can say that I am 64 years young.

Life Story by Jessie Collins

At my age I can look back on many occasions when I have wanted to take a peek into the future and find out what was coming into my life. There are times that I remember very well, and I would like to share with you some of them now.

I was eleven years old when World War II began and seventeen when it ended. That was a difficult time, in some ways comparable to what we are experiencing now, but perhaps not quite so bad. Schools and churches were open, and there were no restrictions to prevent us from going out and about, except for the black-out. With no street lighting allowed and lights on all vehicles carefully shaded, we needed our flashlights to light our way, and they were shaded too. Food rationing made it difficult for our mothers to prepare interesting meals, and we hated the small ration of chocolate or candy which had to last for a month. I often used to wonder how long this would go on and wish I could see what the future might hold.

By the time I reached my late teens, I was courting. (I believe you would call it “dating” these days.) My boyfriend and I wondered what would happen when the time came for us to tell my parents that we planned to marry in due course. The fact that he was Catholic and I was Methodist could cause problems, and we wished we knew whether they would accept this.

The next times that I remember wishing I could see into the future were the three occasions when I was expecting our children. There were no scans in those days, and you didn’t know whether you were having a boy or a girl until baby arrived. When our first child was on the way, I was nervous about the forthcoming change in our lives, and about the huge responsibility of nurturing a new little life. Three years later, I was concerned as to how my little boy would take to sharing me with a baby. In the event there was no problem. He loved his baby sister. Then with number three coming along I felt panicky at times, thinking of how I would cope with three young children.

My husband and I were both teachers, and this was not a well-paid job in those days. Because my parents lived nearby and would be

happy to help with childcare, I decided to go back to work. Time to peek into the future once again. I had always enjoyed my job, but what would it be like now, working with a class full of children all day and then going home to my own children in time to get the evening meal ready? What would it be like for the family to have a working mum? I remember the odd time when my oldest would say quietly to the other two: "Better be a bit careful. I think she's had a hard day."

Years went by, and we began to think of retirement. More little anxieties surfaced. How would the finances work when we were both on pension? (Actually, they worked surprisingly well.) What big changes would retirement bring? We needn't have worried. We had more than seventeen years of helping with the grandchildren, taking vacations abroad, and enjoying being together.

The most dreadful happening in my life came when my dear husband died. I looked into the future, not only in deep grief, but with real fear. I found it hard at first to adjust to being a widow. How could I live without my dearest love? Would life ever be pleasant again? My faith in God came to my rescue, and my dear family helped me so much.

I had always enjoyed being involved with the work of my church, and when that church had to close and I wondered what to do, I found within me a desire to leave Methodism behind and become a Catholic. Too old now to be very active in my church, I find that I have lots of time to pray.

Then there is the time I spend with my family, on both sides of the Atlantic. Life is different but it is still good.

There have been lots of peeks into the future when changes have come, but now I have no more need for this. As an old lady, I am aware that I may not have much future left, but that doesn't worry me. My next big change will be when God calls me home. The assurance I feel that, when that time comes, I shall be in His presence and be reunited with my loved ones is all I need. At last, no anxieties at all.

My One Semester of Villainy by RJ Russell

When I was thirteen, I went through a terrible spate of practical jokes at school. No one was spared, not teachers, not the boys' vice-principal, nor my fellow students. Admittedly, my primary focus was spent on torturing faculty, most especially the boys' vice-principal, Mr. Wardle. He was a disagreeable fellow who liked to wield the paddle on the middle-school boys of John Burroughs Junior High School, and I felt he needed some kind of comeuppance.

One day I brought clothespins to school. I surreptitiously stuffed them in my coat pocket that morning before I left the house. I had deep pockets in this particular coat, and thus I was able to bring quite a few clothespins to school. I spent an entire recess clipping clothespins onto the back of Mr. Wardle's suit jacket, in the hopes that when he sat down he would feel the clothespins. It was not unlike a drive-by assault, except I was walking and, instead of wielding guns, I used clothespins to make my point.

Here's how it would work: I would walk by him, clip the clothespin, and then walk in the opposite direction. By the time I was done, he had an entire row of clothespins hanging off the back of his sport jacket or suit jacket, whichever he wore that day. As he walked around the recess area, students were laughing at the string of clothespins hanging from his jacket.

The interesting bit is that the teachers, who also patrolled the recess area, never told him what was going on. And if they ever saw me doing it, they didn't rat me out. I never got caught, although my understanding is Mr. Wardle sent out an "All Points Bulletin" memo that indicated he wanted the Clothespin Perpetrator found and brought to his office. Since I was an honor student and an otherwise exemplary citizen of the school, Mr. Wardle never suspected me. I wasn't even on his radar. I counted on my otherwise untarnished reputation to shield me from the paddle myself. Being suspended from school, or worse yet being expelled from school, would have been a nightmare come true. I loved my teachers (for the most part)

and the school administrators were pretty friendly and fair; that is, except for Mr. Wardle.

That year I had a math teacher by the name of Mrs. Johnson who was a strange bird. Rather than teaching us math properly, she told us a lot of stories about her early days as a crop-dusting pilot in Oklahoma. I have no idea what that had to do with eighth-grade algebra or why she felt compelled to regale us with such stories of her youth. Anyway, I got the notion that it might be fun to pour honey on her chair, as the chairs were a kind of blondish wood and the honey would not be detected before she sat in it.

Yes, that did occur. She sat fully in the honey-covered chair. Realizing what had happened, she rose slowly from the sticky mess and told us to work from our workbooks and complete the exercises in Chapter Seven. We were to turn in our work (the pages were perforated) and leave our completed workbook pages on her desk. Then she exited the room, being very careful not to turn her back to us, so we could not see the state of her clothes that had touched the honey-covered chair. I think that might actually have been the only day we actually learned math in her class.

Another day I brought a Phillips screwdriver to school and spent an entire recess unscrewing the doorknob to the faculty bathrooms, so that when the teachers tried to pull the door open, the doorknob would fall out, and they could not open the bathroom door. I would hide around the corner from the faculty bathroom and watch as the chaos ensued.

The naughty part of this gambit is that I was one of the designated “Space Cadets” during recesses and lunchtimes. This meant that I could access any hall or classroom in the school during break times. Selection for “Space Cadet” was based on one’s grade point average and citizenship grades. The eligible students needed recommendations from teachers with whom we shared classes—either your homeroom teacher or one of your academic teachers. So it was a big deal. There was a very real trust relationship between the Space Cadets and the school administrators. You got to wear a big

green badge which said "Space Cadet" on it. You could only wear it when on official duty, roaming the halls. I pinned mine to my shirt or dress with pride. The Space Cadets' job was to keep students out of the hallways during recess and lunch times.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking how could I be so mean. You're thinking I violated the trust the faculty and students placed in me. Yup, that was me that semester. I didn't care; I became reckless. Thoughtless even. It was a huge departure from my norm. Huge departure. I was always the "good girl" at school and at home. I helped my grandmother with the dishes and with cooking. I went to church every Sunday. And when yardwork needed doing, I was right there with my brother, raking dead figs in the backyard and desperately trying to avoid the wasps and bees that chased the nectar all around our legs and heads. I helped take trashcans to the curb on pickup days. I looked after the elderly in our neighborhood and checked to see if they needed anything from the store. I babysat kids in the neighborhood and read them stories and gave them coloring books and activities to keep them gainfully occupied. I was always respectful and kind and decent to everyone.

I cannot tell you why the practical jokes overtook my better judgment that semester, nor can I explain why they stopped. Maybe I just wanted to see what it felt like to be a villain, to be "the bad guy." Maybe I was overwhelmed with puberty and hormones, and I just needed to let off steam. Could I have claimed insanity due to puberty? I don't know. But just as quickly as I started my misadventures, I stopped. Before school let out for the summer, I was back to being solely and whole-heartedly an honor student in every way, shape, and form. No more practical jokes. No more "abuses of power." Just an ordinary thirteen-year-old planning to attend summer school, for the sheer joy of learning something new: Geography! I love the study of rocks and dirt. This was going to be a good summer...

Kissed by Lamplight by Robert Mixon

On that fateful dark morning I trudge and stumble onward through the gnarly, overgrown, forbidden forest, helmeted with a lamplight. Is it my imagination, or is some wicked witch reaching out with gnarled fingers to grab my feet and ankles causing me to stumble? This invisible hag even pierces my knee with her long, sharp, twisted fingernail. I turn around but see no visible enchantress or her hands. *Okay! Okay! It must be the darned old tree roots.* Surely the gates to the underworld must be nearby, or are they hidden to us mere mortals. Oh, and is not the descent to Hell easy as Virgil says. Ah, “but to return to the upper air with skies above is devoutly to be wished,” I repeat.

Suddenly, almost hidden from sight, a small black hole gapes at me from the ground. I bend over to enter this place of darkness. Stooping over, I move forward. I continue onward, using my gloved hands and padded knees, into the black bowels of the earth. The lava tube gets so small that I have to wriggle like a nightcrawler in Earth’s entrails, the ceiling being kissed by lamplight. WAIT! Now the ceiling opens up into a cathedral-sized room, with lava stalactites dripping from an ancient, melted dome. Oh my! *Was this not as hot as Hades to melt the ceiling away?*

I think I hear something or someone behind me—or is that just my imagination? A little water drips from far above, and a smallish stream burbles at my feet, but nothing else. I continue onward shinning my headlamp from wall to wall and to the ceiling high above. What is that ahead just now? It looks like a lake in the midst of the floor. *Where is Charon when I need him most, to ferry me across this River Styx?* I stop because the black pool of water seems to end where the ceiling of this cavernous room firmly meets this water’s edge. End of the line? Perhaps. *Drip, drip, drip, drip* the drops fall into the pool. Now faint sounds approach behind me in a regular fashion. *Crunch, clop, crunchy clop, clop.* Yes, it must be footsteps on the rocky bottom.

