LOCUST SHELLS JOURNAL

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still.

naomi olivia

birds’ nests exposed
atop of skeleton trees.
the wind burns holes
in skin unsleeved. it hurts.
i breathe. the minutes
pass. i breathe. winter
will be gone soon. life
unclean. still. i will
bleed. i will breathe.
still.

1 Sansome

Christian Garduno

The train sounds across this sleeping city
well, really, it's more of a town
some days it's roses, some days it's thorns
and that night you went clickity-clack
on my type-writer all night
and in the morning
you wouldn't show what you wrote
I never told you
it didn't matter
because if I really wanted to know
I could read the ribbon in reverse
from the chorus back to the verse
but I don't and I won't
well, at least not tonight
but I reserve the right
and the train horn blows through the empty souls
living on the out-skirts of the night
binary birdsongs in the digital dawn
some days it's vine, some nights it's the wine
you lost me on the balcony
thanking my lucky stars
we ran so fast to our regrets
bumming cigarettes
sparing one every time we could
you never told me that it didn't matter
and it never could
because I have all your dreams down here

you reverse the ribbon
and that night comes alive again

Downsburrow

Sandra Petrinovic

Miss Penelope May, a 40-year-old spinster, has recently moved to the quaint town of Downsburrow. She decided she needed space and time to heal after the death of her fiancé, and what better place to do this than in the country? Joseph Mcquire was an up-and-coming police officer. He joined the force after school and worked his way up to Sergeant. Before his 30th birthday, Joseph, with his partner, was on patrol when the call came in of a robbery at the local bank. Unfortunately, he was killed in the crossfire. Penelope May took his death badly and vowed she would never find love like this again. This led Penelope to move to the country where no one knew her and start afresh.

A year passed, and Penelope felt like her old self again. She found she craved company and tried making friends with other women, but something was always out of sorts. Penelope was extremely level-headed, and her common sense was impeccable. She knew enough and felt well informed about worldly things, and she knew her commonsense always stood her in excellent stead. But Penelope May was still a shy woman who had lived a sheltered life.

Penelope felt like walking to the local tea room for a nice cup of tea with crumpets, jam, and whipped cream. Normally, she would have tea in her garden, but today was warm and spring was in the air, which jolted Penelope into having a spring in her step. She sauntered into the town, greeting neighbours as she passed. She entered Molly's Tea Room, sat down at a window table, and placed her order of a Pot of 5 Roses tea and a scone with all the trimmings. She enjoyed the outing, a slow walk, and beautiful scenery, which set her mood for the rest of the day.

The next morning, opening her curtains to a fresh new Spring day, Penelope felt out of sorts and rather queasy, so she went to see the town's local GP, Dr. Brian Downs. She was lucky to gain an appointment at Dr. Downs' surgery that

morning, for someone had cancelled their appointment. Miss May normally has an excellent constitution, but for some reason, today her constitution seemed upset.

Miss May was stunned at her whimsical fantasy when she laid eyes on Dr. Downs. *'Well, I never,'* thought Penelope. *'What was happening to me?'* She never thought she had any feelings left to offer, not after Joshep. She had recovered from that incident, not thinking she would relive that horrible experience. She also never intended for this to happen. To open her heart to someone, for that someone to creep in. Miss May did not have any family living in Downsburrow to discuss this state of affairs with, so she opted to keep her secret in her heart for all eternity, or at least until so could work something out.

Penelope May found that she had set her heart on this most extraordinary bachelor in the town of Downsburrow. People often wonder why she used 'extraordinary' when he appeared to be just like any young man living in the town. In the eyes of Miss Penelope May, Brian Downs showed empathy and compassion for others. His shyness and humility made him even more desirable to her.

Penelope once said, "Brian Downs remains grounded despite all his achievements. This is what I admire about him."

Brian Downs is the town's local GP. His father, Gerald Downs, was the mayor of Downsburrow, and his great-great-great-grandfather founded the town sometime in the mid-1800s. Downsburrow is known for the Duck feathers that Brian's ancestors collected, which put the town on the map. Duck feathers were sent to the city factories for use in bedding, pillows, and over-time jackets, as well as sleeping bags. Brian used to accompany his father to work over school holidays. Over time, Brian became the first aider when the firm had an accident. That is how he developed a love for medicine and chose to become the town's local healer when he graduated from college.

Brian has been out with a few ladies in his time, but he never found an affinity with any of them. The women were either too loud and brassy or could not hold a decent conversation, some giggled all the time. Brian Downs' ideal woman must have charm, be able to hold her own in a conversation, and have impeccable manners. So, Brian gave up on dating and concentrated on his work, which made him a brilliant doctor. Brian Downs, at 42 years old, considered himself a confirmed bachelor with no intentions to marry. That is until Penelope May entered his consultation rooms with poise and grace, Brian was taken aback, stunned at the figure in front of him. He did not take his eyes off her.

Brian impulsively stood up. “Please sit down, Miss May,” indicated Brian, “and how can I help you today?”

“Good morning, Dr. Downs. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. Yesterday, I decided to go for tea at the town's local tea room and I had a scone with jam and cream, and now I feel queasy and uncomfortable. What could be the problem?”

Dr. Downs nodded thoughtfully and then said “What else did you eat yesterday?”

“Well, I had a light lunch consisting of a green salad with tuna, and for supper I had vegetable soup with bread. Come to think of it, the tuna tasted different from usual,” Penelope said.

“How have you been lately? Any other problems I should know about?”

Penelope thought for a moment and said, “No. I am normally quite well. Nothing more to report.”

Brian nodded, he rose and indicated towards his consulting bed, “Please take a seat on this bed. I would like to check your blood pressure and pulse, your throat and ears first. This is just a routine check.”. Brian’s heart raced; his hands were sweaty, and his pulse was racing. Shaking slightly, he performed

his duties admirably. Everything checked out just fine. Miss May appeared in good health.

“Miss May, please lie back. I would like to check your abdomen for any abnormalities.”

Penelope May lay back, eyeing Dr. Downs suspiciously. Ever the gentleman, he gently pressed around her abdomen. He checked her appendix, fine. His fingers so gently pressed down over her colon area, and he felt the movement.

“Thank you, Miss May, please return to your seat.”

“Miss May, it appears that you are suffering from a food source that is causing your bowels to work overtime.” Brian tried to put it as nicely as he could instead of saying you have diarrhea. He felt that using words that are nasty-sounding is just a little too common for a lady of this stature.

“How can I remedy the problem?”

“We need to get rid of the germ first, and you do this by drinking a lot - to keep hydrated and not eating anything for a day or so. If you feel as if you need something to eat, then please eat a slice of dry toast. The problem should start easing in a day or two. If not, please have this prescription filled and start taking Imodium to stop the issue.”

Dr. Downs picked up his prescription pad, wrote the medication on the form, and handed the letter to Penelope, saying, “If all else fails, please don’t hesitate to come and see me again.”

“Thank you, Dr. Downs.”

Penelope May rose, nodded politely, and so did Dr. Downs as he smiled, and she was gone. Brian’s first thought is, *‘I have to meet her again, but how?’*

Penelope May was so impressed with Dr. Downs' bedside manner, she wondered how he would be outside of work.

Downsburrow is a beautiful and quaint city that has grown from strength to strength, with around 2000 inhabitants and still growing steadily. Beautiful pine trees surround the city, and when the wind blows, a gentle scent of fresh pine floats through the city. Downsburrow is nestled between two large mountain ranges, with a river on one side of the town that feeds into a dam. This dam hosts a flock of ducks and geese and a multitude of bird life. The dam is also used for the town's water supply. The water is pumped to the town's water department, filtered, and then distributed to the residents of the town. Over the years, walkways were introduced around the dam for afternoon strolling or an early morning run. Benches were also placed in strategic positions around the dam for those to sit and enjoy the calm of the water and beautiful sunsets. A park with children's play equipment was established near the dam, and the town council is in discussion about whether or not a petting zoo should be allowed. A tea garden that sells breakfasts and light lunches is also on the council's agenda. These two ideas are way up the council's agenda. They hope this will bring in excellent revenue to aid in the city's upkeep. Downsburrow still farms duck and goose feathers to sell at the market. This farm is owned by Dr. Downs' sister, Megan, and her husband, Samuel. Feather Farm, as it is called, sits on the riverbank, home to over 500 ducks and geese, not including hatchlings.

More elderly folk live in Downsburrow than young people; they enjoy the peace and tranquility the city offers. Also, most have stayed here most of their natural lives, and very few have moved away. This has made this town a wonderful retirement area. More and more young people have found solace in this small town. They like the idea of raising their children in an upstanding and close-knit community, so moving to Downsburrow has increased the population incredibly and brought more work to this beautiful place.

