

SEPTEMBER 2023 › VOLUME II, ISSUE I

HIGHWAY 61, *Revised*

Creative Writing
by the students of
Minnesota State College Southeast
Red Wing & Winona, Minnesota

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Highway 61, Revised is published on an occasional basis under the auspices of Minnesota State College Southeast's Creative Writing program. The essays, poems, and stories in the publication represent work by students enrolled in the certificate the previous academic year.

For more information about the publication or the online Creative Writing Certificate, please contact Pete Beurskens, Faculty Editor, at pbeurskens@southeastmn.edu.

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MINNESOTA STATE COLLEGE SOUTHEAST

Located in the historic river towns of Red Wing and Winona, Minnesota State College Southeast is a two-year technical and community college offering small class sizes, state-of-the-art facilities, and a friendly and supportive environment. In 2023-2024, the college is celebrating its 50 & 75 Anniversary Year: 50 years of service in Red Wing and 75 years of service in Winona. Minnesota State College Southeast is a member of Minnesota State. For more information, visit www.southeastmn.edu.

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MINNESOTA STATE

Highway 61, Revised

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I. POETRY

THE HUMMINGBIRD'S FLIGHT <i>by Sasha McLees</i>	7
ALONE <i>by Sasha McLees</i>	7
CALM AFTER THE STORM <i>by Linda Hang</i>	8
A LETTER TO MY FOURTH GRADE SELF <i>by Linda Hang</i>	8
REQUIEM FOR AN OLD SHED <i>by Noah Beurskens</i>	9
TRUMPETERS <i>by Noah Beurskens</i>	10
SHEARING DAY AT WHITEFISH BAY <i>by Dylan Weaver</i>	12
FIVE POEMS <i>by Phillip Riviezzo</i>	
ECLIPSE - PRIDE	13
CHANGELING - GRIEF	14
HOLD THE LINE - ANGER	15
TSUNAMI - FEAR	16
REDBIRD - DESIRE	17
ROADS <i>by Becky Olson</i>	19
CARNIVAL CLOWN <i>by Becky Olson</i>	20
OLD PORCH SWINGS AND SUNSETS <i>by Becky Olson</i>	21
I HEAR THE BAND PLAYING AGAIN <i>by Becky Olson</i>	22
THE OCEAN ON HIS PLATE <i>by Julianna Kunz</i>	23
TOO TIRED TO BOW <i>by Al Forred</i>	24
SRIRACHA SHORTAGE <i>by Al Forred</i>	24
LAMENT, I GUESS <i>by Skyler Stone</i>	25
SURFACE TENSION <i>by Skyler Stone</i>	26
HEROIC COUPLETS <i>by Skyler Stone</i>	27
ANOTHER FALL POEM <i>by Skyler Stone</i>	28
SOMEWHERE IN MAY <i>by Jack Guimont</i>	29
RIVERSIDE <i>by Jack Guimont</i>	29
CRUEL DREAM <i>by Katharina Weissing</i>	30
THE SEASONS OF TREES <i>by Katharina Weissing</i>	31
MY BALLAD <i>by Christine O'Brien-Umbreit</i>	32
WHO SAID IT WAS COLD? <i>by Kyle Gierok</i>	33
SO VICIOUS <i>by Kyle Gierok</i>	33
SUMMER SUNSHINE <i>by Julia Maynard</i>	34

PART II. FICTION

ALL DOGS PLAY IN ALLAGANDO <i>by Al Forred</i>	37
RETURN TO ROCHESTER <i>by Melissa Meyers</i>	41
THE LIMINAL LINE <i>by Emma Pronschinske</i>	58
HOTSPUR <i>by Julianna Kunz</i>	63

PART III. CREATIVE NONFICTION

DRIFTING <i>by Reed Loer</i>	72
THE NIGHT OF THE MAYFLIES <i>by Melissa Meyers</i>	76
DRIFTING INTO THE DRIFTLESS <i>by Melissa Meyers</i>	79
THE BACKROOM THIEVES <i>by Noah Beurskens</i>	83
HEAVEN ON EARTH <i>by Rhonda L. Rolfs</i>	86
<i>Photo Credits</i>	91

PART I. POETRY



THE HUMMINGBIRD'S FLIGHT

by Sasha McLees

During the early morning all is still,
The light breeze providing a subtle chill
Around the corner a slight buzz is heard,
Belonging to a diminutive bird.
Fluttering over the dew-kissed lawn,
In an instant the humming sound is gone.
After a still moment the bird returns,
And sips sweet nectar at her sudden turns.
She lightly lands on a red feeder
Then hovers in the shade of a large cedar.
In a blur, another bird comes to her side.
Together they fall into a gentle glide.
After a moment, on a sudden whim,
The hummingbirds fly off into the wind.

ALONE

by Sasha McLees

Silence slits through my soul like a sharp knife.
How could I be so alone in this life?
This world seems filled only with strife.
As I sit lonesome in the somber dark,
The bright stars remind me of my old spark.
How I wish I could go back to the start.
I had such high hopes when I was a child
Dreaming of a life so daring and wild.
But now my life's turned out to be mild.
No one to talk to, no one to hold.
I don't know how long I can endure the cold.
This loneliness is just getting old.
After years of doing nothing but roam,
I've decided I will no longer be alone —
I am determined to find my home.

CALM AFTER THE STORM

by Linda Hang

The wind sings to the loving sky
The notes in key with peace.
Come sit with me, my dear, and see
How peaceful the sky can be.

The trees blow in the rhythm sweetly.
How nice the stars shine bright.
We'll meet again someday, you'll see—
The world will be alright.

A LETTER TO MY FOURTH GRADE SELF

by Linda Hang

Dearest Myself, how do you do?
Did my bottle reach you safely?
I know we'll make it to eighty,
But how does the age ten suit you?

I'm still scared of being alone,
So for both of us, I made friends.
You may rest easy through odds and ends.
Everything will be fine at home.

People are still mean, so stay kind;
Do what makes you happy, alright?
Don't despair when there's no end in sight:
We can change the world with our mind.

REQUIEM FOR AN OLD SHED

by Noah Beurskens

We found it in the early spring
When freeze and frost had left,
When snowmelt moisture soaked
Beneath rough earth-crust
Making thawed ground arable.

Before summer's span could come
We sank shovels in the garden,
Cultivating hard clay soil,
Turning the stiff surface
For new strawberry shoots.

It was on a grim day's grind
My spade-point struck cement—
A firm foundation, if crumbled.
It was wide, thirty-five feet north to south,
Twenty from sunrise to set.

What was its use in times long past?
Perhaps a home for sundry tools,
A swine sty alive with snorts,
A hothouse where seedlings start,
Or a smoke shack for curing meat?

To me, a child, it was mystery.
Why poetry in a square of stone?
Whatever its life in times long past,
We undertook its burial—
Beneath berry roots it rests.

TRUMPETERS

by Noah Beurskens

The grass-earth sponge beneath my feet
Sighs and squeaks each time I step.
Field-lakes make a squelching sound
As I steer myself around their soggy banks.
A big one sits before the gate, mote-like,
Barring passage to our yet-sprouted pasture.
My shoe finds a foot-size dry island,
A sturdy brace-spot when undoing the gate-chain.
Along the fence a ground-rise, a long mound running
The whole field border serves as a dry path.
I tread this track to the northeast corner.
Here, the wind blows the hardest
Though the dormant grass stalks are not disturbed.
I lean against the fence and think
Of days when the fields are green.
Will a blitzkrieg blizzard blow
This hopeful warmth away
And veil the earth with white again?
I gaze grimly at the gray-brown ground
And a sound raises my head.
A sound unlike any other—
The best brass horn
Cannot make half the key.
The great white birds wing
Above the ground, below the clouds.
To think that white could give me hope!
The angels of summer flying low, white wings spread,
Broad black beaks snubbing the breeze.
They dip down beyond the sky rim,
Their last trumpet still fading in my ears.



SHEARING DAY AT WHITEFISH BAY

by Dylan Weaver

'Tis early in the morning air,
A warm and sunny day.
The shearer wakes to shave the sheep
Before he's on his way.

Eating breakfast before the work
Makes the day go better.
The lady prepares his favorite dish,
Eggs and toast with butter.

The moment's come, off to the barn,
It's time the work begun.
The sheep can't shear themselves you know,
For that would leave no fun.

The sheep are ready in their pen,
They've waited for this time.
The shearer stretches out his body,
Clearing his head and mind.

The man nearby picks first in line
And to the shearer it goes.
Of how to spare a sheep its wool
Only a shearer knows.

His hands move quick, his blades are sharp,
The shearer moves with grace.
When sheep are many, days are long,
Sweat dripping from his face.

The sheep are silent before the shearer,
They dare not make a sound.
Until the last of all is finished;
Bare, they leave with a bound!

When task is done, day is over.
With time to pack his things.
The shearer takes his pay for work,
And down the road he sings!

FIVE POEMS

by Phillip Riviezzo

ECLIPSE - PRIDE

The sun our king, his eye is harsh and cruel
None dare to meet his gaze or lose their sight
We feel his heat and rage though all the day
Yet when he leaves at dusk, we still are blind

His queen the moon, her light is soft and kind
To show us all the dangers in the night
Midst stars and darkness thick she shows the way
At dawn she hides, lest king be made a fool

Yet comes the day so rare and still so great
The queen is brave to walk across the sky
She stands between and shields us 'neath her cape
To let us stand and look him in the eye

A hand of minutes all she has to give
Till once again she flees, his wrath renewed
Yet for that time, a priceless gift she brings
Where men refuse to bow before their king

CHANGELING - GRIEF

Whence have you gone, my wayward child
Newly gone to timeless isle
Stolen away from newborn's bed
Imposter left in stead

The folk so fair, their merry game
Steal a child, give the same
Raspy coughing, its skin so pale
No child of mine this frail

I miss your smile, your lusty cries
The sparkles in your eyes
Your face replaced with effigy
Destroy it, set you free

A wad of cloth, a smothered breath
Rowan pyre, nothing left
No need to stay on timeless isle
Come home, my wayward child

—*Phillip Riviezzo*

HOLD THE LINE - ANGER

You thought your coins could buy you peace
And words would soothe their rage
So you ignored the warning signs
Till banners red were raised

Sleep sound beneath your silken sheets
And drink your fancy wine
Through night and day, barring the way
It's we who hold the line.

While fields were burned and salt was sown
And storm clouds filled the sky
You fled behind your walls of stone
To watch us fight and die

Dance your courtly, noble dances
And drink your fancy wine
Here in the mud and the ichor and blood
It's we who hold the line.

Then when the church bells sang in joy
From mountains to the sea
You opened up your iron gates
And cried out 'Victory!'

Polish bright your golden armor
And drink your fancy wine
With spear and shield, we'll never yield
It's we who hold the line.

Now spread the word 'round every town
'Cross every grove and glen
Stand ready for that fated day
The foes shall come again

Fight your bloodless honor duels
And drink your fancy wine
For when the last of us fall
There'll be no one at all

But YOU to hold the line.

—*Phillip Riviezzo*

TSUNAMI - FEAR

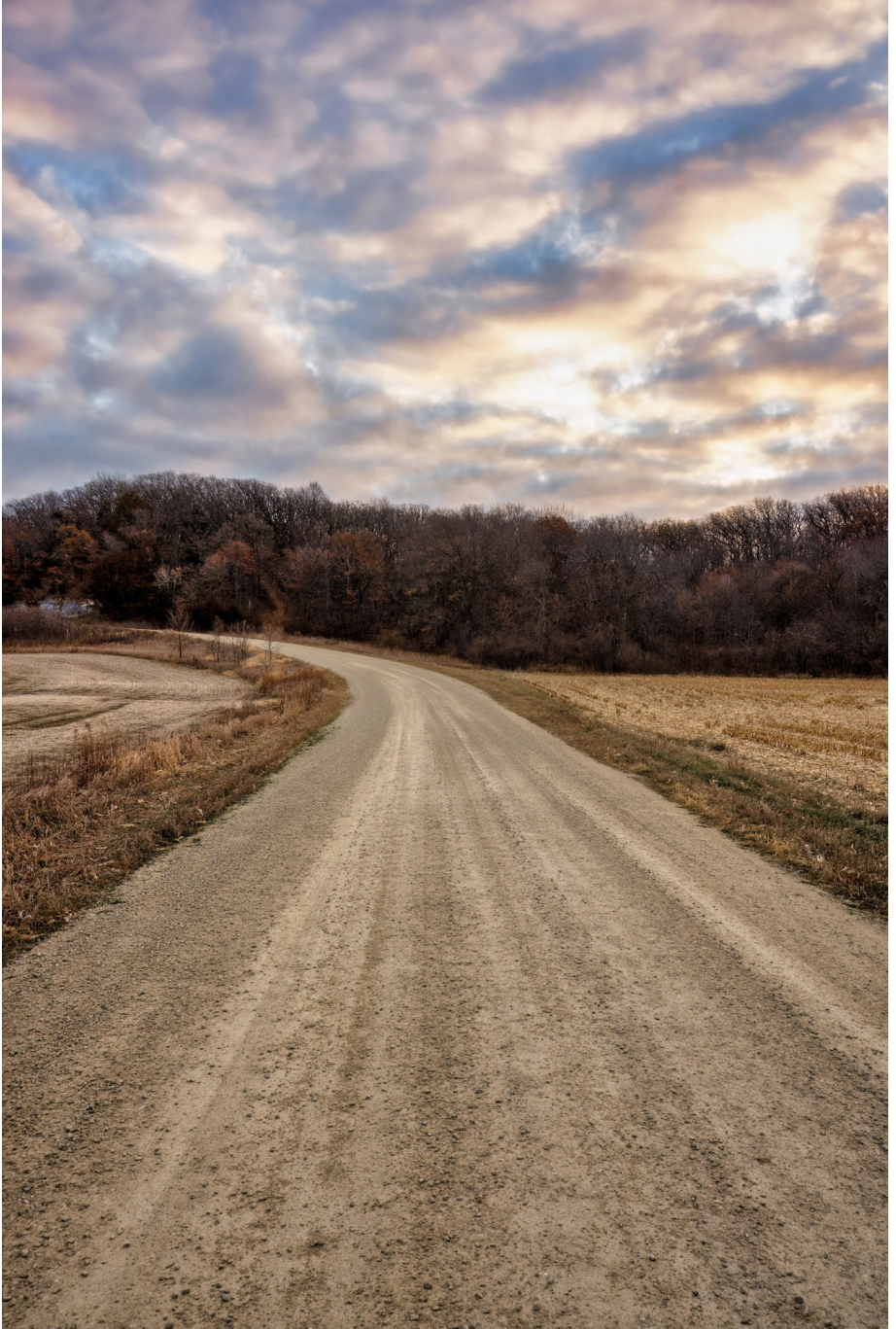
The beach is crowded, laughing, living
Fish swimming, birds perching in trees
The tide goes out and does not return
Foolish men stare in confusion
Brave men shout to run away
Wise men save their breath
Later they will return
And sift through ruin
For shards of lives
They do not stop
For if they stop
Others will sift
Through theirs
They will weep
Mourn the dead
If they stop
They will
Be mourned
Legs churn
Lungs burn
Rumbling
Roaring
Its name
Is on
Their
Lips

—*Phillip Riviezzo*

REDBIRD - DESIRE

The red bird sings a sad and lonely song
Her gilded cage a prison, she can see
It yearns to spread its wings and sing along
With wind-borne birds and freedom's melody
For now she dines on pellets, nuts, and seed
And sleeps at night, so comfortable and warm
Outside on worms and fruit she'd have to feed
And shelter 'neath the trees 'midst rain or storm
By dawn-light's glow she sees a path revealed
That long-awaited chance for her to fly
A window left ajar, the latch unsealed
One single joyful chirp her sole goodbye
The red bird's life is harder now alone
But every note she sings is all her own

—Phillip Riviezzo



ROADS

by Becky Olson

Ribbons of brown, black or white
Travelled by day, travelled by night.

