CUTTHROAT: A JOURNAL OF THE ARTS PRESENTS

THE CORONA CHRONICLES

Stories Inspired By COVID-19

Edited by William Luvaas

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Cover design by Lucinda Luvaas

INTRODUCTION

Last March, shortly after we were asked to shelter in place due to COVID-19, I began work on a novella about our strange new reality. I suggested to other writers that writing a story or novella about our collective plight would be a good use of our time while we were in lockdown and might help us cope with the angst we were all feeling.

I had in mind the challenge Mary Shelley, Percy B. Shelley, Lord Byron and their friend Dr. Polidori proposed to each other: write a ghost story while they were quarantined by foul weather in Switzerland. Out of this challenge grew Mary Shelley's iconic Frankenstein.

Many writers responded to my invitation and sent me emails and Facebook messages saying they would give it a go. It felt like we were contributing to a communal effort to face down COVID, sharing a moment of "collective unconsciousness" such as Jung wrote about. Fear was in the air around us, air that we were reluctant to breathe. I had not experienced such a collective moment since 911 or Kennedy's and King's assassinations years ago. We were in this together and to write about the pandemic—as to Facetime or Zoom with friends and family—was to join the polity of shared grief, fear, anger…and, yes, boredom. Call it a trial run for the oncoming disaster of climate change that will require us to join in common cause again and again.

What would we do with these works once we'd finished them? Most publishers are reluctant to publish long stories and novellas. I discussed the project—for it felt like it had grown into one—with Pam Uschuk, a close friend, acclaimed poet and Executive Editor of *Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts*, where I am fiction editor. and Pam suggested we put together a special issue of *Cutthroat* featuring these works, an anthology to be titled *The Corona Chronicles.*

"Here is your chance," our announcement read, "to write your own Frankenstein. We are open to a wide range of styles and genres, subject matter, setting, characters as long as COVID-19 fits into your story in some way. We are looking for stories with strong narratives and characterizations. No rants or diatribes, please. We encourage speculative and hyperbolic approaches: ghost stories, horror stories, post-apocalyptic works, "Love In The Time of Cholera" stories, "A Journal of the Plague Year" stories, war stories, survival narratives, high drama, humor ….traditional, quirky, lunatic fringe, you name it! We're open to everything as long as it's well-crafted. Excellence is the single criteria."

We got a little of everything, from anthropological, place-based fictions detailing the way COVID has impacted life in different locales to surrealism, grotesque realism, speculative fiction, ghost stories, and, yes, love stories in the time of the Coronavirus. From short stories to full-blown novellas. A number of them are collected here. Sadly, we couldn't include all. In these pages, a Zoom friendship between two women isolated in their apartments abruptly ends when paramedics arrive to take one of them away, an anxious man wanders the streets of L.A. at night with his coyote companions, a woman's former lover returns as if from the dead to waylay her in a cemetery, Coronavirus invades the Navajo Nation fraying the fabric of their communal culture as European colonizers once did, a family flees the city to escape the virus only to have it catch up to them in the country, a woman obsessed with the many odors she's allergic to loses her sense of smell to COVID and forms an unlikely alliance with an autistic man, infected "Hunters" stalk an inner-city neighborhood, and one of them occupies the main character's front porch.

Many thanks to our contributors and to all who sent us their stories.

William Luvaas, Editor

EVEN THE AIR

Kathie Giorgio

From the time you are sent home to work remotely, with no definite date for your return or the return of any of your co-workers, you think of COVID as the shark from the movie *Jaws*. The movie is based on the novel by Peter Benchley, and that novel sits on your bookshelf, but it just doesn't bring the impact of the mechanical shark to mind, or the ever-building background music.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

At first, you mostly hear the music when you watch the news. Or read the headlines on your computer in the morning, on work breaks, and before signing off at bedtime.

Then you stop signing off. When you wake in the middle of the night, you have only to tap your computer and it lights with the current news. Before you even get out of bed in the morning, you check the COVID numbers. The numbers in your town. Your county. Your state. The country. The world. The number of cases, the number of hospitalizations, the number of deaths.

At first, you work only in your home office, coming out for a lunch break in your kitchen, sit down on the couch in your living room for timed coffee breaks. When you go out, it's usually to the grocery store and you mask up. Your mask is an N95, a letter and numbers that didn't use

to mean anything, but do now, and it covers your nose and mouth, tucks under your chin. You soak your hands with sanitizer as you walk in, you wipe down the handle of your shopping cart with the disinfecting wipes you carry in your coat pocket, and you apply more sanitizer to your hands every fifteen minutes.

But then it becomes every ten minutes. Then five. Then you wear disposable rubber gloves. Then you sanitize the gloves every fifteen minutes. Ten minutes. Five minutes.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

You start doing curbside pick-up.

The person who brings your groceries to your car lifts your hatchback, piles the bags inside, then calls for you to have a good day. You wonder, even with his mask, if the air he spouts with his well-intentioned wish flows over your back seat into your front seat. To you. Even with your mask. N95.

You find a service that provides contactless delivery to your door, leaving your groceries on your front step. You watch them drive away, wait ten minutes for what you believe would be the fresh air blowing away any contagion, and then you bring in your groceries. You wear your disposable rubber gloves as you unpack them and wipe them down.

As the numbers rise, you stop going out at all. If you crave a meal from a favorite restaurant, you have it delivered and follow the same protocol as your grocery service. Your food grows cold during the ten minutes waiting time, but you warm it in the microwave and you find it hard to believe any virus could survive in a microwave. You no longer go to the movie theater. You watch Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and you laugh by yourself in your living room. You make your own popcorn, you drink your own soda, delivered by the contactless service. Wiped down by you, after ten minutes on your front step.

Then somebody at work gets sick. Then somebody at work dies. There will be no funeral, because there can be no gatherings. The email from work says there will be a "Celebration of Life" at a later time. No one knows when. There is no duration, no end, predicted. Like your job, it is indefinite.

You wonder where the body waits.

You'd received an email from that person a month ago. You wonder, briefly, ridiculously, if the virus can be spread through wifi. Then you acknowledge your ridiculousness, laugh it off, but at night, when you go to bed, you stare at the ceiling.

How did he get it? He was working remotely too. Wasn't he staying home? Wasn't he wearing a mask? N95?

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

You begin to move around the house with your laptop, doing your work in different places, breathing in, you think, different air. Fresh air. You open your windows, even as the temperature outside stays cold. You wait for spring. You sit by a space heater. The taps your fingers create on your keyboard become muted as you choose to wear disposable rubber gloves while at work. On coffee breaks and lunch breaks, you take the gloves off, but you sanitize your hands before and after. You begin ordering paper plates and hot-drink cups and cold-drink cups and plastic silverware from the grocery store, so you can dispose of everything you touch. You stop using your garbage cans for trash day, just placing the bags at the curb and putting your recyclables in clear plastic, so that you don't have to touch the bins after the garbage men empty them. They complain and leave a note on your door, which you pluck off with your gloved hand and put directly into a plastic baggie, seal it, and stuff it into a larger bag. They still take your

garbage, but they stare at your front window and shake their heads. You wave and call thank you, but you doubt that they can hear you through the glass and your mask. N95.

When your mail arrives every day, you wait the allotted ten minutes, then retrieve it from its box right next to your door, just opening it enough to slide your arm out. You wave at your mailman through the front window. He waves back and, from the way his eyes crinkle, you think he smiles at you from behind his mask. You crinkle back.

The only person you talk to is your neighbor, through Zoom. You and she used to share a beer on your deck, or wine on her deck, after work sometimes. On weekends, pre-COVID, she might call over that she made a large salad, come to dinner, or you would holler that you were grilling out, did she want a hamburger. Now, you both work remotely. Sometimes you wave at each other from your decks, when you step outside for a breath of fresh cold air. One evening, you call out and ask for her email, saying you will invite her to a Zoom meeting for a beer. She agrees and smiles. She drinks wine. You start meeting online each evening and talk about the news, talk about the numbers. She shares that someone at her job died. You share that someone at yours died. You both fall silent.

She broaches that since you are both working remotely and not seeing anyone and not going anywhere, maybe you could still meet for dinner on your decks, even though it is cold. You say no, it is better to be safe. You can meet for dinner via Zoom. She sighs, but agrees.

You watch movies and series together, Hulu or Netflix on your television screens, Zoom on your computer screens, each of you on your respective couches.

When you talk to her, sometimes the *Jaws* music dies down. Sometimes it gets louder.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

During a work coffee break, you think you hear a bump come from your kitchen. You get up and look, but nothing is out of place. Then you see a crockpot on your deck, just outside your slider door. It's steaming.

You wait ten minutes, then pull on your disposable rubber gloves and bring it in. The aroma is wonderful; it smells like chili. You know your neighbor makes great chili. Along with the crockpot is a disposable aluminum loaf pan filled with warm cornbread. You wipe both containers down with your disinfecting wipes and you plug the crockpot in.

For a moment, you smile. For a moment, you consider asking her to dinner. You could even eat in the dining room, where you have a large eight-foot dining table that has never been used. You could sit at either side. You could risk it. You could leave the windows open. It would be so nice to see someone without a screen between you.

For a moment.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

Because you don't have a Zoom meeting set up, you call her on Facetime. She laughs at your pleasure. I just wanted you to have a nice warm meal, she says. I know you love my chili. I know you love cornbread.

You smile, thank her, then set up a Zoom meeting so you can eat together. She's made a pot of chili for herself too, and her own cornbread.

While you have dinner, she asks if she made the chili too bland. I can hardly taste it, she says. But the chili is fine; it makes you sweat. You laugh with her, deciding she's become immune to her own cooking. You notice she sniffles. It's nothing, she says. Just allergies. I need to dust.

So do you. You wipe everything down with your disinfecting wipes.

A few days later, she is running a fever.

A few days after that, she is coughing.

A cold, she says.

But from where? Where could she have caught it? She hasn't been anywhere, just like you haven't been anywhere. Where could she have caught a cold?

Where could she have caught COVID? Could it be COVID?

You eat the chili for dinner for four days straight. After the second day, you make your own cornbread to accompany the rest of the chili. You use a box mix you buy from the grocery store. It is delivered to your front step. You let it sit for ten minutes. You wipe it down.

The chili remains in the crockpot. You wipe it every day.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

On the eighth day, your neighbor doesn't come to your Zoom meeting. You call via Facetime and she doesn't answer. You watch when the mail is delivered; the mailman waves at you and smiles. You wave back. But your neighbor's door never opens. Her mailbox is starting to overflow.

Where could she have gotten it?

On the tenth day, you call the police. You explain what has happened and that there's been no communication for days. She was sick, you say. She was sick. She had a fever. She had a cough. A cold? She lives alone.

The police come. An ambulance comes. They break down her front door.

You see faces appear at other houses, in other windows, across the street. The mailman pauses, waits on the sidewalk.

When the stretcher appears, you can't see your neighbor's face. She is zipped up tight inside a bag. They load her into the ambulance and they leave. There is no siren.

You stagger to your couch. Where could she have gotten it? A cold? COVID.

You leave her crockpot in a trash bag on the curb.

You stare at your ceiling all night, the next night, the night after night after night.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

Where could she have gotten it? Through the wifi?

The air. The air that flows through your house, that goes into each room, and you go to each room, looking for different air. You open your windows, even though it's cold. The air comes from outside. Outside is where the people are. People who don't wear masks. Who keep going to work. Who go to the grocery stores and touch things and then put them back. Who go to the bars. Who go to parties. Who laugh and talk and breathe and breathe and breathe and spread particles into the air. The air which floats. Which travels into houses. Which gets into vents. Which spreads through her house. The houses across the street.

Your house.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

It's coming. It's coming and it can't be stopped. Not by rubber gloves or by hand sanitizer or masks or remote work or deliveries or Zoom or Facetime or Netflix or Hulu or six feet apart or crockpots left in the cold for ten minutes and then wiped down and heated up. Not by cornbread baked in disposable pans. Not by microwaves.

It's coming.

You cough!

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

Someone else at work dies. Someone else's sister gets sick. In the news, seventy-five people at a wedding test positive. A choir at a church tests positive. A newborn baby tests positive. Body after body comes out from a nursing home where no one is allowed in and no one is allowed out.

You can't let COVID get you. It means feeling worse than death. It means being placed on a ventilator. It means having long-lasting effects that go on and on and no one knows for how long. Indefinitely.

And then the virus starts mutating into something else.

There's a vaccine being developed, but will it treat something else?

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

You go online and find a local sporting goods store that delivers. You order a pistol. You order ammo. Just one box. You put a rush on the delivery. When it is dropped at your door, you wait ten minutes. Then you pick it up with your gloved hands and you wipe down the package. You open it, wipe down the gun. Wipe the ammo. Load it.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

You stare at the ceiling that night. In the morning, you check the numbers, then sign off of the computer. You don't work. You stand at the window and wait for the mailman. When he arrives, you wave. He waves back, but you notice his eyes don't crinkle. Neither do yours.

There is no smile. Not even for a moment.

You bring in your mail, find nothing important, toss it on the counter.

Baaaa…dum. Baaaa…dum. Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum!

The music is so loud. You can feel the shark around you. It is swimming around your house. It is swimming through your vents.

You strip off your gloves, throw them away. You take off your mask. N95. Then you call the police and tell them to come to your house. Your door is unlocked. You don't hang up, but set the phone down next to you on the couch. You don't want to be alone and your neighbor is gone. The mailman is gone. There is no one in the windows across the street. Lifting the pistol, you press the muzzle against your forehead.

Breathe in. Breathe out. The air is suspect. Then promise yourself that the air won't get you. Hope that your air won't get anyone else.

You shoot.

The music stops.

Your last breath is a sigh of relief. Of freedom.

***

LATER, AFTER

Jessica Barksdale

Amanda lived by this truth: Everything was a lie. Waking up was a lie. Getting dressed was a lie. Going downstairs to make coffee and toast was a lie, too.

At least, the way she did it. Jumping out of bed and rushing down, happy at the light pouring through the window. Smelling the deeply roasted beans, pulling in the scent and liking it.

A lie.

She was caught in her point-of-view like a hook snare, nothing true or false but a construct. Like the *Matrix*, something she programmed for herself, based on nothing but herself and the props from the real world.

"You have some serious issues," her boyfriend Ben said, more than twice. "It's like you're God."

"Aren't we our own gods?" She passed him the jam, which was quite delicious, even if it was from Grocery Outlet, the discount store where employees didn't wear masks and laughed in the aisles. "Aren't I constructing my own reality every single second?"

"Jesus." He shook his head.

"Aren't we?" she said.

"Knock it off," Ben said. "It's too early for your spectrum-type humor."

He was in a dark mood, his lie of the world full of the bleakness of the pandemic.

"Fine," she said.

He bent down into the newspaper to read something happier than their conversation.

Later, after he didn't say anything else, Amanda put on her mask and leashed up her dog Front Wheel, a name that came to her in a dream.

"That is the most ridiculous name I've ever heard!" was all anyone said when Amanda told them. Ben just rolled his eyes.

Front Wheel didn't care. He was happy despite his one missing leg. He ran with the best of them, with perky ears and wagging tail. His lie was: outside, food, joy, nap, snacks. His lie was true.

If only, Amanda thought.

At the local café, Amanda quite unexpectedly stood six feet behind her college boyfriend on the sidewalk. He hadn't turned around, but she recognized him by his stance, the way he put his hand in his back pocket, palm facing out, his backpack, the same brand that he'd always bought—the kind that showed what a cool mountaineering person he was. He *was* a cool mountaineering person.

On leash, Front Wheel sniffed his right shoe, and Gavin looked down, wanting to pet him and then freezing, remembering, it would seem, the rules on touching other people's animals, especially now. Then he turned to Amanda and froze some more.

"Hi, Gavin." She gave him a little wave. Not for the first time did she appreciate social distancing because Gavin used to be a hugger, an arching-over smothering kind of hugger.

He backed up, but he couldn't get closer to the couple in front of him, either.

"Hey," he said. She watched his face try emotions on like hats.

That's when she remembered how she'd left it with Gavin. That last lamp, flung down three floors, smashed on the asphalt, missing him by inches. Or feet. But close enough.

Right now, if she weren't holding a leash, she'd still feel the ugly porcelain in both her hands.

"Do you live here now?" she asked.

Once more, Gavin froze. It was as if his battery were dying, his on off switch on the fritz.

She held up one hand. "Don't tell me. Listen, this is my café. I come here every morning. Sometimes in the afternoons, too. You might want to just go and never come back. That would be the best option."

She'd learned a lot in six years.

"You are under no obligation to apologize to me."

"Me?" he said. "Apologize?"

"And who else?"

Stunned, he stared at her, and then, without another word or glance, he gave up his twelve feet of space and walked away.

Front Wheel yanked on the leash. Amanda stepped into Gavin's space behind the cute couple with matching dreadlocks.

#

They sat in the park, Front Wheel with a bowl of water (Amanda had a plastic collapsible one in her bag for such occasions) and a bully stick chew and she with her green tea frap.

Wind swirled around them, throwing gusts of pollen across the broad expanse of thick grass. The sun burst out in doses, light and dark, light and dark.

"What kind of dog is that?" a little girl with a pink bike asked, her masked mother smiling behind her. Amanda wanted to frown. To say "Shoo." But she didn't.

"He's a mixed-breed." The girl stared at her. Amanda had forgotten if *mixed* or *half* combined with breed was something not to say about people or dogs. Or likely anything.

"A mutt," Amanda continued. "A rescue."

"He's so pretty." The girl clicked closer with her bike, her helmet a spangly dish on her head. Her mother gently held her still.

"He's not really nice. Or I'd let you pet him. Sometimes, he bites. Hard." Front Wheel had never done any such thing, the lie slipping out before Amanda could stop it.

The mother smiled/started and pulled her child back. Amanda put on the expression she'd invented in fourth-grade, the "I'm not dangerous" smile, making sure her eyes were wide and sincere.

The duo tottered off, the girl wobbly despite her training wheels. She needed a helmet for her whole body.

Everyone did.

Amanda sipped her drink, wishing she were someone else. Or somewhere else. Or that there was a way to scoop out her innards and refill her body with a personality that worked, one that matched how she appeared on the outside.

Sometimes when she passed a mirror or window, she stopped, confused. Nothing she saw reflected back at her matched the horror-show inside.

Instead, a voice inside her, a deep, male voice, often in a Southern dialect said, “I’ll be damned.”

There she was in all her splendor. She’d done nothing to deserve or earn it. She didn’t take care of herself, really, though she didn’t do anything horrible on purpose.

Without her consent or attention, Amanda was tall (5’ 8”), thin (never more than 128 pounds) but nicely muscled. Whatever physical activity she’d tried—swimming, gymnastics, cross country, softball—her body understood intrinsically, moving in the right ways to catch, dive, leap, and sprint. Again, none of it was to her credit. She’d never trained enough or practiced, every coach appalled when she quit the team or class without a backward glance.

Her skin was butter-warmed, luminescent, a shine on her that seemed to come from within. Eyes green. Hair long, straight, thick and a chestnut brown. In the summer, she had a smattering of freckles. In the winter, her eyes glowed like jewels. Everything she wore looked good, even if she threw on what was on the floor and staggered out for coffee, dehydrated and starving.

No matter her condition, someone, mostly everyone, looked at her. With perhaps short, month-long breaks, she was always coupled, partnered, attached. Until she wasn’t. Until the lamps flew.

I’ll be damn-ed.

But, like Front Wheel, she was a mutt. True enough. Her DNA test proved that. No one strain of human more than an eighth of anything. She was equal parts of mostly everything European.

A mixed-breed, needing rescue.

Like Front Wheel, she had a missing part, but even Amanda didn't know what it was.

"Come on," she said when Front Wheel chewed through the last of the bully stick. Nice euphemism, she thought. A fabulous thing to call a dried bull penis.

"Let's go shopping."

#

After waiting in the various lines at Trader Joe's and then shopping up and down the aisles based on carefully placed markers, ropes, and signs, Amanda made her purchases and went out front to untie Front Wheel from the conveniently placed dog area pole (sand, shade, and a community water bowl).

"Pretty dog," a woman said from a bench under a cypress tree. "Real friendly, too."

As Amanda put her bag of almonds, soy milk, and baking powder into her purse, she shot the woman a glance but just barely.

In an instant, Amanda summed her up: Dog person (Husky). Lesbian (too comfortable in her skin). Lonely from quarantine (she'd combed her hair).

Right. Let's not go down that road. It led to the same place everything else did.

"Thanks," she answered and began walking back up to her apartment. She hoped the woman hadn't petted Front Wheel.

"Hey," the woman started, but Amanda didn't turn around.

"I'm—Hey?" the woman called. Amanda kept walking. Men were bad enough.

She and Front Wheel crossed Branard and then walked the thin, root upheaved sidewalk until Chelton. No one was out on stoops or porches, and those who were walking wore masks and crossed the street when they saw Amanda. The neighborhood was hers, as was the apartment. Not Ben's. In her name, not his. She could burst in there, door flinging wide, and pronounce, "Get out."

Arm extended, finger pointed, etc. Exclamations of "pack your bags" and "don't call me" would suffice. No need for a thrown lamp.

But things were already dead. Who had the energy for histrionics? The only bonds they had were fear and need. It could be over in a snap. Then, as she usually did post-break up, she could vacuum, dust, and scrub, make lists of self-improvement and independence-building tasks, call her therapist for the first available appointment, and schedule a haircut, when and if salons ever opened again.

All of it would get exhausting by the end of the first or second week, and she'd chuck it all and go hang out somewhere and meet someone. Like that. Magic.

Now, there was no place to hang out and meet anyone, except at Trader Joe's. The virus and her loneliness would go on forever.

She and Front Wheel turned right at the Rose Garden Cemetery. Honey bees in the hydrangeas and rhododendrons buzzed like tiny saws. The trees were dense with robins. But nature was the only sound. The death business should have been booming, but there wasn't a car or mourner in sight. No gravediggers, not that anyone used that term anymore.

Maybe there weren't any funerals, just open, waiting graves, bodies planted like saplings. Or saplings on top of the mounds. So environmental. Natural fertilizer.

Front Wheel and she turned into the cemetery, walking down the empty driveway. Usually, lines of cars were parked the entire length, up and over a low hill, every plot studded with tombstones and little crypts, but today cherry blossoms blew across the asphalt. Crows pecked at the evenly mowed grass. Dogwood trees twirled like women in puffy skirts. For a while, Amanda assumed someone would stop her, coming around from a hedgerow with a whistle and a cell phone.

"Place is closed," the guard would say. "Dead."

"You think?" she'd say.

"Miss, this is no laughing matter," the guard would go on, walking toward her, his mask sucked down on his face in an intense inhale.

"Fine." Amanda would back off. She could already feel herself leaving.

But she was alone with the dead and Front Wheel.

She walked on. Some of the gravestones were old, etched with dates she could barely make out. Eighteen hundred and something. Nineteen twenty what?

"Creepy, right?"

She jumped a little, jerking the leash. Front Wheel growled. Amanda turned to see Gavin next to her. Right next to her. She backed up, stumbling a little, hoping not to trip.

"What are you doing here?"

Front Wheel growled again, a sound he rarely made. Amanda's skin skittered over her muscles, a river running up to her hairline. Her breath caught under her breastbone like a knife blade.

It was just Gavin. Rock climbing, ice cream eating Gavin. Gavin of the smooth, almost hairless body. Gavin who liked Radiohead. Gavin who loved to talk, who showed her how to

climb, who watched stupid 1960s movies. Gavin who loved her and then didn't, who tried to make a clean getaway, but Amanda stopped that, didn't she?

Gavin didn't back up, but he didn't step closer as she scrambled away, finally resting a hand on a tombstone.

Vanessa Bingham, Mother, Wife.

"Are you following me?" Amanda forced herself to stand straight and not gulp down the air stuck in her throat.

He moved his mouth in that totally annoying way he used to, side-to-side, like a masticating cow. Gavin would make a fantastic toothless old man.

"Well?"

He stepped closer.

"Stop," she said. "Don't come any closer."

Amanda stumbled over Vanessa into another row. Front Wheel started to whine. *Arthur, Dedicated. Loyal Son.*

"Why?" Gavin said. "What are you scared of?"

On a normal day, Amanda could scream and people would run over. Who would they believe? Gavin would be beaten away with shovels. Cops called. Story over.

She finally swallowed, her throat tight. "Look, I'm sorry about everything. And about the café."

"You were a real bitch."

For the café or for everything? She knew the answer.

Amanda turned to look at the driveway, the entrance, cars passing. Wind gusted through the stones, lifting leaves off the grass.

