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Rubbertop Review

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Editor's Note

Well, here we are in the middle of a pandemic.

Our daily lives have been disrupted. We've found ourselves isolated. The future remains uncertain.

I can't speak for everyone, but I'm someone who thrives on routine and structure, both of which have been temporarily ripped away. Days no longer begin with showers, personal care, or preparing to go out into the world. In fact, some

ing together to stay apart, in order to save lives and keep the hospitals from becoming overburdened. The value of neighbors checking in on one another, and phone calls, and coffee dates over Skype. The stories we tell, and the things we create.

This volume of *Rubbertop* serves as documentation of these unique times. Of people sharing their stories and experiences as they navigate this pandemic, and try to make some sense of it.

We'll make it through this, together, as a community of artists, of readers, of people.

See you on the other side,

Jason Jurkowski
Editor-in-Chief



CREATIVE

Joseph Brown

Yeast is the Least of my Worries

Yeast is the least of my worries.

Humanity, which has since the time of the Ancient Egyptians, has been brewing beer, now bemoans on Twitter the lack of access to dried active yeast. A microorganism that lives on every fruit in their fridge and which can be cultured from the flour. While having one of the most potent informational resources in the existence of man, the complaints about access to the global trade network take precedence to watch a little old grandmother from Kentucky talk about how she makes her sourdough.

Technology has freed us from many shackles but not from the want of ignorance. The dependencies it creates on a massive network of trade become apparent in times of crisis. Masks, needed in Italy, are made in America, with paper pulp from Canada. When allies beg for scraps during an emergency, nobody leaves with anything. A sad game theoretic prisoner's dilemma of greed winning out over humanity, due to the worship of a dog over human life.

come.

Keep your lists humanity of the dead, and do not let the light of their lives go extinguished in vein.

home with my family, while wishing I could continue my normal life in Orange County. I miss stupid things, like buying books and getting coffee. Conversations with strangers, going out to restaurants, not being so fatigued.

But for now, I'm going to keep lighting candles. I'm going to look out my window with a cup of warm coffee in my hands. I'm going to fiddle with the bracelet on my wrist and be grateful for all the small things in my life that convince me everything is going to be okay.

Mitzi Dorton

I Broke my Mom out of the Nursing Home During the Coronavirus Pandemic

When the nursing home in Washington state was on the news, I told my son if I started hearing of coronavirus cases in the area, I would go and get mom and bring her home. He agreed but stated how hard it might be to care for her.

There had been a flu outbreak at the nursing home where mom was recently, but it wasn't Covid19. Nurses, aides, and all staff were wearing gloves and masks, as well as my mother's roommate, who seemed to have something bronchial going on. About that time, I picked my mom up for an outing, a carefree drive to the park, which always seemed to serve a purpose for both of us in having more private conversations and relaxation. Mother became herself and I could see her visibly chill with the steady sound of the engine. Although her vision was going, I would point out the changes in the trees, sights in nature she might have missed, and she would smile. On this last trip out when I picked her up, I noticed a used mask and gloves had been tossed in the circular drive at the entryway, and I made a mental note of the lack of care by the staff for visitors and patients. I had been generally happy with the nursing home, although there had been bumbling occurrences. That sighting in the parking area didn't loom larger in my mind until an elderly man in the next town was diagnosed with Covid19. It was an emotional response from the heart, but after discussing it to some small extent with my son and the options with elder services and home nurses, I walked in and said, "Because of the coronavirus, I want to remove my mother and bring her home with me today."

The news was not well-received. The director of admissions froze in step, frowned, and told me to wait. Meanwhile, the receptionist announced that only immediate family were allowed inside and told me s219 (nn)4 (om)3 (a)-5 (l)-cETEM

her, but it had no self-brakes for her in the front. I went to the car to retrieve it, wanting to be on the road before someone decided otherwise, wheelchair or not.

The social worker was now relaxed and helpful, and she congregated with two of the friendlier older aides and they all seemed to be cheering me on now, grinning and waving goodbyes to mom. One commented though with a haunted look in her eyes, "We don't even have one case in this town yet." "Yes, but it's all

her life, so I had been hanging out in revisiting her younger self and feeling especially attached because of it. The noises my mom made, the spitting of blueberries and the hawking sounds I heard when she ate jarred me into reality from my recent writing projects, where I hung out with her in the 1950s and 60s. She was the parent who allowed all of the neighborhood children in her house. I can still visualize her peeking into the fort she let us make under the dining room table, helping us spread blankets to cover it. I remember Mom directing us to go up in the hot dust-ridden attic and search through her cedar-smelling trunk for dress-up clothes. I can still see her in a bubble cut hair-do, wearing stretch pants with elastics at the foot, delivering the cherry Kool-aide she helped us make to the piano bench she allowed neighborhood friends and me to drag on to the front porch for our dress up tea party. I also remember her strict side, admonishment in public places or church to keep still and make no noise whatsoever. Telling mom be quiet now when the manager was home didn't work, as she would forget and call out for a glass of water or another blanket instead of showing me, but no one said anything yet or complained.

Today the wheelchair my son ordered for her with front brakes arrived, along with a dozen boxes of tissues. He also emailed me and told me to spray down the cardboard packages with Lysol just in case. I did, and I wiped down the wheelchair with Clorox and carried both the big and small box to the dumpster wearing rubber gloves. My son shut down his restaurant business and is holed up on lockdown with his wife, their two young children, and his niece from Alabama, who had to leave the university, because of the pandemic. I had told him no amount of money was worth losing family.

Because I'm the family genealogist, I know about the flu of 1918, and my son has

I do have to get up for that and try to put a quilt over her. “No, not that one; it’s heavy,” she says. It’s not really heavy, just thicker than the two so thinner ones. I explain again, “I don’t have another lightweight blanket. These are the only two, and you don’t want to catch cold,” before she points to and accepts her furry robe as an additional coverlet. Her white arms are thin with blue veins netting through the surface reaching out to help. She closes her eyes, the ancient face of the woman who spread fresh line-dried sheets over me as a child. Needless to say, I am sleep deprived, but at least not moving on command every quarter of the hour.

My son gave me an app for doing a doctor visit online using the phone. I hope it works because she has four blood pressure and six blood thinner pills left, and I will have no choice but to use some old expired bottles of blood pressure and blood thinner, of the same brand and dosage that she used to take five years ago, until she can see a doctor. These pills are of a limited number as well. I’m not going to risk taking her at 95 years old to the emergency room or a quick access clinic with the coronavirus going around. I received an email that the new doctor’s office is also doing phone visits and even house calls in an advertisement, but I don’t know how long it will take them to set it up or call me back. As yet, I haven’t heard a thing.

Would I have broken her out if I had thought all of this through? Had I realized just because I ploughed through three grocery stores and purchased umpteen cans and frozen bags of veggies and soups, bought masks and gloves, boxed foods, toilet paper, sanitizers, secured my owugI rld I hl 5-12.1 (e5 (l 5-12.1 gzxD 52

I had concern about my landlord, the thin walls, and mom living with me, she said, “I think you are worrying too much. Your mother is bone china.” The advice resonated, and I knew I made the right choice.

Lisa Gschwandtner

Degrees of Social Distance

My friend in the Bay Area is a CPA who believes the world is largely run by idiots. She has a spreadsheet of all the items in her earthquake kit, including the dates when various items will expire and need to be rotated out. I tell her hospitals are looking for N95 masks. I live in Los Angeles and I have a box of N95 masks in my earthquake kit. An emergency preparedness website recommended them for res. Suddenly we're all hearing about N95 masks.

"I'm thinking of donating mine," I say. "But it's only 10 masks."

"We have extras, too." She means her husband.

"It's still not that many," I say.

"But if we all do it."

My friend in south San Francisco digs holes on the beach. Eight months ago he graduated with a Ph.D in creative writing. His job interviews are now Zoom meetings. He's given up on a tenured position and is looking to teach high school English. He writes, looks for jobs, calls unemployment. He walks to the beach alone, carrying a shovel. The other day a child and her father stopped six feet away to watch him work in the sand. My friend climbed out of the hole. The child said, "I like your hole. Can I get in?"

My friend in Harlem was feeling sick a few weeks ago but continued to work right up until the day he was fired from his job as a laundry attendant in a hotel. "I felt bad going to work sick," he says. "But I needed the money." He's convalescing on his couch in his 350 square-foot apartment. His symptoms are mild. He's been dating someone, a guy who lives nearby. The guy is younger and still going out. "I don't think he's taking this seriously," my friend says.

My friends in Arkansas are staying inside with their two young sons. They moved to Bentonville from Brooklyn in January. "Thank God we did," my friend says. "I would be a wreck in New York right now. I'm just glad my mother's not here to see all this." Her mother died a year ago and for awhile needed a respirator to breathe. One of the sons has a cough. She texts me: *A kid in his daycare is getting tested for COVID-19. I'm terrified.* On a video call I can see her other son doesn't want to go to bed. He sprawls on the floor.

“Poland,” she says. “You mix ground beef, pork, and onions with rice and cheese and wrap it in a cabbage leaf.”

“Sounds light. I have onions if you need them.” She does, so I bring them over. She comes out of the house wearing her bathrobe, apologizing about it. She walks and winces. I have no symptoms but we all know people can be asymptomatic for weeks and pass the virus along. We keep six feet apart. Her glasses glint in the sun.