Routes fold and unfold
Trails that never grow old.

Washboard gravel or
Smooth highway travel.

Dusty windshields
Push fast past cornfields.

Lanes heat with the day
Idly paving the way.

Cool off at night
Under foggy moonlight.

Paths twist, curve and curl
Then snakelike, unfurl.

Roads tattoo the land
Etch it in asphalt or sand.

To work and to play
they lead us away
and back home.

CARNIVAL CLOWN

by Becky Olson

Hobby knobby wobbly Joe
Through the carnival he rode
On a unicycle, there he goes!

Hungry hangry angry Joe
Stealing cotton candy so
His tummy could stop rumbling, oh!

Sunny funny clowning Joe
Running over feet and toes
Of silly Annie Fannie Moe.

Now nervous fearful scaredy Joe
Is worried with the lights turned low
'Cause heading home the people go.

Lonesome, tired, worn-out Joe
Wonders now where he should go
Since over is his cycle show.

Settled in the livestock barn
Sleeps a tired and worn-out clown
Rests his head on duckling down.

OLD PORCH SWINGS AND SUNSETS

by Becky Olson

Courting couple on front porch swing
He reaches for her hand,
They dream of the new house he'll build
On this, his grandpa's land.
She snuggles even closer,
Feels safe in his embrace.
They talk of little kids they'll raise,
Sweet memories they'll make.
The slanting sunset serves up dreams
Anticipation for tomorrows,
Contentment, joy, and happiness
No envisioning of sorrows.
The air now chill, birds' songs are through
It's time to take her home.
They hate leaving his grandpa
In his old farmhouse all alone.
Screen door creaks, wood floor squeaks
They walk in to say "So long."
Grandpa's reading in his favorite chair.
The fireplace's crackling its song.
He walks them out and waves goodbye
Then settles in the swing,
Recalling long past sunsets
And the dreams that they would bring. . .
Gardens that they tended
Children they had raised,
The sunrises and sunsets
Of their good old days.
Old porch swings and new sunsets
Stout sentinels of time;
They cause some to look forward,
Others to look behind.

I HEAR THE BAND PLAYING AGAIN

by *Becky Olson*

Is it a funeral for one forlorn
that loud wail of blaring horn?
Hearts and melody contrite
trumpets cry with high-pitched might.

Is it a high-school football game
at which the players collide in pain?
Flutes play sweet their gentle sounds
while tackles take opponents down.

Is it a political parade
that flatulence from tubas aid?
Both require much hot air
to blow their boasts in the town square.

Is it music from the County Fair
with scent of corn dogs in the air?
Drummers keep the rhythm just so
while dizzying rides spin to and fro.

Is it St. Nick's Christmas Carnival.
Cold hands grip mugs of hot cocoa
While trombones like toboggans slide
down music scales and snowy rides.

Patriotic piccolos
Clarinets, oboes, baritones—
Rhythms, marches, melodies
Float down rivers, climb up trees.

THE OCEAN ON HIS PLATE

by Julianna Kunz

A satisfying calm has fallen on
The oakwood table bearing family meals.
He, barely head-above-the-edge, peeks up
And spies his fork: a ready cause of waves
In his potatoes—mashed—he’s yet to eat.

They splash and plunge like torrents in a gale,
And rising in the lumpy breakers, peak
And form the crest of whitened tidal waves.
How stiff these ever-changing waters seem
When junior makes them dance with cutlery.

But just when things are going good, his mom
Says, “That’s enough” and whisks his waves away.
With dinner goes his boredom, so he slides
Away and down to something more intriguing—
A favorite tractor waiting in the sand.

TOO TIRED TO BOW

by Al Forred

When it's all done and said,
And with all the house lights up.
With the books for now out of the red.
One final plea for maybe a free setup,
But the bar is closed for now, Bub.
On to the next house of worship.
There's a smell like a Kentucky backyard bathtub.
Somebody smoked out the bathroom.
And the Booker wants his money from the club.
I'm still here too, up there. Stage left, I loom.
Another Saturday on the board.
Call home, grab the gear.
On to the next subtle tomb.

SRIRACHA SHORTAGE

by Al Forred

I stare blankly, listless even now
in my kitchen, looking for an option.
You are gone, no more to darken my door.
The caress of your flavor on my tongue,
peppers exotic and sweet, fill my soul.
Believe me, we searched for you everywhere.
Shelves barren. Substitutes will not do.
Oh please! Just come back to my hot sauce shelf!
I lament the myriad reasons for your departure.
The timer rings. My pizza will be bland.

LAMENT, I GUESS

by Skyler Stone

I um I uh I think I uh I um
I'd like to think I'd like to do to be
I uh I um I think I um I uh
I'd like to think I'd like to be to do
I try my hand at fishing for a line
I catch a tackle box but still no food
I put another fish onto my hook
And wait and wait and wait for do to be

I dip my pen into a well of ink
I draw a while in the kitchen sink
I scribble spots and plots and charts and clots
I leave the water on and on and on

I stumble back and forth and back and forth
And back and forth and back and forth and back
And through the elevator doors and wait
And wait and wait and wait for be to do

I uh I um I think I um I uh
I'd like to think I'd like to be to do
I um I uh I think I uh I um
I'd like to think I'd like to do to be

SURFACE TENSION

by Skyler Stone

Water, water, water boat,
Rocking by the dock,
Rock a little longer dear,
Light upon the loch.

Listen for the doodle-doo,
Seconds on a clock,
Water, water, water, dear,
Crashing on the rocks.

Something subtle swells and falls,
Rocking to and fro,
Gentle water wavering,
Sieges on your moat.

Worry about everything,
Things you'll never know,
Rocking by the waterside,
Waiting for Godot.

HEROIC COUPLETS

by Skyler Stone

His name was Sir Jeremy Doonesbury Plum,
Known better as simply “Sir Jerry” by some.
Her name was Sir Guinevere Harriet Clay,
“Sir Gwen” was she called when she rode toward the fray.
Together they battled the fiends of the land,
Their journeys were storied and righteous and grand.
(But better were known they in drunken man’s tale,
'Twas rumored they’d each downed an ocean of ale.)
And each of their ventures, each monster they’d fell,
Found each of them further bewitched by a spell;
And soon the two found themselves fallen in love,
Upon dragon’s back with the starlight above.
So after they’d bested some beast they opposed,
One hero got down on one knee and proposed.
They gathered the best they could buy with their blades,
Had pixie-made pastries, merpeople for maids.
Of course they had satyrs preparing the drinks,
For none are such masters of brewing, methinks,
And had them a wedding so gallant and glad,
The gods all were jealous, but couldn’t be mad.
Now daily they still meet with kraken and king,
In one hand a blade, in the other a ring!

ANOTHER FALL POEM

by Skyler Stone

Seems every person and their mother's written
A praising poem 'bout the changing season.
With natural yearly cycles we seem smitten,
And can't stop babbling 'bout them for some reason.
My habit is to shudder at cliché—
To separate from others is my rule—
But recently I've felt a need to say:
I guess that autumn weather's kinda cool.
The trees burn brightly brilliant and bold
Before the lands turn desolate and still,
Like one last wave of warmth among the cold—
I guess that autumn weather's pretty chill.
The time has come for pleasant sweater walks,
And mini mountains made of leaves that fell,
And distant crows' coordinated flocks—
I guess that autumn weather's fairly swell.
The squirrels scamper in some secret race,
A thing that's happened every year to date,
But still it puts a smile on my face—
I guess that autumn weather's sorta great.
The dwindling birds with quiet chirping song—
And browning leaves that crunch beneath your feet—
And lazy air that brushes leaves along—
Oh, fine!—This autumn weather can't be beat.

SOMEWHERE IN MAY

by Jack Guimont

October — sober — with feet stuck in the sand.
Waiting here, cold fear, please grab this outcast hand.

My coy caused blush — bold rush. Sold when I first saw:
his cheesy grin — I can't win your Minnesota thaw.

It changed me, mostly; and left me wanting more.
Lost love — heart sore; more of you to explore.

Virgin heart — torn apart — I can't say I'm the same.
And he's gone, long gone — not that he's to blame.

Sunless sky — so grey — I truly have to say
In the end, we bend, we're lost somewhere in May.

RIVERSIDE

by Jack Guimont

He stuck his feet into the river tide,
a boy of nine behind his battered eye.
And felt his youth escape his mind - riverside.

He was never ready to say goodbye,
and hasn't felt this lost since Grandma died.
He shouts his rage into the cloudy sky.

He lost the road here on this lonely ride,
starting lost with help from a loving lie.
He thinks of death, and settles that he tried

to set his pain into the river tide.
He tried to find a way to say goodbye,
a boy of nine here on the riverside.

CRUEL DREAM

by Katharina Weissing

Once upon a night a dream came
Stealing into my mind.
“Cruel dream with all your visions,
Why are you so unkind?”

In this dream a friend came to me
And gently took my hand.
This dream by night seemed like a rock.
By dawn it turned to sand.

This friend, he led me to a stream—
It shimmered as it wound
Through groves of blossoming cherry trees—
Pink petals scattered 'round.

My friend, he knelt upon the bank,
And looked into my eyes.
The Northern lights glowed so bright—
They made the stars look shy.

He spoke in quiet, gentle tones,
“Marry me please, my dear?”
The world began spinning—
I heard my heartbeat in my ears.

I woke, and knew at once this dream
Had given me false hope.
“O, cruel dream!” my heart now cries,
And I must learn to cope.



THE SEASONS OF TREES

by Katharina Weissing

The breeze blows through the leaves of oaken trees.
By its motion trees' thoughts are spoken, free.

Flutters of laughter — blustery chatter.
Then trees' sap sinks — their lovely leaves scatter.

In coldness and snow, their bare bark is shown.
While wild winds moan, the trees sigh, mourn and groan.

Then thaws the earth, and the sap from down deep
Up through the roots to the throbbing heart seeps.

Then with budding, unfolding, bursting, and blooming —
Trees' roots are thirsting; bees come bustling and zooming.

MY BALLAD

by Christine O'Brien-Umbreit

I was asked to write a ballad
Didn't know what to do.
I had to find rhythm and rhyme
That are pleasing to you.

Would you experience the magic?
Could I accomplish that goal?
Or should I take all my writing
And bury it in a hole?

Will you be dazzled by my effort?
Have I found the right words?
Or are you possibly thinking that
Writing is for the birds?

I guess it really doesn't matter
If you're trying to run
Because now I can finally say,
"Thank goodness I am done."

WHO SAID IT WAS COLD?

by Kyle Gierok

Moving my feet, I dared to walk
Out into the cold
Over the grass, under a pass
Further from my home

No need for map or compass
I've been here before
But the people that walk amongst us
I don't see anymore

The cold can seem so daring at times
When you are not prepared
Lines as fine as balancing dimes
Try not to be so scared

SO VICIOUS

by Kyle Gierok

Move now with haste, complete your hunt fierce beast
Creature with tails, one not your own, such glory
So far you move, to have and host your feast
Go now! With speed! The pride need not worry.

No time for fun, prepare for battle you must
A wall stands tall, no match for you, a fence—
Leaping like fire, your legs you surely trust
No enemy to see—stare into the distance.

Prowling darkness, you lurk despite the night
The moon your friend, the faint dim sun, but how
Monster of homes, you love to show your might
Eyes in the dark—let out a glorious meow!



SUMMER SUNSHINE

by Julia Maynard

The sunshine is so bright
In yellow and orange rays
My hair reflects the light
The rival is the night
But the sun rules the days
The sunshine is so bright
I love to fly my kite
The heat causes a daze
My hair reflects the light
I see my kite take flight
The days pass in a haze
The sunshine is so bright
Cold dreams of the knights
And high-flying blue jays
My hair reflects the light
Summer wins the long fight
Warm days and the trees sway
The sunshine is so bright
My hair reflects the light

PART II. FICTION



ALL DOGS PLAY IN ALLAGANDO

by Al Forred

A waterbed can be a fickle solicitor. At one moment, one can be roused and ready for today's dice shake. In the same moment, a calm realization that fighting this contained sea could be more a chore than other options. MacCool found himself in this exact scenario. If it wasn't for a strange scent stirring him, he would not have skipped a tooth on the blade of slumber. What was this that he was smelling? It was familiar, of course. He had lived in this home his entire life. So many things have been prepared, burned, left out, and giggled about that in his old age they began to run together; a flock of memories whizzing and whirring.

What IS that? He could no longer stand his curiosity over this tantalizing smell, so he heeded the Sirens' call of slumber and made his way off the waterbed. He made his way through the darkened doorway into the hallway.

"It must be evening already," he thought to himself. With the force that he could on his aged frame, he shook off the cold that crept under the doors and through the windows. He despised winter but knew Mom, Dad, and the Boys were quite fond of it. And so, being the guardian of this home, begrudgingly he accompanied them. He loved the Boys more than they would ever know, and as for Mom and Dad he was willing to die for them. The life of a family dog is never dull. Not even after all these years.

In a room off to his right, he heard what sounded like one of the Boys. He always found it quite odd that the rest of his unit, his pack, never howled or barked like he did. They could whine just fine and they did when they were younger. Some in secret and others more openly.

Regardless of these small boundaries, they were in sync. The Boy was making such a racket with laughter and holding that odd bone that they run to when it begins to scream. Just as he was passing by though, the Boy called his name.

"Mac!" he exclaimed from his chair. Their eyes met and Mac entered the room. He remembered the first time looking into those eyes when the Boy was a pup. He fondly remembered that hot July evening when the Boy ran into the room, dove onto the waterbed and began to whisper into Mac's ear about getting his first kiss from the girl on Taylor Street. He remembered the time they decided to become hobos and live in the shelterbelt, only to come in when the sun went down and they ran out of cookies. Oh, those sweet, loving eyes though. Still bright and full of life.