"What?" he asked. "Should I leave you in peace?"

Peace came out of his mouth like something impossible and slightly disgusting. Distasteful.

Amanda watched her former boyfriend. What *was* she scared of? Not his body, one she still knew. She could kick him hard on his right leg above the ankle and bring him to his knees. There was always the hernia he refused to have fixed, claiming anesthesia was too dangerous instead of admitting he was scared. She could jab him in the spot to the left of his belly button. *Pow*. Superhero. And off she and Front Wheel would go.

But she didn't make any of these moves. Instead, she felt like crying. The end really was here. Gavin wanted to infect her. He didn't look sick, though he might have waited to test positive before coming to find her.

Amanda took in a breath and pushed her hair back over her shoulder. This was crazy. She knew better. Jesus. Back when they lived together in that house in Seattle, he'd never been anything but pretty much normal. She didn't even have to ask him to take out the garbage.

"This virus is getting to me," Amanda said, bending down to scratch the top of Front Wheel's head. She looked up, finding her power, one made of lies and confidence and hatred, years of it, rolled and tight like wax. "What do you want?"

Gavin adjusted his backpack, enough so that she flinched. What was he looking for? And then he shrugged and leaned against the trunk of the overhanging maple.

"Do you remember that painting?"

He didn't need to say more. A small museum in Montparnasse, two euro entry fee. The entry was dark, the halls creaky, but as they ventured inward, she and Gavin would find

themselves in large galleries with high ceilings and gallons of light. In one, *the painting*, as they called it from then on: *Destruction of Paris*.

Amanda had forgotten the artist, but it was by a pal of Picasso and Braque. Maybe it was Juan Gris. She didn't know now. That part of her life where she looked at things intentionally unreal was over.

But then. Yes. The painting was a *Guernica* but not as big. A *Still Life with Violin and Pitcher* but with destroyed buildings and a red sunset. Or what seemed like one.

"It's horrible," Gavin had said, reaching out and grabbing her hand.

"The worst," she'd agreed.

They spent a half hour in front of *Destruction of Paris* before going to a café and trying to speak only in French. It might have been the best day of her life.

"It was horrible," Gavin said now.

"The worst," she said, this the conversation they had from that first spotting of the painting. When they were at stores and saw long check-out lines; or were driving downtown and were stopped by a herd of cars at a toll plaza. When the bills were due; when her mother called. When they were hungry.

"It's horrible," one of them would whisper.

"The worst."

Gavin slumped down to sitting, leaning against Arthur, *loyal son*.

"This is really the worst," Gavin said, moving his hand, taking in what? The world? This conversation? The virus? Or them, this conversation, the past?

Front Wheel whimpered and Amanda took out her collapsible bowl and filled it from her hydro.

"You always wanted a dog," Gavin said.

"I always wanted a lot of things," Amanda said.

"I'm sorry I scared you."

Amanda sat down next to a tombstone and ran her hand over the granite: rough, pitted, gritty under her fingers. She couldn't see the date on this one, either, facts rubbed clean. It didn't take long for things to go from perfect to shit. Here this stone was, something a family member picked out, especially for, who? She leaned closer and sounded out the name.

Sebastian.

Father, Son, Dedicated.

Sebastian. His stone. Now pitted and rough as if swept by storm and salt and sun, which it had been.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

He pushed his hair back and looked right at her. "When this whole virus thing started, I started checking in on people. From the past. Maybe unfinished business. You remember Eric?" Amanda snorted. Eric. The former roommate who stole things, like computers. Who begged forgiveness and then moved to Sweden without replacing anything.

"He's still the same. And there were some work people. My sister." He snorted. "Then I came to your name. Last thing I remember—"

"The lamp."

Gavin blinked. "The call. After."

What call? Amanda petted Front Wheel and thought, opening old doors backward, stepping through them, aching in lead shoes. The years since Gavin left, the work she did to cordon it all off, replacing him with Ben. But first with Ryan. With Diego. Always with work,

and maybe even with Front Wheel, though her dog felt real. Felt onward, moving toward something. All the daily walks had been taking her someplace. Maybe to right here, this cemetery.

The call. She really couldn't even pretend to forget.

It had been late, nighttime or early morning. The lamp had long ago been swept off the sidewalk. Sometimes when she came home in the late afternoon, she'd imagine a glimmer, a glint, an iridescent shell on the pavement that would flicker and disappear. She'd stop, breathe in, and wait for it to reappear. It never did.

But everything else? Destroyed or thrown away.

"I remember."

"Why couldn't you have said yes?"

Why? Amanda shook her head and tried to swallow. Why not yes? Why not say yes to forgiveness and forever when he'd asked? That was all he wanted. Yes to change. These would have been the better choices, but how many psychic feet of failing to get there? What lengths of barbed-wire and how many brick walls would she have had to rip down to move closer to Gavin.

So much easier to let him squirrel off in his friend's Honda. Easier to watch him smash that suitcase and backpack into the backseat and never look back. Goodbye. Then throw a lamp. Suffer. Move on. Or not. Not.

"You're not sick are you?" she asked.

Gavin shook his head. In the dappled light, she could see he had a streak of gray at each temple like his father used to. Or did. Maybe Gavin's father—Jerry—was dead. Or maybe he was just completely gray.

"Me either. I know I had it in February. I was so sick, I didn't think I would ever get well."

"But you did."

"Ben—"

"Your boyfriend."

She sighed. "For now."

Front Wheel got up and stretched and then climbed onto Amanda's lap and curled into a ball, closing his eyes.

"He likes you."

"I'm lucky." She was. In Front Wheel's solid little self, she was lucky. Amanda laughed out loud, a sound foreign and painful, the sound like rocks in her throat.

Heat began to gather on the worn surfaces, the sun arcing higher over the canopy of trees. Dappled light flickered on Amanda's legs. Eventually, Ben would wonder where she was. At some point, she would have to get up off this grave and go back into her life. This moment? This interlude with the past? She was being tested. And with the past, she'd always failed before.

"This is the worst," she said.

Gavin looked up at her, nodded. "Horrible."

"It seems like forever."

"It might be."

"Maybe when forever is over," she said, wiping grass and leaf bits off her hands and standing up. "We can talk again?"

Gavin stood, too. Finally, someone else appeared in the cemetery, two people, jogging in masks. From the street, a truck bellowed out a honk. Voices. A jingle of a bicycle bell. If she closed her eyes, Amanda might be able to imagine this was a normal day.

She waited for his answer as she picked up Front Wheel's bowl and dumped the water on Arthur, the stone looking new for a moment, almost shiny. A sigh built up in her chest. The spell was over. There never was any going back.

"I'll email you," he said, pulling his mask out of his back pocket. "Stay well, Amanda."

She tried to lift her hand, but her body was as heavy as the granite and marble around her. So instead of waving or running after him and grabbing his shoulders and turning him to her, saying yes and yes and yes, she watched him leave, nodding as he waved.

#

She hadn't planned it as she headed home, Front Wheel jangling on his leash, her groceries bumping against her legs as she walked. She ignored the stares from passersby, kept her eyes straight, her mask on, her hair flowing behind her. She let the sun hit her face as she waited for the walk sign to flash green.

When she was little and growing up in Oakland, she thought the voice at the light was saying, "Walk like a dog" not "Walk sign is on."

Now, she wanted to walk like a dog, her dog, Front Wheel, happy and pleased with himself and his outing and life in general. He was happy with her, looking up now and again before jangling onward. Amanda wanted to hunch over, get on all fours, and trot back to her apartment, lively in her steps. Who cared now?

Gavin had said *this* might last forever, but right now, for the first time in months, Amanda was okay with that.

"Ben?" she called when she opened the door and let herself in. Unhooked from the leash, Front Wheel clattered over to his water bowl and started lapping.

"Here," he called from the bedroom, his voice different, dark as ink.

She clunked her purse down on the counter and headed down the hall. The noon light radiated gold into the apartment. She needed to dust. Maybe even mop. Pick up the pillows and the glasses and clean the inside of the windows. She needed to clean up the papers and magazines and dog toys.

In the bedroom, Ben was hunkered over his green duffle bag, the one he took on every trip and vacation, but this was not the time for either.

"What are you doing?" she asked, though it was clear he was packing.

"I called my mom," he said.

His parents lived in Corvallis, less than an hour away, but Amanda had only met them twice.

"And?" she scratched out.

"I'm going to isolate in their au pair above the garage. And stay there until—" Ben stood, straight, unfurling his six foot one height. "This is over."

This. There it was again.

Inside Amanda, she felt it again, that thing that gripped and held her ramrod straight, but made her arms want to spin, her hands to grab. What? What? A book? A chair? A lamp. Yes, she wanted to crush the light, punish it.

But then for an instant she saw it, the sparkly flutter of a porcelain fish scale on the sidewalk. There, the wet shine of Arthur's grave. Dedicated, loyal son. Dedicated. But to what was Amanda dedicated? Was she a six-armed mythological creature bent on her own destruction?

Yes. Yes.

No.

She sat on the bed, trying not to notice that even in his leaving, Ben couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Okay," she said. "I get it."

"I know you do," he said, hand on hips. Then he bent down to zip up his duffel. "And, well, if…when there's a break—"

"No," Amanda said, feeling her tongue hit the back of her teeth. This the right word. "No."

#

Later, after Ben was gone, and she and Front Wheel had left the apartment and returned once more, Amanda sat on the couch, her couch, and looked out into the late afternoon, her dog on her lap. The sky was purple at the edges, the street below quiet. This was nowhere near over. But her dog was soft and a spring breeze blew in the slatted windows.

She checked every part of herself in the moment: her body, her thoughts, even her hopes that seemed as intangible as the light scent on the wind. She'd finally put herself right here in this exact way. Amanda was going to stay here for a while.

All of it was true.

***

THE SOUND OF WILD ANIMALS IN THE NIGHT

Douglas McBride

I walk around outside in my costume late at night. The coyotes drift down into the neighborhood to hunt at about the same time. They see me and I see them, all of us curious. There's a routine we have. If I walk, they walk. If I stand, they stand. When I stare, they stare back. They watch me transform. My hands and face morph beneath the shifting city lights. My clear face shield reflects the dim orange glare of countless street lamps. Broken halos of red, white and blue flash overhead, police choppers a constant above us. Down on my knees: the lights of downtown float across the mirrored buildings like lit detritus, pouring down into my palms. By midnight, it seems I can hold all of L.A. in the luminous cradle of my gloves. Double layered, they shake blue-green through the darkness: a flimsy pair of teal-transparent disposables atop sky-hued latex. The coyotes watch my gloves shudder in the night and wonder about me. They make me wonder about myself. Their heads turn—their gaze refocusing—whenever they spot a cat. A tiny dog barking within earshot makes their ears go up straight. When sirens blare past, they close their eyes, raise their jaws and howl up at the moonlight. I watch from

somewhere in the background as they wail. The neighborhood dogs howl right along with them. I close my eyes and try to howl just as loud. When we cry out together the stars multiply, redecorating the night sky all around us. As long as I've been alive, they've never been this visible from within the city. By the time I open my eyes, the animals are still at it. The stars brighten and twirl, responding to their sonic prayers. It sounds like a chorus of insanity. But it makes sense to me. Nothing could be more natural, really. This is something I've only just come to understand in a tangible way. I'm beginning to think of the coyotes as my little instructors. I can't teach them anything in return. I might be something like a clown to them. They tolerate me all the same.

We're in this together. Estamos juntos en esto. The advertisements on the locked glass doors of the Bank of America spell it out for us. The coyotes like to gather near the ATM most nights. And why shouldn't they? There's no one around to stop them anymore. Seeing them there makes me happy. Some like to sit perched on the concrete wall in front of the bank. Others will search for scraps close to the trash cans nearby. Now that I'm familiar, they don't react much when I approach. In between these strange moments, we sleep, wake and watch for the moon, for each other. The moon falls and the sun quivers back up into the blue sky. Moon, sun, moon and sun, before the moon reappears yet again. When the coyotes spiral back down from Griffith Park, I spiral back up. Late at night, I can wander through the middle of the street. I can stop and just stand there if I like, scream and cry out loud when I need to. It sounds crazy, but it brings me sanity. The few cars out know to find their way around me. My black hood makes me a faceless stranger, even in my own neighborhood. It covers everything but my eyes: my face, my chin, all the way down past my neck. My black jacket is just an extension of my hood in the darkness. The moonlight bounces off of me, back across the shiny orbs of the coyotes' eyes.

What I can see floating across my palms also exists within the span of those orbs. Shuttered storefronts and buildings: lit towers of pink, green, yellow and blue, all cloaked in the same hazy orange from the street lamps. Empty roads, locked doors and trash blowing around in the street. Shadows of silent, pointless billboards for things no one needs, for companies gone bankrupt. There's a quiet sadness there too. As if every emotion within the City of Angels registers somehow in their gaze. Everything we see becomes familiar to the group, all of it communal somehow. The coyotes narrow their eyes into slivers, let them close. The sun fires itself back upward and we get ready to do it all over again.

By daybreak, L.A. is a different place. The Hollywood sign that once would vibrate through the heat and smog above Griffith Park has changed. The ash from the fires is long gone. These days, the sign just sits there through clear skies. You can see the patchwork details of every letter. It looks fake from afar somehow. Even the aerial photos they take now look doctored, surreal. There are so few cars on the roads and freeways. It makes me want to laugh at times. I think about those empty freeways whenever I start to lose it. I think about the coyotes: where they rest with their kin in the daylight, nestled somewhere up above the foot trails in the Park. It's those simple thoughts that help me most. Maybe it's easier than thinking about all the people. There are too many to wrap my head around anymore. The friends and neighbors gone too soon. From outside of their homes, we create invisible protections for their families. With streaks of light refracting through my gloves—from right there in the middle of the street—we send guardian angels to watch over them. The coyotes pay close attention, take part in their ways. They sing out their spells when the city asks them to. We walk on together once our work is done. They follow my lead quite a bit nowadays. I prefer when it's the other way around. I imagine they know more about all this than I do. Maybe I'm wrong. There are so many maybes

now. Maybe it's the army of strangers that get me dressed up at night, their lives somehow summarized by one random photo. Their faces placed next to one another without their permission: on webpages, in newspapers, in emailed memorials. Some days it seems whatever remains of our humanity is present in their eyes. Maybe it's all in my head. Maybe this is just how we grieve. Or maybe this is how we survive. It's absurd, but there are no real definitive answers. There are people who still want to pretend none of it is even real. Like it never happened—isn't still happening—could never happen to them. They're delusional. Maybe they know it, but still want to pretend. Maybe I want to do the same thing deep down. I can't pretend we've got any real solutions though. Our healthcare system in the U.S. is like some cruel joke we've played upon ourselves, upon the world. The coyotes seem to know when there's pain in the air. At the right time of night, it sounds like they're crying out because of it. Because of our endless stupidity. The neighborhood dogs always echo their cries. They can't help themselves. Maybe they're struck by a painful feeling of longing, or deja vu. Lights flick on and windows slam shut as they join in. Somehow, everything makes more sense when I close my eyes and listen. I myself cry out, ask for help yet again from the heavens. The duplicating stars wink back at us from the smogless night sky. We Americans can point our fingers toward so many more stars these days. Each finger is yet another confirmation. We like to say we're number one here in the United States. Maybe it's just an American thing. The rest of the world can't even laugh off our claims anymore. Their lives are at greater risk because of us. We're by far the leader in confirmed cases and deaths. The roar of what comes next might be both deafening and quiet all at once. Everyone wants to get back to normalcy. But without safe vaccines to fight the newest, most contagious strains, we're still spinning our wheels. Without any treatment that goes beyond just therapy, it might only be a matter of time before the next wave hits. We can stay positive,

distract ourselves. Still, the next reoccurrence might be more deadly than the last. When I do my best to ignore it all—to make myself preoccupied with something, anything else—it can fade from my mind for the better part of a day. It comes roaring back in the end though. So, I let it come. I get suited up in my costume and get ready to go back out into the dark.

Under the moonlight, I can forget for awhile. Our entire street looks different beneath it. Our shabby, rent-control apartment building becomes an oblong, sliding shadow. It leans, melting into the gray asphalt below. When daylight returns, it arises again to become four floors of peeling, pink and poop brown paint. I say poop brown only because that's what our kids like to call it. We live on the fourth floor, in the brown. For the time being, we still have a place to live. So these days, poop brown is my favorite color. My wife says our elevator is moody. Some days, it moves from the pink all the way up to the brown. The times I've gotten stuck inside—or the laundry has—drain my sanity. So, I haul our clothes over my shoulder up and down the four flights of stairs. Since keys and doors can be tricky, I carry my squirt bottle of homemade disinfectant around with me everywhere. It might sound like paranoia, but our building is full of young people who party together, with nurses and nurse trainees on every floor. We live right next to Children's Hospital and the Kaiser Hospital buildings. We love our neighbors, but I'd rather be careful than get anyone sick. I spray the door handles, lids and the buttons of the machines. I drop my stuff in, start the washers and let the door slam shut behind me. After one more metal gate in the garage, I'm out on the street. I always take a few steps out into the moonlight before I stop and turn around. Sometimes I'll lower my head and take a knee. For a few weeks, I was down on both knees, my forehead touching the concrete. It was right after someone else we knew had just passed. I thanked the building. I thanked God and Lady Luck. I thanked my dead Father. I thanked Mother Earth and all of them again. Who or what do you

thank for your own life? For the life of your loved ones? Most people might thank whatever their version of God is. To each their own. I can't blame them. We have two little girls to be thankful for. My Mom just turned seventy nine. So many of her friends and peers are gone now. The disease continues to sweep through our care facilities here like wildfire. When it runs through my head—what so many others have lost—mere thanks isn't enough. Not for what we've been given. I'm not a religious person. Even back when it didn't risk lives, I wasn't a churchgoer. Some nights, I take it as a sign of whatever remaining sanity I've got that not much has changed. On other nights, when it's the opposite all of a sudden—and I'm down on my knees on the sidewalk—it feels like getting down low lifts me up. Like maybe I'm looking in the right place. I know I've found something on my late night walks, maybe something unnamable. It takes over at times, gets me suited up again, out into the moonlight to join with the others. We stride the pavement together under astral light. Time wanders with us, alongside us. It stands still in certain moments, disappearing altogether. When the tick of the invisible clock returns, the coyotes begin to hang their heads. One by one, they meander off, back toward the hills. I get on with my daily life, finish up our laundry. I haul our big canvas bag back upstairs. Turning the key, I leave my shoes outside the door. I drop my mask, hood and clothes in the bin behind it, shower with soap and hot water. I dry off and sit in the dark awhile. I try not to wake my wife when I crawl back into bed. The girls will wake me in the morning. They'll climb all over me and giggle. In between going crazy to try to keep them sane, I tell them more about the coyotes. "But, what's their names?" my six year old V likes to ask.

"I don't know," I say, my nose on the edge of a hot cup of coffee.

"They've gotta have names Dad," my nine year old H says.

"Okay," I say.

I often don't know what else to say. The boom box gives me ideas sometimes. H got one recently for her 9th birthday. It sits on the tiny used desk we bought for their tiny room. I sit in the cramped armchair covered with laundry and stuffed animals next to the desk. Turning on the CD player, I pass H a disc. Not all of our CD's are kid friendly. Our Christmas CDs make the grade though. When H plays it and V dances, the coyotes get names. "Hey... how about Dasher and Dancer, Prancer and Vixen?" I say.

"What?" says V.

"What about Rudolph?" says H.

"Can I be Rudolph?" I say.

"You do got a big nose," V says.

"You can't be Rudolph. It has to be a coyote," says H.

"Yeah. The magic one," says V.

"But they're all magic," I say.

"That would be cool. But not likely. Can they fly?" says H, curling her brow, a pointer finger held up to my face.

"I don't think so. But maybe," I say.

"We could pretend. They could have a song. Then we could do a show!" says V, her eyes lighting up.

"You two and some flying coyotes in a show?" I say

"Yeah! Yeah!" says V, jumping up and down.

H giggles and nods. "Okay," she says.

"Sounds good to me," I say.

When they come over and give me giggling hugs and kisses, everything feels right in the world. Nothing else matters. The feeling disappears quick as the girls go away. The roar re-appears in my mind. Maybe the coyotes have a similar ability. They can cancel out the roar of the apocalypse with their cries. As bad as things get, whenever I'm in their presence, it feels like the disease—and all the rest of the insanity in the world—can't win. So, I get costumed up and do it all over again.

There are days when I'm just waiting for night to arrive. Days when I stare at my phone too long and throw it at the couch. I pick it back up, unable to help myself. On my phone's screen: a clip of another black man shot in cold blood. Racist white civilians do the shooting some days. Most days it's racist white cops. Sometimes they're one and the same. Sometimes the cops will kneel on a black man's neck until he expires. He'll plead with them, say he can't breathe—echoing the last black man choked to death by cops—but they'll ignore him, like all the others. My thoughts will feel petty, meager, impotent, my every action worthless. I'll join marches, call, sign petitions, donate. But they'll do it again. So, I'll pick up the phone, stare some more and repeat every action. The definition of insanity. "Fucking genius," I'll proclaim to no one.

Maybe I'm just talking about myself. Maybe I'm trying to get outside my own skin somehow, to think about something or someone else. Maybe I've got too many questions. Then again, maybe only questions make sense when you're offered nonsensical answers. I try to stand a few feet away awhile, leave the phone upside down on the couch. "Come on," I mumble to myself.

"Can you chill out please?" my wife blurts out at me.

I never have a decent answer for her. "They're playing in the bedroom," I say.

She picks up my phone from the couch and stares at the screen. It confuses her. There's a friend of mine onscreen dancing with food. He's filling up boxes with various vegetables, doing twirls and grooving. "What?" she says

"He could at least wear a hat. It attaches to hair just like clothing," I say.

This particular guy has long, curly hair. He's volunteering to provide food for needy families with a bunch of our other friends. At first it wasn't too bad. But now they're pulling twelve hour shifts down at the Unitarian Church every Saturday. There's a small parade of them dancing around with food, filling up boxes together. They wear masks, but they're in a tight-packed space, indoors. "That's not it. You want to be there with them. So, fine. Go," she says. She sounds angry.

"They run temperature checks. No one's gotten sick yet," I say.

"How long will that last?" she says, walking away.

I might be even more careful—or more paranoid—than she is most days. We still cry over the same photos, for the same friends. But people are struggling to survive in the midst of this thing for lack of food and shelter. The lines go on for blocks and blocks around the church. My friends are like me in many ways. None of them attend the Church. It's just a staging area to provide aid. Where we differ is that they're actually helping people. My phone only serves to remind me that I'm helping no one. Unemployed, I've become an anxious, stay at home Dad. Going to work alongside them—to take direct actions, or protest side by side—was never an obstacle in my mind before. But now the rules have changed. Now there's a chance I could get people sick; my kids, my Mom, my wife, my friends. It's hard to see where the lines are on the page anymore.

"Daddy, are you still a writer?" V asks me on a Thursday.

She's the six year old. "Yeah. But mostly I'm a Daddy," I say.

On some days, I'll sit in our girls' bedroom and play dolls with them on their bunk bed. The white wooden frame takes up about half the space of the entire room. It's covered in stickers that were on it when we bought it used. Sometimes, I let my head fall back on the bed and focus on them. I like to stare at the shape of the adhesive stains, to pick at them. "Could you still love writing if you're unwell again?" V continues.

I keep picking away.

"Like regular kind unwell? But crazy-crazy worse from the world?" she says.

"Yeah. Because your love helps to heal me," I say.

I turn toward her, wave her in with both hands. She crawls over, gives me some hugs and kisses. "Okay. Then, could you fix your writing? So you could fix everything else? You could write about us and about love. Then we could go back to school. Only true love has the power for fixing. Remember? Like the Trolls."

"You mean like Poppy?" I say

"No. Not the dancing Trolls. The other ones. Like the Trolls that are rocks. Like in Frozen," she continues.

"Oh. Right…" I say.

We talk a lot about the power of love. Maybe I say I need to fix my writing too much. Maybe I say too much in general.

"So?" V asks.

"He can. But he's still gotta be Mama's helper," H says, giving me a thumbs up.

She's the nine year old. I give her a thumbs up back. "Your Mama is smarter and braver and stronger than me," I say to V.

We're fortunate my wife still gets a paycheck. She works for a public elementary school. Due to budget cuts, we've been told her pay may soon be slashed by a third "And also you can't have a baby," H says.

"Nope. And Mama had two babies. That's brave and strong. Nose beeps?" I say.

H comes over and touches the tip of her nose to mine. "Beep," we both say at the same time.

