

\$4.00

BUCK OFF MAGAZINE

VOLUME 6 / FALL 2016





THANK
YOU

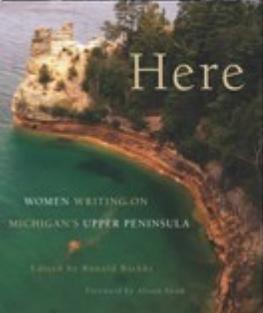
VOLUME 6 LIVES
BECAUSE OF YOU:
OUR READERS,
OUR CREATORS,
OUR FANS.



TABLE OF CONTENTS



- 5 **Life Goes So Fast That It Scares the Hell Out of Me**
Ron Riecki
- 6 **Gross** - *Grace Davies*
- 7 **JOSEPH GOEBBELS' EMPLOYMENT SELF-EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR DAN'S DOUGHNUT HOLE**
- Matthew Vasiliauskas
- 10 **Dig Site** - *Kelly Granito*
- 11 **Cabined** - *Bruce J. Berger*
- 17 **Loch Raven Reservoir Treeline** - *Reynaldo I. L. Williams*
- 18 **Community** - *Julianne Berokoff*
- 19 **A Suburban Crime** - *Jillian Diblasio*
- 28 **Miscarriage (For My Wife)** - *Chris Menezes*
- 29 **Cobblestone** - *Aaron Leiningner*
- 30 **The Act of Sitting In** - *Vernon Keeve III*
- 37 **Earth Tones** - *Reynaldo I. L. Williams*
- 38 **Cassiopeia** - *Michael Lisieski*
- 39 **Alabama Marshland** - *Fletch Fletcher*
- 40 **From The Castle** - *John Swetnam*



06

**EDITOR'S
NOTE**

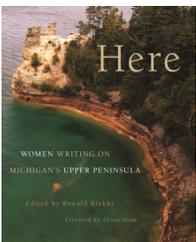
Editor-in-Chief S. McClory

Growth comes in many ways. For us, it was about new challenges to overcome, more submissions than we have ever received in previous volumes and sticking to strict deadlines when the staff do not see each other on a daily, weekly and sometimes monthly basis. As editors, and writers, we carry on because it keeps this literary dream alive. We do it for you, for ourselves. We hope you enjoy this volume!

Life Goes So Fast That It Scares The Hell Out Of Me

Ron Riecki

It leaves a purgatory in my gut.
There's a heaven somewhere in there too,
thirsty.



Ron Riecki's books include *U.P.: a novel* (nominated for the Sewanee Writers Series and Great Michigan Read), *The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works* (2014 Michigan Notable Book awarded by the Library of Michigan, Eric Hoffer Book Award finalist, Midwest Book Award finalist, Foreword Book of the Year finalist, and Next Generation Indie Book Award finalist), and *Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula* (2016 IPPY/Independent Publisher Book Award Gold Medal Great Lakes—Best Regional Fiction and Next Generation Indie Book Award—Short Story finalist).



I took a bite of a rotten peach.
And it was a sense
rather than a scent
I recoiled from, and spat
chewed bits of skin
into the sink.
Squinting at the wasted fruit,
I cursed.
It tasted of you.

Grace Davies is a Professional Writing major at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania who has just come off an exhausting, yet productive, semester developing herself as a poet in an intensive workshop-based poetry class. Having spent the past few months developing some rather heavy work, she decided to take a step back and write a few "breath pieces" to return a little simplicity to her writing. When not writing and living the typical cyclical college student life, she is also playing the violin, illustrating short comics, propagating cacti and succulents, and raising the occasional wayward wild animal.

**JOSEPH GOEBBELS'
EMPLOYMENT
SELF-EVALUATION
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR
DAN'S DOUGHNUT HOLE**



Matthew Vasiliauskas

The goal of this form is to provide information from which you and your supervisor, working together, can create goals and action plans.

Dan's Doughnut Hole, Hell's premier dispenser of fried confectionery, prides itself in taking seriously the concerns and suggestions of its employees, which is why we encourage you to respond thoughtfully to the questions below.

Please complete this form prior to the annual performance review with your supervisor, and be sure to make a copy of the completed self-evaluation in advance of the review meeting.

With your help, Hell's first and most trusted doughnut franchise will progress into the future, stronger and sweeter than ever.

Thank you for your cooperation.

- **What do you consider to be your major on-the-job accomplishments since your last review?**

Well, of course, I'd say turning this morbid excuse of a dessert dispensary into the top confectionery in all of Hell. There are some, the disgusting names of which I've submitted for immediate liquidation, who have questioned my loyalty to National Doughnutism, and to them I 'say look at my hands!' These hands, stained with powder sugar and cut with the finest sprinkles, have raised fried dough to levels of superiority the Reich could only dream of. And yet, I still remain a common and deplorable backroom Sprinkler. A Sprinkler! And why? Because I was caught "fingering" the jelly-filled center of a bear claw in a rather dimly-lit supply closet. I'm sorry, but that I will not apologize for. Every time my tongue touches the moist and creamy center of these pastries I'm reminded of a young *fräulein* I would meet in the parks of Cologne. And like the doughnuts I so adore, my tongue would investigate her for hours in the darkness. Well, it was only much later that I came to discover my plump dame to be an escaped and surprisingly docile pig belonging to a local petting zoo. Did it matter? No - we were in love!

- **List your areas of strengths and areas needing improvement.**

Strengths

Eloquent speaking voice.

Refined anti-semitism.

Strong understanding of the subtle nuances of maple and cherry glaze.

Apt at marital infidelity and a proud supporter of local brothels.

Good listener.

Open to new and inventive ideas for improving human liquidation.

A team player.

Areas of improvement

Trying to become less handsome.

- **Do you have the resources you need to perform your job? What additional resources or information would be helpful?**

As I said in my last review, a good doughnut cannot exist without propaganda, just like good propaganda cannot exist without a doughnut. We need more propaganda! Now I'm just as fond of our beloved mascot *Chew The Caring Cinnamon Twist* as the next person, but the word "chew" does not sit well with me. A chew is the filthy act of mastication. A chew is disgusting! Yes, it sounds too much like "ahchoo," a sneeze, something horrible the body must get rid of. Therefore, I propose a final solution to the mascot problem: *Oscar The Inviting And Necessary Oven*. You see, an oven offers warmth and security. An oven is necessary for pastry growth, and if we want to grow National Doughnutism, this is where we must place all of our hopes and dreams. Now, I'm aware that a certain coworker of mine, Lenny, crassly suggested *Clubby The Crumb Cake* based on my clubbed foot. This kind of discrimination is appalling. The idea of trying to persecute someone for the way they were born nauseates me beyond belief, and I would advise the party leaders to consider immediate liquidation of this lowlife.

- **Are there any changes that could be made to improve your effectiveness?**

As with the Reich, we must approach everything with sound common sense. Here I am, toiling next to numbskull Lenny in a cellar when I should be addressing the people! Which is why a weekly broadcast entitled *Goebbels' Sweets* is in order to inform our valued clientele of the intricacies of fried dough preparation and our plans to nationalize all pastry shops into a single party. If people know more about their leaders, they will have greater respect for them. I remember the Führer had a sweet tooth. Yes, he certainly enjoyed a good bombe or two, and at the Berghof, after dinner, we would make our way into one of the local villages, flowers in our hair, and pay a couple of desperate recovering alcoholic school girls to engage in a knife fight as we sang "Deutschlandlied." Oh, those wonderful summer evenings!

- **What are your long-range career objectives, and what are your plans to accomplish these objectives?**

I will not rest until National Doughnutism is the only pastry party in Hell! And, of course, I'll do whatever it takes, whether that's distributing leaflets door-to-door or visiting the lesser known but equally alluring back alley brothels of the province. I am completely committed to the cause. You see, I am a proven and trusted leader. In fact, the people of my home village Rheydt graciously bestowed upon me the historic Schloss Rheydt Palace. This act was ordered by the Nazi Party, but no matter. With guns to their backs and knives to their throats, the fair citizens of Rheydt willingly arranged this most honorable gift. Just as I made things right in Rheydt, I will do the same for *Dan's Doughnut Hole*. I can confidently say that National Doughnutism is a religion. That friends are the future. My doughnut is my church, and chocolate and sprinkles are my gospel.



Matthew Vasiliauskas is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago. His work has appeared in publications such as *Conjunctions*, *Berlin's Sand Literary Journal*, *The University Of Wyoming's Owen Wister Review*, *Chicago Literati* and *The Pennsylvania Review*. Matthew currently lives and works in New York City.



My eyes squinted shut when he opened the door,
dissecting the darkness with crude angles
of bathroom light.

As he washed his hands I hunted the room
for her yellow hair
illuminating her face as she lay in the darkness,
arms crossed tight, torso curved over her folded knees—
an alabaster S that silenced me.

This is the dig site. This is the excavation
of the woman who lives inside my cells,
who dresses herself in my face and who slips
in and out of the ruins,
who deciphers the glyphs on the walls of my heart
because she remembers scrawling them there, fingers bleeding
in desperation to make herself
known.

Now we can barely remember that room,
It's synthetic rug and its shallow ache,
the sink turning on and off and the drip
that followed us for years.

Left behind are refractions of light,
sharp tools and shadows
and the mirror on the stucco wall.



Kelly Granito is a former teacher who deeply identifies as a lifelong learner. She earned a Bachelor's degree in English education at Western Michigan University, focusing her studies on the use of poetry in critical pedagogy. She then spent two years living and teaching in greater New Orleans, an experience she credits with deepening her passion for place-based writing and learning. Her interests in race, gender, and education policy lead her to The George Washington University, earning a Masters degree in American Studies. She worked at the National Endowment for the Humanities, developing digital humanities lesson plans. Granito now works in education policy reform in New York City, a city that inspires much of her writing. She has been published in *Midwestern Gothic*, the *Laureate*, and on the National Endowment for the Humanities educator blog.

CABINED



Bruce J. Berger

Jenna Abrams slumped against the window, dozing in the rear seat, the gentle rocking of Hal's Explorer as it slithered northward over the otherwise empty Manitoba highway soothing her and pushing away her misgivings. Her husband and his two friends had been quiet since the last rest stop, their amiable chatting about Winchesters and Springfields, .30-30s and .30-06s, temporarily abating. The vehicle jolted over a hole in the road and she woke, tense, alert, and scared.

"Where are we, Hal?" She could see the sun setting in the northwest, its distant glow of dark orange just falling beneath the pines lining a barren field. Jenna shivered against the cold. Early November, and yet mounds of snow still littered the landscape, and icy patches glinted at her from the road.