The boy was much gentler with Mac since he had begun to develop lumps all over his body and how his joints ached. His soft voice still speaking to that bone as his hand glided across Mac's fur. It was still like velvet from when he himself was a pup.

They're there together in this moment, living in age.

"That smell though. I guess he don't care that much, but I must know," Mac thought.

He turned his attention back towards the hallway giving a look back at one of his Boys, then proceeded on.

"He'll be a fine Dad someday," Mac confided to himself.

Back in the hallway, Mac turned his attention to the other rooms. Nothing in the water room. What about the Boys' room. There he found his other Boy. He was laid out on his bed with a talking box on his chest. The Boy was turning parts and the box made crackling sounds like a fire until it stopped, and a man was talking with the sound of many others in unison screaming. Mac hated that sound.

"Why he lays there and listens to that horrible box is beyond me," Mac thought. "What's worse is when he starts to yell back at it. I never know if he's going to celebrate it or destroy the damn thing. And what is that smell in here?" He entered the room ignoring the sounds from the box and proceeded to sniff it out.

"It's similar, but it's not... not... Whoa payload!" Mac then observed a section of a sandwich that the Boy must have forgotten about. But just as he had gotten it into his mouth a loud hand clap from the boy made him drop it.

"No way that I just got caught," Mac thought to himself as he looked up. The Boy seemed to have turned his senses toward Mac while still focusing on the box. Mac slowly dropped the sandwich back where he found it.

"Nope. Too much of a rush for this old heart." And with that, Mac left the room. The smell was even stronger now that he was back in the hallway.

"The living room? What does Dad have? What's he doing?" he pondered. His nose was practically burning to know what this was. His stomach was starting to grumble, and he began to feel tired again. "No," he reminded himself. "I've got to find that smell."

As he entered the living room, he found Dad sitting in his big comfy chair watching the tiny people in their box. Dad let out a loud and warm greeting. Dad understood Mac probably better than the others. He treated Mac with the utmost dignity and grace that an aging companion should

receive. Dad was holding on to a bowl.

“Perfect. Dad has what I’m after,” he thought. “Maybe I’ll just sit here and stare at him until he shares. Yes. That usually works. And it’s me, so of course Dad is going to share.” Mac took to his pose like a model ready for a portrait. He sat. He felt that tired coming back to him.

Readjusting his haunches, he figured it would go away, but no.

“This time of year, I tell ya,” Mac thought. After a while, Dad looked over again at Mac from that big comfy chair. Still with the bowl in his hands, he turned and leaned towards Mac.

“This is it. Finally,” Mac thought but was quickly saddened. Within the bowl were peanut shells. Dad shook his head while communicating that Mac wouldn’t like them.

“The hell I won’t.” And with that, Mac thrust his face into the bowl and proceeded to get whatever he could out of the bowl.

“Mac! NO!” Dad exclaimed. Mac felt it in his whole body, and it scared him a little. He pulled back and looked up at Dad. Dad scowled at Mac and turned away. Back to the tiny people in their box. Mac felt scorned and guilty, but that smell was everywhere around him.

Was it Dad himself? Is it the big comfy chair? He sniffed all around but couldn’t figure it out.

Where was this damn smell coming from? A clank and Mom’s singing came to him like the angels singing. The Kitchen.

Mac entered the kitchen. Mom had an array of tools and bowls strewn about the countertop by the sink. She had just spun around from the pantry back to the oven. Mac had found the source. He and that magnificent sniffer he had. She was over the stove doing something to something up there.

“If I could only jump up and see what she’s doing up there.” Just as he pondered a solution, she was spinning back around and stirring up that glorious, enchanting smell.

“Oh, how cruel she can be when she cooks,” Mac thought. “Would it hurt to share just a little? Maybe I can wait for when the Boys come in to eat. They always share.” No matter how much he tried to console himself, he needed to know now before he got too tired. What is that smell? Mom could have dropped a morsel to at the least give a hint, but she’s too good to make a mess. What is that smell?

Mom is moving all around the room now. Like a tornado of dishes, cutlery, glasses, butter, buns, and...

“No. It can’t be,” Mac thought. To his amazement, Mom was almost floating back towards the table with The Smell: pot roast.

“This can’t be. With the potatoes and carrots, onions and garlic, and three glorious pounds of one hundred percent grade A beef.” As Mom placed the dinner on the table, she called to Dad, Dad to the Boys. She stepped out of the kitchen for just a moment to call them.

That moment was all Mac needed.

“Come on, Old Boy. Here’s your chance. Don’t let it go,” Mac thought to himself. With one brilliant and precise motion, his body moved in a way that it had not in a long, long time.

He felt the rise and fall of his lungs, and he sank his teeth into that pot roast exploding into his mouth. In the resulting euphoria, Mac had failed to notice that he had not landed on his feet though. However, he was on his side shaking and sinking his teeth deeper and deeper into his prize. There was only a small amount of time during which he discerned the sound of Mom screaming and falling to hold him as he was slowly calming down. The flavor was rich in his mouth. The pot roast was perfect. He saw his pack one last time from the arms of his Mom as his tired heart ultimately won and Mac became perfection.

Dad and the Boys labored in the December permafrost. A lesson that a speechless and shocked Dad did not want to teach anytime soon. They went inside to pick up Mac and bring Mom to the spot that they chose. She had wrapped him in his favorite blanket from the waterbed along with his prize: the pot roast. That perfect and fleeting pot roast. No one will ever know just how perfect it was aside from Mac. Mac, that faithful and humble guardian.

Mac, the keeper of secrets and celebrations. Mac deserved this one.



RETURN TO ROCHESTER

by *Melissa Meyers*

He'd been thinking about Theodora's pink slippers when he arrived at the boarding gate. They were the exact shade of the cotton candy at the county fair. Every night after the 10 o'clock news, she'd shuffle up the carpeted stairs. He'd fill a glass of water from the kitchen tap, and then follow her up. She'd click on the bedside lamp, slip off the right slipper, point it towards the wall with the cherry blossom wallpaper, then slip off the other one and point it in the same direction. She'd climb into her side of the bed. He'd slide in next to her, punch his two pillows and then pull the quilt she sewed for their thirty-year anniversary up to his chin. Then she'd begin to read.

"Boarding Pass, please." The airport employee in the navy blazer held out her hand. He pulled out his ticket to Rochester, New York, and she took it. "Scanner is broken, please proceed on your flight to Rochester." Her hair the shade of amber honey, speckled nose, and slender form caught him off guard. She reminded him of what Theodora looked like when they had first met.

The reading together, it was a silly habit they had developed. One that made a sharp pain in his back act up every time he thought about it now that she was gone. The pain had started coming after her death, but when he thought of their nightly reading ritual, it blazed fire.

"PLEASE proceed for boarding," the airport employee said.

He'd never told his morning diner buddies about Theodora reading to him. Charlie and Jack would have snorted coffee through their noses and ridiculed him with jokes about being a kindergartener. At least that's what he imagined. He'd never even told his daughter Claire about it. She would have thought it was sweet, but he wanted to keep the memories of them reading together tied up in a box marked, "Theodora and Roger."

"SIR, PLEASE PROCEED FOR BOARDING," the airport employee with the honey hair waved her hands in front of his face and indicated he should move down the jetway.

He reddened, and tried to stammer out an apology, but then just shuffled forward. Reminders of Theodora were everywhere. He didn't know if he'd ever get used to her not being there. He failed to grasp how he was supposed to go about life as normal, when normal had been Theodora for the past forty years.

He continued past another flight attendant standing at the door of the aircraft. A whiff of new car smell mixed with smelly socks greeted him

as he walked onto the plane. He couldn't wait to get home to his apartment where he'd glance at those pink slippers and finally be able to sleep.

He hadn't slept well for the full week he'd been at Claire and Mark's home. Visiting them had been all right, the pain in his back receding when his grandkids invited him to build Legos and play their adventure games. It had been hard to be around Claire. In looks she favored his side of the family, but her mannerism was all Theodora. The way she spoke crisp and soothing in the same breath, the way she folded her hands, and even how she grasped a teaspoon to stir her morning coffee. He struggled to be in the same room as her.

"We will be taking off shortly, please make sure your luggage is stowed under your seats or in the overhead bins. This will be a short flight. If you need something, use the inflight app for ordering."

Their nightly reading just happened. He wished they'd started thirty years earlier, when Claire had been young. Theodora had been reading a book about a horse, Seabiscuit, one night, and she said, "Roger, you've got to hear this." She sat up straight in bed and read about the racehorse who won against all odds, during a time when most of America was down on its luck. When they finished, he'd said, "Well, what should we read next?" And they had chosen another book. Their reading together continued until the last day when she'd receded into a thread-bare shadow of herself.

He nodded courteously at the young woman with jet black hair and pink streaks before he squeezed his lengthy frame into the seat next to her. The girl wore a maroon hooded sweatshirt with a large golden M. He was going to comment about the short flight, but she never looked up from her phone. He sighed. When they finally were in the air, he reclined his seat the ½ inch they allowed, and closed his weary eyes.

He thought about the books they had read, page-turning John Grisham novels, a lot of Agatha Christie mysteries, Theodora favoring the grandmotherly knitter with the razor-sharp mind, and he the Belgium detective with his meticulously groomed mustache. She had wanted to explore classics. *Oliver Twist* and *Black Beauty* were the ones he liked the best, besides *Little Women*. He blushed thinking about how much he looked forward to the story of the March girls. They had started reading it after Theodora received her diagnosis.

She had said, "Can we reread one of my favorite childhood books? I'd like to feel that young again." She hadn't warned him about Beth. He still teared up when he thought of her dying so young. Why did the author



have her die? Surely, authors controlled these things. If he had been the author, he'd had have Beth recover from her long illness.

They never finished *A Man called Ove*. It had been a poor last choice, a book about a widower dealing with depression and a terminal heart condition. It still sat on Theodora's side of the bed. Bookmarked page 97. After she passed away, he couldn't bring himself to finish it, or to return it. The Rochester Public Library kept sending notices. Until he went and paid for a lost book. Some days he wondered how it ended for Ove. Had he gone through with it? He'd understand if he had.

A voice broke through his thoughts: "We are beginning our descent. Please place your seats in an upright position, buckle your seat belts, and put your tray tables away. The weather in Rochester, Minnesota is a nice 50 degrees. I hope you enjoyed your flight."

Rochester, Minnesota! He felt his eyes widen; he simultaneously began to sweat while all the moisture in his mouth vaporized. He grasped the sleeve of the lady with the jet-black hair sitting next to him.

"Excuse me," she said.

He tried to speak, "W-W-What did that pilot say? Did she say Rochester, Minnesota?"

"Yeah. Of course. That's where we're going." She rolled her eyes at him and shifted towards the side of the airplane.

Roger rapidly pushed the blue button with the person icon. A man dressed in pressed navy-blue pants, a buttoned-down shirt, and a striped red and cream tie approached him. "Sir, it is too late for refreshments, we are descending." The attendant narrowed his eyes and cancelled his light.

"NEW YORK!" Roger clutched the man's hand. Spit flew from his mouth onto the man's sleeve. "I'M GOING TO ROCHESTER, NEW YORK!"

The man wiped off the spittle from his arm. "Oh." He sighed loudly and paused. "I see." Roger willed the man to say, he'd heard wrong. Instead, he said, "The airline must do something about this. This mix-up happens at least ONCE a week." He patted Roger on the hand. "We'll get you back to New York." The gesture made him feel like a placated old dog. The attendant abruptly turned and walked to the back of the plane.

He leaned toward the window. What would Theodora have thought of this situation? She was fastidious about detail. He knew the truth: if she had still been with him, he wouldn't be in this situation. He felt like the scrambled eggs he'd made at Claire's house for breakfast.

CLAIRE! He was supposed to call her when he arrived. Now, he'd

be hours later than planned once he finally arrived in New York. This was going to make her worry about him even more. She had talked extensively about how she wanted him to move to Chicago. She'd said he seemed purposeless. PURPOSELESS. Of course, he was purposeless; all their retirement plans had collapsed the day he watched Theodora's body lowered into that gaping hole. He looked out the window again, the blackness greeted him, and he thought if it swallowed him up it might not be such a bad thing.

He'd lie. She couldn't know he'd gotten on the wrong plane. She'd start worrying about his mental capacity. That Belgian detective never would have made such a mistake. He'd stayed sharp right up to the end. But he hadn't had a Theodora to lose.

The airplane taxied on the runway. He let the girl with the hooded sweatshirt out, then stood up and removed the plain brown luggage with the caramel-colored handle. They'd bought the matching traveling set after their marriage and used them to travel to Hawaii and on that Alaskan cruise. As he walked towards the exit door, he saw the attendant tapping his fingers on the wall.

"What's your name sir?" He said.

"Roger Moray."

"Roger. I'm going to take you to the Delta Airlines desk and get you on the first flight back to New York."

"Thank you." He smiled at the man. He wanted to hug him, but he just grasped the handle of his luggage a little tighter and soldiered on. Stand up straight, old man. Stand up straight. He remembered that when Seabiscuit had gotten injured, he'd recovered to win the Santa Anita Handicap. In fact, what had the man said earlier, once a week? He was just a victim of statistics it seemed.

They entered an airport terminal, and passed a sign that said, ROCH-ESTER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. He looked around. This is the smallest international airport I've ever been in.

"NAME PLEASE." He jumped at the loudness of the attendant's voice. He looked up to see a pint-sized woman with cream colored hair at the airlines desk.

"Roger Willard Moray," he stammered. Her voice making him feel like he'd just had a double espresso at Starbucks. Claire had ordered one for him once. He hadn't slept for two days. She typed for a moment on her keyboard.

"9 AM!"

He blinked.

“9 a.m.?”

She stopped typing and spoke slowly. “Your flight to CHICAGO leaves tomorrow at 9 a.m. Your connecting flight to NEW YORK is rebooked for 12 p.m.”

He swallowed. “Where should I sleep?”

“Multiple hotel accommodations can be found throughout the Rochester area. The Kahler usually has rooms, and they offer an airport shuttle. Taxis are in that direction.” She pointed to the right.

“Thank you,” he said and pivoted in the direction she pointed. Seeing a taxi, he got into it, and nodded at the driver with a neatly clipped beard and wearing a red polo shirt.

“Where to?” The driver said.

“I don’t know.” He couldn’t remember that hotel she had mentioned.

“Mayo?” the driver said.

“Mayo?” Roger said.

“Mayo Clinic. The world-renowned Mayo Clinic? Will and Charlie?” The taxi driver’s dark-brown eyes squinted at him in the mirror. “Do you have an appointment? Anyone coming from out of town, usually comes here for the clinic.” The taxi driver paused when he got no response and then he said, “What brings you to Rochester?”

Stupidity. He wanted to say. “Nothing” is what came out.

“Nothing?” the driver said with a slight rise in his voice.

“Nothing. It was an accident.” His words tumbled out faster. “I heard it happens at least once a week. I’m from Rochester, New York, I got on the flight to Rochester, Minnesota, accidentally. I’m booked to fly back to New York tomorrow. I’m just a statistical victim.” He heard Theodora’s buttery caramel corn laughter behind his increasingly silly explanation.