I wave in V and she does the same. "Beep," we repeat.

V reconnects her nose to mine and narrows her eyes at me. I do the same and she growls. I growl back. "You wanna mess with me?" she asks.

"Nope. You wanna mess with me?" I say.

"No. But you gotta fix things. Grr!" she says.

"Grr! Okay...Grr!" I say in reply.

Later on that night, I'm out in my costume trying to fix things. Colorful lights blur across the surface of my face shield through the darkness. Plastic supermarket bags spin end over end out in front of me across Sunset Boulevard. I've got my green army backpack slung over both shoulders. It's weighted down with as much as food as I can carry: apples, oranges and stacks of nutritional supplement bars. The weight feels good. I know it'll lighten with each batch of tents I can hit. At the tent city closest to the Hospital, I can usually give away at least half the contents of my pack. Same goes with the tent city near Goodwill, just around the corner. There's enough to do on any given night. I like to take my time and stick to my routine though. First on the list, I check in with my little instructors. When I get to the ATM, there's a few friends there already. They lie in wait under the red glow of the Bank of America sign. I click my tongue at them in the dark. They notice me. Sniffing the air, they begin to shift around. One pushes his two front paws

out toward me and arches his back. Yawning, his massive jaws open up. Tongue outstretched, he licks the air and sits upright. I wait and watch. There are three others visible. What looks like a Mama and her two young stand beneath the overhang of the bank entrance. For one reason or another, they've put some distance between themselves and the larger, yawning male. I wait and watch awhile more. When the time seems right, I reach down into my front jacket pocket. I unseal the Ziploc freezer bag inside it and take out a homemade biscuit. It's been basted in turkey fat. They know the smell. I break it into four pieces, so they each get a piece. I don't recommend doing this. It's not wise to feed coyotes. My comrades and I have sort of an agreement though. As long as I'm around, they won't kill any neighborhood dogs or cats. They won't hesitate otherwise. My first week out at night, I witnessed a grubby little white poodle die in a hurry. It happened so fast, all I could do was watch in shock. A small coyote broke it's neck within seconds and hauled it off right in front of me. After that, I started paying closer attention to their movements, as well as to the neighborhood itself. So many people keep their small dogs outside at night. Any fence with vertical bars—where they might reach their long snout through and grab a dog by it's neck—is an open invitation. I learned how they can work in pairs too. If they see a cat, one of the coyotes will approach it in plain sight. It'll push the cat in a certain direction, where a second coyote waits to catch it in it's jaws from a spot in the darkness. The streets are devoid of people at night nowadays. Seems like there might be a few more dead pets without the snacks. So, I've always got them. If there were people out, I wouldn't consider doing it. But the streets are empty, silent. This is the world we live in now.

After their first snack, we move on together. I walk closer to the center of the street to keep eyes on them once they enter the light. To my left and right, their paws tap quietly through the shadows. They tend to like the outer edges: the far end of sidewalks, beneath the awnings of

the buildings. As a loose group, we saunter down toward the Goodwill. Once we're there, it's easy to see the tent city outside the parking lot has grown. Each small tent casts a tiny mountain of shadow into the gutter on Lyman Place. I nod at the faces I know best; pass out half of what's inside my pack. Over near the Hospital it's more of the same. The illuminated blue and white Kaiser Permanente sign floats high above our heads. Gary ambles toward me beneath it in his L.A. Dodgers baseball cap. He's a sun-bronzed white guy with an odd set of teeth. He's usually shirtless and barefoot in a pair of jeans, but I've never seen him without his Dodgers hat. "Hey, hey. It's chef midnight. What's for dinner?" he says.

"I got chocolate peanut butter or peanut butter and honey," I say.

"Chocolate," he says.

I pass him a chocolate peanut butter Power Bar. "Apple or an orange?" I say.

"Orange. The apples are too hard," he says.

"I thought you were gonna get your teeth checked out," I say.

"I did. They want me to do all this stuff though. They're crazy," he says.

I nod and pass him an orange. We just stand there together for a few seconds in the dark. "Where's all your friends?" he asks.

"They're around somewhere," I say.

He looks around a bit. In the shadows and out of sight, the coyotes are enjoying a snack at the far corner behind us. I won't tell Gary a thing about it. Sometimes he gets aggressive for no reason. "Where's Carlos and Lamar tonight," I say.

"Oh... damn. Hang on," he says.

He stalks off quick and begins rummaging through a collection of clothing and bags piled atop the sidewalk. After awhile he stops and stares at the ground. A few seconds pass before he bolts; jogging down Sunset Boulevard, disappearing into darkness.

Once I empty my pack of everything I've got, my friends and I wander together down toward the Vista Theater. The purple and green lights of the marquee make me feel happy for some reason. In the spot where a giant film poster should be lit up, there's pure black space. In white lettering, the words **To be continued...** are scrawled across the black. Pulling another treat out from the Ziploc bag in my jacket pocket, I notice something in my periphery. At the far corner of Sunset Boulevard, a squad car slows to a halt under the red gleam of the stoplight. I break up another biscuit and toss it into four corners near the box office. The coyotes wander into the shadow of the overhang as I walk away. They won't follow me if they've got something to snack on. A few moments pass. The cop car makes a slight turn toward my side of the street. Moving along the sidewalk toward the vehicle, I act like I don't even see it. I swing both arms, mimic a speed-walk as best I can. Still, my heart starts to pound, heat surrounding my neck. Anger begins to rise up within me, acid at the back of my throat. I jump and stretch in place at the corner, crack my neck and shake my wrists. The car meanders, the cops inside eyeing me for a moment—some weird fitness freak in a hooded mask, out getting exercise—before they continue on up the street.

After they're gone, a small army of paws wander into a pool of light beneath the theater arch. I click my tongue at them. They follow, even as I turn my back. I head away from the cinema and double back toward Kaiser Hospital. As we draw closer, I scatter another biscuit into the shadows for them. Once I arrive, I stand at the corner awhile and close my eyes. It's become the last part of my routine each night. Time moves on me in fits and starts when I do this.

Everything goes quiet. I reach out—make a silent offering, an apology—to everyone I know that's passed on. The faces pass before me, moving through me. One remains, holds on. I'm down on my knees on the sidewalk again when I hear a reply for once. *It was just my time*, the voice says.

It opens my eyes. There's ongoing construction right there in front of me: bright lights, a giant crane upright on Sunset, a collection of orange cones out in the street. The workers are gone for the night. There's an ever-present crackling sound up near the light atop the crane. A humming permeates the whole area around the corner. I close my eyes again, lower my head and listen. More time passes. Maybe it's a few moments. Maybe it's twenty minutes. After awhile, I rub my eyes dry; rise to my feet. I start to walk north on Vermont Avenue, up toward the hills. Soon I'm running out in the middle of the street, the sound of paws tap-tapping side by side with me in the moonlight. Trying to sense everything I can hear—and everything else I can't—I close my eyes again mid-stride. I listen to them move and to myself alongside them. A smile forms on my face for the first time in weeks.

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CLOSE CONTACTS

Shelli Rottschafer

Kill the Savage, Save the Man: A Preface

Much of Amerindian historical trauma escalated in 1879 when the US assimilation policy of transforming Native American children into functioning American citizens began. Captain Richard Henry Pratt, a U.S. Army Officer who was once warden to the Fort Marion military prison, developed an "education for extinction" program. Its first site was the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania where several tribes' children were stripped from their families.

Later in 1895, Pratt publicly professed that this program's purpose was to "kill the Indian, save the man."[1] Few argued with the question of providing an education, yet clearly the "best of intentions" didn't translate into kind results. Indian Schools were constructed to inculcate individualism in Native people. In order to achieve this type of indoctrination, first-nations of the Americas were educated within Euro-Western values because it was believed that assimilation would create more functioning U.S. citizens. The aim of this methodology was to destroy communal values held by Natives and thereby eradicate the basis of traditional societies

[1] Churchill, Ward. *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: Then Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools.* City Lights Books, 2004. (13-14).

by killing the savage in order to save the man. One who went through this type of education would learn to say, "I" instead of "we," "me" instead of "us," "mine" instead of ours."[2]

Despite near cultural genocide for Amerindian peoples, 125 years later a "culture of resistance" is revitalizing indigenous intellectuality and way of life in order to recapture what was, and what should have been (Tinker xxii).

As Lakota elder Matthew King states, "You can't know how to get to where you want to go unless you know where you are now, and you can't know where you are now unless you can see clearly where it is that you've been."[3]

King's words resonate with the Diné intellectually, for Navajo spiritual life is guided by the Beauty Way. This path acknowledges those who came before, those who walk now, and those who will walk seven generations ahead. Included on this journey upon sacred land are human relatives as well as more-than-human relatives; for we all may walk in beauty.

"Night Way": A Diné Prayer

In beauty may I walk

All day long may I walk

Through the returning seasons may I walk.

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[2] U.S. Dept. of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.* (Washington, D.C. 34th Cong., 12t Sess., 1859) pg. 559 cited in George E. Tinker. "Preface: Tracing a Contour of Colonialism: American Indians and the Trajectory of Educational Imperialism". *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: Then Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools.* City Lights Books, 2004. (xiii-xvii).

[3] Ed. Harvey Arden. *Nobel Red Man: Lakota Wisdomkeeper Matthew King.* Beyond Words, 1994. cited in George E. Tinker. "Preface: Tracing a Contour of Colonialism: American Indians and the Trajectory of Educational Imperialism". *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: Then Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools.* City Lights Books, 2004. (xxiii).

Beautifully will I possess again.

Beautifully birds

Beautifully joyful birds

On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.

With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk.

With beauty before and behind me may I walk.

With beauty all around me may I walk.

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty lively may I walk.

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty living again, may I walk.

It is finished in beauty.[4]

Close Contacts

Noemí has been working 72-hour weeks for the last month. The perfect word to describe it is exhaustion. As an essential health care worker at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services, her readiness is part of her state's response to the spreading of this silent sickness.

Noemí likes her governor. She appreciates that before being elected the governor was the Secretary of Health for the state of New Mexico. The governor gets the need to focus on health care throughout the state. However, Gallup is hurting. Daily life is a challenge because the city abuts the Navajo Nation. It is apparent that the community and it's cyclical poverty are hit hard

[4] This statement was transcribed in 2004 from the Chaco Canyon Visitor Center in New Mexico.

by this sort of thing. Preventing people from coming into town only aggravates the problem, yet it seems it must be done.

Today is the first Friday of the month: Friday May 1, 2020. A payday, and the day governmental checks come in to their recipients. This is the day that people journey from their hogans, load up on staples from Walmart, and fill their water tanks from public wells. Before, extended families would meet at Earl's Diner, which acted like a family dining room. People gathered over a meal before carrying on with their monthly errands.

Like the Chees who, before COVID hit, gathered to talk over stuffed sopapillas, they wondered how Granma Nola was faring after her amputated big toe surgery. They arranged who was in charge of bringing Grandpa Tony to dialysis for his next appointment. But now, these family negotiations stop. Instead they are carried out over the phone or yelled from a parked pickup in the family drive.

Shutting down travel within the region has cut those ties. Face to face conversations are lost. It's hard to say if these changes will be effective. Because of the Gallup Mayor's request for the Governor to enact the Riot Control Act, everybody who still needs to go to a store ends up going to fewer stores. 'Mom and Pop' businesses lose out. Yet Walmart remains abuzz.

And forget the Gallup Saturday Flea Market. That too has been suspended. No more puppies from accidental litters being sold. They are left on the side of Highway 491 now. No more bowlfuls of blue corn meal mush readied to warm away the cold morning. A McMuffin sandwich with an extra sausage patty and American cheese takes its place. Traditional makes way for the fast dream of America.

Last night, Noemí and Theo were sitting on the back patio. The stars were out, bright in the dark May sky. The gas burning fireplace backlit their tumblers of Pinot Noir, casting a ruby

glow. Their kids, Martina four and Cory two, were tucked in early, when a commotion broke out below on Green Street.

Sirens were silenced but the red and blue lights circling from the Sheriff's SUV out-shown the Milky Way above. Theo looked over the patio wall and saw that the cop had pulled a woman out of her car. The lady wasn't breathing. She had overdosed on something.

Theo ran back into the house, found his backpack, and pulled out his Narcan syringe. He carried it for emergencies. Theo teaches physics at Gallup High School. The Narcan is meant to prevent an OD on campus. He never anticipated using it for someone curbside at his backdoor. The twirling lights and police presence demonstrate that in Gallup as well as on the Rez, the opioid epidemic has hit hard.

Syringe in hand, Theo passed the Narcan to Noemí. As a trained RN and first responder, she was more prepared to inject the serum into the lady's limp body. Noemí saved the woman's life as Theo and the sheriff looked on. The red and blue lights whirled across their faces as they stood, arms crossed to fend of the chill of the high altitude air, and waited. Waited for the paramedics to arrive and take the woman to Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital.

That was last night.

#

This morning, Noemí awakes to the smell of fresh coffee. She walks the stairs. Her bare feet shuffle along the hardwood floor. "I need to sweep," she thinks. Bits of sand cling to her arches, an errant raisin from Martina's afternoon snack of trail mix lodges itself between her big toe and "the one that goes to the market." Standing at the kitchen sink, peering out the window,

Noemí notices the discarded wine tumblers along the lip of the outdoor fireplace. Dinner dishes crowd the basin, forgotten in the trauma of the evening. The coffee maker on the counter beside her burps out steam as the last drip fills the carafe. Thank god they had remembered to put the timer on for this daybreak addiction.

For the past month, Noemí has been tracing close contacts. COVID has changed her career. Before, she would drive as far out as Ramah to do nutrition clinics or breast-feeding seminars for expectant mothers. Although she misses her clients, they were always temporary outpatients. With the change, Noemí doesn't come in contact with anybody other than her co-workers. Yet her co-workers who directly interview the patients on the Navajo Reservation are most assuredly candidates for getting sick.

They live on the Navajo reservation. They come in to Gallup to work at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital. They come to get supplies on the first of the month. They go home to their arid land. No running water. No direct sewage line. An outhouse beyond the modular home next to the matriarch's hogan and the corral with the family sheep. They live with Granma and Grandpa, their Shimá sáni and Shicheii. They live with their older brother back from the Middle East, who drinks away his PTSD and wishes he were the warrior he thought he would be once he graduated from high school.

Johona Chee is Noemí's co-worker. She goes back to her family's land each evening. Johona and her sunny disposition represent the hope of her community. She graduated. She went to Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona. She earned her Associates in Public Health and became a Certified Nurse Assistant. She returned to her community, because she wanted to make a difference. She wanted to show that you can leave home *and* come back. The Navajo Nation can be a place of beauty. Dinétah can be a place for the future.

Until COVID hits the Rez.

Johona like Noemí is an essential worker. However, Jo's home life is significantly different than her team leader's. Johona goes home to a house packed with people, with nothing to do but watch QVC for things they cannot afford on satellite TV. Instead of joining them on the couch, with a can of Tecate in hand, she chooses to not be part of the do-nothings. She is doing something.

Yet Johona feels immobilized, an observer, not an actualizer. Because when Granma Nola comes down with a rasping cough, Johona realizes she is the asymptomatic one. She becomes the link from the outside world to Granma Nola, who is now positive with COVID-19. She is the one that links the other close contacts, who make up her extended family. It is a nightmare.

It is her nightmare because Johona went to college to become a contemporary version of the Navajo mythical "Monster Slayer". She studied Public Health so that she would be a woman warrior of her people. But because of her contact off the Rez, she inadvertently became that very monster.

Noemí's phone rings as she pours black coffee into her cherished ceramic cup. It is Johona. Tearfully Jo explains, "I can't come in to the conference call today. We are bringing my Granma Nola to the hospital. Her cough is worse."

Noemí reassures Johona. "Be there for your grandma as she walks down this next trail." Jo understands all too well what Noemí is saying without saying it. This is probably the last trip off the Rez that her Granma Nola will make. Time to present her well.

Johona clicks her cell and turns to Grandpa Tony. "Shicheii, I am going to dress Shimá sání." Her grandfather takes this cue and steps outside to the front stoop of the trailer. His knees

creak as he bends. The sound alerts the family dog and Lobo emerges from the dirt to have his ears scratched.

Johona reaches into the closet. It smells of mothballs and old lady soap. She selects her grandmother's dark red velvet skirt, her navy calico shirt, and the blue wool sweater bought last Christmas from JC Penny. Even though it is early May, her grandmother has a perpetual chill, and Jo thinks, "Better to have layers on, especially if the Urgent Care waiting room is cold."

Granma sits on the corner of the bed. She half wheezes, half sighs with her head tilted back as Johona pulls the brush through her long white hair. Jo ties a silk kerchief over her grandmother's head. Then she adorns Granma Nola's neck with her prized turquoise squash blossom necklace, wondering if her grandmother should wear this to the clinic where it could be misplaced, yet Jo knows her Shimá sání would not be caught dead in town not properly adorned in her best.

With a hacking cough that retches through her body, Granma Nola holds her cane in one hand and clutches Johona's elbow with the other. The two women, one the matriarch and the other the hope, walk out the door of their family home.

Grandpa Tony and Lobo turn from their seats on the stoop and watch the women go down the stairs, across the dirt yard to the blue rusted Ford F-100 Ranger in the drive.

In passing, Granma Nola whispers "Ya'`át`ééh" to her partner of fifty-one years. The shizhé`é to her children lifts his chin, scrunches his nose, and purses his lips toward the direction of the horizon. It is his silent farewell to her, a gesture that has been repeated without thought over their shared years. He knows he will see her again, whether once she is released from the hospital, or wandering along their own eternal path.

Johona walks Granma Nola to the passenger door, opens it, sets her cane next to the center console shift. Granma grasps the hand grip, and Johona places her palms on her Shimá sání's bum to launch her into the seat. "Naughty awéé!" Granma extorts.

"Well, Granma, I have to get you up there somehow!"

Rounding the front grill of the truck, Johona mutters "old woman," but then catches herself. This might be the last time she thinks in annoyance about her Shimá sání. It might be the last drive into town. Settling into her side of the truck, she reaches over her grandmother's lap to the glove compartment. Johona pulls out the handmade masks Granma Nola made from quilt fabric. She stores them here for their in-town visits. Johona slides her mask on aided by the rearview mirror. Then she helps her Shimá sání adjust hers, knowing it might be the last time she can peer upon this face of wisdom that she always has taken for granted.

Forty minutes later, Johona steers into the drive of the Urgent Care at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital. The masked greeter nods as he glides through the automatic doors rolling a wheelchair in front of him. It is the night security guard, the one that always is nice to her; she recognizes his eyes. He must be getting overtime if he is here now.

"Johona, what are you doing here?"

"I am here with my grandmother. She needs to be seen. She has symptoms. I think it's COVID."

"I'm sorry, Johona. We will take good care of her. You can talk to the head nurse to give her Mrs. Chee's information, but you can't go in with her. You need to say your good byes."

Clutching her grandmother's hand, Johona stammers, "Shimá sání, ayóó ànííniíshní."

"I love you too, my sunshine," and Granma Nola is wheeled into the emergency room as she prays, clutching the squash blossom to her chest.

That afternoon, Noemí opens her front door to an inconsolable Johona. Her only reaction is to catch her friend's collapsing body in her outstretched arms. This is done without thought. She is there to console. This time, she is the strong one.

But now Noemí realizes her actions add her own family to Granma Nola's close contact count. She mentally tracks the numbers. Noemí is close contact number eleven. Theo 12. Martina 13. Cory 14. Who knows which one will be the next, to walk in beauty.

Let's Sing for Your Granma

Rather than walk back into the kitchen to begin a pot of coffee on the wood burning stove, Grandpa Tony sits outside humming sadly to the dog. He waits for Ash to roll from the couch, run his fingers through his hair and scratch the crust from the corners of his eyes. Ashkíí sleeps on the sofa, wrapped in an army surplus blanket. That has become his usual spot since his return from Afghanistan.

Ash knows it is time. Time to do something other than what he is doing now, which isn't much. But, with the lockdown in place, he doesn't have a choice other than to keep doing what has become his routine: wake, plant his feet on the cold linoleum floor, walk around the couch past the metal folding table used as the dining room table, pick up a split piñon log, open the cast iron swinging door to the stove, and rekindle the morning fire. Ash fills the Stanley Coffee pot

from the purified water jug on the counter. He sets the metal filter in place, loads Folgers grounds, and adds an extra tablespoon to strengthen the brew.

Lobo rises from Grandpa's side to scratch the screen door. He is wanting his breakfast. The dog runs like clockwork. He is more consistent than any alarm.

"Grandpa, what do you want with your scrambled eggs? Jimmy Dean or Oscar Meyer?"

Ash opens the door to the refrigerator and mumbles as he sifts through its innards. "For how many people eat bacon, Oscar Meyer must be a millionaire."

Ashkíí lays a slab of meat on the metal table and slides the skillet from the cupboard. Cast iron meets cast iron as he swings the heavy weight onto the stove. The bang of the pan on the burner echoes the bang of the screen door as Grandpa Tony steps into the house.

"So it's to be a house of bachelors this morning. Ash, Lobo, and Oscar Meyer." Upon hearing his name, the dog whines from outside the screen.

Ash shouts toward the door. "Don't worry Lobo. You won't be forgot. I will save you some bacon grease for your kibble."

"That dog is spoiled. I thought Johona was bad. But since you've got home Lobo has put on weight. He can't run the sheep like he used to." Commenting upon the triviality of everyday is easier for Shicheii than verbally acknowledging that his partner of fifty-one years has left for the emergency room.

#

After the meal, breakfast dishes pushed to the side, the men sit in silence. They are the quiet ones who opt to eavesdrop upon Johona and Shimá sání's conversations that inform them

of the usual goings-on. Comfortable with their pause, Ash picks up the dishes, sets one in the tub to soak, and then scoops a cup of kibble onto the other from the bin next to the door. As the door squeaks open, Lobo comes from under the stoop and sits at Ash's feet as he places the dish on the ground.

"I'm going over to Win's. I'll do the dishes later."

Grandpa nods in answer and says, "You know, you'd make a good short order cook at Earl's. You should ask Yanaha about it. She's a waitress there, right?"

Ash sniffs the air and juts out his chin in the affirmative, a trait he has learned from his shicheii. "I'll think about it. She told me that hours are few over there. Everyone is cut back because of the COVID. Even she is just manning the door, ringing people up, and bringing them their take-out orders. Mostly green chili cheese burgers or Frito pies to go."

"Ya, but you make a mean burger Ashkíí, just like your Granma."

Ash turns behind the house, directing his feet toward the hogan that once was the family home. The octagonal log constructed and adobe-chinked house is empty except for storage. Granma Nola keeps the dirt floor raked bare and lines one wall with bins of meal for her animals. Shelving units hold canned peaches and preserved jam. Others are a catchall of Grandpa Tony's discarded tools or dissected car parts waiting to be used in the untold future. It is clear who's side of the hogan is whose.

Ashkíí enters the hogan, lifts a bin, and scoops out meal into an old Folger's coffee can. He walks around to a ramada that shades a corral of sheep. They start bleating once they see the can. Ash pours the meal into a trough, and then thins out a half bale of hay on top. The sheep trot over and the grey one with the clear blue unseeing eye nudges in first. She's their toughest

and oldest ewe. The one that doesn't tolerate Lobo's nips to keep her in pasture and kicks indiscriminately, not caring whether it is Ashkíí or a canine leg that meets her blow.

Ash finishes the morning chores so that Shicheii can sit on the deck in the shade. The dog instinctually leans into Grandpa Tony's thigh, letting Shicheii know he is not alone. Ashkíí knows that Grandpa Tony has worked for a long time. When Shicheii was young, he went military too. He was in Korea. When he came back, he returned to sheep herding like his father before him. He had seen enough of the outside world to realize he was content with the traditional life he thought he left behind.

When Ashkíí and Johona were real little, Grandpa Tony and Shimá sání took them in once their parents died. Their parents' pickup truck had been hit head on by a drunk driver returning to Kayenta on Highway 264. They had gone to The Inter-tribal Ceremonial to sell Navajo tacos and sopapillas from their auntie's stand during the rodeo and Pow Wow. Unfortunately, they never made their way home from Red Rock State Park that August sundown. The other driver swerved into their lane as he leaned down to grab another cold one.

Shimá sání and Shicheii tried to instill tradition in him. Yet Ash resented that his parents were gone. They died way too young. Johona was more receptive. She was younger. In high school, Ash started hanging out with the wrong crowd. After his first year at Gallup High School, and being caught one too many times with pot, Grandpa Tony and Granma Nola signed him up to attend Rehoboth Christian School. Ash wasn't having any of it.