"Hey, you're awake!" Hal said pleasantly. "We're about 20 miles from the cabin, and you're going to love how peaceful and beautiful it is there."

She wondered once again why she'd invited herself along with the guys on their annual white-tailed deer hunt. Hunting was, in all honesty, the last thing she cared about. All macho foolery she thought, but she'd never complained during the first few years of their marriage at Hal's fall excursion with his buddies. When his special week in November rolled around, she kept working at the library and relished time home alone, playing classical music as loudly as she cared to, as early or as late as she wanted. Jenna luxuriated in occasional stretches of time when she did not have to play the role of wife, when she could be just her own person.

Yet, this year, as November approached, she could not stand the idea of being alone for a week. Everything had changed when she'd lost her pregnancy months earlier. With the incipient baby separated from her womb, with the new life within her gone forever, she deserved much more attention from Hal. He needed to stop pretending that everything was normal in their lives.

"Pretending? I'm not trying to pretend things are normal. When we lost the baby, I was as devastated as you were." He pushed away the legal pad he'd been jotting notes on and turned around from his desk to face her squarely.

"Oh, you know what I mean. We're both in mourning still, right? We should be together, at least this year. I shouldn't have to stay here by myself for a week."

"But, Jenna, you know how hard I work. I love to get away with the guys. It's only one week. The rest of the time I'm completely yours." He stood, hugged her, and tried to kiss her, but she pushed him away.

She didn't want to be coddled. She wanted to be invited along on the trip, knowing that the emptiness of the house this particular year would unravel her nerves if she stayed behind, especially because Hal would be having a good time without her.

And the thought had crossed her mind that maybe deer weren't the only living things the guys were hunting. She had thought that all they did was hunt and drink, but what if they drove into

town in the evenings to pick up women? Hal wasn't that kind of guy, really, but when one's far away from a spouse, things like that were known to happen. She hated herself for being suspicious but had to accept the possibility that Hal would stray.

“Couldn't I be useful to you and the guys if I... came along? You know, I could help with the food, run down the road for groceries, and we could hold each other at night.” She pursed her lips. “A one-time deal. This year only,” she promised. She hadn't thought Hal would go along with the idea, but he surprised her.

“Sure, come along.” Without even considering what it might mean to be the only woman to spend a week in the woods with three guys, she was committed.

* * *

The cabin was better than she had imagined. It had been constructed with care and looked sturdy, even against the cold Arctic winds. With three bedrooms, it could easily house the four of them. A large fireplace dominated the living room, and a modern kitchen stood to one side. She packed away the food they'd brought, while the men grabbed a few logs from a small woodpile in front of the cabin and started a fire.

Hal opened a couple of bottles of strong Merlot, and after two glasses Jenna became dizzy and shuffled off towards their bedroom. They had wanted her to keep drinking.

“Just one more glass?”

“Nope, Hal, too many calories. ‘Nite guys.”

Jenna left them to continue their discussion of the habits of white-tailed deer. She'd dozed for what seemed like hours when she felt Hal in bed next to her naked. She was tired and her head still spun from the wine, but she wanted to please Hal, so she responded to his advances. As they approached climax, they tried to soften their loud grunting, and their noise turned to laughter. After, their heartbeats slowing, they held each other.

“I'm so glad you came along with us, Jen,” Hal murmured. Jenna wanted to unburden herself to Hal right then and there but saw that he was already half asleep. She needed her rest too. *Maybe tomorrow*, she thought.

In the very early morning, she sensed Hal dressing for the hunt of the deer that were plentiful in Manitoba in November. He whispered that they'd all be back by noon with more firewood and their kill, and later she heard the Explorer rattle off.

* * *

When Jenna awoke, head throbbing, she realized that she'd slept longer than intended. She glanced at her watch, chagrined that it was already half-past ten, and the guys would be back soon, famished. She wanted to please Hal by preparing something nice for their lunch. Climbing out of bed felt like wading into a lake of ice cubes, and she wondered if there was any heat still coming from

the fireplace. As she dressed, the day outside seemed awfully bright. She peeked around a curtain to discover heavy snow was falling, already piling high on the window ledge. The field she faced lay blanketed in crystal white.

The fire had burned out. Jenna found a few more logs on the woodpile and got them burning, but that would be it until the guys came back with more. She pulled on her heavy ski jacket and set to fixing scrambled eggs, bacon, salad, and toast. At least there was electric power for the stove. She realized that the electricity also ran some baseboard heating, which she turned on at once.

By one in the afternoon, when Hal, Frank, and Paul hadn't yet returned, Jenna decided to venture outside. Perhaps she might see the Explorer approaching in the distance. She had to push hard to open the cabin door against the harsh wind. Snow still fell in blinding heaps of white, and the glare nauseated her. More than a foot had fallen already, and she grew anxious. How had Hal and the guys gotten anywhere in all that? Why had they left at all when the weather was so bad? Where were they now? Why hadn't they called?

It occurred to her to check her cell phone. She returned to the cabin, dug out the phone from the bottom of her handbag, and fumed at the absence of a signal. Ridiculous! Alone in a cabin in the middle of nowhere and no way to contact the guys, or anyone else.

* * *

Not remembering when she'd lain down, Jenna found herself waking up on her unmade bed. She could hear male voices in the living room, joking. So they'd come home when she was asleep, and now they were back. Relieved, she launched herself out of her warm cocoon of blankets and marched out of the bedroom. The half smile on her face froze into a grimace. The room was empty. The door to the front of the cabin was open, and piles of new snow had blown in.

"Hal? Are you ...?" Jenna cut off her question and realized she was alone. Her heart thudded as she thought she could almost still hear the voices that had roused her from slumber. Stepping into her fur-lined boots, she struggled with the door against the wind, finally pulling it shut and firmly latching it. Night began to creep across the fields outside and snow grew higher against the cabin's windows. She realized the heaters were stone cold. Trying in vain to turn on a lamp, she discovered the power had gone out. Jenna shuddered in the dark. A sharp pain ripped through her abdomen and subsided before she could even wince. Nerves, she thought.

* * *

The snow had stopped, and Jenna guessed that more than two additional feet had accumulated since she last looked. It had now been more than a day since Hal and his friends had left.

Jenna could see only white through every window: pale white towards the southwest, away from the rising sun, and glistening white towards the northeast. The wind had pushed together tall drifts. She'd slept fitfully, jumping frequently at real or imagined sounds. She opened a can of

peaches in heavy syrup in the hope of generating an appetite only to start retching, bringing up a foul-tasting green bile that she spat into the sink. She stared at the gelatinous glob sliding slowly into the drain as if it had a life of its own.

Jenna tried to divert her gloomy thoughts by playing solitaire with a dilapidated set of cards she'd found. Her hands trembled, however, and she could barely concentrate. Putting her head down on the pine table, she let tears spill out, thinking that at least she still had enough emotion to cry. The cold had not yet frozen that instinct. She'd not cried like that since the end of her pregnancy, as Hal had held her, also crying, and she'd told him what the doctor had said. "It just wasn't meant to be, Jenna. I'm sorry."

She heard a noise outside, and the front door of the cabin swung open, bringing with it another blast of frigid air. A white-tailed deer, the very kind of deer that Hal had come to hunt, pushed into the relative warmth of the cabin. Jenna backed into a corner, screaming "Get out!" but the deer seemed uninterested in obeying. "Get out!" Her stomach twisted; she could still taste the green bile. She grabbed a broom and held it in front of her, screaming again as she approached. She swung the broom at the deer's head with all her strength. It ran out into the mist.

* * *

Another day passed and another. No more wild beasts visited Jenna, whether in her dreams or as she sat awake for endless hours staring at the front door. She knew Hal must be dead. She knew Frank and Paul must be dead. Why else hadn't they returned? She, too, would soon be dead.

Jenna smashed two wooden stools against the bricks of the fireplace so she could use the pieces for fuel. For kindling, she cut into strips the three hunting posters that had decorated the cabin, tossing their dusty frames into the fire as well. Despite burning as much of the cabin's furniture as she could, she continued to shiver. All the sweaters in her suitcase, every stitch of clothing she could pull around her, did nothing to stop the cold from penetrating her bones. She didn't have the stomach to take down the massive moose head from its mount on the wall and burn that as well. She drifted once again into a fitful sleep, lying on the sofa.

She was a little girl, attending her own birthday party. Her friends were also six years old, dressed in bright colors, yelling. Then a mom came into the picture, a mom that looked like Jenna, carrying a small bundle. Jenna heard an infant crying from the mom's package and a dagger of fear pushed away the joy of the party. The mom bent down to show Jenna her baby, but Jenna could not bring herself to look. She imagined a malformed horror, a baby with only one eye and no mouth and tiny fins instead of arms, a baby who was aborted. Yet, something forced her to turn towards the bundle. The mom started to move aside the blanket that blocked her baby's face, and, as the baby wailed again, Jenna jolted awake.

Jenna opened her eyes, but still heard the crying. The awful noise came from the kitchen. She could hear the baby screaming as if it were caught up in a strange machine that wrenched its arms from its sockets. She covered her ears, but the noise grew stronger, her hands magnifying the sound waves. She knew she could put an end to the crying only by looking at her baby, face to face, eye to eye.

Without realizing that she had moved, Jenna found herself in front of the refrigerator. She reached out in a trance and touched the cold metal of the handle. A spark flew from her fingers just before she closed the distance. The refrigerator glowed in a sickly greenish light. Jenna pulled the door open, knowing before she did so that her unborn baby would be stuck there resting on a shelf.

The crying stopped instantly when Jenna saw her daughter, what should have been her beautiful daughter.

Hal never knew what Jenna had done. She'd made the arrangements to be treated at a "family planning clinic" in Eau Claire, sixty miles from Minneapolis, a place where no one would recognize her. The procedure had been painless. She was surprised at how little regret she'd felt at the time.

She stood and decided to go out and find Hal. Find him or his body. But surely he could still be alive, she prayed. She would get help. Somehow, she would get them back to Minneapolis. She would forget about the nightmares. They would go back to their married life, just the two of them, the way she had always wanted it.

She removed her boots, took off her ski jacket, peeled off sweater after sweater, and removed the heavy ski pants and the blue jeans underneath that and the long underwear underneath that. When she had stripped herself completely naked, she stuck her feet back into her boots without benefit of pulling on socks. For a second, she admired her slim body, vowing to keep it slim for the rest of her life.