The taxi driver scratched behind his ear. “Well, I’ve never heard of it happening before. Been driving a taxi here ever since I moved down here from Cloquet twenty years ago. But you should make a clinic appointment while you are here, save you the trouble of coming back,” he said.

“No thanks. My wife died of cancer. I hate clinics.” It came out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“Sorry to hear that. Tough luck, indeed. So, where to? Meter’s running,” the driver said gesturing toward the dashboard.

“The lady at the desk mentioned a hotel that started with a K.” Roger said.

“Kahler Grand is right downtown. You can take a tour of Mayo Clinic in the morning before you leave or make that appointment,” he said and soon they were zipping down a wide quiet highway.

“Not much night life here, huh?” Roger managed to get out, hoping to change the subject from his own need for an appointment.

“Na. Rochester is full of sick people and the people who take care of them. Half the population of the city works nights anyway. We do have some excellent restaurants. What kind of cancer did your wife have?”

“Pancreatic,” Roger managed to get out. There was that pang in his back again.

The taxi driver whistled long and low, “Sorry to hear that. That’s a nasty one. Goes quickly. Not a good rate of recovery.”

Roger thought about how the cancer had eaten away Theodora’s soft curves to the bone. How her dimpled cheeks had grown translucent. There was the day she’d reached out for his hand and her wedding ring tumbled off her birdlike finger into his. He’d kissed her hand and said, “I’ll put this away for safe keeping, until you feel better.” The doctor’s prognosis had been three to six months. She’d made it five.

“Yeah. She did go fast,” he said.

The taxi driver nodded. “When?”

Roger paused. The cherry trees had been in full blossom. He’d noticed them at the cemetery, bursting pink their sweet odor lingering in the air reminding him of Theodora’s favorite perfume. Could it already be half a year?

“She died last spring. Do you like to read?” he asked.

“Read? I like a good thriller every now and then,” the driver said.

Their talk switched to John Grisham and *The Pelican Brief*. The driver pulled off the highway, and the skyline of a small city became visible. “That’s the downtown. Most of those buildings are associated with the clinic in some way or the other.”

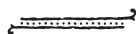
Roger nodded to the driver. He was only half listening. They soon pulled up in front of a tall ochre brick hotel.

“Here we are, the Kahler Grand, the first Mayo Clinic hotel,” the driver said.

Roger approved of the hotel that looked like it was constructed in the 1920s or 1930s, a time when architects constructed their visions interlinking beauty and function. When materials meant to endure anything were used. The history of the building comforted him like a bowl of Theodora’s homemade chicken noodle soup. He thanked the driver, tipping him generously.

He checked in at the front desk in the spacious lobby and took the elevator to his room on the sixth floor. Hungry and out of sorts, he dropped his suitcase by the door, set an alarm and flopped onto the bed

without taking off his shoes. The last thing he remembered thinking was that tomorrow night he'd be sleeping in his own bed, with Theodora's pink slippers in view.



Bells. Striking. One. Two. Three. Four. They continued ringing up to nine. He sat up, and the room shifted into circles. He looked for the slippers. Bare carpet. He took in the strange walls. His brain grappled to remember. The alarm clock blinked nine o'clock next to his head. Roger read the words "Kahler Grand" etched into a menu sitting on the table by the giant mirror. A man with tousled grey hair, black circles and a thick furrowed brow stared back. His flight! He threw the covers back and leaped out of the bed as yesterday came sprinting back.

His phone buzzed. Claire's name flashed across the screen.

"HELLO," he said.

"Dad! Are you alright? I've been calling and calling. You were supposed to let me know when you made it home. I've been worried sick," she said.

"I overslept. I had my phone on vibrate," he said, "I'm in Rochester."

He moved to the window and looked out at the strange buildings towering around him. A massive gray and silver building with curves like an airstream trailer rose above his sixth-floor window. He saw a large sign that said, "MAYO CLINIC," and people were scurrying in all directions on the sidewalks below.

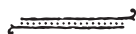
"Well, glad you made it home. I've got to get back to my job, but listen Dad, I want you to seriously consider what we talked about," she said.

"Yeah, I'll think about it, Claire. I had a great visit. Your boys are good boys."

"Call me if you need anything, anytime. I love you." she said.

"Love you, too."

When the call ended, he felt cruel like that man who refused to serve more gruel to Oliver Twist. He couldn't remember ever lying to his daughter. He rubbed his head hard. Hunger surfaced. He'd jump in the shower, find food, and then call the airline to reschedule his flight once again.



Roger found himself in a labyrinth of passageways on his search for breakfast. The front desk attendant had pointed to a hallway and said something about walking to the subway or skyway. He replied that he just wanted some black coffee, eggs, and a bagel with cream cheese, and he didn't want to go far. She pointed him to the right.

He was now wandering through a low passageway milling with hundreds of people. Wheelchairs, walkers, people wearing colorful cloths tied around their heads. Must be cancer patients. He winced and looked at his feet. Professionals dressed in blue scrubs and white lab coats with official badges crisscrossed around the patients as if they'd already had one too many caffeinated drinks. He stumbled upon a café and ordered his breakfast. He thought about the guys at the diner. He noticed there was a voice message from Jack. He hit play.

"Roger thought you'd be here this morning. Hope to see you tomorrow. Let me know when you get in."

He hit call.

"Jack. Hi. It's Roger," he said.

"Roger. Are you back?"

"No, I had a little flight trouble. Listen. You can't tell anyone else, but I landed myself in Rochester, Minnesota. Don't laugh, I got on the wrong flight. I didn't tell Claire. She can't know," he paused for a breath.

"Minnesota! That's crazy. How'd you get on the wrong flight?"

"The airline said it happens all the time, like two or three times a week. Rochester, NY, or Rochester, MN. They need to be clearer about their signs and check in process. I should sue." Roger gave a dry chuckle. "Do you mind just going and checking on the apartment? Refill the fish's automatic feeder? Collect the mail, etc. You know where the spare key is, right?"

"Yeah. I can check on it this afternoon. Where does Claire think you are?"

"Rochester," he said and Jack laughed

"I should be home tonight or tomorrow," Roger said. "Bye. Jack." Roger took another swig of his coffee. It tasted smooth like the ribbon candy he used to eat when he was a boy. He'd have to get a refill before leaving.

Feeling better from his morning breakfast, he ordered another coffee and decided it was time to rebook his flight. He stepped out of the cafe into the airport-like atmosphere of humanity winding in and out of the tunnel system of shops, restaurants, and information stations below the clinic. He'd figured out that this was what the receptionist meant by

subway. No fast-moving trains here. They should come to New York City. He smiled.

Roger headed in the direction of the hotel. But then a familiar tune caught his attention. He followed the music to a vast atrium with floor-to-ceiling windows reaching up two levels. A woman with permed white hair stood on one side of a grand piano playing one part of a duet. Her fingers danced lightly across the keys. She turned and smiled at the elderly man who was answering her high notes with lower ones. The duet continued. Surprisingly, their nimble fingers never missed a note.

They had drawn a large crowd. The music bounced and skipped off the keys and then suddenly they switched places. Then Roger was dancing with Theodora swinging her in circles, their laughter mixing with the music of the Can-Can. With each dancing note, they moved faster, their happiness building. Then the finale came, and Roger opened his eyes. All the people around him had dispersed. The piano playing couple strolled off holding hands.

Roger watched them go, then slowly turned to take in the stately marble columns, floor, and sweeping staircase. He looked up to the high ceiling where glass-blown chandeliers dangled. They exploded cheer with their sunshine yellow coiled up with cobalt blue and seafoam green. He walked by a shop selling wigs and head wraps. A shirt on display said, "No one fights alone." He stopped and stared at it. Reading the shirt, his eyes began to water.

Theodora's hand was in his. It felt like the China teacups his mother used to sip out of for afternoon tea. The one with pink chrysanthemums. When he was six, he knocked one off the table and broke it into a hundred fragments. The tears came hot and quick. His mother pulled him close and let him cry and then slipped him a piece of hard sweet candy.

The day Theodora slipped away from him, he had held her hand long after she left him, but the hot and healing tears never came. As he stared at the shirt, he realized he had pushed away not only Claire's attempts to comfort him, but had done so to all his friends. He wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve and followed the stream of people forward.

He passed a large circular desk where a woman in a blue vest stood ready to answer questions. He stopped to talk with her.

"Is it always this busy?" he said.

"Monday through Friday. Yes. The clinic is closed on the weekends, then the place rests," she smiled at him, and he read her name badge, "Sister Margaret."

"Sister, I heard one can take tours of the clinic," he said.

“Yes. Tours are from 1-2 p.m. Monday through Friday. They start in the Gonda building near the elevators.”

He nodded at her, “Thank you.”

He headed to his hotel, but on his way he saw a sign that said, “Rochester Public Library.” He wondered if this library was anything like his library in Rochester, New York. He followed the signs. The glass double doors slid open. Roger entered the lower level of the library. The scent of adventure stirred up with dust and longing greeted him. He stepped in searching for the fiction department. Before he found it, a musical voice drew him to the children’s area.

A woman with cropped hair the color of his morning’s cup of black coffee stood in front of a group of children. Her eyes held the attention of a group of wriggling tots seated on carpet squares. Roger sat in the back row with all the parents.

She smiled in his direction and continued reading a story. It was about a hodge-podge group of friends, a boy that only wants to be kind, a mole that likes cake, a fox that is wary of the world, and a gigantic horse that despite his size is gentle. Her lithe voice rose and fell, and Roger shut his eyes.

He and Theodora were sitting on a blanket at a park. An ancient oak extended its branches above them. It had a trunk so wide it would take three adults with their arms stretched to encircle it. He placed two candles in the center of the blanket and tried to light them. The wind whipped, and match after match faltered. He finally got the candles lit. Then he turned towards her to find she was gone. He ran around the tree searching for her. He circled it again and did not find her. The wind pushed him, and he called out for her.

“Sir, Sir, wake up. I think you may have been having a bad dream.”

He opened his eyes and blinked at the blinding lights. A face that wasn’t Theodora’s stood above him. He realized it was the librarian.

“Are you okay? Your snoring is a bit loud for Storytime.” She smiled at him.

He gave a small chuckle and she shushed him, but her indigo eyes laughed.

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll behave myself next time. What was the name of that book?” he said.

“*The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy,” she said.

“Captivating tale. I may have to check it out. I missed the ending.” He said and gave a weak smile.

He suddenly realized he hadn’t contacted the airline yet. He rushed

back to the hotel, getting lost twice before he managed to find it. He went to his room and dialed the airline.

“Delta Airlines. Please press the number for the corresponding option.” The voicemail ran through a list of choices. He finally got to the one about rescheduling tickets. After some explanation, he managed to make the scheduler understand.

“We can get you on an evening flight at 8 o’clock tonight,” she said.

He hesitated. A quote from the little Belgian detective with the mustache popped into his head, It is the brain, the little grey cells on which one must rely. One must seek the truth within. That was all the encouragement he needed; a plan formed in his mind.

“How about a week from now?” He said.

“Oh, okay let me see,” He waited patiently as she looked up flights. A calm settled on him, the pain in his back absent.

“Yes, we have several flights about a week out,” she said.

“Let’s do that.” After he hung up, he wondered if he was being foolish. He went to the desk and extended his stay for the week and spoke to the desk attendant who gave him an Explore Rochester magazine, and then he asked her for restaurant recommendations.

The next day, he took a tour of Mayo and learned about the history of the Doctors Mayo. He found out it all started with a tornado, a local M.D., William Worrall Mayo, and a Franciscan Sister, Mother Alfred Moes. The Sister had wanted to build a hospital to take care of the sick and needed a physician to staff it. The sons of Dr. William Worrall Mayo, Will and Charlie, had been the visionaries for the medical center, traveling around the world to learn about the latest techniques in medicine.

In his opinion, the best part of the tour was the Plummer building. He learned it had been designed and built with an extraordinary amount of input from Dr. Henry S. Plummer, a colleague and employee of the Doctors Mayo. The sixteen-foot bronze double doors that stood open were the first indication of grandeur on a vast scale. The tile and intricate carvings throughout the building fascinated him. The carvings consisted of everything from St. George, the patron saint of England, slaying the dragon, to the icons of the Republican and Democratic parties. St. George was a nod to the Mayo family’s English ancestry, and the happy elephant and a sad donkey a reflection of the outcome of the 1928 presidential election. Roger chuckled aloud when the tour guide told the story of how it represented the year the building was finished, which happened to be the year when Republican Herbert Hoover defeated Democrat Al Smith.

He heard bells chiming when he toured the buildings and realized

those were the same ones that had woke him up. He learned the bells consisted of fifty-six sets that made up an instrument called a carillon. A musician played concerts on it throughout the week. Roger was told that from the Annenberg Plaza you could hear the concerts the best.

After his tour, he wandered the grounds and turned around the corner to see a long, low reddish-brown brick church. It reminded him of the English countryside with a proper garden that surrounded it. With all the tall clinic buildings it seemed out of place nestled at the feet of these giants. As he neared the church, he read the sign, "Calvary Episcopal Church, open daily for private prayer and meditation." He sat in the garden.

All around him, the leaves of the trees colored red, yellow, and orange in the church courtyard danced in the crisp breeze and let go of their branches sometimes one by one, sometimes several at once. The branches would be bare for months, until new growth came, but then they'd start again in the spring, like the cherry trees on the way to the cemetery. A cool breeze made him shudder. He saw that the church doors were open. He entered in.

He hadn't walked through the doors of a church since Theodora's death. The aura of the church enveloped him. It was warm with a hint of chocolate laced with cinnamon. The stained-glass windows shimmered their soft yellows, vibrant blues, and subtle greens arranged into images of the gospels. He sat in the last pew. He ran his aging hand along the pew in front of him. It was stained in a rich oaken color. He decided to leave. He didn't know why he'd come, he had nothing to say to God. He glanced again at the stained-glass windows but remained seated.

He had used all his words and prayers pleading with God not to take Theodora. And he'd been left with nothing. As he sat, the tears came slowly, sliding down his weathered cheeks. He missed her. He missed her so much. She would have loved today, seeing and hearing about all this history of this medical community. He just didn't know how he'd continue without her. He didn't really want to continue without her. Why was he still here? Claire was right, he had no purpose, no reason to get up in the morning. No Theodora. He should have been the one with the cancer. The tears came hot and torrential now. He blew his nose, he wiped his face, but he let them come. He didn't know how long he sat before he felt a soft hand on his shoulder.

He jerked his head around. A petite woman in her mid-50s with soft gray hair and emerald eyes dressed in a cream-colored vestment squeezed his shoulder and shooshed him like a mom quieting her baby. After a

moment she said, "Crying is so healing."

"I've lost my wife, Theodora," he blurted out, "I'm lost without her."