Although Rehoboth had tried to right the wrongs of its boarding school past, its reputation remained. The school helped create a lost generation of elders who no longer believed in the Beauty Way, couldn't speak Navajo, and had assimilated into becoming stereotypical "apples." Ash wanted nothing to do with appearing red on the outside, but white on the inside.

Ashkíí was surprised his Diné grandparents would want him to go to Rehoboth, but it was clear they were at their wits end.

Ash paid his penance for two years. Grandpa Tony drove him to the bus stop every morning in the dark before the sun was up. The bus took him to school along I-40. He sat in class bored out of his mind. His only outlet was playing ball. Ash played basketball in the gym during Phys Ed. He played hoops outside in the wind before the bus drove the rest of those who lived off Highway 491 home. Ashkíí played Rez Ball on an unpainted backboard with a metal drum lip for a net, just before walking down the dirt road to his Shimá sání and Shicheii's trailer. That was high school, until one day he got caught smoking pot beyond the dumpsters instead of playing hoops before taking the bus home. It was his last strike because of his previous history before attending Rehoboth.

As a result, Ash finished at Gallup High School where he had begun. His sentence was to occupy a desk in Mr. B, the Physics teacher's study hall. Mr. B was okay. A tall bilagáana, not from New Mexico originally, who had married a local nurse and had chosen to stay. Mr. B gave subtle advice, making you think you were making the decision, but leading you in a good direction. He also turned a blind eye to the fact that Ash mostly wanted to be in his study hall because Yanaha Nez was in there.

Yanaha was and is smart. She studied Physics; she could do stuff like that. Ash, on the other hand, did not get all those numbers. Yanaha went to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Well, at least for a while, and then things happened. And now she's back in Gallup, waiting tables at Earl's like her mom did and taking care of her kid Jonny.

Ashkíí's education was the Army. Mr. B had tried to dissuade him from that.

"Ash, why are you going to fight a white man's war? There are so many other things you can do."

But Grandpa Tony said signing up for the Army was an admirable thing, especially for those who needed some discipline. Shicheii explained, "If we can't be warriors for our own people, because there are no more wars to fight, then we could fight for our other Nation, the United States of America." He hoped Ash would come home changed, a warrior hero, honored and respected, like he was after Korea.

Well, Ash's war in Afghanistan was not his Shicheii's war in Korea. Instead he learned to ask, "Why should brown people be fighting other brown people?" They were fighting another settler/colonizers' war. This time in the name of new gods, which were money and oil.

These are the questions Ash can now articulate in hindsight after talking things through with Win. Winslow Wilson is the Chees' next door neighbor, who is nearly as old as Ash's grandfather, yet has a really different perspective on things.

Ash stands outside Win's trailer door and claps loudly three times. That is the way he announces he is there, instead of walking up to the door rapping loudly, like he used to. COVID has changed a lot of things. You can't just go over with a six-pack of Tecate in hand to sit on someone's couch and watch basketball. Besides, the Lobos aren't playing the Cougars now. The University of New Mexico and Brigham Young University are both shut down, gone online, and no sports. Same for the LA Lakers.

The State of New Mexico has made it really clear: everyone is supposed to be social distancing. It's hard here on the Rez. People live multi-generationally in their houses. Like Shimá sání, Shicheii, Ash and Jo. Diné live communally, helping each other out; like Ashkíí going over to Win's to make sure everything is alright.

But, really, it's the other way around. It is Winslow who is helping Ash come out of the silence where Afghanistan has put him. Ashkíí doesn't talk about his time over there. What happened only comes out in random statements like admitting to Yanaha that he can't really sleep. He just tosses and turns on the couch. His nightmares wake him. The only comfort he has is to go outside in the cold and look up at the night sky until the dog comes up to the deck from under the stoop. What reminds Ashkíí that he is here, and not there, is the warmth of Lobo's skin and how his fingers weave through the mats behind Lobo's ears until Ash finds the sweet spot that makes Lobo's hind leg twitch.

Today, Win comes out with a Dr. Pepper in hand. He sits on his front stoop as Ash leans on the picnic table out front. They talk to each other lowly, making sure they maintain their distance.

"I saw Jo drive into town today with your Granma."

"Ya, her cough got bad. Johona took her in to the hospital. She thinks Shimá sání will have to stay."

"That's hard. Jo probably feels like she is leaving her behind, all alone. But your Granma, she's a strong woman. She knows Tony, and you, and Johona are praying for her. Your thoughts, that energy. That is what makes her strong."

Ash nods, not sure what to say. He rests his chin on the palms of his hands, his elbows bowed as they rest on his thighs. He is bent in pain.

Ash mutters, "I remember, when I was over there it reminded me of home. How it looked. Same landscape. Rocks. Red earth. Small withered trees. But it didn't smell the same. It didn't have the herbal scent of piñon. It didn't have the iron metallic aroma like before a curtain of monsoon rains hit. It wasn't the same, even though it looked similar."

"That was coyote trying to work it out in your brain for you. He is always the constant trickster. Don't believe that inverted reality. Shed it. You are here now. You are stronger than you feel. And because you are, you need to be a warrior. A warrior for Jo, for your Granma."

Win wonders if his words are landing where they need to. He gets Ashkíí's need for a sense of place, something that is tangible and rooted. He craved a sense of belonging too when he was in Vietnam.

Drafted in 1967, Private Winslow Wilson endured basic training at Fort Pendleton in California. One morning during roll, there was a call for chaplain volunteers. The guy behind Win whispered to raise his hand, and said that he would tell him why later. With this overheard advice, Win slowly raised his hand. The whisperer had knowledge that a chaplain's assistant had a lower chance of getting shot.

What Winslow didn't realize in becoming a chaplain's assistant was that one of his main duties would be to write home to all of the families of the soldiers who had died. And so began Win's training. Trained to type. Trained to be succinct. Trained to divorce yourself from emotion. Trained to be there in body, but to allow his mind to travel back to where he really belonged.

So, Winslow practiced his typing. The ding, ding, ding, pah-ching of the keys hitting the paper. The carriage edged to the end of a page, resounded with a bell, and whisked back to the left hand side. This rhythm, over and over again, created a perfect mantra. A prayer that led him back to the drumming circles at the Ceremonial Pow Wow.

At night, Win would take his portable typewriter back to the barracks to practice. Tóhajilee…. Kinlichee…. Chinle…. Tsaile….

The soldier in the bunk next to him tired of the ding, ding, ding, pah-ching of his typing.

"What the fuck?" He looked down at the letters Winslow punched onto the paper. "What's this nonsense? Lukachukai…. Teec Nos Pos…. Dennehotso…. Kayenta…."

"I'm practicing."

"But why are you practicing this? Quit making up nonsense words", the private said. Winslow didn't respond. He continued typing. These weren't merely words, they were places. They were his places. Shonto…. Moenkopi…. Wupatki…. Chi Chil tah….

By practicing this rhythm, Win meditated. By practicing, he created ceremony. He respected the warriors that came before him and those that are in battle now. He remembers those he typed for in Vietnam. He knew his writing, "We regret to inform…" perfectly nailed the coffin shut. And he feels for those, like Ashkíí, who are still fighting their battles.

This is why Ash comes to Winslow now. Win is respected. Some would call him a Medicine Man, because he follows the Beauty Way.

Winslow looks across the yard to Ashkíí seated at the picnic table. Ash has gotten out his cell phone and is hen pecking away. Win thinks to himself, "These kids these days. None of them know how to type. None of them know how to talk. They just sit with their heads bowed."

"Ashkíí, let's do this the right way. Let's sing for your Granma."

Win walks back through the door of his house, and comes back outside with his cowhide stretched drum and stick. He sits back on the porch, and Ashkíí straightens his body upright to look at Winslow.

Drumming the rhythms, Win begins the beat. It is the same ding, ding, ding; but instead of the pah-ching, it is a deeper thud as he wails the stick against the hide. Ash taps out the same rhythm with his fingers along the bench of the picnic table. They both begin their lament. "Yah-ta-hey... Ya' `át` ééh", and repeat themselves until Lobo hides under the Chees' porch.

Ramah's Enchiladas

In the midst of COVID, if you thought Gallup was quiet just take a look at Ramah.

Traycee Nez returned home March 15, when Spring Break for the University of New Mexico officially began. This was intentional. She planned to run her portion of a long distance relay for BEPRA: The Bears Ears Prayer Run Alliance. The third annual run was to be a Spring Break gathering.

One of the main purposes of the 195 mile relay is unity, to unite Southwestern tribes as stewards for Mother Earth. Runners from each nation, Ute, Zuni and other pueblos, Hopi, and Diné planned to stride toward healing relationships with each other and the land. Her leg was to carry a medicine bundle of tobacco, cedar bark, sage, and blue corn meal from Ramah to Combs Wash in Arizona, on to Red Mesa, and then White Rock near Bears Ears National Monument. But, like everything else, it's been postponed indefinitely.

UNM delayed Spring Break two weeks, which turned into converting school completely online for the rest of the semester. Before Traycee could journey back to Albuquerque from Ramah to resume her life, Orion, her stepfather, convinced Brenda to have her daughter remain on the Rez. His argument was that Traycee would be better off there, protected within her family clan, rather than in the big city. That was before the COVID tallies were being publicized. That was before the mayor of Gallup requested the governor to lockdown the city to all non-residents through the Riot Control Act. That was before Gallup and Zuni-enforced nightly curfews running from 8pm to 5am. All streets into the city limits were now controlled by

traffic stops, so that only two people per car could carry out essential household errands or emergencies.

Ramah Navajo Reservation isn't technically Traycee's traditional hogan. It doesn't invoke nostalgic feelings, especially now that there are 808 positive cases in McKinley County, 2,973 cases within the entire Navajo Nation, and 98 deaths overall. Rather, Ramah is now her mother's home, the one Brenda Greyeyes Nez moved to when she married Orion Begay.

Orion, like his namesake, is a warrior. He hunts, gathers, and takes care of his wife, his family, and his clan. Ore-ee-ahn, as he says it, not Oh-rye-un, provides. He sits on the Council at Tribal Headquarters and is local Sheriff; that is why Brenda moved from Gallup to Ramah. Yet, Traycee isn't so sure about this move. Traycee sees herself as an Urban Indian, not a Rez Indian. Born in Gallup, Traycee moved to Albuquerque for college. She followed in her older sister's footsteps. Yanaha Nez ventured off first. But things happened, and Yani returned West, braving the things she had to carry.

Traycee Nez is determined to follow a different path than her sister. Not that she resents her. Not that she doesn't feel for her, but rather the opposite. She admires her sister's resilience. Many say we don't learn from history. Well, Traycee most definitely has learned from her sister, and the reality Yanaha's life represents. Too many indigenous women have lived through similar *her*stories.

Was Yanaha cursed from birth because her mother named her the Navajo word for 'bravery'? Because of her name, must Yanaha always endure every situation with courage? Yani braved being one of the only girls in her high school class to take Physics. Yanaha warriored on to be a first-generation college student at UNM. She worked hard, earned the scholarships, made the grades.

But she was a kid who wanted to have fun too. As a first-year, Yani lived in Coronado Residential Hall, the dorm next to Johnson Field. The dorm was noted to be "socially rich," where freshman athletes experimented with their newfound freedoms out of the reach of their parents' gaze. Yanaha found out what that meant for herself one Spring morning, waking up in the soccer field adjacent to the hall. Her head pounded. Her mouth was dry. She was cold, dew covered, and woke to find her unbuttoned jeans crudely yanked to her hips. Her underwear twisted oddly below her cheeks and pubis. A wet slime moistened her inner thighs. Yani felt bruised. She didn't remember anything other than leaving the dorm with her roommate, who was intent on going to a party.

Yanaha remained silent about what happened. After that night, her roommate noticed she was more distracted. Yani was quieter. She did not go out on the weekends anymore. She stayed in the dorm, reading at night, doing her physics homework, and checking it twice before turning it in on Monday. That pattern carried her through to May, when she packed her things, and bundled her books in U-haul moving boxes to load into the storage unit of her mother's apartment complex back in Gallup.

Yanaha's summer job at Earl's Diner waiting tables alongside her mother extended into the Fall. At first, she said her tips would go toward her next year's room and board deposit for school. But, as the bump of her belly grew, it was clear her tips would be going to something else, because she chose to stay. Casually, the other wait staff would ask her, what names was she thinking about. Something in Navajo? Something else? To be kind, they would leave boxes of hand-me-down baby clothes in the staff locker room. It seemed like everyone else was anticipating her child, except Yanaha who didn't expect how much her life would change.

And then he came. With his grey eyes, which could only mean one thing. He was half hers and half someone else's. Yani named her son after them both: Jonny Greyeyes Nez. Jonny, a diminutive of her nickname. Greyeyes like his unknown Anglo father.

Many thought his middle name was after her mother Brenda's maiden name. That was just coincidence, but it represented the same sentiment. Somewhere down Brenda's family line, there was a white man that injected his own lineage into her ancestors,' just like Jonny's donor had.

Traycee is determined not to be like her sister. Her nephew's existence is one of the many reasons why she doesn't drink. She doesn't date. She doesn't go out. She wants nothing to do with men in a romantic way. She doesn't have time for that. She is going to be different.

When Traycee began her first year, she was well prepared. Yanaha made sure of that. Traycee worked at Earl's bussing tables the summer before school, so now there were three sets of tips coming in to support her. Traycee would pay the extra fee for a room in a suite of women only co-eds in Laguna-DeVargas Residential Hall, which was not immediately next to the field. The day she moved in, as her mother was turned to her dorm closet folding her sweaters onto the upper-shelf, Yanaha pretended to be playing with Jonny on the floor when she passed Traycee a handful of condoms.

"I don't need these, Yani. I won't be doing that."

"Just keep them. You never know," she whispered.

Even Orion, newlywed to her mother, helped out. As with many families, he had a distant relative, one of his auntie's cousin's kid, who got Traycee a job at Bow & Arrow Brewing Co. Although she wasn't twenty-one yet and couldn't serve alcohol, Traycee's bussing job at Earl's and the fact that she was somehow family got her a job as a barback. After her

classes, she would take the bus downtown from campus and clean pints, mop floors, and straighten patio furniture.

Traycee was surprised at Orion for having this connection and being willing to share it. Orion seemed provincial and insular because he sat on the Council at Tribal Headquarters as Ramah's local Sheriff. However, there was more to her stepfather's traditional façade.

The Ramah Band of Navajo are an interesting mix, and the town of Ramah is known to be a village of interesting mixes. Ramah sits between the reservation district and a Mormon settlement. On the way to the HUD housing community along tribal land, you have to pass through the town of Ramah which basically consists of one main street. On this street, is the Lady Stagecoach Café that serves basic New Mexican fare and caters to both the random mountain biking tourist and the Mormon Elders recruited from Salt Lake City who visit the local homes in pairs.

Ramah is also the point of departure for tourists headed to El Morro - Inscription Rock National Monument where there are U.S. Forest Rangers guiding visitors along the trails and maintaining the picnic grounds. Or the Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary out beyond Candy Kitchen, where Traycee had gone on a field trip in Middle School for science class. Basically said, if you are in Ramah, you mean to be there, because it is too far from any place else to get lost. Orion is from there. He is an interesting mix of traditional Navajo converted to Mormonism, but with ties as far reaching as Albuquerque 130 miles away.

Or maybe he just doesn't know about the personal life of his auntie's cousin's kid. But how could he not? On the Rez, most everyone is related and knows each other's business. That is why his suggestion to look into a job at the brewery demonstrated his understanding. The owners of Bow & Arrow Brewing Co. are a power couple, both indigenous women. Proud and

affirming, their relationship is an inspiration to their entrepreneurship. This was apparent to Traycee her first day on shift.

"Let's get this straight", the manager said. "I will use the words of the owner. 'Be like buffalo, never turn your back on a storm. Face it.' What does that mean to you? Well, here we are open and accepting to both the indigenous community and the LGBTQ community."

"What's LGBTQ?" Traycee wasn't sure what her boss meant.

"You ever heard of someone who is 'Two-spirited?'"

"Hmm, maybe." Traycee thought that was something taboo. Something you didn't necessarily talk about, but knew existed within traditional culture.

"'Two-spirited,' it has different names in different Native cultures. But it refers to someone who fulfills a traditional third-gender ceremonial role. So, it's more than being gay, or lesbian, or queer. It implies that a person can be both male and female, that these aspects are intertwined in them…a pair in one body."

Traycee wondered if Orion had directed her here to subtly say he was okay with her being who she was. Traycee had only told Yanaha and no one else that she wasn't interested in boys. But maybe it was obvious to others while she was still questioning it herself. Here it was okay to question. It was okay to be different. This was a concept that had existed in indigenous intellectual life for centuries, only now was she grasping it for herself.

At Traycee's contemplative silence, her boss changed the subject. "What else are you into? What makes you you, Traycee?"

"Good question, I am still figuring that out. But I guess I am a runner. When I was in high school I ran cross country."

"Are you on the team at UNM?"

Traycee shrugged her head negatively.

"Have you ever heard of Wings of America or Sacred Strides; they do a run called BEPRA?"

It was clear Traycee had not, so her boss pulled out her phone and cued up a video from *Outside Magazine*. It showed Native runners running at daybreak. Running for something bigger than themselves. It showed how, in the past, those that ran messages to others were revered. And this time the message was a personal way to honor and interact with the places that were sacred to the Navajo and other tribes of the Southwest. In particular, they were doing it as a protest to the reopening of The Bears Ears National Monument that President Obama had designated in 2016 but which the new president was shrinking in size and opening up for desecrating mining and drilling.

"Do you run? Have you run for them?" asked Traycee.

"No, but one of the organizers comes in here for a beer once in a while. Next time I will introduce you to him. I dig what he has to say. He explains that running in prayer means to run for something other than yourself. It's a way of using your voice through actions. And, in my opinion, it's up to the younger generation, like you Traycee, to break down those barriers. Because, in the end, we've all got to learn to live peacefully among one other."

Traycee takes these words to heart. It is what keeps her going while in quarantine in Ramah. Although she is often bored to tears and can't talk to her friends on ZOOM or complete her distance learning homework because the internet connection is for crap, she is still busy training. Sometimes she runs from their house by Tribal Headquarters to the Lady Stagecoach Café, where her mom began working once she moved to Ramah and before COVID happened.

On long runs, Traycee heads toward El Morro – Inscription Rock National Monument and turns around when she starts seeing it in the distance miles away.

Today is Mother's Day. Her mom is preparing enchiladas. Orion would rather have mutton stew than "Spanish food," but he knows Brenda's recipe is killer. Brenda says, "All good cooks are good thieves. They steal their recipes from family, friends, and neighbors." And this one she spliced together from the untold secret ingredients at the Lady Stagecoach Café.

Green Chile Chicken Enchiladas[5]

Ingredients:
Approximately 8 green chilies deseeded and diced or one cup Costco Hatch Green Chiles / Bueno Green Chiles
Diced garlic cloves to personal taste
Dash of dry oregano
Medium size container of sour cream
One medium size tomato, and another diced to garnish on top once cooked
One medium size white or yellow onion
One package of chicken breast, no bones or skin
One large package of Monterey cheese
One package of flour tortillas (10 count, use 7 within a 9 x 13 Pyrex pan)
One avocado, sliced to garnish on top once cooked.

Preparation:
First, trim the chicken of fat and gristle.
Put chicken breasts in a medium-sized pot and boil. Make sure the meat is thoroughly cooked.
Put chicken meat in the frig to cool. Set aside the chicken broth to use later.

Once the chicken is cool, shred into little pieces.
Set aside in pot on a burner you are not using yet.

Dice garlic - add to broth on stove.
Dice onion, tomato, and green chilies. Add a dash of oregano, salt, and pepper.

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[5] Recipe provided by Tracy La Valle (Albuquerque, NM 2000).

Bring to a boil.

Let broth simmer, add sour cream - stir in thoroughly.
Ladle into the small pot with the shredded chicken, just enough to wet and give flavor.
Set the rest of the broth to the side.

In a large casserole/lasagna pan (9x13) take your tortillas. Fill them with the flavored chicken.
Roll and place in pan.
This should make 7 rolled tortillas.

Shred Monterey cheese in a thick layer on top.

Ladle broth on top so that the liquid comes up to 1/2 way in the pan.
Don't fully douse or cover the tortillas.

Bake at 375 until the cheese turns golden brown.
This should take about 40 minutes – more or less.

Decorate with sliced avocado and diced tomato.

And if desired, in order to cut the spice of the chilies, serve with extra sour cream or a glass of milk to drink.

As her mother prepares the meal, the house fills with the aroma of onions, garlic, and green chili stewed in chicken broth. The enchiladas are adorned with unbaked shredded cheese. The Pyrex pan rests in the refrigerator until Yanaha arrives with Jonny. Ashkíí is driving them down from Gallup because the lockdown lifts at midday.

To fill her time before their arrival, Traycee slides on her sweatpants and tightens the laces of her shoes. She heads down the dirt drive toward Highway 53 and Ice Cave Road. The beat of her shuffling feet creates a rhythmic meditation. “I run. I run for me. I run for my people. I run for this land.”

Reopening

Time never told us to have faith in the sepulcher that awaits us.
The night carves us into separate acts,
but I do have faith in that turbulent creek of blood within me.

Excerpt from "Time" by Jim Harrison found in *In Search of Small Gods* (2010)

The dog lies prone, hind legs below belly, forearms extended toward the drive, snout sniffing the wind, cradled between his paws. One eye twitches open, expectant, perceiving a hum of a vehicle in the distance.

Inside, the trailer is busy with movement. Ash sets the metal table. Placemats, big plate, knife and spoon to the right, big fork to the left, plastic tumbler above, a roll of paper towels in the center for napkins at the ready. Grandpa stirs the stewing pot, mutton simmers in a broth of onions, garlic, and Navajo parsley.

Johona left earlier that morning. She had to login for a conference call with Noemí. Jo had found out from Mr. B that she could use the hotspot for internet from the Gallup High School parking lot. The connection to their house was too intermittent and broke her documentation of tracing contacts. Shicheii was too annoyed with her yells of frustration. He claimed it was upsetting the dog, but really it was cutting into his addiction to Judge Judy. He would rather hear the judge chide the defendant than cringe as Jo berated her laptop.

Ash was jealous of Johona's escapes into reality. Stepping off the Rez was a rarity these past few weeks. His only times away from their land were the Mother's Day supper with Yani and her son down to meet her mom and stepdad in Ramah and, other than that, he had been to Walmart a pair of times with Win to stock up on supplies for both households. He was surprised to yearn for the Saturday Flea Market days when he would accompany Winslow.

Most weekends, Winslow Wilson set up shop from his downturned flatbed truck. He would pull into the backside of the Gallup Flea Market and park in his permitted spot with the grill pointed out at the sage foothills so that he could open the back gate to display his wares.

Win bought blank military dog tags online, and would stamp out made-to-order lettering. Instead of rank, name, religion, blood type, and identification number; the usual requests were "In God I trust" or dates of an anniversary. These he displayed in a wooden bowl upon an army surplus blanket. But to the side was his real money maker.

Winslow was a piecer. He would drive all the way down to Zuni Pueblo to buy his Nevada turquoise or spiny oyster shell pieces wholesale in order to make necklaces or dangle earrings. These he sold, either at the Saturday Flea Market or as a walking seller outside of Earl's. When at Earl's, he could count on Yanaha slipping him an extra sopapilla now and then while the tourists looked on. To pass the time at the flea market, he would have staring contests with the Mormon boys who set up a pamphlet table directly across from the backend of his truck.

Sometimes Ash would come with him either to say hello to Yani at Earl's or to wander the stalls at the flea market. Dressed in his desert fatigues with the name Chee stitched on the left, Ash was a commanding figure. In contrast, the boy volunteers who lived in Ramah came with freshly pressed white shirts, black pants, and ties with their Elder So-and-So badges. They sat meekly; Ashkíí stood stoically. Eventually, Win would make peace, giving both groups of young men a fresh watermelon water or bowl of steaming blue corn mush with honey. He knew the boys could be brought to a truce through their stomachs.

Yet, because of COVID schedules were altered. Driving down to Zuni wasn't an option, and the Saturday Flea Market was shut. Hopefully, Win, with the help of Ash, could make up his revenue during The Inter-tribal Ceremonial. He could sell his wares. Ash could hold the

money. And Yanaha and her family could sell plates of enchiladas or fry bread to the Native families and tourists who came to participate in the rodeo or traditional dances. From now until August, he would have enough time to prepare a stockpiled inventory of dog tags and pendants. That was a long ways off though and a lot could happen in between.