The streets in Downsburrow are narrow, which fit only one car at a time, only because when the town was built all those years ago, the roads could only handle donkey and horse-pulled carts. So, as the city grew, the council decided to keep the roads wide enough for one vehicle at a time, which kept the quaintness of the town alive and the driving hooligans at bay for the safety of all residents. Down the main street of Downsburrow, the whitewashed stores with corrugated or slate roofs brings a robust scent of foods and drinks, and an increased economy that the hustle and bustle of any market alive with people could be proud of. In every corner, an array of flowers blossoms and blooms, and intertwined around every lamp post, either ivy or jasmine creeps, reaching the tops and trying to grab hold of store roofs.

The narrow side streets are lined with white-walled thatched-roof cottages. Each cottage displays a unique quality, ranging from hanging baskets laden with petunias and Begonias, or the ever-popular fuchsia, bright pink in all its glory, to houses that sport the heart-shaped leaf Ivy crawling up the walls intertwined with Star Jasmine. The fragrance of Jasmine, filtered with coffee and baked scones from each cottage, lingers in the air as you pass, blasting your taste buds into action. In front of most houses stand a wooden bench, a favourite spot for the elderly to linger on in comfort. As one walks by to market, which is a favourite pastime with the folks of Downsburrow, an eager greeting encourages one to stop and chat. Coffee is always offered along with a tasty bit of gossip about all the things the neighbours' children get up to, or even the adults, and even the goings on around in neighbouring villages.

Especially old Mrs. Tucker, who enjoys a large amount of complaining and chin wagging about other families.

She always has something to say about “Today’s children and adults never learnt to be polite and respectful towards anyone, old or young. The government should do something about that.”

She never had any solutions to any problems either. Mrs. Tucker's other pet peeve is dear Penelope May. She often complains to Carol, “Just look at Penelope May popping in at the doctor’s office. Always leaves vanilla muffins or chocolate cupcakes for him. She once informed me that it is the way to a man’s stomach. Well, I never. I said. A young lady never runs after a man. Her reply to that was I must make him aware of my affections; otherwise, how else do I get him to notice me?”

Carol choked back a laugh, and Mrs. Tucker threw an icy glance her way. Carol surmised that Mrs. Tucker came from the dinosaur era, which made Carol stifle yet another laugh.

Funny enough, Carol has heard Penelope say, ‘A way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, and once the good doctor tastes my culinary skills,he will surely be impressed.’ Carol burst out laughing when she remembered this comment. Mrs. Tucker huffed at Carol, hurriedly packed up her tea things, and disappeared inside before Carol could ask how she caught her husband.

Carol Jennings is Dr. Brian Downs’ receptionist, and she has picked up on Miss May’s enthusiasm for the charming Doctor.

On a few occasions, Penelope had consulted Dr. Brian for some ailment or another, and she always left an invitation to a dinner party being held at her home on his desk, hoping that one day he would accept it.
Dr. Downs, being a brilliant doctor, has not realized Penelope's advancements, although Carol has caught him staring at Miss May after she has consulted with him, and when Penelope has turned around to bid her farewell, he has fumbled with his shirt buttons or papers on his desk.

One Sunday afternoon with a mild breeze which highlighted the sweet fragrance of jasmine, Carol and her next-door neighbour, Maude, sat on Carol’s wooden bench sipping coffee and dunking chocolate biscuits.
“The handsome Dr. Downs has an admirer,” gossiped Carol.

“Who?” asked Maude.

“Miss Penelope May, and when I cleaned out his bin on Friday afternoon, I found a few dinner invitations thrown away.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Daily, she leaves an array of confectioneries for him.”

“Lucky man, and does he appreciate these delicacies?”

“He thinks I bring them in for 10 o’clock tea.”

Maude laughed, “Do you not tell him who brings the eats?”

“I do, but he says, ‘No, I don’t think so. Miss May is a patient, and she is a confirmed spinster.”

Maude sipped her coffee slowly. Then she said, “It appears that Dr. B and Miss M need a small nudge in the right direction.”

“Maude, you cheeky devil. What do you have in mind?” smiled Carol.

“When is the next dinner party to take place?”

“Umm, actually last night.”

“Well, then, perhaps you should be the instigator.”

“What? No way. I am not getting in the middle of someone else’s love affair.”

“Come on. You do realise if you pull this off, you will not just be the talk of the town but also our resident matchmaker because you got the two most awkward people together.”

“Mm, well, if you put it that way. Fine then.” Carol paused. “On one condition.”

“What?”

“Will you help me?”

Maude nodded with a smile. “I thought you would never ask.”

Carol eyed her friend and just shook her head.

Carol held a games evening at her house the following Saturday. She was arranging a bouquet of freshly cut sweet peas from her garden in the sitting room when Maude arrived bearing snacks and wine. Maude said, “My cousin Frank will be joining us.”

“Wonderful, and my brother Donald is joining us as well.”

“How about Dr. Downs and Miss May?” asked Maude.

“They agreed to come. The surprise is that neither of them knows the other will be joining us.”

“And you told me that I was sneaky,” laughed Maude.

Carol’s guests slowly arrived at 7 pm. First to arrive was Penelope; she ushered her into her living room. Right after Penelope came Donald and Frank together. Just one more guest.

A sharp rat-a-ta on the door. “Aah, my last guest has arrived.” smiled Carol.

She ushered the good doctor into her small lounge. Maude and Carol held their breath. Brian and Penelope stared at each other. Small beads of perspiration formed on Brian’s brow. Penelope sat wringing her hands in her lap. An awkward silence settled over the guests. Maude spoke first, “Carol, how about a small glass of sherry to start the evening?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Maude, would you give me a hand?” said Carol, pulling Maude towards the kitchen. “What was I thinking?”

“…that you are doing a wonderful deed.” her friend replied.

They quickly poured six small sherries, placing each glass on a tray and waltzing into the sitting room.

“Everyone comfy?” she asked, handing out the sweet red liquid. The group accepted the glasses and sat in further silence. “Well, brother dear. What have you been up to lately?” asked Carol.

“I have joined the local mountain bike club in the town. We go off-road riding on weekends. Actually, we have a fun ride tomorrow in the woods. The club has set up a trail for us to follow. I am looking forward to that.”

“That sounds awfully dangerous,” remarked Miss May.

“It’s a great idea to get outside for exercise and fresh air,” said Brian.

“Although I wouldn’t try mountain biking. Far too reckless in my view. A good walk is just as beneficial.”

“So, you are not an adrenaline junkie then, Dr. Downs. Personally, I think it’s perfect. Perhaps I will be a spectator tomorrow, Donald, and find out what all the fuss is about,” said Frank.

“Feel free to come and watch. You might enjoy it,” said Donald.

“I would much rather walk around the dam. Far safer,” said Miss May and Brian agreed. Maude picked up a side plate and helped herself to a few snacks. “Please, everyone, help yourselves.”

Brian and Penelope reached at the same time for a side plate and they brushed hands. The shocked look on Penelope’s face frightened Brian.

“OH, I am so terribly sorry. I did not intend to touch you, Miss May.”

“It’s quite all right. I think I shall wait awhile. Please feel free.” She pointed towards the food.

“May I refill your sherry glass, Penelope?” asked Carol.

“No, thank you, Carol, I am fine.”

Carol smiled and nodded. Donald and Frank had been included in the task of getting Dr. Downs and Miss May together, and these two took bets on which one would make the first move tonight.

Donald tried a little more small talk with the good doctor. “Doctor Downs. I believe your family has been in Downsburrow right from the beginning of this town's inception.” And all Donald got was “Yes, that’s right.”

Donald nodded. “Excellent.”

Frank tried another tactic. “Miss May, may I call you Penelope?”

“Of course.”

“Have you and Dr. Downs been on many dates?”

Frank and Donald sniggered.

Frank prided himself on always being a direct, in-your-face kind of guy. Penelope stared at him, turning a bright shade of red, and Dr. Downs coughed out part of his sherry. Carol nudged Maude, who was trying to suppress a laugh.

Maude cleared her throat and said, “How about a game of truth or dare?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” bellowed Frank and Donald.

“Frank, Truth or dare,” she asked.

“Truth.”

“Have you done anything in your life that was foolish?”

“Yes, I have. On an evening out with friends, I drove too recklessly and could not stop my car in time, and I ended up in the dam. The car had gone under, and I was soaked to the skin after dragging myself out through my side window. Luckily, it was open. I had the police on my case, and a few thousand Rands later, I had my car pulled out of the water.”

Gasps of disapproval sounded from the doctor and Miss May.

Maude said, “That was just reckless of you.”