She didn't say anything just patted his shoulder, which somehow induced more tears to come. She stood there, her hand resting on him. He let the tears come until nothing was left. She said, "Come have a cup of coffee." He rose and followed her into a little atrium, and she brought out a cup of coffee. He took a sip. It was hot, black, and sweet.

"Tell me about Theodora."

He took a deep breath. "I loved her so much. Everything about her was soft, pink, and fluffy." He paused and laughed softly. "I may have just described her favorite pair of slippers. She was beautiful, inside, and out. She liked to read. We read together every night before bed. Do you know we even read *Little Women*? And I a grown man cried like a boy when Beth, the March sister, died. But when my wife of forty years died, I never cried once."

"She sounds like such a precious woman. I cried when Beth died, too. She was so young. It seemed so unfair." She sipped some coffee and gave him a soft smile. "Grief is mysterious. It isn't something we can stamp on our foreheads and declare to the world, though that would be nice. Our hearts pulsate with pain, and we are burdened to carry the void we feel every single moment. Sometimes, we are so paralyzed by the pain we stop living and we stop ourselves from feeling."

He nodded. He could see that.

"Thank you and thank you for the coffee," he turned to go.

"Please come again. We have several support groups for people who have lost someone close to them," she said and placed a brochure in his hands. "You don't have to do this alone."

He walked out the doors into the setting sunlight on a late autumn day. He pulled his jacket closed around him. He was exhausted. He went back to his hotel room, climbed into bed, and slept.

It wasn't the bells of the Plummer building that woke him up, but his ringing phone.

"Hello?" he said rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Dad? Jack called me. He said he's worried about you. You never came home? Where are you?"

He paused for a moment. Shoot. He'd forgotten to tell Jack that he'd extended his time in Rochester.

"Claire. I forgot to call Jack and let him know I was staying longer," he said.

"Where DAD, WHERE are YOU staying?" she said.

“Rochester, Claire. Rochester, Minnesota.” He thought he better get that out before the conversation got more confusing.

“What! How did you get to Minnesota!” she said.

“Shhhh, you don’t have to yell. I got on the plane for what I thought was Rochester, New York, and it was Rochester, Minnesota. Just that simple,” he said.

She was silent for what seemed like a long time to him, before she said, “But, why are you still in Minnesota? Are you having trouble booking a return flight? Dad! I’m coming to get you.”

He soothed her and talked a while before she calmed down and realized he wasn’t stuck or losing his mind. He told her about the clinic, the Mayo Brothers, the couple playing the grand piano together, and he even mentioned the church and the conversation he had with the pastor.

“I didn’t know you and mom read together. She was always talking about these books she was reading, but I didn’t know she was reading them to you.” She laughed gently.

“And me to her, just in her final days,” he said.

Her voice rose higher, and she laughed the same rich laugh as her mother. “*Little Women* Dad! My big foreman boss dad reading, *Little Women*? Did you cry when Beth died?”

“Shhhh. This stays between you and me,” he said.

The distance that had grown between them after Theodora’s death shortened, pulling them closer than they had been in months, maybe even years. “I love you, Claire. I’ll be home at the end of the week, I promise.”

“Okay, but you need to call me when you get to Rochester, New York. Love you Dad,” she said.

They said goodbye and Roger spent the next week, visiting Mayo every day. He’d hang out near the grand piano until someone played a spontaneous concert. He found the Annenberg Plaza and a schedule of the carillon concerts and listened to the fifty-six bells chiming from the top of the Plummer building streaming through the cooling air and sprinkling down on the patients, staff, and patrons of Mayo Clinic. He visited the third floor of the Plummer building to tour the historical offices of Dr. William and Dr. Charlie, marveling at the ingenuity. He wished they allowed people to sit at their desks.

At the Mayo bookstore, he picked up two books. One titled, *The Doctors Mayo*. That was a thick beast of a book. He’d save that for winter reading. The other, *The Sister’s Story: Saint Mary’s Hospital – Mayo Clinic 1889 to 1939*. He wanted to know more about how the Sisters of Saint Francis had played an integral part in the clinic.

He dined at several restaurants, still astonished at how the whole downtown seemed to shut down when the clinic did. He went to Story-time appreciating that the librarian welcomed him and didn't seem to think it odd that a grown man wanted to hear her read. He visited the church one more time. This time the tears didn't come, but there was a peace that settled in his heart. He lit a candle and whispered a short thank you prayer for all the years he had with Theodora. Then he went and bought that shirt in Claire's size that said, "No one fights alone." He bought a cap that said the same thing for himself.

A week later, he said goodbye to the hotel staff, and got on the airport shuttle with his luggage. He looked out the window as the shuttle pulled onto the highway away from the downtown. It grew smaller and smaller, and the landscape turned into groups of trees dressed in their last change of autumn attire. Soon they would stand naked ready to rage against the winter storms. It was good their life was in their trunk and their roots, buried deep.

He entered the airport and checked in at Delta Airlines for Chicago and then Rochester, New York. As he waited for the employee to check his luggage, he heard someone behind him talking loudly. He turned and saw a woman with hair swept up in a messy bun. "I can't believe I did this, Mom. I got on the flight for Rochester, Minnesota! Minnesota! I won't be home for hours now. All the return flights are booked."

He smiled and whispered under his breathe, "It happens about once a week." He wanted to tell her that she should stay awhile and see this Rochester. But when he finished checking his baggage she was gone. He'd leave that up to the taxi driver. His connecting flight in Chicago was uneventful. He made sure to read and locate Rochester, New York, on the airport sign.

That night he turned the lock in his apartment. He walked in and a faint whiff of Theodora's perfume greeted him, the one that carried the scent of cherry blossoms. Tears came, but the pain in his back didn't. When he finished crying, he texted Claire. He walked up the stairs, and then he stood outside his bedroom for a long moment. He turned on the light and there were Theodora's pink slippers, the color of cotton candy waiting for him.

They were so small. He walked over and picked them up. She'd have thought it ridiculous that he'd left them there for so long, so he carried them to the closet and placed them on a high shelf. He'd be able to see them when he opened the closet door. He shut the door. Got into his flannel pajamas. Walked down the steps, got out a glass, turned on the tap

until the water ran clear. He carried the glass upstairs and shifted until he wasn't quite in the middle of the bed, but where he had a little more space. He reached over and turned on the bedside lamp on Theodora's side. For a moment he hesitated. Then he reached over and picked up the lost book that he paid for, *A Man Called Ove*, stamped Rochester, New York Public Library. He opened it to page 97, and he began to read.



THE LIMINAL LINE

by *Emma Pronschinske*

The first thing Adela Lithgow noticed when she woke up was how cold it was. But that moment was short and fleeting when she realized she was not at home in her flat. She woke up on an old oak bench in the middle of an empty railway station. It was strange to Adela. Normally the railway stations were bustling with people traveling, but she hadn't seen a single person since she woke up.

The lights above her were dim, and Adela thought it must be very late. A few of them flickered as a pounding took control of her head. Adela gripped her hands to her head hoping to relieve the pressure on her mind. Did I drink? Adela thought to herself. That must've been how I got here. She did have the habit of wandering whenever she drank. Not that she ever drank often, but she'd never gone this far when she did. Adela didn't even recognize what station she'd gotten off at. The last thing she remembered was visiting a law office to ask for help on her sister's case, but nobody seemed willing to do anything—even when she offered a higher rate of pay than the going rate.

A draft swept through the platform, blowing past Adela's messy brown curls into her neck and face. She was glad she decided to wear her sweater. The draft drove Adela to stand up from the creaky old bench and begin to figure out just how far she had wandered away from home.

As Adela Lithgow walked down the platform looking for any signs of people to ask where she was, she noticed just how long it was. She'd never seen a platform this long and she'd been to some of the biggest stations in England. From where she stood, she couldn't see the end of the station on either side of the tracks.

Once she thought about it, Adela realized she had been having some trouble seeing clearly since she woke up. That's when she realized she didn't have her glasses. She rushed back to the oak bench she woke up on to look for them. Maybe I just took them off before I fell asleep, she thought to herself. However, when she arrived at the wooden bench there was nothing there. Adela knitted her brow disappointed in her actions, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

Since she couldn't seem to find a single person while looking around, Adela turned her focus towards finding some signs or maps hanging on the walls. Maybe there will be some signs big enough for me to read. Walking down the expansive station, Adella tried to stay calm. She'd been lost on the rail network before, but something in her stomach told her

that she should find her way home soon.

Adela knew that was the right thing to do. Her sister needed her now more than ever, and now Adela was lost in a train station God knows how many kilometers away. The only thing was, how could she get back home if she didn't know where she was?

After a few minutes of walking, Adela did find a directory sign, or at least what should have been one. When she walked up to read the sign she couldn't, but it wasn't because she didn't have her glasses. There was no print to be read on the sign. It was just a blank blue background.

Seeing that, Adela's anxiety surged with her heart rate. What kind of railway platform had signs, but didn't print anything on them? Was this some sort of sick prank? Had she gone mad? Adela hurried her walking pace and began to search for the station lobby. There must be somebody that works here in the lobby, right? Perhaps they can show me to an exit.

The first door Adela came upon was to a single-person restroom. She only looked in for a second before moving on. What she needed was a way out. Soon after, she came to a room with empty rows of waiting chairs. Thinking that it must've been the lobby, Adela searched for a ticket counter or an exit door to the streets. There was no door, and the counter she did find had no attendant.

Her search continued and a few minutes later the young woman came to a heavy set of metal doors. When she pulled the doors open, she was delighted to find a set of stairs. Finally, she was getting somewhere. That place was giving her the creeps. Adela rushed down the steps nearly tripping over her own feet as the steps leveled flat and curved. Then, again, another set of steps led her back up to the surface. Glad to see another set of doors, Adela tugged on the handle pulling one door open only to see that she'd been led back to the same platform and its never-ending appearance.

Quickly, Adela's worry advanced into distress as she began to run down the station's platform. She didn't know what time it was, she couldn't find a single soul, she was lost in a very large and very strange station, and something in her stomach kept telling her that she should be trying to get back home to her sister. She began to call out for anyone there. Her voice echoed and bounced off of the endless tiled walls and concrete floor.

Desperately searching for an escape from the suffocation of her anxiety, Adela ran as far and fast as she could. She ran into numerous dead-ends on the sides and even more desolate waiting rooms, screaming for release from the cacophonous silence that gripped her. And after what seemed an indeterminable and impossibly immense amount of time to

Adela Lithgow, her lungs began to seize up from the exertion and distress.

She immediately began to search for a restroom. It wasn't difficult considering she'd found eight while rushing through every door she had come across. Adela charged through the door, slammed it shut behind, and scrambled towards the toilet in the corner. She frantically collapsed over the bowl and her cries began to muddle. Then they quickly sputtered out as Adela began to retch, feeling as if she were going to cough up her lungs.

No matter how much her body insisted that she would vomit, Adela couldn't. The hyperventilating young woman tried to catch her breath, but the panic and heaving wouldn't subside. Hitting her chest with her fist Adela rasped for better air, lungs still tight. Eventually, her nausea ebbed away without release. She slumped between the bowl and the wall as her heart rate began to settle with deep breaths.

Adela sat there quietly for a while, letting the last of her tears dry and taking the time to collect herself. After some ten minutes, she pushed herself up from the floor and walked to the sink to refresh her face. She turned the metal faucet. It squealed with the twist and water came pouring out. Adela splashed her face, rubbing her cheeks and eyes, the muscles taut from her ordeal.

She turned off the spout leaning on the edges of the sink and watched the last of the water slip down the drain. Adela took in a deep breath and lifted her head to look at herself in the mirror. Her hands gripped onto the sink ledge tighter, and her toes curled in her shoes. The tears began to well up in her eyes from not blinking, but she held them back, taking a controlled breath of fresh air. Crying or screaming would never help her, and she knew that all too well now.

Taking another breath, Adela closed her eyes and opened them to look at the mirror once more. It was by all standards a normal reflection, but there was one jarring omission. Adela Lithgow could not see herself.

Quietly, Adela turned toward the restroom door and reached out for the handle, but she paused to stop herself. She leaned her forehead against the cool door.

"Have I really gone mad?" Adela asked herself.

The thought had begun brushing around the back of her mind since she woke up. She'd had a bad feeling at first, but somehow the odd coincidences began to turn into inexplicable terrors that bent her reality. Adela turned around and slid to the floor against the door, defeated. She didn't want it to be true. But it couldn't be, she was fine yesterday. Then why was this happening to her?

Time itself stilled in the moments Adela sat against the door contemplating all that had happened. But soon, she stood herself up once again and left the restroom, purposefully avoiding the mirror hung to the wall. She wasn't sure what to do with herself, but she knew staying there on the floor would do much more harm than help.

So, she started to walk down the platform again, eyes fixed on the concrete floor ahead. Adela walked by every bench, door, and waiting room that she would have investigated to find any clue or exit before. Now, Adela couldn't bother herself to care. As she walked, she tried to make sense of every odd thing that happened to her in the station. But no matter how long and hard she thought, no matter how far she walked, Adela didn't understand. She couldn't.

"What's the point anymore? I may as well be dead if this isn't a nightmare," Adela said to herself, resigned to her circumstances.

The instant those words left Adela's mouth she stumbled to a quick stop, almost walking into a passerby. Adela was startled, turning to look at the figure as it passed. She was about to ask a question, but her jaw dropped in shock. When she turned around, suddenly she saw several other figures filling the station. Some stood at the platform ledge waiting for a train. Others walked past her or sat in chairs or on benches waiting.

However, she promptly realized that these were not normal people. Adela forced herself to blink a few times to be sure she was seeing correctly, even without her glasses. But the figures milling about were still dark shadows of people. There was no colour to the silhouettes. They were grey, silent, emotionless people. If Adela could call them people.

Adela stood numbed with horror watching the figures. They each moved independently around the railway platform as she heard the whistle of a train in the distance and the rails and ground began to shake. More of the shadowy figures slowly began to move, some rising from their seats. It looked as if they were all going to board the coming train.

She felt the ground below rumble with more fervor as she heard the screeching of brakes that slowed the train. Adela hadn't moved a meter since her run-in with the grey figure that passed her by. Eventually, the train whined to a stop in front of her. Then the train door hissed open next to her.

Adela took a cautious look inside from where she stood. It looked just like any other train she'd been on before, perhaps even a bit nicer. She looked to the side. The silhouettes were already boarding, and she knew she had to make a choice.

A part of Adela reminded her that she had no clue where the train was

going and no reason to follow in the footsteps of those odd grey characters. She didn't even know who they were. Or what they were. But the rest of her shouted that she couldn't take another minute in that rail station alone. She couldn't find a way out on her own, and her sister was waiting. So, Adela straightened her posture with a sharp breath and held her head in resolve as she took the first step.



