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# TEMPE COMMUNITY WRITING CONTEST 2017

## Honorable Mentions

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# *The Game*

Christine Foy

· ADULT FICTION ·

Alicia's mom, known in the club as Marianne Rene Moldoff, scooped a bit of shrimp salad off her fork and turned it facedown beside the new cottage porcelain plate. The candle holder at the table's center was empty, but lace place settings and crystal water glasses balanced the look. A newly cut flower lay across the table's edge, a recent, "our valued patron" trend of the club. Marianne straightened in her chair and peered for a few beats at Alicia who immediately straightened. The early afternoon light in combination with the hushed murmurs of visiting couples created an atmosphere of listlessness, but Marianne pushed her plate toward the center of the table, leaning forward.

Taking his cue, a waiter in cummerbund and bow tie approached wordlessly to refresh her water. The stiff fabric of his dress coat brushed her arm. Marianne lifted a finger, and the man backed away, carefully cradling the glass pitcher.

"I'm so full," Marianne emphasized the words, a hand on her stomach. Alicia was going into the ninth grade. She was hungry. "Anything for my baby," Marianne had said in front of the waiter when they'd ordered. Three ounces of steak sat atop a thin, blood-tainted gravy. New potatoes, buttered and rolled in herbs, dotted the plate. Alicia let go of a roll clutched in one hand.

"Me too," Alicia said slowly, eyes on the fork she placed facedown next to the wide white plate, just as her mother had. "That steak was big." The waiter appeared immediately to whisk the plate away. Her mother relaxed in the tall backed chair.

"We have a big day today," her mother began, referring, Alicia guessed, to their afternoon of shopping. "You're getting older, and I want you to...be careful with your choices." She let the words sink in. "Red is the color this fall," she said, making star-bursting motions with her palms. "The ankles are bold and wide. You wouldn't think that would circle around so soon, but it's being done a bit differently — not a flare! Something that moves. Someone your age can wear that." Marianne leaned across the table. "You don't have to be as subtle as I do."

As she spoke, Marianne's lip twitched slightly at the corner. Alicia's eyes hung on that tic, her mother's words blurring into an indistinct mass. The details changed, but their meaning remained the same: "Be pretty." Marianne had been a fashion editor for a magazine — "*A huge part of the underground, cutting-edge fashion culture; one of a kind, really*" — that had been taken over by a mainstream operation. Marianne talked about clothes all the time. She made fun of the other housewives, using words they didn't know and then laughing shrilly at their blank stares. "Provincial" and "suburban wasteland" Marianne muttered on the way back to the car. Between grocery shopping and a tea time that was an excuse for *Borggreve* shortbread and soap operas, she flitted between late brunches and trips to exclusive outlet malls, spending hours over choices of beveled

or double-thick glass bottles for the foyer.

The steak sat in Alicia's stomach like a stone. She regretted the choice.

Alicia folded her hands in front of her on the table and steeled herself behind them. She broke into her mother's talking. "I was thinking about trying out for soccer." Alicia's heart beat hard. Silence filled the space between them, the interruption jarring Marianne. Alicia looked at her mother. Marianne was effortlessly thin, and Alicia was not, though she wasn't fat. There was little assurance that Alicia's waist might lengthen and thin into the slight, hourglass figure her mother had. Alicia's father was a barrel of a man. Alicia had taut legs, and her thighs rubbed each other when she walked. Her mother was blonde and tan, eyes sharp auditors of the weaknesses that surrounded her. By comparison, Alicia's brown hair made a halo of wisps around her face.

The waiter came over, but Marianne waved him off. Old couples left. The sun's yellow light burned through the bay windows. Marianne sighed delightedly and placed her chin on the back of hands, elbows on the table. "This is a surprise. Tell me all about it." She smiled thinly, eyes alight.

Alicia paused. The words tumbled over each other in her head, but where to start? She hesitantly described lounging on the lawn of the old library on an early spring day; the rays of an unobscured sun radiated her skin. A ball bounced near, startling her, and then legs, gangly and bare, rushed nimbly by. She watched the adolescent girl move the ball without thought between the insteps of her feet, racing. Uncharacteristically, she went to her, learned the girl's name. Alicia imitated the movements, the ball resistant to her unsubtle attempts. The afternoon dribble became a ritual at the lawn or park where girls who really played soccer welcomed her in.

Marianne listened without interruption, eyes fixed on Alicia's face, a small smile lingering. Then, her brow furrowed in puzzlement. "The only thing is the transportation. I won't be available at the drop of a hat to take you where you need to go."

Alicia was unfazed. "Megan is already on the team."

Marianne muttered the name to herself and looked at a spot on the floor. "Hmm, she's rather masculine, isn't she?" Alicia shrugged. "It's up to you, it really is," her mother said.

Alicia took the opportunity. "Maybe we can shop for some stuff. Tryouts are this week." Alicia took a sip of water, looked longingly away.

"I don't know if we have time," her mother replied. "Maybe next time. I *do* want to encourage you." Marianne's thoughts ping-ponged. "Just remember you're a student first," and, "I don't want you to be a visitor in your own home. You are a member of this family." She finally settled on, "I never thought sports were your thing. When did you find all this time?" Alicia shrugged, lost for words. Her mind went, instead, to the day on the lawn, her foot finally finding the right spot on the ball, the ball rolling obediently forward.

"Well, I didn't know you were doing all this. I'm happy you found something you like..."

Alicia thought she might convince her mom to at least buy some shoes.

Just then Marianne shrieked as a lanky blonde came around the foyer. Marianne's arm shot up in a wave, and the two immediately embraced, exchanging air kisses. Alicia couldn't hear everything, but she saw Marianne touch the woman at the elbow and then lightly on the shoulder, smiling broadly, laughter rolling like thin bubbles above her head. Her mother said something about "all the good work," the woman had done, and "how grateful that school must be. All the

poor children.” At this, Marianne shook her head in large arcs.

A boy approached the table. Alicia stood up but didn’t come around. “School is starting soon,” he said.

“Yeah,” Alicia replied, keeping her voice level.

“Sucks to be freshmen,” He said.

“We’ll be alright,” Alicia wanted to say but didn’t. The boy was startling, messy but attractive. He wore impossibly baggy jeans, a gaping hole at one knee. A long oversized black shirt hung over them. “I think we’re leaving soon,” she said instead and blushed.

“Fun day?” he asked.

“Shopping,” Alicia answered. She wanted him to go away and stay all at once.

He huffed, and Alicia shrank inside, but he said, “Most girls would love that.”

“I might try out for soccer,” Alicia said after a pause.

“I think that’s awesome.”

The boy weaved between tables, towering over them. He felt good about her playing; the thought gave her confidence. She wadded up a napkin and tossed it, catching on her toe. The wad bounced lightly into a miniscule basket at the host stand. The maître d’ scowled.

Alicia looked up. Her mother’s eyes gleamed as she held out her arms, beckoning. She shuffled toward her daughter in modestly heeled pumps. “After today, there will be a lot more of that.” She looked over her shoulder. “You two might be set up. That’s Misty’s son. She’s envious, says you have a unique look.” Marianne grabbed her purse from the hanger and exited quickly, the maître d’s salutation trailing her.

Alicia hesitated. She raised her eyes to the full-length mirror in the foyer, conscious of the maître d’s inconspicuous stare. The dress was stark. It had been suggested by her mom, now several paces ahead. The floral patterned fabric fell two inches above her knee and flattered each small movement. A gold belt finished the look. Suddenly, like a baby, she wanted to cry. The strange thought came to her that she wished she’d at least finished the steak.

# *The Less Lucky*

Nathan Young

· COLLEGE FICTION ·

Rob McManus had been my favorite author. I read him every day until I read nearly everything written and I would reread it again and not mind. That was around 1972. My wife and I were uncomfortably poor and it got to be stressful. After searching some time I took a second job as a night worker at a factory that dealt with steel. I had been trying a long time to send out stories and articles for some money but if I received word back it was rejection. I did not mind it so much but still we had no money and I had a wife to care for. I had read a lot over summer, and I had even written a lot, but when I took the second job in winter that changed.

It did not help that my wife loved to go out. The past summer we would go on walks or to restaurants and those were nice times, but it left me with little money and even less time. Still though I had been able to write by candle light when she slept, and that's where I got a lot of it done. In the winter, though, there was no time. And when I somehow found some the writing was bad.

I didn't like it, so I tried to talk to my wife one day when the bottom of the sun had merged with the skyline outside and shot forth its beautiful colors.