It was still dark when she opened the door, but she knew that dawn must be near. She walked out, pushing her way slowly through the deep snow. Soon it would be light. It felt as if a warmer day might come along.

Jenna found herself far from the cabin, the snow glistening with the last of the moonlight. Snow flooded over the top of her boots, numbing her feet and igniting a searing pain that ran up her legs to the core of her body. The pain felt good to her. It was what she deserved, she realized. Her dead baby had somehow returned to even the score.

She marched until she could march no more.



Bruce J. Berger is an MFA candidate at American University in Washington, DC. His work appears in *Prole*, *Jersey Devil Press Anthology*, *Black Magnolias*, and a variety of other literary journals.

Loch Raven Reservoir Treeline



Reynaldo I. L. Williams



Reynaldo Idelfonso Lindsay Williams was born in Oriente, Cuba in 1958, but now lives in the United States since moving when he was 11. Portuguese, Jamaican and Spaniard background, Reynaldo's education stems from U.S.A; received Honors in Art in High School, and continued studies in Art and Photography at the School, of Visual Arts in NYC. Serving in both the Navy and Marines as a Medic and is now retired from the military and is currently an Analyst for the Federal Government. His experiences in life have allowed him to see both the darkness and the light in mankind. However, he chooses to enhance his surroundings by photographing the way he feels, using a variety of methods and software.



I've kissed your husband,
held the bone of his hips, filtered
his coarse hair. If he pressed
behind me,
I'd know him.

Yes, this is strange and the preacher
is speaking now,
but I sit across
from you

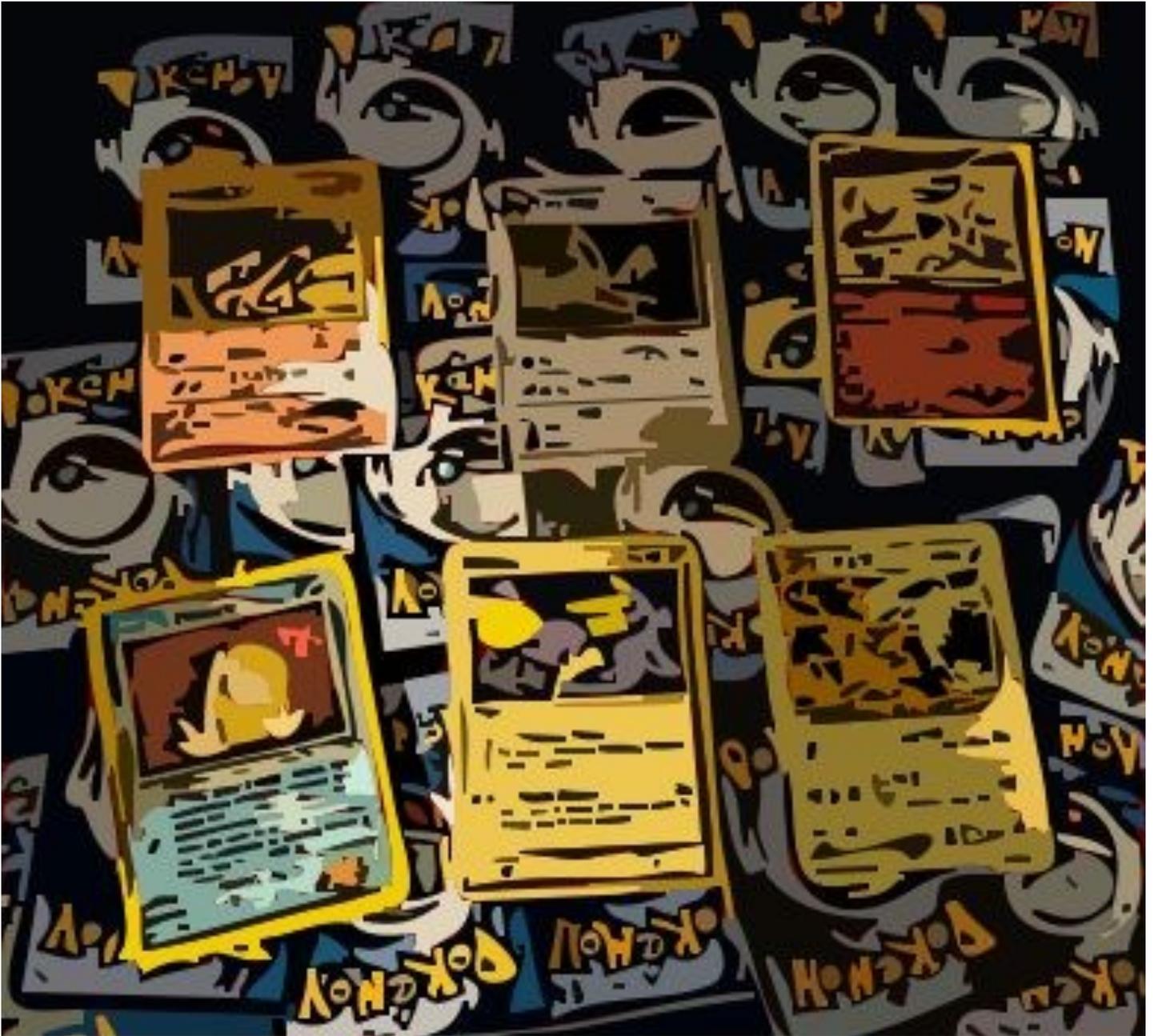
and him and all I can see is how we
drank and how my husband
loved you, too.

(We never talk about that, though.)



Julianne Berokoff is a recent graduate from CSUF, and is pursuing a path in poetry and creative non-fiction. Her poetry will soon be seen in *Black Fox Literary Magazine*.

A SUBURBAN CRIME



Jillian Diblasio

Tragedy is never an easy hurdle, especially when you're in first grade. I'll never forget that fateful day when I placed Nip, my favorite of the mountain of TY Beanie Babies I was beginning to collect, on the front of the stage during lunch and lost him forever. I went to the authorities immediately, of course, to report the kidnapping but was only met with a stack of orange papers by the school nurse reminding everyone to come to the Lost and Found and reclaim lost items. Something changed within me that day as I entered the class where the thief in question, Hannah Longinetti, sat smugly in her seat with her red hair and freckles, both of us knowing that justice would never be served. Sure, my parents and relatives showered me with Nip Beanie Babies left and right shortly after the incident. But replacing Nip was like buying a new Woody or Buzz Lightyear: you just can't buy a new one.

So when second grade rolled around I decided to open up shop under the slide, adjacent to Missy and Brianna's imaginary ice cream parlor. "PRIVAT EYE" was written proudly in as many different colored crayons as I could get my hands on just above my little counter.

Business was slow in the beginning of the year and I resorted most of my play time to doing other things. Still, I always kept my eye on my shop and Missy and Brianna were always there to fill in a straggler. But by February everyone knew who I was thanks to the Furby Genocide of 1999. I was getting requests left and right to "take care of" fellow second and third grader's once beloved Furby toys when we all finally discovered Furbies were the spawn of Satan himself. And while the only Furby I took care of was my own by sending it down a flight of stairs followed by a one-way trip to my top desk drawer, the exposure was enough to get my name around and send legitimate cases my way.

I had built a solid reputation by May, having reconnected ten classmates with their lost toys. Every case had been solved within the allotted twenty minutes of recess. I was on top of the world. Or, at least, I should have been. But all these cases were merely lost toys. I was waiting for the big one, the big case that would send my career to the top.

On May 18th, 1999, fellow classmate Wendy appeared on my doorstep almost immediately at the start of recess. Wendy wasn't her real name; I like to keep all my clients' identities private and she is no exception.

She came to me at the beginning of recess, her eyes red from what I can only guess was a solid twenty minutes of crying.

"I was told that you might be able to help me."

"Maybe. It depends on what it is." It looked for a minute like Wendy was going to start crying again. But like a champ she took a deep breath and continued.

"I think someone took something of mine." She averted her eyes and I knew there was something fishy going on.

But at the same time, I didn't have the patience to slowly pry the information out of her.

"What did they take?"

"My Gyarados card."

Pokémon had been growing in popularity throughout the year and it wasn't until April that the school decided to ban all Pokémon toys, cards, games, etc. from the grounds for first through fifth graders. Underground battles would still occur during playtime especially when a sub was in. Subs didn't know any better, so sneaking a card or Gameboy battle was pretty easy. I myself possessed an impressive card collection but hardly ever battled. It was *Pokémon Blue* that I prided myself in, being the first kid to wield a Gameboy Color and currently in possession of a Mew, Mewtwo, Blastoise, and Charizard.

Being the evolution of Magikarp, the most useless Pokémon, Gyarados is a rare card. Rare cards are hard to come by especially if you only purchased the standard pack. Suffice it to say, the only way to really get your hands on a Charizard or Blastoise is if you dish out the big ones for the expanded pack. It was pretty well known that Wendy's parents refused to purchase these gold mines and Gyarados was her pride and joy. Still, the fact that someone may have stolen a Pokémon card from Wendy was unforgivable.

"So what happened exactly? I need all the details."

"Well, I was in a battle with Peter and it was a double battle: me and Sam versus Peter and Tom Kim." I cringed at the mention of Tom Kim's name. "Sam asked if he could borrow Gyarados for the next battle so I gave it to him. But at the end of playtime when I asked for it back, he said he didn't have it." She started to tear up again as she relived the horrible memory. "I told the sub but she didn't do anything about it."

"Typical. Going to the sub was useless."

"So, will you help me?" I knew right away what my answer would be but I let the thought hang in the air for a minute.

"I'll take your case."

Wendy's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. "Thanks!"

"Don't thank me yet. First, I'm going to need some payment." Wendy nodded before she fished into her pocket and revealed a pink, purple, and turquoise gel pen. I frowned, folding my arms across my chest. "Do I look like the type that collects gel pens?" This was a lie: I did collect gel pens but because that was all I was ever paid with, I had developed a collection that was too big even for me.

"That's all I have."

"You got two Kimberly toys from McDonald's right?" I had been begging my mom to take me to McDonald's for the sake of the Kimberly toy that was released for the week. She was my

favorite Power Ranger and spoke to me on levels only a second grade girl could possibly understand. But, of course, this had to be the week where my mom decided we were going to eat healthy from now on and since Wendy's parents were always working, fast food was their way of living.

"I can bring it in tomorrow."

"Then you got yourself a deal."

We shook hands. Normally, I would have taken payment upfront. There were too many crooks in this school. But Wendy was nice - everyone knew that. And I knew she'd keep her end of the deal.