HOTSPUR

by Julianna Kunz

The trailer groaned to a halt in the dust. The animal inside continued to cry out and stomp impatiently. The metal trailer clanked each time the horse kicked against it, sending harsh, jarring sounds across the grounds. Some distance away, Erik looked up from tightening the girth for Sara Johnson, a new rider at Dublin Stables. In fact, the disturbance caught the attention of everyone nearby, riders and horses alike. Erik felt there was a maelstrom contained within those metal walls, and he longed to see what it looked like.

Two men came out of the hauling truck; one went to Mr. Fitzpatrick, owner of Dublin Stables, with a clipboard and paper. The other began unlatching the trailer door.

Erik was burning inside. “Sara, honey, go to the arena and Miss—uh, your riding instructor. She’ll show you everything.”

Erik sighed in relief. He could never remember that instructor’s name; hopefully the girl hadn’t noticed. He watched her for just a minute, making sure she got to the arena, then he hurried over to the commotion. He might be better accepted by the two men if he seemed mature. Erik slowed his pace, and smothered his bubbling excitement, trying to remain calm. As he neared the trailer, he affected a little scowl, and made sure to deepen his voice.

“Looks like one of them spitfires, Mr. Fitzpatrick,” he said, forcing a tone of nonchalance. “Everything’s all ready for him, though.”

“He’s just juggled by the ride. These hills aren’t the Derby racetrack. Just let him loose in the pasture for a spell so he cools down.”

A black stallion, shiny-coated and evil-eyed, was pulled out of the trailer, and the lead rope given to Erik. The horse snorted, and tried to resist the young man’s hand.

“Don’t give me sass, you son of a gun. You’re sure somethin’ else, and I like you. So don’t spoil it.” Just for good measure, Erik whipped a carrot out of his back pocket—the handy, well-worn, all-purpose pocket—and let the stallion munch away at the first bite. When it reached for more, Erik pulled the vegetable away and led him easily toward the pasture.

Erik removed the halter and slapped the horse forward. It started out a few paces, but suddenly it swung around. The stallion yanked the carrot from Erik’s hand with his teeth, and bolted down the other side of the field. The young man started.

“Hey, you!” but the rest died in his throat. The stallion was now bucking

and rearing, tossing dirt everywhere. Some mares, grazing contentedly near the fence, perked up and ran right along with the newcomer. Erik laughed in spite of himself. Glancing back to make sure Fitzpatrick wasn't calling him, he leaned against the fence to watch the spectacle. That horse was so spirited, so full of life. He was a new face, too. Erik, completely absorbed in the stallion, fell deaf to the noises around him. To the long dusty trailer rattling down the driveway, back to the open road. To the excited laughs of the young riders, shouting to their other friends about their experience. To the general whinny of horses, and of one in particular. One that was peculiarly loud and persistent, crying for relief. The relief of being answered, of being heard. It continued throughout the week, and though Erik occasionally recognized it as Hotspur's, he responded superficially, taking only the necessary steps for care, and less often than before. The black stallion, after all, was new, and a little younger, and wild, and...

Erik kicked Hotspur's flanks with his heel, urging the stallion faster. The evening wind blew by his face with a biting sensation now, and both horse and rider seemed exhilarated by it. For a few merciful minutes, it fanned away the mounting pressure of guilt around him. Erik had been reminiscing, recalling, while taking this evening ride, how neglectful he had been of Hotspur this past week, since the black stallion arrived. Surely he had a right to admire other horses; he wasn't married to Hotspur. And the dapple grey would understand. The communication was deeper than spoken words. Deeper than any spoken language, be it Greek, or Welsh, or what not. And yet...

Erik gave the beast more rein, and Hotspur bolted to a full gallop. Erik marveled—as he always did—at the power beneath him. There was a mighty machine, capable of thrills and excitement beyond belief; literally riding the wind, burning ground beneath its feet. He could see the blacksmith's sparks from the anvil, but this time coming from his horse's sturdy metal shoes. Erik smiled with pride at having thought of "Hotspur" for a name; it was perfect.

He let out a long, wild whoop—perhaps it was the little, long-ago bit of Cherokee in him that so loved these kinds of things: the summer air pounding through his lungs, and hearing the horse's powerful breath as it too inhaled the breeze. He could control the animal's every movement with his lower body, and actually seemed to become part of it. The horse's hooves pounded the ground with a very distinct rhythm; a methodical, four beat "thud" as they raced across the field. But most of all, Erik

enjoyed the risk; the unpredictability of these creatures. Horses, after all, were wild, untamed spirits who might become their own masters at any moment they chose. Especially the black stallion.

He pulled the horse to a stop at the far end of the Dublin Stables acreage, and looked back in awe at the flaming sunset on the horizon. The stable, house, and horses grazing in the pasture looked like black, cookie-cutter silhouettes against the bloodshot sky. Nature was settling down for the night...for the most part. There were a few horses still grazing in the pasture: two skewbald mares, and the newly-arrived stallion. He enjoyed pushing the mares here and there, but Erik knew that wouldn't last forever. Hotspur neighed loudly as the stallion stirred the mares away from their eating place.

"Isn't he something, Hotspur? I bet he could even lick you. I'll have to ride him sometime. Maybe tomorrow."

Hotspur snorted, and shook his head.

"Still sizing him up, huh? Alright. Time to get back, anyway." Erik snapped the reins, and Hotspur started back at a canter.

Erik realized an exchange of blows was inevitable. He remembered vividly how, from the day the black devil had arrived, each became noticeably tense around the other, and each snorted incessantly. Hotspur made it clear to others in the past that he was the master, but he proved it to either very young or very old males. This boulder of coal was five, and definitely a challenge. Hotspur would have to fight hard to remain dominant. Here, again, Erik felt a little guilty. Hotspur was his horse, but he was still enchanted by the shimmering, oil-black coat of that new arrival. He was sleek, muscular, and very spirited. Just the kind of horse one could do something daring with. And Erik lived for the daring.

But in the meantime, the present sunset was gorgeous. Erik couldn't believe he was staring evening in the face. Today was Saturday, the busiest day of the week, and he thought he'd never see the end. There were so many junior riders, so much to do, so much to re-do, what with the constant running here and there, tacking up horses, or not. Feeding, watering, brushing, instructing the juveniles—it was quite insane, and Erik enjoyed every minute of it.

As the pair went by the pasture, the black stallion perked up his head and neighed. Hotspur pricked his ears, but obeyed his master's touch, guiding him away towards the stable. He slowed instinctively to a stop right outside the doors. Erik had trained him well in that. The young man dismounted, tried to lead his horse inside, where water, fresh hay, and a grooming awaited. But Hotspur seemed reluctant to go this time;

the black stallion was still neighing in the pasture, and Hotspur kept snorting and tossing his head.

“You want to fight, huh? Okay.” Erik quickly removed the saddle and bridle, and set the dapple grey loose in the pasture. He threw the tack over a stall door, and ran outside. He was not going to miss this.

“Mr. Fitzpatrick!” cried Erik, “Come here, quick!”

Erik’s boss, who had been going over files most of the day, came running out of the house.

“What is it?”

“Hotspur and that new devil are going to have it out, right now!”

Fitzpatrick came running across the yard, and came to the place where Erik was sitting on the fence rail.

“How could you let ’em get so close?”

“They were bound to do this sooner or later. Anyway I’m glad. It’ll let the pot boil over and go back to normal.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion. You didn’t answer my question.”

Erik sighed in impatience. “There ain’t no stoppin’ this.”

“Mr. Peters, you’ve got no more—.” But Erik wasn’t listening.

“Golly, there they go!” he cried.

The two males rushed at each other, sounding a weird, half-grunt, half-squeal as they swung their legs in the air. Hotspur reared, and tried to pounce on his rival. The black stallion did the same, but lunged for Hotspur’s throat with its teeth. Hotspur fell back, and reared again, this time striking for the stallion’s face.

The stallion met his opponent head-on, swinging his forelegs aggressively around, then beating them forward at Hotspur. Hotspur lunged for the other’s throat this time, biting and biting, hoping to score a hit. The black stallion dropped back on all fours, spun sharply around and kicked his hind legs at the dapple grey. Then he turned around again to pound his enemy. Hotspur seemed to retreat, running a few yards toward the barn, but he turned around and started to chase the black horse, rearing and falling forward to pound the beast in front of him. The black stallion charged, and lunged again at Hotspur, meeting him head on. For a few seconds, they seemed in a deadlock, standing on their hind legs, beating at each other with their front hooves, and advancing toward the throat at every opening.

Erik watched all this in amazement. If it had been a fistfight, he would have been cheering and shouting on the side, making mock punches and screaming himself hoarse. But this was ten times more exciting; there was ten times the brute strength involved—and perhaps ten times the rage.



Even Fitzpatrick was engrossed now. Here was the pinnacle of battle for supremacy, and it was a fine piece of work. It was nearly dark now, except for a faint haze of light in the west. The horses were barely visible, but the men strained their eyes to see.

Hotspur lunged again and again. And every time, the black stallion met him equally in return. Erik marveled at how often they targeted the throat, the only vulnerable spot on these beasts, it seemed.

The black stallion retreated a few yards now, and paced back and forth in a circle. Suddenly it charged at Hotspur, beating down, and down, and down, until finally it found an open spot. He leaped at Hotspur's neck, and bit down hard. Hotspur gave a loud squeal of pain. He turned and kicked the stallion in the shoulder, causing it to wobble for a second. That was enough. Hotspur wheeled, and turned the same tactic on his rival, but with renewed energy. He charged and charged and charged. The black stallion reared and lunged back, but not quite so often. Hotspur seemed on fire; he dove at the reprobate before him, lunging at his throat, swinging his hooves madly. Both stallions neighed fiercely, but Hotspur kept attacking. The new stallion swung one last time, then allowed himself to be chased down the pasture. Hotspur pursued the dark horse about halfway down the field, then returned, prancing victoriously toward Erik, and the stable door.

Erik leaped off the fence, and patted Hotspur's thick neck proudly.

"I'd almost forgotten how good you were. Thanks for reminding me," he whispered. Then, in a louder voice, "You're a champ, Hotspur. You know how to fight your battles."

"Alright Erik, now that they've had it out, take them to their stalls and fix 'em up. And," his boss added, turning to walk back to the house, "I'd still lock their stall doors tight, just in case."

Fitzpatrick walked away, smiling in spite of himself. That was a most refreshing event.

Erik groomed and doctored both horses with admiration. But saving best for last, like his mama always taught him, he tended to the black stallion first. The horse was bloodied and clearly spent; a beaten soldier, captive in the victor's army, too worn out to fight back. Erik felt pity for him. Before he went to Hotspur, Erik stroked the beast affectionately on the muzzle. The black stallion was a very good fighter. A very good one. And he said as much to the defeated animal. The horse seemed to enjoy this tidbit of praise, and grunted softly.

Then Erik went to Hotspur's stall, where the dapple grey looked strangely transformed in the darkness. The little beam of light from the

moon came through the stall window, and fell on Hotspur's body. His outline glowed white in the darkness, and when the light glistened on his blood stained coat, he looked like a ghostly specter from some medieval legend. He was born for battle; he of all horses would prance boldly, and go forth to meet armed men. Taking in the scene for a moment, Erik felt he would burst with pride. All distraction from other animals faded away—far, far away into a forest of forgetfulness. No horse was more majestic, more powerful than the one standing before him.

“You're the best, Hotspur,” he said in a low voice. “You're the best. Don't ever let me forget it.”

Hotspur grunted softly, and sniffed around impishly for a carrot in that handy, well-worn, all-purpose pocket.



PART III. CREATIVE NONFICTION

DRIFTING

by *Reed Loer*

When our canoe is fully loaded, we swing out into the river. The current whisks us away. The instability of the canoe is unsettling at first, as it's early summer, the first canoe trip of the year. That will fade, and we'll feel a part of the river soon.

The other canoe slips in front of us on the first bend—I can see Keegyn and Ethan giggling about something unseen. On my left, the outside of the bend, Jake tootles along in a kayak. I have my feet up on the gunwales, and in the front of my canoe my friend Sawyer is soaking up the sun as much as I am. The water moves along at a good pace. In the shallows, sunlight flutters off the surface of the water, dynamically mesmerizing.

After the bend, the river widens, and we grab hold of each other's boats. We're talking, but not really having a conversation. Just passing comments on the scenery; the easy depth of the water, the brilliant green of assorted trees lining the shore, and the stillness of the blue sky above.

Our style of canoeing would be aggravating to some. We're not trying to log miles and risk missing a gorgeous stretch of river. We're just drifting along, letting the river decide the pace. We don't need to be in control. Backwards or sideways is fine; we can always correct our direction.

Canoeing is a meditative adventure. The sensory input—the gorgeous colors, the warm sunlight, the gentle breeze—pleasantly occupy one's mind. Sometimes, because the ego likes center stage, I have to concentrate on being here, now. Usually, though, the river lulls me into a gentle mood of intake, absorbing my surroundings. On days like today, the five of us share this mindset. Our actions are harmonious; we simultaneously want to swim, a lunch spot is unanimously decided, and when it's time to camp, there's no debate about where. Later, when we're tired and this mindset fades, we'll have disagreements. But for now, drifting is all there is.

A bald eagle soars above the treeline on our left, swoops toward the river and lands in its nest—a massive configuration of sticks. We can see small heads peeking over the rim of the nest.

My thoughts are most productive in the canoeing mindset. I contemplate things with equal parts care and reason. This balance is a natural state for a human being, which is why the five of us can all find it, but it's uncommon in my daily life. Usually I'm using my past experience to tell me what's next, what choice to make. These experiences are why I make different choices than Jake or Sawyer or Keegyn or Ethan. Each of them has lived a different life; each has different genetics. When our brains

search for an answer by pulling up an analogue to the situation at hand, each of us will pull up something different. It's subconscious, so when the decision is made, I can't understand why everybody doesn't agree with me.

The river has deepened. The sandy bottom looks so inviting. We hop out of the canoes, swimming alongside them, all of us drifting. Somebody starts throwing an orange around. Perfect. A game of catch sounds perfect. How far can we throw this orange to each other? Oh, not that far. Nothing wrong with a wet orange.

Perhaps the beauty of consciousness is its inherent uniqueness. It's me, it's everything I've ever experienced and nobody else can feel how I do any more than I can know how they feel. Romantic, but it doesn't forgive anything. I still need to deflate my ego sometimes, and remind myself that my reality isn't necessarily true just because it feels that way to me. My interpretation of the world is only mine, and can't apply to seven billion others.

We're back in the canoes and wet, slightly cold in the breeze. Every ounce of sunlight is absorbed. I look over and see the rest have tipped their heads back like me, their faces trying to fathom how wonderful sunlight feels. Just gorgeous. A discussion emerges; how did we ever stop worshipping this ball of light, the life-giver? It's so incredible we can't even gaze upon it. If there's anything sacred in this world, it's the raw power of these celestial events, the same ones that somehow resulted in us.