Someone appears out of nowhere with a large black plastic bag. A bright headlamp blinds my eyes as a decked-out caver looks straight at me. *Why is he looking at me, and where did he come from?* He continues looking straight at me and asks, "How would you like to dive into that dark pool of water and come up on the other side? We have clothes for you to carry with you in the black plastic bag, as well as your helmet and headlamp."

Do I have sucker tattooed to my forehead? Why would I dive into complete darkness under this ceiling in the large pool, and what is on the other side? What indeed?

"Oh, no problem," he says. "There is a large room on the other side of the siphon. After about five to ten feet swimming underwater, you will come up into a nice room with lots of air. You will find a plastic pipe with a stopper wedged in it that is keeping the water filled up to the low ceiling. The water will drain out after you remove the plug, and we can just walk through the drained passage."

Hmmm. I guess I am THAT sucker, but what the heck. I take off my lamp-bedecked helmet, place it into the black plastic bag, dive into the inky black, Stygian pool, and feel my way under the ceiling while holding my breath. I come up to gasp new air on the other side of this 40° black, watery grave-wannabe. Dark, cold, wet, but I am alive.

Aha, I can change in the darkness before pulling the plug. I put on the dry clothes, helmet and lamp. After I've pulled the plug and drained the foreboding black pool, the caver walks under the ceiling on just a wet path and small trickling stream, followed by several others.

I later return to a campground near the bewitched forest, where various other folks seem to be also staring at me. A sign next to my feet reads, "Don't feed the cavers." Are we really just that strange?

The Trees Are Talking by Peter Letts



xxx

Elizabeth and her grandmother were taking a walk in the wooded area at the edge of the suburbs where they lived. There were pine trees, with their straight trunks and regularly spaced small branches that resulted in a conical shape, and maples, whose divided main stems and a sudden profusion of twigs and leaves looked more like open umbrellas. Here and there were majestic oaks and the occasional slender, white poplar rising above the smaller trees. Over the years, paths had been created by many feet trampling the undergrowth and hands bending or breaking branches that blocked the way. The more mature trees had extended their canopies at higher elevations, but there were plenty of gaps for sunlight to shine through.

Elizabeth and Grandma were very comfortable with each other—one with the role of a student and the other a general knowledge teacher—but occasionally they reversed those roles with the student explaining her concept of a new technological innovation. Grandma was happy to provide a foil for such explanations, with the occasional question to stimulate the young mind's understanding. They were meandering along a path they knew well, when Elizabeth suddenly slowed to a stop and cocked her head a little to one side. She stayed that way for several minutes, occasionally turning in different directions until her behavior prompted a response.

"What is it, Elizabeth?" asked Grandma.

"The trees are talking, but I don't know what they are saying."

"What does it sound like?"

"It's a sort of mumble that gets louder and softer. Sometimes it is fast, sometimes slow, and it goes up and down like notes in music."

"How do you know it's the trees?"

"Well, it's as if there are lots of different voices taking it in turns to say something. Some are stronger or more important than others, and some are quite tiny and almost not there; but they all get a turn. If I concentrate on one of the trees nearby, most of the voices fade away until it is that tree's turn to speak, and then it becomes much stronger for a little while." She gave her grandmother a puzzled look, hoping for some adult explanation.

"Do the saplings and bushes get a turn too?" asked Grandma, as she tried to make sense of this unexpected phenomena.

"I think they are the tinier voices," said Elizabeth, "but they are more difficult to isolate."

"Well," said Grandma, "some biologists think that plants communicate with each other by releasing chemicals that reveal their status. It's not like a conversation, but more like a dog's warning growl or submissive rolling on their backs, or cats hissing and going puffy-tailed. It may be that the plants are vibrating the surface of their trunks or wiggling their leaves, and your brain has recognized

the small sounds and movements as non-random behavior. If you keep listening for a long time, it might be possible to understand some of what they are saying, but you would probably end up disappointed and frustrated. People have been listening to whales and dolphins, and even songbirds, for a long time, without any idea of what they are actually saying to each other. Parrots can echo human speech, and occasionally what they say appears to be relevant to something, but do they understand what they are saying?"

Elizabeth tried to digest the suggestions and asked, "So my brain is acting like one of those AI computer systems. It's absorbing thousands of apparently unrelated items and linking them together to produce something normal and everyday. Except that it's like listening to a foreign language; I hear the sounds, but I don't know what they are saying.

"And *you* don't hear them. Is that because your eyes and ears aren't as sensitive as mine, or because your brain doesn't work as well?" she added with a mischievous grin.

"Probably a combination of all three," said Grandma good-naturedly. "Do you want to try to make more sense of what you are hearing? I could stand next to one of the trees and wait until you say it's talking, and then try to interact with it. Maybe shaking a branch or banging gently on the trunk with a stick."

"Okay," said Elizabeth. "How about that maple tree over there. It has some low branches you can reach."

Grandma found a dead piece of wood in the undergrowth and moved next to the maple tree, within reach of a branch. Then she waited for Elizabeth to give a sign that the tree was taking its turn to talk. It took several minutes until, when the sign was given, her grandmother took hold of the branch and moved it backward and forward a few times. Then she used the piece of wood to tap gently on the trunk. In both cases, she used the opening bar of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to control the rhythm and repeated it five times. Then she turned back to Elizabeth to see if there was any reaction.

“Wow!” said Elizabeth. “That was really cool. When you moved the branch, the tree paused a bit, and then I think it was trying to repeat the sequence. When you tapped on the trunk, it reproduced the sequence almost immediately after you stopped. Now it has finished whatever it was saying, and some other tree or bush is having a turn. Shall we try it again?”

Grandma nodded and resumed her position by the tree, saying, “I’ll try a different pattern, maybe SOS in Morse code, and do the trunk first.” It took about the same amount of time before Elizabeth gave the signal, and her grandmother rapped SOS twice on the trunk. She waited a few seconds and then moved the branch in the same pattern. Elizabeth looked a little disappointed with the result.

“It repeated what you did, like before. The trunk taps were pretty exact, but the branch waving was a bit fuzzy.” Then, before her grandmother could respond: “Oh no; now they’ve all stopped talking.”

Grandma patted her consolingly on the arm. “Welcome to the world of real-life scientific experiments. Most of the time they don’t give any useful results. What did we learn this time? Trees seem to have a communication mode; in this mode, they recognize some forms of external input and respond by echoing it; possibly to us but more likely to the other trees. Maybe tomorrow or sometime next week or next month or next year you will hear them again. Then we can try something else.”

Over the next few weeks Elizabeth went back to the wooded area several times, sometimes with her grandmother and sometimes by herself, but she heard nothing except the rustling of the wind, and once, the drip-drip-drip of rainwater filtering down. She also thought about what had happened and tried out her ideas on what she assumed was Grandma’s expertise.

The first and most obvious question was, “If it only lasts a couple of hours, are we just missing it?”

“Possibly,” was the response, “but you would have to camp out here for a week or more to see if it does happen regularly. I don’t think your parents are ready for you to try that on your own, and I’m too old for that sort of adventure.”

The next few questions were related to possible timeframes and the corresponding activity. They eventually came to a consensus that it was probably a “once in the springtime” event and was related to new growth, but the exact details would require more evidence.

There were also questions of how widespread it was. The wooded area was not very large, and it had seemed like all the trees and bushes were taking part. But did the same thing happen in forests that covered hundreds of square miles? It did not seem likely that tens of thousands of trees would take turns to speak, one at a time.

Grandma found a children’s science website, called “The Wood Wide Web,” that described how trees communicate with each other using root fungi to send chemical messages. Elizabeth found that very interesting, but later in the year she started high school, and talking trees became less important than new friends and activities. The subject was resurrected when she asked her grandmother for suggestions about college, and they agreed that courses in artificial intelligence and plant biology might give her more insight into the phenomenon.

During her second year at college, Elizabeth decided to spend the spring break camping in the woods, to see if she could sense the trees talking again. She told some close friends about her earlier experience, and they agreed to help. They arranged to borrow some very sensitive audio-visual monitoring equipment, and they got permission from the local town council to conduct an experiment that involved camping out in the wooded area for a few days. At first, everyone was enthusiastic and eager to make suggestions as they set up the equipment. Elizabeth was pretty confident she could identify the maple tree her grandmother had interacted with, so they set up the monitoring equipment centered on that location. Then they

tested it by rustling branches, tapping on tree-trunks, and stomping on bare ground. To synchronize tree-talking with recorded data, Elizabeth had a time-coded data-entry device, which allowed her to characterize what she was hearing. She described what she had heard years before, and members of the group simulated the different sounds from several locations, while she entered identification codes. This provided a baseline linkage between the codes and the recorded data.

These activities took most of the first two days, and then the group settled down to wait. They had basic equipment, like folding camping chairs and a couple of tables, which allowed for a variety of board and card games. A rotation was set up for one member of the group to pick up pre-ordered food and drink for meals, and at first everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Then questions began about how sure Elizabeth was that something was going to happen. She and her grandmother had made notes of the state of leaf development when they provoked a response from the maple tree, but it was impossible to get an exact match, so she had timed the camping experiment to start a few days before the expected talking event. A couple of group members indicated that they were prepared to wait as long as Elizabeth thought there was a possibility of success, but the others started to make excuses for not staying.