"There's just one more thing: you do realize this has Raptor written all over it, right? You know... Peter might be involved." Her expression dropped upon my suggestion. It was a little known fact among all the kids of the playground that Wendy and Peter were sweethearts and that if anyone was going to get married farther down the road, it was those two.

"He's not involved."

I knew not to pry any further. "Go and enjoy your recess. If anything comes up, I'll find you."

Wendy shoved the gel pens back in her pocket and ran off. It wasn't until she was well out of range that I turned to my next door neighbors.

"You boys get all of that?"

"Yeah, we got it," Dan Levi replied while his twin brother Zach finished off a sale. It was likely the only sale they would make for the day. The Levi Brothers were the new owners of the imaginary ice cream parlor after Missy and Brianna were evicted back in March. I didn't expect the pair to be in business long and, feeling sorry for them, would occasionally let them assist on my cases.

"So I'm thinking you two question Tom Kim while I handle Peter." Given Tom Kim's and my past, I figured my best bet was to stay as far away from him as humanly possible.

"But what about Sam?" Zach asked.

"We'll hold off on him for now. Let's meet back here in five minutes."

"Roger," they both said in synchronization.

The Raptors were a small group of third graders with the exception of Peter, who was only a part of the group solely because they all played hockey together. No one was really sure what the Raptors did exactly other than run around the field, screeching like the predators they were named for and clog the slide on occasion. No one was even sure why they were called The Raptors in the first place but I had a feeling *Jurassic Park* had something to do with it. But still, they always made themselves out to be a group that could cause trouble in an instant at any given time and, given Wendy and Peter's history, this seemed like a good time to stir up trouble.

I approached Peter on the soccer field with all this in mind. He didn't seem surprised to see me in the slightest. The two teams rushed passed him, towards the other end of the field where the goal was.

“I didn’t take Wendy’s Gyarados card,” he said, as soon as I was close enough to hold a conversation. He was wearing his blue Wayne Gretzky jersey and, with his messy brown hair and crooked teeth, he looked like a hockey player in the making.

“Relax. I’m only here to ask a couple of questions. Did you even get a look at the card?”

“Sam didn’t use it in battle. Not once.” The two teams were now heading in our direction. We moved out of the way before we could be trampled. “I think it’s weird he didn’t bother to use it if he borrowed it: his water Pokémon are terrible.”

A bunch of kids began to scream at the other end of the field. A goal had been scored. I couldn’t make out who the goalie was, but whoever it was knelt on their knees in defeat. I resumed my attention to the suspect in question.

“So what exactly are you getting at, Peter?”

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine Wendy lying about something like this but at the same time, if I borrowed Gyarados, I would have used it.” He shrugged. “Maybe she misplaced it.”

Peter’s gaze lingered towards the soccer game and I knew I was losing him. Second graders; they held the attention span of a goldfish sometimes.

“Do you really think she misplaced her most prized possession?”

Peter didn’t answer right away. “It doesn’t matter what I think. If Sam has it, there’s no way you’re going to get it back.”

“I’m working on it.” Peter’s face scrunched in puzzlement. But before he could ask any questions, the soccer game was heading our way once again. “I’ll let you get back to your game.”

The Levis and I reconvened shortly after. We sat together under the slide, enjoying fresh scoops of imaginary ice cream. Tom Kim had claimed to see the handoff and didn’t see Sam give it back to Wendy at any point. Which was good: we now had an eyewitness account. I didn’t reveal any of the details Peter had provided me. Not that it was much. But there was still one point that stuck out above the rest.

“Do either of you have your Pokémon cards on hand?” I asked. I never bothered to bring any toys to school after my first grade incident. The Levis exchanged wary glances. Zach ruffled his blonde hair.

“Why?”

“If what Tom Kim said is true, I’d bet all my gel pens Sam is just dying to use his new prize in battle with someone who wouldn’t know about the incident at playtime.” While Tom Kim, Peter, Wendy, and myself were all in the same class, the Levis were not. And it was not well known yet that the brothers and I were working together.

“But we could get in trouble if we’re caught.” The Levis were a rare breed. They were small and skinny, each with a watch on their wrist that they often pretended to synchronize. They went

to bed early and got up at six o'clock in the morning. And they never broke the rules.

“Don't go soft on me now,” I snapped. “If I have to bribe you, I will. All I'm asking is that you battle Sam using only fire Pokemon. No one will find out.” My sudden change in demeanor put the two in their place. They averted their blue eyes in shame and I knew I had them.

There were no more arguments. There simply wasn't enough time for it. While the Levi Brothers attempted to draw the snake out of its hole, I had other business to attend to.

There were only three minutes left of recess when the Levis came running towards me, faces red and giddy with excitement.

“We saw it!” Zach exclaimed. He desperately shoved a few loose cards in his pocket.

“Brought it out when I put Charizard into play,” Dan added. He smiled proudly. Like Gyarados, Charizard was Dan's prized possession when it came to Pokemon cards.

“Good work. You didn't get in trouble did you?”

“Nope.” They laughed - the idea of possibly getting into trouble in such a big field seemed ridiculous to them now. I knew I would get them to break the rules one day. All they needed was a little push. “Now what?”

“We wait.”

The whistle blew and, like a pack of animals in a zoo, we were herded inside. We slowed upon entering the dark, dingy lunchroom, our eyes having to adjust from the bright, life-filling light of the sun. The kids on lunch duty brought in our two crates filled with a mountain of lunch boxes. Everyone flocked to the crates as if the crates were a dead carcass and we were lions. Then again, we only had twenty minutes to eat our lunches. I didn't bother to look for my lunch in the crates and took my seat at our class' table instead, waiting for the flock of hungry second graders to pass.

Wendy sat next to me, no doubt looking for an update, but I didn't give her so much as a glance. My attention was focused on Sam, one of the many kids placing their toys on the front of the stage.

I waited a few minutes, letting Sam take his seat and start eating his Lunchables before I got up and looked into the crates at the end of our table. Both were empty.

“Where's your lunch?” asked Peter, who had grabbed the very last lunch box.

“Guess it must have been left behind,” I replied. It wasn't unusual for a lunch box to go MIA every once in awhile, especially if you slipped one of the kids on lunch duty three brand new gel pens during recess.

I walked up to one of the lunch aides, who always surveyed the floor to make sure everyone was kept in line, and told her my situation. She asked if I needed an escort but I insisted I could navigate safely to the classroom myself. Luckily, our classroom was right down the hall from the cafeteria, across from the restrooms.

But now was the more difficult part as I started to head down towards the lunch room exit where Mrs. Kringle stood at the podium, surveying the area like a hawk. If dinosaurs once walked the earth, Mrs. Kringle was probably there and she would probably exist until the sun died, which she had told us would happen in a billion years or so. She was the meanest teacher I had ever known, next to my Sunday Bible School teacher who always told us of damnation and said we would go to Hell for playing video games. But if Hannah Longinetty could get away with swiping my Nip Beanie Baby, I could swipe Sam's Pokémon cards.

I walked up as calmly as could be but my heart was going at a million miles per minute. I hope she didn't see it, see my heart practically jumping out of my chest. Or the sweat that was beginning to drip down the side of my face.

I knew exactly where he left it: as close to Mrs. Kringle as possible. Clearly this was deliberate but I had to take the chance. I reached out towards the deck, my fingers just inches away from the rubber-banded cards.

"What do you think you're doing?" a sharp, old voice rang in my ears. I stopped dead in my tracks, allowed my heart to have a mini attack, and finally turned to face my opponent.

"My lunch was left in the classroom so I thought I'd just put my cards back." Mrs. Kringle stared at me, skeptical. I could tell she was using some sort of witchcraft or artificial intelligence to try to scan my thoughts and feelings at that very instant. I could only hope she saw my fear as a fear of her rather than a fear of doing something wrong.

"You know you're not supposed to have those." There was disgust in her tone. She could confiscate the cards right then and there, undoing everything I had planned. But I was generally a good student and I hope that shone through in this one instance of disobedience. "Put them away and don't let me see them again."

"Yes, Mrs. Kringle." I grabbed the cards and practically ran out of the lunch room, my Esmerelda sneakers blinking pink with every step I took.

I didn't dare look at them until I was safely in the classroom. My *Hercules* lunchbox was safely on the floor where the crates had been.

It was only then I flipped through the deck. Peter wasn't kidding; his water Pokémon were terrible. Still, he possessed an impressive grass-type and psychic-type collection, wielding a Venusaur and Gengar. But I didn't see any Gyarados yet and was getting towards the bottom of the deck.

It wasn't until I got passed his Pikachu that I saw it glistening in the light, a sparkling blue Gyarados card with the little star in the corner signifying its rarity. His teeth were bared and positioned in such a way that looked as if he would jump out and bite my finger clean off.

I shoved the card in my pocket and assembled the deck together. I was just about to head out of the classroom home free when I saw him: Tom Kim standing in the doorway.

Here was the thing about Tom Kim: we were sworn enemies ever since Kindergarten. It was destiny before we even knew each other, a saga that was meant to carry on all throughout elementary school for the simple reason that he was the biggest kid in our grade and I was the smallest. And that was the law of nature. Of course, being the biggest kid in our grade, Tom Kim made the mistake and thought he could get away with anything and I had seen enough movies where the big kid picks on the little kid to know what happened when action wasn't taken. To put it simply, I wasn't going to be a chump and I fought back tooth and nail every battle, landing me in time out on several occasions. I feel as though my teacher tried to keep the peace between us by pairing us as Valentines in Kindergarten. Either that, or it was a sick and twisted joke by the gods. Regardless of the reason, that did not work out and I guess the school realized we were just not going to get along. So we were separated to different homerooms in first grade. I don't know what idiot made the decision to reunite us in second.

He stared at me for a good solid minute, no doubt piecing it all together. That's it. I was done for. Caught by my worst enemy.

He looked down the hall towards the lunch room.

"Wait here." It was an order. An order I didn't want to follow but knew it was pointless. Even if I ran, I'd be caught with a one-way trip to the principal's office.

I peered through the doorway towards the lunchroom. It was just as I suspected: Tom Kim was talking with Mrs. Kringle. The snitch. I thought about eating the Gyarados card so Sam couldn't get his hands on it. But then I realized Wendy probably wouldn't like that very much.

Only Mrs. Kringle didn't look my way. Instead, she followed Tom Kim towards the back of the lunch room. Were they going to get Sam and report the crime? Teachers never cared about this sort of thing.

Unless this was an opportunity. An opportunity to put the deck back on the front of the stage without Mrs. Kringle noticing, which was something I hadn't thought of. But it was Tom Kim we were talking about. Why would he help me? Tom Kim never struck me as the type who was all for the sake of justice.