We've decided to create a sea shanty. It's Keegyn creating it, really, with his musical mind. The other four of us are just giving it the good energy needed to mean something. "Today, today, we paddle the St. Croix/The stream, the stream, for no mere little boy." If anybody heard us who has not been in a canoe, they'd quickly judge. Any canoeist, however, would dig it.

A set of rapids approaches. We spread out, and, being in back, I steer us for the heavy riffles showing deep water. When we're thirty feet away, being sucked forward, Sawyer points out with a maniacal grin a passage around a log, hugging the left bank of the river, then curving right around a fallen tree back into the main channel. I carve a C on the right side of the canoe and swing us toward the entryway—it can't be more than four feet wide. Hard paddle, we graze the log and we're in. We're headed straight for the fallen tree. That thing will tip our boat and suck us under. I use my paddle as a rudder and swing our bow hard to the right. We're pointed toward the exit, but the current is sweeping us toward the tree. We paddle. Come on, man, PADDLE! Our tail hits the trunk of the tree

and sends us spinning, but we're alright. Just laughing.

Ethan doesn't believe in free will. He believes our past experiences shape us, and we will only make decisions accordingly. I disagree. This position assumes the ego has full control over our being, and executive function is our highest power. I think there's something deeper to humans than that. Something that allows the five of us to share this experience in the same mindset, despite our vastly different lives. I could call it a soul, but that brings up superficial connotations. This isn't the rational, decision-making mind. I don't really know it exists, but I feel it.

After the rapids the river has evened out. Four feet deep, and swift. We're paddling, not because we've got anywhere to go, but because the motion feels right. Steady. Just drifting on downstream. The sun is well past its peak, but there are several hours of daylight left. The canoes have spaced out, and we're not talking much.

I certainly hope I have free will. Without it, I'm banking on how I was raised, what I've been taught, and choices I've made in the past. My parents are wonderful people but not perfect, I don't have much faith in what I've been taught, and I certainly don't think I've made every decision correctly. All these factors do influence me enormously, though. Consciously picking and choosing which parts to use and which to discard, after seventeen years of life, is more self-awareness than I have.

We've found a campsite and erected our temporary means of existence. From where our canoes are tied up, a path leads into a small open clearing with a metal fire ring in the middle. Trees start to close in by the water, but leave an opening above a steep slope over which we've strung our hammocks.

We sit above this slope now, silently watching the colors of sunset reflect off the water. We're tired, and as the sun disappears this place feels lonesome. Not unpleasantly so—my friends are here too. A poignant loneliness. I feel trapped by my own head but lucky to have one.

The sun is gone and in the fading dusk we rally to cook dinner. It's chicken and rice on the menu tonight. We season the chicken and wrap it in tinfoil, then shove it into the coals. We slop some water into a pot and let it sit over the fire. The previous harmony of our minds is gone. We're tired and hungry, and nobody feels like anyone else is doing their fair share. The attitude is snappy— all we need is food. The previous meditation on the moment is gone. I'm hungry, now. I don't want to wait. I want it now.

While we wait for the food to cook I look at our camp. There's not color, but a silhouette of what we've created here. Some of it is gorgeous;

our hammocks outlined between trees, our canoes floating gently by the shore, and the five of us staring intently into the fire. But in my peripheral I notice plastic bags hastily shoved away. I see broken branches and dead shrubs marking our inhabitation. Products of our mindset. We don't come here and merge with nature. We come here to escape our artificial lives, but they never leave our minds, and we leave our trace.

Dinner is served. We might be tired as hell, but boy do we get excited about food. It's silent except for the crackles of the fire and the grunts of appreciation. Campfire meals are sublime. My god, this chicken!

We eat and are content. The day is done and there's nothing to do but sit here and talk until we can't keep our eyes open. No lights except the fire, merrily illuminating just enough for us to see each other. I remember I brought chocolate bars. I retrieve them and pass around the slightly disfigured sweets. Murmurs of appreciation. The stars begin to make an appearance, and over the water the moon gives us something to ponder.

Tomorrow we will clean this camp to the best of our ability, then pack up and drift downstream for another day. We will leave our peculiarly natural world soon, but there's no reason to think about that. As the fire burns down and we migrate to warm sleeping bags, I'm excited to fall asleep, because I know I will wake to coffee and a river. Tomorrow must be a good day if it starts that way.



THE NIGHT OF THE MAYFLIES

by *Melissa Meyers*

When I was very young, I witnessed the hatching of the mayflies. In the early 1980s, we lived in a maroon-colored rental house on Grove Street in La Crosse, Wisconsin. My older sister Julie, my younger sister, Jolyn, my mother, and my father. Later, Michael John joined us. But by then we had moved to another town.

Our house was near the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and we had college students as our neighbors. My mother always said the words, “college students” as if she were uttering a dirty word. Of course, there were the beer bottles left on the lawn and the college student that played drums at all hours. Now I am a mother, who had small children once, I can see how she would find this a nuisance. In addition, there was also a college student that trained to bike competitively. He’d shaved his legs on the back porch. I learned from my dad excess hair somehow got in the way. Years later, I realized the college students (pretend I am saying the word with disdain) were only slightly younger than my parents. My parents married at the age of eighteen, right out of high school, and had three children by the time they were twenty-two. With small mouths to feed, they did not have leisure time to play drums and spend time in competitive biking. Attending college was never within their grasp.

The university and our house on Grove Street were not far from the gray-colored and sprawling Mississippi. Sometimes, the smell of dead fish mixed with the smell of the brewery and caused the air to carry the stench of yeasty rot. The smell lived closest to my dance studio. Each week mom and I walked to the dance studio. I traipsed along in my pink leotard and tights, wrinkling my nose, and trying to pull out my hair brushed back too tightly by my mother with the hated bristle brush with the pink handle. That is why I am surprised by the joy the hatching of the mayflies stirs up in me, because they too stunk like dead fish.

One evening, my mother cried out to us, “The mayflies are hatching!” in a voice that did not reflect disdain like the words, “college student.” We saw long-curved bodies with straight needle tails and prehistoric dragonfly-like wings fluttering in mass and sticking to anything near a light. Drawn especially to the streetlights, the insects covered the entire length of the poles along with the light covers until they cast Grove Street in an eerie glow. Until that evening, I did not know mayflies existed. Suddenly, my world was full of creatures that emerged in hordes and lived tragically brief lives—for only 24 hours.



My mother's voice carried a tone of celebration, and so we ran outside to get closer to them. One stuck to my arm and in panic I flapped it up and down to rid myself of this strange insect. "They don't bite. They are harmless," my father said, and reassured by his words, my sisters and I ran under the insect clouds fulfilling their life cycle, relishing this mystery.

The next day, we gathered up our buckets and shovels from the sandbox to collect mayfly carcasses. My mother had been right, and now their bodies squirmed no more. They had fallen, as they had hatched, and lay in pile upon pile on Grove Street. Like autumn leaves, they crunched beneath our small feet. We filled our plastic pails to the brim with our plastic sandbox shovels. We were intent on feeding them to the three turtles that lived in the massive Red Wing stone crockpot outside the steps of our house. After we dumped several buckets into their domain, the turtles must have felt like the Israelites in the desert, overwhelmed with too much manna. My mother told us to "STOP" or we would make them sick. So, for the rest of the day, we were mayfly movers, filling and dumping them from pile to pile just for the pure joy of working with dead insects.

As an adult and college graduate, I picked up a *National Geographic* magazine, on the cover was a photograph of an enlarged mayfly. I flipped to the article and read that La Crosse, Wisconsin, was the premier spot to experience a mayfly hatching. I put it down, and I saw my sisters, giggling and holding their plastic buckets, scooping up hundreds of them that one magical July morning. I then heard my mother's voice in my head: *You don't have to be a college student to know that.*



DRIFTING INTO THE DRIFTLESS

by *Melissa Meyers*

In the last glacial period, the ice moved methodically through the region of the United States called the Midwest. It flattened, leveled, and compressed the terrain into plains, destined to grow mile after endless mile of cash crops. A sliver of land encompassing southwest Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota, and northeast Iowa was bypassed by these colossal frozen sheets. All these areas escaped the crushing power of the glacial ice. With the absence of their impact, the runoff from the melting ice split into rivers and streams, creating a varied landscape of hills, valleys, caves, sinkholes, and ridges.

This area is known as the Driftless Region. I grew up in this unique and diverse landscape. A place where tributaries leap and bubble into the mighty mouth of the Mississippi River that eventually spits into the gaping Gulf of Mexico, mixing with the salty brine of the Atlantic. When I met my husband at college, I'd assumed we had similar childhoods since we were both from Minnesota. Then I visited the town of New Richland in south central Minnesota, where he grew up. It is a land rich in prime earth for the growth of corn and soybeans. There is not a significant hill that exists for the breadth of Waseca County. As we walked around the town, he showed me a drainage ditch where they used to throw sticks in when he was young.

The lack of ecological diversity my husband experienced growing up caused me to think about how the physical world in which we grow from child to adult shapes us. How much am I a child marked by the topography, flora, and fauna of the Driftless Region? I know I am marked by the imperfect parenting of my mother and father, as many have experienced. My parents' lives were impacted by mistreatment which caused undiagnosed mental illness, and in turn it impacted me and my sisters and brother's world. If I didn't gain the ability to overcome adversity and develop an unwavering optimism from my parents, did I get it from my environment?

The Driftless Region is certainly a place I did not know was special until I left behind the tree-covered bluffs dotted with hickories and hardwood oaks. Thinking back, I see it was a place where nature reached out her arms and encouraged me to play in her watercress-covered streams and explore her textured terrain. In the summer between second and third grade, a defining moment stands out, Sara Bernsdorf, my neighborhood friend, and I packed a lunch of baloney and cheese sandwiches,

filled some plastic water bottles, and set out to scale our local mountain.

In the 1980s, many parents allowed their children to do such things, unsupervised, in a town of six hundred people. I am part of the last generation that had a childhood without cell phones. The last generation to know what it meant to be truly free from the tentacles of technology. When we set out on the footpath located behind Sara's house wearing only shorts and tank tops, void of any sunscreen, we had only our stick-thin legs with our knobby knees, and our eight-year-old knowledge to accomplish our goal. It was Sara and me versus Mt. Tom.

Mt. Tom, also named Thompson Bluff, was the largest bluff in Hokah. The original Dakota name for the bluff has long since evaporated from the memories of the people who now live in the land. I wish I knew what it had been called. The stamp of the Dakota remains on the town in the name of Hokah, the word for the Root River that runs through it, and the last Dakota Chieftain in the region, Chief Hokah. But Mount Tom, like Pike's Peak, is named after the first European settler in the region. In this case, it was Edward Thompson, not Zebulon Montgomery Pike. Thompson arrived in 1851 and established a flour mill on the banks of Thompson Creek. I once stumbled upon a pair of river otters playing in the shallow waters of Thompson Creek, above Hokah Falls, tumbling, diving, and fishing. I was told river otters at that time were extinct in southeastern Minnesota. I and the otters disagreed.

At four hundred feet, Mt. Tom falls short of mountain status. But it loomed large over our little town. In my child's eyes, it could have been Everest. It stared me in the face every time I made the trek from my home on Main Street to my Grandparent's white house down the hill. To get to their place I walked down a long curving sidewalk that ran along with the sloop of a hill, past the massive brick Catholic church and parochial school, where bats resided in the belfry. When I came around the corner of St. Peter's, there Mt. Tom stood, daring me to come and see the world from the skies.

It finally got the best of me. So, in the summer of 1986, with three months of nothing to do, I roped Sarah Bernsdorf into my plan. She was the youngest of three sisters and an appropriately adventuresome friend. She agreed to it. At first, we skipped quickly up the pathway, confident of our choice to conquer a mountain. In the beginning, some trees shaded our way. We spoke of the danger of rattlesnakes, which is a real danger in Southeastern Minnesota. I know now it could have been a timber or an eastern Massasauga. Both are considered pit vipers with a venomous bite. Their tan and grey color with black and brown splotches help them

to blend into the local landscape. As we skipped along, we exchanged the collective knowledge we had gained from our parents about these poisonous creatures. They liked hot places, especially rock faces where they could sun themselves. We needed to make a lot of noise to scare them away. If we heard a rattle, we should back away. I am sure if we saw one, we would have panicked, but like many of my unsupervised activities growing up, no one got hurt. Two giggling girls stomping through the underbrush would have sounded like a stampede of buffalo to any resident snake.

The path turned and our tree coverage disappeared before us, the bedrock turned into soft sand, the color of buttermilk or brown sugar. My father taught me the rock was named sandstone. I learned the lower parts of the bluffs are a loosely cemented construction of sandstone and carbonate rock, deposited millions of years ago when much of North America was a wide shallow sea. Upon the sandstone layer sits dolostone, a chemically altered limestone resistant to erosion. Essentially, the bluffs sit on a structurally unsound foundation. The stronger rock can and has broken through the layers of sandstone. That day, Sara and I tried carving our names into the soft rock with pointed sticks. We didn't have any proper knife or tool with us, so we gave up, and moved on.

The path at this point scattered and split, but we followed a narrower path hoping it wasn't just a trail made by the wanderings of whitetail deer or goats. We began to see Hokah grow miniature via the view from Tom's perspective. Nineteen eighties silver Cadillacs and Oldsmobile station wagons with fake wood paneling shrank to the size of matchbox cars. The Catholic church, which we knew to be colossal, was now, not so much. This experience birthed in me the desire, when problems seem overwhelming and when life becomes inundated with decisions and complications, to seek a bird's eye view of the situation. Sitting on the shoulders of Mt. Tom, we were eight-year-olds with a giant's perspective, taking in our world as a macrocosm. To this day individual problems from this vantage point always seem so conquerable to me.

Sara and I moved under a scraggly pine tree, hot and parched, we sat and devoured what now seemed like meager lunches meant for little girls, not for mountain climbers. We were determined now more than ever to make it to the top. We gulped down our lukewarm water promising each other we would reward ourselves with a 7-UP or A&W root beer from the pop machine in front of the I.G.A. grocery store. After we finished our lunch, we continued to climb. There were more pebbles than before, I slid and scrapped my knee. The crimson color of blood slowly integrated with the tan-colored dirt. Without Band-Aids or tissues, I let it bleed.

The terrain was now all brush and rock. It seemed as if Mount Tom had turned on us. He apparently didn't want two children scrambling up to view the world from his head. The path continued, but it was full of sharp rocks and juniper bushes that pierced when I grabbed them to help pull me up the side. Finally, we reached what we agreed upon was the highest point. We had made it. We lounged, panting, recovering, basking in the summer heat, much like any local rattlesnake. We'd bested the beast.