“So that’s what you look like!” she says.

solute window for interesting, unusual, exciting relationships. That's why you have the energy to separate, clarify, assert right now. There is something about Uranus that's like ... it's exciting for a minute. And then it helps you see things very clearly."

what remind us of our individual humanity, and sometimes our lack of heroism, which make us real even when events seem so very much like a dream.

Instead of becoming completely listless, I decided to do something I would never attempt when people could see me: look like a complete trainwreck. It felt like a small way to assert control over my life in a situation that so easily controlled all of us, silly as that might seem. I liked the caky feeling of my heavy hair, reminding me that in my house no one was judging me. I could reset. I liked bushy hair under my armpits, knowing I would be mortified if anyone at school saw me like that. And to my surprise, I liked that while I could still communicate with friends and family outside of my nuclear unit (Times like these really prove that technology is indeed a blessing for our generation, not a curse), I had time to figure out what spending so many more hours alone really means to me.

I could see who I am when you strip away all the distractions and facades, all the way down to shampoo.

Maria Sing-yi Hwang
Empty Air

grew from 50 to 500 face masks. Her calls were repetitive, again calling out for face masks with the same redundancy as the Buddhist chanting that echoed through your house. But rather than peace, her pleas only resounded with fear. I reached out to everyone I knew who had even a tangential connection to medical personnel. I went to my nurse's station at my office building and begged for face masks. She informed me that I could only have one. I sobbed thick, heavy tears that clung to my face. I cried out that my ah-gong had died and that I needed these masks to protect my family. I offered her money, and the trim of my collared shirt began to soak with my loud and salty pleas. She told me not to tell anyone, when she eventually handed me five masks.

A deep sense of fear and failure began to set in as I worried that death could be following my whole family and what would happen if this new virus caught a hold of my ah-ma, or my ah-ee, or anyone else that carried my warm, waving memories of Taiwan.

A toast to Ah-gong from your atheist granddaughter:

Ah-gong, we now hold these cups of whiskey in our hands and in your honor. You were the foundation for my mama, and so you ()9 (ekng (en-US)/MCID 823 B

tion, like most Taiwanese people, never came in the form of touch. You held my hands and said, “Maria, come I will go blind soon. I want to look at you so I can remember your face. Let me look at you.” I put my thick hands in yours. You studied my face, letting your failing eyes gaze into your dark-skinned granddaughter. And I studied you in return, with your mouth slightly agape and your sagging cheeks. A last few strands of white hair still poked from your otherwise

a particular variety of butter, of potatoes, of fish, of bread makes him leave his

Ann Kathryn Kelly

See

It snuck up on us, most of us. We see this now.

Outside of a handful of specialists—epidemiologists, scientists, one whistleblowing doctor on the front lines in China who is no longer with us—we ignored the rumbles, the shifting ground, the building pressure, that has blown the top off this volcano.

Did it really just start two months ago? It feels, already, so much longer. We heard about it, in passing. But it was half a world away.

Concerning, then? Not really. It won't come here. A few weeks later? Alright, maybe. A few days ago? Yes, probably.

Today?

Sealed borders, emptying streets. Flatten the curve. Shelter in place. Designated grocery shopping hours in parts of the United States for the elderly—7:00 to 8:00 a.m., every Wednesday. To shield them, keep them safe, from the rest of us.

We see it now, we are living it, we fear we'll cross—are already crossing—an unfathomable line into a world we believed existed only in dystopian books and movies. One shaped by fear, questions, unknowns, mathematical equations, survival of the fittest.

Society wonders when life will return to *normal*. Yet, our new normal is informed, changed, by biology and the blind lessons it metes; in the swelling number of infected around the globe.

Meanwhile, liquor distilleries in parts of the United States shift, overnight, from producing booze to cranking out hand sanitizer. Opened free, to 7 (ks a)9

Mother Earth draws in a deep breath. Exhales.

We turn our undivided attention from ourselves outward, in a way that feels strange to a global society conditioned—reared—to lead with, *What about me?*

In this moment when self-isolation is a choice in some areas, a government mandate in others, we rediscover that social media can unite us when we don't use it to divide us. We embrace ways to reach across digitally, safely, to keep connection alive. A revelation sinks in. We are in this, every person, country, city, village, together. We are responsible for the elderly, the immunocompromised, the vulnerable, the poor, for each other.

Meanwhile, Venice's *sh* shimmer and dart through empty canals. Skies clear. Italian citizens, in a country on lockdown, sing opera from balconies, their arias *li* ing through the air to settle onto those around them, on other quarantined balconies. It reaches through YouTube, to ears around the world. *ei* r songs, the de *ni* tion of the human spirit's capacity to hope and hold on to each other in whatever way allowable.

Mother Earth pulls in another long breath. Spins on her axis, hoping humanity will internalize the lessons this time. Will see, will act, will reprioritize. Will resist the pull to return to the old ways, the easy ways, the devastating ways, when given the green light to pick their lives back up again.

Catherine Lieuwen

swoop.

As they pushed me with rifles toward the TSA line, I fished in my purse for my passport and government papers, which included more personal information than I had ever given anyone.

I had some kind of special passport – something I applied for that let me travel one last time to soon be with – and quite possibly soon dies with – the one I loved.

The passports were given out by a lottery system and my number was recently chosen by the government.

Airport employees were yelling over megaphones. The National Guard was in place inside and outside the building. Police and police dogs were everywhere.

The TSA was stretched to its breaking point like ropes on a breaking bridge over a deadly river.

As I put my bags down on the security belt, I was told to strip down to my bra and underwear. Before I would protest, a security officer gave me a towel and two women in PPE lead me to a decontamination shower where they handed me a white paper gown and told me to take off my bra and underwear.

(This is quite possibly a memory of a real-life trauma I experienced in my college sorority when I was, along with the other new pledges, awoken in the night, led to shower, told to strip, take off all jewelry and nail polish, and given white sheets to cover us until we were taken to an undisclosed location for a clandestine ceremony – about a topic so secret that if we told a soul, our lips would “wither and return to dust.” Perhaps another piece on this true story later.)

In the airport bathroom, I stepped into a narrow, Plexiglas decontamination chamber and held out my arms as a cold, chlorine-smelling mist sprayed over my shivering body.

I put on the paper gown and was then escorted by a woman to more TSA check

On my way to my gate, I was looking around, so horrified and bewildered at what I was seeing that I lost my footing going up the escalator and I tripped. I fell and cut my palm open on one of the metal, jagged stairs. As I struggled to rise at the top of the escalator, a policewoman, a high-ranking male police officer and some kind of high-security airport agent surrounded me and lifted me to my feet.

The gash on my palm was bright red and bleeding. A woman in a hazmat suit took out a scanner that resembles those forehead temperature scanners we've become all too accustomed to lately.

"I don't have a fever!" I said, "They took my temperature when I got here."

"We're not scanning for fever, Ma'am," the high-security police officer said, "We're scanning your blood for bioterrorism."

"What?"

The woman scanned the cut on my palm. As we waited for the results on the scanner, the police officer said, "Ma'am, you understand that if you test positive, you will be 100% guilty of international terrorism."

I started gasping for air. I wasn't sure if it was from the shock of what I had just heard or if I was suddenly experiencing a telltale symptom of the virus. As one of the officers readied his gun and another slapped a handcuff on my wrist, I woke up.

I was in sweats, sitting up and panting.

As is often the case when waking up from a vivid nightmare, I was still groggy and was trying to convince myself that the reality I was now back in did not contain elements of my staggeringly frightening dream. But there were some elements. And I was scared.

I felt my forehead – cool to the touch. I turned on the light, got up, splashed cold water on my face, then found a clean towel instead of the used one in the bathroom. I wiped off my face and the sweat from the dream, washed my face

Rebecca LoBraico

Invisible

“We shouldn’t have any sex until this is over,” my husband, a robust, passionate Italian, declared a month ago, erasing any doubt that the corona virus had

I benefited from this frugality. It meant that I got out of college debt free. After

usually volunteers.

We come together for every meal now, play D&D and board games, solve murder mysteries, toast marshmallows over a camp re in the repit, go on walks and bike rides. We see my husband more because he isn't travelling for work. I notice that my kid who's had panic attacks about homework is sleeping better and smiling more. I turn my weekly produce basket into fancy salads and dinners.

When we're on a walk and I see my neighbor on her porch, I go stand in the street and greet her. She vents about being home with her family, too. It feels magical to just get to share emotions. Our usual smiles at seeing each other feel a step bigger.

When I post a funny social media statement that my washing machine is broken, but it doesn't matter because no-one outside my family knows whether I'm wearing pants and if someone else can recognize that I'm smelly, they're standing too close, ten friends offer to do my laundry for me.

ese are the privileges I'm most thankful for in this moment. In what feels like the end of the world as we know it - we bond together to do our best to make sure everyone feels as close to ne as possible. at seems like the biggest privilege of all.

Michael McQuillan

Empathy Against the Arrogance of Power

The bedroom door shuts me in, not out. Here I'll write for as long as I want on my cellphone. It was hard to compose or revise once the pandemic made family togetherness an all-day affair and limited laptop use to what my wife's job requires. Sharon and I have decades of service in high schools with her social work and my teaching history till June when I retired.