Frank shrugged.

Frank asked, “Donald, Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“Right, the floor is yours,” said Frank.

“I dare you, Frank, to kiss Maude. Not on the cheek.”

Penelope, appalled, covered her mouth. Donald, without hesitation, grabbed Maude and kissed her on the lips.

“Cheeky. Carol, truth or dare,” giggled Maude.

“Dare. I dare Brian to ask Penelope on a date,” said Carol.

Brian shifted uneasily in his chair, and Penelope, sipping her sherry, coughed, dribbling sherry down her chin.

“I…I…I…” Brian stammered, and Penelope stared at him, hoping for those few words to escape his mouth.

Dr. Brian Downs stood, grabbed his coat, thanked Carol for the evening, and escaped. Penelope watched as the door closed behind him.

“What a fool I have been!” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. “I had hoped that one day he would notice me.”

Penelope May rose to her feet, collected her coat, wished everyone a pleasant evening, and left with an aching heart.

Carol went to work on Monday and found a handwritten note from Dr. Downs, saying, *‘Dear Carol. I have been called away for an emergency family*

meeting. Please cancel all my appointments. I will see you in a week. Yours, Dr. B. Downs MB.'

Carol tried calling Penelope May, but all she got was the answering machine. A week went by, and still no one had heard or seen Brian Downs or Penelope May. The following Monday, Dr. Downs walked into his consulting rooms with his head held high. The day was uneventful except that Carol could not believe how assertive Dr. Downs had become. Brian Downs projected such confidence and presence that the ladies took notice. It appeared that he had overcome his shyness and was eager to meet the world head-on. Carol wondered what had taken place in the week her boss was away.

Brian said to himself, "Enough is enough. I must get my head in the game. Pluck up the courage and ask the lovely Miss May out on a date. Tonight is the night, straight after work. Ask her to dinner." In the same week that Dr. Downs went away, Miss Penelope May went to visit a counsellor two towns away. She did not want to bring attention to herself. She did not want people to talk about her, saying that she wasn't quite right in the head. Penelope knew she battled to talk to people, so she went in pursuit of a life coach. The exercises Penelope underwent with the encouragement from the life coach were astounding. Penelope's whole outlook on life opened up before her, and it showed in her demeanour.

Dr. Brian Downs stood nervously at Penelope's front door under a small roof, which helped when rain poured down. A soft white porch light lit her front door, which had a small blue stained-glass window embedded in the wooden door. Brian felt something spongy under his feet, and he looked down. He was standing on a mat saying 'Welcome'. Brian was wringing his hands, his nerves getting the better of him. "Get a grip, Brian, she isn't going to bite.". Before losing his courage, Brian knocked on the door, a barely audible knock. He waited a few seconds, and the door opened to a stunned Penelope.

“Miss May, I…I…I have liked you for a long time. UMM, would you care to go with me to dinner tonight?”

Penelope, with her newfound self-reflection, warmed at the sight of this wonderful but shy man standing in her doorway. She wanted to hug him, but she daredn’t in case he lost his nerve.

“Yes, dear Brian, I would love to go to dinner with you.”

Brian Downs and Penelope May made a mental note to thank Carol for bringing them together and showing them that they can also have happiness, just like everyone else.

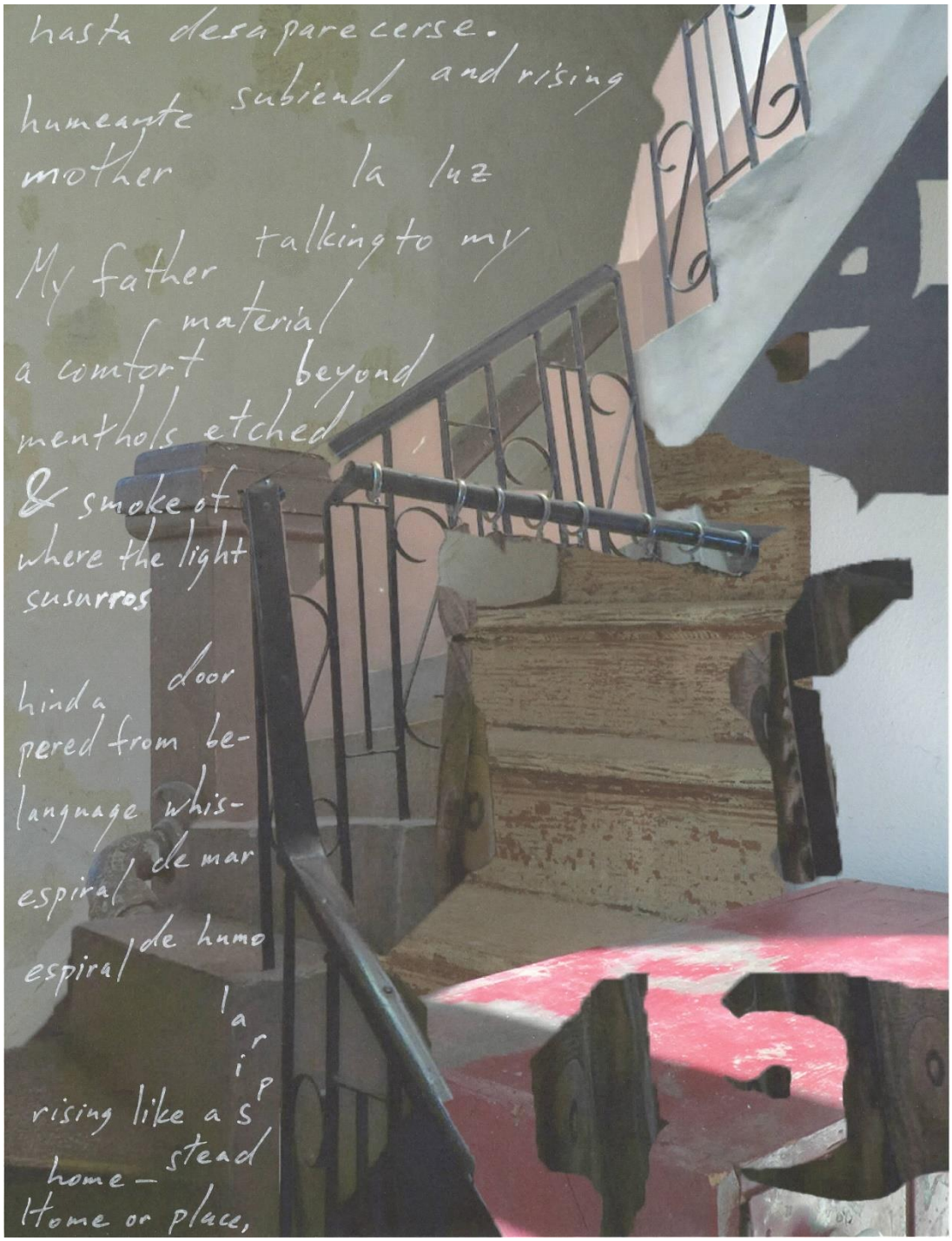
Something Stirring

Bonnie Demerjian

It’s Super Moon and the time of big tides. The sea is restless and we’re the same. Massive logs, the ones skulking on the beach for months, are ready. We watch the water. Will the geography of our shore be rearranged this time? Everything is moving out there and the rising waters are awake. Refuse from the garden tossed there all season will float off, the seaside erased, ready for a new beginning. Oh, to be so cleansed of all that vainly troubles, the detritus of used up hours. Small logs and branches, the ones that have slowed our path, they’ll float away too, but there’s a tension bound with the mighty ones. Will they leave us at last? They’ve been nearly a part of the family, looked out upon every day as we wondered about their past — part of a log raft, felled by a storm on a distant island, a traveler from the inland river? And now is the day of their leave-taking. We watch as the waves inch closer. We give the logs a gentle shove at the tide’s ultimate and they’re on their ponderous way. Part relief, part sadness as they depart. We’ve been companions, but look. Drifting toward us, a new vessel seeking a sometime home. And we, like them, are torn as the tide moves water and blood — to stay or loose ourselves and become unmoored.

UpStairs

Joshua Bridgwater Hamilton and Shiven Saxena



Recycling

Sarah Das Gupta

water polishes refines
reduces to the essence
the hand grasps a polished stone
across the smooth surface
a drowned coin gleams
re-baptised in sand and water
its value trebled by
the river's constant flow.
leaves are water-logged
soon skeletons absorbed
in primeval mud
the alpha and omega

a log skinned by the current
sheds its green scales
sinks till only a hunch backed
savaged spine
threatens summer skies

patiently the water wears
the rocks
a century or two
may break the strongest will
the green hair of
long dead girls
trails in the river's flow

bones rise and fall
on the gritty bed
not transformed
to twisted coral
nor to translucent pearls
just white bones
worn wearily away
part of the slime
drifting slowly
seawards

Heart in Her Throat

Christine Lajewski

Almost every day for the past decade, Marlena ate her own heart. The tissue would tear free from arteries and veins and squirm up her throat. She'd hold the lump in place, hoping this time she would choke. It always sprouted hooks and heaved itself into her mouth. She surrendered and ate it, slice by bloody slice, because what waited for her was much worse.