Thinking back on my life, I realize I have overcome multiple beasts. My father went into treatment for his alcoholism when I was in third grade. Though he remained sober, his alcoholic temperament lingered, and the beast of depression and social anxiety lurked in the shadows of every room in our house. I have often felt like I and my siblings raised ourselves. As my father struggled to keep a job, my mother worked hard to keep us fed, pay our mortgage, and give us the best she could, with little left at the end of the day for emotional support. Like the glaciers crushing the Midwest landscape, this unstable upbringing could have crushed me. But instead it bypassed me. I have been shaped by the melting runoff of addiction and mental illness, but my soul reflects the landscape of the Driftless Region. I have become blufftop views, babbling brooks, karst topography, and ridgelines that stretch on for miles.



THE BACKROOM THIEVES

by Noah Beurskens

Some would say that to be Catholic and to be thieves is an impossible concept, a complete contradiction, an unresolvable paradox; but somehow we worked it out. My friend Isaac, his little sister Maria, and myself were the members of that fearsome, debonair, infamous, and entirely unknown organization known as the Backroom Thieves. Location: Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, Big River, Wisconsin. Headquarters: the back classroom of the parish school.

To actually call it a school would be an overstatement. It was a school building, but the nuns and priests and the hems of their various habits flapping down the halls had long been absent. The building was now used only for parish potlucks, the monthly Knights of Columbus pancake breakfast, and catechism classes taught every Wednesday for an hour in the evening and an hour in the afternoon. My mom was the director of religious education and Isaac and Maria's mom was the youth group director. Often Isaac and Maria's mom would come in and work at the same time as mine, so we kids got free range over the entire parish. We attended catechism class in the afternoon. We were each in three different classes, being a year apart in age, and afterwards, when the rest of the kids had left, we would assemble in one room or another and weave great fantastical narratives to go along with our imaginary play that we relished so much.

There are two different ways that children play pretend: the first is to take their surroundings and completely transform them into another setting, land, and/or universe. A table might become a Viking ship, a classroom might be a dungeon, a door to the yard might be the gate of a grey stone castle. The other way is to take the setting they're in and transport it in itself to another time or place. Often St. Mary's Cemetery would be a mountain range, but sometimes it would be St. Mary's Cemetery, except that we would be chased by assassins with curved swords and spiked steel helmets. Or we would hole up on the handicap ramp, and from that lofty vista we would rain arrows down on enemy cavalry coming across the parking lot. We were steadfast in defending the church we all loved so much. It did not bother us that it was unlikely that cavalry with spears and lances would ever be in a situation where they would be charging across a concrete parking lot on a hilltop in twenty-first century rural western Wisconsin.

The Backroom Thieves idea was born, unsurprisingly, in the back

room. It was dimmer than the other rooms, the chalkboards were rougher, the wall paint was a sickening yellow, and the cupboards were chipped and dented. That, of course, gave it high appeal. The back room had the aura of being unwanted, little used, obscure. We needed to have a headquarters, and we had already been banished from the basement, the garage, and the school office. All these places had one thing in common: they were used, often. But, this new spot suited us just fine. No one came back there for anything, really. Nothing was kept there that was needed often, or at all.

We had the problem of being thieves and still staying Catholic. We were rascals, like all kids are, but we liked to be Catholic rascals. We sat on a stained plastic table and thought, putting in the intellectual energy that we should've put into our homework. Finally, we found the solution. If we took things that the school didn't want and never used, and didn't actually steal them, but rather stored them in a special treasure trove within the school limits, then we could not get into trouble. We were delighted with this brainchild. It was fun, it was imaginative, it was logical, and best of all it was moral.

When all the students from afternoon catechism class had cleared out, we emerged from our den like salamanders slipping out from beneath the rocks. We went about together, or in a single and a pair, or each by him or herself, and often we crossed each other's paths so frequently you couldn't tell what formation we were traveling in. So, we pulled our heists. Our targets were as follows: cupboards that were partially hidden in corners or that were very deep; bottom drawers of desks; musty spaces in the basement; boxes that sat dust covered behind piles of chairs; nooks and crannies in the kitchen with doors that stuck when you tried to open them. All of these were veritable tombs of King Tut for us. Isaac found a baseball with an illegible signature. Who could it be from? A famous baseball player perhaps? Babe Ruth? Ty Cobb? Maria brought in an old, scarred deck of playing cards. What was the mystery behind that? A magician from the past? Illegal gambling? However, my greatest find was a stumpy glass goblet. It was shaped like a glass oil jar. I discovered it in the back corner of one of those cupboards with the door that slid sideways and got stuck, so that only the front part is ever used for storage. I might as well have been Galahad, or Indiana Jones, discovering the Holy Grail.

But joyful times must come to an end. The empires of Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome, and The Backroom Thieves, all fell. There came a time when my mom resigned from the job of director of religious education, and someone else took the position. We thought we

could still keep the Thieves going, and we did for a little while. Then one day we went to the old freestanding cupboard where our treasure trove lay, and all the valuables and spoils that we searched for all those long afternoons were gone. A while later, deadbolts appeared on all doors. Then rules were put in place. The kind of rules that were enforced. Thus ended our reign over that school building. It was no longer a haven, but a compound bent on restricting us.

All, however, was not lost. We still had the rest of the parish, and soon another club was born: The St. Mary's Adventurers.



HEAVEN ON EARTH

by *Rhonda L. Rolfs*

When I was a baby, my parents brought me to a place that became my lifeblood and refuge: my heaven on earth. I believe that my parents found the same beauty and respite in this place. That is why they continued to go back one to three times per year.

My parents found this place before I was even born. A young couple from Iowa had settled it and built it from scratch. Their names were Fletcher and Sadie Hoyt. They named it Buena Vista Resort. It meant “good view.” How true that name was. It sat on the south side of the east arm of Potato Lake seven miles north of Park Rapids, Minnesota. Fletch used to tell us how he had to crawl under the brush to get to the lakefront the first time he saw the land. He and Sadie cleared the brush, cut down some of the massively tall pine trees, and built cabins from these trees. Nothing fancy. They were all lakefront, right near the beach.

There was a small red cabin, a medium blue cabin, a bit bigger white cabin (with a sofa!), their home (a long green structure with a little storefront addition), and a long white duplex cabin with an adjoining inside door. They also built two large docks. The cabins did not have running water. There was a central well and pump where you would fill your bucket with water. Fletch and Sadie’s house had cold running water in it. The facilities consisted of outhouses. There were two sets. There was a shower head in the laundry building, and you would sign up for a time to shower. Each winter, Fletch would cut ice from the lake and store it in a big icehouse that he had built. The ice would be packed in sawdust to prevent its thawing. Each morning during the summer, Fletch would bring a new block of ice to each cabin and put it in the icebox refrigerator. The cabins had two bedrooms with curtains for doors, a front living area of a sink, propane stove, table, and chairs. Each cabin had a big central propane “stove heater” that would heat the cabins on cold days and nights. Later, Fletch added electric refrigerators. When my parents started going there, the resort had wooden fishing boats. Fletch transitioned to lower maintenance aluminum fishing boats when I was small. A boat was furnished with each cabin. Customers generally brought their own boat motors.

When I was in about third grade, Fletch and Sadie built a new home up on the hill. Their former home now became known as the long green cabin. It had three bedrooms. The storefront became the third bedroom. Fletch had an older building that at one time had been a cabin and was



being used for storage. It now became his new store and office. He always supplied the store with milk, bread, candy, and soda pop, in returnable bottles, of course. He had all of the popular flavors of the time, like Strawberry and Grape Crush, Bubble Up, Root Beer, etc. The store operated on an honor system. We would place the money for our purchase on the counter and, if necessary, make change from the cash drawer. He had photos of harvesting ice, bears that visited the resort, great fish catches, etc. all over the walls of the store. He also had a barometer that he had made. It predicted how our fishing would be for the day.

When I was in about fourth grade, Fletch built a central shower house on top of the hill. It was a hike up there to use the new flush toilets and showers, but we thought that we had gold!! When Fletch went to town, he would go around and ask us if we needed anything, and he would bring it back for us. Sometimes, I would ride along with him to town and I loved watching him get minnows for the resort. He had several old milk cans that he would haul the minnows in back to the resort. The minnow dealer in town could count the tails on the minnows so fast that I couldn't even begin to keep up!! He would scoop the minnows up, cup a bunch in his two hands, flip their tails up, count, and drop them into the milk can. The minnow tanks at the resort were old bathtubs. Fletch had cold water running into all the tubs. He also had an old water tank that he kept cold running water in for us to keep our minnow buckets in when we weren't out fishing. Even obtaining our minnows was on the honor

system. We would just write on a pad for our cabin how many and what size of minnows we took. Fletch would total it up at the end of the week and add it to our cabin bill.

No one locked their cabin doors. Everyone trusted everyone there. The same people came back year after year and we all became good friends.

No one stayed inside their cabins those days, other than to eat and sleep. Everyone would be sitting outside or out fishing. Most people would “still fish” back then, which was why we needed the minnows. Still fishing, which I have done most of my life, is a lost art, but one which I refuse to give up. Everyone trolls now and uses artificial bait. Call me old fashioned, but I feel more a part of nature if I don’t have to listen to a boat motor all day. Still fishing is a skill that must be learned. You use a slip bobber, sinker, and a long leader with a minnow on the end. You cast it out and wait for a fish to grab it. When the bobber goes down, you can’t jerk. You must give the fish line so it can take the minnow to a feeding spot and eat it. Then, when the fish has eaten it and runs, you will feel a big jerk. That’s when you must set the hook (jerk back). Sometimes you are too quick or too slow and you lose the fish.

It’s not just feeling a jerk and reeling it up like in trolling. It is how well you can outsmart the fish. I still like that challenge! Waiting for a fish to bite on my minnow gives me the time to observe the loons, eagles, ducks, etc. I can absorb the different shade of green in the forests and the smells of the lake and woods. I can listen to the sounds of the waves, the frogs, and nature.

There were no televisions in the cabins. We never missed it! There was too much to do! If you wanted a radio, you brought Your own and could get the Park Rapids station for news, weather, and music. Most people brought books, crafts, games, etc. for use on rainy or windy days. The kids would build sandcastles, catch bullfrogs, swim, fish with their parents, play horseshoes, tag, tetherball, hide and seek, jump rope, etc. Each day, everyone would wait for the hum of the boat motors signaling that someone was coming back in from fishing.

You knew the sound of everyone’s motor. Each motor had its own voice. We would run to the shore to see what they had caught. Every night, all would gather around the fish cleaning house while Fletch would clean the day’s catch and everyone would share their fish stories of the day. Watching Fletch was how I learned to clean my own fish.

Fletch and Sadie were like a third set of grandparents to me. Sadie taught me how to crochet. I would help her plant her flowers each summer. Fletch would pay me in soda or candy to bail the boats out after

it rained. We had high technology coffee cans or milk jugs to bail with. When we would leave for home, Fletch would give us candy bars to munch on during our long drive back home.

As Fletch and Sadie aged, they sold the resort to the adjacent resort. It became Pine Rest Resort. Fletch had several acres of uncleared timber surrounding the resort. He and Sadie put up a mobile home on the adjacent lot. We still stayed in close contact with them, and I visited them regularly when we were there. Now, the resort was double in size. By this time, we were no longer staying in the cabins. My father had purchased a pick-up camper for our truck. We had many memories in that camper! We would park it under the massively tall pine trees. I would lay in my bed at night and watch the pine trees sway in the breeze.

Pine trees don't bend in the wind like other trees. The entire straight tree sways in the wind. The great horned owl would occasionally bless us with its call. The loons would talk into the night. What peace and serenity.

I headed off to college in 1977. I was still able to go to the lake for one or two weeks during those summers, even though I was working. After college, I entered the "real" working world. I had no vacation at all my first summer, and only one week the second summer.

When I was finally able to get back north, it had been over two years. I had forgotten how the fresh pine air smelled. I remember getting out of the truck after our arrival that summer and it hit me. The air was the pure smell of pine and water. It was fresh. Not like city air smelled.

The orioles and loons were singing their songs. The chipmunks were running about. I could finally experience the peace of sitting in a boat and absorbing the sounds of nature. No honking horns, sirens, traffic noise, etc. It was nature at its best. This became my refuge from the stress of life. I needed to come back to the lake to stay alive.

Eventually, Pine Rest Resort closed, also. All the cabins and history were torn down. Two mansions now stand where all these memories once existed. I stayed at the resort across the lake a few times, but that has now also closed. I have had to move on to different lakes and resorts. They serve to provide my needed respite, but they will never be the same as I had grown to love. I knew every single fishing hole on Potato Lake and could read that lake like a map. I could always catch fish! It was fun to catch fish when no one else could. Our friends from those days gradually passed away, including Fletch and Sadie.

I feel like a novice trying to feel out new lakes and fishing spots. When people go to resorts now, they need their televisions, computers, and privacy. They don't sit outside and socialize like they used to. People go

out fishing and go back to their cabins. Many don't even fish. They jet ski, water ski, and lay by the pool. No one sits outside and becomes a part of nature. Getting to know everyone staying at a resort is a thing of the past. Kids don't play together and make up games like we used to. It is all video games and television now. It's all very "private." The honor system doesn't exist anymore at resorts, either. People ruined that by stealing and being unfair.

I continue to "still fish" and occasionally troll. I own my own boat now; a sixteen-foot fishing boat with a thirty-horsepower motor and an electric trolling motor and depth finder/fishing locator. Yes, I have gone more "high tech." I still bring my ninety-six-year-old father to the lake. Last summer, he even went out in my boat with me a few times. He saw me catch a trophy Black Crappie while trolling and he caught a nice Northern Pike while "still fishing."

My refuge will always be the lake. It may no longer be like it was when I was younger, but I can make it as close to those times as I possibly can. I can find my refuge and survive. My daughter has discovered the same refuge in going to the lake. She is now sharing this gift of renewal and survival with my grandson. May it continue to be passed on from generation to generation. Thank you Fletch and Sadie and mom and dad for introducing me to my "heaven on earth."



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TRUMPETER SWANS Photo by Tom Fisk.....	11
https://www.pexels.com/photo/swans-flying-in-winter-17153972/	
ROAD Photo by Tom Fisk	18
Photo by Tom Fisk: https://www.pexels.com/photo/clouds-over-dirt-road-near-forest-15113264/	
WINTER TREE Photo by Tom Fisk	31
https://www.pexels.com/photo/big-bare-tree-on-field-in-winter-15847308/	
WOMAN WITH SUN IN HAIR Photo by iiiiii	34
https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-showing-her-back-54566/	
DOG Photo by Frank J.....	36
https://www.pexels.com/photo/happy-dog-16194574/	
AIRPLANE Photo by Bruno Henrique.....	43
https://www.pexels.com/photo/low-angle-photography-of-brown-high-rise-building-showing-blue-airplane-in-the-sky-3294476/	
DAPPLED HORSE Photo by Dids.....	67
https://www.pexels.com/photo/close-up-photography-of-white-horse-2600383/	
MAYFLY Photo by Chris F.....	77
https://www.pexels.com/photo/green-mayfly-sitting-on-glass-wall-5298381/	
LAKE Photo by Jonathan Petersson	87
https://www.pexels.com/photo/green-leafed-trees-421759/	

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