"Vanessa," I said. "I am very tired of two jobs. I don't get to do things I want anymore."

"But what do you mean? We have money now, and we go out every day, too."

"Yes, and the restaurants are delicious and the city is beautiful, but I don't have time to read or to write any more."

"What's the matter with that?"

"Well it's something that I love to do."

"Do you love it more than me?"

"I suppose not."

"Then what is it? You want to quit the fun and the money so you can read and write stories?"

"Well, yes. I was perfectly happy the way we were when I had only one job."

"But we were very poor."

"We could go out less," I said.

"But I love to go out. Don't you want to be able to take us to nice places?"

"Yes, it is nice. But I want to write too."

"Do you want it more than you want to make me happy?"

That was a really rotten question to ask and I was beginning to become disheartened. "I suppose not."

It stayed that way all throughout winter. When the leaves stopped falling and started to get their color back it was spring time, and that was when the big thing happened. McManus travelled a lot and there was talk of him staying in our town.

In the meantime I worked still. And one of the warm spring nights my wife told me very happy news, but I knew after that I would not have time to seriously write again for a long time. The second job would have to stay too. One thing about it did work though; my wife agreed to go out less in order to save money. I was able to write by the golden sunlight that poured through the blinds while my wife napped in between my jobs. She had begun to get tired more. I would not have time to send anything out, but at least I could write now for a couple hours during the day.

So it was 1973 then, and that's when Rob McManus did end up coming to our town. One day I called in sick for both of my jobs—something I had never done—and I went to McManus's. He was a sort of local celebrity, and it was not hard to find him. His house was on the outskirts of town on a hill where there were not many people. It was small and white, and you could see a shed in his backyard. I knocked on his door that was white too, and after a while he opened it. He was glaring almost, eyes squinted, and he said to me, "What do you want?"

It was surreal to have someone I revered so much in front of me, and I was slow and dumb to respond. "To talk."

His face softened a bit though. "About the writing?"

"Yes," I said. "About the writing."

To this he smiled, and it was comforting to see a burly, hard man like him smile. "Come on in."

I did go in, and it was plain inside. There was a beautiful wooden desk that stretched half the length of the wall it belonged to, and the desk was covered with papers and pens and notebooks and other books. And that was it; no couch or chairs or television. On the walls, however, there were pictures. Pictures of McManus holding massive fish, pictures of McManus with geese, pictures of a younger self when he was in the war. McManus went into another room to grab me a chair.

"Here," he said. "Do you want water or coffee or anything?"

I sat down. "Yes, please. Some coffee sounds good."

He left the room, and I could smell the coffee and could hear the pot gurgling. He came back and said, "So what all would you like to talk about?"

"I'm not all so sure."

"Do you write too?"

"Yes. Well, I used to. A little. I work too much now to write."

"Well that's a shame," he said. "There is nothing quite as beautiful or important as creation. That's all right though." He went out and brought the coffee in small tin cups like the ones you take camping. "I would like to read it if that's alright with you."

I was surprised at this; it was strange to me that this man who I held so high would offer me his help. "Sure," I said. "I would like that."

"When would you like to drop it off?"

"I can stop by before I work tomorrow morning if that works all right."

"Just right."

“You really are a great writer, sir,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“James.”

“Would you like to go out for lunch?”

“Okay.”

And we went out and drank a little and had sandwiches from a cafe. It was a good time, and I promised to drop off some writing the next morning.

I had not told Vanessa I called out of work. At the time that I left McManus’s I would have been at my second job already. I had many hours to myself, which had not happened for a very long time. I was not sure what to do, so I walked around until the moon began to grudgingly swim through the thick night. I walked to where I knew there was a nice and cool river, and I stripped off my clothes and went in. It felt refreshing to be cold in the warm night.

I also felt rotten though. I should not have offered my writing to him like that. The writing was no good, and I was wasting his time. I stayed in the cool river a while before going to a warm bakery where you can smell the bread from down the block and you can feel the cold melt off you. I ate there, and then it was time for me to go home.

The next morning I woke up early to stop by McManus’s. I knocked on the door and waited a minute, and as I was deciding to lay the papers on his doorstep he opened the door.

“Hello, James!”

“How are you, Rob?”

“I’m good,” he said. “Is this your writing?”

“Yes, but Rob if you don’t have time, please don’t waste any of it on this. I should not have imposed in the first place.”

“Don’t forget, I was the one that offered it,” he said. “I’ll read it, and I’ll be happy to do so.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Come by early tomorrow morning. I’ll be up. We can talk about the writing and something else too.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do that.”

‘*Something else too*’ he had said, and it stuck with me for the rest of the day.

Vanessa was still awake when I got home from work which meant she had stayed up for me until I got home, for it was very late.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing much. I just want to talk.”

“About what?”

“You, really,” she said. “James, we won’t have time for much of anything besides the child once it comes. I just want us—want you—to understand. I don’t want our kid’s father to be locked up in his room every time he has a second to be reading silly books or writing silly stories. I know you love it, and I’m glad that you do; but there won’t be time for that for a long while, dear. I just want to make sure you really understand that. It’s okay with just you and I, but it won’t be that way much longer.”

“I know, dear,” I said. “I was about ready to give it up anyway.”

I woke up early enough so that the moon was still out a bit; the sky had turned from black to a navy blue, and the moon was setting towards the north. I took the car to Rob’s little white house, and by then the east side of the sky was beginning to brighten slightly. Seldom was I awake so early, and it was depressing to drive with no one out and with no noise but the motor of the car.

I knocked on the door, and after a minute I thought I had perhaps come too early. He answered, though, and he was lively enough.

“Hello, James,” he said. “Come in.”

I did, and he brought me coffee and cream and asked if I wanted any breakfast.

“No,” I said. “Thank you.”

“James, I will be frank with. Your writing is really remarkable.”

“You can tell the truth,” I said. “Really, Rob, the truth will help me more.”

“I mean it very seriously. I’ve not read writing like this in a long time. It’s refreshing, really, to read your work.

I did not know much of what to say. “Thank you.”

“Listen,” he said. “I’m taking a trip to the Virgin Islands for a while pretty soon—I’ll be gone a year, maybe. I would love to take you with me. I could pay you, say, a dollar a day? I know it’s not much, but we could write and fish all day, and the Islands have really beautiful country. I know of a lot of publishers and papers that would love this if I were to shove them a little.”

“I’ve tried sending work out,” I said. “It’s never been taken.”

“Then they are rubbish papers.”

“Thank you.”

“Come with me to the Islands, James. I believe this is what you really need as a writer.”

“There is nothing more I could ask to do than that, and I’ve never said anything more true before. But I have a wife and now a child on the way. I’m afraid I can’t leave.”

“Don’t say that yet. Go home, and let’s meet again tomorrow morning to talk and have coffee and breakfast. It’s only for a year.”

“Okay,” I said. “I will see you tomorrow.”

“It really is excellent writing, James.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I left the little white house on the hill and could not remember being so excited. It was a lot to ask, but maybe Vanessa would understand. This was something much bigger now. And he was right; this was what I needed. My heart beat faster whenever I thought of it, and I spent the rest of the day coming up with the best way to tell Vanessa.

Vanessa woke light and beautiful, as she always had. “What is it, James?” Sleep was thick in her voice.

“I’d like to talk if you wouldn’t mind.”

“It can’t wait?”

“I’d like to talk now,” I said. “It’s important.”

“Okay.”

“Do you know Rob McManus? The author?”

“Yes,” she said. “In fact he’s moved to our town.”

"I know. I've seen him."

"When have you seen him?"

"Before my morning job," I said. "Anyways I showed him some of my writing, and he's really impressed. He wants me to go on a trip to the Virgin Islands with him. He says he knows papers that would love my work."

"Darling, that's great! You haven't missed any days of work too, so I'm sure you could take a week or so off for the trip. What a fun time that will be! I'm very glad for you, dear."

"No," I said. "It's for a year; I would have to quit my jobs and miss the baby's birth."

"Oh, James—"

"I know, dear. I know. But an opportunity as beautiful as this had to at least have been tried."

I did not go to see Rob the next day. It would have been too sad for me, I think. I hope he understood. I thought he did, but it hardly made a difference; it was such a damned awful thing either way. So I worked all day and all night that day like I had all winter and like I would for several years after Rob McManus's departure for the Virgin Islands. I later heard he decided to stay at the Islands. After a few years, when our child was old enough, Vanessa told me she wanted to vacation.

"Somewhere really beautiful," she said. "We have the money for it now."

"Yes," I said. "We do."