On the three thousandth day, Marlena felt the oversized muscle squeeze its way up. She shut her eyes as shards of pain stabbed her chest. In the blackness, she saw the cavity left behind and the rim of light marking the abyss within. The black hole tugged at her lungs, diaphragm, intestines. Rather than consign herself to the bottomless void, she took a bite and swallowed. Then another, and another until once again it congealed into a pulsing mass in her chest.

It tasted like a slimy body dredged from the bottom of a green lake. Like Danny. Like Debbie.

"Again, Babe?" Hadley called from the bedroom. "It's so not necessary. I haven't done it for months."

"I know, I know," Marlena said, sinking to the floor and pressing a fist into her sternum. Over the years, she had learned that eating someone else's heart staved off the horrible disgorging for a week, but she never liked doing it. She already had too many lives to account for.

Hadley, on the other hand, enjoyed his craft. He was like her: a sinner with a singularly terrible punishment. In the past year, they'd found comfort in each other's shared experiences, although she wouldn't call it love. Marlena's unforgiveable was a sin of omission. Hadley admitted to multiple sins of commission stretching back a century, although he didn't look a day over

forty. He was elusive on the details, but she did some research and suspected he was a conman who married multiple women at the same time. All of them disappeared. It seemed several of them were pregnant when it happened—a two for one.

Hadley was a rent-a-nurse, moving from hospital to clinic to assisted living, picking off the vulnerable and moving on if he had any hint that someone had become suspicious. Marlena worked in the kitchen of a nursing home, where she could do the same if she was clever enough, desperate enough. It was one of dozens of jobs she'd held across the country.

"Still leaving tomorrow?" she asked as he helped her to her feet.

He nodded. "A clinic in Nome. I probably won't be gone long. It's only a four-week gig although it has potential to go much longer. Some of these areas are so desperate for help."

Alaska. Of course, she thought. A lot of indigenous women went missing up there, with only perfunctory investigations. She'd eaten hearts of stone before. She suspected one beat in Hadley's chest. He was good to her, however, and she had learned most of what she knew from his vast experience. To be honest, he was an improvement over the men she had hooked up with in the past. She would miss him.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Seriously, you look terrible. I know what you need." He kissed her neck and pulled her toward the bedroom.

They lingered after lovemaking. "You're still depressed," he said. "You keep inflicting this pain on yourself when you should just go with the remedy."

"I'd just rather not kill."

"And when you can't stand it anymore, you'll eat someone else's heart anyway."

“Has it occurred to you that all this is a test? I mean, sure, I’ve failed so many times. But if we could withstand the temptation, maybe we might get to go someplace better.”

“Like the abyss?” Hadley laughed. He always denied it, but he couldn’t tolerate the pain of the disgorgement. He was even more terrified of the black hole in his chest. “There’s no instruction manual for our situation, Babe. If I’ve found something that works for me, I don’t want to screw around with it.”

Marlena sighed. “I meant we might be allowed to die. Didn’t you ever try killing yourself?”

“Once, when I did the first unforgiveable. But I don’t dwell on the guilt anymore.”

“I lost count of how many times I tried. Jumping, shooting, burning. None of it worked. I’m still here.”

Hadley suddenly grew very quiet. Then he squeezed her close to his chest and said, “You know, there’s one thing that might do it. Someone would have to eat your heart.” He laughed.

The pit of her stomach turned cold. “It’s a thought” she said, her temples pounding as she pulled away from him. Even if it did kill her, finally and forever, the thought of Hadlley turning on her frightened her. She didn’t want him to have her heart anyway. He didn’t deserve it.

As she dressed, Hadley prattled on about his next chosen victim, a young man about to be released from the hospital psych ward and transferred to a rehab facility.

“So you’ll pretend to be his Uber driver?” she said.

“Something like that. I need a heart before I travel. I don’t want to barf up my guts at TSA.”

Marlena scowled. She never chose the innocent, or anyone who had a chance at recovery. When she could no longer bear it, she took people who were terminal, or those who didn't deserve to live. In fact, she had one picked out: an orderly she caught molesting a bed-ridden old woman. He would be meeting her that night, buying her silence in return for five thousand dollars.

She caught the orderly's eye in the hall that afternoon, and whispered, "Town forest. Eleven PM."

Marlena arrived an hour early and parked her car off road. She hid and listened to the wind. It always carried the voices of children--never laughing, always weeping with the ache of broken hearts. When the orderly reached the designated trail head, she stole up behind him, stabbing him in the kidneys. He barely had time to register his shock before he dropped to the ground.

His heart was black. Bathed in his own blood, it tasted meaty and sweet. Like justice. She sighed, anticipating days of relief from the rotten burden of her sins. She pocketed the money then dragged his body deep into some heavy brush for the scavengers to enjoy.

#

Hadley was pacing, chewing on his fingers, when Marlena came through the door.

"He got away?" she asked.

He leaned his forehead against a window, rocking side to side. "I can't fly tomorrow if I don't get a heart." He was such a baby. Just anticipating the pain made him frantic.

"You could go hunting," she said, watching him from the corner of her eye. "It's not like you've never done it before. I have to clean up. I got blood in my hair." She knew what was coming; she slipped a chef's knife under her shirt.

She ran the shower hot, steaming up the bathroom. He was nude when he entered. He got into the tub, kissing and fondling her. She slid her hand outside the curtain, pulling the knife from the folds of a towel on the back of the toilet. As his hands moved to her throat, she thrust the blade under his ribs. He cracked his head on the faucet as he fell, pulling her down on top of him. She quickly cut out his heart before he could revive.

In place of cardiac muscle was black stone, the sign of a truly evil man. She soaked it in the blood pooling in his abdomen, kneading it with her fingers to soften it. It was one of the most delicious things she'd ever eaten. Two hearts in one night! That would last her a while.

Marlena packed Hadley's sectioned remains in a big suitcase, cleaned the apartment and, in the gray light of dawn, left town. She was almost too exhausted to drive. "I'm so tired of this life," she whispered.

#

Ten years earlier, Marlena's husband deserted her along with four-year-old Danny and two-year-old Debbie. She started an affair with someone on the town council. Marty swore he loved her, that he would gladly leave his wife except for one snag: he didn't want kids. The relationship was going nowhere but she loved him too much to send him packing. Every time he walked out the door, she wondered how different—how much better--her life might be if she had no children. Then she would panic at the very idea of losing Danny and Debbie. "Never, never, never," she would swear. "Don't listen to me. I don't mean it."

She was driving the children home one December night after a tree lighting ceremony. On a dark back road, she hit a patch of ice, spun around and shot down a bank into the icy river. Her face smashed into the steering wheel. Dazed, Debbie and Danny whimpered softly from the back seat.

Marlena squeezed through the window into the black freezing water. It stabbed like a hundred knives, yet she somehow made it to the riverbank. Wind rushed across the river, carrying a faint, plaintive cry: “Mama.”

It was the first time she ever felt her heart in her throat. She waded into the killing waters to save her children, felt the crippling pain in her bones, and froze. She stepped ashore. In an instant, her decision was made. The wind sang, “Mama,” the car sank, and Marlena screamed.

The morning after the funeral, her heart tore loose for the first time. Marlena vomited it into the kitchen sink, staring as it pulsed. It was white, a flag signaling her cowardice. She saw the black hole inside herself. In agony and terror, she could only think of one way to return the organ where it belonged. Panic-stricken, she crammed it into her mouth. Gnawing, gagging, chewing, swallowing, even as the muscle spasmed, the heart reconstituted itself in her chest.

Marty never called, never even sent condolences. She saw him once coming out of a restaurant with his wife. The woman must have been eight months pregnant. Her face was rosy, luminous as she leaned her head on his shoulder. He patted her swollen belly and smiled fondly.

Marlena stumbled into a deserted alley and regurgitated her heart for the second time that day. It was the first and only time she had to do that. She quickly snatched it up and wolfed it down before a hungry rat could pounce on it.

She haunted Marty’s steps until he asked to meet at a hotel far from town. She waited on the side of the road instead, where he would see her in his headlights. As he pulled over, she turned and fled. He chased her down a wooded gully where Marlena stabbed him. Overwhelmed with hunger, she consumed his black heart. She left him on the tracks to be dismembered by the next speeding train.

