Reedy Branch Review

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rbr Pitt Community College

Reedy Branch Review

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Reedy Branch Review

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The Gambler's Daughter *by Anna Howell*

"Amy."
My name isn't Amy.
"Amy."
Alice.
"Amelia"
My name is Alice!

"No need to shout," March said to me as he took a sip from a steaming cup of Earl Grey. It should have blistered his lips, but he acted like he didn't notice the heat. Ms. Mouse buttered a tea biscuit and Hatter was late again. He was always late to my parties.

"But my name is Alice. Why won't they ever use my name?" I gritted my teeth. March sighed and took another dainty sip.

"Don't worry your pretty head over it, dear," Ms. Mouse squeaked while licking crumbs off her paw. She paused mid-lick to stare at me. "You're a lovely girl no matter what name you go by."

Breaking away from her gaze, I studied the lace patterns in the tablecloth instead. It was pretty, but served no other function. I wanted to tell Ms. Mouse that my name was Alice, and it was the only name I would go by. I wanted to throw a fit. I wanted to cry and scream and spill my tea all over the stupid, pretty tablecloth.

"Thank you, Ms. Mouse," I replied, acknowledging her compliment. Madame Thompson said I should always show thanks for a compliment.

March twitched his whiskers and opened his pocket watch with a *click*. "I do not believe that Hatter will show today. Perhaps

it is time for a quick nap." Ms. Mouse brightened. "A nice kip will do us well. Don't you think so, Alice?"

I silently watched the tea swirl in my cup before relenting. "I guess." I heard Ms. Mouse's quiet "Have a lovely sleep, dear," as my eyes fluttered closed.

* * *

I opened my eyes to a plain ceiling splashed in late morning light. I had woken up too early again. There was a tapping in the corridor outside my room. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* It was Madame Thompson, of course. The sound of her expensive shoes was so different from the hushed slide of slippered feet that came from the other girls here.

The tapping stopped outside my door. For a moment I wondered if I could pretend to be asleep, but quickly dismissed the idea. Madame Thompson could always tell when we were really sleeping. A scraping noise came from the lock as the Madame slid in her key and twisted it with a *shnick.* The door eased open, and suddenly the room felt much smaller. Madame's presence could do that. She was a petite woman, but when she stepped into a room the whole place seemed to be drawn to her, leaving very little space for the rest of us.

"Alicia, why are you up so early?" Her full lips formed the gentlest of pouts, immediately broadcasting her displeasure.

"Didn't sleep well," I mumbled, eyeing her through my hair. "And my name is Alice."

"Of course it is, love." She gave me a pitying glance. It was the kind that said she felt bad for my situation, but didn't feel sorry for me. "Look at me. Let me see the pretty blue eyes." I lifted my

head. Smiling, she pushed my hair away from my face and sat on the bed next to me.

"There now. The ladies told me you had a wonderful day, yesterday. Perhaps you'll feel up to seeing more people soon." This meant that I *would* be seeing more people soon, since I couldn't say no.

"Will I be seeing more people today?" I asked. I liked to be prepared, even if the knowing made it worse. Madame looked thoughtful for a moment before replying. "No. I think you're right on track for your visitor quota. Maybe in a few days." She looked out the small window next to my bed. I could tell she was thinking hard about something, but I just followed the sunlight as it wrapped around one copper curl that hadn't made it into her French twist. She turned her head back to me and gave a beautiful smile, like a rose in bloom.

"Have you read any in that book I loaned you?"

"I shrugged. "A little bit. It's a good book."

She seemed to lose some of the heaviness in presence at my answer. "I'm glad you are enjoying it, Alicia." She stood slowly, smoothing her skirts with the movement. "I have to go check on the other ladies now. Try to get some more sleep before evening." That was all she told me before sashaying out of the room. With her gone, I felt like I could breathe again.

"It's Alice."

* * *

"Mary."

Not again.

"Oh, Mary."

My name is ALICE!

"Are you sure?" asked a sly voice. To my left sat Hatter. His burgundy top hat was shabby and threadbare; his coat was in an even worse state. He was tapping his yellowed nails against his porcelain tea cup, while throwing a smirk my way. Hatter always seemed to know something I didn't. It did nothing for my temper.

"Yes. I'm Alice."

"Never mind Hatter, dear. He just likes to rile you up," Ms. Mouse squeaked out, giving Hatter a pointed glare. "Here, have some biscuits. They're very good today. March has outdone himself." The hare puffed up with pride at Ms. Mouse's motherly comments. I took the offered food and set it in front of me.

"Would you like to play a game, Mary?" I whipped my head around to see Hatter shuffling a deck of cards, his cracked lips pulled into a grin that showed off his crooked teeth.

"That's not my name."

Ms. Mouse interjected, "I told you, you're lovely no matter what the name. Really-"

"Yes. Who cares about your name as long as you keep your pretty face?" Hatter interrupted. He stirred his tea lazily. "But my question goes unanswered. Would you like to play a game?"

I was always wary about Hatter. He seemed to do more harm than good in most things. "What kind of game?"

He grinned wider, turning it into something vicious. "A betting game. A simple card game, really. With higher stakes. So, do you fancy yourself a gambler?

I shook my head. "Madame says that gamblers are the worst sort. Besides, I don't have any money to play with.

Hatter's crooked grin never wavered. "Not all debts are paid in money," he leered. I shot to my feet, ready to flee the table.

"That's quite enough, Hatter. You have upset her," March came to my defense. "I think this particular date has reached its end. Alice, it has been lovely to see you. Let us go Hatter." I shut my eyes so Hatter couldn't see how close to tears I was.

* * *

It was noon when I woke up to Madame's tapping heels making their rounds. From the sound of them, I guessed it would be some time before she reached my room. I watched the sunlight edge through the window and waited.