Crafting essays or nursing a manuscript took much of my days from then on. Conversing with Katy, our daughter home from college, and romping outside with our rescue dog brought further pleasure on weekdays until Sharon returned and we "caught up" over a afternoon coffee.

On Wednesdays I helped cook for and serve 300 CHIPS Soup Kitchen guests, earning joyous exhaustion. Attending lectures at St. Joseph's College, the Brooklyn Historical Society and Fraunces Tavern Museum replaced evening lesson planning, and I published a few book reviews. The crisis shattered a fulfilling routine though I'm fortunate as the world walks its life or death line.

Envelope, napkin and legal pad scribbles surround me on the bed's edge. An open window brings enticing fresh air. Seeing friends outside on the sidewalk would inspire but for that I camp out in the living room.

I view brick walls back here but I'm grateful to be alive. Sharon's uncle has died from a previous illness; injuries that a car collision inflicted killed our 89 year old soup kitchen coordinator.

Objects piled beneath the window point out I'm old: high school yearbooks, Katy's framed childhood portrait, the first piece our son Sam published in Penn State's campus newspaper, an autographed picture from George McGovern for serving in his 1980 South Dakota Senate campaign, my hockey scrapbook of ticket stubs, programs and player cards. A lifetime's artifacts lend comfort as I warm up to write.

secret,” my beloved observes.

I bow to her wisdom as the mirror shows snow-colored hair.

Traci Musick

Somewhere in the Gallery of Important ings

It is quite the ordeal.

e neck gaiter, the gloves, the hand sanitizer, and the can of disinfectant. All of these weapons as I head to the battle eld. I am armed and ready.

What will I confront on this mission? Will I come out victor or victim?

It now takes a concerted e ort just to head to the grocery store. Small routines, simple tasks are no longer so simple. All that folks once took for granted is set on a new course in the eyes of a pandemic. Somewhere in the gallery of important things, lessons lie waiting to be learned. To be picked up, examined, and re-con- gured. During the powerful trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic, lives are changing. Time is evolving. We sit indoors through stay-at-home orders. We are lumps of clay waiting to be molded and shaped into what? What new landscape will arise a er the sea surge crashes all around?

is is history in the making.

And I wonder, what emerges from this storm of infectious meditation?

I park at a distance from the grocery store's entrance. Pull on my gloves. Adjust the tube of cloth over my nose and behind my ears. I am wrapped snugly in ways only I think will protect me best in this moment of time. I step forth from the comfort zone of my vehicle and march forward with a rm heart and determined mindset.

With choreographed precision, the store doors open like magic. What am I entering? Could this automatic mouth suck me in and devour me whole? Is this death's portal waiting to su ocate its next victim? Like the fear that rises from gut to throat upon the closing snap of a roller coaster safety bar, I wonder what kind of ride this will be?

In swi motion, I wipe down the handlebar of the shopping cart. Is the virus, this invisible enemy, there—lying in wait? Or does it sit upon the can of corn I grab? What about the bag of chips? Am I shaking hands with this unwelcome

down in agreement. That's new store policy. That's what the sign states hanging at eye level. Here, I pause and consider. It is a symbol of greater meaning. Panic buyers dictate a new course of action. Now I shake my head in exasperation. We all get punished for this hoarding.

But then I think of the four bags of rice setting in my pantry. As I snatch three from the shelf with a soldier's hungry appetite for victory, my eyes dart around to see if I have a clear line out of this aisle. Then, I steer away from Mr. Conversation. I justify my ways because this provision is difficult to come by these days. When I see it, I grab it.

What behaviors get justified in the midst of a pandemic? What should we learn from this experience?

This ride is one we all wish to be over. We are mounting the rising wave. Haven't even hit the pinnacle. And when we do? Then what happens? 1,800 lives yester-

depletes the fuel tank that is filled with love. A resource we are to offer and share to one another.

Didn't we do enough? Are we taking more than giving? Are our supply tanks on empty? These troublesome questions pummel with each breath.

"That will be \$54.37, ma'am," says the lady standing on the other side of the Plexiglass. It's a new protective installation. For her to avoid my breath. And I to avoid hers. We create our barriers—whether real or imagined. We attempt to prevent dis-ease.

As I reach for my debit card, I hesitate. Is this a hand grenade? Do I carry the enemy in my purse? Is a personal detonating mechanism waiting to discharge within my hand's grasp? I whisper another word of thanks for gloved hands as I finish the transaction. This dis-ease makes me question every step.

"Thank ya, hon. Hope you have a nice day," she says as I place the bags into my cart.

"I just want you to know, I really appreciate your work, your service at this difficult time," I reply in a muted voice through my neck gaiter. And I really mean it.

As I roll towards the exit doors, I wonder, how much will this trip truly cost me? What price will I pay?

Somewhere in the gallery of important things, I think we haven't appreciated enough. We haven't lived and loved fully. We haven't noticed the finer details. We have allowed dis-ease to dictate our minds and behaviors. Who's acting responsibly? Who's living recklessly?

These questions continue circling their rounds on this battle field.

Like, what's essential to life? And do we value it? What's a good leader? Is it one that does best for himself? Or one that does what's necessary for others? Somewhere in the swell of this sea, I know we should all be learning about loving the world and all that is in it. We have failed to accomplish this our mission. Our reason for journeying here. And now there is a price to pay.

When I step outdoors, I breathe in the fresh air. I know we are in touch with something that is real. Lessons from the universe urge us to walk away from this storm with a new vision, a new perspective. Some say that "words don't teach;

shower, and then shelter in place. This is quite the ordeal.

And yet, I think...

Dis-ease is a universal immersion.

With our cups steeped into a boundless ocean, will we finally see ourselves as part of it and the infinite sky?

Maybe through this christening, each living soul will be cleansed and refreshed.

For when the sea's swelling swing ceases, might we then see this passage of time's storm like winds move over the water...

Redeeming.

Revitalizing.

Re-lling with humbling hopefulness.

Vicky Oliver

Isolation's Silver Linings

Since Saturday, March 14, 2020, I have been holed up in my apartment, voluntarily self-isolating. My husband has been sequestered in the apartment, as well, but continues to leave each day to go running in Central Park. I think he's being reckless, since without his forays, I am fairly certain we would both survive this

fectant Spray for me, and six rolls of Bounty paper towels for him.

I feel like I have won the lottery.

President Trump compares this pandemic to war, and like a war, there are acute shortages. It took me three weeks to find Purell, which I actually keep under lock and key along with my jewelry and silver. The delivery of Neutrogena soap arrived, but it did not contain the brandy-colored glycerin soap I ordered, but some white hand soaps stamped with the name “Neutrogena,” so who knows? Bounty and other name-brand paper-towels have disappeared from the grocery store aisles in Manhattan, and so my husband ended up ordering six reams of industrial, one-ply paper towels that you might find at La Guardia airport. The paper towels have no perforations, so I just tear them off from the roll.

“You don’t know what you’re ordering,” X says, grimly staring at the paper towels.

There is a third-world feeling to all of this—a pandemic that has spiraled out of control, gray-market products when you can get them at all, and beneath it all a free-floating anxiety and distrust in our government officials. President Trump recently received a 60% approval rating for how he’s handling the crisis, and I tend to agree that he is dealing with it as well as can be expected, but it’s terrifying to me that each governor is empowered to give his own directives. This is a national crisis, folks, not something that can be muddled through, state by state.

The only exercise I have gotten since March 14th is in my arms, which are developing new muscles from the amount of oomph I’ve put into my daily cleaning ritual. On the plus side, there is not a dust mite to be found in the apartment. However, I feel deep guilt, even shame, that I am setting women back many years. For I have never cleaned this hard—cleaned as if my very life depended on it.

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When I was een years old, I was best friends with the daughter of John Lilly,

Since I live and write in two apartments, I receive coronavirus updates from both of them. The apartment where I ordinarily write is in a complex of five buildings. One of them has reported a person who tested positive for covid19. However, eleven of the building's staff have called in sick, which strikes me as a protest or walk-out of some kind. My husband calls it a "sick out," and says some companies are experiencing this, too. The building is hiring others right now to fill in for the eleven on "sick out." This has quashed my desire to go over there until this plague passes. Today, sadly, my other apartment has also reported that one of its residents has tested positive for covid19. *Please, dear God, let the person be on the other elevator bank*, I think. For the first time, my husband agrees to wear plastic gloves when he takes the elevator today. Under his macho exterior, he

during this crisis. During this cruelest month, we could all use a little Christmas.

Because my husband and I don't have kids, nothing has interrupted my sleeping patterns for long, and on an ordinary night, I sleep for nine hours, pretty much straight through. But this panic has disrupted my circadian rhythms, and each night is a little different from the one before. Sometimes I oversleep and wake up at 10 a.m. when I used to get up at 7 a.m. religiously.