Those that left agreed to leave all the recording equipment set up and offered to come back occasionally to help out with food delivery and social support. Eventually there was only one other permanent member of the group—Richard, who was very quiet and self-contained. Elizabeth came to realize that they had been taking almost exactly the same set of classes, and she was about to ask him about his target major when he stopped what he was doing and cocked his head to one side. Moments later she heard the tree conversation start up.

They looked at each other, and she said, “You hear it too!”

“Not as well as you,” he said, “but let’s turn on the recording stuff and start the identification process before we have a discussion.”

“Do you hear the same sounds that I hear inside my head,” she asked, “and the way I characterized them audibly?”

“Close enough,” he said, “and, since everything is time synchronized, we can match up any significant differences later.”

The recording setup had a single on/off switch, and Richard had his own data-entry device for identification codes, so they spent the next two hours in companionable listening-mode. They looked at each other for confirmation when the trees stopped talking, broke out into broad smiles, and indulged in an enormous hug. After that initial embarrassment from close physical contact, they relaxed and talked about what to do next. It soon became obvious that neither of them wanted to call the rest of the group back immediately, and that was put off until the next day. They spent the rest of the day and night finding out about each other, suggesting possible explanations for the talking tree phenomenon, and occasionally sleeping.

The next day they called their friends to come and help dismantle the recording equipment, explaining that Elizabeth had heard something the previous evening and they might want to help analyze it. Richard said he had tried to hear things and entered some identification codes but wasn’t sure if they were of any use. There were comments from one or two of the group, asking how well they were able to sleep after all the excitement; but most were more interested in seeing the results of the experiment. The group took the equipment back to the college computer lab and transferred all the data to a common database. Then the search for information began.

Extracting information from large datasets is often a slow and laborious business, especially if one is not sure what is being looked for. In this case the start/stop times, when identification codes were entered, created much smaller subsets and also provided some parallelism, so that a theory based on one subset could be tested on another, hopefully with a similar information content.

Atmospheric sound waves are rapid variations in air pressure with combinations of many different frequencies. As an example, a single note on a piano consists of several frequencies that are all integer multiples of a “fundamental” frequency; for middle C it is 262 positive and negative pressure peaks per second. Simultaneous multiple notes just add the pressure values at each instant of time. Acoustic analysis starts by measuring the frequencies that are present and how strong each one is, and then assigning them to harmonic families.

Video data is much more complex. At each time instant there is a two-dimensional set of points in space, and at each point in space there is a set of color-values. Typically these values are equally spaced across the spectrum of a rainbow and may extend into infra-red and ultraviolet. Another level of complexity is possible if the video consists of stereo pairs of images. Analysis usually starts with simple statistics; how many red points in each image and what is the variation over time, for example. It can continue with classification of each point into a small number of categories based on multi-dimensional statistics, finding contiguous areas of individual categories, using those areas to identify objects of interest in single images, and then tracking those objects over time.

The database rapidly became a cause célèbre among the computer science geeks and mathematicians. They started a wiki for posting ideas and algorithms, and after a few weeks there were some initial results. The acoustic data had two distinct types of signal; one was a single harmonic family with a very low fundamental frequency—below human hearing range; the other was a set of harmonic families with equally spaced fundamental frequencies clustered in the mid human hearing range. Both signals were very faint but consistent over multiple subsets. With the acoustic results as a guide, the video data began to make more sense. Analysis algorithms could look for sequences of image events with the same fundamental frequencies as the acoustic signals. They discovered that the low fundamental frequency matched vibrations in the trunks of tall trees, and that the

human-level fundamental frequencies probably matched vibrations in their leaf canopies, although the correlation was much less.

Elizabeth was a little confused by the analysis results. She and Richard had assumed that all the trees, saplings, and bushes had been talking. If it were only the tall trees, they must have been sensing the sounds from a much wider area, because there were definitely a lot of voices. Then she remembered what her grandmother had told her: trees communicate with their immediate neighborhood by underground fungi, and there was a web site called “Wood Wide Web” that described it. What if tall trees were the network hubs for an internet of trees? She knew that the recording equipment had been concentrated on the single maple tree, but maybe there was enough data from other trees to test her hypothesis. She posed the question on the wiki, and confirmation was almost immediate. There were other pairs of signals hidden in the acoustic database. It appeared that the single below-human-hearing frequencies were some kind of identifier for transmitters, and the other human-hearing-level frequencies provided message content. In that sense, the leaf canopies were acting like some kind of acoustic antennae.

Some people wanted to continue working on the database to try to decode messages, but Elizabeth remembered her grandmother’s comments on understanding whale song and preferred to return to a normal life. She and Richard tried camping in different locations for the next few years but didn’t hear any talking trees. It wasn’t clear to them if the timing was wrong or if they had lost their sensing capability, so they decided to get on with a normal life together.

Years later, when Elizabeth and her daughter Jane were walking in the woods, Jane suddenly slowed to a stop and cocked her head a little to one side. She stayed that way for several minutes, occasionally turning in different directions until her behavior prompted a response from her mother.

“Are the trees talking, Jane?”

The Tree Shaman by RJ Russell

The Tree Shaman, known to his people as Ki-Ya, walked along the scorched forest that was once his people's home. He felt such a deep pang of loss and grief wash over him he began to cry, and it felt as though he would never stop crying. This was completely understandable for his connection to the trees was rooted in love and respect for each unique tree life. It was as though his entire family, his literal family tree, had died all at once. It was a painful, aching blow. He felt his heart would never recover from such loss. The beauty and grandeur of the forest had been replaced with black, smoldering, twisted remnants of trees. He was father and mother to these trees, having planted them hundreds of years ago. He watched them grow from seedlings to giant Douglas firs, redwoods, and beautiful, graceful pines of many types. This once lush forest had sustained him and his people, the Elf Groundlings, for hundreds of years. They had lost so much more than their homes: they had lost their way of life, their community, and their natural environment. They had lost a part of their souls—perhaps the most important part of all—their precious connection to the Earth.

Ki-Ya sat on a burnt stump to catch his breath and contemplate the way forward for himself and his people. Could they plant trees again? Yes, but it would take a very, very long time—hundreds of years—for them to create the canopy of beauty, strength and life the trees provided his community. Even with his magical shaman powers and special growth tools and prayers, it would still take such a long time to rebuild their beautiful forest. And it would be a different forest with a different personality, a different collective soul. What was lost here, was lost forever. What to do? Were there even any unburnt seeds from the old burnt-out logs and limbs that he could harvest to make a new generation of trees? He walked amongst the tree ruins and, every now and again, picked up a seed, an acorn, or a root that seemed to be clinging to life. Perhaps he could bless these seeds and

acorns and roots with the magic of life and make the forest beautiful again.

Good thoughts such as this swirled through his mind; but angry thoughts roiled about in his mind, too. He recalled that terrible night, just two days ago, that took almost everything away from him and his people: The air was thick with smoke as he and others shook their fellow groundlings awake and carried the little ones and everyone's belongings—as best they could—to the edge of the burning, smoky forest. They lost a few elves, Brox and Knix and Gita. And a few others were missing, but Ki-Ya and most of the community were accounted for and safe, a blessing to be sure.

Ki-Ya shook the memory of the fire from his mind and turned to the future. He took out his prophecy stones and laid them out on the sacred leather pouch-turned-tablecloth that had been handed down to him years ago by his grandfather. Ki-Ya began the consultation with the spirits. First he took three deep meditative breaths, keeping a steady pace of breathing that helped him to focus his thoughts. Then he spoke out loud:

“Oh, Tree Spirits, guide me now and help me to help my elf kinsfolk. What shall we do? Shall we travel northward and take up residence in a forest untouched by such destruction, or shall we stay here and rebuild?”

The Tree Spirits responded: “You must leave this place as quickly as possible. There is more destruction coming. Winds and fire of such force and fury they would carry your people off to unknown lands and separate each of you from each other. You must go! You must stay together. The Elf Groundlings must survive to care for another generation of trees, and the generation after that, and so forth. You must train your replacement, eventually. You cannot do that here. There is naught but destruction and darkness here.”

Ki-Ya promised the Tree Spirits that he would follow their guidance and get his people to safe ground. They would leave today.

The Tree Spirits nodded their approval and offered a few more words of wisdom: “Be careful with your kin; they are fragile, vulnerable, and scared. Some will not want to leave their homes. Some will have doubts along the way and will want to turn around and come back. You may find a few elves rebellious and unwilling to head northward; unwilling to be led to safer ground. They may want to split off and go somewhere else. Be patient and be gentle. Offer them guidance, but do not force the issue. Let them come to realize this is the only way to survive. Do your best to keep everyone together; but accept the fact that some may leave. In order to survive, you must be together and support one another. This is the way.”

Ki-Ya nodded and thanked the Tree Spirits for their wise guidance. Before he gathered up the sacred leather pouch and stones, he took one long, sad look at the charred forest. He said a prayer to the Tree Spirits that this place might someday come back to life. He took a portion of the roots and acorns and seeds he had found earlier that day and cupped them in his hands. He whispered the sacred words of healing, protection, and growth and breathed the magic life-breath into the seeds and acorns and roots. Then he threw them heavenward and watched a gentle wind carry and scatter them across the scorched earth. This forest would come back, not to its former glory, never that. But this forest would come back, different and new. Ki-Ya hurried to the shelter, where his kinsfolk had gathered.

“What news, Ki-Ya? Have the Tree Spirits offered guidance to you,” asked Mira.

“Yes, the Tree Spirits have spoken. We must leave today. They have told me more destruction is on the way, and there is no time to lose.” Some of the elves gasped. Some of the elves sighed a kind of deep sigh that is reserved for such moments of great sadness. This was the only home they had ever known. They knew every nook and cranny of this forest. They had names for each of the trees, and the elves loved their life here. It would be hard to leave it behind, even

though there wasn't much left of the forest itself. Other elves sprang into action, gathering the little ones and stuffing what belongings they had into their packs. Still others collected any food they managed to save for the long journey ahead. Hopefully they would find some tasty morsels of nuts and seeds and berries to keep everyone fed.