Like today.

Winslow walked over from his side of the drive to the Chees' trailer. He smelled the mutton stew from afar. So did Lobo, who was waiting patiently outside the screen door. Win clapped three times, letting the men inside know he had made it over for their invitation. Technically, he shouldn't have been over there. At least that is what the news said regarding group gatherings. But he was like family, so he was there to celebrate the arrival.

"When do you expect Jo back?" he shouted from the stoop where he sat scratching the dog's ears.

"Not too long now. Jo had to go to work first and then would swing by to pick her up before coming home." Ashkíí replied as he taped a heart cut out of red construction paper to the Plexiglas window of the screen door. It said "Yá `at`ééh Welcome home" in practiced letters.

"Who made that? Looks like a four year old's writing."

"Good, because he almost is. Jonny made it for the party today." Ash pressed the tape to secure the picture.

"That's Yani's kid, right? She's a good one," Win complimented. "You like her, eh?"

"Yah, she's a good one alright. Once this is all over, she is thinking of starting school again at UNM – Gallup. She wants to be an engineer. Maybe Civil Engineering to make public projects on the Rez, like roads. Maybe Architecture to construct health clinics so we have more

access. She'll eventually have to finish in Albuquerque, but she can get her Associates here and then transfer," said Ash sadly, wondering if he would be a part of her plan.

"She'll figure it out. We know what she went through, and now with this COVID those things are just bumps in her road. She will learn to round the turns and drive her own path." Winslow thumped Ashkíí's back reassuringly.

Grandpa Tony walked through the screen door and stopped behind the two men. Ash's phone was ringing in Shicheii's hand; he gave it to Ashkíí to answer.

"They're on the way," Ash assured them.

Lobo bound down the steps into the dirt yard. The hum of an engine and a dust plume kicked up from the road to announce an approaching vehicle. From within, silhouettes were outlined against the horizon behind. Johona drove slowly along the rutted path. A child's hand played in the updrafts of the wind, sticking out of the back driver's side window. Long billowing hair whipped out the back passenger window and a hand blocked an inflated metallic balloon from escaping. Last, a small kerchiefed head nodded toward the dash, peering through the windshield, eyeing those standing on the porch.

Jo pulled up to the house. Jonny swung his door, jumped out, and ran to Ash's open arms. Yanaha slid down from her seat, and pried the passenger door open exposing a red velvet skirt and black sensible shoes that landed softly on the earth below. In welcome, the dog crouched crawling to her feet. He licked her outstretched hand. His owner had finally made it home.

Glossary of Words

Ach' éé	Woman's daughter
Asdzání	Woman, wife, female partner
Ashkíí	Boy In the narrative, it is the character Ash's full name.
Awéé	Child (singular)
Ayóó Ánííníshní	"I love you".
Begay	Meaning son of. Often a last name.
Bilagá ana	White person or foreigner / outsider
Chee or ´tichíí	The English pronunciation of the color red in Navajo. Often a last name
Diné	"The People." the traditional name for Navajos.
Dinétah	The Navajo Nation. All the land that is sacred.
Greyeyes	Grey Eyes. A last name created after Anglos came West. Often this last name would be adopted for a child that was half Anglo half Native. Many times, this child was a product of sexual assault and their lighter eyes were a badge of this trauma.
Hogan	Navajo traditional eight-sided home made out of pine logs and chinked with adobe.
Johona	Meaning sunny Used for a girl's name. Pronounced Jo – ho – na.
Nizhóní	Beautiful. Used for a girl's name. Pronounced Niz-hoh-nee.
Shicheii or Shi cheíí	Maternal Grandfather
Azhé `é or Shi zhé `é	Father

Shimá	Mother
Shimá sání	Maternal Grandmother
Yah-ta-hey or Yá `át` ééh	Greeting / Farewell
Yá zhí or Yazee	Meaning little one. Often a last name.
Yanaha	Meaning brave. Used for a girl's name. Pronounced Yahn – nah – ha.

Places within the Navajo Nation or Dinétah

New Mexico:

- Gallup is the largest city in proximity to the Navajo Nation.
  It is near the Arizona border in New Mexico along I-40.
- Hwéeldí (Navajo) or Bosque Redondo (Spanish) means small grove.
  It is the name for Ft. Sumner, New Mexico, located along the Texas border. This was the internment camp from 1864-1868 where the Diné were forcibly marched on "The Long Walk." The people were imprisoned, starved, and forced to assimilate until Chiefs Barboncito and Manuelito negotiated the Diné's release.
- Ramah is a village south of Gallup. In Navajo it is called TI' ohchini or the "Place of Wild Onions." It is also near Zuni Pueblo and El Morro – Inscription Rock National Monument. The Ramah Band of the Navajo Reservation district, like Tóhajilee, is its own autonomous district separate from the main Navajo Nation.
- Red Rocks State Park is where The Inter-Tribal Ceremonial Rodeo and Pow Wow is held annually in August. It is a fairground and hiking area just East of Gallup.
- Tóhajilee is the furthest east district, which is separate from the main Navajo Nation. This settlement was created during "The Long Walk" when the Diné were displaced by Kit Carson and his regiment. Those that stayed in Tóhajilee were abandoned by the troops, and local Puebloan natives took them in. Unfortunately, Tóhajilee is now known for its crime, as there is a high homicide rate and meth use.
- Yah-ta-hey is a village along I-491 headed toward I-264 which leads to Window Rock, AZ: the capital of the Navajo Nation. The name of this town is an English pronunciation of Yá `át` ééh which is a traditional greeting and farewell.

Arizona:

- Chi Chil tah
- Chinle
- Dennehotso

- Flagstaff is where Northern Arizona University is located as well as the Museum of Northern Arizona. which is a repository for Indigenous material and natural history from the Colorado Plateau.
- Kayenta
- Kinlichee
- Lukachukai
- Moenkopi is near the Hopi Reservation, which is surrounded by Diné land within Arizona.
- Shonto
- Teec Nos Pos
- Tsaile is near Canyon de Chelle and where Diné College is located.
- Window Rock is the capital and governmental seat of Dinétah, The Navajo Nation.
- Winslow was originally settled as an Anglo Rancher and Railroad town along I-40. The song "Take it Easy" by the Eagles references this town.
- Wupatki is a historic ruins cultural site near Flagstaff. Nearby is also Walnut Canyon National Monument where cliff dwellings are preserved.

Utah:

Combs Wash, Red Mesa, and White Rock are sites near Bears Ears National Monument and locations for BEPRA: Bears Ears Prayer Run Alliance.

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THE COMPOSTABLE HOUSE

Mark Brazaitis

After the first death, they decided to leave the city. They knew the virus would spread across town with the catastrophic speed of nuclear fallout. They rented a house, sight unseen, in the mountains ninety-seven miles west. With a mixture of efficiency and panic, they packed clothes and computers and kids (they had two, a girl and a boy) into their SUV and drove across the bridge and away from the plague.

They were fortunate, privileged, blessed. They had good jobs, which they could do remotely, and money, thanks to their good jobs and his parents and her grandparents, who'd left them with sizeable inheritances. They would even be drawing an income from their apartment. They'd rented it to a pair of college students, friends of friends who had been kicked out of their dorm room and didn't mind watering the fleeing couple's plants and feeding their tropical fish. The couple's children—their daughter was ten, their son was seven—were old enough to entertain themselves, or at least each other, and mature enough, their parents hoped, to continue their interrupted school years online without too much oversight.

The house was made of wood, stone, and what looked like, but couldn't be, they decided, adobe. It had large glass windows and was set back into the forest. A creek flowed in front of it. The landlord had left the key under the straw welcome mat, and after they entered the house and looked around—the kids bounded upstairs, arguing over whose bedroom would be whose—they

decided they were satisfied. They would have to be. Rental houses outside the city had become as scarce as toilet paper.

They'd brought with them food from their refrigerator and cupboards, thereby sparing themselves, for a few days, anyway, a trip to the grocery store in town, twenty miles away. After they unpacked, they had dinner. The children ate little—they wanted to continue to explore their new home—and soon left the table. The father and mother shared a bottle of pinot noir. The parents lifted their glasses and offered a toast to their safe escape from the pestilential city.

Presently, the daughter and son rushed up to them, wide-eyed, breathless. "We found the basement," the daughter said.

"The basement?" the father said. "I didn't realize the house had a basement."

"Yes, it does," exclaimed the son. "And there's a man in it."

"Very funny," the mother said.

"It's true," the daughter said.

The father finished the wine in his glass and stood. "Show me," he said.

He followed his children down a hallway and into the kitchen. At the back was a door to the outside. Perpendicular to it was what the father, on inspecting the house after their arrival, assumed was a pantry or broom closet. Upon opening the door, the father was surprised to find a long staircase down. At the bottom was another door, a yellow glow emanating from beneath it. The father said, "Are you sure you saw someone down here?"

"He was standing in the doorway at the bottom," the daughter said.

"What did he look like?"

"He had a lot of red hair," the daughter said, "like the top of a Dr. Seuss tree."

"Did he say anything?" the father asked.

The daughter and son looked at each other. “He said, ‘Hello and welcome,’” the daughter said.

“And he said our names,” the son said.

The father gazed at his children skeptically but didn’t interrogate them. He descended, his children a couple of steps behind him. The stairs were wooden and their creaking seemed excessive and dramatic, as in a horror-movie scene. At the bottom of the stairs, he knocked on the door. When no one answered, he knocked again. Same result. He tried to open the door but it was locked.

“Are you 100 percent positive you saw someone?” the father asked.

Both children answered yes.

The father knocked on the door again. Again, no one answered.

They returned upstairs to the kitchen, where the mother was waiting.

“We didn’t see him this time,” the daughter told her.

She looked at her husband and children. “We’ve all had a long, stressful day,” she said. “Our imaginations are probably as riled up as our nerves.”

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In the morning, the father called the rental agency and asked its manager about the basement.

“It’s possible it has an occupant,” the manager replied.

“What do you mean by ‘possible’?”

"The owner of the house makes the main floor and the second floor available to rent. He keeps the basement and the attic to himself."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"It was noted in the contract you signed."

"You mean the twenty-eight-page, single-spaced contract we had about five minutes to read before you were going to move on to your next customer?"

"Exactly."

"I'm guessing he can stroll from the basement to the attic whenever he likes."

"No, as page eighteen of the contract states, parties with access to the basement and attic cannot, without permission, access the first and second floors and vice versa."

"Good," the father said. "We'll restrict him to the basement."

The house's owner was its architect, the landlord explained. "If you didn't get to page twenty-three in the contract, it explains that the house is compostable. It's designed to be absorbed into the natural environment. "

"When is this supposed to happen?"

"After fifty years."

"What year are we on now?"

"Forty-nine, give or take. But don't worry," the manager assured him, "after decomposition begins, the house will take at least eighteen months to become completely uninhabitable. If I didn't think the design was absolutely bonkers, I would admire it. Even the windows and refrigerator are compostable."

"Why in the world would someone build a compostable house?"

"As I understand it, the architect thought the house would gradually prepare its occupants to do what he believes we'll all have to do one day—live on our wits in the wild."

"Is he out of his mind?"

"There have been rumors of mental illness. Schizophrenia. Bipolar disorder. Lifelong membership in the Sierra Club and Greenpeace."

"So we appear to have a housemate," the father said, "a housemate who, one way or another, is crazy."

#

After the rest of the family trickled in for breakfast, the father explained about the man in the basement. The children seemed unfazed. They were used to having neighbors because of the apartment building they lived in. The mother was less sanguine. She strode to the basement door to make sure it was locked, then propped a chair under its knob.

It was Monday, which meant the adults had to work and the children had to go to virtual school, although even the exclusive private school they attended had been vague about what this entailed. After they cleaned the dishes—there was no dishwasher—they all found spots in the house to settle behind their laptops. When more than two of them were online, however, the Internet connection became exceptionally slow and sometimes stalled entirely. "We'll have to work in shifts," the father declared. "Parents first." After they instructed the children to stay in or near the house, the father and mother climbed the stairs to begin their workdays.

As he clacked away on his computer, he heard the backdoor open and close. He looked out his window and saw the children walk into the woods. He might have shouted a warning

about Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Lyme disease, and the Big Bad Wolf or Bear or Coyote—whatever wicked mammal prowled the premises—but he was on a Zoom call with a pair of clients who owned shares in a company doing gold mining in the Amazon. The father advised them to buy more since Brazil's president was boastfully indifferent to the virus and the mining would continue apace.

The mother was the president of new-site acquisitions at Dollar Glee. With the country's economy likely to be in bad shape for years, and consumers therefore likely to seek the cheapest prices available on household goods, Dollar Glee was in prime position to prosper. "More misery," the mother was now fond of saying, "more Glee."

At a little after four, the father decided to take a break. He walked downstairs, but he couldn't hand off internet privileges to one of his children because they hadn't returned. The mother had made everyone peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, which sat on plates on the kitchen table. After grabbing a sandwich and stuffing half of it in his mouth, the father walked out the back door. A few steps from the house was a pond, perhaps fifteen yards wide and twenty yards long. Beyond the pond was the trail he'd seen his children on. He called them but heard nothing in response. He looped around the pond and followed the trail until, five minutes later, he came to a fork. He opted to go left. After climbing a hill, he descended into a half-moon-shaped gravel lot on the side of a road.

A red pickup truck was parked in the lot. The bed contained a wheelbarrow, a black tarp, a pick, a hoe, and a pair of shovels with soil on their blades. *Gravedigger*, he thought, although, as far as he knew, no one in town was even infected with the virus much less dead from it.

On the opposite side of the road a man stood amid the trees. It was difficult to see him. He either wore brown clothes from foot to neck or was naked, his body as brown as tree bark.

His hair was like leaves of a red maple. The man nodded slowly, deliberately, as if he had concluded something grave about the father. Fear squeezed the father's heart. He wanted to shout something defiant, but a noise to his left startled him. He turned as a woman in a red bandana, her ponytail the silver-gray of spider's threads, tossed a third shovel into the bed of the truck.

"Had to take a bathroom break," the woman announced. "Help you?"

"I'm looking for my children." The father described them.

"Haven't seen them." She looked him over. "What brings you our way?" she asked. "The plague?"

"To be honest," he said, "yes."

"You must number in the hundreds by now. You all raided Mimi's this morning."

"Mimi's?"

"Our grocery store." She paused. "Do you have a summer place here?"

"We're renting," he said.

"Whereabouts?"

He told her. She nodded. "Forest Angel," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's how we locals refer to the house's architect and owner. His actual name is difficult to pronounce, like Rumpelstiltskin on steroids."

"We wouldn't have rented the place if we'd known about him," the father said.

"Why? Don't like the design?"

"He's living in the basement."

"I suspect he won't bother you if you don't bother him."

"He better not," he said.

"How long will you all be in town?"

"There's bound to be a vaccine or a cure before long," the father said. "We won't be here forever."

"None of us will."

There was a pause as he absorbed her words. "You're a gravedigger, aren't you?"

"I provide burial services to animals who are killed on the roads."

"Roadkill," he said.

"To use the pejorative term," the woman said, "which makes the animals seem like expendable nuisances instead of living creatures with the same capacity to feel pleasure and pain we have."

"What's a better term?" he asked.

"Brothers and sisters—or at least second cousins."

He thought the woman was joking, so he laughed. She didn't. Presently, she excused herself, hopped in her truck, and drove off. The father turned back to the trail and headed toward the house. He found the children standing around the pond.

"We saw the man from the basement again," the daughter said.

"What?" the father said. "Where?"

"In the woods," the daughter said.

"Did he say anything to you? Did he do anything to you?"

"He asked us if we thought we could live in the woods," the daughter said.

"What did you say?"

"We said we didn't know," the son said.

"And what did he say?"

"He said people have forgotten how to live in the woods," the daughter said. "He also said people have forgotten how to live with the woods."

"What absolute nonsense," the father said. "Please don't talk to him. He's a disturbed old man."

The father ordered the children inside. As they returned to the house, the father walked around it. On its south side, a stone staircase led down to a moss-covered door. Above the door was a rectangular opening the size of a shoebox. The father startled as a bat flew from it and grazed the top of his head. He was reminded of the origin of the virus. *Bats,* he thought, backing up quickly. *We should kill them all before they kill us.*

Upon entering the house, he made sure the door to the basement remained locked and held fast by a chair. He and his wife sat the children down and told them they weren't permitted to venture beyond where their parents could see them from the upstairs windows. "We left the city to keep you safe," the father said. "It would be a horrific irony, and outright horrifying, if something were to happen to you here."

The father and the mother again climbed to the second floor and resumed their places in front of their computers. At half past six, the father and mother decided to quit for the day. Downstairs, they called the children, but neither appeared. They circled the first floor several times, as if the children might be playing hide-and-seek. The father stepped out the back door, calling their names. He circled the house, stopping above the stairwell to the green door. He wondered if the old man had invited them to see his hideaway. The father fantasized about fumigating the basement to rid it of bats and the batty old man.

He walked down the stone steps and pulled on the door. It was locked. He knocked. He knocked louder. "Listen," the father shouted, "stop whatever you're doing with my children!

You might be an eccentric old man or you might be an ax murderer. Without a background check and a sit-down interview, I'm in no position to tell. So leave my children alone before I—"

"They're here," his wife called down to him from the kitchen window.

The father returned to the house. The children stood at the mother's side. "Where were they?" he asked.

It was the daughter who answered: "The attic."

"I told you: the attic isn't ours," the father said. He frowned. "The man from the basement wasn't with you, was he?" He inspected the children's eyes for guilt; he found only defiant amusement.

"Well?" the father said. When the children again said nothing, the father raced up the stairs. Winded, he paused on the second-floor landing to catch his breath before completing his climb to the attic. He yanked open the door. No one was in the room. The far window was open. Beyond the creek and the road was more forest, thick with leaves in a variety of greens. Within the leaves, the father thought he saw the red of the old man's hair. The father shouted across the divide between the house and the trees: "Stop bothering my children! You're scaring them! We don't want anything to do with you, understand?" When the old man didn't reply, the father screamed, "Do you hear me?"

There was a flutter in the trees, and what was red within them flew toward him. He fell to his knees and covered his face. He expected the creature—a red-tailed hawk, a woodpecker, a deranged cardinal—to strike him. Moments passed before he pulled his hands from his face and looked out the window. Whatever had flown from the trees was gone.

Slowly, he made his way downstairs. In the kitchen, the mother put her hand on the father's forearm and squeezed. "Let's have a drink," she said. "The children are working."

The father and mother retired to the living room couch with two glasses and a bottle of merlot. By the time the parents finished the wine, they were too tired to make dinner. They invited the children down to snack on sandwich bread, cheddar cheese, and yogurt sticks. After the makeshift meal, the parents helped themselves to another bottle of wine. They fell asleep on the couch.

The father woke up sometime later. He wondered where the children were. He rose and walked upstairs. Their rooms were empty. From the window in his daughter's bedroom, he saw them beyond the pond at the edge of the forest. The old man stood beside them. The father raced downstairs, then outside. By the time he reached the children, the old man was gone. The children were standing in front of white flowers that grew from bushes with gray-green leaves.

"Where'd he go?" the father asked.

"Who?"

"The old man from the basement."

"He showed us the moonflowers," the son said.

"They come out at night," the daughter said, "like vampires and bats."

"Did the old man tell you this? Was he trying to scare you? Was he suggesting he himself is a vampire?" The father looked into the woods. "Where did he go? I want to talk to him."

"The flowers smell like lemons," the daughter said. "Smell," she urged him.

He ignored her. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"It's morning," the son said.

"It's the dead of night," the father said, but even as he spoke, the day's first light rushed across the forest floor and touched their feet.

#

At breakfast, the parents told the children they were prohibited from leaving the house without one of them present. The mother explained everything the children could do inside the house. They could read, they could paint and draw, they could play any of a number of board games, including Life, Monopoly, and Clue. “We’ll even let you watch TV,” the mother said.

“There isn’t a TV,” the daughter said.

“No TV?” the father said. “What kind of house doesn’t have a TV?”

“This one,” said the son.

After they extracted promises from the children to obey the rules, the parents climbed the stairs to the second floor. They both stopped twice to catch their breath. The father blamed his fatigue on his failure, over the past couple of years, to exercise regularly. They settled in front of their computers.

At some point during the day, the children shouted from below: “We’ll make ourselves lunch!” The parents shouted back their approval. The parents munched on energy bars.

At six-fifteen, the father decided he’d better give his spot on the internet to one of his children. The mother, meanwhile, said she would continue working. The entire depressed Midwest, she said, was ripe to become Glee Land. He walked downstairs and into the silent living room. The board games remained in their boxes. He listened, but could hear only the clicking of keys on his wife’s computer. He called his children. No answer. He lumbered back upstairs; coughing fits twice caused him to stop. The attic was empty. From the window at the back, he gazed down at the pond. He saw the old man on the far side. His children were on the near side, half naked, their toes touching the water. One of his and his wife’s greatest

shortcomings as parents was their failure to teach their children how to swim. The father flung open the window, but as he was about to shout a warning, the children dove into the pond.

He lumbered downstairs, calling his wife to join him. The children, their hair wet, their bodies soaking, burst into the kitchen. The son held a fish, which was gray-blue and longer than his chest was wide. The fish flapped, its tail striking the boy's shoulder. "We don't have any food left," the daughter said, "so we caught dinner."

"I bet the pond is contaminated," the father said. "I bet it's full of toxins."

"Why?" the daughter asked.

"Because everything is full of toxins," the mother replied.

"We're hungry!" said the son.

"Throw it back in the pond," said the mother.

Reluctantly, the son returned outside and dropped the fish back into the pond.

When they were all gathered again in the kitchen, the father asked how they'd caught the fish, and when the children's answers were vague and improbable, he said, "Did the old man teach you how to swim? Did he teach you how to fish?"

The children ignored his questions. They held their bellies and said they were hungry. "We'll order a pizza," the mother declared. But none of the pizza places would deliver so far into the country, and neither parent felt like driving into town. They rounded up a can of tuna fish and Graham Crackers, which became the children's dinner. The parents dined on wine.

#

The next morning, at a little after six, the father drove to town to buy groceries. Expecting Mimi's to have been restocked overnight, he wanted to be the first in line. Parking spaces were filled up and down Main Street, and he drove a maze of side streets until he found a spot half a mile from the store. He intended to run, but several steps in he felt winded. His cough returned, dry and grating. He walked as swiftly as he could, but by the time he arrived the line stretched to the end of Main Street. He realized he'd forgotten his mask in the car, but he didn't want to sacrifice his place in line to retrieve it.

In front of him, an unmasked middle-aged woman, her lipstick the red of a Ferrari, asked him if he was from the city. "How did you guess?" he said.

"Your watch," she said.

"Your earrings," he said. They smiled like confederates.

The father and the woman coughed at the same time and turned their heads toward Main Street. The same red pickup he'd seen the day before, driven by the woman with the spider's-thread ponytail, pulled by. Standing in its bed were four people in animal costumes—a chipmunk, a squirrel, a rabbit, and a bat—and a man in a suit. They waved at the people in the grocery line before, one by one, the animals collapsed. The man looked contented, his arms across his chest, his chin lifted like a conqueror's before he wiped his brow, shivered, and collapsed. The truck turned the corner and disappeared. It had been some kind of performance or protest, the father thought, although its meaning eluded him.

A young woman wearing a mask with a blue-and-green planet earth on it walked down the line of shoppers, selling pamphlets with the names and pictures of the area's edible wild berries, plants, and mushrooms. The woman from the city bought the last copy. "At home, I have

a whole closetful of kitsch from the countryside," she said, fanning herself with the pamphlet. "Here's something else I'll never use."

By the time they were permitted inside Mimi's, the shelves had been picked of most of their desirable items. Toilet paper and paper towels were gone. So were all hand washing products and disinfectants. The only cereal left was a generic version of Lucky Charms. The only meat was a package of pigs' hooves. The father managed to find four cans of beans, a box of chocolate pudding mix, and a wilting head of lettuce. In line, he again stood behind his fellow refugee from the city. He was jealous of what she'd filled her cart with: three cans of cream of potato soup, a bag of frozen green beans, and a pint of chocolate ice cream. He felt a sneeze come on, and he captured it in the crook of his arm.

She said, "Allergies."

"The air here," he said, "is worse than in the city."

"Amen," she said, and coughed and coughed.

#

Halfway back to the house, the father realized he'd forgotten to buy gas. The needle had tumbled into the red E zone. He thought about turning around but decided he would need to return to town soon on another grocery run. When he pulled into the driveway of the rented house, the children greeted him outside the front door. The daughter had a bowie knife in her belt. The son's lips were outlined in what the father first thought was blood but concluded was berry juice.