#

Marlena replayed the crimes, first and last, that brought her to this latest escape to a new town in a new state. She wondered, not for the first time, if she should have just let that rat eat her heart. She took a job at a soup kitchen. It was there that an idea for a final exit came to her. If it didn't work, it would be nothing she hadn't earned.

One morning, she broke in and waited for the final disgorgement. The organ had flushed pink, a sign, she hoped, that her gift was acceptable. Hands trembling, she diced the heart into bits, then added it to a stockpot of soup in the refrigerator. As the void opened in her chest, she lurched into the alley. A wind alive with the cries of children swirled trash around her legs. Marlena's intestines were the first to disappear into the widening interior chasm, followed by stomach, lungs, abdominal muscles. It hurt like hell, and she wept.

Faint voices welled up from the abyss: "Mama? Mama!" As eyes and brain and skull caved inward, she saw her children waiting for her. There was a bottom to this hell after all.

Between

Hilary Steele

Rain slips like grease down dark windows. You stare through your reflection as you wait for your coffee to cool. You still have hours to drive.

A boy with grey eyes speaks to the girls at the next table. Make-up creases in the corners of their eyes as they bridle, hiss, half-rise from their seats in fury.

Don't you talk to us. Who let you in here?

You tell the boy your name. You ask him his. Sam likes double cheeseburgers and table tennis on Thursdays.

The girls' mouths tighten. You have oiled the perches of their anger and it hovers, rages, sinks sullenly into the jaws of the women they will become.

A woman arrives. Her lanyard clicks against her tray. The burger she brings is double cheese. Her eye-roll is not tilted towards the girls, still spitting as the door closes behind them. It says

When will he ever learn?

Dwarf Planet

Laura Ingram

After "The Moon and the Yew Tree" by Sylvia Plath

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
My mother's milk is space dust, its own element.
I suckle mercury, and it makes me into an alien.
I speak a language nobody knows
and never grow up.

After the nightmare, my hand over my heart.
In the dark, I mistake my own
arms for Saturn's rings.
Outisde the window glass,
star-spat cloud buds into bright flower,
petals blue as Earth.
I ellipse the black garden like Pluto,
harvest Hiroshima ash into my apron.
The grasses whispering their griefs to my ankles
as if they could fell me like a fawn
take me out of the trap and make me their god.
Maybe I could make it rain all the time.
I use the water as a mirror,
comb the uranium out of my hair.

I would like to believe in tenderness.
The moon is no one's wife—
she is a white-knuckle, an empty hand.
The moon is a fist.

There’s radon in the well water .
It has already killed a calf
and wasted my body.
Bedridden with War,
the sun, that hairy lioness, catches my fevers.

Or moon is my death mask. I know her name.
she throws the sea over her shoulder like salt,
pockets an infant’s caul in her night gown.
There is no loneliness like longing.
Every constellation as an effigy,
candle-lit by nebulas,
all distant as saints.
Every face you see in a dream is a face you’ve seen before.

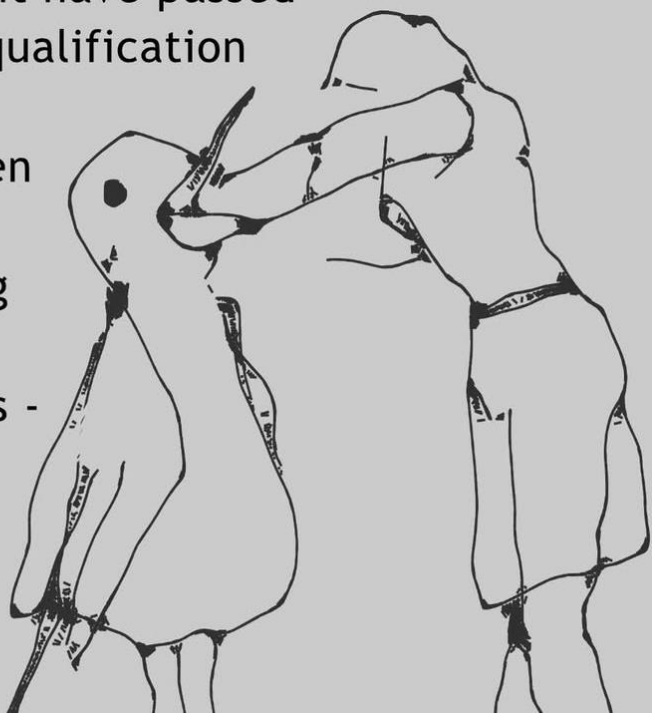
~

c_zientek

the ocean bird loving 7th grade science
student was thrilled that her proposal
for the state conservation / ecological /
environmental project was accepted.

but her overly graphic and oddly
enthusiastic demonstration of highlighting
“the harm done to sea birds by plastic bags”
by stuffing plastic bags into the mouth
of a life sized paper maché albatross -
just - just might have passed
the judges disqualification

if it hadn’t been
for the local
bookies betting
on the final
number of bags -
amid nasty
allegations of
‘bag fixing”



What the Chickadee Says

Cynthia Pratt

After Joy Harjo's, She Had Some Horses

The Chickadee says to make haste.
The chickadee says it will soon rain, a downpour.
The chickadee says I'm not as pretty as a mockingbird.
The chickadee says feathers paint lies—truths—if you read them
correctly
The chickadee says don't question the sky, only drink it with lemon.
The chickadee says barricade the windows or night will close in.
The chickadee hears everything I say, but it won't tell a soul.
The chickadee says my name is coquette spelled like
the rufous-crested hummingbird.
The chickadee says that I lug too much body to flit
at the sugar-watered feeder.

That's what the Chickadee Says

The Chickadee says to name my first-born Jasmine and dab her
with avocado oil and lavender.
The chickadee says take the second-born to the river and teach him
to throw rocks
The chickadee says we haven't prayers enough to live long lives,
only wise ones.
The chickadee says to turn our head scarves into dragon kites, fly them
above the stars.
The chickadee says nothing will come of the task, only that it can find you
when you tangle in the shreds.
The chickadee says there is an emptiness in the belly of us all.
The chickadee says to name your vacuum like you would name your lover.
The chickadee says skylight. Lightning strike. Soft touch. Tomorrow's dream.
The chickadee says raindrops have dried on each of my son's stones.

That’s what the Chickadee Says

The Chickadee says each bird becomes a legend when it dies.
The chickadee says wait for no one because all those lovers are now dead.
The chickadee says his chirps are only echos of your voice
riding air currents.
The chickadee says don’t care if your song reaches no one.
The chickadee says sadness is like a wilted magnolia.
The chickadee says I will never again dance like a coquette.
The chickadee says old is old is old and tomorrow
is still just as iffy as today.
The chickadee says to make a list of the happy endings I have known
before it’s too late.
The chickadee says I may be a mockingbird after all
because I blur in the window.

AirLabs

Douglas Baker

I didn't tell Dek I was visiting Mrs. Bird. He would have said not to, but things hadn't been going great for me at the firm, and I thought it might help. Around ten, I left my office in downtown Pittsburgh and took an hour-long bus ride to Homestead, passing through depressed neighborhoods until the bus dropped me on a dead commercial street with boarded-up shops and charred brick buildings and a one-legged old guy tinkling coins in a silver can. The air smelled like industrial waste. Cigarette butts and litter lined the curbs. It was very hot in my wool suit.

Mrs. Bird's house was a mile down the road and then up six steep blocks, and I kept wondering how anyone could stand to live here. Chain-link fences in front yards kept pit bulls from tearing me open. The streets were all treeless and weedy. Domestic arguments erupted through propped-up windows, the sounds of shouting and then glass shattering against a wall. I was surrounded by it. The limited vocabulary of desperation. A constant state of agitation out here among the dependent, the unemployed, the dropouts, the addicted, the angry and brutal, the forgotten. None of this was new to me: I didn't live in this world, but it's where I made my money.

I reached Mrs. Bird's duplex and knocked. A voice inside began grumbling profanely, and something fell over, a chair or coatrack, and then the door swung open. Cigarette smoke plumed through the screen, followed closely by the smell of rotten food and cat piss and some other kind of piss I couldn't identify. Mrs. Bird's eyes were almost black and her lips were cast in a perpetual sneer, a cigarette resting between them.

"Mrs. Bird," I said. "We met last week, in our offices downtown."

She stared at my suit and hated everything it represented, the way people like me prey on people like her, the way we use them up, extract cash from them by knowing the nuances of an exclusionary legal system. I recognized her expression

from my life before law school, when I was still among the rabble, throwing elbows to ensure I got what was mine.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

I followed her to the kitchen, where we sat facing each other across a table. I lit a cigarette, hoping it would disarm her. She crossed her arms and waited for me to begin.