Other times, I can't get to sleep at all, and end up staying up quite late to write. To me, this period feels like a mourning, or maybe it feels more like a break-up. When I was single, it used to take me months to get over breaking up with someone, particularly if the guy dumped me first. Each day afterward, I would think about the guy, wondering what I had done wrong of course, but also hoping he would come back. This feels like that. Each day, I am mourning the life that I had—that we New Yorkers all had—with its many freedoms and its fun. And I am hoping it come back. As in the weeks after a break-up, each day is a little easier to tolerate than the day before. I am becoming acclimated to the different spaces in my apartment. And sometimes what gets me through is the same sort of reasoning I used when getting over a break-up: *just take it one day at a time.*

Maybe tonight at 6 p.m. when the French national anthem plays, I will open my window and have my Alexa robot belt out the American national anthem. Or not. Either way, tomorrow will be better. And maybe if I am incredibly lucky, the Q-tips will arrive, too.

Luisa Kay Reyes

e Wisdom of Liliuokalani

When we moved to the small village of Hartville, in Northeast Ohio to live with my grandfather, we were presented with a dilemma. My grandfather had a baby grand piano in his house, so I had access to a piano to practice on. But all of the piano teachers in the area were so lled up with students, that they didn't have room for a single one more. Thankfully, after a while, my grandfather came to the rescue. He was a retired mathematics professor from the University of Akron, but in his retirement years had returned to one of his original life interests and was working as the devoted organist at one of the local Methodist Churches. Consequently, when he asked the elderly Mrs. Schaefer to take me on as a piano student, she readily agreed.

Jennifer Shneiderman

Housekeeping in the Time of COVID-19

My sideburns are white and there is a skunk stripe down the middle of my head.

another shopper headed in my direction, an expressionless Hispanic woman who is staring at the empty, ravaged shelves. She doesn't slow down. She looks like she's in shock. I do a U turn with my cart, the damaged wheel popping with every step. I quickly find couscous and cereal. There are no paper products of any kind. A crowd of shoppers surround an employee in a black uniform. His name tag says his name is Jorge. He is holding up his hands defensively. He doesn't know when the next shipment of toilet paper will arrive. They should check back first thing in the morning.

I find an open checkout stand and nervously pull money out of my purse. I see

Sarah Sorensen

e Happiness Report

March 4, 2020

It is my birthday and I am on my morning commute to work. It's when I see the Trumpeter Swan standing in the center highway lane, disoriented. It is completely at odds with downtown Detroit and cars are slamming the brakes, veering, trying not to destroy it. The swan preens its long wing feathers, at a loss for what is happening. It is hard to tell if something is injured when it still looks so vain. I turned forty today, marveling at my face in the mirror, still fair enough to please me.

At work, no one knows it is my birthday. No one knows about the beautiful,

erine laments that a universe intact, but without Heathcliff is a stranger. However, with Heathcliff, the rest of the universe could cease. She didn't need it. I selected the tattoo several years ago, once I realized what true love felt like. I wanted a permanent mark. Things end because it is right for them to end. I am never sorry that they began.

I am okay. I will hide as long as needed.

[If you know how to sew, we are asking you for masks]

March 23, 2020

I am not "essential." I have been asked to stay home. My home is the place that I have made of it, filled with so many things. I do not want to be "essential," when absent is so much better. Things will be arranged and I will work from home, like the luckiest lucky. I will be spared.

My New Year's resolution was to forgive everyone this year and to not let any the worst of them. I practice breathing deeply to calm

Forgive
is the only thing

ex's dog, swimming. There is my ex standing on the shore.

Somehow I end up lying down in the dirt parking lot, clinging to her desperately. I hold her so tightly that I cannot be sure if she is holding me at all. I look into her left eye and the cornea is peeling away. I rigidly push away from her, feeling the anchor of panic sinking me. I will call an ambulance.

She tells me not to, but I get mad.

“YOU ARE GOING TO THE HOSPITAL.”

She looks at me deeply. She looks at me like she never once did when we were real, together.

“You really do love me,” she says. “I know that now.”

It is the nicest moment that we never really had, even as I am stricken with terror.

I wake knowing that I never want to go back to proving to her that I am not the same person I was when we were together.

I will not fucking die.

[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]

[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]

[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]

[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]

[If we do not think that you can survive, we will not take measures to save you.]

March 31, 2020

An email informs me that two people in my apartment complex have been diagnosed. I scoop the litter box in silence. I walk the dog. I practice breathing. It seems wise to do as many chores now as possible. I do not know what will happen.

Ray Van Horn, Jr.

What Would Stan Lee Say About COVID-19?

The reality is here. No more jokes involving beers you jazz up with lime wedges. No more taking a sneeze or cough for granted, even if that's presented nervous laughter covering an at-large paranoia. It hasn't fully rooted yet, but the seeds of the blame game have been planted. You just know once the deaths slow down, the world re-opens and the aggrieved are allowed to mourn properly, the headlines will shift from a tone of desperation to the promulgation of a scapegoat hunt. The media, then society by attrition, will deign itself as one, unified global tribunal. To think the sickness, dubbed by politicians and their constituency alike as a silent assassin, could germinate into something to possibly further taint who we are as human beings. Evil is already winning big and doing so cloaked, for crying out loud. Where's a cape-wearing superhero with disease-busting extrasensory perception when you need one?

It's a Sunday and I'm reading some old *Black Panther* comics from my collection. Given the governor's orders of essential traveling only in order to help reduce the spread of Coronavirus, I've had time to reorganize, purge, shred and compartmentalize within the confines of my relatively-sequestered life. I'm not here as much as I probably should be, but I'm still more productive at home than I've ever been. It being Palm Sunday where service is being held in the church parking lot from cars with rolled-up windows, I'm grateful for the chance to drop out from *all of it* with King T'Challa for a spell. When he's mashing a villain in the face with a royal-sized Panther foot, I'm actually saying "Right on," under my breath.

I've seen 5K races I was entered into canceled, though I was handed my shirts and swag for non-held events. I call them souvenirs from the Coronacolypse. Holding a shamrock-shaped completion medal--unearned--felt so surreal I jumped on the opportunity a couple weeks ago to trail run seven miles in atonement. That's nearly four miles of extra credit. For the other canceled race, I did a recreation of the proposed course in town with a longtime friend and her running group. Another St. Patty's-themed run we

de antly simulated, then capped with lunch and pints at a local Irish pub called O'Lordan's. We'd started at 10:30 a.m., but it felt more like 3:30 before dawn. If

less enough to book a room there.

We're in broken office sections of a small office that's usually bustling with chatter and laughter by the daily patrols from dozens of realtors and clients. Usually we can't keep people away whenever one of my comrades brings her puppies in. Right now, the constant hum of the copier/printer machine serves as our primary pulse. That, and the omnipresent riot of the metal band, Tool, from the boss' office. There's also the constant *spritz-hiss* of disinfectant spray. We sanitize and wipe down every single room a client comes in and out of. I joke that I've long

much less their production, has ceased for the interim. It's as if the Red Skull and the Joker crossed publishing lines to effectively engineer the mother of all lethal, abiding capers.

COVID-19 has become the ultimate nemesis no superhero could've prevented. The time for heroism comes not in the funny books, but in the hospitals, from first responders, even with the average do-gooder donating food to a needy neighbor. Sorrow prevails right now and we could *use* a butt-kicking display of good triumphing over evil, much less a hearty laugh followed by a long, tight hug you'd never forget. My cousin had to resort to sneaking to the outside window of my aunt's hospital room in order to see her. Her own mother. Those who are losing loved ones to the Coronavirus currently have no benefit of a

Cristina Tomàs White

Parental Estrangement in the Midst of a Pandemic

Being home almost all day, every day forces you to face the pesky truths you would have more easily avoided under normal non-pandemic circumstances.

 e sink is full of dirty dishes? Wash them when you get back from work, if it's

ly eating at me. What if something happened to my father? He lives barely 20 minutes away, but I haven't really spoken to him or seen him in over three years.

cause you've only seen one side to him doesn't mean he doesn't have any others! The kind and considerate and caring person you see now and then is the same broken man who shouts at his wife and children at night! And yes, I have suggested he get help, but I can't force him to do something he doesn't want to do! If only it were that simple.

I remember the summers I'd go back home from university because I had nowhere else to go, and how I'd spend them wishing they'd be over so I could get away from him. There were times when I couldn't avoid him even if I wanted to because he'd come to my room to argue. He'd remember something I'd said days or hours earlier that had bothered him and he'd have to let me know.

I'd often get mad and resentful, but sooner or later guilt would sink in. I was still financially dependent on him and felt like a hypocrite for not being able to shun him completely. He was also family, like everyone always said, so I had to forgive him.

He wasn't constantly mean, though. His drunkenness would ebb and flow like an everchanging tide taking his cruel words and anger with it. Just like Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, my mom would always say, for the longest time clinging onto the hope that his transformations would one day stop.

He actually could be the kindest person in the morning, sometimes even spending hours in the kitchen making you your favorite midday meal, and then pick a fight with you over nothing in the evening. Or he could also be nice for a few days in a row, drinking quietly in front of the television on his own, but then sooner or later he'd find a way of inflicting his pain on others.

The last time I ever saw him I was over at my parent's house - back when my mom still lived there too - because I had been working nearby. I was supposed to meet up with a friend who lived in the area a few hours later and decided to wait at their place until it was time to see her. And things had been relatively good that day with him after all, why not spend a few more hours at my parent's house?

I genuinely can't remember what it was he started saying to me. I answered something back and got up to leave. As I turned back I could see him flipping me off, too drunk to realize he wasn't even doing it discretely.