"Mommy's sick," the daughter said.

The husband found the wife sitting up in bed, her laptop on her lap. The climb upstairs had cost him: He panted like he'd been sprinting. "Are you all right?" he managed.

She looked up from her work. She was two shades paler than usual, and her eyes were watery. Husband and wife coughed at the same time. "My muscles ache," she said, "and I have a small fever."

"How small?"

"One hundred point five."

The father stepped into the master bathroom and checked his temperature. "Shoot," he said. "99.9."

"It might be a summer cold," the wife said. "Colds don't disappear just because pandemics appear."

"Yeah," the husband said, and coughed and coughed and coughed. "It's probably a summer cold." He retrieved his computer from the table in the corner and, like the wife, set up to work in bed. Presently, a headache pounded against the sides of his head. He shivered and sweated. He closed his computer and buried himself under the blanket. "I hope to God this isn't the…"

"Why would you—why would either of us—have the…? Before we left the city, we weren't running around town, going to bars or museums or, God help us, church."

"We didn't even go to the gym," the husband said, chuckling until a cough consumed his laughter. In bed, he tried again to work. There were new ventures in deep-sea extraction of gold, silver, and platinum. Precious metals would be needed to build the technology of the future. He wanted to alert his clients to these opportunities, but he had trouble thinking clearly. He looked out the window. His children were high in a tree, sitting next to each other on a limb like in an

old-time photograph of construction workers on a beam above the city. The father groaned, left the bed, and pulled open the window. “What are you doing?” he asked the children.

“We’re pretending to be birds,” the daughter said. “We’re seeing the world from their perspective.”

“It’s called sympathy,” said the son. “Forest said so.”

“I want to climb to the top,” the daughter said, “but Forest says I’ll have to wait until I grow wings.”

“Come down right now!” the father said. “It’s dangerous. You could kill yourself!” The father coughed, coughed, coughed. A headache assaulted his brain, and he closed his eyes to fight it off. When he opened them, his children were on the ground below the tree. He was, he thought, delirious. Work, he decided, would be his cure. He pulled his phone from his slacks and called a client, but he couldn’t stop coughing. His client said, “I’m hanging up before you give me the virus.”

In the afternoon, husband and wife woke to a thunderstorm. It shook the house and knocked shingles from the roof, which fell past the window like dark playing cards. Rainwater trickled into the master bedroom above the headboard. The father felt the house drop like a broken elevator, then settle with a shudder.

The power was out, which meant they couldn’t access the Internet. The wife worked on her cell phone. The husband tried to do the same, but his fever made it hard for him to concentrate. As if celebrating their parents’ wedding anniversary, the children burst into the room with a platter of berries, nuts, and mushrooms. After they left, the parents slipped the platter, its offerings uneaten, beneath the bed.

Hours passed, and the father felt a cloud was growing in his chest. His breathing turned to wheezing. He needed two breaths now in order to fill his lungs with the oxygen he ordinarily inhaled with one. His wife's breathing had a similar desperation.

When dawn broke and their fevers soared, the wife said, "Hospital." Their cell phones were dead. The electricity had failed to come on in the middle of the night to recharge them. They couldn't call an ambulance. "We'll have to drive," the mother said.

Between gasps and coughs, they shouted for the children, but the children didn't respond. The father staggered up to check the attic, but when he opened the door on the second floor and stared up the stairs, he saw sky—beautiful, blue, indifferent. He staggered downstairs. They weren't in the kitchen. He wanted to check the backyard, but he couldn't leave the house by the back door because it had become halfway buried in the house's collapse. One of the kitchen windows was exactly at ground level, however, and he crawled out of it. He thought he heard the children's laughter in the forest. When he opened his mouth to call them, he succumbed to a cascade of coughing.

Feeling a presence at his side, he turned. Forest Angel stood beside him. His red hair was like a bird's nest—no, it *was* a bird's nest. A cardinal flew from it, and the father heard the squawking of baby birds and saw their tiny beaks. "Leave my children alone," the father said to the old man. "They were fine before we came here. You've turned them into savages. When my wife and I come back from the hospital, we're going to get a restraining order so you can't come near them."

But what if their stays in the hospital were prolonged? the father thought. What if he or both he and his wife…? He had to think practically, professionally. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and removed a handful of twenties. "In the meantime," he said, "if you could make

sure they have what they need, I'd appreciate it." When he made to hand the money to the old man, the old man slowly shook his head. The father tried to force it into the old man's palm, but a wind blew from the south and scattered the bills across the pond.

The old man reached for the father's shoulder. The father recoiled, although an instant later, he understood the gesture's intention was comfort. He mumbled an incoherent apology, his cough intruding on the last few words. He left the pond and walked to the front of the house, where his wife was waiting by the car. They stepped in and drove toward town. Neither knew where the hospital was. When the father glanced to his left, he saw the children, in a clearing between trees, standing in front of a fire, long sticks extended into the flames. He doubted they were cooking marshmallows.

Husband and wife hadn't driven more than two miles before their car sputtered and died. The father confessed to failing to get gas. The mother upbraided him with hard words punctuated by hard coughs. They breathed like the air was water. "We'll have to hitchhike," the wife said.

"We'll give the virus to whoever picks us up," the husband said.

"We have no choice," the wife said. "Infect someone or die."

They stood on the side of the road. Few cars came their way; none stopped. "Asshole!" the mother shouted as they whizzed by.

"If you were them, would you pick us up?" the father asked her.

"No," the mother said, "but I'm not as naïve and generous as they're supposed to be."

Exhausted and ravaged by coughing and gasping, they fell to their knees. Trees surrounded them. They might have been penitents at the altar of an outdoor cathedral. Before long, a red pickup truck pulled onto the shoulder a few yards ahead of them. It was the truck he'd

seen twice before. The man stood and approached the driver's-side door. "We need to go to the hospital," he managed to articulate. The woman with the spidery ponytail told them to hop on.

Straining their weak muscles, the parents hauled themselves up on the truck bed and again fell onto their knees. The truck pulled onto the road and picked up speed. It was a moment before the husband recognized they had company. A fox, a turtle, and a goose, all dead, lay in the bed of the truck. So did several other animals, flattened into unrecognition. The tools of the woman's trade were lined up on the truck bed's right side.

"My God," said the wife, collapsing onto her stomach, "we're riding with roadkill."

The husband tried to remember the more dignified way the woman had spoken of the dead animals. Cousins, wasn't it? Brothers. Sisters. Aunts. Uncles. Grandparents. Children. Sickness leveled him, and, wheezing, he lay among the animals. He feared they were all headed to the same place.

***

COVID NON-SCENTS

Diane Koerner

Tom was 54 when he escaped from the senior living facility where he was locked in for 10 years.

I found out when my phone jolted me awake at 6 a.m.

"Where is he, dammit?" the Manager of Oakmont Villas yelled.

How dare he accuse me. "Did you phone his nephew?"

"Dahlia, my dear," he said, switching tacks. "I did, but no answer there. Please, you're the only person in our log to visit Tom in the last few months." His false sweetness evoked memories of the saccharine scent of air fresheners used to cover the assaulting smell of death at Oakmont.

I hung up and dropped the phone on the bed as if it had scalded my hand.

Just then, a text message pinged. I looked at the screen and saw it was from Tom—we had exchanged numbers when he showed me his new iPhone.

What is *venez m'aider*? Oh, that Jeopardy clue we both liked in the Word Origins category. But it didn't tell me where Tom was, just that he was signaling ***Mayday, Mayday, Mayday***.

A minute later, a second text arrived. A long, endless line of pink flower emojis.

A Year Earlier

As soon as I entered Oakmont and signed in to visit my mother, Tom threw his karaoke mike on the dining room floor to drag me to the daily trivia posting on the open door. It read, "A mongoose and a monkey are climbing a coconut tree in Hawaii. Who will get the coconuts first?" I answered, "The mongoose. There are no monkeys in Hawaii."

I turned to go upstairs, tripping over my own feet as I visualized Hawaii's palm trees swaying in the fresh tradewinds instead of the sad sight of my mother sitting with blank eyes in her airless room, unable to move the left side of her body, crying in pain.

"See, there are no monkeys in Hawaii," I heard Tom tell the crowd of grumbling seniors before continuing his song.

Tom stood out in the crowd at Oakmont, because of his youth, his full head of long, unkempt black hair and a lean but strong body always dressed in a saggy polyester track suit. Above all, he had an enthusiasm for life that belied his surroundings.

How Tom had ended up in the Memory Care Unit with my mother, instead of the regular rooms at Oakmont Villas Assisted Living Facility, I couldn't fathom. Until the morning he came to breakfast wearing no pants.

Most of the caregivers were new to the country and to the English language. They were not at all sympathetic to Tom's enthusiasm and desire to repeat himself fast, loud and nonstop like a windup toy gone wild. They preferred the drugged, wheelchair-bound stroke victims like my mother.

Well, they didn't care much for her either. I was told she yelled, "Help me," all night when my sister or I wasn't there.

When I was alone on the elevator with the Oakmont Manager one day, he reprimanded me for conversing with Tom during meals.

"Ignore him," he told me, squeezing my upper arm. "You're encouraging Tom to talk so much; it's annoying the staff."

Oh, anything to not annoy the staff.

"Ouch!" I shook my arm out of his grasp with lawsuit in my eyes.

Then I questioned Tom's diagnosis.

"It's… somewhere on the autism spectrum."

"But why is he here?"

His sneer let me know I was becoming as annoying as Tom.

"Why do you care?"

I wasn't sure.

One day when I brought my mother to the medical office for a blood pressure check, the chatty nurse answered my questions.

"Tom has Asperger's…high on the autism spectrum. He's intelligent but has neurological problems…misses social cues."

"Has he been here long?"

"As long as me—ten years, ever since his elderly mother died. I remember hearing she was 42 when she had him, a mistake or miracle, whichever way you want to look at it. Tom had a much older brother, dead now too. A nephew pays his monthly fee."

So, he spends $6,500 of Tom's inheritance each month to lock him up.

"He visits Tom every couple months and cuts his hair—in those weird spikes—and then they play cards. That's all I know. Why do you care?"

I wasn't sure. But Tom had filled a small hole in my heart and inked a question mark in my brain.

Unlike the staff, Tom wasn't lacking in feeling. When my mother had her final stroke and died, my sister closed her eyes, I kissed her hand one last time, and then we walked out of her room right into a big encompassing hug from Tom. For once, he said nothing, just inched back down the hall. And left us speechless.

After my mother passed, I missed her every day, but I didn't miss the choking cloud of antiseptic cleaners and air fresheners at the Villas. The first day I had visited my mother there, I wore a white cotton mask to keep from getting an allergy attack. But the Manager at the front desk told me I would scare the residents—I looked contagious.

"Take the mask off or leave," he said. This was before Covid, before people envied my charcoal-lined mask. I wore it to protect myself from the smells at Oakmont.

So, visits with my mother required a truckload of expensive pills and as many outdoor excursions as the weather allowed. Our favorite destination was a historic mansion with glorious gardens open to the public two short blocks away. Usually with Tom tagging along, marching like he was crossing the River Kwai.

I first met Tom the day I carried in two shopping bags of unscented cleaning products and bedding for my mother's room.

"Here, let me carry those. I'll carry those. Let me," he called, running over from the activities table, dropping bingo chips along the way. Then Tom offered to help push my mother's wheelchair to the gardens. As soon as we were outside, Tom and I simultaneously said, "Ah,

fresh air," and laughed, immediately creating a bond. Our walks together became a frequent habit since all Memory Care residents needed to be signed out with a "responsible" party… which I guess was me.

My mother's crooked smile always beamed, and her memory sparked when we reached the gardens.

"I named my daughters after flowers," she told Tom one day, then looked me up and down. "You're pretty. What's your name, dear?"

She didn't realize, but she had given me the right non-scent name. She especially liked the vibrant hot-pink dahlias at the gardens (they matched her hot-pink straw hat). So I would race her wheelchair through the heady fragrance of the white gardenia bushes, past the bitter smell of the yellow chrysanthemums, far back to the dahlia dell. The breeze blew fresher there. Maybe because dahlia blossoms emit no scent**.**

We would end our visit singing "What a Wonderful World." My mother had been a pianist, and could remember songs better than anything else. But if my mother mixed up a lyric, Tom would bend to her ear and whisper it. "No, no, no, it's 'The bright *blessed* day,' Mrs. B." How he knew the lyrics to every song was a mystery. Like everything else about him.

Once Mom was in bed for her afternoon nap, Tom and I, both trivia buffs, would watch Jeopardy. It cheered me up after the heart-breaking hours I spent with a mother who barely remembered me. Tom shouted out the Jeopardy questions before I could. Hard to believe because I could have been a contender. I passed the online written test right before Mom's stroke, and was invited to play a practice game. But when I walked onto the mock stage in a San Francisco hotel, the cologne and perfume on the other contestants gave me brain fog, a devious plot on their part I felt, so I up and left.

My mother up and left us eight months after she moved into Oakmont Villas, right before Christmas. My grief and loneliness often steered my car past there, the last place I held her hand. I would also think of Tom and wonder if it would be "appropriate" to visit. And if I should risk exposing myself to the mix of perfume and disinfectant.

Instead, I would visit the dahlia garden and sit on the carved wooden bench facing the tiny buds nestled beneath the spent flowers in winter, while I conversed with my mother's spirit. I would ask her questions and hear the answers inside my head. In my peripheral vision, I sometimes caught a hazy glimpse of her dancing the polka with my Dad in between the flowers.

One Sunday, as I sat in the magical dell where the veil was easily penetrated, I heard my mother tell me to do what I wanted. To visit Tom.

I had to bang and buzz for five minutes to get in Oakmont's imposing front door, which was surrounded by fresh new pots of magenta bougainvillea (their attempt to make the run-down facility look like a four-star hotel). Unlike the Memory Care Unit, it had never been locked before.

"Sorry, sorry, we had to put in a special key code after one of the folks slipped out and took the bus to his son's house," said the receptionist. "We got in trouble for that!"

I laughed.

"Seriously, Dahlia. How is your family? What can we do for you?"

"I'm here to visit Tom."

"Really? Well… Please fill out the visitor sheet."

As soon as my nose started smarting from the sickening smell of strawberry air freshener with an undertone of bleach, Tom's off-key singing blasted my ears. I walked to the open door of the activity room and read the day's trivia question. Finish this Beatles song: "All you need is

_____.” Tom was crooning the word love when he dropped the mike and raced over to hug me and prove that true. The rest of the room yelled variations of “Finish the song already, stupid.”

Tom wouldn’t let go of my hand as he unplugged the mike and took his bow. “Let’s go, let’s go for a walk,” he said, as the seniors were wheeled to their rooms.

We double-timed it through the late January chill to my mother’s favorite place, the garden. We huddled close on the cold wooden bench and sang “What a Wonderful World” until a stiff wind blew dead dahlia petals to the ground, and Tom and I back to Oakmont.

Freezing February

Fifteen minutes after the Oakmont Manager’s call, I was still staring at Tom’s emojis… then it hit me.

“I’m on my way,” I texted, then ran to get dressed, grabbed my car keys and opened the front door to thick San Francisco Bay Area fog. My bare feet slipped on the slick, wet concrete porch. I went back in for my boots and hooded jacket, and then once again for a blanket.

I screamed with frustration and stomped my frozen feet when I arrived ten minutes later at the mansion and saw a huge padlock on the iron gate. A tall mossy rock wall surrounds the gardens, but I could see the building through the cut-out rose design in the rusted orange gate. I called Tom’s phone and heard a far-off chirp, but no answer.

A burly man dressed in overalls appeared through the mist. “We open at 10 a.m.,” he said. “First, I gotta do some weeding.”

“Please help, a friend got locked in there last night.”

“Not possible!” he said and lumbered away.

"Please help me," I screamed, and he came back, clearly annoyed. But he pulled out his enormous key ring and opened the heavy gate. I ran behind the mansion to the dahlia garden in back. I stopped short and gasped, holding the stitch in my ribs, when I saw Tom lying in a puddle on the wooden bench.

"My God, did you get stuck in here?" I asked.

He sat up and shook his head, but his entire body quaked, so the answer was unclear. The caretaker helped me pull Tom to his feet and hold him up—drooping like a melting ice pop.

When we got to my car, I grabbed the blanket to cover Tom's disgusting earthy-smelling clothes, damp with dew and God knows what else.

"I'll drive you back to Oakmont so you can get a hot shower and breakfast."

"No, no, no," he said as he climbed into my car, his bloodshot eyes darting back and forth. "Do you want me to die?"

My forehead just sank to the steering wheel. *Another fine mess I'd gotten myself into.*

"Didn't you watch the news (sneeze)… the news last night?" he asked.

"No…"

"Someone in a Seattle nursing home is dead, dead from that virus. They said everyone in group homes, even here in California, could die."

My neck whiplashed toward Tom. "The virus is killing people in nursing homes?"

Searching the news on my phone, I read:

Feb 29, 2020: *The first coronavirus-related death in the United States has occurred at an elder care home in Seattle. Health officials fear this is the tip of the iceberg for nursing homes and assisted living facilities everywhere.*

"Can you call your nephew for help?"

"No, no, no," Tom said, hands drumming on my dashboard. "Take me home (sneeze)… home with you."

"I can't. I've got this stupid immune disorder. My house is my only safe place. I'm putting my mask on now."

"But I can't understand…understand you with that mask on."

"Well, I can't handle car fumes or the smell on your clothes. I can't take care of you."

Through sneezes and sobs, he said, "Last night, they took Muriel away in an ambulance (sneeze)....The firemen were rushing, rushing her out (sneeze)…"

"*Gesundheit*."

"I ran out the door with them, climbed over the mansion wall (sneeze), and hid in the garden."

Oh God, what choice did I have?

I turned the key in the ignition and pulled my car out toward home, barely missing a passing biker, while Tom yelled, "Be careful, careful, careful…."

Bits of morning sun broke through the fog as Tom started toward the front steps of my immaculate 2-story home in the Oakland Hills, dragging my now filthy blanket behind him. I raced to lead him down the sloping side path to my basement door.

"Muddy shoes and blanket stay outside, please. Later, put your dirty clothes in the garbage."

"Garbage?"

I couldn't contaminate my washer with the bleach and the sticky, smelly fabric softener used at Oakmont.

Opening the door to my basement guestroom, Tom went in, looked out the window and approved of the backyard view, as if he was checking into a hotel. I asked him to go into the bathroom and scrub with the baking soda in the shower. "And wash your hair a few times with my unscented shampoo," I insisted. "I'll go make breakfast."

"I only eat oatmeal," he called after me as I went upstairs to the kitchen.

"Me too." Being a vegan, and gluten-sensitive, there weren't that many choices.

While I put water on for tea, I called my sister, a hospital administrator. Lily would know what to do.

"Dee, how could you be so stupid?" my snarky sister asked. "Tom may be infected with Coronavirus and now you could be too. Is he coughing?"

"No, just sneezing. He slept out in the f-ing fog."

"If he sneezed on you, you'll have to quarantine for 14 days. That's the protocol."

"Oh, c'mon. I put my mask on in the car."

"Anyway, I'll call Oakmont and tell them where to pick him up. There are liability issues here…"

"He won't go. But can you let them know he's safe? And ask them to give Tom's nephew my address? He can take him."

"Who…who can take me?" asked Tom, having climbed the stairs to the open kitchen door wearing nothing but a coating of baking soda.

"Bye, Lil—an Abominable Snowman just appeared." Hand over my eyes, I begged, "Please go back and wash off that white powder. It's getting all over….You're supposed to rinse off the baking soda."

"But why? I thought it made me safe, safer for you."

"Pleeeease. Go shower again." My dials were being turned up too high. A headache started throbbing from the base to the top of my skull. Tom put too much faith in me—gnawing at my own sense of safety.

I ran upstairs to the bedroom for a migraine pill and grabbed my ex-husband's terry-cloth robe. Sometimes it gets so cold and damp in the house I wear it over my clothes. There are probably emotional reasons I still like to snuggle inside…some sweet chocolate-covered memories bouncing around with the bitter ones. I didn't want to give it up, but Tom needed something other than baking soda to wear.

"No raisins? No cinnamon?" Tom asked, banging his bowl with his spoon.

"Sorry, the smell of cinnamon bothers me."

"No coffee?"

"Even a whiff of coffee grounds does me in."

Once he had his subpar oatmeal and passable green tea, Tom asked, "Where did you get this big, this big striped robe?"

I explained divorce.

"Why would your husband leave? You're the nicest…the nicest in the whole, whole wide world."

"Well, it turns out I'm the *hardest* person in the world to live with—since my liver got toxed out at the lab where I worked. Now, any chemicals, *any* strong smells make me sick…and a witch, according to my ex, Rick."

"Glinda or the Witch of the West?"

"The bad one. Rick hated showering every time he came home covered with second-hand fragrance or smoke. Shaving without his menthol cream. Hand-weeding the yard instead of

spraying it with chemicals. He said I was impossible to live with. It's okay, at least I got the house in the divorce." *Along with the mortgage.*

That's when I started to tear up, something I hadn't done since my mother's funeral. I was already two months late on my mortgage and panicked that I'd be in foreclosure before my disability appeal went through.

Damn, I had totally forgotten about the exam Social Security had set up this morning.

"Life is pain, Princess, and anyone who tells you different is selling something," Tom said with deadpan delivery, then laughed.

"Not funny!"

"Haven't you seen *The Princess Bride*? It is. It is… *It is* a funny, funny movie. They showed it at Oakmont once a week."

"No, my Mom only liked musicals," I said, tears streaming now.

When Tom's bottom lip started to quiver, I got it together and told him to take a nap downstairs. His nephew would come to his rescue.

"No way, no way," he screamed, drumming my kitchen table. "I lived with him for one week before he moved me…moved me to the Villas. I scared his children…scared his wife."

"Okay, now you're scaring me. Please stop banging the table." After a deep breath and brain scan, I said, "The children must be grown by now. It'll be okay."

I had to tuck Tom, still wild-eyed and shaking, into his basement bed and tell him he could stay for now. Then I climbed the stairs to my office and sat on my red silk stool for a meditation on Loving Kindness (which I was feeling a lack of right then):

May I be filled with loving kindness.

May I be truly happy and free.

#

My sister's callback assured me I would not be free (at least not of Tom) for the next two weeks.

"First, his nephew is in Europe. Second, I checked the updated CDC rules. You both need to quarantine. I'll stop at Whole Foods for you. Some of Matthew's old clothes could work for Tom. He can't even fit in his Elvis costume, so I might as well give Tom that too. And he'll love our karaoke machine. Glad to be rid of it."

Oy vey, as my grandmother used to say.

So, the Surrender Meditation next. But Tom called, "Time for Jeopardy!"

I struggled to answer when Tom asked during a commercial, "What time are the meals here?"

Good question.

"Is karaoke in the afternoon or evening?"

"I don't have a cook, an activities director, or caregivers. You can stay for two weeks to make sure you haven't caught the virus, but you have to go easy on me."

That night, I searched online to better understand Tom's disorder. I read:

Individuals with Asperger's often have abnormalities in their style of communication and speech, such as a repetition of vocalizations. They can have narrowed or restricted interests that provide a sense of security and comfort for them, becoming obsessive about and extremely knowledgeable in their field of interest. Being forced to leave their activities can cause extreme distress. They use self-imposed rules or obsessive routines that make them feel protected.

Not that different from my no-scent rules.

Miserable March

The next morning, I had to take more than several relaxing breaths when I heard Tom sneezing *and* coughing. Lily came as soon as I called, donning mask and gloves, with big tablets of wellness formula that smelled like Gilroy's stinking garlic festival. Since he didn't have a fever, she said we could assume Tom just had a cold.

Several days later, when I started coughing, I took the formula myself as the pills somehow no longer smelled like garlic to me. My sensitive sense of smell had been squelched—I couldn't smell fresh dog poop if I stepped in it twice.

After her daily phone check-in, my sister arrived wearing a mask and gloves, carrying gallons of chicken soup. Accepting no argument, she drove us to her hospital for COVID-19 testing. For the next three days, I was not only coughing, but doubled over with dread. We downed chicken soup and garlic capsules for meals, and zinc lozenges for dessert.

When we got the COVID results—Tom and I were both positive—I threw my meditation cushion across the room, cursing the compassion that made me bring him home.

Tom recovered while I lost strength, collapsed like a garlic-stuffed chicken roasting in my oven of a bed set to 101 degrees.

I complained constantly, although breathless and drained, while Tom nursed me—holding my icy hands in his warm ones, feeding me cup after cup of soup. When he brought in a deck of cards, I swatted him away.