"Mrs. Bird—"

"—Patty."

"Patty, I wanted to see if you had questions. About what our firm can do for you. I know you may be talking to other firms. But here's the thing. They can't do what we do. They don't have the resources for a big case like this. Ask around. We're the best."

She chuckled slightly and shook her head as she took a drag of her cigarette.

"You're not our only drone case," I continued. "We've sued AirLabs before. We know the risks they took. Corporate cover-ups, negligent behavior all the way up. You know what that means?" I asked.

"No," she said in her raspy voice. "But I'm betting you're going to tell me."

"It means big verdicts, possibly punitive damages," I said. "In a wrongful death case like this, it means a lot of money for you. And a lot of money for me."

"So far you're not telling me anything I don't already know," she said.

"Then why the hesitation?" I asked. "What's holding you back?"

In my briefcase, I had an engagement letter just waiting for her signature. She slid a Newport from its package and lit it with a flexible grill lighter, staring at me as she pulled the trigger.

“My husband was an asshole,” she said, pausing to look up at the ceiling. The smoke hung about her head in a sort of halo. “I would have divorced him years ago, but we got his VA pension and I wasn’t about to go back to being a nurse. He paid the mortgage on this here piece of shit. But I hated him. And then one day one of those things came flying out of the sky, right to the front porch where Denny was sitting.”

She dragged deeply, held the smoke in her lungs, like she wanted to swallow all the darkness and disease and keep it inside herself.

“I’m not following,” I said.

“You know where I was?” she asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Where I *was*,” she said, almost spitting the words at me. “When it happened.”

“I have no idea,” I said.

“I was on the porch.”

She took another drag, staring at the shocked expression on my face and then started laughing. It burbled up from her lungs, the laughter, all bathed in smoke, which spouted out her mouth and nose like steam from a tea kettle.

“Yeah,” she said, “it had a little propeller on the front, the drone or whatever, just spinning, chopping away bits of that bastard like he’d been doing to me for years. Going right into his neck. He was screaming and swearing. He couldn’t stop it. It was one of those big fuckers, for carrying packages. Broke both his arms. That propeller just kept chopping away at his neck. Must have lasted almost a minute. It was like that thing was killing him on purpose.”

She ashed her cigarette into a half-empty bowl of cereal. My own was burning down unattended. She slid the bowl toward me.

“That must have been … traumatizing,” I said, trying to steady my voice.

She stubbed out her Newport, shook another from the box, lit it. A smoky cough erupted from her thick lips.

"He used to beat me," she said, getting louder now. "I'd be at work vomiting because my insides hurt so bad. Sometimes I couldn't get out of bed. Over the years he got too fat and weak to do it, but I never forgot. So when that drone started bearing down on him, I thought it was the angel of death sent by the Lord God himself."

Her eyes were wide and threatening as she relived it.

"The blade kept spinning as he tried to slide backward but he was up against the house, his words coming out all garbled. *Patty, you bitch, you fucking cunt!* The same shit he'd been telling me our whole marriage. Then boom! Blood starts spraying out everywhere. It was fucking great."

She set down her cigarette and reached for a half-empty bottle of diet Coke.

"Denny's broken arms hit the porch floor with a thud, and I knew he was dead. But that drone never stopped. It bore right on down through his neck until his head came off, and then it kept stuttering against the wall like some kind of damn locust. And then everything went quiet. There was the crash when they fell from the sky, and then silence."

She looked at me defiantly now. I tried to imagine watching my wife, Emma, get murdered. No matter how bad our marriage had gotten, I couldn't imagine feeling the way Patty Bird did.

"Now what do you think about that?"

She was testing me. She wanted the money—she wanted to extract it straight from Denny's fat corpse—but needed to know I wasn't squeamish. Just let it go, I told myself. Stay calm, stick to the script, hand her the engagement letter.

But I couldn't do it. I dropped my cigarette butt into the cereal bowl and rose.

"You know, it's really too bad," I said.

"What is?"

"That there wasn't another drone. For you. Then we'd have even one less piece of shit on earth."

It must have been obvious that she'd upset me because she started laughing, tauntingly. She was still cackling as I left her place and headed back down to the bus stop. I could barely light a cigarette while I waited. Everyone I knew had a story about that day. People had been killed in every possible way: chopped and lacerated and dropped and drilled and swarmed. But I'd never heard anyone laugh about it. I was still shaking when I took my seat on the bus. A man swayed up the aisle toward me. He had the marks of a survivor, scars covering his body, a missing eyeball, only six or seven fingers left.

"You spare a dollar?" he asked.

I handed him a five, and he moved forward, mumbling his pleas to the other riders, most of whom just looked away. I wished I still had my driver's license.

The bus crossed the Homestead-Grays Bridge, muddy Monongahela below, Homestead behind, a slowly disintegrating world. All the way back downtown I looked at boarded-up buildings, each a reminder of that day. Window companies were still booked out for two-plus years. So many people had died that the morticians couldn't keep up. They kept corpses preserved and scheduled funerals twelve months out. Of course, some people didn't need coffins; there was nothing left of them.

As the bus entered Pittsburgh's city limits, I was thinking how this place was shit even before AirLabs moved in. Looking out at Fifth Avenue, it was hard not to feel like we'd just utterly failed as a society. Everything was dystopian. Abandoned residences, burned-out signs for closed businesses, rusty railings lining fractured sidewalks, weeds springing from crumbling retaining walls, knotweed practically swallowing brick houses. And in the midst of it all, people limping around looking half dead.

I checked my phone before I got off the bus. My assistant emailed that Dek had been looking for me earlier. I should have gone back to the office then, maybe tried to explain things. But I couldn't make myself do it. I decided to get lunch at the club instead, to have a few drinks on the firm's dime, and that made me feel a little better. I thought about how I'd fallen out of favor with Dek. I was his favorite associate for years. With him there was always a blurring between personal and professional. To please Dek, you had to do more than work. You had to take his midnight calls, smoke his cigarettes, drink his shots, snort his cocaine, drive him home after a late night. In the last few years, though, I'd just stopped caring. Then I got the DUI, which had to be reported to the disciplinary board and caused the firm all kinds of headaches. I fell out of favor, with Dek and most of the other partners. I still worked hard most days, but Dek said I'd gotten sloppy. There was an early drone case where our document review team overlooked critical documents revealing that AirLabs had deliberately ignored the risks of their technology. Without those documents, the case settled for too little. It wasn't my fault—I wasn't the one clicking through the documents—but I got all the blame because I oversaw the review team. In truth, Dek just needed a fall guy.

After lunch, I really should have gone back to the office, but Marcie had messaged and asked me to come see her in Lawrenceville. I walked in the blazing heat past a dozen panhandlers, people missing limbs or fingers or ears, victims of the AirLabs drone disaster. Near the bus stop, a woman sat slumped against a wall, her legs stretched out over the sidewalk, a paper cup dangling from her fingers. Her head was bent to the ground, obscured by the hood of a large sweatshirt. She looked up, and I could see the startling emptiness at the center of her face: she didn't have a nose. Something had bored a two-inch-wide hole in the center of her face. I'd heard about this sort of thing. Small drones, unable to kill, had attacked human faces solely to disfigure them. I threw a few dollars into her paper cup before boarding the bus.

Marcie and I had met in the months following the drone disaster. She'd been my waitress one night when I was in a booth, drinking myself unconscious. When

the bar emptied out, she slid next to me. Back then everyone asked the same question: Where were you that day? Marcie was riding in her friend Deana's car when the machines started pounding against the glass. At first, she thought they were birds. Then one shattered the windshield, and bits of glass blinded Deana, who swerved into a building. The impact knocked Deana unconscious. Within seconds, smaller drones were swarming like hornets. There wasn't much left of her when it was over. Marcie had managed to roll out of the passenger seat and slide under the car until the attack stopped. She still had nightmares about the sound. She said it was like a hundred dentist's drills all going at once.

After we met, Marcie and I kept seeing each other. We had no illusions about what we were doing. Lately, though, things had gotten strange. Going to see her had stopped feeling like an escape and was taking the same trajectory as my marriage: gradual disillusionment and disappointment on all sides.

I knocked on the old wooden door of her apartment. Marcie answered the door in her pajamas.

"I see you're having a productive day," I said, following her into the kitchen.

"Can you not?" she said.

"I'm kidding. I think it's totally great that you haven't gotten out of bed yet."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Why shouldn't I be?"

She pressed her palms to her temples and sighed.

"God, I was actually looking forward to seeing you," she said. "I just—please don't be a dick right now."