But a few of the elves looked at one another and shuffled their feet. They expressed doubts—just as the Tree Spirits had said they would. They asked Ki-Ya why the community couldn't just stay here and rebuild the forest. Ki-ya reminded them that more destruction was on the way. And soon. He gently told them any effort towards healing and growth would be lost yet again. "No, we cannot stay here," Ki-ya said. "We must leave today. The Tree Spirits have foreseen great peril here for all of us."

And with that, everyone strapped their belongings onto their backs and prepared to leave. The little ones were gathered up by their parents. Babies were attached to woolen snugglies and were carried in front, so moms and dads could keep a close eye on them. Belongings were carried via knapsacks, and a few items were carried in pouches that strapped onto leather belts around their waists.

Ki-Ya offered a prayer of protection for their journey and words of encouragement. "Tree Spirits, guide us true across lands unfamiliar to us and keep us safe along the way. Find us shelter when we need it, and bring us strength and joy to meet our journey's end with grace and resolve. Lead us to a happy place, a good new home where we will live free among the trees and once again find comfort in your loving branches and beautiful leaves." Everyone uttered the elf version of "Amen" in unison, and thus began the long and arduous journey northward.

It would be days before they could rest. The winds and fires were wafting in their northward direction. It seemed like the fires were determined to catch up and devour them whole. Angry flames licked and curled in their direction, seeming to say, "You will not get away

so easily, elf groundlings.” The children cried, and some of the adults did, too. When they felt they could risk it, they stopped by a winding river and set up a make-shift camp. They had traveled 300 miles through rocky and hilly terrain. Everyone was exhausted. Cold compresses were applied to weary feet to help ease the pain of blisters. The Tree Shaman knew now was the time to speak soothing words of encouragement. He told his kinsfolk how brave they all had been these past three days, since they left their homeland. He told them how proud he was to be their Tree Shaman. He wished them good dreams. They would be leaving early the next morning. And with that, everyone fell into a well-earned sleep.

Morning arrived and, after a quick breakfast, they resumed their journey northward. A few of the elves were heard grumbling again about the journey; a few wanted to go back or settle by the river. Ki-ya explained that, although the river lands were good for camping, they could never be a permanent home.

“We are too vulnerable; too out in the open,” explained Ki-ya. “We can easily be seen by other creatures such as wolves, bears, and humans. The humans would be especially dangerous to us. They would want to cage us or sell us or exploit us in some fashion. Nay, we cannot stay here.”

Other elves, who had narrowly escaped detection by humans, nodded in earnest. Most of the older elves knew the story of Brinna who was captured by a human and never seen by her kinsfolk ever again. Hers is a sad story for another day, but suffice it to say, her fate is a cautionary tale of what happens to an elf who is seen by a human. No good can come of it, that’s for sure.

They trudged on in silence, lost in their thoughts. Some of the parents did their best to keep the children’s spirits up. They told stories or made a quiz game out of asking the children to name the flower they passed by, or the tree, or the plant or bush. Anything to keep the children’s minds occupied and happy.

Everyone was getting tired, and Ki-Ya knew it was time to camp for the night. They chose to make camp beside a stand of trees that was not far from a lake. After dinner, Ki-Ya told the elves he was going to meditate for a few minutes but would return soon. He walked to the lake and prayed to the Water Spirits:

“Oh, Great Water Spirits, is our journey true? Are we going in the right direction? Will we find a new home soon?”

The Water Spirits responded: “Your journey is yet long, but you will find your new home. The challenge will take its toll on you and your kinsfolk. Your losses will be felt. You may be blamed for them. But you are respected and loved. Do not lose heart. Had you stayed in your old home, your losses would have been far worse. Far worse. Remain steadfast; stay the course.”

Ki-Ya returned to camp, only to see a few belongings missing. Two of the grumbling elves had left the safety of the camp and headed out on their own. Ki-Ya mourned the loss but knew he must stay with the group. He prayed that the two might return or catch up to the group, but he did not look for them. A few of the elves asked why he was not going after Ji-Ya and Ramok. He explained his promise to the Tree Spirits to keep everyone together and safe:

“I cannot leave you to search for one or two. I cannot force them to return. My job is to keep as many of you as safe as I can. We must stay together, but I cannot force anyone to stay. I can only recommend and offer guidance.” Ki-Ya’s voice sounded tired to his own ears, but he pressed on. “Our best chance for survival is to stay together, support one another, and build our home in a new place, a new forest. This is what the Tree Spirits have told me, and this is what we must do. We will get there—we are only a few days’ journey away. It won’t be easy, and we may lose a few others along the way, but we must press on.” His kinsfolk nodded. They stood a little taller—which was hard because grown-up elves are only twelve inches tall—but they were showing their resolve, and Ki-Ya felt relief washing over him.

Mira, who was a wise and loving elf, smiled and offered comfort to Ki-Ya through her words: "We will not allow the fires that burnt our homes to burn holes in our hearts. We are with you, Ki-Ya, every step of this journey. We know you are leading us true, and we look forward to seeing our new home and building a new life together. We will find our joy." The elves cheered, and Ki-Ya smiled. It felt as though a burden had been lifted off his shoulders. He felt young again. As he looked around his kinsfolk, the love he had felt for his beloved forest, he found again ten-fold for his kinsfolk. They would be all right. They would make it.

They left at dawn the next morning. Before leaving, Ki-Ya scribbled a note for Ji-Ya and Ramok, letting them know which direction and with which trails the elves were traveling, and pinned it to a tree. He hoped they would rejoin the group.

As the morning hours fled by, Ki-Ya realized the group was making excellent progress. It seemed like the good weather had aligned with easy trails, making the journey almost pleasurable. The smoke and hell-fire that nearly enveloped them was well behind them now.

Ki-Ya realized something else, too. Last night he had had an epiphany. He called Mira to his side and whispered in her ear, "Mira, I think you would make an excellent Tree Shaman. Let's begin your training on these last days of our journey." Mira smiled and nodded her head in agreement. She had wished to be the first female elf Tree Shaman all her life. And now she would be trained by the best. Sometimes even out of darkness and the flames of destruction, the path to enlightenment and goodness can be found.

"Okay, Mira, let's begin your training." Ki-Ya took the sacred stones out of his pouch and said, "Each of these six stones has a life force, a resonance from within them. You take three deep, rhythmic breaths and utter these sacred words to awaken the stones: 'Blessed stones...'"

Matches by Robin Layne (To the Supreme Matchmaker)



xxxi

Now
I feel like a box of dud matches.
What makes it worse is
sometimes they light
bursting in colorful, brilliant flame
—and then
are carefully
pinched
out
with utmost care to get it all
so the scorching flame will hurt no more...

But
the duds
still
burn
the skin of my heart.

Lord,
make me a match
that can never be
extinguished.

Fire! by Jessie Collins



xxxii

Scouts or Guides rubbing two sticks together,
Making the sparks that will light their campfires.

Groups of friends, singing their cheerful songs,
Sitting in circles around the warm flames.

Cozy fires in old-fashioned kitchens
Heating the water—the ovens as well.

Log fires blazing to warm the great halls,
Both warmth and light from those flickering flames.

Bright sparks from carelessness, lightning or power-line
Beautiful forests ruined by fire.

Homes burned to ashes. Many lives ended.
Changed now to tragedy, beauty all gone.

Facts Lost in the Retellings by Zita Podany

Just another ordinary day.
Yet a bit of apprehension
wrapped me as I walked home
from school that afternoon.

I could feel something was wrong.
Only fifteen more minutes and I would be home.
That's when I heard the wailing sirens.
They were getting louder by the minute.

Anxiety gripped my soul.
My dad was at home
recuperating from a knee surgery.
I quickened my pace, dreading the worst.

As I rounded the corner to my street
from three blocks away, I could see the fire engines.
My feet took flight as I juggled the books in my arms.
Closer and closer, my feet ran faster.

The flames, the smoke, the burning wood.
Fear spread through every bone.
The house was on fire, screamed my brain.
I could not breathe, gasping for air.

Dry mouth, aching throat, out of breath,
I arrived at my house and saw a flurry of activity.
My dad all excited, forearms red from the heat
the water hose still gripped in his hands.

“It’s not our house!” my brain screamed in relief.
The house next door, upstairs charred.
Firemen pointing hoses
another telling me to stay back.

The heat had been intense.
The upstairs almost gutted.
Only a driveway separated our houses,
the width of a car and a half.

No-one was home next door.
All had left the night before.
We were elated thinking
they were moving away.

Wild parties, drugs galore
active all night long.
So we were glad they were moving
good riddance we had hoped.

All their motorcycles and cars
were removed from their
garage and driveway
the previous night.

Suspicious activity my dad tried to explain
to the fire inspector that day.
“Arson,” the fire inspector declared.
Three incendiary devices were found in the house.

“Had the third one gone off, your house would have been toast,” he explained. Neighbors gathered, each retelling what happened with great relish and embellishment.

Much like the telephone game we played in primary school, the final story spread like wildfire. Just a shard of its original version as the newspaper headline screamed bloody murder.

Without verifying, without proof, the journalist wrote his own blazing version: Three disgruntled motorcycle gang members torch professor’s house because of failing grades.



What to Leave Behind by Mindy Black

It's easy to choose what to bring

My family

My photos

My important papers

But what to leave behind

What deserves to become ashes

These items that have been in my life

Objects surrounding me with comfort

Giving me a sense of safety and control

Now, if I have to drive away

To an unknown future

Full of unknown objects

Will I always think of what I left behind?