"What? You don't have to sing," he said, shuffling the cards. "No singing during Gin Rummy."

"Leave me alone. Need to sleep."

But sleep was elusive as every dog in the damn neighborhood started barking non-stop. I finally drifted off only to wake to Tom singing "Red Roses for a Blue Lady" in a bedroom filled with pots of red geraniums I recognized from my neighbor's porch.

Sounds were now as annoying to me as smells were before. When I cussed about the noise of my phone ringing, Tom put it downstairs, only to drown out important phone messages from Social Security with the blasting TV.

Two weeks later, I was much better (I could tell because the strong peppery smell of the geraniums was overwhelming again). But there was now a Stay-in-Place order for the Bay Area. Deliverymen would now be my best friends. I wasn't sure I had any others because my bitchiness increases in proportion to how sick I'm feeling. Tom made himself scarce after I threw a flowerpot out the window, and even my sister Lily, who luckily never caught the virus, just dropped off more soup, took my temperature, and sprinted for the door.

Awakening April

With the return of sunny weather and a little energy, if not a spring in my step, I phoned Social Security to reschedule my disability review. A callback from a robot informed me that exams were on hold due to the pandemic. I needed those disability checks, since I'd already spent my savings on experimental medical treatments that hadn't worked, and now I was supporting Tom too.

"Goddamn it," I screamed at Tom, "this is all your fault!" He toppled an ottoman as he ran out of the living room, escaping the wicked witch. I set the ottoman back on its legs, while mine buckled. I sat down on it and sobbed.

Contacting the bank, I received a Coronavirus extension on my mortgage payments while being cautioned there would be added fees and fines to pay later.

If I lost my safe home, there was my sister's in Berkeley, but I was allergic to her cats, her new carpet and her teenage daughters' favorite toiletries. Tom would have to return to Oakmont.

I called Oakmont Villas' Manager to see why he hadn't transferred my big eater's monthly fee to me as requested. He said he had told Lily of their iron-clad contract and the formal 3-month notice requirement.

"Dahlia, I'm sure it's illegal that you absconded with Tom," he threatened. "I emailed Tom's nephew but have yet to receive a reply. Oakmont has more than exceeded all the disinfecting precautions regarding the virus, so just drop Tom off before I call the police, young lady…."

I hung up, wishing I could make a slamming noise with my iPhone. I imagined all the poisonings that would now happen in the Memory Care Unit with colorful disinfectant bottles all over the place to entice thirsty seniors.

Tom was watching the news, drumming his hands as he heard:

Around 1,600 Californians, both residents and staff, have been infected at senior facilities statewide.

"See, I *have* to stay away from Oakmont!" he called out to me. "I can't go back there and watch all my old, my old friends die."

I asked Tom if he could contact his nephew.

"You still want him to take me, take me away?" His eyes froze in fear as he slid off my beige leather sofa, his body turning limp like jelly with panic.

Where the hell was his nephew?

#

"Please shut off the TV," I said one blue-sky morning, wearing my mother's hot-pink straw hat. "I have a brilliant idea of how we can get exercise and fresh air without leaving home."

"But I was watching, watching this great…"

"It's so nice out. Let's pull the dead weeds in my backyard and plant a vegetable garden. Lily brought over some tomato starts and plenty of seeds."

"Why?"

"Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to garden and the entire neighborhood gets tomatoes. Ha ha."

He didn't get the joke but got excited.

"I can use them all! To make fried green tomatoes, spaghetti sauce, and…."

"You can?"

"Yes. My mother schooled me in more than Lakes and Rivers, Word Origins, Capitals of the World, and Shakespeare."

"You were home-schooled?"

"After third grade, I got less bloody…less bloody noses at home."

"Okay, the tomatoes are all yours," I said, hoping this "victory garden" of sorts would lower our grocery bill.

That night I dreamt I was in Las Vegas. Interpreting the dream, as I'm wont to do, I realized why. I was losing all my money, had no idea what day it was, and wanted free cocktails (if only my health allowed me to have alcohol!).

We were now on a schedule. Tom's rituals steadied him. I found an old whiteboard and markers in the garage, and Tom scribbled out a timetable, *somewhat* similar to the Oakmont's:

Today is _____?_____

7:30	Yogi stuff
~~9~~ 8:30	Oatmeal Wash dishes
10	Planting and hoeing
12:30	Shower
Lunch	PB&J for me Salad for D
2	Go for walk (wear mask) Quiet time for D
4:30	JEOPARDY!

On a piece of paper scotch-taped to the bottom of the board, Tom wrote whatever fun games he had in store for that evening: bingo, gin rummy, Trivial Pursuits or, his favorite, karaoke.

The only part of the schedule I enjoyed was Tom doing the dishes. I always wanted to add: *Find another living situation for Tom.*

Miraculous May

I missed the little socializing I used to do with my sister and girlfriends, who now all smelled like they bathed in fragrant hand sanitizer. So, I slowly learned to ignore Tom's incessant chatter (I now forgave the caregivers at Oakmont) and saw his company as a comfort as well as an inconvenience. The world was too much for both of us.

I stopped worrying about Tom's second-hand clothes from my brother-in-law. Most days I didn't get out of my comfy yoga outfits only to watch T.V., play cards, and teach Tom to meditate.

On Mondays and Fridays, karaoke nights, Tom used aloe vera gel to create an Elvis pompadour and wore the sequined costume that hung off him like tinsel on a Christmas tree. I found an old shawl in my closet to twirl around like Stevie Nicks, whose songs, especially "Edge of Seventeen," I liked to butcher. Tom always left me laughing when he squealed the refrain "Ooh baby, ooh, said ooh."

But while Tom became less anxious—I think my healthy diet and non-toxic lifestyle calmed some of his usual agitation—my financial situation continued to make me crumble. Things were going from downhill to desperate (Lily had no more money to lend—her husband was now on unemployment). And I would soon max out my credit cards.

#

After a grungy but glorious morning in the garden, dancing in the dirt over our first bounty, I took a long soak in an Epsom Salts bath. I dreaded making lunch for Tom. It would

comprise scraping out the stuck peanut butter from the bottom of the jar, like trying to shake the last nickel out of a piggy bank.

Surprises awaited me in the kitchen. Tom had made a colorful salad of homegrown lettuce, grated beets, and orange slices. Next to my plate was an airmail envelope from Tom's nephew, ripped open, smeared with red—I hoped it was beet juice, not blood. The envelope's contents and Tom were both gone.

I called Tom's cell over and over as I paced around the kitchen wondering what his nephew wrote that made him run away again. An hour later, I got back the same text I had received once before…an endless line of pink flower emojis.

In the dahlia dell, now blooming with pink petals unfurling from tight buds, I found Tom leaning forward on the wooden bench, not wearing his mask. Instead, an impish smile. He was hiding something behind him. Too tired to scold him and still sore from the strenuous morning gardening, I collapsed next to him, enjoying the compost-free breeze.

Tom handed me a white-tipped dahlia (he had ignored the *Please Don't Pick the Flowers* sign), then a Thank You note with a check for $6,500 from his nephew, notated Monthly Fee.

"I've been waving them in the wind to get rid of the inky smell," he said.

Far away, I heard an ethereal whisper of "What a Wonderful World." Tom started singing my mother's favorite song and then I joined in, feeling our lives inescapably entwined in the age of the coronavirus.

***

THE THREE DEVILS

(excerpts from a novella)

William Luvaas

PAGES 9-27

It was said that silent carriers filled with bad air went stalking victims once the foul air took control of their moral system. It was essentially a moral ailment. Never before in history had such a thing been seen, and humans had no immunity to it. It wasn't just that carriers—"Hunters" as they were called—were infected with foul air and might not realize it or were in denial about it, but that they purposely sought recruits and became quite literally predators upon their fellow man. This happened only after the ailment had progressed past the initial silent phase. Who could believe such a thing? Believe that the stricken chose to infect their own families? That they passed through grocery stores breathing foul air on packaged goods and vegetables, slinking along with cruel little smiles, knowing they would gain new recruits, much like vampires? Because, it was said, whoever touched what a Hunter had touched became infected. Some said college-age Hunters gathered on beaches among heedless young sunbathers. Moving their beach towels close to those still breathing good air, they would wink and nod at each other and pen healthy bathers in so they could not escape the foul air exhaled all around

them. A pulmonologist in Milano said the world could expect to see more Hunters among the young than among older populations. Of course, he did not use the term "Hunters." No one in official positions did. He called them "positives." Positive in what way? There was no way to test who carried foul air and who didn't. No way to tell by looking at them—or so we thought early on.

But many rejected such thinking. As skeptical as people might be about others' capacity for goodness, most weren't ready to believe that parents would purposely endanger their own children. Thomas Sanchez, that enthusiastic doomsdayer, was infuriated by such thinking. "You know why the Lord burned Sodom and Gomorrah, because the people were evil. You know why he condemned Cain to wander the earth in torment, because he killed his brother. Nah, righteousness is rewarded and evil is punished. God would never permit the slaughter of innocent children or defenseless elders."

This, after all, was during that time of elections when the candidates themselves, who all insisted they were negative, drew crowds of fanatic followers who breathed freely on one another, then fled out of auditoriums to breathe on others.

The Woman On The Corner was one of the first to report—first on Neighbor to Neighbor, then on social media—that the Hunters were accosting people on the street, wrestling them to the ground and breathing foul air directly into their mouths, pinching their noses closed as if performing mouth to mouth resuscitation on a drowning victim, except in this case drowning them with foul air. Once their victims' cheeks puffed up like balloons, they released their nostrils, and good air hissed out of their noses while foul air filled their lungs. The Woman On The Corner claimed to have seen one tackling another neighbor and performing this ugly act of moral violation on her. Macy wondered if it was Mrs. Hernandez. Mr. Taylor said this was

proof positive that the Woman On The Corner was off her head. "I never seen no one tackling anybody, and I walk maybe two hours every day. When does that woman ever leave her house? How she gonna see some air mugger or whatever the hell they are?" There were similar reports from Rome and Cairo and Beijing and, especially, New York: people seen tackling others in public and giving them mouth to mouth. But you expected that of New York even in normal times. Stock traders were said to tackle others on the trading floor, but they'd been doing that for years. It was a theory, anyway, that caught on mightily on the Internet, likely because it is a medium that thrives on paranoia. Some would say hate.

Still, early on, if they could have been counted, the deniers certainly outnumbered the alarmed. Isn't this always the case with bad news? We do not want to believe in calamity until we can no longer ignore it. If this weren't true, we would all be hiding under rocks. Young deniers congregated in large numbers in defiance of the foul air panic. "This is Y2K all over again," they insisted. "Much ado about nothing. Man up, dude. You can't walk around scared all the time. Hey, the air is bad everywhere. What else is new?"

Then came the epidemic of crows, hordes of them flying in tattered formation, scolding and squawking, rattling dice back in their throats as they occupied the branches of magnolia trees and weighed down palm fronds, staring hungrily down at us with their evil little black eyes. Upon seeing them, some people fled into their houses or cars, terrified when a murder of crows (as it is called) dive-bombed them. It was claimed the crows were conveyors of foul air; they thrived on it. "They's demons, you know," The Woman On The Corner said, "always has been. Just listen to them croak and tell me they don't sound like devils." She was constantly putting alarmist posts on Neighbor To Neighbor, which was once an informal community bulletin board noting street fairs and public meetings. There had always been an element of public anxiety on

the site: reports of broken car windows and stolen batteries and young men going door to door with clipboards casing houses, so that if you read Neighbor to Neighbor regularly you would think the neighborhood was a war zone. Now Neighbor To Neighbor contributors posted the latest reports of foul air hot spots, certain alleys and stores you should avoid. Some small businesses were forced to close their doors after a few such posts.

Others, the lighthearted, the glass-half-fullers, fed and encouraged the crows. They threw out snacks for them in their backyards. The crows gathered in flocks, screeching and chasing each other away. It was a point of pride to these folks to have crows follow them, fleeting from tree to tree as they walked down the sidewalk or gliding slowly overhead like dark drones. It was total rot and bird bigotry, they said, to imagine crows breathed only bad air and carried it with them to contaminate entire blocks. They were beautiful creatures. Very smart. Very savvy. They knew more about human beings than humans knew about them. *That's precisely the trouble*, one of the fearful posted, *they know we are in trouble, and they're closing in on us*.

It was said that the Hunters lost their sense of taste and smell immediately after their lungs filled with bad air. This was why they were so hungry—at least appeared to be to the few who witnessed them and survived to tell about it. Smell and taste went long before their lungs began to harden, before they began to tackle people on the street and violate them mouth to mouth. They were seemingly perfectly normal, mixing with others, including their own families, and suddenly found themselves unable to smell or taste. They become monstrously envious of those who retained their olfactory senses, even of their own mates and children. Grandmothers snatched food off the plates of their grandchildren and stuffed it ravenously in their mouths, thinking that it must be more nourishing than the tasteless food on their own plates, which was as bland as cardboard. The whole point of taste and smell is, after all, to whet the appetite. They

seized their grandchildren by the back of the neck and pulled their faces close to peer into their eyes, thinking them secret carriers—or about to become so—because they recognized each other. Alarmed families locked such aggressive grannies in a back room to keep them from terrifying the children, only to find, a few days later, their children acting in much the same way: seizing food off plates with famished, hostile little smirks. Imagine what it must be to eat tasteless food. You would lose all desire to eat. No wonder they looked so hungry. No wonder crows followed people about, hopping from tree to tree in hopes they had a scrap of bread hidden in their pockets, prepared to assault them if they didn't give it up.

This was one of the greatest horrors of the foul air outbreak reported on social media. Entire families mistrusting one another, locked away in separate rooms so they couldn't accost each other. What became of such families? How were feeding arrangements managed? Access to bathrooms? No one could be sure because they didn't dare venture into such homes, notorious repositories of foul air. Not even the police would step inside when they received reports of domestic violence unless they were equipped with hazmat suits, which few were. There were reports of family members killing each other, even reports of family cannibalism. This can't be believed. We may at times be monstrous, but we aren't monsters. Although a woman from Spain put up social media posts that went viral and were reported to have had more views than the Olympic Games, which went into great detail about how, first, their grandfather caught the foul air and seized food from his beloved grandkids' plates, then breathed foul air in their mouths. Who can believe such a thing? Then the six children ganged up on their father, who rapidly progressed through the stages of olfactory loss and other early symptoms of bad air, turning a greenish hue within four hours, his eyes gone hollow, his lungs, given the tortured way he was breathing, already beginning to clog up with mucousy cement. He chased his wife

around the house. She holed up in a bedroom and pushed furniture against the door to keep him out. From there she delivered reports on social media to a fascinated, if horrified, world, placing her iPhone against the door so listeners could hear crows squawking outside and her husband's rants, occasional screeching hullabaloos, either as if he was wringing the necks of crows and devouring them, feathers and all, or they were pecking greedily at him. At one point, we distinctly heard him collapse to the floor with a hollow thud. Poor man was a goner. Soon after that she said she was losing her sense of smell and pleaded with the world:

> Try to love one another, impossible as that seems in a time of hate.
> Confuse hate by turning it backwards into love. Stay away
> from others even if you are tortured by lack of touch. And, if
> you are young, avoid sex. God is testing us. Think of how much
> worse it could be: Sodom and Gomorrah or the Black Plague.
> God wants to learn if he made a mistake in creating us. He wants
> to know if we can remain good and hopeful even on the doorstep
> of hell. He wants to know if we are still a creation made in his
> own image and has devised the foul air experiment to find out.

Some were moved by this. Others said it was sentimental rot. Still others that it was blasphemy. Many thought the whole thing was a fabrication, since it was generally accepted that the Hunters deliberately posted misinformation to mislead and terrify the public, telling them such and such a place was safe to hike, only to be waiting in the bushes to leap on hikers. Telling them that only those with hollow eyes could be trusted. That the best way to defeat the bad air was to congregate on beaches where fresh air blows in off the sea. That wearing half a coconut shell as a skull cap kept bad air away. This explained the run on coconuts.

Scientists generally applauded and seized upon the Spanish woman's account, for it suggested that the greater the infusion of foul air the more quickly the victim was overcome by it. They had suspected this. Now the father's rapid decline proved it. Her account was made especially potent by the low, soothing timbre of her voice, so calm and nearly angelic, making the horrors she was reporting seem all the more horrendous.

But it wasn't just Hunters who deliberately posted misinformation. There are three devils, Willy Jefferson told his neighbor Hicks: *The Unknown* (which is to say "bad air"), *Fear* (the belief that good air everywhere is being supplanted by bad), and *Denial* (insistence there is nothing to worry about). "It's been that way through human history," he said. "Uncertainty, fear, and denial, the three potentates of human misery. The Bible is full of examples and great literature too. All three of them are hard at work now advocating for their position."

Beyond the coconut shells, there were other myths. Willy kept a list of them:

- Cow urine protects you from bad air (originating in India).
- Not a single surfer has been found with Foul Air Syndrome, because their lungs are full of good air coming off the sea (originating in California).
- Chili peppers drive bad air away (originating in Texas).
- Mockingbirds, which attack crows, are one of the heroes of the bad air epidemic (which seemed true enough to Willy).
- Foul air hangs above the houses of evil people, especially Democrats (originating, it is said, from a Baptist church in Florida).
- Bad air warps the air over Republican households (also concocted in California).
- Bad air is just good air gone bad.

This last was the most provocative, because it was true and said something profound about the nature of good and evil. Don't most people accept—all over the globe—that children are inherently innocent and good? It's only as they grow older that they lose their innocence and become acquainted with evil. Their good air goes bad.

This simple axiom sparked a worldwide campaign: SEQUESTER THE CHILDREN. Protect the innocent. Proponents suggested that if only we could sequester all the children in special structures built for that purpose, we could preserve their good air and prevent the bad from infecting them. It might have worked. But how long would they need to remain isolated? Weeks? Years? Their entire lives? There were heated arguments about this online.

Macy O'Brien, surprisingly, was a big advocate of SEQUESTER THE CHILDREN, possibly because she had no children of her own. While a fervid believer in population control, she was not anti-children. Rather she believed that only by limiting the birth of future children can we assure the well being of those already born. Quixotically, she was also a fan of sci-fi novels that prophesize the imminent end of the world, which gave her common cause with Thomas Sanchez. She stood on the sidewalk in front of his house while he sat on a lawn chair on his front porch, and they discussed what the Bible and sci-fi had in common: imminent disaster, the end of days, some lucky souls winging away to heaven or to distant planets, the near certainty that evil will eventually triumph over good, and so the world will end.

Poor Macy must dodge off the sidewalk into the street when passersby approached in case they were carrying bad air and didn't realize it, or they were among the deniers who made a point of walking close to others and breathing on them to express their skepticism, or they were, God forbid, secret Hunters. She sometimes had to run into the street to get away from them. None of them accosted Thomas since he had a shotgun leaning against the wall beside him and

made it clear to everyone that he would use it. He offered to let Macy borrow his .357 magnum pistol, but she abhorred violence.

"You know what *The Book* says: permit the little children to come onto me and forbid them not," Thomas said. "I can't understand why people don't want to do that now. It's the only way to save the kids from evil."

"So you think it's not foul air but an epidemic of evil?"

He opened his hands. "It always has been."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Literature suggests as much. Or at least considers the idea. Dostoevsky was obsessed with it, so was Joseph Conrad."

"And Saint Augustine."

"You're right, Tom, him too. What about your Jesus?"

"My Jesus!" Thomas Sanchez tilted his chin upward as if listening for instructions from heaven. Macy was the only person outside his family he permitted to call him "Tom." "You're right...you're right. It's true. He may be the only person in history who believed good will ultimately triumph over evil. The only one. That's why people love him."

"How about Martin Luther King and Gandhi?"

He considered this. "Right! They were messengers. And Mother Teresa."

Generally though, people did not look to religion for comfort during the foul air crisis, not even in this unusually religious neighborhood. Maybe faith once helped to explain and justify human misery, but such explanations were no longer convincing, not in an age of science and prosperity when suffering seemed archaic. Belief might provide the faithful a simple explanation for bad air, as it did for Thomas Sanchez, but couldn't drive it away.

#

Willy Jefferson still talked to his wife daily even though she had been dead for five years. She was one of the few people he ever talked to, which is to say he mostly spoke to the air. This made him singularly qualified to interrogate the foul air hypothesis. He told his wife Luella he was in a quandary about this whole bad air business, which had come to be known as "Foul Air Syndrome" or FAS. "I don't want to be a denier like Hicks next door. Well, you know the man. He believed 9/11 was a hoax perpetrated by the media and still does to this day. He believes this thing is a media invention too. Okay, maybe they've exaggerated it, but Hicks is a damn fool. You ask me, it's deniers like Hicks who are at greatest risk of catching FAS. At the other extreme we got the nut job up on the corner. Yeah, I know you're going to tell me she was brought up fearful and all and you feel sorry for her. But now the woman claims Hunters are camped on her front lawn, like a homeless encampment. I walk by there every morning and don't see nothing but her weed patch yard. I don't hold much water in this whole Hunter thing, anyway. Sounds like something Stephen King would cook up. Holding victims down on the ground and blowing foul air down their throats! That's cuckoo bird territory. So here's the question: Is there a middle ground between being either shit scared and living in denial? You understand what I'm saying? Yeah, I'm being careful; you don't need to worry about that. I go walking early in the morning. Look, I don't believe this crap about Hunters coming out at dusk, but why push my luck. Besides, there's no one out early and I value my privacy. I still sit out here to read. You know I won't give that up. A person needs some pleasures in life else there's no reason to get up in the morning. You know I enjoy talking to you out here. Gets my day

started. I don't even mind when Leroy or one of them walks by and asks how you're getting along and I can hear them grin. 'She doin' just fine, thank you, Leroy. How're you?'

"What I'm thinking, I should be helping out down at the food bank instead of sitting on my ass doing nothing. You understand? Now don't go on about how dangerous it would be. They don't have enough volunteers with so many people afraid of the bad air. I can wear a handkerchief over my mouth if you're worried. I'll look silly, but I'll do it. Gloves, too. I got to do something. Can't just stand by and watch it swallow us. You hear me? That's why I went to Nam. My country needed me. When all is said and done, some believe it's their duty to help out in bad times and some don't. There's volunteers and there's slackers. I'd like you to give it your blessing, Luella. The bad air might catch me up, but I'll go down fighting. Do nothing and my conscience will drag me down."

Meanwhile, Hicks next door was talking to his wife about how silly it was for people to be staying home from work. "If there's all this foul air people talk about, it could be anywhere: inside your house or right outside. No saying. Why would it be limited to people's places of employment? That don't make sense. If you ask me, it's a lot of propaganda, worse than the 9/11 hoax. Reminds me of the grassy knoll and all the conspiracy stuff after JFK's assassination."

#

Macy was teaching her classes online now, which suited her. She'd never liked lecturing. It was shyness that led her to be a bookworm as a girl and to choose reading as a way of life. Her students understood this and tolerated it, even stepped in to fill the void when she was

having an off day, as a student did their last day of regular class. They were discussing Kafka's *The Trial,* and the girl asked if other students ever saw the world as Kafkaesque. "He's brilliant at describing what can't be described. Like what's happening now with FAS. It's surreal." Another student told how a man had stopped his car mid-street and threw the door open to talk to him, ignoring other drivers who had to dodge around his car, honking their horns. "I'm not even sure he noticed. I was out for a run, and I stood on the sidewalk panting, trying to understand what he was saying. Something about a traffic ticket, and when he went to court no one was there. A sign on the Judge's bench said 'in absentia.' Then he got another ticket which said his fine was doubled for failure to appear the first time, and he would face jail time if he failed to appear again. So he went back to the courthouse—that very morning—and it was closed. Poor dude was sucked right into *The Trial*. Still, he creeped me out. When I took off running again, he followed me, jabbering nonstop with his door standing wide open, until it snagged on a stop sign."

What Macy loved most about teaching was how students came to realize that we are all living in our own novels. Literature is an expression of everyday life. The question is always: How much do we write our own lives and how much are they written for us by outside events? All of literature can be seen as an attempt to answer this question. It's an ongoing debate. Authors can be broadly divided into three categories:

- Deniers of Fate's final authority who believe character is fate, like Shakespeare.
- Those, like Flannery O'Connor and Kafka, who accept Fate's ultimate authority.
- And those who dodge back and forth between as if unable to make up their minds, like Mark Twain and Toni Morrison.

All three are viable positions. She saw students wrestle with this in their own lives, especially at a time like this, and found it gratifying to discuss it.