"Where would you like to go, dear? Wherever you want."

"I can go anywhere."

"Would you like to go to the Virgin Islands to see your old friend?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"What is the point?"

"Well, okay. What about Cancun? Or France?"

"Those sound fine."

And we went to France, and I got to live the writer's life; we drank, we walked the streets of Paris with the lights and the smells and the people, and we ate at cafes. It was not a good time for me.

The kid grew and I worked hard all the while, and I made enough money to send him off to college. He did well in school and in sports, and Vanessa and I were both very proud of him. By the time we sent him to college, any youth or ambition I once had had been drained from me and the well was now dry, cracked and thirsty.

I worked many years more until I was a very old man, and then I worked some more because you cannot think much when you work. Sometime around then came the death of McManus. It was headlined in the local papers, and the story talked about the history of his life and his works. It included a letter he wrote near his death too.

*To whom it may concern,*

*I am getting very old now. And I suppose I am writing this for no other reason except that I am a writer, and it is what I must do. I have lived very long and very happily, and I am blessed to be able to do what I love. It has been such a great life because of it. I have travelled the world, and as a young man, even in my most ambitious dreams, I had never believed I would be able to write for a living and live out my final days in these Islands that I love. One has not seen beauty until one comes here.*

*In my life I have few regrets. I have made some big jumps and sometimes I have landed hard on my ass. That's okay though; you learn and get up again. It's a far better choice than to not jump at all. The only thing that makes me sad anymore is seeing so many people in my life that never took the jump. In fact, when I was much younger (before I had even moved to the Islands), there was a young writer who was one of the most bright, most promising writers I had seen. His work was great—beautiful even—but it had so much more potential. He could not come with me because he had responsibilities, but I bet he is sad now. Perhaps he may even read this when I am finally dead. If he is, I want him to know I still read his stuff from time to time, and it is still a treat to me.*

*That is the thing, though; you must take the big jumps to be happy. It is this man and several others that make me sad. There could have been so much beautiful writing and a few more happier lives.*

*Like I said, I am very old. Death is on the horizon, and He is coming to me soon enough. But I am not worried or scared. I have known since a very young age that I will die, so I am prepared. I have lived the happiest life I could and Death will have to take it knowing I do not mind, and I hope that irritates Him a bit.*

*Thank you to everyone who has helped make my life the beautiful thing it has been. I hope you all got to live as great a life as I did. I will see you all soon enough.*

*Love always,*

*Rob McManus*

Never before had I felt emptiness like that. It was the instant I found out I had wasted my life. And that is something you cannot get back. I did not know what to do after I read the letter. I sat at my desk for an hour—maybe more even. I was too empty to cry or yell or do much else but sit. So I sat, and I let the thing sink in.

Once it did, I reached in a drawer and pulled out my very old notebook. I got my notebook and began to write; it made me feel even worse, and then I did begin to cry. But I am a writer, and it is what I must do. I began to write, and after a while I began to feel good.

# *Misfortune*

Carlos Pulido Martinez

· HIGH SCHOOL FICTION ·

It seemed unnaturally unfamiliar that today. For the first time in years, I had outplayed my alarm. With much ease, I sat on the edge of my bed and stared in awe at my alarm clock that signaled exactly 3:00 a.m. It was slightly concerning when I realized that this was precisely one hour past the time that I had gone to bed. Even so, I was brimming with energy. It felt like I had never had such a good sleep in my life. All the clutter in my mind and distress in my body had been wiped. I perceived a certain emotion of being limitless. My typical irritated mood was no more and in its place I found a sense of unfathomable power. For a second, I was convinced that this was a dream, but this was undeniably real. I must admit, I was dumbstruck. Had I been drugged? Was I dead? I ignored these absurd propositions, though it was difficult with this extraordinary scenario in hand. Usually reality was never this kind to me. This notion of absolute eagerness was a very rare occurrence for me.

After some time elapsed, or so I thought, I glanced at the alarm clock's bright red LEDs once more, only to find they still marked the same time. I decided that the batteries were in the process of dying out and promised to replace them later. My priority now was to find the correct time. I reached for my cellphone and was astonished when I saw that it, too, reported 3:00 a.m. I dug in my drawer to find my watch. Same result. I desperately rushed to the living room in search of any additional clock. Who was I fooling? I had never owned a clock. The only exception was an old, rectangular, obstructive gift that I received from a friend many years ago. It had nicely found a place in my closet where it primarily served as a jacket holder, given its wide and stable base. To worsen the situation, as I took off all the clothes from it to reveal its face, I remembered that it no longer functioned correctly. While placing everything back, I couldn't help but expel a loud chuckle, when I saw that it, too, marked 3:00 a.m. I revisited my watch only to find the minute-hand pointing at the 12, and the hour hand at the 3. I wasn't convinced. "Don't lie to me!" I shouted jokingly. How could it be that from the moment I woke up to now, not even one minute had passed? I stared at the second-hand, which was also motionless, with so much intensity, as if expecting it to elicit a response. Now confusion ruled my mind. Most definitely, I had been drugged or all the clocks in my home had been altered. Whichever, I certainly was in for a very peculiar Wednesday morning.

I took a peek outside the window and saw empty streets and a solemn, dark sky. It was starless, moonless, and with no signs of the sun rising anytime soon. To top it off, even when these very strange events were occurring, I was still affected by the inertia of the energy that I had mysteriously woken up with. It persisted and challenged me to be more active. This made it impossible to go back to sleep. I settled for a shower. After all, I would still have to report to work

later today.

The same positive charm accompanied me everywhere I went. It was as if I had unlocked the way to living every moment always enthusiastically. Those small details that usually went unnoticed in my routine life, today were ideal to brighten my mood even further. The drops of hot water felt heavenly, as warm steam rose up. The sound of streams of water gushing down offered me a peaceful trip to a hidden waterfall where endless liters of water harmoniously fell in bands splashing against my skin. Upon finishing, it only felt adequate to dress particularly nice. I favored a white dress shirt and a splendid navy blue business suit. I added brown loafers and a tan leather belt. If I had to trade not knowing the accurate time just to feel this sensation everyday, I would not hesitate to choose it. Afterwards, finishing touches of a light blue tie and a stylish pompadour did the trick. I grabbed my tan trench coat and portfolio and headed for the door, determined to find the correct time.

Within seconds of exiting, I expected to feel the remorseless cold of a typical winter in Northern Illinois. Those fast winds that clashed against trees and made them shiver, also clashed against my skin and instantaneously defeated me. I knew the clothes that I wore were not going to be nearly enough to handle a monster of this magnitude, and all the snow that had fallen on Monday was currently frozen, which would only add to my demise. Instead I found something different. Something pleasing. Don't get me wrong: All of these winter strikes and a freezing temperature were still present. The difference was within me. It was as if my sensation of objects and events had been severely disturbed since I woke up. I could only perceive a gentle, mildly cool breeze swishing through my face. Then it began snowing.

I took a few steps, carefully balancing myself between clumps of snow and sheets of ice. When I had walked enough to see past the trees that surrounded my complex, I noticed the vastness of my neighborhood, which shone with the absence of people. Not a single soul outside, not a single light turned on. I continued walking in the direction of the local train station, which I regularly used to get to work.

The snow was falling harsher, almost cruel, and to a point where it became difficult to see. It also became difficult to walk with a forward face because every time I glanced up, a sudden wind gust would attempt to slash my face. I walked for a long time. Two blocks downhill, then turned right. Walked straight for about three quarters of a mile and at the corner of the last block I saw a small light coming from inside a bakery. It seemed to be the only place that was open at the time. I was overjoyed at the possibility of seeing another person, and the pure thought of the aroma of fresh bread only made me more impatient. As I entered, I noticed a distinct atmosphere to the one that I had perceived previously.

Perhaps this was because I was greeted with a bitter face. A slim, middle-aged man with a sour look, and whose dark eyes tracked every movement I made since I entered, offered no response when I spouted a subtle greeting. I ignored this man, and proceeded towards him and the register. Before I gave a forward step, he held his palm up and abruptly motioned me to a stop.

"You should have been more careful" the man angrily exclaimed.

"Pardon me?" I replied with a confused tone.

"You should always be more cautious when entering someone else's property," he yelled in a loud yet disappointed voice.

“Listen, sir, I regret whatever I may have done, but I’m really not looking for trouble today. I’ll leave now, and we can forget about this unfortunate incident,” I claimed in an effort to sound confident, but in reality I began feeling uneasy. I could feel the tension in the man’s tone and I truly did not know what had upset him.