Realizing my opportunity was fading, I knew I had to take the chance. I was a goner either way. I ran down the hall, stopping as soon as I hit the lunchroom. I didn't even look at Tom Kim or the table or Mrs. Kringle. I put the deck back and walked to my table.

It wasn't until I was seated and opening up my lunchbox that I dared to look back. Mrs. Kringle and Tom Kim were coming back from the nurse's office. There was a hint of annoyance on Mrs. Kringle's face; she never seemed to like Tom Kim.

Tom Kim sat at the other end of our table. I could just barely make out the conversation. The lunchroom had reached its all-time peak for the day and was louder than a clap of thunder.

“What happened?” Eric asked.

“Stomach ache.”

Wendy and Peter looked towards me, expecting an explanation. But I didn't say anything. I couldn't with Sam sitting across from us. They'd have to wait until after school where I'd return to Wendy what was rightfully hers. But for now, I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a Capri Sun, and chocolate chip cookies with my name on it.



Jillian Diblasio is a freelance writer in the New York/New Jersey area with a B.A. in Digital Filmmaking. Her previous work has been featured in *Ramapo's Media Collision* and she currently writes for *A Place to Hang Your Cape*.

Miscarriage (for my wife)

Chris Menezes

If we plant our feet in wet, black soil,
our toes will gouge out the eyes of our mother
with roots that lengthen downward,
into the pools of her welling sockets.

We can learn patience from the trees,
decipher their language of silence,
their code of rustling leaves;
we can feast on the sun
and wash it down with the moon.

We can die every year without feeling sad,
shed the age off our faces,
our fruit that rotted and wasted,
feed the decomposers
the corpses of our children with love.

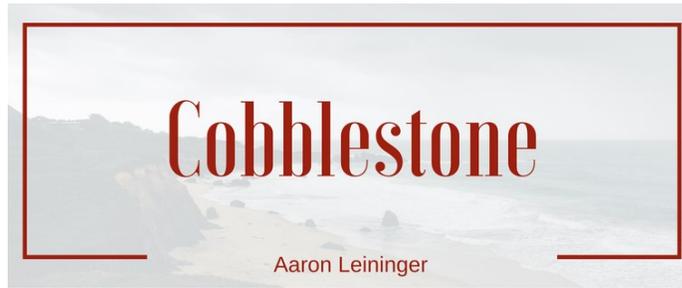
We will be shelter for the winged and weary,
territory to the animals of greed,
become all things
to all things.

If I could be reborn with you from the beginning,
in the tenuous womb of a seed,
I could tolerate this fate of living
as a spindle in life's machinery.

But for now, let us be still,
let the year gnarl us
together.



Chris Menezes is from California. He has a Bachelors in Creative Writing from CSU Long Beach, and is currently getting his MFA at Converse College. His writing has appeared in journals like *Switchback*, *RipRap*, *Foliage Oak*, and *Vulcan: A Literary Dis-Allusion*. He works for N2 Publishing in Raleigh, North Carolina, and loves to play music, surf, and go on long road trips with his wife and dog.



Captured from isolated corners
Unearthed
Taken
dragged from wide-open streams
and flowing rivers

to be cast among flagstones
and puddles
mortared into city walls

crushed forever
by heft of wheel and
press of hoof
and
boot heel

holding back
now
where once
it was a continual giving
away.



Aaron Leininger is a poet whose work has appeared in *Gravel* magazine. He is currently a major in Creative Writing at Chico State University and resides in Redding, California.

THE ACT OF SITTING IN



Vernon Kieve III

On the way there, I couldn't stop staring at all the white faces. There was so much hate and fear in their eyes and coming from their mouths. I had only been to one march before but even then the same sentiment was in those milk white faces, and I always wondered if one of them would get away with stealing the life from my body. On that day? Maybe. I always feared them, because unlike any of the people marching alongside me, they could take the life of a colored person and get away with it. Just like they did with that Till boy over in Mississippi some summers back that haunted my nightmares. Just like they will tomorrow and all the days to follow.

Yet I kept looking into their white faces, my heart quickening its pace, wanting to go home, but I couldn't. If I let the fear of those people live in me, get underneath my skin, then it would grow into my own hate and I refused to nurture hate. Perhaps we all felt that way, walking side by side, because to give hate any life meant giving another person power over you. So, just like in the first march, I looked down at my feet and continued with the crowd, looking up only now and then.

I did not know her. I had never seen her before, and from all the discourse created around her, I found out that no one really knew her. She was a pretty woman, almost too pretty for words. She just showed up, and when my eyes were not looking at my own feet they kept drifting ahead, darting directly to her. I wasn't the only admirer. Later on, talk buzzed about how she stole the eyes of everyone marching. Some people said she emerged from an alley on Water Avenue, others said from the park by the river, and some were sure she was just there; that she just appeared. In my mind, we all just looked up and saw her.

Her skin was the darkest of any black I had ever seen, and I was a little envious by how it reflected the light of the sun, almost like a shimmering mineral more than human skin, and the shade was evenly beautiful. The sun bounced off the sheen of her shoulders and the top of her back, and I imagined her skin was warm and smooth from oil. Her hair rose to the sky, round, kinky, solid - unified black, curly, and glossy. My mother would have taken a hot comb to her head quicker than she could say Madame C.J.; because of the way it fought gravity and did not flow, nor surrender under the simplest of gusts. My own hair did it before my mother taught me to tame it, to surrender to the comb instead of letting it free. Two minutes of watching her decadent dark crown made me want to throw out my hot comb and Vaseline.

She wore a white dress that almost glowed silver in the sunlight and against her deep rich skin, and she walked proudly as if nothing could catch her. I had to rush ahead just to get a glimpse of her face. And I tried, but we stopped, for we had arrived. Our destination. If only I hadn't bumped into the classmate ahead of me, Jimmy, who had halted with a silence. He turned but said nothing, just shook his head as if to say 'Be more careful, especially today, Mae.' I was known to be Clumsy Mae in those days, but at that moment it was more of a warning than a playful suggestion.

The Reverend was speaking ahead of us, but the round black tuft of hair that rose towards the heavens proved to be a distraction. I wanted to hear her speak, to breathe in and out words to excite us. I wanted to see her face, to copy her expression and wear her crown of protection.

There were two diners and a lunch counter on Main Street that we were supposed to split into groups and occupy. They were among businesses that disallowed colored patrons, to put it nicely. After a few moments of speaking, the Reverend began to point to the places and everyone parted but instead of moving left, I moved right with Jimmy and the shining woman with the crown. I couldn't help but follow her.

We walked up to Worthee's Wool Company and Pharmacy, and she pushed the door open while the six of us trailed behind her. Worthee's regulars were eating and talking, moving through the slow motions of daily life. A silver stool was waiting for my body but I hesitated, seeing the disgruntled white lady with blonde wispy curls staring at everyone in my party with disdain. There were other eyes looking at me too: those of my peers. Every other black body had taken a seat, but I was still standing. I turned around to see if there was anyone in the booths, but they were empty. *Sit down*, I thought as my body trembled, my peers still watching me, yelling with their expressions. I looked up and saw her face for the first time. Her eyes glimmered silver while her nose was shallow and wide like my own and the corner of her mouth rose as if to smile but it was just her natural look. If she fully smiled, deep undiscovered dimples would emerge. She looked like Pearl Bailey and probably had pearl white teeth.

Jimmy coughed in the seat next to mine and I rushed down, almost falling off.

An old, thickset, steely-haired white man trudged from behind the pharmacy counter yelling, "I don't have no problem with you coloreds, so what is this madness?"

We didn't budge.

"Get y'all black asses out my store before I call the sheriff and his boys."

We remained silent, still.

"Is that how you niggers are gonna be then?" he yelled, a roughness to his voice. "Nancy, call the sheriff."

"Gladly," the wispy haired waitress said through smacks of gum, disappearing to the kitchen.

A couple entered, white as powdered sugar, but after they looked around at the pending commotion, they immediately left before Worthee could call them back.

"You people are ruining my lunch rush. Spending the night in jail for a few sandwiches? What are you niggers gonna think up next..." he murmured.

I was beginning to think we had lucked out in not running into any real trouble. Worthee had a mouth on him, but he wasn't about violence. All bark. I frequently stared down the counter to the lady with the black storm above her, sitting statuesque. Others caught glimpses of her out of the

corners of their eyes and, in a way, we all felt connected to her, to this moment, to what it meant for all of us. I stared ahead of me at a milkshake machine, imagining the possibility of ordering a strawberry milkshake. My stomach churned knowing I couldn't.

People piled at the front window but they looked like blobs in the corner of my eye. It didn't take long until the Western High School boys peered into Worthee's and the mere presence of them, the fear in the pit of my stomach, made me look at them fully. Judging by their smiles, they had found what they were looking for, and I no longer thought about that strawberry milkshake.

The shortest and stoutest boy in the group was the first to enter and speak, "Ma, these them niggers you call us about?"

The wispy haired waitress smiled and popped her gum. "Yes, Jebbie. This them. Look like them niggers that go to that old crumb of a school, Booker T."

"Them niggers that tried to campaign to play us in ball last year?" one of the boys called out. "Even though they knew they would've gotten whipped. These boys look scrawny - we woulda broken 'em."

We all remained silent.

"What you boys all want, on the house?" the waitress asked of her son and his friends, looking beyond us all as if we were nothing more than unwanted dust.

A tall boy spoke, "I don't know about you boys, but I need chili."

"Maybe some pie."

"Oh, yeah, and coffee."

"Yeah, that's right you nigger bitch. I hope you like your coffee hot," one said, jolting towards Jimmy but falling short from actually hitting him. There was plenty of time for that.

I prayed to god. I prayed that it would all end before it had even begun, that Worthee would just close shop and everyone could spill into the street and find another counter to sit. I looked down at my old dress and wondered, *would this be the last thing I'd ever wear? Would this be the one I'd be buried in?*

The Reverend had told us to wear old clothes for this and we all did, except *her*, the woman with the pretty silver-white dress. It looked new. I think the boy behind her ordered tomato soup.

"I wish we could just kill these niggers right here," said one of the boys, though with my back turned, I didn't know which one.

"Park down by the river has plenty of trees."

"Put these dirty apes back in them trees and with a rope to keep 'em still."

They all continued to order and wish death on us, and we all knew that we were going to be wearing all of the food that the kitchen prepared, but worse than that? We just wanted the allowance to order.