I looked around the apartment. Her shades were closed, piles of clothes littered the floor and couch. I was suddenly ashamed to be seeing a person who lived like this. On the floor, half-concealed by a ratty shirt, was a bottle of prescription pills.

“What are those?” I asked.

“What?”

“Your little bottle there. What is it?”

“It’s nothing. Can we go to my room?”

We went to her room, but it wasn’t any good. There was something so pathetic about the whole situation. An affair with a waitress. A lawyer in a miserable marriage, with a child at home, skipping out on work to fuck someone who served beers for a living. I didn’t feel guilt, exactly—after all, Emma and I hadn’t slept together in years—but I was doing something beneath me.

“What’s the problem?” she asked.

“There’s not a fucking problem,” I said.

“I mean…”

She looked down at the limp thing in her hand. That pissed me off.

“Maybe it’s you,” I said. “Did you perhaps consider that?”

“Fuck you,” she said.

She got out of bed and started pulling her pajama shirt back over her head.

“There’s a good idea,” I said, “why don’t you get back into pajamas. Really let the world know how much you’ve given up.”

She looked at me and said, “You’re an asshole.” She said this quietly, as though she were seeing me for the first time.

“All this time,” she continued, “I thought, deep down, you were a nice person, that everyone else was missing it. Like underneath the asshole you pretend to be—at work or with your wife—there was the real you, a good you. But I get it now: it’s assholes all the way down.”

I looked at her and couldn't believe I'd wasted a single minute of my time on her affection.

"You disgust me," I said.

And that was it. I walked out of her apartment and back to the bus stop. I never looked back.

It was getting late in the day, but I had to go back to the office to get a few things. On the ride back, Emma called to remind me we were having dinner with her parents. I groaned. I couldn't stand the thought of another evening with Emma's dad, Martin, an accountant, a punctilious man in wire-rimmed glasses, who crossed his legs like a woman and never laughed. I'd never been good enough for him. Over the years, Emma had come to share that view. Back when Emma and I use to fuck, she wore his default expression, like a person in line at the DMV.

The office was clearing out when I got there. I slipped in quietly, but after five minutes, Dek knocked on the door.

"What happened today?" he asked.

"In what sense?"

"In the sense of where the hell were you?"

"Working," I said.

"I just got off the phone with Patty Bird," he said.

He was blocking the doorway. I was busying myself packing up papers and my laptop.

"The lady who came in last week?" I asked.

"I know you went down there this morning."

"Whatever."

“She told me you insulted her. She said you seemed drunk or high. You called her a piece of shit and said she deserved to die by drone. Sound familiar? I didn’t catch it all, she was pretty mad. She said she *was* planning to retain us but now she’s going with someone else.”

“She’s full of shit,” I said.

“You’re denying you went there?”

“I went there, but you do not want this woman as a client. She watched her husband get murdered and laughed about it. She’s a fucking lunatic.”

“It doesn’t matter!” he yelled. “You’re out of control, okay? You’re constantly using. You disappear for half the day. What were you here for today, two hours? You’re sloppy and reckless. Nobody trusts you. Listen, I know you’ve been through a lot. I sympathize with that. But I cannot have you working at this firm right now. You’re a liability.”

“Are you firing me?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “But I’m placing you on a leave of absence.”

“Until when?”

“Until you can get your shit together. Until you can be trusted to work at this firm. We have resources. We can get you into therapy, whatever you need. But you can’t be here right now.”

He made me hand over my key pass, like I might sneak in at night and vandalize the place.

“I’ll have your stuff boxed up and sent home.”

“Don’t bother,” I said.

He tried to shake my hand when I left, but I slapped it away as I walked past him to the elevator bank. I descended to the war zone of downtown. Dek got heated sometimes, but he’d change his mind in a few days. There was no way he could

keep me on leave, not with everything I knew about him. If necessary, I'd blackmail him. I'd give him a few days to cool off and then call him and recite everything I knew: his cocaine use, his prostitutes, his impropriety with clients, his questionable use of firm funds. I had photos, text messages, names—everything I needed to make a compelling case to the disciplinary board.

When I stepped onto the street, I was already thirty minutes late for dinner. I walked toward the Andy Warhol Bridge. I walked over the bridge slowly. It was after six, still hot but breezy above the water. I stopped and closed my eyes and could almost imagine the world that existed hundreds of years ago, before colonial expansion. What good had we brought to this place since then? Smallpox and steel mills and drones. Pollution and menial labor and tortious conduct.

On the day of the AirLabs disaster, drones targeted pedestrians on Pittsburgh's bridges, including this one. Our firm had the video: carrier drones dove out of the sky in a coordinated attack and three figures plunged to their deaths at almost the exact same moment. Five years earlier, AirLabs had held a contest to see which U.S. city would host the pilot program for large-scale open-air drone use. Every city wanted to win. Pittsburgh offered billions in tax incentives and won. City officials said the program would create tens of thousands of jobs and revolutionize the way cities were run. AirLabs bought up most of Chateau, an industrial neighborhood along the Ohio river, and began rehabbing warehouses and erecting new corporate offices. Everyone was optimistic.

At first there were only a few drones in the air. People were thrilled to see them in those early days. It was unmistakable proof of progress: the future of our city, of all cities, of humanity. But as their volume increased—until they had replaced every mailman and delivery truck—people got uneasy. There was something unnerving about the way those robotic devices filled the sky. We all felt it. It was like everyone knew that one day something would go wrong. They were menacing; they made it feel like we were no longer in charge, like humans had finally ceded control to

machines. They hummed quietly above us, buzzing past each other, communicating in ways we couldn't understand, almost conspiratorially.

We never figured out who orchestrated the attack. There are lots of theories. Some people say China did it. Others speculate that companies in industries about to be made irrelevant made it happen. A surprising number of people believe that the US government was behind it. I doubt we'll ever know for sure, but my own theory is that the drones themselves made the decision.

I opened my eyes and looked at the ruined city. Now the sky was dead. Evening sun burned in a strangely cloudless sky. The heat had not abated. I was a few blocks from the restaurant when I started thinking I didn't have the stomach for another dinner with my in-laws. I stopped in an alley, took a couple oxycodone, and smoked a cigarette. For several minutes, as the paper burned down to the filter, I was free.

At the restaurant, I spotted them in a booth and walked over. Only Emma's mom stood up to greet me. The table was empty except for a bottle of wine and some glasses.

"Sorry I'm late. Did you already finish eating?" I asked.

"We've been waiting for you," Martin said.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"I agree," he said and sneered.

Eventually, the waitress came by, and we ordered. Time passed slowly as we finished the wine and ordered another bottle and talked a lot of bullshit. This is how things were now. Nobody wanted to acknowledge what had really happened to us, but it was always bubbling under the surface. Emma and I barely looked at each other. She couldn't conceal her hatred anymore, not even in front of her parents. We stay married for Austin, I guess. Our food arrived, and Martin ordered more wine. The long day was catching up to me, but I ordered a cocktail. Things were swimming

now. I wanted to get outside. I couldn't take the way they were talking and laughing, as though nothing were wrong, so I slid abruptly from the booth and stood staring at them all. They looked back at me in stunned silence, and Martin was almost smirking, hoping I'd make a fool of myself.

"I'm going outside to smoke," I said.

"Oh, gross," Emma said. "Do you have to?"

"If you're going to kill yourself," Martin said, "do something that won't take so long."

Emma laughed.

I said, "Fuck you, Martin."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a prick," I said. "When this marriage finally ends, the best part will be never seeing your fucking face again. Emma, I'll see you at home."

I threw a few hundred-dollar bills on the table and left. It was dark now. A few blocks from the restaurant, I realized I was crying. Our house wasn't far up the hill, but I stopped in a park and lay down on a bench. I tried to clear my head, but the memories kept coming.

Our neighborhood had been hit hard by the drones. We lived on the north side, up the hill, with a view of the city, close to the AirLabs headquarters. Once the attack started, drones targeted any life forms and had a clear directive to kill. That's why they knocked pedestrians off bridges and broke through windows to get at people sitting inside. Most of the property damage was incidental.

I was working from home that day. Emma was eight months pregnant with Austin and had gone to the hospital for an appointment. I stayed home to watch Caroline, our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. She was talking in broken sentences, laughing, getting into everything, running in her clumsy way. She was perfect.

All morning I'd been trying to keep her entertained in between conference calls. Back then, our firm was handling lots of cases coming out of the opioid crisis. Dek had made a fortune early on, and now he couldn't keep up with all the new clients. That morning he'd scheduled a firm-wide call to assign a list of new matters to different teams. The meeting was mandatory, and Emma knew about it before she left for the hospital.