Possessions that represent me

But are now gone

What would that mean

Would I be less than who I am

Or free to reinvent myself

As I think on these things

The smoke is cleared away

The threat is gone for now

I can breathe cleaner air

So I breathe and for now

I don't have to decide

what to leave behind

The Fire Lily by Lisa Maria Braun

A shock
of linear leaves
 ravaged
by wildfire

pushes forth
a hollow scape
 crowned with
 bowing
 trumpet-shaped
 flowers

Crimson at the base
fading to salmon pink

they produce nectar
 attracting butterflies

ensuring
Life
Continues
while sunbirds revel in the syrupy sweetness



(c) Callan Cohen www.birdingafrica.com

“I’m Dying” by Catherin Violante

Hearing him say it tonight
Was hard
I didn’t respond
I could feel my breath
Catch in my throat
I didn’t want him to repeat it
He didn’t
There was a long silence
He said it was okay
He said it was like watching
A movie and knowing
What’s going to happen
But you can’t stop it
I told him about my mother
The night she took my hand
And whispered the same words
The night she knew
It was inevitable
And then I felt bad
About making it about me
We talked about cheese
And apples and wine
He’d have a bite
Or two if he could
I asked him if he
Minded being alone
He said he preferred it
I’ll call him again
Tomorrow, and the next day
We will sit in silence, or laugh
Share a story, say our goodbyes, and wait.
Because, that’s what we do.

He Came in Cold by Zita Podany



xxxv

“He came in cold,” the emergency room receptionist told me, as though she was rattling off yesterday’s menu choices.

How could that be? my mind replaying the route I followed behind the ambulance. In a series of red lights, I had lost the ambulance on the way to the nearest hospital. What went wrong? My mind could not grasp what the nurse conveyed to me.

She must be wrong, my mind screamed behind a cold sweat that slowly meandered through my body. I looked at her and, through the lump forming in my throat, said, “Please check. The ambulance would have come five minutes ago. His name is...”

A staccato rhythm of fingernails tapped the keyboard, her eyes on the screen and without missing a beat, she once more declared with a finality in her tone, “He came in cold. Someone will come and talk to you soon. In the meantime take a seat in the waiting room.” Her red

manicured finger pointed in the direction of the sparsely furnished waiting room.

Take a seat. Just like that. So many emotions flooded through my brain, zapping the life out of my veins, out of my soul, out of my being. Take a seat. So matter of fact. As though I had come to watch a movie in a dark theater or just stepped on a bus to nowhere.

“How soon?” I managed to squeak out words from a parched throat and a mouth that felt as though cotton had been stuffed into it.

Without looking up from her computer screen, she once more pointed to the waiting room. “Take a seat; someone will come out.”

My eyes felt moist as I once more persisted, not wanting to accept her words, yet my body was already reacting to an unseen pain. “I want to go be with him,” I said, feeling the first tear hit my cheek.

“I told you someone will come to talk to you.” She turned to the next person in line, dismissing the distress slowly unfolding.

I walked into the waiting room. Trying to wrap my brain around the piercing words searing into my flesh. “He came in cold.” The words echoed in my brain, turning this way and that, and each time the results were the same, pure disbelief. I could not sit. I wanted to be with him. I knew he would want me to be there, to hold his hand, to reassure him. We had been down this road together several times—the ambulance ride, the emergency room, and the long wait for test results. Each time I was there to reassure him, to ask questions, to translate medical-speak to words he would understand, to be his eyes, his ears, and his voice.

This time it was different. We were in a different hospital with a different set of rules, and I had lost the ambulance, so my entrance to the emergency room was thwarted by a receptionist who did not understand—she was just doing her job.

Pacing, the rational part of my brain whispered, “The receptionist is wrong. Have her page the nurse or doctor.” The emotional side sent every nerve-ending into a tailspin of deep turmoil. In either case, rational or emotional, I knew he wanted me to be with him. I could

feel it in my bones. He needed me to be there to help him, to calm him, to just be there to let him know he was not alone.

A nurse emerged from behind the ER doors. The receptionist pointed toward me. Ten long minutes had passed since I walked into that waiting room.

The nurse looked at me. "We are doing everything we can for him," she said in a tone reserved for ordering a hamburger. Unfeeling, devoid of human empathy. She too was just doing her job, by the book, by the procedures of the hospital, following protocols. Efficient, sterile, and robotic. Programmed not to show they understood the seeping distress spilling in front of their eyes.

"I want to see him. He needs me to translate for him and to answer questions about his medical history," I said, hoping I sounded rational even as my voice broke through several octaves of tight vocal chords.

"We will let you see him later. Right now we are running tests." Her tone was firm, unyielding.

Hope surged through my body. My mind grabbed onto the words that they were running tests. They would not be running tests on someone who had come in cold. Would they?

As I followed her to the emergency room door, I tried to explain that I was his medical Power of Attorney, his caregiver. "He needs me to translate for him. He is 93 years old and hard of hearing. He won't be able to understand you. He understands my voice. Have you contacted his doctors? They can tell you I always come with him to..."

Before I could finish, she cut me off. "We are doing everything we can for him." She punched the button with her ID card. The ER doors swung open.

"No, you are not," I said. "You are preventing me from being with him, to translate and to answer any medical questions."

"We will ask him if he wants to see you, and the doctor needs to approve it." The rolling of her eyes underscored her impatient tone, as she turned on her heels and disappeared behind the closed ER doors.

Refraining from an impulse to kick those doors, I could hear my mom's voice whispering in my brain, "Be calm. A cool head will prevail."

The receptionist caught my eye. "Ma'am, you will need to sit and calm down. Otherwise I will have to call Security."

A half hour ticked by. My throat ached with each gulp of air. I walked over to the receptionist. "I want to talk to the head of the ER department or to the doctor in charge." My words were calm, deliberate, despite the churning in my stomach and the urge to scream them from the rooftops. "And if he/she is not available, I want to speak to the administrator in charge." Something in my eyes made her pick up the phone while I stood rooted in front of her desk.

After what seemed like hours (ten minutes had passed), two people emerged from behind the ER doors. They introduced themselves as they led me to a corner of the waiting room. One was the nurse in charge of ER that evening, and the other was a social worker. I explained the situation to them.

"We can provide a translator," the social worker said, "What language does your father speak?"

"We speak a combo of languages which have modified over time." I tried to explain that a stranger would not know the meaning of combo words we had modified for our use at home. They exchanged looks. A wall of silence ensued. I took a deep breath. "If need be, I will go to the administrator in charge. At this point you are hindering his care and preventing me from being able to assist in his care so he can get timely and optimal medical treatment."

They both got up and walked toward the ER doors. I followed. The nurse stopped me in my tracks. "We will check with the doctor. In the meantime, you need to sit quietly in the waiting room. Otherwise we will call Security to remove you." The doors once again closed with a familiar click.

Another ten minutes slowly ticked away. Just as I made up my mind to find an administrator, the ER doors swung open. The nurse beckoned to me. "The doctor said you can see him now."

She led me through a maze of small hallways. Stiff and unsmiling she pulled back a curtain to one of the examining rooms. There lay my dad, without a blanket, half naked, shivering, holding onto the rails of the ER bed as if for dear life.

He saw me. “What took you so long to get here? I told them I wanted to see my daughter. The doctor said they couldn’t find you. Where were you?” He struggled to sit up. His face animated. Our roles reversing as he shivered and tried to pull the gown over the electrodes on his chest.

I turned toward the nurse, “Please get a warm blanket for him.”

As I tucked the warm blanket around him, he breathed a sigh of relief, his body relaxed. He knew I would be his ears, his eyes, and his voice on his road to recovery.

I looked at the nurse and the doctor. “By the way, the receptionist told me he came in cold.”



Welcoming Lilly by Robin Layne



xxxvii

“Go *waay* over there!” Stuart urged.

Mitsie ran in a circle, then sat down no farther away than before. She leaned toward Stuart, tongue lolling.

Stuart, seated on a gold velvet sofa, held up the terrier’s ball, teased her with it for a second, then threw it.

Mitsie caught it, then perked her ears.

Gabriel, the gray cockatiel on Stuart’s left shoulder, said, “Avon calling!” The bird danced back and forth on his human perch.

Mitsie dropped the ball and barked, looking out through the mansion’s open doorway. No flies lived in Heaven; only butterflies floated into this living room from the garden out front.

“Who’s there?” Stuart called.

Two cats jumped from their corners of the room and ran toward the entrance.

“Not Avon!” A large young man poked his head in the doorway.

“Ah, Dean! What’s up?” Stuart asked, as Dean rushed through the doorway, reached down to pet Shaman, the black-and-white long-haired cat, and stooped in front of Stuart.

“Good news,” Dean drawled, brown eyes twinkling. “She’s arrived.”

Stuart knew instantly who Dean was talking about. “Why did you get the news before me?” He stood and returned Gabriel to his wooden perch.

Dean shrugged. “Maybe I was watching the gates more. You’ve been busy with the animals.”

“But she’s *my daughter!*” Stuart said with fake indignation.

“She was my *best friend!*” Dean countered.

“She was best friends with a number of people,” Stuart pointed out.

“I got here before you,” Dean said.

“Only by a week.” Stuart stood and hugged Dean. Mitsie pranced around them. Shaman groomed himself as his gray tabby mother, Smoke, ran out the doorway. Lilly was the only member of Stuart’s family who had liked Smoke. Smoke had birthed several litters of kittens before Lilly’s parents brought her to the Cat Adoption Center. Stuart now wished they had gotten Smoke spayed and let Lilly keep her longer.