I looked over at the gleaming woman at the end of the counter again as she stared silently at the chalkboard filled with weekly specials in front of her. All of the faces between hers and my own belonged to girls and boys from Booker T; I looked to the right of me and saw the same. We were not with any of our teachers or church leaders. They would not just walk in the door and stand with us, maybe even scare a few of the boys. I wanted to say something to Jimmy, but I didn't want to scare him anymore than what he was probably already feeling. I looked past him, at her. She glowed, forcing me to refocus on the milkshake machine. I wanted to be like her.

I hummed to myself to drown out the voices of the Western High boys as food began to fill the order window. I jumped as some of the boys behind me said "Over here." A boy behind me reached in between Jimmy and me in order to retrieve his food, and Jimmy immediately scooted over to close the gap and leaned in closer to my body, the warmth of the plate touching both of us.

The sound of slush and plate hitting the counter made me jump as I looked down and saw the tranquil woman covered in tomato soup, a piece of pie rubbed into her face and hair. She licked her lips and smiled, her teeth bright and shining just like Pearl Bailey's. It took only one attack to push the others, picking up food and smearing it hard against our faces, blueberry against black. Suddenly, steaming hot coffee burned my scalp until my body folded in pain. Jimmy had leaned in and caught some of the coffee thrown towards us, seeping into his back. Luckily, the coffee was only hot enough for second-degree burns.

"Don't fall off the stool, Clumsy Mae," he whispered.

An angry voice behind me snarled, "Don't worry - we got more for you niggers. We got help coming."

Jimmy remained close.

"This nigger bitch got a protector. When the fellas get here, we should get them to put him in a tree first. Maybe see what he is protecting for ourselves."

"We don't fuck monkeys, Ham, just kill 'em. Keep yourself clean," one of the boys said.

I moved to turned around, ready to give him a piece of my mind, the heat of the coffee turning my blood to boil, but Jimmy put his arm around me tight to face me forward.

A few of us were crying but the woman, covered in soup and pie, was still wearing a smirk as the boy behind her leaned in and spoke who knows what into her ear.

"Anything else boys?" the waitress asked, smug.

Worthee stormed down from behind the pharmacy counter, oblivious to the event but certainly not the mess.

"Nancy, I thought I told you to call the sheriff. Some deputies should've been here. You just called your boy and his hounds!" he yelled. "No more food. Tell Lincoln if he makes any more

it is coming out his pay and your own. Now call the sheriff, and none of this shit was on the house. Pay up boys, unless you want Nancy and her son to be short on their rent, yet another damn month.”

She obeyed, looking down but managed to send a dirty look in our direction as the entire shop fell silent. Jimmy leaned in and whispered, “God damn,” and I was glad he shielded my laughs from the crowd.

Nancy slowly walked to the register and rang each boy up as they stepped out. She had to tell a few of the boys that she would cover for them.

But the worst wasn't over just because they left. Nancy disappeared into the kitchen and spoke loudly with purpose on the phone with the sheriff's office. Maybe we could all get out before they arrived, I thought, but *she* remained seated even with the nearing sirens.

Five deputies arrived and walked to the back of the store, stiff, white and angry. One spoke, “All right, you people have made enough of a mess for Worthee and Miss Nancy here. You should all get back home, or else you're going to spend the night down in some cells. Is that what you want?”

We looked at each other but no one moved. I brushed Jimmy's arm off of me and sat up straight, the glisten of the milkshake maker keeping my attention. Jimmy mimicked my posture and the others ensued in silence. It's not what we wanted, to go to jail. We just wanted to sit in, to show them we weren't going to be turned away.

“Okay boys, push 'em out.” The deputies put their nightsticks horizontally into both hands and, with outstretched arms, began pushing our bodies from our stools as if the thought of our skin touching them would ignite us all into flames. They knocked the woman once and she slowly and gracefully stood towering over the men, looking even taller than she was before when we were marching. It appeared as if the deputies behind her backed up, the others violently taking hold of the boys, leaving stools spinning. It happened so fast, we all jumped to our feet and were pushed out of the door, spilling onto the sidewalk.

The other protesters were being pushed and guided into the streets from the other diners, some without hesitation, others kicking and fighting and screaming. The sheriff spoke from the loud-speaker attached to his car in the middle of Main Street, saying over and over, “Go home, or go to jail.” He might as well have said, ‘give up and accept it’.

As soon as he finished speaking, panic erupted behind me as men in white robes with hidden faces filled the streets on horses, cars and on foot. A few of them carried torches but many of them carried shotguns. I turned to the deputy nearest me. He formed the widest grin and said, “Get home safe now, niggers.”

He pushed me and I fell forward. Jimmy caught me before the ground, and turned to charge the deputy. The two of them began to fight, and I thought the deputy was going to hit Jimmy in

the head, but the firing of a shotgun filled the air, forcing protesters to run in all directions, the klansmen running after them.

It was as if time slowed down when *she* slowly walked into the middle of Main Street. Some say it started at her feet, some say it started at the tips of her outstretched arms, but I saw it in the glow of her back, the glow of wings - wings made of fire.

She was engulfed in flames, her clothes burned away and her hair was once again reaching to the sky, untarnished.

Guns pointed at her and fired but the bullets fell to her feet. Her wings got brighter and bigger, as did the fire that veiled her entire body. Guns kept firing and she kept walking slowly down the middle of the street until she was face to face with the men on the horses. She gently touched the horse whose rider was trying to put bullets into his shotgun, his hands shaking. The horse neighed and burst into flames and the klansman fell backward and into the ashes of the horse he had rode in on.

She slowly lifted her hand and each klansmen burst into flames. Then she surged like a rocket into the sky, leaving a trail of fire and smoke that began where she once stood, and continued to rise higher into the atmosphere where the small dot that she had become disappeared into the clouds. The klansmen screamed in agony, but the flames merely burned the robes and clothes from their bodies, revealing to the crowd their bare identities. The guns burned in their hands, dropped quickly to the asphalt, and the naked men quickly ran and disappeared into the distance, even past Ms. Wispy Nancy as she shielded her eyes.

The rest of us were left with questions on what we had just witnessed or if, somehow, it was all a dream. Jimmy, of course, missed the whole thing as he grappled on the ground, the flames and her exit extinguishing the fight.

So many of us were so willing to turn that event into nothing, too afraid to give it a name, even though it was for good. For us. Some of the people who I knew for sure saw it happen renounced what they had seen immediately or later on in life. Me, on the other hand, I have always believed in angels. I don't know if that woman was indeed an angel, but I went to every protest and sit-in that I could until I couldn't take the tear gas anymore in hopes of seeing her again. And also, with the secret hope that maybe it was her strength to sit in, her act of courage to face the klan that gave her wings, and maybe I could've gotten wings too if I was just as courageous.

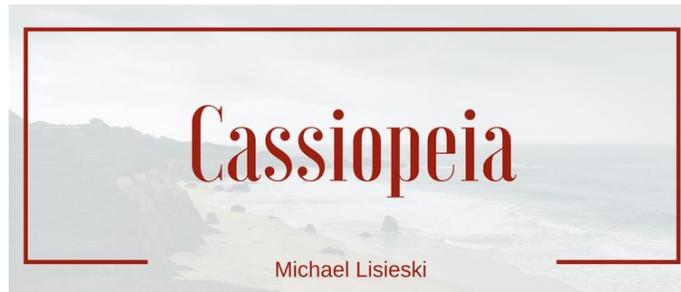


Vernon Keeve III is a Black and queer writer from Virginia, and a high school teacher in Oakland, California. He has read his poetry at the SF Poetry Jazz Festival, the Berkeley Poetry Festival, and the Oakland Book Festival. He has been published in *Ishmael Reed's Konch Online Journal*, *Black Girl Dangerous*, *Entropy*, *Foglifter*, and *Blues Arrival: Stories of the Queer Black South and Migration*; and he received the Zora Neale Hurston Award from Naropa University in 2012. His book of poetry and essays, *Southern Migrant Mixtape*, will be released in January of 2017 with Nomadic Press.

Earth Tones



Reynaldo I. L. Williams



That night it came
to me, its voice
a warble under
canal-wide eyes.
All the world
could have slid
through its pupils,

black as all that
sleeps. And I had
no way to say:
I've seen it too,
tiny love. The way
night opens into nothing
and nothing still.

The way you wake
confused, and cannot help
but sheepishly call out.
The desperate half-panicked
walks through the hallway
searching for some unknown
and missing thing.



Michael Lisieski was born in Ohio, grew up in Western Pennsylvania, and attended college in Buffalo. He now lives in Detroit with three cats, two rabbits, and one of his partners, where he studies neuroscience and dreams about being a homemaker. He has poems published or forthcoming in *Midwestern Gothic*, *Passages North*, and *Star*Line*.



The planet thinks here, where the ground and sea choose
to be the same. From this bridge I can see
synapse sparks in a ripple between reeds,
because I choose to travel cageless.
But here I have to move above
the land. Nothing man-made can stand
for long. The serenity of still water
and live green hides
untamable ideas.



Fletch Fletcher is a North Jersey science teacher and poet. His work has appeared in multiple journals such as *Adanna*, *Euphony*, and *Crack the Spine*, among others.

FROM THE CASTLE



John Swetnam

On the hill above the town stood the ruins of a castle. In the courtyard grew the softest grass in the district, sweet smelling and easy. Young men and their girlfriends climbed the hill to view the sunset, lying back to watch the first stars appear in the darkening sky. If certain articles of clothing found themselves discarded, where was the harm in that? The boys of the village always treated their lovers with consideration, and no girl who climbed the hill path returned without some token of endearment. Sometimes the young ladies returned with another gift – one quite invisible but sure to make its presence known in the coming months.

When Mariaelena was asked who might be the donor of her gift, she replied, “Wait until the baby is born and I can see the color of its hair.”

If the baby was red headed, the father was Angus, the son of the Scottish mining engineer. If it was blonde, then Sven, the delivery boy at the Danish bakery, was the leading candidate. If the child was dark haired, then the landlord’s son was the one. Mariaelena had enjoyed hiking to the castle far more than the old ladies in the church thought proper.

When the boy arrived, his hair was white as new-fallen snow. She named him Dieudonné, *God given*, which was quickly shortened to Donny. The traditionalists in town expected her father to throw her out for the shame she brought on the household, but she was his only child and he remembered when he had climbed to the castle. Her mother doted on the baby, boasting of his blue eyes, sturdy limbs, and how quickly he learned to walk.

So Donny grew, adored and petted, a natural leader among his classmates and an annoyance to his teachers.