I started laughing. It was comical, really, the ridiculousness of it. I made the same rude hand gesture back at him, thinking just how childish the situation was: an intoxicated parent, shouting at their child over something insignificant, decides to give them the middle finger, which she then gives back.

He didn't find it funny. He got up and chased me to the other end of the apart-

Pamela Willits

Tolerance in the Time of the Coronavirus

As I finish filling my gas tank, I notice the billboard above the seasonal corner ice cream stand. A photo of a man holding a woman, her head turned sideways is buried in his chest, reveals someone coping with some unseen tragedy. *Begin Your Grief Journey* is written across the top of the billboard and I realize it's a funeral home ad. With the current pandemic, I think of those about to embark on their own personal journeys, unsure if friends and relatives will succumb to the virus.

As I pull out of the gas station, a vehicle with New York plates catches my eye. What's odd isn't the out-of-state plate in mid-winter, but the kayak balanced on its roof. I reach Whole Foods just as President Trump's latest press conference is winding down. Reporters are eager to know why Jeff Bezos has been calling the White House. I imagine Bezos is eager to help in distributing goods. I prefer to think his intentions are more humanitarian than profit driven.

As I cross the parking lot I notice two more cars with kayaks and begin to wonder if Amazon delivers to America's back woods and beaches. I wonder if this is just another modern day scourge set upon humanity – much like the recent bush fires in Australia - or if there is something bigger at play here. Will we begin to see an exodus headed for isolated terrains? Once our focus was on school shootings. Now, despite government warnings not to do so, we are focused on stock piling food, and the most precious commodity of all - toilet paper. Inside Whole Foods, I find aisle after aisle of empty shelves. Peanut butter, canned soup and flour had flown off the shelves during the weekend run on food. Today is Monday, March 16.8 (o)-9 (d)-3 (a)18 (y i)3.1 (s)TJETEMCd2hinexF0 0 12 18 375 (d

worth of items into her pickup truck. Safe inside my car, I turn on the radio. *Another One Bites the Dust*, the 80's song by Queen, blares.

As a writer, many things I hear send me to Google Search – the British rock band's song now being one of them. It turns out that *Another One Bites the Dust* was one of many rock songs that Christian evangelists alleged contained subliminal messages, claiming that when played in reverse the chorus could be heard as "It's fun to smoke marijuana." Reading the lyrics I realize the song wasn't about

FICTION

Abdullah Aljumah

Wet to his Knees

Lovely mellow background music reverberated softly in a lounge situated in the air district of Manama, Bahrain. The lounge guests were conversing behind a swirling, dirty cloud of smoke as the stagnant stench of cigars filled the atmosphere. A sharp smell of strong liquor wafted in the air, like black plumes billowing from the windows of a burning house. A hint of sickness tainted the fragrance of the rather luxurious lounge.

On the far right, near the emergency exit, Sammy sat hunched forward, sipping his favorite whiskey and resting his right hand against the rough paintwork that coated the trim of the bar counter. The door hinges squealed as if they issued a warning but the humming noise and giggle of the lounge patrons silenced their plea. A short, dark-haired woman, in a rather white, formal blouse, and high heels, walked in. A whiff of irresistible perfume caught Sammy's nose as she treaded past him. She sat at the corner table and meticulously placed her black, leather purse in front of her. Her short, black, silky skirt slid from between her knees and her hidden angelic beauty revealed. Sammy's eyes sailed towards her.

were silent sounds echoing in his ears and a dark-colored wound that remained with him forever. Suddenly, his past righteous religiousness came back to him. He envisioned purgatory, an angel with a hot rod waiting for him.

He screamed!

At 12:00 p.m. the phone on the nightstand, beside his bed, started ringing. It was the hotel receptionist, calling to remind him of checkout time. The ringing had interrupted his lewd, wicked dream. He found himself wet to his knees and he jumped out of his bed in shame, feeling guilty for betraying his wife in a wet dream.

He jolted to the bathroom and took a religiously-prescribed, cleansing bath.

the booth behind Peter were filled with people in suits.

We chatted amiably for a few minutes, and then our food came, a pizza slice and a salad for each of us, the latter a mound almost buried in cheese, and our desultory conversation largely ceased as we began to eat.

He past, never far away, returned, for we were also having lunch with ghosts.

Once we left the station in Paris that morning, the train ran smoothly, and I was in danger of taking a nap in spite of my breakfast coffee. I didn't want to; I wanted to look at the French countryside as it sped past. I could, of course, have gone to the dining car for coffee or tea, but I didn't want to have caffeine jitters.

Peter and I were about to spend a week with his mother in Florence, where she had settled with her fourth or fifth husband—Peter believed he might have missed one—and his mother promised that we could come and go as we liked. Peter believed this as she had never cared, apparently, what her three children did.

"That wasn't so bad for my brother and me," he said, folding his paper, "as we soon learned to take care of ourselves as the husbands and lovers came and went. But Michelle—that was no way to treat a daughter. No wonder she has had so many problems."

Peter spoke of his sister as if she were still alive, though I knew her ashes had been surreptitiously and probably illegally scattered in the Cuyahoga National Forest back home. Peter had never accepted her death, and I as his friend saw no reason to press the point.

Another reason we had gone to France was that Peter wanted to get out of town after breaking up with his lover, Zane, who had left him for an older man with a great apartment in Chicago. I had never thought much of the lover, and,

ple screaming as if the world were at an end. e screech of brakes, the screech
of *something*

“Zach wanted to come back,” he said. “The Chicago guy kept biting Zane’s lip when they started to make love and wanted to do other such things. I guess he was a Dean at Purdue and commuted the three hours or so because he didn’t want anyone on campus to know of his preferences.” Peter said all this as if reporting the six o’clock news.

“Did you take Zane in?”

“No. And it was awful. All I could tell him was ‘After what I’ve been through,

restaurant. I wondered if the two men had started a fight—I knew Peter was behind me, so it couldn't have been with him—until I heard Peter say,

“Thank you for all the entertainment you have provided us.”

I assumed he was talking to the two men who must have come up, and I wondered if he were trying to get us both killed with his sarcasm. On the other hand, after the bombing, part of me wanted to do nothing more than fight back.

I turned around to see the comedian Jay Leno standing there, shaking hands as he made his way forward through the crowd.

“Thank you,” I said as he passed, shorter than I had imagined, but he gave me his well-known smile and moved on.

Outside, Peter and I saw him posing with fans while someone took their picture. The day was unseasonably warm, and as we walked to our cars, I couldn't wait to get into mine and turn on the air conditioning, suddenly aware that I was covered in sweat.

Peter held out his hand, I thought to shake mine, and I returned the gesture.

Instead, he kissed it. I sensed rather than saw the other men coming out of the restaurant. I smiled at Peter as he released my hand and straightened up.

“Next time,” he said, “lunch is on me.”

Nazli Karabiyikoglu
e Beaten Beatrice

She does look like her mother. I was leaving the mansion when I heard the people whispering under the staircase. Every piece of clothing I was wearing became heavier by the second. My cape strangled me, I had to gasp for air. Taste and smell of the bed I'd been on for hours lingered with me. My mother wouldn't

said to myself. I grabbed the silver gas lamp. I poked the tortoises, pushed them aside. At the bottom of a mossy log my name was buried. Bam! Kraf! Kpoink! I made sure they all knew my name.

John Mason

e Father and the Son

“Yes, Eloise. Of course,” Father McElhenney said, only half-listening to the doddering old woman who’d been talking at him since evening mass ended, nearly an hour ago. All the more vexing was that he had no idea what he’d just agreed to. He tried to listen, but he just kept drifting in and out.

Mrs. Bowlan, though, didn’t seem to mind his shifting attention, if she even noticed it at all. Her only real intent seemed to be to hear herself speak, and she was nothing if not verbose. And to compound the frustration, there was nothing he could do. She was one of the most senior parishioners of St. Paul’s of the

“It’s just so inappropriate.” Eloise went on, as if the Father hadn’t spoken at all. “Why, when Keri Rooker went to clean the rim of Phil Harrison’s car, you know the one, that fancy little number that looks like a box.”

“I can’t say that I recall it, no.” Father McElhenney was doing his best not shove the nosy woman out and slam the door after her. He could feel the slow throb beginning, right behind his left eye. He’d been getting awful headaches of late. He’d had one so bad a few days back that it woke him in the middle of the night, and he retched all over the bedside table. The acrid smell of vomit still hung in the air of his room, though the mess had been cleaned immediately after.

“Well, at any rate, when she bent over, I swear, you could see right up her—”

“Mrs. Bowlan!” Father McElhenney interrupted, not interested, in any way, in what she could or could not see when Keri Rooker bent over. “You have my word, I will speak with Sister Mary Tildon and make sure the Girls’ Choir is more properly clothed at the next car wash.”

“Thank you, Father. It’s just the decency of the thing,” she spouted as he gently pushed her over the threshold. “Oh, by the way, will you be at the pancake

“Eloise!” Father McElhenney snapped, though he immediately regretted the outburst upon seeing her dejected visage. He leaned through the archway, placing a hand on her shoulder in a consoling fashion. “I promise, I will find you in the morning and we’ll take our meal together. And at the next breakfast social, I will arrange to cook with you. But it’s getting late and I have much to do. So, if you would excuse me.”