Before I had a chance to turn away, he quickly pointed at my feet and burst out laughing. “No, no, no. You, son, misinterpreted me. I ain’t mean no harm either, I just wanted to let ya know you walked right into that ocean, and I thought that with your fancy shoes and everything, I should let ya know, ya know?” The man suddenly switched to an innocent tone while hysterically chuckling. I looked down at my feet and, sure enough, I had stepped right into a puddle of coffee. I couldn’t believe I had not noticed it. I had made a fool out of myself and had not even realized it. Although, I must admit, I was relieved the man didn’t mean other business. I offered my systematic apologies and tried changing the subject. He offered me a few wipes, but it was of no use. The sole was covered in a layer of stickiness that would require more than a simple wipe to fix.

“What can I get you, son?” he asked, partly still laughing at the joke I had become, as if it was the most comedic act he’d ever witnessed. I gazed and at random made my request.

“Two slices of banana bread and a regular will do,” I demanded with the urgency of wanting to leave as soon as possible. As soon as I mentioned regular, the man broke down in tears of laughter. It took him over a full minute to regain consciousness. And when he did, he gave the most bizarre advice I have heard. “Listen, I know you are in a rush to get places, but don’t rush, ya know. Time is no longer a constraint for you, ya know. You will soon be taken to where you belong and in that place, those things that haunt your head will be no more. It’s alright to be afraid, ya know. I was scared when it first happened to me, too, but that was back in the year of 1850.” As soon as he finished what was supposed to be a passing down of knowledge, he suffered another mild laughter attack. At this point I was convinced that at the least, one of us was insane. I just couldn’t tell if it was him and his fairy tales, or me for imagining that he existed. But while we were at it, I thought it was only right to contribute to the lunacy.

“By the way, speaking of 1850, do you happen to know the current time and why the streets are empty?” I immediately regretted it, but it was of no use, as he was already crafting another demented response.

“Son, I tell you again, time does not exist here, and there are people here, you just have to spot them, ya know,” he said, absolutely convinced.

I opened my wallet, handed him a five and said “keep the change.” What he said next sounded like a warning more than advice but I overlooked it because he had lost credibility the minute he started telling his tales. “Y’all are the same. Y’all think I am crazy, ya know. Well that’s all right, I guess you will believe me when it happens to you, ya know.” I simply nodded, grabbed my purchase, and walked out of the store.

I walked a few blocks east and entered the train station. Surprisingly, the sun began showing early symptoms of appearing soon. The station was filled with people. It certainly was pleasing to be back to reality after such a crazy morning, I stood in a line where my fellow Chicago commuters had impatient expressions on their faces. Once the train arrived I sat in the back and shared seats with a gentleman who was about my age.

“Excuse me. Would you mind telling me the hour?” I asked.

“Oh, why yes, of course. It is quarter ’til one,” he responded.

“Are you sure? It’s just that just a few minutes ago, it was pitch dark,” I questioned, fearing that I was four hours late to my job. The man assured me that he was telling the truth and claimed that it had been long since the sun rose. However, one thing that stood out was that the gentleman’s watch had a large scratch across its face. In fact it seemed to have a completely cracked face. I felt impatient and sought the conductor’s assistance; I asked him how long he thought it would take to arrive to the city. He threw a funky look.

“What city are you referring to, sir?” he enquired.

“What do you mean. The only city on this route. Chicago. Chicago!” I recalled answering back in an impolite manner.

“Sir, uh-um, I believe you are in the wrong train,” he smiled jokingly. Other passengers who overheard our conversation slightly giggled. I became furious.

“I need answers. I need answers immediately! Tell me the time, and tell me where this train is headed, and don’t play any more tricks,” I ordered.

He began, “Well you see, there is no time here, and this train is headed home.”

Before he could finish his thought, another passenger interrupted him.

“I think he doesn’t know yet,” he stated with self-assured character.

“That I don’t know what?”

The passenger set up tension in his speech as if about to reveal a misfortune.

“There is no more Chicago. Those years have ended for you and those moments will not resurge today, not tomorrow, not ever,” he argued.

My jaw dropped because I already knew where he was going, but I still looked at him in doubt. He finished: “Don’t you get it? All of us aboard this train are dead. You are dead!”

# *My Diagnosis in a Word*

Rena Maas

· ADULT POETRY ·

There is a word in my mouth  
Smooth as a river rock  
Hard as forged steel

Its searing heat burns  
through my nostrils, my tearducts, my eardrums  
seeking its escape

It pushes against my heart  
and I brace against its crush

The word runs sharp through my veins  
like shards of glass it rips and tears

I stay still through the pounding and burning  
I show nothing on my face

I cannot expose it to the air or let it out  
Its radiation would scorch the earth beneath my feet

I need to cage it  
like the animal that it is

I build for it a sack  
of blood and spit and mucus  
and bury it in my cheek

It constantly seeks its freedom  
to soar free and far like my soul

Though many doctors have spoken the word  
I know I must never  
dogs would howl, children would run and hide

those around me would be brought to their knees  
though I alone would be destroyed

I must control it

I want to drown it in whisky  
or smother it with fast growing vines  
whose seeds I eat with breakfast

I could chew on it, gnaw at it  
Until I created a weakness  
Then pull it side from side, pole from pole  
I would never work

I need to bite it clean in half  
Like killing a snake  
To break the syllabic bond

Only then would my blood pump unrestricted  
and my muscles loosen

I could lay down then, just where I stood  
and sleep one thousand days

and when I awake  
I would awaken with clarity  
with neither taste nor feel  
of that stinging burn, that biting bite

At last I could return home  
not forgetting but having never known  
My body going on without its soul

# *Las Vegas, 1997*

Ahmani Fatari-Daniels

· ADULT POETRY ·

When I was four years old,  
My Granny would send us kids out to play.  
In her chair she'd rock herself to sleep.  
Out into the hot sticky mess we went.  
That's when he would lay me down  
on my back covering crispy grass,  
unbuckle my overalls,  
and send my Tweedy Bird panties  
scooting down to my ankles.  
He would then attach his chest to mine.  
I remember how when he pulled away  
the sound of Velcro circled in my ears.  
He'd push through, his face hovered  
above me, and his shadows tied themselves  
to the ground next to us.  
I remember noticing his skin  
how it looked like the mud pies he  
had helped me make earlier  
I noticed the ash that cracked across  
his face. In his brown skin he carried Granddaddies  
eyes, like dim-lit candles  
when he clenched them shut  
I believe he shut me out; left me in the dark.  
I remember noticing his hair  
and how it stuck up like  
the grass we laid in.  
Perfectly plowed rows  
his hair of thin tiny curls.  
He'd then lean into me,  
quicken his pace,  
and push off of me like  
a seesaw. I could feel  
the rubbing of his shoes

on my skin. It felt like  
Indian burn running up my legs.  
When I would try to see past him,  
I remember noticing  
the clothing lines hanging  
over us like double Dutch  
ropes. They rocked back and forth  
mimicking His motion.  
I once saw a cocoon wrapped around the  
lines; hanging. It rocked too.  
Looking past the clothing lines,  
I used to see the sky all around  
me. It always seemed so far away.  
My eyes captured its images like a lens  
of a kaleidoscope. I remember seeing one bird,  
then two,  
then too many to count.  
I once watched a whole flock of  
birds watching me.  
I stared at them for so long  
that they had to begun  
looking like the patches  
of black feathers on Granny's church hats.  
He'd then rock harder.  
The wind beneath him would stutter. He'd stop,  
roll over, gather his things, and leave.  
His shadow would finally move  
and unveil the sun.  
I'd close my eyes and bake. I'd see thick  
reds smeared on my eyelids,  
and the sun peeking through their edges  
invading with bright yellow fingers.  
I would lay there sunken into the ground.  
The locust would sing with the power lines.  
This had always put me to sleep.

# Hannah Weisman

## Love Song

· COLLEGE POETRY ·

### Part One: Philia

I called your name as begrudgingly as I could because you were hollow and hollow boys sink.

Yet the person that descended the stairs wasn't you  
not the busted filament the sweet girls stepped on.  
not the melophobic nightmare I'm trying to wake up from.

Oddly enough, you were the sun. Just for that moment, all primrose and cotton, like I have never seen. I'm thrilled by the transformation, but there isn't time, and who am I to give a compliment?

You squeezed my sunburns and everything felt as it should. You took everything I had as I knew you would: stubborn and selfish.

There is something to be said for the calloused path where flowers still grow.

And just like that, it was easy enough to leave and not look back.