* * *

At about the time when Donny began planning a trip to the castle with Eleanor, he was expelled from school for breaking the nose of the mayor’s son.

“What possessed you to do that?” Mariaelena asked.

“He called me a bastard,” said Donny. “I couldn’t let that go unchallenged.”

“Do you think I liked being called a slut?” she retorted. “Sometimes you just have to let things pass.”

“Apparently you let quite a few things pass up your skirts,” said Donny, but when he saw the look on her face, he immediately regretted it. It was the only cruel thing he ever said to her. To anyone in fact.

Mariaelena must be given credit, for instead of recalling the sacrifices she made for Donny, she focused on the future. “The mayor is vindictive,” she said. “He’ll jail you for assault and battery. You have to leave town now.”

“Where will I go?” he asked. The memory of the mayor’s son crying with blood dripping down his chin no longer gave him the pleasure it once had.

“That I can’t tell you,” his mother said. “It’s a big world and I’m sure there is good and bad in all its parts. I have no money, but I have saved the gifts that the three who might be your father gave me. Maybe they will help you survive until you can return.”

At the word “gifts,” Donny perked up.

“Here is the trowel which Angus gave me. He said his father used it to find precious minerals in the ground.”

Donny looked at the trowel doubtfully. His mother used it to weed around the daffodils.

“Here is a wooden spoon from the baker’s boy. The baker used it to mix the dough.”

If anything, the spoon was more disappointing than the trowel. Its only use was stirring soup.

“The landlord’s son gave me this,” she said, and unwrapped a large brooch with a cameo of a lady’s head. “When you push this tab,” his mother said, “the front flips open.” Inside was a tiny picture of a woman wearing a long dress. “He said it was a picture of his mother who died when he was born.”

“Is it worth much money?” asked Donny.

“Don’t sell it, Donny,” said his mother. “But you may give it to a girl if you fall in love.”

“Then I should put your picture in it, Mother,” said Donny, “for you are the woman that I love most in the world.” He immediately felt proud, for he realized that he had said something that was both true and loving and which had given her great pleasure. Then, to his amazement, he saw a tear trickling down her cheek.

She ran to her sewing basket, coming back with a tiny pair of scissors. From a picture of the women’s choir she cut all around her face and wedged the scrap over the woman in the long dress. Just before she snapped the lid shut, a tear fell from her eye directly into the brooch where it sealed the two pictures together.

She handed the brooch to Donny, who put it in his backpack along with the spoon and the trowel. Then he hurried out the back door of the house. Seconds later the police chief came bursting through the front door. There were those who said that the chief had waited until he heard the back door slam, for Donny was well liked in the town and the mayor was no more a favorite than his dolt of a son.

Once outside the village gate, Donny took a side road through the fields and up into the nearby mountains. He was certain the mayor and his men would search the main roads and there was no way to outrun the horses of the guards. At sunset, he saw an immense cavalcade pour down the road, the uniforms of the guards glowing in the final rays of the day. He pushed on through the dusk and into the night. At every crossroads he selected the way that led uphill, hoping it would lead him farthest from his pursuers. At midnight, a half moon rose and revealed a cove set among the peaks. A north wind had risen and Donny could see clouds gathering, harbingers of snow. Soon the first

flakes of what promised to be a considerable storm began to fall.

At the base of the surrounding ridges was a rude cabin made of logs. Desperate for shelter, he scrambled down the pebbly slope. He believed it must be some shepherd's hut and since he saw neither light nor smoke coming from the chimney, it must be deserted. When he came close, he found that the house had no windows and only one door. Over the sill, a faint line of light showed that the cabin was not unoccupied. Still, the night was cold, and whomever he met could hardly be worse than freezing in the open.

Summoning his courage, he knocked on the door to inquire if he might sleep for the night. The light flickered and went out, and a second later he could hear the door squeaking on its hinges. The interior of the hut was so dark that Donny could make out nothing within, but he did hear a wheezing breath and the cracking of arthritic joints. Then a voice, as creaky as the hinge on the door, spoke.

“What comes to my door, be it man or beast
Greatest in power or even the least
Witch or warlock, coward or brave
Must answer my question or live as my slave.”

Donny's first thought was to run, but a great gust of wind sent a swirl of snow into his eyes. Outside he would surely freeze, so he squared his shoulders and said, "Ask away, old witch," for, as everyone knows, witches loved to speak in quatrains.

“First you must tell me what flies at night
Seeking its quarry without any sight
Fleeing the sun and loving the moon
Out with your answer and out with it soon.”

“That's easy,” said Donny. “It's a witch.”

“No it isn't: it's a bat,” said the voice from inside the cabin.

“Witches fly at night,” said Donny. “Everyone knows they can't see well. Look at the old witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel. She couldn't tell the difference between Hansel's finger and a stick, and she was in her own house. And you always see witches silhouetted against the moon in pictures.”

“But bats hunt insects with sound, which is without any sight,” the witch replied.

“I answered your question,” said Donny. “You didn't say that it had to be a correct answer.”

“That's absurd. Any answer could be wrong. You could have said 'wildebeest.' That couldn't possibly count.”

“Why would I say wildebeest? They don't fly by night or day.”

So they argued and the night grew later and the snow deepened. Finally, they reached a compromise. Donny would be the witch's slave on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and free on

Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Every Sunday they would flip a coin to see if it were a free day or a slave day. On days when Donny was her slave, the witch could ask three questions which he must answer. On days when he was free, he could ask three questions which she also must answer. This accord reached, the witch invited Donny into the hut, and he was glad to be out of the snowy night.

The second Donny stepped through the doorway, his eyes were dazzled by brilliant light, and when he could see where he was, he found himself not in a small log room, but in the entry hall of a great palace. Twin curving stairways swept down from a marble balcony above. On the balcony stood a beautiful woman with long auburn hair, dressed in a gown of lustrous silk. He raised his hand to shade his eyes from the light of the powerful chandelier and was startled to see ruffled cuffs emerging from the sleeve of a velvet jacket.

“I hope you like my humble abode,” said the woman, her voice as warm and friendly as the loveliness of her dress.

“It’s very nice,” stuttered Donny, who had never seen anything so grand.

“In case you are wondering,” said the witch, “today is Friday, which means that you are my slave, and are dressed as such. Run to the kitchen, and bring me the ripest and most delicious apple.”

“But where-” began Donny.

“I ordered you to go,” she replied in a haughty tone. “Deliver it to me in the conservatory.” With that, she swept away through ivory paneled doors.

Donny gazed about him, hoping to find some other servant who could tell him the way to the kitchen, but he saw no one. There were a half dozen doors leading from the entry hall, so he decided to try one and then another. He wandered from room to room, crossing a music room, a billiard room, a salon furnished in a French style, a dining room set with gilt-edged cutlery for twenty-four, and a butler’s pantry, until he came at last to a small room with a single two-burner stove and a tiny refrigerator. On the table was a basket full of apples of various sizes and colors – green, golden, and ruby red.

Donny had not eaten since the morning and the sight of this luscious fruit made him want to snatch one. With so many in the basket, it would never be missed. As he reached out, he felt something poke him. His backpack was vibrating wildly.

He looked inside, and there was the brooch, jiggling so much that it hopped over the big spoon. He picked it up and snapped it open. To his amazement, the picture of his mother began to speak.

“Donny, don’t eat one the apples. The witch sent you on this errand to test your honesty. It’s a trick rich people play to try out their maids. They leave what looks like a large number of coins on the dresser, but have carefully counted them to see if any will be missing.”

Donny was amazed by this turn of events, but he was bright enough to ask which apple was the most delicious.

“The largest golden apple. Put the brooch away for she will try to take it from you.”

Donny put the brooch back in his backpack, grabbed the largest golden apple, and set about trying to find the conservatory. When he arrived, he found the witch sitting in an elegant wicker chair, surrounded by all manner of flowers – orchids, *narcissus*, lilies, freesias, and *agapanthus*. She took the apple, tasted one small bite, and said, “You chose well. What made you pick this one?”

Donny didn’t know what to say since to answer truthfully would reveal the secret of the brooch. Instead, he said, “Oh, I just picked one. It took so long to find the kitchen, I was afraid that you would be angry with me.”

“You are a fortunate young man,” she said. “Do you find me beautiful?”

“Quite,” said Donny. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“And could you fall in love with me?”

It didn’t take the vibrating of the brooch in his backpack to let Donny know that this was a loaded question. “I’m in love with Eleanor, my schoolmate,” he answered. “She is not as beautiful as you are, but when we hold hands, my heart beats faster than in any race I have run.”

If this answer bothered the witch, she gave no sign. She dismissed him for the day, saying if he was hungry, he had only to go to the kitchen and the appliances would give him whatever he wanted. He would find a room in the attic with a soft feather bed to sleep in.

The kitchen was as generous as the witch had mentioned, and Donny ate three roast beef sandwiches and an enormous order of fried potatoes, washed down with a large cup of steaming hot chocolate. Then he climbed a narrow staircase to the attic. Soon he was fast asleep without even bothering to take off the foolish clothes the witch had made him wear.

When he woke the next morning, he found himself back in his school uniform. He went in search of the witch. He wandered through a dozen grand rooms, empty of servants or any living thing, until he found her in the music room, playing an *étude* upon the piano. He noticed that she had changed her appearance. She looked a little more like Eleanor than she had the day before. *She wants me to love her*, he thought, *but I will never betray Eleanor*.

The witch turned to him and said, “Good morning, Donny. Do you have any questions for me today?”

“Will you teach me to play the piano? Will you show me how to shoot billiards? And who won the World Series in 1920?” asked Donny, for he wanted to keep his questions as innocent as possible. The witch told him that the Cleveland Indians had won in 1920, and gladly agreed to give him lessons and teach him to play pool. By the end of the day, he not only could play “Für Elise” but could shoot three ball combinations as well.

One day followed another. There was no work to do, for the palace magically cleaned itself each night, and the rooms would rearrange themselves so that where you wanted to go was always right behind the door. The witch did not ask Donny again if he could love her, though she continued to look more and more like his Eleanor. Mostly she asked about his life in the village, his classmates, and his family. Donny kept his requests simple, for he realized that the witch was actually very lonely, despite all the amusements of her magnificent palace. While the life was easy, Donny longed to be free and out in the world again.

“Why don’t you throw the doors of the palace open and enjoy the company of guests?” he asked one Tuesday. “Many would climb the mountain to enjoy your hospitality and you wouldn’t be alone.”