"So which type are you, Professor O'Brien?" the jogger asked her on that last day of meeting together in the classroom.

"Me?" The question caught her by surprise, and she realized she didn't have an answer. Perhaps this is why she taught literature rather than writing it, although it had been her childhood dream to become an author. The realization stunned her speechless.

So the girl who usually stepped in and took over when she was feeling off, proclaimed, "It's pretty obvious. Macy is an in-betweener; she doesn't favor one type of writer over another. That's why I love this class."

Macy was particularly afraid to ride the metro home that evening, even though she lived only two stops from USC and there were few people on the train. There was an ongoing debate about how long bad air remained in an enclosed space after a carrier had passed through. Some claimed that it could remain for weeks; others found this preposterous. Foul air always disappears. Consider the smell of cooking in a kitchen. It dissipates even when the windows are closed. What becomes of it? Does it seep into the walls or fall to the floor? Do we inhale and reprocess it? This worried her on that trip home. Was she reprocessing bad air?

She emailed her dean that evening: *I will be cancelling my in situ classes, Dean Whitlock. I understand the university hasn't yet come to this decision, but I feel it's the responsible thing to do. If I'm penalized, so be it. We will meet online until further notice.* She also decided that evening that she would write a novel titled FEAR OF BREATHING while she was in seclusion, and realized moreover that she was not an in-betweener at all but firmly in Flannery O'Connor's camp. Fate is the great determiner. Here was proof of it: FAS was providing her an opportunity

to write a novel, so she would do it. She was up until four a.m. She wrote fifty pages, then fell asleep with her head on the desk, exhausted.

The next morning, an op-ed appeared in the *New York Times* arguing that the Foul Air Epidemic was a result of global warming. Animals like polar bears and bats were being forced out of their natural habitats and invading habitats of other species, like grizzly bears and humans. While humans had invaded the habitats of hundreds of incompatible species that had once lived at a distance. *These invasive species minutely change the air's chemistry so that indigenous inhabitants are put at risk, as are the invaders. Our environment is becoming somewhat more anoxic, and those mediums which once enabled us to thrive, air and water, are slowly becoming toxic to us. We can expect an explosion of anaerobic organisms unparalleled for over three billion years.* He was proposing that humans are going to be replaced by bacteria.

When, bleary-eyed, Macy read the article late that morning, she understood that she was writing a post-apocalyptic sci-fi novel and that she had already prophesied what this scientist was proposing. Perhaps she was the genius that she had always believed she wasn't. The idea unnerved her.

Thomas Sanchez was also thinking along apocalyptic lines and spoke to Macy about it when she passed on her walk that afternoon. "Suppose this bad air hangs around a while like they predict. People will stop mating, you know. They'll want to keep their distance. My wife is already refusing to stay in the same room with me."

"Maybe that's a good thing. No...I mean...not you…I didn't mean...not your wife, Tom. I mean having fewer children. Maybe the world needs that."

"God wants us to have more children, not less. He commanded us to be fruitful and multiply."

"Yes...well, maybe...a long time ago. I'm not sure it still applies."

Macy observed that The Woman On The Corner had posted no trespassing signs on her front lawn. She was spraying the grass with Roundup when Macy walked by. "That kills the grass, you know," Macy said from a safe distance.

"I wanna kill it. The Hunters won't like it here so much if the grass is dead," The Woman said. "They's still human even if they don't act human." Macy realized she would have to base a character on The Woman On The Corner: she epitomized something. She was infected with fear. Also realized that she was being much more assertive than usual. Maybe writing was emboldening her.

#

A blackbird had been perched for two days on the head of the life-like owl decoy mounted high atop a pole overlooking the vegetable garden in Willy's backyard, meant to scare crows away, but this crow wasn't impressed. It made Willy nervous. What kind of bird was this? Other crows kept their distance, scolding the owl from the palm tree out front of his house. Maybe they were afraid of the defiant crow, too, sensing it was infected with foul air. Crow social distancing. The idea amused him. The bird's BB eyes fixed on him. "What's your problem?" he demanded. "You eating my strawberries?" He considered walking up and shaking the pole to shoo the bird away, but it seemed prudent to keep his distance, as he did from people lately. Perhaps this was a Hunter in the guise of a bird. Possibly there were Hunters among many species. He might throw a rock at it, but if he hit and killed it he would have to get close to dispose of its body. Besides, he didn't want to harm it if it was a normal bird, a fellow

animal with every right to live. It might even be Luella paying him a visit in another incarnation. She could be bossy and obstinate like a crow; she had always been fond of them.

"Not saying you are," he told the bird. "Just that you could be. Isn't no harm in talking to a bird anyhow. I went to the food bank. I wore a mask and latex gloves like I promised you. They told me to come back in two weeks after I self-quarantined. I told them I already did. They said another two for safety's sake. I could see they were overwhelmed: people stretched out the door and around the block. Whole families. A line of cars maybe a quarter mile long. It was like a scene out of the depression. Everyone out of work, out of money. The priest in charge saw me looking and shook his head. 'All this from a threat we can't see and can't be sure is real.'"

"'Oh, it's real enough all right. Real as a heart attack,' I told him. He said he never thought he'd live to see anything like this, which surprised me since he sees it every day: people without a roof over their head or enough to eat. Maybe not so many. 'That's different,' he said. 'That's man-made. This is an act of God. We can't see it, we don't know how big it's going to get or when it will end. It's the great unknowable.' I said the worst things are always the ones we can't see, 'cause what we can't see we can't avoid. Anyway, if I'm still here in two weeks, I'll go back." The bird shifted on its perch, causing the owl's head to bobble. Like it was asking Willy why he thought he might not be here in two weeks or how he could assume he would be.

"I've lived through worse. I'm a survivor. Sometimes I wish I wasn't, but I am."

At that, the bird leapt off its perch and winged straight for him, hovering two feet over his head with a great flurry of wings. Willy ducked and covered. His dog Jackal, who'd been lying beside him paying close attention to the bird as if sensing it was something more than a bird, leapt for it, barking and snapping. Willy fled to the house with hands shielding his head, Jackal

on his heels. He slammed the door closed behind them. His heart was racing; he hadn't been this shaken since the Tet Offensive in Vietnam.

"Damn thing got too close. It isn't no Luella. I don't know if you're full of bad air," he said, looking out the window at the crow, "but you're flying in it sure enough. I could feel it under your wings. Reminded me of the air over in Nam. Moldy jungle air. Death air." He could feel it clinging to the skin under his shirt, fetid and greasy. The bird was hovering just beyond the glass, treading air and glaring in at him with a primitive anger that was like nothing he'd ever seen. He worried that it would break the glass to get at him. It's eyes black and glassy as obsidian, forged in some angry fire from days when the earth was still molten rock. An omen perhaps that the world was turning molten again. He thought to get his gun from under the bed and blow the damn thing out of the air. But who knew what evil would spew out with its guts. He clapped his hands to chase it off. The bird flew over to perch on the back of the chair he'd been sitting in. It rubbed its beak against the fabric, inhaling what little of him remained behind. "What do you think it wants?" he asked Jackal. "Do they want to replace our good air with their bad? Is it some kind of hunger you think? One thing's sure: I'll have to quarantine for two weeks now whether I want to or not. I may be contaminated." In all his reading about zoology, one of his favorite subjects, he'd never heard of an animal behaving this way.

Willy Jefferson was a self-educated man. He'd come west with his family from Alabama when he was fifteen. Some said Willy was one of the brave black children who first integrated schools in Montgomery. He was beaten for it and the family targeted with death threats. So they fled west. Doubtless this was true since he carried a silent dignity about him, like one who'd acquitted himself well in battle and took quiet pride in it. He had two years of college, but poverty made it impossible for him to finish. He enlisted and went to fight in Vietnam, where he

acquitted himself well in battle again. Despite not graduating college, he was well-educated, self-taught, a voracious reader, always sitting out on his porch with a book. Folks would stroll past and call out to him, seeing only the top of his head beyond the low wall enclosing the porch, "Morning, Willy. What you reading today?" Proudhon, he would say or Thomas Mann, neither of whom they'd ever heard of. He loved novellas and had made it his task to read every one ever written in English and the three languages he'd taught himself: Spanish, French and Italian. Macy shared his love of reading and sometimes sat on the porch talking books with him. "Did your wife like to read?" she once asked.

"Nah, she loved to cook and garden. She kept my feet on the ground. Since she left me, I sometimes feel I'm going to float away."

"I know the feeling," she said. "Maybe it's living inside your head so much. Or loneliness."

It impressed him how honest Macy was, given her shyness. He once considered dating her, but she wasn't his type. High strung and fussy, skinny as a pole. He liked women with their feet on the ground and some flesh on their bones. He told her to let him know if she ever needed anything. "If anyone ever gives you grief."

"Who's going to give me grief? I feel perfectly safe here."

He realized he no longer did, intuiting that the comfort and security people took for granted was a thin glaze that concealed something ominous beneath that was bound to break out one day like a hidden fever. Maybe that day had come.

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There was no saying when he arrived, possibly during the night or early that morning before Willy woke up. Surprisingly, Jackal didn't sound the alarm as he usually did when a stranger approached the house: a single startling bark. Perhaps the intruder was very quiet. Willy was in the kitchen making coffee when he heard Jackal snarling at the front door.

"What the hell, Jacko? Someone at the door?"

Instinct stopped him from throwing the door wide open as he usually did, ready to give a hearty welcome to a neighbor or point at the "no soliciting" sign if it was a solicitor and bark, "Get the hell off my porch. Can't you read?" They always carried clipboards, thinking it made them look official. He cracked the door open just enough to peek out through the reinforced screen door. After the Rodney King riots, most residents had installed solid steel doors with thick metal mesh impenetrable to anything but a cutting torch, along with bars over the windows, since some rioters trashed their own neighborhoods. Willy was alarmed to see a man sitting in the lawn chair where he usually sat reading, turning abruptly to him when he opened the door. "What the hell?" Willy began, about to unleash a volley of curses, but something about the man's distorted face made him hesitate. Jackal growled low in his throat, teeth bared, lunging at the door, then backing off and scratching at the hardwood floor as he retreated. "Damn, Jacko, take it easy." Willy had never seen his dog show fear; he could be quite menacing.

The stranger's face was blurred, no doubt due to the steel mesh, his image pixilated so that the mind must fill in the blanks to make sense of it. But Willy's mind couldn't make sense of what it saw: the face blurred but not the body. The intruder's legs outstretched, his feet planted on a five gallon bucket Willy kept out front to wash the car. He wore scrappy tennis shoes, tattered khaki pants, a grease-stained hoodie bearing the logo: "All For One / And One

For All." Odd slogan for a homeless man to boast, he thought. Then again, maybe it wasn't. And why assume he was homeless? Who else would have the audacity to sit in his chair? Yolanda down the street once found an entire family camped on her porch and shooed them away with a broom. Perhaps he doesn't realize he's violating my space, Willy thought, since the stranger's demeanor asked, "What you looking at?" Or he was mentally ill, as many were said to be. You'd expect a homeless man to have a garbage bag stuffed with belongings at his side. Or a grocery cart out on the sidewalk. Opening the door wider, Willy didn't see one. He wanted the intruder to see that he was a large man and Jackal was growling nonstop at his side.

The trespasser's face was generic, genderless, neither young nor old, but not abstract, not featureless, rather the features were coarse and exaggerated, right out of a *Comedia dell'arte* bestiary: huge eyes, gaping nostrils, skin wrinkled as a prune from forehead to mottled neck—minutely wrinkled as if all the worries of the ages rested on his shoulders. As if, like Cain, the creature must wander the earth from pillar to post. Perhaps "he" wasn't the correct pronoun to apply to the trespasser, for Willy sensed that this being wasn't strictly human, maybe not human at all except in form. The correct pronoun may well have been "it." This sent a shiver down his spine.

Willy closed the door and leaned back against it, gripping his elbows and breathing. "What the hell, Jacko! Who...what's that, boy? Scared the hell outta me." Willy didn't scare easily. As a teenager, he'd helped integrate schools in Montgomery, Alabama. After his first tour of duty in Nam, he re-upped (his buddies thought him crazy); he survived the Tet Offensive, was on the Selma march back in the day and faced down crackers who spit in his face without flinching; he'd once nearly died of pneumonia, which left his lungs scarred before it moved on to the next poor bastard, because that's what ailments do: they hunt down their victims, roam

streets and hospital wards seeking the vulnerable, much like lions cull the weak from zebra herds. He'd once seized the blade of a knife that a mugger brandished at him outside the liquor store on the corner of Jefferson; it nearly sliced off a finger. The only thing that had ever truly frightened him was Luella's breast cancer. And now this…whatever it was.

Some threats, he knew, are limited, like a tooth ache; we can fathom the extent of the damage they're likely to do. Some are unlimited, like a stock market crash; the potential damage isn't readily knowable, but we know it will ultimately end. Worst of all are the existential threats, like Luella's cancer, which are totally life altering and unfathomable to us. The intruder seemed of this third kind.

"What we're going to do—" he whispered to Jackal who regarded him quizzically, likely wondering why he was whispering and why he didn't chase the intruder away "—we're going to leave him sit a while. No harm done, right? We'll come back in half an hour and see if he's gone, which he likely will be. Chase the bastard off if he isn't. That okay with you?" Jackal whined.

Willy fixed him a bowl of kibble with a bit of wet food mixed in. "Only two days worth left," he warned. "Hope they'll have restocked the shelves." Only half a bowl of granola left for him. No bananas. No milk. No one knew why the stores were out of most staples. They were facing foul air, not a food shortage, not a hurricane that disrupted the supply chain. Didn't make sense, but nothing did lately. Granola with water didn't cut it. Neither of them was much in the mood to eat anyway. Their thoughts were out on the front porch.

He went into the backyard to check the ruby red semi-dwarf grapefruit he'd just planted. A little nervous going out, looking this way and that, asking himself, "What's the problem? You worried the bastard has an evil twin or something?" He couldn't likely have scaled the fence

since it was eight feet high. Still, Willy patrolled the yard as if walking point, peering cautiously around corners of the garage and storage shed and into the garden. His son Justin would have ragged him about it. "Whassup, Pop? You look like a spooked rabbit out here."

Sometimes there's good reason to be spooked.

Jackal sniffed at the bottom of the steel gate on the south side of the house, vacuuming up smells from the space where it met the ground. "Isn't gone yet?" Willy asked him. "What d'you suppose he wants?"

Something more, he knew, than the recyclable cans and bottles homeless scavengers dug out of recycling bins. Willy had once chased them off, until Denny Tibbs admonished him, "What it cost you, man? The brother recycles bottles you toss out to buy him a slice of pizza. Always put your trash back in the bin, don't they? You doing them a good deed and don't cost you nothing." So he let them take it. Now and again, some poor wretch took a drink of water from the spigot by the front porch. He couldn't begrudge them that. Everyone gets thirsty. But he got howling mad the time a man took a dump in his driveway and Willy stepped in it chasing him off the property, stood with his foot stuck in a mound of human excrement left by a stranger, which was sucking the sneaker off his foot. He ran into the house to get his revolver from under the bed, tracking excrement across the floor behind him, and chased the man down the street, with Luella shouting after him: "Willy, are you crazy? Get back here with that gun." After scrubbing the floor, he threw his brand new Nike sneakers in the trash.

He ran the speech he would deliver to the man on the porch (if it was a man) past Luella, seeking her anger management advice. No telling what he might say if left on his own.

"All right, brother. I know it's hard times. Nervous times. People saying they never experienced nothing like it. We're all in this together, so I got nothing personal

against you sitting on my porch. All right? But there's a principle here, you understand? It's my porch, and I ought to have some say in who uses it. Besides, I like to sit out mornings reading a book and talking to my wife. Let's say you have a bag of crushed cans sitting beside you on the sidewalk, do I have a right to make off with it, brother? You gonna say I'm not using the porch just now and you're only borrowing it. I understand. Under normal circumstances, I'd say, 'No problem.' But these aren't normal times, brother. Man, I don't know if you're carrying bad air and you don't know if I am. I can't squeeze by you to get the mail without coming too close, you understand? Besides, I'm not sure of your intentions. Maybe if we could work that part out we could come to an agreement. Fair enough?"

Jackal cocked his head as dogs will do, as if to ask, "All that, really?"

"Just trying to find the proper tone." Because it struck him that this intruder might be one of the folks he would be helping to feed down at the food bank once he'd finished his quarantine. This was practice for that time. He didn't want to get off on the wrong foot. Call it a test run, right down to maintaining proper distancing.

He went back in the house, holding a finger to his lips for Jackal to keep quiet. As they approached the front door, he experienced that shiver of fear he'd felt earlier and admonished himself, "Nothing to worry about. Just some sad, homeless bastard taking a breather." To be on the safe side, he tied one of Luella's old scarves around his neck like a bandanna to cover his nose and mouth. Still, he hesitated before turning the knob. It was like passing a lurking cop car doing 85 in a 65 zone; you dreaded looking in the rearview for fear you'd see red lights flashing

behind you. Willy shut his eyes as he cracked the door open, hoping the intruder would be gone. He wasn't.

Asleep, it seemed, eyelids closed, smooth as a lizard's, contrasting the wrinkled skin of his face. Like shutters, really. He was draped wantonly over the chair waiting for him, Willy knew, biding his time. No chance he could get past him without tripping over his legs. Anger hit him like the palm of a hand against his forehead. He opened the screen door wide and shouted, "Y'r on my damn porch, man. Y'r fucking trespassing. Get moving."

The man's lizard eyelashes rolled slowly upward like an old-fashioned scroll top desk; dark eyes fixed Willy without expression. If eyes are windows on the soul, his were windows on an empty room.

"Go on. Git!" Shooing him away with a hand. "You want me to call the police?"

One corner of the intruder's mouth lifted in what wasn't quite a smile. He didn't speak—maybe couldn't—nonetheless, somewhere deep in his brain Willy heard him say, *The police don't worry me none*, as if the creature's mind had invaded his. It placed its hands on the chair arms as if to stand up. "Damn you!" Willy leapt back behind the steel door and threw the latch, snatched his hand away as if it had given him a shock. He stepped away from the door, fearing the creature would put his face against the mesh and blow foul air at him, but it remained frozen in that tense pose as if preparing to rise. *I'm here*, Willy heard him say without speaking. Jackal heard it too and barked furiously at him through the steel mesh, whined, backed away, then rushed forward to bark again.

How close did you dare be to one of these so-called Hunters? Six feet? Ten? One-hundred? He was too close. Willy closed the heavy inner door, ran to the bathroom and scrubbed his hands for a good minute, then brushed his tongue with a soapy toothbrush.

Couldn't say why. He hadn't touched the creature. It just seemed prudent. Admonishing himself, "This is silly. Go out with the gun and chase him off. He's got no right to be there...except maybe he does. That's the trouble! Nothing's certain anymore. Not security, not property, not common sense...nothing. Not even good air. Everything's on loan."

Nonetheless, he marched through the living room, gun in hand, Jackal on his heels, threw open the door and confronted the beast with the revolver. The creature stood up to greet him, not six feet away. His face remained blurred even without the intervening steel mesh, undulating as if heat waves washed over it. But not the body. Willy grabbed Jackal's collar as he rushed past him to attack the beast; the dog nearly pulled him off his feet. He just managed to slam the screen door shut before the creature stepped inside, then the heavy oak door behind it. That last image of the beast was one that would remain embedded in his mind and keep him awake nights as images from Nam had done for years, projected against the dark walls of the bedroom. The creature's mouth yawning open, teeth oddly spiked—like toadstools, with thin stalks and wide caps. Something hideous hung at back of his throat, seething as if flies swarmed over it. The empty eyes reflected cold, metallic light back at him. Whatever life the thing possessed was not animal life. And the smell! Like the catarrhal smell of bronchitis amplified many times over. The odor of foul air perhaps. Foul air was sitting on his front porch. It had come for him.

He retreated with Jackal to the backyard and gargled repeatedly with hot water from the utility sink faucet, having heard that hot liquid neutralizes bad air. Many things were said to do so. Some wore amulets of woven hemp around their necks, others rubbed aloe vera on their faces. Russian Orthodox believers drove the empty streets sprinkling holy water to keep it at bay. All of it nonsense, Willy knew, but also knew that in the face of such an existential threat we will try anything to comfort ourselves. In Nam, the boys fired into the air for a mad minute

before turning in, hoping to keep Charlie at bay—but actually betraying their whereabouts to him. During an earthquake in Mexico City years ago, a terrified man had knelt in the street to pray for mercy and was run down by a bus, the only casualty resulting from that quake. Action, whether sensible or not, gives us hope. He'd come far too close to that monster and was likely done for.

"It's all right," he assured Jackal, who had been nearly overwhelmed by the stench given his acute sense of smell. "Give it a little time and the smell will dissipate. It hangs in the air for a while. We should stay out of the living room for a few days until it leaves."

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CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Jessica Barksdale's fifteenth novel, *The Play's the Thing*, and second poetry collection, *Grim Honey*, were both published spring 2021. A Pushcart Prize and Best-of-the-Net nominee, her short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in or are forthcoming in the *Waccamaw Journal*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Tahoma Review*, and *So to Speak*. Her work has been recognized by *The Sewanee Review*, *The Wigleaf*, *The North American Review*, and *The Ocotillo Review*. Recently

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Mark Brazaitis is the author of eight books, including *The River of Lost Voices: Stories from Guatemala*, winner of the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award, and *The Incurables: Stories*, winner of the 2012 Richard Sullivan Prize and the 2013 Devil's Kitchen Reading Award in Prose. His stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *The Sun*, *Witness*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. A former Peace Corps Volunteer and technical trainer, he is a professor of English and the director of the West Virginia Writers' Workshop at West Virginia University.

Kathie Giorgio is the author of five novels, two story collections, an essay collection, two poetry chapbooks, and a full-length poetry collection. A novel, *All Told*, will be released in late 2021 by Austin Macauley Publishers. A poetry chapbook, *Olivia In Five, Seven, Five; Autism In Haiku*, will be released in August 2022 by Finishing Line Press. She's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize in fiction and poetry and awarded the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Wisconsin Library Association, the Silver Pen Award for Literary Excellence, the Pencraft Award for Literary Excellence, and the Eric Hoffer Award In Fiction.

Diane Koerner is a writer and environmental activist living on the island of Kauai. A former journalist, she now writes fiction when not hiking to waterfalls or swimming with dolphins. Her short stories have been published or are forthcoming in anthologies—"Panic in Paradise" in NOTHING WITHOUT US, and "Goats in Gotham" in STORIES OF THE NATURE OF CITIES. Under a pen name, she has published a collection of short stories and a novella.

William Luvaas has published four novels, including *The Seductions of Natalie Bach* (Little, Brown), and *Going Under* (Putnam), and two story collections. *Ashes Rain Down: A Story Cycle* was *The Huffington Post's* 2013 Book of the Year. Nominated for the National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, Pen-Faulkner and others, Luvaas has been praised in book reviews and featured on NPR. Fellowships include NEA, Ludwig Vogelstein and Edward Albee Foundations. Among his story awards are *Glimmer Train's* Fiction Open Contest, *The Ledge Magazine's* International Fiction Prize, and Fiction Network's National Fiction Competition. His work appears in *The Village Voice*, *Antioch Review*, *The Sun*, *Washington Post Book World*, *American Fiction Anthology* and more. He taught creative writing at San Diego State University, UCLA's Writers' Program, and New York's Writer's Voice. His short screenplays won Best Adapted Screen Play (Golden State Film Festival) and Best Short Feature Film (Delta International Film Festival). Fiction editor for *Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts*, Luvaas lives in L. A. with his wife Lucinda, a visual artist and filmmaker, and their Akita Mimi.

Douglas McBride was born and raised in Los Angeles. A collection of his recent stories were performed there as part of the New Short Fiction Series in 2019. He was named a finalist for Hypertext Magazine's inaugural print contest that same year, as well as for the 2020 PEN Emerging Voices Fellowship. In 2021 he was named a finalist for the William Faulkner

Competition in the categories of Short Story and Novel in Progress. He still lives in California, where his wife and two young daughters gallop around him on fairy-horse-puppy-dragons.

Shelli Rottschafer is a graduate of The University of New Mexico (2005). After completing her doctorate in Latin American Contemporary Literature she moved to the Midwest. Since 2006, she has taught at a small liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is a Professor of Spanish and teaches Spanish Language, as well as Chicanx and Latinx Literature. An outdoor enthusiast, Shelli enjoys spending as much time in nature with her partner, Daniel Combs, and their black retriever rescue, Makeda, whether along the Great Lakes shorelines or within her heart's connection to the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range.

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