“Oh, of course, Father. See you bright and early tomorrow.” Eloise chirped, though her exuberant tone couldn’t conceal her forlorn gait as ambled away down the hall in a wake of disappointment.

“Yes, Eloise. Of course.” Father McElhenney softly called after her, wishing he’d handled their parting with more aplomb. He slumped down in one of the chairs beside the door, exhausted. He wasn’t lying when he said there was a lot of work to do. When he was first informed that he was receiving yet another new assignment, it was also revealed that it would be accompanied by a new title: Senior Chaplain of the Evening Order, which was just an elaborate way of saying he had to straighten up and close down the church every night, except Tuesdays, when one of the Deacons filled in.

He wasn’t averse to the work though; he actually found it somewhat calming. The problem was, at that precise moment, he couldn’t really remember what exactly he was supposed to be doing. There was something, he knew, dangling just outside his mind’s reach, but he couldn’t clasp it.

is wasn’t the first incidence, either. He found, w (r)13 linhcid13 (e)-5 ((a)-5(sn))

Perhaps in time, once he'd settled in thoroughly, he could discreetly visit a local physician, but for the moment he needed to be careful and work through this

the Liturgy of the Eucharist when mass began.

“I’m sorry, my son. The hour is much too late. You’ll have to return at some other time.” Father McElhenney said, his thoughts fixated on a warm drink and the comfy armchair in his bedroom. Perhaps he might take a small repast, as well. It was late and he felt he’d earned a piece of pie.

Or maybe he’d try watching that fish movie again. His nephew on his sisters’ side, Aldus, had sent it to him for his birthday a few weeks back. He’d tried to watch it the very night arrived but found it perplexing. There was a maid who couldn’t talk for some reason, and she had the task of cleaning a fish man’s room. Rather than tidy up, though, the woman kept staring at the fish man and putting her hands on the glass of his tank.

It was infuriating to Father McElhenney. Why was the man a fish? Why couldn’t the woman talk? And why did she keep touching the glass? Didn’t she know she was just making more work for herself? The Father just couldn’t make sense of any of it. He eventually turned it off and tried to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes all he saw were fish and broomsticks leaping upstream together.

“I really need to speak with you.” The man pleaded, forcing his way through. Father McElhenney was ripped from his reverie and knocked off balance as the young man strode past.

“Whatever it is, it will have to wait,” Father McElhenney said sternly, pulling the door wide and extending an arm as an invitation for the man to take his leave. “Father Christiansen will be in at 6 sharp tomorrow morning. He’ll be at the confessional by 7 and would be more than happy to—”

“Don’t you remember me, Father?” The man’s gaunt face twisted, and he looked both furious and, for some reason, afraid.

“I’m sorry, my son, but you must be mistaken.”

“Come on, Father. You know me.”

“I’ve never seen you at any of the services.”

“Think harder.”

“No, I don’t think I’ll go yet,” the man said, crossing his arms. “You are Father McElhenney, yes? Father Killian McElhenney?”

“How do you know that name?” He fell back, using the bench to prop himself up. No one had used his given name since he was a child. He loathed it. When his family had immigrated from Ireland to Boston when he was still an adolescent, he’d started using his middle name, David. It was even what was printed on his driver’s license.

He thought back, tried to remember anyone he might have told. Twenty- ve years and thousands of faces began to swirl around him. It was all a blur: mewling children gave way to petulant adults. Loving couples crumbled and fractured under the weight of innocence and complicity. Everything was tangled. His memories were a swamp and he was sinking.

Confused and unsure, Father McElhenney did the only thing that made sense. He prayed. He recited the Prayer to Saint Christopher, the first he’d learned as a boy growing up in Westport, and the one he always fell back on in time of doubt:

Grant me, O Lord, a steady hand and watchful eye. at no one shall be hurt as I pass by. You gave life, I pray no act of mine may take away or mar that gift of thine...

As he recited the words, he felt the familiar sense of calm begin to grow inside him. Clarity’s grip began to tighten within and just like that it all came rushing back. Father McElhenney recalled the good things first. A boy who liked baseball, and he was good at it. He could hit the ball with an accuracy that far outpaced his peers. When he’d round the bases, golden locks would slip out from his cap, precariously obstructing his vision, but he didn’t care. He took the turns with wild abandon, pumping his little legs harder and faster while the outfield rushed to the fence just to watch the ball sail gallingly out of reach.

The boy held a large wooden mallet that was far too cumbersome and fumbled to swing it down. There was a sound, like a gong, and Father McElhenney saw himself give the boy a purple bear. And then he hugged the boy, gently. They were happy.

But then there was the rest. The boy sat curled in a chair, staring at the ground. His mother was crying. His father was stammering. There were parish officials and they had papers everyone needed to sign. Father McElhenney smiled at the boy and handed him the purple bear again. It bounced off the ground.

“Jimmy.” The Father whispered. He looked around and found that he was now sitting at the end of the first pew, directly in front of the altar.

“I go by James now,” the man said. He was sitting in the opposite row, across the

aisle. Though he was a man, grown, there were traces of the precocious boy he'd once been. A stray strand of blonde hair sticking up where it shouldn't.

"James, yes." Father McElhenney shook his head, trying to banish the memories and regain his wits. He didn't like remembering. "You said you had a confession for me?"

"My wife le . " e words rolled slowly out, each one hitting the ground like a lead weight and reverberating around the cathedral.

“Father?” He felt a tugging at his wrist again and Jimmy dri ed away like early morning mist before the sunrise. Mrs. Bowlan was standing there, on the other side of the archway, looking apprehensively up. “Father, did you hear me? Are you alright? Should I call someone?”

“I’m so sorry, my dear, I was miles away.” Father McElhenney said, feigning jocularity and trying to rid his mind of the demons that infested it. “Did you need something? I really must nish up so I can get some rest.”

“Oh, yes!” Mrs. Bowlan tittered, happy to gloss over any concern she had for Father McElhenney’s well-being. “Do you really think I could get in the kitchens that early?”

“Yes, Eloise. Of course.”

Ryan McDivitt

We Don't Have to Wait for the Next Purple Sky

Pastor Douglas Christy was the only preaching man in Arkansaw. Not to be confused with Arkansas, a state of the deep south, Arkansaw was an unincorporated census-designated place in the eastern portion of the town of Waterville, in Pepin County, an hour and a half drive from Downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. As of the twenty ten census, its population was one hundred seventy seven. The date was January first, not only signifying the birth of a new year in human existence, but marking the death of Angela M. Christy, loving wife of Pastor Douglas and mother to their beautiful daughter, Chrysanthemum. Exactly one year ago, Douglas, in the heat of an argument with his wife, left their quaint West St. Paul residence in his rust outlined white Chevy Colorado to blow off some steam.

When he returned, emergency personnel swarmed his single story two-bedroom ranch. He was told by a blank man in a blank manner that Angela has shot herself point-blank with his favorite double-barreled skeet shooting twenty gauge. No matter how passionately he insisted, the men assured him that it was in his best interest not to see the corpse. In the passing wntg /Sp(t o)12 (f a)um u13 (e

his seat taking another swig from his thermos, eyes focused on the winding country road that stretched before him.

“Kinda, we’re doing fractions right now,” She said, her gaze darted to storm clouds forming on the purple horizon. “Mimi said if you try hard enough, you can shoot a rainbow out of your tummy and make the angry clouds happy again.

That’s what rainbows do, make the mad weather feel better.”

“Who’s Mimi,” Douglas said. He pressed his thumb against the rubber rim of the thermos. The Pastor found it in an abandoned truck deep in the depths of his father’s property. He and his older brothers would roam the woods whenever their Dad was piss drunk and in a foul mood, which was usually his default state. The old man thought time in nature was well spent as it gave the boys some freedom and that men belonged in the wild. The thermos was beat up and didn’t retain heat very well, but the nostalgia made it priceless.

“Mimi is my favorite Youtuber.” She said. “She goes on all sorts of adventures and has a dog named Sir Barksford. He talks funny. She’s friends with all the animals and tries to make everyone smile. It’s all make believe but I really like it.” Her rounded cheeks pressed into the rear passenger window glass; eyes fixed on the fading streaks of purple.

“Well, that sounds positive at least. Where’d you get on Youtube at,” He said, taking another sip from his thermos.

“Chromebook day is Thursday,” she said, “we do online homework and play on cool math games, I gave you a paper about it Daddy,” she said. Chrysanthemum pulled back her head from the window. Her cheeks were red and raw from the cold glass. She rubbed her face in a circular motion. The friction gave way to warmth and comfort.

“Oh, the Chromebooks that’s right,” Douglas said. The Chevy pulled into an M & H gas station and rolled up to the pump, almost overshooting it. A man with

"I'm doing just fine Michael, how are the boys," Douglas said as he shifted upright in his seat.

"They're doin' jus great. Kenneth just got his first squirrel at the property last weekend. He's a real deadeye just like his Daddy," Michael said, shoving the lump of tobacco in the back-right corner of his mouth.

"Isn't he a little young to be shooting don't you think," the Pastor said.

"Well, the earlier you start'em the better." Michael said, "Don't you know that? I keep forgetting you're a city boy. I know you ain't from around here, but I figure it's common sense."