At almost eleven thirty in the morning, with the conference call still dragging on, Caroline walked to our back door and began pounding the glass with both hands. She was yelling, "Out! Out! Out!" I muted my phone, but Dek was asking me something. I needed to respond, but I couldn't while Caroline was making all that noise. I ran to the door and opened it, thinking I'd just stand inside and watch her play in the backyard while I finished the call. She walked slowly to her sandbox, stopping to admire dandelions and long blades of grass, fascinated at the beautiful world she was still discovering. I was standing at the window watching her, answering Dek's questions. I was mid-sentence when I saw a dark shape descending rapidly toward the lawn. I remember hesitating and Dek irritably saying, "*And?*" But the thing in the sky was coming down fast. It happened in an instant: the large carrier drone opened its robotic arms as it swooped down and grabbed Caroline and flew high into the air with her.

I never saw her again. We learned later that the drones picked up children and flew them several hundred feet above ground level, far enough to allow the bodies to reach terminal velocity, and then simply dropped them. This made it nearly impossible to identify the bodies; they basically exploded on impact. We still don't know where Caroline died.

Since then, I'd spent every day trying to stop thinking of the moment I saw her disappear. Emma never forgave me. I've reimagined the event so many times—tried to recreate it so that I kept her inside or fought off the drone or died in her place—but every time it comes out the same. She always dies in the end. Two years later,

as I lay on the park bench, I was still locked inside my kitchen, watching my daughter soar into the sky.

I finally got up and began the walk back to my house. When I got home Emma was already waiting for me in the kitchen. I stepped past her to get a glass of whiskey.

"I think you've had enough," she said.

"I don't."

"This won't take long," she said.

I sighed and sat down across from her. She was looking beyond me, just over my head.

"For two years, I've been waiting for the moment when I would start to hate you a little less," she said. "I knew I'd never stop hating you completely, but I thought it might get a little better. That I'd wake up and be able to look at your face again."

Her expression was hard, totally incongruous with the tears streaking down her cheeks.

"But it's never going to happen," she said. "I'm sure now. A month ago, maybe, I woke up early and looked at you sleeping, and it just hit me: I will never get over this."

We almost never talked about Caroline, but she was always there, her ghost sitting in the room with us.

"I wasn't sure when to tell you," she said. "I thought maybe I'd wait until you were less of wreck. But after tonight, I can't do another minute of this. I can't share the bed with you or see your shit lying around the house or watch you pretend to care about Austin. I just can't."

She turned and looked to the sliding glass doors at the kitchen's far wall, and then back at me, meeting my eyes for the first time. For just the briefest moment, I saw them soften, and I remembered the person I'd married.

"Anyway," she said, "I don't want to get into details or logistics or whatever. I just needed to tell you. Tonight. I'd prefer if you slept in another room."

With that she rose and went upstairs. There was nothing surprising or new about what she'd said. On the rare occasions when we spoke frankly to each other, she always made it clear how she felt about me. But this time, it seemed she meant it.

I got the whiskey from the liquor cabinet and went to the front porch. I sat on the steps and gazed at the ruined city, its lights still glittering, its sad inhabitants still carrying on. As I sat there, drinking glass after glass, I pictured the world ending. Not today, or next year, but ending all the same.

Eventually, I went inside. I stumbled upstairs, still wearing my suit, loosening my tie. At the end of the hall my bedroom light was still on. Emma was probably reading. I was headed to sleep in the guestroom. But first I went into Austin's room. I stood and waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and then looked down on him in his crib. For a long time, then, I stared at his poor, sweet face, so oblivious to the horrors that awaited him.

Contributor Bios

in order of appearance

Cyrus Carlson is an abstract artist from the Midwest. His small, colorful paintings create moments of attention in a distracted world. Find him on Instagram

naomi olivia is a godless Transgender poet from st. louis/florida. her work appears in Smacked Zine, Viridine Literary, Dadakuku, Partially Shy, Pfudalmda, & Subtext Literary Magazine. find naomi on:
Instagram (a collaboration with best friend & editor erin vastola).

Christian Garduno's work can be read in over 100 literary magazines. He lives and writes along the South Texas coast with his wonderful wife Nahemie and young son Dylan. Find him on:
Linktree

Sandra Petrinovic is a South African amateur writer, wife, mom, and grandmother. In her spare time, she reads, enjoys traveling, and dabbles in arts and crafts with her granddaughter. Sandra is evolving in her writing and is always willing to learn more. She has self-published two children's books: Creepy Coincidence and Keegan's Adventures. Other short stories written and published are 'A Cruel Ending' – Wickedshadow Press, Bon Courage – Words Empire, and 'Tales of Bonnie Ward' – Otherwise Engaged Literature Journal.
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Bonnie Demerjian writes from her island home in the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska, a place that nourishes her writing. Her poetry has appeared in Unbroken Journal, Antler Velvet, and Blue Heron Review, among

others. She is a member of the Blue Canoe writing group. She has also written four books on the area's human and natural history. When not writing, she is gardening, hiking, boating, and watching the ever-changing ocean.

Joshua Bridgwater Hamilton is an Assistant Professor at Southwestern College, Kansas. He earned a BA in English and Humanities and an MA in Spanish from the University of Louisville, holds a doctorate in Spanish with Indiana University, and has an MFA in Poetry from Texas State University. His books are *Excavator* (Gnashing Teeth Publishing 2024) and the chapbooks *Rain Minnows* (Gnashing Teeth Publishing 2020) and *Slow Wind* (Finishing Line Press 2016). His poetry appears in such journals as *riverSedge, Más allá de las palabras, Windward Review*, *Driftwood*, *Voices de la Luna*, *Amarillo Bay* and *San Antonio Review*, among others.

Shiven Saxena is an educator and Artist working in Mixed Media. He is an Assistant Professor of Digital Arts at Southwestern College, Kansas.
As an artist, Shiven explores the fluidity of identity and the Self as it transforms over time and place. His work weaves together fragments of memory to examine the narratives that we build, and let shape us. Using layered textures and images, He creates pieces that invite viewers to consider their own evolving stories and connections.

Sarah Das Gupta is a writer from near Cambridge, UK who has also lived and worked in India and Tanzania. Her work has been published in over twenty countries from New Zealand to Kazakhstan.in Literary journals and anthologies. She has recently been nominated for Best of the Net and a Dwarf Star.

Christine Lajewski is a writer, retired alternative high school teacher and haunt actor, and a teacher/naturalist at Mass Audubon. Born and raised in Flint, Michigan, she now lives in Cumberland, RI close to her adult daughter and son.

Her first novel, JHATOR, a spiritual fantasy, was published in 2014. Her collection of horror short stories, ERRING ON THE SIDE OF CALAMITY, and a horror novel, BONEBELLY, were published in 2018. She has had short stories published in Dark Tales, Sanitarium, The Flash Fiction Press, Siren's Call, 34 Orchard, and the anthologies A Shadow Over Deathlahem, The Misbehaving Dead, Shallow Waters, Wicked Women, and Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice.
Website
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Hilary Steele is an emerging poet based on the edge of the Fens. Her work has been commissioned by Syntax Calendar for an exhibition on John Clare, featured on the podcasts *Write Club* and *We the Poets* and has been published in the *True Voices* and *Glow* anthologies.

Laura Ingram is a young poet who lives and writes in rural Virginia. Her work has appeared in over one-hundree literary magazines and journals, among them Juked and Gambling the Aisle. She is the author of six collections of poetry; The Solitude of the Female Preying Mantis, Animal Sentinel, The Ghost Gospels, Junior Citizen's Discount, Mirabilis, and The Taffeta Parable.

c_zientek. a frustrated and disillusioned old man in denial about many of life's 3rd act revelations.

Cynthia Pratt Cynthia Pratt is a founding member of the Olympia Poetry Network's board which has been in existence for 35 years. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals including *Raven Chronicles*, *The RavensPerch, The Writing Disorder, The Last Stanza Poetry Journal, Kestrel Journal, Third Wednesday Magazine,* and in six anthologies, including Washington

Humanities and Empty Bowl Press, *I Sing the Salmon Home* (2023) and Humana Obscura's Blue Anthology. Cynthia has poems in two other upcoming anthologies: Bird Brains, and Casting Lines. Her manuscript, *Celestial Drift*¸ was published in 2016. Her manuscript, *That Wild Knocking*, is forthcoming in 2026 by Finishing Line Press. A former Lacey Councilmember and Deputy Mayor of the City of Lacey for the last 12 years, her term ended in December 2021. She is the first Poet Laureate of Lacey as of 2022. She reads too many murder mysteries and talks to birds even though they don't reply back.
Website

Douglas Baker lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with his wife and two children.