The witch looked startled, for in all his other questions Donny had acted the part of a simple soul willing to accept the world as it comes. “Isn’t it obvious?” she asked.

“That’s not an answer,” said Donny. “It’s just another question. It’s Tuesday. I ask the questions.”

The witch shrugged and said, “Perhaps you are right.”

Donny waited because he didn’t want to waste a question by repeating it.

The witch gave a sigh. “I disguise my palace because I am in hiding. There is a horrid, wicked creature that seeks my destruction. If it ever found me, my days on this world would be at an end.”

“Will you tell me about this creature?” asked Donny, using up his second question.

“It is called the Cheney, for it seeks to chain everyone to its desire for wealth and power. It is a great white blob, and impossible to kill because it doesn’t have a heart, just a machine inside its chest. Everyone it meets is immobilized by its implacable nastiness.”

“And the Cheney wants to kill you,” said Donny. Clearly this was a statement, not a question.

“As you can see,” said the witch, “All of my magic is domestic, the magic of home and garden. I can make a palace with a hundred rooms fit inside a cabin, clean itself, produce all the food and flowers that anyone could want. But I have no magic for killing.

“Long ago the Cheney offered to marry me. Together we could rule the world. When I refused, he vowed to do away with me. Part of his magic is to seem just like everyone else: proud of his home country and eager to defend it. If I revealed his vile intent, fewer people would follow willingly. He couldn’t let me live.”

“So you ran away,” said Donny.

“It hasn’t been easy living here alone. Why do you think I accepted your stupid bargain? I needed someone to share my time.”

Donny was ready for his third question. “If I slay the Cheney, will you grant me my freedom? Then you could invite as many people to your palace as you wished.”

“I’m very fond of you, Donny,” said the witch. “But I don’t think you can defeat the Cheney. Why should I let you go?”

“That was a question and it is Tuesday,” said Donny.

The witch looked terribly sad, for she thought that Donny could never succeed but, in the end, she agreed.

The next day Donny was dressed in his school clothes, just as he was on his days of freedom. He picked up his backpack and found the witch in the great front hall. She looked at him sweetly and asked whether he was ready to leave.

“Can you provide a magic sword to help me?” Donny said hopefully.

“Donny, I have no magic for weapons, and you can only carry from this palace what you brought in. What is in your backpack?”

“Just this trowel and this spoon,” said Donny, showing them to her. One of the men who might be my father said the trowel would find precious things in the ground. The baker’s assistant gave my mother this spoon, which is good for cooking. And I have a brooch with my mother’s picture and the picture of another woman in it.”

The witch took the trowel from Donny and held it in her hand. Then she chanted.

“Touch this trowel to the ground
All the wealth that can be found
Will increase a million fold
Diamonds, rubies, silver gold.”

Next, the witch took the spoon.

“Let this spoon that’s made of wood
Do the work that all tools should
Shaping to its master’s will
Forms his wishes to fulfill.”

The witch reached out to take the brooch, but Donny pulled his hand back, for he remembered his mother’s admonition only to let someone he loved have it. She tried to snatch it from him, but as her finger grazed its surface, she jumped back with a cry of pain.

“This brooch is far more powerful than I,” she said, “It contains mother love which is the greatest force in the universe.” The witch held up her hand and spoke.

“Here the force that all things seals
Now its power is revealed
What it touches will stay bound
From whatever sight or sound.”

“Those first two lines didn’t rhyme,” said Donny.

“It’s an assonance,” said the witch. “I’m letting you go. Don’t quibble about my prosody.”

Donny would have liked to find out what an assonance was, but if he didn’t leave he might never find the Cheney. He put the brooch into his pack and walked out of the doorway. Looking back, he saw nothing but a small wooden hut. He climbed out of the valley and turned down the path from the mountains.

The second he saw his village, he was overcome by a desire to see his mother, Eleanor, and his friends. *There is no harm in passing through*, he thought, *and the Cheney is as likely to be in one direction as another*. When he came to the gate, he found no one on guard and the streets deserted. No smoke came from any chimney. An eerie silence permeated the town, broken only by the whisper of the breeze over the rooftops.

At last, he heard the sound of someone weeping and was surprised to find it came from his own home. Pushing open the door, he found his mother sitting by a cold fireplace, crying as if the world were coming to an end. They rushed into one another’s arms, but she hurried to cut short their greeting.

“Where has everyone gone?” he asked.

“They fled because the evil Cheney is coming to ravage the town,” she explained. “I couldn’t leave because I was afraid that you might come back and be caught. Now we must run as well, for there is no one that can withstand the power of this creature.”

“But I am on a mission to fight the Cheney,” cried Donny. “I have pledged to defeat him or I would never be able to see you or Eleanor again.”

Before they could argue further, they heard a wheezing sound and the echo of a rotund footstep and Donny knew they could never escape in time. Tearing himself free from his mother’s embrace, he rushed out, and there in the main square of the town, stood the Cheney.

The Cheney was an enormous creature, as tall as the town hall tower, bald and bloated, for he had devoured the men and maidens of a thousand villages. He bore a condescending sneer, sure that no man or beast could resist him. This was no ignorant monster, for Donny could see in his eyes the gleam of a cruel intelligence.

“Is this stripling the best the town can send to oppose me?” he roared. “Better an army of archers and ten battalions of infantry. It almost isn’t worth the effort, but one must eat. And raw striplings do have a fine flavor since they haven’t been ruined by smoking and drinking.” Then the Cheney gave a chuckle that spoke of vain self-satisfaction.

“Stripling I may be,” said Donny. “But I have vowed to defeat you and that is what I shall do.”

“You don’t even have a weapon,” sneered the Cheney. “What’s in that backpack of yours? Schoolbooks? Is your plan to bore me to death with your essay on what you did over vacation?”

The Cheney began a confident advance with his blubbery feet striding across the square. Donny reached into his backpack and his hand closed upon the handle of the trowel. He snatched it out and jammed it between the paving stones of the main square and shouted.

“All the iron in the ground
To the surface must be found
Grow in size a million times
To obey these magic rhymes.”

There was an enormous rumbling sound and up from under the ground poured all of the ax heads and spades and wire and nails that anyone in the whole world had lost. Once in the square, the pieces swelled and fused together into a gigantic ingot as tall as the Cheney itself.

“How nice of you,” sneered the Cheney. “After I eat you, I’ll force some smithy to make me a giant war hammer bigger than the one that Thor wielded when he defended Valhalla.”

The great lump of metal was so huge that the Cheney had to waddle three extra steps to get around it. Before he could take the second step, Donny grabbed the spoon and touched the great lump of metal and spoke.

“Now let bars of steel entwine
In a network strong and fine
To surround the Cheney’s rage
And entrap him in a cage.”

Out of the top of the ingot, vines of steel shot upward high over the Cheney’s head and down behind him in a series of great arcs until they touched the ground. At the same time, the sides of the lump sent bars spinning around him, in and out of the standards until within a few seconds the Cheney was completely surrounded. He rushed to grab the bars of the cage and shake them loose, but they didn’t budge.

While the Cheney was attempting to break out, Donny rushed to the cage door, which the iron had included without being directed, and he touched the brooch to the lock. As he opened the brooch, his mother’s tear dripped out and settled on the latch. The metal smoked and fused so the Cheney was trapped forever.

The people who were hiding outside began to drift slowly back, and when they saw Donny and his mother standing beside the trapped Cheney, they were quick to raise rousing cheers. The town council voted to award Donny a medal of valor that the mayor was required to present at a public ceremony. The next day, Eleanor showed up at school wearing a marvelous cameo brooch.

Seven days later a beautiful woman with auburn hair appeared at the town to invite the entire population to an enormous picnic to be held at her palace high in the mountains. Everyone was provided with a plate that was instantly filled with each individual's favorite food. The witch wandered from family to family, delighting in their company, for from questioning Donny during his stay she had come to know all of them as well as he did. At the end of the picnic, the town decided to present her with the cage containing the Cheney. His appetite was so enormous that feeding him threatened to bankrupt the community and it was clear that his maintenance would not pose any cost to her.

Donny often went back to visit the witch. She had created a separate, smaller palace to house the Cheney, one that was quite delightful, but probably not really to his liking since there were no doors big enough for him to escape. Still, given that most monsters end up blown to bits at the end of stories like these, the Cheney couldn't really complain.

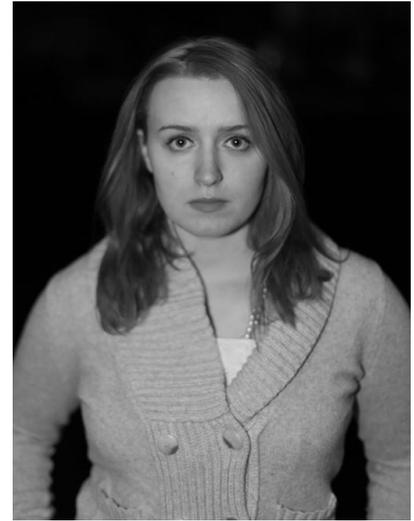
And so, they all lived happily ever after.



John Swetnam's work has appeared in *Proteus*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Kestrel*, *Review Americana*, *Blast Furnace*, *Carnival*, *Garbanzo*, and *Tule Review*. He is currently revising a novel set in Guatemala.

Volume 6 Editors

Sara McClory is an avid writer, reader and film buff and has a general love for storytelling. North Shore born and raised, Sara received her Degree in English with the concentration in Creative Writing at Salem State University. She has been published in the creative world (and worked with other publications) as well as working freelance and technical writing. Her dream for Buck Off is to create an online environment of the strange creative creatures that stray away from the traditional forms of arts and open up to all submissions possible. She's obsessed with the show *Twin Peaks*.



Joseph Benavidez is a proud cat daddy, enjoys reading fan fiction and loves traveling by boat. He has had his work featured in magazines, newspapers and museum exhibits. A graduate of Salem State University, he uses his education to write about pumpkin-scented candles and the value of Tyler Hoechlin chest hair blogs.

Sandy Sprague is still waiting for her letter to Hogwarts, even though she would have passed all her N.E.W.T.s by now and, according to multiple online quizzes, would be a Journalist for the *Daily Prophet*. She's not one to give up on hope, though. In the meantime, she works as the Program and Volunteer Coordinator and a Library Assistant at Abbot Public Library. She is not planning on becoming a Librarian - that's for the smarty pantses. No, she aspires to being a Grammar Nazi, fixing punctuation and sentence structure wherever she sees it, starting with being an Editor for *Buck Off Magazine*. In her free time, she attends literary events and spends her money on improving her book hoard.