"I grew up shooting at my Dad's farm up in McGrath, you know near the lake," the Pastor said, "I could blow a pumpkin ball through a chipmunk's heart from a quarter mile away at five years old," Michael listened intently as his scowl shifted to disinterest, "I just haven't been much for shootin' recently. I think I've had my day."

"Well, that's a shame." Michael said, "I haven't known a good holy man that don't believe in our God given second amendment. It was lookin' a little dark around your neighborhood a couple days ago and I would hate for anything bad to happen to you or your beautiful little girl." He snorted, air squeezing through his phlegm ridden nostrils.

"That was actually a family friend of ours from St. Paul," the Pastor Said. "She's a real nice lady, a doctor actually, helping me around the house."

"If you say so," Michael said. He took a couple steps closer. Too close for comfort. "Pastor, you been drinking?"

"Absolutely not," the Pastor said, clutching his tarnished thermos, "This is just coffee."

"Maybe an Irish coffee," he said smirking. "Another thing you'll learn real quick around here is the smell of vodka on a man's breath," He took a couple steps back towards the pump. "But we're all sinners in the Kingdom of God aren't we? I'll see ya next Sunday Pastor."

The Colorado pulled into its destination. A small unmarked cemetery near Angela Christy's hometown of Forest Lake. It was unkempt with weeds knee high around the tombstones. Two teenagers with minimum wage salaries were responsible for weed whacking this stretch of Washington county's cemeteries and their respect for the dead was about as abundant as their paychecks. Chrysanthemum was asleep in the back; her eyes had grown heavy and her consciousness faded when the sky's brilliant purples blended back into dreary greys.

"We're here honey, make sure to grab the flowers," the Pastor said. He reached

Brent Taylor

UFOs

1.

Some time before we'd get the call that Ben saw his face in the sky, that he believed that he had a police escort on his way to school, he sat on Leo's mom's roof, improvising quiet solos on the electric guitar. We had to unplug at midnight. Leo's mother was asleep down the hall, so the patch cord lay lifeless just inside. Leo was somewhere in the suburbs, somewhere in America. Leo was the summer after high school, maybe a year before we would visit Ben in Ridgeview.

He was famous then, or soon to be.

And we were all coming along for the ride: Leo playing keys—once he learned them—Lenny on back-up vocals. Ben, of course, a roadie was needed, maybe someone to write lyrics.

Those nights, Ben would be strumming the guitar. Lenny, the only one of us who

had gotten into college, would be there too, usually passed out on the bed: the world's

premiere punk rock valedictorian. And Leo, of course, always at the ham radio, the

one that belonged to his father before his father got some waitress pregnant and disappeared when Leo was in ninth grade. There were some others—like Jared Prince who drank two bottles of cough syrup on his seventeenth birthday and woke up in his parents basement, sleeping in the crib he used as a baby—or Jimmy Island, whose older brother sold weed and Lucy, their parent's house under surveillance by the FBI. Many rotated in and out through various days of the week, various hours of the night, but it was always us, and we were always a little bit lost, a little bit insane—and Ben, always the nucleus.

We honestly thought it was Leo who would start hearing voices —reference his

addiction to conspiracy theories, the Smoking Gun bookmarked at the top of his

favorites—that, even though he wouldn't admit it, he was actually searching for extraterrestrial life on that radio, or—perhaps more astronomical still—for his father. He would sit in his room for hours, turning the knob by degrees, while Ben would feel out a muted radio on the roof just outside.

at summer had something to do with searching, but frequency too—both of which are functions of time. We didn't have jobs, we were out of school, there was never anything to do, yet always this pervasive feeling of waiting. And always, in the distance, the moon an unidentified glowing object—and beneath it, a red light flashing from a cell tower in the distance. We didn't talk about it, but it was sending us a message: something about sleeping through every day.

Something about nights spent dreaming.

2.

We sat on the roof of Leo's mom's house, just outside his bedroom window, passing a joint, the red light on the cell phone tower in the distance, flashing messages.

We ignored it.

There are things you just don't talk about, Leo said, much later—he was referring to Ben—but it holds true for a lot.

Leo had taken a break from the radio to join us on the roof. Lenny was already passed out on the bed inside, snoring. Someone, probably Leo, made a joke about him having been the valedictorian.

Ben was trying to teach Leo to open a zippo and light it in one fluid motion. Practice, Ben told him.

He put the electric guitar—a knock-off Fender Strat—to the side, showed Leo one more time. His face was briefly illuminated, long, handsome, goatee like a smudge of dirt on his chin. Then, it went dark. He handed Leo back the lighter.

Ben taught himself to play with only a book of chords, on an acoustic guitar he found in his parents' attic. A year later, he was writing songs. By next spring, though,

we'd come out on the roof, and he'd only be playing a single note over and over again.

For a long minute in the dark, everything went silent, even Lenny's breathing.

Then, Ben laughed—a sharp, mirthless laugh.

Hah!

What? Leo said, failing at the lighter. What's so funny?

Ben said nothing.

At summer, Ben still knew something we didn't. There's another way to look at it now, the inappropriate laughter, the long silences: signs. Either way, he was tuned

into a frequency we couldn't receive.

I asked what's so fucking funny, Leo said.

He sat straight up.

Ben laughed again.

Leo tossed the lighter at him.

Just because you don't get the joke, Ben said, doesn't mean it's on you.

Man, what the fuck are you talking about?

That's when we heard a loud siren behind us, threading its way in the dark through the hills of white houses, through the safe, American suburbs, locked up tight for the evening. A deafening sound came down around us, closing in: rising, whirring.

An increasing wind. At first, we thought it was terrorists—or the Chinese.

Then, a blinding light shining down from above.

Leo dived through the window. Moments later, he stuck his head out with Lenny, awake now, beside him looking out. Ben just sat there like Buddha, barely looking up, almost like he had been expecting it to happen. And me, I still can't tell you whether it's sadder to have been taken in by the mother-ship or to have been left behind on the ground.

No one quite agrees on what happened that night. Whatever it was, it was not what was reported in the official story. We would go on to college, get decent jobs,

married, mortgages, kids. None of us talk to each other very often anymore. Lenny calls

Leo every year on the day Kurt Cobain died, but we're light years from where we were.

That summer, though, without actually talking about it, we were trying to decide what the worst that could happen was—when something finally happened.

That is, when—and if—we ever discovered life out there.

Kevin Richard White

Stay Until the Movie's Over

Buscemi and Keitel were arguing just as Sam walked in.

"What did I miss?" She said. She took off her coat and put it in the empty seat on the other side of her. Her bag dropped on the ground with a loud smack.

"You've seen this movie before," I said.

She laughed, but I could tell it was forced. It might have been out of awkwardness or sadness; it wasn't because it was funny.

"I was arguing with my roommate," Sam said as she whispered in my ear and rubbed my arm. My heart jumped - her hand felt amazing in the cold theatre.

I didn't need to know the fake reason or the real one. "It's okay. Don't worry about it."

Sam and I had been on and on again for years. It toyed with me; I don't know what it did to her. I've seen her at her most gentle and at her most frenzied. I loved her perpetually wet hair. I loved the tiny clicks of her tongue as she struggled to say words she didn't often use. I'd drive drunk if it meant picking her up from somewhere.

But we hadn't seen each other for a while and it pained me a bit. Life gets in the way and I understand. I just really enjoyed her company. But when I saw *Reservoir Dogs* was playing at the Ballroom, I figured it was a good chance to be around her. It's one of her all time favorites. So I said I was going and it would be awesome if I could see her for a bit. She wouldn't give me a straight answer, but I knew she would come.

“Nothing, Sam. It’s all good.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see she was still gazing at the floor. I heard her take a deep breath, play with her bracelet. It wasn’t good that she was this restless. I could see something building, in both her and me. Another deep breath. Then, she ran a hand through her hair and looked back at the movie, like she had just figured something out. She swallowed hard and tried to smile.

“Are you okay?”

"I just don't want to stay."

"You'll stay. You love this movie."

"Keep it up and you'll see," I said.

It wasn't the same Sam as it was a half hour ago. Her smile was still there, but it was shallow, like she had been sucking on something sour and flavorless. I know this was bothering her and that she thought she was doing the right thing by mentioning it. I had the thought in the back of my mind, I admit, when she wasn't getting back to me for a couple of weeks. But I didn't want to face it. I was afraid of being on the wrong end of it. But now I was.

She put her hand back on my arm and I wanted to shake it off. But I couldn't. It just felt right. Just like a drink in summertime, it brought me back down to a calm state. I looked down at her and saw she was close to begging. I couldn't let it go there.

"Okay, okay, forget it," I whispered. "Just...stay until the movie's over. We can talk then."

A few scenes passed and I looked back over at her. I got a better glimpse of her hair - new cherry red highlights. Maybe it was something she had done for the new boyfriend. I grew angry at the thought.

"When did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Her hair."

"I don't know." She fiddled with it, uncomfortable. "A couple days ago."

"Why?"

"Why, what? It's my goddamn hair."

"He must have not liked the natural color."

"Jesus FUCKING Christ, Garrett, you are a little shit," Sam said. She tried to stay quiet - a mixture of a whisper and a yell - and it definitely caught the attention of some others in the audience. No one said anything, but I felt eyes on us.

"You never let people get to you before."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"I like how you look. It doesn't make sense to do something like that."