Doesn't

that

just

eviscerate

me

now?

These golden glowing memories won't fit on

a slab of stone in the far end of the yard.

You were a friend of mine, but now, you're a curse. When your name is spoken, a room goes silent.

Sorrow isn't mysterious.

This is all there is, all of our midnight drives to nowhere mean nothing.

Now, we're here.

Now, we're this.

Now, we're nothing useful.

Anyway, I'll come by again tomorrow.

It's not like you're going anywhere.

### Part Two: Ludus

I'm not worried about you, sweetie.

You're not going to tear the stars out of the sky and burn them in a trashcan by the freeway anymore. I know that much.

You explained it to me: you only keep them in your pockets to hold when you get cold. I don't mind, because you need them to fall asleep and I don't do that anymore.

I prefer when the nightmares build up in my brain and I bite my lip till I taste blood. I like to keep time with the ghosts on my back porch and dress them up like we can change who they were and what they did. Like we didn't promise anything.

The rules are very clear, I think, in that we've made too many promises. Between the two of us, there's barely enough backbone to cross a highway, enough rage to make a few laps around the track, enough confusion to give our mistakes a holy name.

The rules are clear in that they're written on the back of a brown paper bag and I'm sorry I didn't notice when I threw them out. My car was a mess and I just can't stand having receipts.

This isn't about love, though I suppose it could be. If you'd asked nicely. If I hadn't said tomorrow. If I hadn't started early. If I had a clue what it was.

For now, we are eternally, simply together  
in a yellow house at the end of the road  
we can have a piano in the garden  
and no one can break all those promises.

There's still twenty-four hour diners, pancakes, one flavor of tea, and no one needs to run away just yet.

### **Part Three: Agape**

They keep telling me what makes the us good is the urgency.

The ripping at your skin

I need to draw your smile  
need to see if your skin feels like I dreamed it two days ago.

But I don't believe in love and they don't understand why

Believing is already so hard to do

the way a mouth shapes words but never shoves them out,  
because my next move has to be  
right right right  
but then it's  
average

I don't carry much with me other than

shaking hands because the car won't heat  
the green light reflecting off of your eyes from a clock three minutes slow.  
and a box of handwritten letters in pink and blue and black pen burning through your  
pocket, every corner pronounced,

No hush you need to save it.

No it needs to matter in just the right way  
and of course there isn't a honey-colored path to say when, we know

The right way doesn't exist.

The right way is sometimes a beeline lit with torches on the way to the worst thing you know.

The right way is the road by your house with too many turns and too many signs of wild horses crossing.

The right way is north up the 101, why did nobody check the maps?

I thought you said south, dammit.

Do we have time to stop for snacks?

No?

Even with my bone melting speeds?

Even if I merge lanes like there isn't air?

No?

Of course not, I should've known. That's what we don't have.

We sit in the same booths like it means something more.

We order the same things like it defies our gods  
mysterious important relevant

The feeling in my stomach needs a name

I don't know, pick a better one for me.

Let's go kill something.

Let's love it to death.

# *Though They Are Beautiful*

Morgan Carpenter

· HIGH SCHOOL POETRY ·

Faeries do not trade in souls  
as demons do  
Uninterested in the petty power of individual hearts  
how one views and justifies one's own self.  
Instead, they trade in histories  
in ripples across the human world  
in the power, not of whom you love, but of whom loves you

Names are what they trade in  
Which have a power like few things do  
To create and to destroy,  
To rise and to fall,  
To win wars and conquer nations,  
To save lives and souls and futures.  
In human hands, they turn the devil to 'the devil you know'  
and carefully place men and empires into eternity  
Men have lives, but names have stories  
and linger when men fade from remembrance

What care do they have for the lives of men?  
They desire stories -  
The magic of them,  
The pleasure,  
The feelings they bear

Ancient lives desire newness  
And lust for power to do the impossible  
For all that they could do too much too soon

As such, Faeries are dangerous

They would start a war for the music of battle,  
Sell heart and mind and soul for a new color -

a brighter blue,  
Shatter that sky for the glint of the pieces,  
Destroy the world just to hear the sound

They do not hate humanity  
Not like demons and monsters and ghouls  
Nor love it to disaster  
As gods and angels and spirits  
Within them, a horrible neutrality -  
all lesser beings inconsequential to mad rush for sensation  
Therefore, do not step off the path

Watch your step  
Leave an eye for the rings of their circles  
Marks of their homes.

They are lovely and alluring  
And many a man has lost his heart  
Then later his head

Do not stray from the path

Lest they draw you in  
Shower you in flowers and kisses  
Smile for you an ageless smile  
. Promise pleasures beyond all that your kind has ever known

Heed now my words, and never wander

They would tear down the heavens to steal the secret of their light  
And what is a man, in the face of the stars?

# *The Other I Am*

Author wishes to remain anonymous.

· ADULT NONFICTION ·

I must continue my stand, even against all odds. The enemy is presently drowning in Christmas debt and the stock market is floundering out loud on today's front page news where even the most ignorant shopper might take heed just by standing in line at the checkout while I am standing outside aloof before the Walmart with a beggar's sign.

God's name is etched carefully in the dirt at my feet. I know because I put it there, same as yesterday and all of the yesterdays from tomorrow on. With my finger I bent there scratching his name in the dust, same as Jesus. And by this manner I force God to behold his finest creation even though I am just an animal. I stand here, not always alone, with my sign waiting for human kindness. A rare thing. These are heartbreaking encounters and I an unwilling partner at best. Because the Lord's supper is still present within me, how can I stand here alone in a Christian country, what used to be my land, when everywhere was my home?

Now, my sign paints a mugshot held hard against my chest: "PLEASE HELP HOMELESS." But really it says: "PAY THE RENT!"

"Pay the rent!"

'But I can't pay the rent!'

'Pay the rent!'

'But I can't pay the rent!'

'I'll pay the rent!'

'My hero!'"

My Yaqui Dad was in love with that performance and I played those parts to perfection – the villain, the coquette, the pompous ass – before a loose audience of part-time drunks.

Moreover, I had two set pieces. Peering intently at the palm of my hand I lamented forlornly,

"Po' little fly. Po' little fly. Ain't got no mother. Ain't got no father. Ain't got no sister. Ain't got no brother. Po' little fly. Fly away little fly. Far, far away little fly. To the sky, little fly, back to God. Fly, fly away!"

And then, WAP! I'd smash my little hands viciously together before the shocked silence of red-faced men who in turn broke out with uncontrollable laughter, clapping wildly.

We didn't know back then that I would linger outside of a Walmart today. But look at this audience. Every kind of bottled up resentment and pride. Momentary motherly concern, self-proclaimed female camaraderie, the concerned gentleman with a helping hand, and the guy who helps himself with something resembling an unruly fish flopping around brashly but unsuccessfully in one hand with a few coins held out sheepishly in the other.

“A monkey for a quarter,” my Dad used to say and I’d crash down from the top bunk gripping a hairbrush eagerly, like a deranged monkey itching to scratch his head for a quarter. Later, it was a long wooden handle with a claw at the end. I was too old for a monkey, but the pay was still the same. Now, I’m the monkey of today. An old monkey, I am, but my own monkey. Begging for a quarter, at least. Nothing’s changed. I’ve been a beggar all along. Begging silently with one sign or another.

So let’s be real. Van Gogh never sold a painting and neither have I and, yet, who exactly is Van Gogh today? Because I really don’t mind. In fact, it’s kind of weird. A severely diminished version of myself crawls shamefully across the street to plead outside of a Walmart with a beggar’s sign, with the express purpose that a markedly enhanced version of myself might swagger shamelessly back across the street to a public library with a canvas in hand and maybe a little something more in my stomach than just the Lord’s supper. If a painting has a soul of its own, then how can you sell a painting? Who buys it, anyway? Who are today’s owners of these souls? Where are those potato eaters, the ones who failed to enrich their own creator? When you ask yourself a question like that, then naturally you paint a beggar’s sign and crawl.

You see, a beggar’s life takes place in soundbites in the brief seconds before a driver pulls away. Every day I’m losing votes in the form of dollars and cents just by failing increasingly to show the right sign: the sign of improvement. Like a small cat waiting patiently for his milk, I am every day my present self, still. By holding forth silently with a painting in my hand, instantly my monkey is disqualified, over qualified, and yet my monkey has got to eat. No mind where it sleeps, it has its coat, of course.