Stuart pulled Dean out the doorway as if he were the bigger of them. In perfect health, he was again the adventurer of his youth. He liked to swim in the Sea of Glass without scuba equipment and hike up mountains, Mitsie at his side. Stuart had always been close to animals, and he had been pleased to discover the pets he loved waiting for him when he entered Heaven. As they joined the welcoming crowd, he said, “I can’t wait to see my Lilly! I have so many things to say to her! We never had a proper goodbye. She wasn’t even sure I made it here. Does Gary know yet?”

Dean tilted his head. “Gary who?”

“My sister’s son. He took Lilly under his wing in the last years of his life.”

“Oh, yeah. My angel told me he was supportive of her writing. Like you.”

Stuart nodded. “I met Gary at the gates years ago. Thanked him in person for buying Lilly a computer.” He waved to several friends of

Lilly's who had passed over before her—Marie, Minnie, Teri, Bev, Lyn... He had come to know them all.

"Boo!" called a male voice behind him.

Stuart jumped. There was never anything to be afraid of, but he could still be startled, in a good way. Gary tapped his shoulder, sending a warm tingle as far as Stuart's arm and back. "You've been spending extra time with the Holy Spirit," Stuart said.

Gary grinned. "What a contrast to the chills I felt before I died!"

"There she is!" Dean said.

At first all Stuart saw was a bright light—a guardian angel escorting someone through the gates into Heaven. The crowd cheered. Through the clear vision that Heaven grants, Stuart soon saw his daughter's short figure and long hair. He waited as Lilly met and spoke with others in front of him—friends she had wanted to know better, then people she hadn't met before but had wished she could: her favorite authors, then King David and Mary Magdalene. After that, she met people she had influenced in good ways. But as she walked closer, Stuart saw something in Lilly's eyes that surprised him: a deep longing. Lilly kept scanning the crowd, even biting her lip. Who was she looking for? He lifted his arms and waved them. She blew him a kiss but still looked around and beyond him. "Mitsie, climb up on those rocks so she can see you!" he urged. Mitsie obeyed, then wove through the people toward her mistress. Smoke showed up next to Lilly, who reached down to stroke her. Stuart saw tears in his daughter's eyes. He pushed carefully through the crowd, closer and closer.

A woman in a long robe with light-blue trim reached Lilly. Now Stuart heard his beloved daughter's voice: "Oh my—it's *you*! I always felt like you were looking out for me—ever since I found that bookmark in the gutter with that quote from you—two days after you came here."

As he approached from the side, Stuart saw Mother Teresa nod. "I never did stop my work," she said warmly, grasping Lilly's hands.

"I wanted to be like you," Lilly whispered.

“And you *are*! You do many small things—”

“With great love!” they chorused together. They laughed for joy.

Stuart sighed. This beautiful moment brought tears to his own eyes. Thinking about Lilly’s tears, he remembered who promised to wipe all tears from the eyes of people in Heaven. Realizing that not even Mother Teresa had removed Lilly’s longing, he knew it wasn’t his task, either. He stepped aside and whispered, “Lord Jesus!”

Now he heard the most melodious male voice behind him, calling Lilly’s name. Had Jesus lingered at the back of the crowd all along? Everyone parted for the King of Kings, who shone so brightly Stuart hardly noticed what He wore. His glory brought Stuart to his knees. The dog and cat lay motionless.

When Lilly saw her Lord face to face, she sighed deeply and sank to her knees. She wore a white gown like a wedding dress. Jesus touched her shoulders, strengthening the woman to bear His mighty presence. He took her by the hand and lifted her to her feet.

Next, Stuart felt power at the top of his own head. “Oh, Lord,” he managed to say, “what do you want with me? This is Lilly’s moment. She wants to be with *you* now.”

A tender smile added extra light to the Lord’s countenance. “You’re her father,” he said. “I want you and Lilly reunited.”

“I wasn’t there for her long,” Stuart said. “I didn’t take care of myself and died early.”

“But in many of her dreams you represented her *Heavenly* Father. What more important role is there? Stuart—I love your daughter. She loves Me. I paid for her with my life. I ask you for her hand. Are you willing to give her away?”

“I-I’m anxious to visit with her face to face. But I know her heart belongs to you most of all. God’s will be done.”

Jesus lifted Stuart to his feet. Then He gently laid a hand on Stuart’s back and the other on Lilly’s and drew them together into an embrace.

“Oh, Lilly!” Stuart cried. “Welcome home! And I’m so glad you’re now with the One you love most. My blessing on you both!”

Last Day by Sheila Deeth



xxxviii

From mountain to forest, a path through the trees
To a valley of grass and a swift-blowing breeze,
From the river that's flowing from seasons to seas
And the bridge that will carry you over to me...

'Tis there I've been waiting in castles so fair
Where the sun is like water, the sea is like air,
The stone is a river of wonder, and there
In the whisper of thunder, the promise of care...

So come now, from pinnacled mountain of power,
Come down through my valley, come up to my tower,
For I've waited so long now, and this is the hour
Drawing closer, come closer, and come to my bower...

From mountain to forest, to path through the trees,
To the valley of grass, to be borne on the breeze
To the river, you're called to me, home now, to me,
To eternity, future and past, we'll be free.

Journey by Catherin Violante

Leaving behind barren hills
That scallop the gray sky,
Earth's budding bosom,
Not yet jagged from erosion.
Past Victorian pop-up houses,
With stiff white fences
That clack at the end of a stick.

Toward the horizon, on a pitted asphalt highway;
A burnt tongue cutting through fields
Of perfumed wildflowers and weeds.
The city glows, an Australian fire opal
Set in the prongs of destruction and shadows.

Headed on a journey, toward sunsets,
Narrow paths of mirrored leaves,
Amber ponds and white birch forests.
I will discover my destiny on hearts of
Orchids and gull dipped seas.

Where blue skies blacken into night and
Constellations stipple the hemisphere.
On every breath inhaled, a song of freedom
As every juncture lightens the crushing weight
That tethered me, to a life without you.

A Raven's Quest by Judy Beaston



xxxix

Wolfram pulled his head back beneath the tree canopy. “We have to leave, Ravenna.”

“But I love this tree. This was meant to be our home. I’m soon to bring us little ones, you know.” She reached a beak beneath her left wing, then the right, preening and cleaning.

“Without water, we’re doomed.”

“But surely those dark clouds banked on the horizon will bring us rain.” She stuck her head past a nearby leaf and sighed. “Isn’t that what Korbin claimed?”

Wolfram stamped a foot and shook his head. “Korbin!” He spat toward the ground. “That bird would have us all dead. He doesn’t know a mouse from a rat, real food from junk.”

Ravenna looked around, reached a talon toward her favorite silver tube, a treasure found the day she met Wolfram. “I’m glad Branwen isn’t here to endure this.” Her sister had met an untimely death beneath a metal monster.

“Ah, yes. I know you miss her.” He nudged her gently with his beak. “I miss her, too.”

“Where will we go?”

He pecked at the branch, then stared toward the west. “I heard from the ferret family about a large forest land that way where water falls most days of the year.”

“How far?”

“I don’t know but I know we can’t stay here if we want to raise a family.”

“Then, it’s settled. We must leave.”

“We’ll set out before the others wake in the morning.”

Thick orange-red bands drove their rays above the horizon as Wolfram and Ravenna soared beyond their forest home and set their sights on lands to the west. Thirst and hunger drove them onward. Uncertainty pulled against their decision, but Wolfram’s wings flapped determination, and Ravenna breathed into the possibility of a safe future.

As they flew over vast brown fields, some waving fronds of seeded growth, Ravenna spied a small fire. Humans fed the fire from a pile of wood debris nearby. Big metal monsters growled over the ground, some pulling trees whose lives were taken without consent. Ravenna sent prayers that some meaning might be found in these losses. She had yet to find one for the loss of her sister.

“Down here!” Wolfram tipped his wings and dove toward a small pond.

Ravenna followed. At least their thirst might be assuaged.

They landed first in nearby trees, scouting the area for imminent danger. Wolfram made the decisions, and Ravenna waited until he flew toward the water.

She sipped gently, then stepped within, letting the water flow over her wings and body, shaking and dipping and shaking further. To be cleansed was a treasured gift this day.

“Look out!” Wolfram squawked, his voice screeching in an effort, it seemed, to deter a danger Ravenna hadn’t noticed.

Flying as quickly as she could with wet wings, she reached a nearby branch. Wolfram joined her. Below them, a pack of dog-like animals paced. The smallest among them placed front paws on the tree and howled. But Ravenna and Wolfram were safe—for now.

“We must fly away,” Wolfram whispered.

“My wings are not dry.”

Wolfram nodded. “We shall wait, then.”

“My belly cries out for food. Perhaps there are berries near here?”

“I will not leave you. We’ll search for food in that field over there—when it is safe.”

Ravenna nodded, tucked her head beneath a wing, sobbed quietly. Why did she have to indulge in a bath?

Finally, her wings dried, the dogs gone, Ravenna followed Wolfram over the pond and across a vast meadow. He dove down first, catching a mouse. Ravenna landed next to him and gobbled several insects she found nearby.

As they finished their meal, clouds covered the sun, hovering over the west where the sun was quickly heading into repose. A chill wind set the meadow flowers dancing.

“We must leave,” Wolfram cried out. “We must chase the rain. I feel it. Do you?”

Excited, Ravenna did a little dance. “Yes! Yes!”

They rose above the meadow together, once again heading west, searching, hoping, praying for the land where rains fell and they could raise their family.

As the ground beneath them changed from brown to yellow to green, and trees became numerous again, while fields of corn and grasses became plentiful, Ravenna knew they’d be home soon. The stories Wolfram had been told were real!