"Are you done? Are you going to shut up now?"

I needed to. But everything was swirling. Everything felt upended.

"I just...I had to ask."

"You ask some pretty shitty questions at pretty shitty times. You always did."

"Sam."

"Don't Sam me. You're getting to be pretty annoying."

to stay. It was a good movie.

Out in the lobby, there was nothing there. The popcorn machine chugged along. The squeak of a tile from someone moving out of eyesight. I heard the wind dip and swim down a lonely, dirty street like a whistle that hardly worked. I stepped out onto the sidewalk and put on my gloves. I looked both ways but I didn't see where she went.

POETRY

Chloe Cattaneo

rahma

I want to recycle the minute you opened your mouth.
holding a boiled peach with both hands
the plucked center of pain closed within me.
we tried to make the city tender in each other,
like smoke rising from a house re,
cherry blossoms fat & helpless underwater.
we are swimming in something new and ruinous.
the lights of the kennedy center
waver in the \$4 lemonade heat.

Jason B. Crawford
e Moon

Bryon Dickon

Pomegranates (A Prayer)

I focused on the red arils scattered on the kitchen table, and counted five things that *were red: cranberries, hibiscus flowers, re engines, the oral pattern on my mother's dress, and my least favorite shade of lipstick*. I fold my hands together, a gesture that in my family translates to *I have something to say*, hands that were manicured just that morning. My parents look up from their breakfast of biscuits and honey, and I want to stuff my mouth with lavenders, to color my breath lupine and blue, to stop up the words that want to come out, *that need to come out*.

Say it. Don't say it. Say it again. Things that are blue: *irises, ocean-eyes, the living-room carpet, juniper, the blouse I hide in my closet*. I pray, oh god do I pray, that I can bury their son, plant him in the soil, and they would see that he would flourish. I take three deep breaths: *inhale, exhale*. I plant flowers in my stomach, and they bloom through my esophagus. *One, two, three*. I say it: *I am miscellaneous*. I say it again.

Ryan Eghlimi

Amid Iranian Protests

From a Son:

To this land you enter
as a screw through a cork
Do not let crumble
what you will dance back up
with a great big pop
No, no bits shall fall in wine

Till my last breath
on this glass
li s its dense form
I soak the sun of my father
into blanching skin
and co-exist without touch

Zak Hartzell

Magical

is what i called the drip
of her watercolor clung
to its wooden masonry wet
as she made me
take it
back

not magical not cool

E5Tm[(n)4 (o)11] 12T0 Tc 0 Tw 12 0 0 12 36 416.7961 Tm[(n)4 (o)11]

Daniel Edward Moore

Hardcore Happiness Myths

If only I'd done a better job
dodging those ancient bombs of bliss
that found me thirsting for liquid relief,
a worldly mix of love on the rocks
melting the paint of Jesus's tears
on a steeple inside my chest. If only
I'd known what happens when
the body becomes the spirit's slave
blindfolded & bound in a box of beliefs
where Elvis found his blue suede shoes
& danced like a heathen on the Lake of Fire
before Martin's head hit the balcony rail
& freedom poured from Mulberry Street,
not a wooden cross. If only heaven
had been a body that had nothing to do
with perfection or place, nothing to do
with a spirit healing the weirdest & worst
wounds we bear, like tiny black coins
at the end of our names, to help explain
our addiction to endings, our ignorance
of how suffering works, exhausted
by sucking reality's breath, out of everyone,
always, the same & forever, the gorgeous,
gritty & gone.

henry 7. reneau, jr.

watch what they mouth say, but listen what they hands do

i grew up hearing certain accents
& vocabularies
& speech patterns
that were the aural essence of *Home*
or the audible signal of danger:

a feral howl

of incarceration, or the morgue, that
makes *Home* a muted whisper of fear, or pain
that is slow to change, that is now, & maybe,
then, like a metaphor's promise of
how it ought to be: trying to reach the next world
with a spoon;

(*thrust lever li toss.*)

my life, a soundtrack of false platitudes
attering the air of thorns about my ears,
continually looping a distorted truth,
a disabled symbolism for freedom,
like a gimp
would drag the weight of her body.

the mute icon depressed, a deleted
allotment of common sense:
blind, cripple & crazy as
drowning in silence.

we hear nothing,
but the clean crack of hearts breaking,
& the accepted ruin
of *matters of fact*. Repetition

like a shovel searching out the truth;

(thrust lever li toss.)

a soundtrack now, looping
funeral dirges of national carrion eagles &
securitized oil, the façade of propaganda:
an Oscar worthy suspension of disbelief
patriotic cheering the murder of bin Laden,
that goes viral & seals a book deal,
& movie credits, for Seal Team 6;

(thrust lever li toss.)

/le in the world //

Benjamin Anthony Rhodes

Nutshell

It was a beautiful planet
the last time we came here.
Red grass lying on with the breeze,
invading the air so we had to wear masks
around our mouths. There wasn't any water.

But there were boats – one boat that we saw,
we assume others cut through sunlight too.
Red sunlight that set purple, left behind
a white sky. Stark white that kept us
awake all night. And I haven't slept
since I last saw you.

Kelly Talbot



morial Poetry Prize (2018) and was a recipient of the Zora M. Ledinko Endowed Memorial Scholarship. His pronouns are he/him/his.

Mitzi Dorton worked as a learning specialist for the disabilities center at a community college in the southeast, where she also led a writing lab for dysgraph-

Maria Sing-yi Hwang is a native of Akron, Ohio, and a resident of Boston. She identifies as Taiwanese, and uses pronouns she/her.

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Nazli Karabiyikoglu is a Turkish author, now full-time resident in Georgia, who recently escaped from the political, cultural, and gender oppression in Turkey. She helped create the #MeToo movement within the Turkish publishing industry, from which she was then excommunicated. With an M.A. in Turkish Language and Literature from Bogazici University, Karabiyikoglu has five published books in Turkish and has recently completed translations of two new books for international publication. Having won six literary awards in her country, she has been nominated for Pushcart Prize in 2019.

Ann Kathryn Kelly lives and writes in New Hampshire's Seacoast region. She's a Contributing Editor with *Barren Magazine*, works in the technology sector, and leads writing workshops for a nonprofit that offers therapeutic arts programming to people living with brain injury. Her essays have appeared in *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*,

John Mason has a Master of Arts in Teaching from Lee University and is currently completing a second degree, a Master of Arts in English, at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI). He has taught writing and English at both the secondary and collegiate levels and currently teaches at both UNI and a local community college. He has also worked for the *North American Review* literary magazine, and as a staff writer for the website *We Got This Covered*.

Ryan McDivitt is an Air Force Veteran and soon to be Alumni of the University of Akron.

Michael McQuillan, former U.S. Senate aide and Peace Corps Volunteer, writes for the *History News Network* and *Harlem World Magazine*.

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems have been in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Cream City Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Phoebe*, *Mid- American Review*, *December* and others. His poems are forthcoming in *Weber Review*, *Cultural Weekly*, *Tule Re-*

an inferno of free verse illuminated by his affinity for disobedience, like a discharged bullet that commits a felony every day, a spontaneous combustion that blazes from his heart, phoenix-uxed red & gold, exploding through change is gonna come to implement the re next time. He is the author of the poetry collection, *freedomland blues* (Transcendent Zero Press), and the e-chapbook, *physiography of the ttest* (Kind of a Hurricane Press), now available from their respective publishers. Additionally, he has self-published a chapbook entitled *13hirteen Levels of Resistance*, and his collection, *the Book Of Blue(s) : Tryin' To Make A Dollar Outta' Fi een Cents*, was a finalist for the 2018 Digging Press Chapbook Series. His work has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net.

Luisa Kay Reyes has had pieces featured in *the Raven Chronicles*, *the Windmill*, *the Foliate Oak*, *the Eastern Iowa Review*, and other literary magazines. Her essay, "Thank You," is the winner of the April 2017 memoir contest of *the Dead Mule School Of Southern Literature*, and her Christmas poem was a first place winner in the 16th Annual Stark County District Library Poetry Contest.

Kelly Talbot has edited books and digital content for Wiley, Macmillan, Oxford, Pearson Education, and other major publishers. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies. He divides his time between Indianapolis, Indiana, and Timisoara, Romania.

Brent Taylor lives in Atlanta where he studied fiction at Georgia State University. His work has appeared in *the Alabama Literary Review*, *the Bryant Literary Review*, *the Crab Orchard Review*, *Harpur Palate*, and *Phoebe*.

Emily Uduwana is an emerging poet and author based in Southern California, with literary publications in *Straylight Literary Magazine*, *Specter Magazine*, *Miracle Monocle*, and the

Pamela Willits grew up in Fairview Park, Ohio. While a high school student at FHS, she worked as an editor on the school's annual creative writing magazine entitled *Footprints*. She earned her bachelor's in photography and cinema from the Ohio State University and remained in Columbus, Ohio, for 30+ years, where she worked as a reporter and a magazine writer before entering the nonprofit sector as a grant writer. She also took creative writing courses post-graduate at the Columbus State Community College. In 2011, she returned to the Cleveland area, where she works as a nonprofit consultant and grant writer under the business name, PJ Wordsmith. She returned in part because of her aging parents, who she is now shopping for. In 2019, she became a member of Literary Cleveland.