I scratch my head and ponder these things profoundly, but who can tell? I never look at them, at their faces. Putting them on the spot like that is rude. After all, this is a democracy – nobody has to vote. Those potential voters who vote the very same way for their presidents, with their dollars and cents. But, no. Rather I just stare blankly at that name written faithfully in the dust: I am.

Because, hey, who am I?

# *Gramma's Irish Eyes*

Kim Neudorf

· ADULT NONFICTION ·

*For your smile is a part  
Of the love in your heart,  
And it makes even sunshine more bright.<sup>1</sup>*

Gramma's laughter came easily; it was frequent, full-bodied and unique. There was no holding back. It was fun to watch it build. First her bright blue eyes twinkled in delight, then her smile broadened to reveal a perfect plate, and at the crescendo she would double over her thick waist, simultaneously stomp one foot, and accessorize her enjoyment with a high pitched, "Aakk!" Adults less fond of her antics described her laugh as a cackle, but to me, it was endearing. And on the rare occasion when Gramma had a shot of rye whiskey and water, her raucous laughter reverberated through each room of our modest farm home.

Gramma's love of being with her family was palpable. When she met me on the street, she would greet me with laughter and with animated joy she would say, "I'm tickled pink to see you!" and then she'd give me (and anyone I happened to be with) a cheery smooch. This would startle the unprepared, but they quickly succumbed to her harmless enthusiasm. The depth of her emotions overcame her at times, during both the good and bad times of her long life.

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Christmas is a magical time when you're six years old, and in 1963 I remember feeling pure joy, as I prepared for bed and looked out the window of my second story bedroom towards the barn. The solitary yard light that reflected off the snow crystals reminded me of the glitter-decorated Christmas card we received in the mail that year. This Christmas day had been equally as perfect.

My contentment that late evening had a lot to do with a surprise Christmas gift from Gramma. Inside a small unwrapped box was a gracefully shaped, brilliant, cobalt blue bottle with a gold label and a shiny gold top.

As I shyly held up the most beautiful bottle I'd ever seen, Gramma announced with delight, "It's *Evening in Paris!*"

My family sat speechless around the tinsel Christmas tree. I, too, was surprised to be receiving such an elegant, grown-up gift. I hoped it would be ok to keep this fascination, and looked to my parents for their nod of approval.

Gramma quickly offered her excited explanation, "The bottle's empty, but I knew she'd

like the pretty bottle anyway.” Warm laughter of acceptance filled the room. I unscrewed the gold top and put the bottle up to my nose. The strong sweet fragrance lingered on my fingertips, but Gramma was right, the bottle was bone dry.

But oh my, what a treasure! It was special, not only because of its shape and colour, but because it gave me a privileged peek into the mysteries of the adult world.

\*\*\*\*

Gramma was not extravagant. There wasn't money on their farm in Nestledown, Saskatchewan for extravagance. She owned only two pieces of jewelry: a simple gold wedding band that she wore every day, and, when she dressed up, she wore an elliptical-shaped black Alaskan diamond ring on the opposite hand.

During one of Gramma's visits to the farm, she pulled something out of her glossy white vinyl purse that sat on her lap and, with a mischievous smile, placed an object into my small hand. “This is for you, dear.”

It was a ring, appearing to be identical to the black Alaskan diamond she was wearing. Mom immediately interrupted the exchange and questioned Gramma, “Should she really be getting that? Isn't it too expensive?”

I, too, felt undeserving.

With laughter and a twinkle in her bright blue eyes, Gramma explained, “It comes from Avon.” And that simple fact somehow made it acceptable.

The beautiful ring was mine!

As an eight-year-old, I was thrilled to bits with my latest acquisition, and in the warmth of a sunny summer afternoon, I traipsed off toward the pasture, proudly wearing my new ring. I skipped through the grass and cow paths, the dog and the cows my companions. I allowed my imagination to transform the pasture and animals into a grand kingdom complete with chariots and horses, handsome princes, and princesses wearing jewelled gowns.

In an instant, this marvellous moment turned into one of panic and terror.

The ring, it's gone!

In anguish, I retraced the steps I had so gaily walked moments before. I checked my hands over and over again and prayed for a glimmer of gold. “Please, please,” I whispered in desperation for a change in fate. My sobs turned into wails, as I paced back and forth, searching through my tears for the ring lost somewhere within the dull black earth and cow dung. The cows bawled with me; my perfect light-hearted afternoon destroyed.

\*\*\*\*

I remained close to Gramma my entire life and in her ninety-fifth year I looked forward to spending a few hours with her on Mother's Day in her private care home. Although her eyes were now a milky blue and she was a more diminutive version of her former self, her smile had not diminished. In fact, her smile was more engaging, more wondrous. How many times over all these years had each facial muscle and fold moved in perfect synchrony?

It was an unusually warm spring day, and we chose to sit on the south-facing patio, where she could feel the sun's warmth against her face. We talked about her caregiver's garden and some of the early signs of life peeking through the soil. As we reminisced about bygone gardening days on their farm, I reminded her of the hundreds of quarts of raspberries and Saskatoon berries she once canned and stored in the cellar.

That afternoon we played one of her favourite games at the patio table — BINGO, and I marvelled at the way she carefully reviewed each vertical row on the card and dotted each called number with a neon pink coloured dabber. Following our game, we sat quietly. This visit would end soon, and I wondered how many more precious moments like this I would have with her — so glad that we had this one.

I watched as she looked down at her reedy, transparent, venous hands and in one easy movement she removed the black Alaskan diamond ring that hung loosely on her finger. As she passed the ring to me, she said, "I want you to have this before I lose it."

The irony of her words and this loving gesture touched me. I was humbled by her sensibility.

I am undeserving, I thought.

"Gramma, do you remember giving me a ring just like this when I was a little girl?" She did not. I told her the whole regrettable story of how I lost the ring in the cow pasture. When I finished, she responded as if none of that mattered, "That's okay; I want you to have this one."

\*\*\*\*

There were many long and uneventful days living as a child in rural Saskatchewan. A break in the doldrums occurred when puppies and kittens were born, when baby chicks were brought home from the hatchery, or when the occasional piglet had to be nursed back to health in the house. But one day stood apart from the rest — the day a letter arrived in the mailbox, and it was addressed to me. The contents of the letter shared details about farm events, and concluded by inviting me to stay at their farm for a week-long visit, signed, "Love, Gramma xoxoxo." With my immature penmanship and Mom's help, I used a thick red pencil to tell Gramma I would like to come to her farm.

I looked forward to spending the week with Gramma and Grampa, but found their farm even more uneventful than our own. I spent one boring afternoon snooping around a dark cubby-hole attached to a second-floor bedroom. It was there that I found a small black bible, about the size of my thumb. The front page had my uncle's signature written in pencil and his home address —Nestledown, Saskatchewan. I showed Gramma the bible and she told me to keep it.

As I grew into a teenager, I would periodically pull the tiny black bible out from my night table and read a small passage. The bible was eventually forgotten about after I moved away from the farm to begin life on my own.

Decades later, when my uncle took his life, I was reminded again of his tiny black bible and returned to the farm in search of it. I scoured through the drawers of my old dresser and night table, now located in the dark, dusty and mite-infested barn, but disappointingly could not find it amid the discard and rubble.

\*\*\*\*

Gramma was a part of my life until she was 99.5 years old. In her last year, I saw her fade into a shadow of her former self. Her mind failed her and her speech became garbled nonsense. She was incessantly preoccupied with being cold, and despite my best efforts, she never felt warm again. But every so often, there was a noted glimmer of recognition, and she seemed to know for a moment who I was and I was rewarded with her smile.

Shortly after she died, I picked up my own aging mother for a road trip. We planned a short hike in the national park on a beautiful spring day. As we drove out of the city, Mom pulled something out of her large black purse sitting on her lap. "Did I ever show you this?" she asked.

In disbelief, I said, "Oh Mom, I haven't seen this in years!"

As I drove, I described her deceased brother's signature and address inscribed on the first page and explained how the miniature bible came into my possession fifty years prior. Mom explained that she recently found the bible when she was cleaning out a drawer in her china cabinet. She speculated that when they retired and moved off the farm into the city, she may have rescued the little bible from my bedroom furniture.

I imagine those Irish eyes were smiling, when mom and I exchanged laughter about the bible that was once lost and now found.

*When Irish eyes are smiling,  
Sure, 'tis like the morn in Spring.  
In the lilt of Irish laughter  
You can hear the angels sing.  
When Irish hearts are happy,  
All the world seems bright and gay.  
And when Irish eyes are smiling,  
Sure, they steal your heart away.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1,2</sup> *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling* written by Chauncey Olcott and George Graff Jr.