“Here, Wolfram?”

“Yes, Ravenna. We found the land of my dreams, a home for our family.”

And thus, a raven’s quest birthed the colony found living to this day in the forests and lands around Mt. Hood.

Escape from the Forbidden City to the Flaming Cliffs in the Gobi Desert by Robert Mixon



xi

Let me caution the listeners that, in this tale of woe, we may cross snakes or, as Indiana Jones says, “There had to be snakes.” Snakes indeed!

Flying to Beijing on my trip to the Gobi, I dreamed of beginning my adventure in the footsteps of Roy Chapman Andrews, the real life model of Indiana Jones. I calmly read Andrews’ autobiography *Under a Lucky Star* and Novacek’s *Dinosaurs of the Flaming Cliffs*, while flying over the vast Pacific. Is it true that Andrews was startled in his childhood by a snake slithering through his hair while sleeping under the stars? True enough.

Andrews was employed by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) with more bravado than scientific training. In 1922, Andrews first flew to Beijing, but, unlike me on my expedition, he set up a city within the famed Forbidden City. The Forbidden City today has over 9,999 rooms, 70 halls and palaces. For the AMNH museum’s

Gobi expedition, Andrews hired forty people, two trucks, five touring cars, and 125 camels.

“125 camels?” Andrews had arranged for camel trains to meet him in the middle of nowhere. Bandits disrupted when and where they could get together in the middle of the Gobi. So how he managed to get nomads to meet him, with the camels carrying supplies of gasoline for the vehicles and other supplies, is a wonder.

Andrews found the world’s first dinosaur eggs and braved armed bandits, blistering heat, blizzards, howling haboobs (sandstorms), and snakes. He killed not one but over 47 Gobi Pit Vipers in a single night, many inside warm tents. Yikes! Oh well. He just moved on. He found lots of dinosaurs and had the remains taken back to Beijing in the now-emptied crates, by camel—he had plucked camel-hair to cushion the precious cargo’s journey.

I too was headed to the Gobi to hunt buried dinosaurs, but first the sights of Beijing beckoned with the Great Wall, silk, cloisonné, and pearls.

Along with Doc our expedition leader, Andy, and a dozen of our fellow museum friends, we headed to the Forbidden City. We entered the Meridian Gate with its tiered pagoda structures towering over red walls. I stopped to take pictures along the way through four gates of the city, using trees and gates to frame my memories. What could possibly go wrong?

After passing the Gate of Heavenly Purity, it gets amazingly complex, with numerous palaces, including those which housed thousands of concubines, amongst other treasures, for the emperor. The magnificent gardens and trees caught my imagination. Along with co-leader Andy, I stopped to frame some gorgeous shots of palaces with bonsai-shaped trees and cherry blossoms. How could I not?

Suddenly I looked up, and no one was in sight. I ran from gate to gate, palace to palace, but to no avail. Where could they be? I remember someone saying it is always good to carry a printed card

with the hotel address and phone number. Did I have one with me? Nope. What to do! What to do!

Then I remembered we were eventually to exit through the Northern Gate of Spiritual Valor. Wouldn't fellow expedition members be found at some bus on the other side of this gate? This made sense to me, on our one-way tour through this vast forbidden place. I exited and, lo and behold, nobody and no bus was seen. Adventure turned from wonder to woe in a heartbeat.

Alas, I had the bright idea to sneak back into the Forbidden City and look around some more. I don't know how I managed that without a proper ticket, but I snuck in past some humorless guards. WHEW! I magically escaped being escorted to the local hoosegow yet again. A few twists and turns later I suddenly ran into Doc and Andy. Saved!

We flew to Ulaanbaatar and Dalanzadgad. From Dalanzadgad, we drove, in old Russian vans, to the Three Camel Lodge in the midst of the trackless Gobi. I asked the driver what that long bent metal rod behind the rear seat was for. He said, "When the battery dies, we use that to hand crank the engine over." Oh my!

After a couple of nights spent in gers (yurts) alongside the lodge, we headed out for the Hongoryn Els (singing sand dunes), and yes, along the way we got stuck in deep sand and ran our battery down to zippo. Out came the giant rod from behind the front seat to crank the engine over... Eventually we all piled out and helped to give an extra push to the dilapidated Russian van.

We also visited a nomad's ger and saw "granny's simple still," for converting fermented mare's milk into vodka. "It's not that bad," as they say. It was fun to see two shy guys milking the mares. It turns out milking mares in this horse-nomadic culture is definitely women's work, and his wife was off having a baby.

I unfortunately got severe tourista. I was assured that it would take three days to recover, after taking serious meds. I wanted to climb the towering Hongoryn Els a day and a half later. I was shaky

climbing those thousand foot tall dunes but somehow made it to the top, zig-zagging.

We toured the famous Flaming Cliffs (so-named by Roy Chapman Andrews) where dinosaur eggs, *Protoceratops* and more, were discovered by Andrews. I found a nice *Protoceratops* anklebone for our leader.

Now we went further out into the middle of nowhere and set up tents to explore for dinosaurs ourselves. That first day we found a Velociraptor arm in the side of a hill. We spent several days excavating this find for the Mongolian Museum.

On our last day working the site, I saw an immense dark brown cloud on the horizon. "Haboob," they said.

"What?" I replied.

"Haboob, a furious desert sandstorm is coming at us from miles away."

Back at camp, one of our women was taking a shower in the shower-tent atop a wooden pallet. I pulled a chilled beer from a generator-powered cooler and carried it across the desert, viewing the brown cloud. All of a sudden, ferocious sand-laden wind blew so hard over my beer-can that it literally sucked all the beer out in a long foamy stream. I thought of chasing the stream of suds, when I noticed that the wind had toppled the shower tent with the woman inside. Some quicker soul got a towel and helped her out of the wreckage. When the gentleman rushed in to aid this damsel in distress, someone questioned the lady's privacy in the matter. The fellow just replied, "Well, I am a doctor." True enough.

The next day, in addition to finding more dinosaur bones myself, I stumbled across a piece of debris in the Gobi. I don't know why I lifted it up carefully with my geology pick. I just don't, but thank my lucky stars. Yes, yes, and yes, it had to be the one and only Deadly Gobi Pit Viper. My wife smiled, taking a wonderful photo of me and the snake with its forked tongue hanging out.

Safely back home I mused to myself, "It had to be snakes."

Global Warming by Sheila Deeth



xli

“An asteroid finished the dinosaurs off. At least, that’s what they say. Splashed dust and ash and stuff into the air, global winter and all that, so nothing much could grow. And they were cold-blooded too, so no sunshine meant, well, like freezing to death, poor things. And the ones in the water; I guess the water stayed warm longer—don’t they say it sticks to kind of the same temperature... takes forever to change? So yeah, but the trouble was, stuff didn’t grow right in the water without sunshine, so if the dinosaurs didn’t freeze, they starved. Then everything starts warming up, and a whole new world begins...”

The student turns her page, stretches into a more confident stance to read her report, and continues.

“Mammals didn’t wait for an asteroid; they did it all themselves. Burned so much stuff the atmosphere went wrong, and they sort of burned themselves too, like the sun was too strong, before they froze. Drowned as well, with the ice caps melting and all that. But

when the trees caught fire it was just like the asteroid all over again, lots of ash in the air, then too cold and nothing growing. And a whole new world began, again.

“So now it’s us.” She waves her forelegs in the air while her middle hands hold the copy of what she’s written. Nervousness trembles from her feelers to her feet, till her head starts bobbing up and down, and the writing splits into a million little pieces. She blinks multi-faceted eyes, one by one, until she can focus again. “Sorry,” she mumbles, and the teacher gives that three-handed wave that means *Come on now. Wind it up.*

“So, yeah, now it’s us,” she continues, striving for a note of confident defiance, though she wishes she could sit back down. “And we’re forever fighting, like, leaving carapaces on the battle-grounds, and all that weaponry, and it doesn’t decay right, not like regular bodies, and...”

The teacher waves again, so she hurries to the closing line of presentation. “Yeah, and the scientists say we’ll all go extinct pretty soon.”

It’s done! Shan rushes back to her seat, not daring to look at anyone. Meanwhile the teacher, a giant in his towering exoskeleton, walks slowly on all six legs to the front of the room. “Yes, full marks for history, Shan. But really,” his voice all mockery, “who can tell me how long insects have been on earth?” Hands fly into the air. “So why would anyone believe we’ll ever go extinct? You can’t trust those scientists, Shan. Just fear-mongering. Fake news. Insects will rule the world forever.”

Shan guessed the dinosaurs and mammals used to say something like that too.

The Closing Chorus by Jean Harkin

No flights of reds or yellows,
No blues and greens, nor blacks and whites
Flashing through the forest,
Winging over the skies,
Fluttering around our backyards,
Cruising in quiet ponds
Or challenging seaside waves.

No wake-up chirps at dawning,
No settle-down twitters at dusk,
No symphonies from the blackbirds,
No mocking screeches and songs,
No sweet, longing cries of the doves
As nothing is left to mourn.

November skies will be empty
Of southbound feathered spirits;
Springtime will arrive somber
With no sunny bird songs to tell us,
No chorus to hail brighter days.
Must they fall to the fate of dinosaurs?

Or might their own keen behaviors
Save their lives and tribes with feathers?
Might intellects more direct than we know
And soaring spirits of hope so pure
Ensure they endure in the skies
Until sunset on Planet Earth?

The Harvest by Catherin Violante

A darkening cloud brings a rude breath of wind
That passes over the field of harvest
His flask full of beer was only half drunk
The thirsty earth flecked by his sweat and spit.