# *Climbing the Eisriesenwelt*

Megan Janetsky

· COLLEGE NONFICTION ·

Traveling is a strange thing; two days ago we were in the center of a humid, sweltering and buzzing Rome, now we lean over a wooden railing looking down the side of the Austrian Alps.

Surrounding us are steep, chasm-y mountains dotted with trees. The rock is steep and the smooth slate cuts down in a sharp drop to the valley below. In the distance, past the valley that separates us from the rest of the Alps, you can see a dark outline of mountains. Lingering over them, and us, is a coat of fog. It hangs eerily around the trees and dims my vision. For once in our travels, it's quiet. The hikers here are few and far between.

We're at the top of the Alps. I'm at peace. It's a stark contrast from how I was feeling hours earlier.

Katie, my friend who agreed to spend two months with me packed in various hostels in various places in various conditions, walks next to me with her cherry red umbrella slung over her shoulder. We had resolved ourselves to make it to the ice caves of Salzburg, Austria. Period. No question.

The caves, the Eisriesenwelt, look like a small niche in the mountain, but they're like a reverse iceberg. They're 1775 km above sea level and span 42 km — the largest ice caves in the world. Ice coats the first kilometer and the rest is a cold, dark, and really big cave.

Basically, the ice caves are sick. The only problem is getting there.

We wake up early in the morning, pulling out bodies from our cocoon of sheets. Just a few days earlier I came down with a nasty case of bronchitis and spent most of my time taking pulls of cold medicine, sleeping whenever I had more than 15 minutes of down time, and forcing myself to push forward.

Our hostel is mere miles from the Alps, I'm not not going to go. I climb out of bed and pop a cough drop.

I know, Mom. Bad idea, but what can I say? I really wanted to freeze my ass off in a dark cave on the side of the Alps.

We get directions to the caves from one of the hostel workers. She's a native Austrian and she told us she travels up to the caves twice a year because she loves it so much.

The process of getting there is more intense than the actual caves themselves. It's...well, it's a process.

## **Step #1:**

Katie and I walk down the street away from our hostel and toward the train. Europe is ridden with trains. Public transport isn't as big in the U.S., especially not in Arizona. Buses, trains,

metros, ferries; even smaller cities like Salzburg are dominated by it.

We take this train far, far away from the city. Katie lays slung out on her two seats facing me; her head nods against the glass. Looks like I'm not the only one wiped out.

The train runs parallel to this swirling blue-brown river that passes through Salzburg. We're in this little nook pressed between two mountains; I look up and I can't see the tops. It's some serious Hogwarts Express shit.

I check my phone diligently in between five-minute nap intervals. I figure the worst thing you can do in Europe other than, you know, dying, is get lost in the middle of the mountains where everyone speaks German. Not only would we not understand the language, the language we wouldn't be understanding wouldn't even be a pretty one.

We pull up to our stop and practically duck and roll off our train because, Jesus Christ, Austrian trains stop for approximately .2 seconds.

### **Step #2:**

Okay, so Step #1 was pretty easy. It's like the light rail only less drug dealer-y, and more Harry Potter-y. We step off the train and the station is dead. It looks like a murder scene after someone cleaned up the blood, suspiciously empty. It doesn't help that it's drizzling and the area has a light coat of fog. We look at the makeshift map our Hostel Guardian gave us and wander around until we find a woman working at the station. She points us to Step #3: the bus.

### **Step #3:**

We hop on the bus and our driver, a nice middle-aged Austrian-German man, packs us in. English speakers are few and far between. He pulls out of the lot and lays his foot down on the accelerator. We know instantly what the rest of the ride is going to be like: Jetting up steep and narrow roads, squeezing the bus into small places a bus normally wouldn't fit, flying around corners like a drag race with the assistance of fish-eye mirrors at each turn.

Our driver pulls up to Step #4 and I take a breath — something I didn't realize I'd be holding.

### **Step #4:**

We'd been warned, to my dismay, that our journey up wasn't all planes, trains and automobiles. Normally I'm down for a good hike, but my lungs were not having it. At this point, I'd already spent half the day coughing and taking cautious puffs of my inhaler.

We have a 20-minute hike to Step #5 and I practically pull myself up the railing, when there is railing. I stop every few minutes and peer down the mountain. Lots of fog and a sharp drop. Very Alps-y. It's raining consistently and I whip out this crappy little umbrella we got at a souvenir shop on the way up.

We walk through this tunnel that's been made through the mountain. Lightbulbs connected to wires peek through the rock above us, water streams along the electrical cords and I wonder if it's occurred to anyone that maybe that isn't the beeeeeeeest idea. Slowly and painstakingly we arrive to Step #5.

**Step #5:**

We're packed like sardines onto a ski lift. Without warning we're thrust up through the fog and it's clear to me that this isn't just a ski lift, it's a ski lift on crack. We're in this confined little room basically jetting up the mountain. Water hits us sideways and we're being lifted practically straight up. The cliff we're soaring over juts down at a 70-degree angle. This trek obviously isn't for pussies.

**Step #6:**

It's our final leg, another hike. The trail zigzags along the cliff face. It looks like some pathway you see leading up to some sort of Buddhist monk temple in an action movie. Wooden railing is the only thing keeping us from a God-knows-how-far drop. A sort of shade has been constructed along the uppermost parts of the railway, made with wood and rock to block the rain.

Suddenly (a.k.a. not suddenly at all because, like, fuck.) we're walking into the entrance of the caves.

It's this huge hole in the mountain that kind of looks like a scene from the Lord of the Rings. Stairs fashioned out of rock lead up climb up to the main platform. Water drips from the entrance. It's freezing here. Katie and I packed layer-upon-layer. At each "step" of our little journey we pull on one more item of clothing. I start out with jeans, a t-shirt and jacket; I end with an additional jacket, scarf, beanie and umbrella.

On the main platform there is this huge wooden door. Before it, guides dressed in snow gear light lanterns.

We wait in line until our guide comes up and waves us in. He's young, mid-to-late 20s with an Austrian accent. He tells me his name, pronounced Han-ess, spelled like John in English. And just like that, we're tossed lanterns.

The cave opens up and it's pitch black. Even without lanterns, the cave around us is dim. From what we see at the entrance, there's little to no ice and I wonder for a second if we've been jipped. Han-ees tells us we're going to be climbing 700 stairs and one kilometer into the cave, then he lights up what looks like a firecracker. It's this long stick that lights up at the end, after a piece is burnt it just falls off and the light continues to go down the stick. Except, the light shines brighter than any fire cracker or our lanterns combined; it illuminates the entire cave.

I talk to him later post-tour as he lights up a cigarette and send a stream of questions at him.

"We use magnesium, have you seen the Harry Potter films?" he tells me, taking pauses for me to nod in confirmation. "You know that Lumos thing? On the wand at the top there is a little magnesium. Pretty cool, eh? They're the traditional way to guide since the 1920s."

We look up and it's clear this isn't going to be one of those "let's walk around in a circle and be tourists" kind of excursions. The cave stretches up, ice melds with slates of limestone. You can't see the end. The ice itself looks like a wave came into the cave and froze instantly. As we walk, it gets more and more ice-y. It's below us, over us, all around us. The stairs are small, rickety and built over the ice — less stairs, more scaffolding. Our group of about 40 walks in a line up these tiny stairs, clinging to the metal railing until our hands hurt. I pull my hood over my head and stick my hands in my pockets; it's in the negatives here.

As we walk up we reach these unnatural structures erected from the ice. It looks like a whale breaching the water nose-up. You wonder how they got here, how long it took to create these massive all-natural sculptures out of water droplets.

Turns out, not all that long.

We reach the end of our stairs and walk onto a “path.” What I mean by “path” is that they’ve nailed two long wooden planks out on the flat part of the ice. No railing, just wood. Where’s Bob the Builder when you need him?

Han-ess practically hops on the ice. I’m assuming he has ice shoes because without them, his energy would be way more impressive. (Sidenote: At one point in the tour, Han-ess whips out a jar of bubbles and blows them over the illuminated ice. “There’s no point to this, I just like them,” he says to the group of people, all with perplexed looks painted on their faces.)

Behind him is what he calls The Ice Elephant. It vaguely resembles an elephant. Vaguely. However, in past years it’s melted and reformed.

“The Ice Elephant 10 years ago was really an elephant, but in the past three years, it’s changed,” he explains. “The past two years there is no water coming up there any more so all the gaps close again — that’s the natural thing for the cave. You don’t see the ground ice change, but the icicles they do; they change in just a year.”