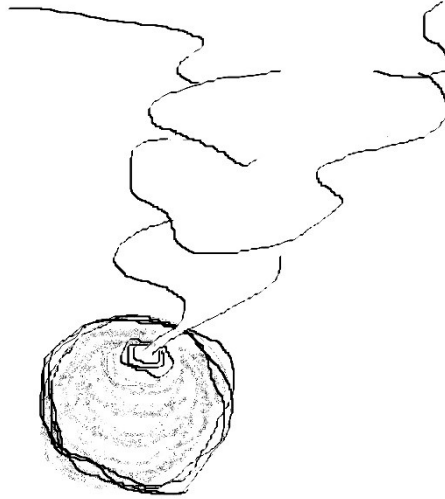
She loathed him, the rebellious sister, her threadbare
Smock heavy with pinched carrots and beets,
As she dug into the parched soil with her bare hands,
Faint from toil and hunger.

Side by side, they tilled the rows of insufferable
Barren seed and drought
Their birth land by right, now orphaned and withered
By plague and storm of fine dust, and sand.

One more season, another moon, no feast for thanks,
A mournful task becomes a ritual of duress,
Both prisoners to an enemy land. Bound by blood
And promise, a dying father's wish.

The wind blows past another chill, warning
Of a season too cold to yield
Cradling her full apron like a pregnant belly,
She protects the last harvest, the heir to paucity.

Kansas in My Mind by Jean Harkin



xlii

Is it a bird—or a plane—
Or a shooting star? No.
It's a house being
Tossed by a tornado!
Run away from this place
Into the storm cellar
Where we'll all meet
And greet our neighbors.
Did someone bring treats
Or a flashlight or candles?
Perhaps a good time to tell
Stories of tin men and lions,
Of witches and wizards;
A night to speak of storms and weather
And whether we'll arise
Into sunshine or devastation—
That is the question.
Let us pray...

Respect, Integrity, Truth by Judy Beaston

I settled into sleep
on Winter Solstice eve
held by her long, dark embrace
cuddled as if day
might not return, and I
dreamed of journeys
far from this land,

engaged with fellow travelers
all of us immersed in our search
for renewed light shining
upon truth, respect, integrity.

That last line came to me
after I'd awakened, reflection
of what I search for daily,
find here and there,
pray holds more power
for our future than the distended
stomachs of those gorging
on the food of fools.

The rest of the dream's portrayal
weaves its details into my thoughts
as I begin my morning, grateful
for another opportunity
to dance, laugh, share greetings
with neighbors and others
this chilly December day.

Mountains and Valleys of Life by Jessie Collins



xliii

As a child I loved to see pictures of mountain scenery, though I never saw any actual mountains. Our family vacations were always taken in the coastal area of northwest England which was fairly flat. In my late teens I began to take bicycle rides with a friend onto the moors above the town where we lived. Here I enjoyed the moorland scenery, which was at least hilly, though not mountainous. When at last I went by train to the Lake District, some of the pictures I had seen came to life. Though these were not high mountains, they seemed to tower over the beautiful lakes down in the valleys.

Childhood was far behind me when I took my first vacation in North Wales, and I fell in love with the glorious mountain scenery. Again, these were not the highest of mountains, but to see how they rose up from thickly wooded valleys was such a joy. A railway trip

around the base of Mount Snowdon gave us the chance to view it from all angles.

Several years later we drove into Scotland and there we saw real mountains, some of them clothed in trees and bushes in their lower parts, and some just bare and craggy. Driving around the narrow roads in the Highlands was quite an experience. I was glad that I wasn't the driver! I remember camping on the shore of one of the great lakes, with Ben Nevis looming up behind us.

Then at last came the pleasure of holidays abroad, firstly in Europe, where we marveled at the beauty of the Alps. Next came the first of our visits to USA and the glory of the Wasatch Mountains surrounding us with the Great Salt Lake in the valley below. We had some wonderful trips to see Bryce Canyon, Zion Canyon, and the joy of the Grand Canyon, which was indescribably beautiful. Then we returned to Salt Lake City and set off in another direction, to arrive at last at Yellowstone Park. I was in tears, standing by the Lower Falls of Yellowstone, gazing at the sheer majesty of God's handiwork. On to the Grand Tetons, and again I was overwhelmed as I stood inside the plain little wooden chapel and saw the mountains, framed in the window behind the altar. There was no need of stained-glass windows there.

In Oregon I have had the pleasure of a visit to the base of Mount St Helens and learning about the eruption of the volcano, seeing photographs of the lava causing such damage as it flowed down into the valley below. My favorite mountain is Mount Hood, and I shall never forget the experience of traveling by car halfway up the mountain, struggling to walk in thick snow, and seeing the snow-clad upper reaches glowing pink in the sunset.

I look back now, remembering all those mountains and valleys, and think how descriptive they are of life itself—the plains of everyday life, the mountain tops of great occasions, and the valleys of stress and sadness. Mountain tops stand out in joy. There was Degree Day at the end of my time at university. Then came our wedding day and

the births of our children. In later years we were very happy to attend their Degree Days, and afterwards came the day which marked the pinnacle of my teaching life—my appointment as deputy headmistress of a happy primary school. We rejoiced when grandsons were born, and again when our younger son was ordained a priest. I was glad to be still here in this world to celebrate his Silver Jubilee last year.

No life is all mountain tops, and I can remember deep valleys here and there along my way. I think the very first one was when I was only seven years old and my adored grandma died. She had always been a huge part of my life, and I was old enough to realize what I had lost. A few years later the death of a dear granddad distressed me, but the valley was not so deep this time. The last months of my mother's life were a long, ever-deepening valley as we realized that she would not get well, and losing her was very hard. My father lived with us in his later years, and the road became a rocky downward stretch as his final illness progressed. Then of course came the deepest valley of all when I became a widow.

Once I had struggled back to the plains of everyday life again, nothing else has affected me so badly until this year. Life was running along quite smoothly, with happy visits to family members bringing pleasant interludes here and there. Then came the coronavirus—and lockdown—and it really seemed to be a never-ending valley of despair. Even now there is brightness to lift me up. My dear son who is such a busy priest has welcomed me into his home to keep me safe. My elder son and his family keep in touch with me by phone; lovely parishioners here have been so kind and helpful; and I have learned the intricacies of Zoom to keep me close to my daughter and many friends in Oregon. However deep the valley, I have proved once again that—in the words of a favorite text—“Underneath are the Everlasting Arms.”

Images

- ⁱ Image provided by author, Zita Podany
- ⁱⁱ Photo provided by Sheila Deeth
- ⁱⁱⁱ Photo provided by Sheila Deeth, taken at Eyam, UK
- ^{iv} Photo provided by Judy Beaston
- ^v Al Copone's home en:Chicago Daily News / Public domain. This work is in the public domain in the United States because it is a work prepared by an officer or employee of the United States Government as part of that person's official duties under the terms of Title 17, Chapter 1, Section 105 of the US Code.
- ^{vi} Photo by Faruk Kaymak on Unsplash
- ^{vii} Original ink art created by the author's daughter
- ^{viii} Photo provided by Sheila Deeth, taken in London, UK
- ^{ix} Photo provided by author, Sheila Deeth
- ^x Photo provided by Karin Krafft
- ^{xi} Photo by Image by Holeysocksart from Pixabay
- ^{xii} Photo provided by Sheila Deeth, mask provided by OregonFreshMasks
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/OregonFreshMasks>
- ^{xiii} Photo provided by Judy Beaston
- ^{xiv} Illustration provided by author, Zita Podany
- ^{xv} Illustration provided by author, Joe Mendez
- ^{xvi} Image provided by author, Zita Podany
- ^{xvii} Photo provided by Sheila Deeth
- ^{xviii} Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash
- ^{xix} Illustration provided by author, Catherin Violante
- ^{xx} Illustration provided by author, Robin Layne
- ^{xxi} Photo provided by the author's son
- ^{xxii} Photo by AbsolutVision on Unsplash
- ^{xxiii} Photo provided by Sheila Deeth
- ^{xxiv} Illustration provided by author, Zita Podany
- ^{xxv} Photo provided by Sheila Deeth
- ^{xxvi} Photo by Max LaRoche on Unsplash <https://unsplash.com/photos/uu-Jw5SunYI>
- ^{xxvii} Illustration provided by author, Robin Layne
- ^{xxviii} Photo provided by Karin Krafft
- ^{xxix} Photo provided by author, Karin Krafft
- ^{xxx} Photo provided by Judy Beaston
- ^{xxxi} Photo by Yaoqi LAI on Unsplash
- ^{xxxii} Photo provided by author's daughter
- ^{xxxiii} Image provided by the author, Zita Podany
- ^{xxxiv} *Cyrtanthus ventricosus* Willd. - Scarborough, Cape Peninsula, South Africa Jan 2016, own work by Callan Cohen / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)
- ^{xxxv} Image provided by author, Zita Podany
- ^{xxxvi} Photo taken in Alaska by Sheila Deeth
- ^{xxxvii} Illustration provided by author, Robin Layne
- ^{xxxviii} Photo provided by Sheila Deeth
- ^{xxxix} Photo provided by author, Judy Beaston
- ^{xl} Photo by Ling Tang on Unsplash
- ^{xli} Photo provided by RJ Russell
- ^{xlii} Illustration provided by Sheila Deeth
- ^{xliii} Photo provided by the author's daughter, Sheila Deeth

*Thank you for reading our anthology,
and we hope you've enjoyed it.*

*Please support your local library—
where words are what make us human.*

*Please support **our** local library too,
by leaving a book review and telling others about this book.*

*And please help protect the world in which we live,
and **all** the people we share it with.*