The caves, it turns out, are eternally changing, molded by the wind like a sculpture. Han-ess explains it once to our tour group while I’m out of earshot and again when I ask him about it. I still have no clue how the fuck it works.

He says it’s like an oven because the cave winds up the mountain.

“In summer, when the air is hot, the deeper little cracks and holes the air is sucked in. The air cools down and it sinks to the lowest point, which is here at the entrance. In the winter, it is cooler outside so the warmer ice cave air is pressed out here and the cold air is sucked in.”

Yeah, I don’t know. This is why I gave up on science years ago, I’m just going to do my thing and he can do his.

Basically, there’s a lot of wind that pushes in and out of the caves. I’m talking like hardcore winds, up to 75 km/hr winds. As a result, the cave changes almost daily. In his eight years as a guide, Han-ess said he’s seen almost everything change; the ice moves up and down like a really slow tide. His favorite part of the cave changes on a year-to-year basis.

“I’ve seen it so many times,” he tells me. “Every part has some beauty. There are a couple parts that are just beautiful. There’s a part called ‘Ut-Gutz-Boo-urg.’ It’s a mythology thing. It’s this part where all the icicles change. This year, I like it the most.”

So we walk through these massive rooms of ice, so detailed and perfectly imperfect that no man could have created them. Han-ess climbs through gaps in the ice, lighting it up as if it’s a candle.

All the while I’m slipping in pictures (this is a strictly no-photo zone; I take them anyway.), with a harsh German woman with bangs hissing at me in the background. I want to immortalize it in my memory or at least have a way to conjure it up. Stuff slips out of your mind so fast when you’re seeing new places every day.

The caves give me a weird perception of time. We’re closed off by a giant wooden door, in a pitch-black ice cave. I feel as if time has stopped. Yet even the ice around us is changing as we

sit there marveling up at the waves of glass-y water. It's frozen, time seems to be frozen, yet it's moving. This cave has been here since, perhaps, the beginning of time and it's been moving and changing ever since.

# *Reality Check*

Om Gawali

· HIGH SCHOOL NONFICTION ·

It started with a warp, then it became something more. I was actually fine with school, not that hard, not particularly easy. I was walking down the school's hallways when he went free-falling through reality itself. I thought to himself why this had to happen now, I mean I had control of pretty much everything now, and a wormhole just had to swallow him up. I wondered if I would still be able to keep streaks in the space. Then I fell, right on my bottom that too. I looked at my surroundings and found that he was in some sort of laboratory. That brings us to now. A man in all white came up to me and ushered me to a lobby of some sort. I looked away and then he just disappeared. I was there for a good 20 minutes, this place had internet access, so I quickly formed an escape plan. I tried to call someone, somebody and then it happened again, a warp appeared and sucked me whole. This time I was freaked out, somebody could've pranked me up until now. But then I freaked out. This was something which was messing with reality for real.

And that was terrifying. Then I finally fell again. But this time was different because this time I ran. My surroundings looked the same as before, but no man came towards me this time. I lost a sense of time and then blacked out. I was strapped to a chair and more scientists looked at me as I recovered. I tried to escape from my restraints to no avail. Another thing to know about me, I'm deaf. Yeah, it sucks but you get used to it after a while. Anyway, the scientists said a few things which, I, of course, didn't hear what they said, but one of them signed to me to calm down. I couldn't sign back, as I was strapped, but I did cease my shaking. Soon he signed to me that what I was experiencing was reality dilation. But I knew it wasn't.

I knew a thing or two about quantum physics and I knew this wasn't any sort of reality distortion. Someone was somehow controlling these warps and then sending them to my location in time-space. My restraints were lifted and I signed most of it to the scientist next to me. He seemed to mull it over and then decided it was best for me to rest. I pleaded to him that it was essential for me to find a way to stop this being from controlling the warps. As I got up and started to sign to ask where we were, the scientist was walking towards me and then the warp opened. I fell through the new warp that appeared in the space that I had just been standing in. I realized that I could control the warps location if I tried. I tried to concentrate on my house but then ended up crashing through the ceiling of the hallway just before I saw myself fall through a warp the first time around. Everyone stopped. I tried to sign but I was in a form of dilation paralysis, but then I started to speak. Then I blacked out.

I ended up at a hospital nearby the school. I looked at the front and saw that a group of more scientists surrounded me. I started to find out that after I had blacked out my most diligent dude, named Josh, picked up my unconscious body as the school became infested with worm-

holes. Soon after I recovered, I went back to my school and found that, indeed, temporal signatures began to take effect on the visual interpretations that we saw. My temporary speech had left me, so I signed this all to Josh, as he came with me. As we left, a chair stuck between two of the rifts had begun to dematerialize into an antimatter substance, and then it hit me. I knew what it was that was targeting me. Years ago, I could speak normally, like any other person, but then I had a traumatic car accident that took away my ability to speak and gave me foster parents.

During the car ride, I had a sibling, and only I remember him. He was sucked in by the immense temporal pressure that took away his existence and everyone's memories except for mine. Someone had time-traveled and I needed to stop whoever they were. I worked it through and it made total sense why all of this had happened now. I was living in an alternate reality; the warps were sort of a backup mechanism, but I knew that these warps would tear up reality itself. I needed to find the person who had time-traveled so I could fix this. I immediately signed it to Josh and followed the warps. He looked confused and I continued sprinting towards my house. As they were getting concentrated around the perimeter of my household, I thought about possible people who might've traveled through time and then I got sucked into another warp. I blacked out once again. Man that was getting annoying. I quickly scrutinized my new location. I instantly knew it was the future for one reason: I saw myself. My future version came up to me, then just as he was about to speak, another portal, not below me, and it took him down.

Then it was just me in the inevitable future. Or was it? This gave me some needed thinking time. I still needed to find this mystery time traveler or reality would be destroyed, and then I realized that this future could be one of many possibilities, but because I had just come from a world-ending crisis in the present day, this meant I was in a reality in which I or someone else had succeeded. Of course, this future could very well change. Then, as quickly as he had left, my future self returned. I was about to ask how he could speak, but then reality got to me first. All he uttered was, "You." before I was swept away. I was returned to present day at my house, where Josh, my foster parents, and my brother surrounded me. But my brother was dead. I quickly realized that I was the one who caused the temporal pressure in these realities. I began to speak and also found out that minute but irreversible changes occurred in the multiple realities. I communicated this to my resident owners, and they believed me, they had taken me in when I was a child, but now they knew that in an original timeline, it wasn't supposed to be. I was truly in awe of how understanding they were. Then I went through another portal.

I was in the space-time continuum once again. It rippled behind and above me. I tried to make sense of how any of this was happening to me; it seemed that two realities in which I existed were connected by these warps through time and space. My body was fluid in the space in between these multiple realities. I wondered if I could go back to the site of the cataclysmic event that triggered the timeline splitting apart. In the meantime, I floated in the midst of space-time. I was in the warp for a while, almost as if the timeline were contemplating where to send me next. Then it all dissolved and found me in the future, but not as far as before. In the time that I had come, everything had changed. Portals ravaged the abandoned neighborhood that I landed in. I tried to make sense of how far exactly I was. For the record, someone came to me before I had to do anything at all. It was Josh; he tried to speak to me, but it was lost in the windy desert that the town had become. Then he tried signing, but a random portal appeared and a dresser whacked

Josh unconscious.

I tried to gather my wits and carry him to help, but then reality enveloped me again. I was sent back to the high school I was at. And I realized I could find out where these portals lead to, if I went in them, eventually leading up to the master of these portals, and stop myself from ever creating this distortion. Then I jumped through, leaving Josh to find out why there were multiple versions of myself all throughout town. First off, I had jumped back into the futuristic laboratory once again. The man in all white came through to me and signed that they had made a very important extrapolation. In the same moment that I was about to sign something to the scientists, the earth erupted between us. Then it ended, it all did. Reality crumbled on itself, and I was stuck in a state of limbo. But in the end, reality must resolve itself, whatever way it can. Imagine your life flashing before your eyes, and then it being altered. You wouldn't know it because the timeline would make complete sense, so nothing really changed. And that's exactly what happened.

Entire histories were rewritten to fit the reality and new timelines were created. As soon as the new timeline was created and reality was altered. My world faded into oblivion. Then I awoke in a room, my room. It was early morning when I left my room, and what I saw took my breath away. Next to mine, there was another room, and my brother was alive. At that moment I knew something had changed. My entire life, I had been living with my brother.