When I was a little girl, father read me stories. Mother wasn't around to do it. She died when I was an infant, and father never liked talking about her. But he would read to me all the stories she left behind. He would read fairytales and fables and myths from the well-worn pages. My favorite was "Alice Through the Looking Glass," because I shared my name with her. I had friends who had read it, too. We would hold tea parties and pretend to be characters from the book. I was always Alice. It suited me best.

Father hadn't read any stories to me in quite a while. In fact, I hadn't seen father in a long time. But Madame took care of me, so it didn't really matter. Father wasn't very good at taking care of daughters anyway, not like Madame was. She always made sure her girls were the best.

Madame finally reached my door. A click of the lock and a swish from the door opening, and there was Madame Thompson, looking displeased. I didn't move. I didn't know if it would upset her.

"Alicia, you fell asleep during your final visit last night." I hadn't noticed, to be honest. She sighed. "This is unacceptable, Alicia. How can I trust you to reach your quota when you are so irresponsible about it?" I remained mute, watching through blonde strands of hair. She had called me Alicia again. I didn't correct her this time. Madame paced for a bit. "Clearly you aren't sleeping at appropriate times. I'm afraid I will have to revoke privileges. We cannot afford for you to slip up again." She marched toward my bed. I flinched as she reached out, but she just brushed the hair out of my eyes and gently grabbed my chin, turning my face towards her.

"You are too valuable. You must learn to adjust like all the other ladies." Madame paused here to look more closely at me. "Such a pretty face. Pity your father gambled like he did." She spat the word "gambled" as if it had done her a personal offense. She would have despised Hatter.

"It doesn't matter now. I know you won't make the same mistakes tonight." Madame grabbed my brush off a nearby table. "Here, let me pin up your hair." She started to brush my hair and twist it into what was probably a work of art. She always did the girls' hair before they were presented. "There now. Time to get ourselves ready for our guests." She walked out of my room, the wine fabric of her skirts hissing behind her.

* * *

When I got to the tea party this time, I collapsed into the nearest chair. Everything ached, and all I wanted was a hot bath. My back and hips hurt most.

"Long night?" I jumped and turned to see Hatter sitting to my left once again. He sat on a bar stool with his legs crossed and appeared to have traded his burgundy hat for an equally shabby blue one.

"Where are March and Ms. Mouse?" I asked.

He smirked at me. "Preoccupied." He popped the "d" in an obnoxious way, like a small child.

"What do you mean?"

"I've decided we should have a heart to heart. The other two get in the way."

I couldn't decide if I should be more worried for my companions or myself. Hatter could be very unpredictable if left unchecked. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

He eyed me thoughtfully before producing a deck of cards from his coat sleeve. "Do you want to play a card game with me?"

"No." I was growing tired of his constant badgering.

"Why not? Your father was very fond of them."

"I don't think it's a good idea to make debts. I have no money."

Hatter smiled coyly, as if he knew a secret and found great joy in keeping it from me. "Not all debts have to be paid in money."

I leapt up and stomped away from the table.

"Where are you going, Alice?"

It was the first time he used my name without me having to correct him. The victory tasted bittersweet.

* * *

I took my place in line with the other girls, hoping that Madame had not noticed my tardiness. The room where we had

assembled was huge and garishly decorated. It was a receiving hall, smelling heavily of perfumes, wine, and sweat. Most of us were dressed in pastel colors, lavenders, powder blues, petal pinks, and mints. I was in blue to "bring out my eyes," as Madame would say.

The other girls gave me side-eye glances while they whispered among themselves. My popularity with our visitors made many of them jealous. They would murmur terrible things about how my father had sold me to Madame, about how I was "touched in the head." I knew it wasn't true, though. My father had brought me to Madame because he didn't know how to look after girls. He had told me so himself. And none of them had met Hatter, or March, or Ms. Mouse.

"Quiet now, ladies." Madame called us to attention. "We are ready to receive our visitors. Please remember that you all have a quota to fill and to make sure they enjoy themselves." With that last reminder, she opened the doors and welcomed in our guests.

Men of every age and lifestyle came through to talk to the girls. Some went off into dark rooms, while others spread out among the loungers and plush wingback chairs.

"And this is Alicia, our most popular lady." Madame presented me to the man at her side. He was clean and well dressed, clearly someone of moderate social stature. He grasped my hand and kissed it. "It is a pleasure to meet an angel of such beauty."

I gave him a small smile. I never knew why Madame introduced me to these men. I would speak with them, offer them refreshment, but I always made my way back to the tea party with March, Hatter, and Ms. Mouse. It seemed pointless to entertain them when they let me leave so willingly.

"I'm sure you will be even more beautiful by the end of the night, Alicia," he whispered in my ear.

"Thank you, sir," I said, accepting the compliment.

I wanted to tell him he was hardly the first to call me lovely. I wanted to tell him that I was more than just a pretty thing, that I had won a battle of wits with Hatter. I wanted to tell him that Madame was lying about my name. I was not Amelia, or Mary, or Alicia.

My name was Alice, and I was late for tea.

What It Means to Serve *by Alyssa Xiong*

I had decided a mere month before I moved to Greenville that I was going to leave. To be sure, the life I had in Charlotte was comfortable, but it had become a bore, and I knew that I had reached a standstill. I was mentally and physically drained.

Let me back up a little. Soon after graduating from high school, I moved out of my parents' house, which meant that I suddenly had a number of bills for which I was now responsible. So, with little work experience and no post-secondary education, I decided that I would try my hand at waitressing, which paid a measly $2.13 per hour (not including tips, of course). I did this for five full years, serving people every day. There were good days and bad days, but it seemed like the bad always outweighed the good. I felt as if I had to kiss patrons' feet but allow them to treat me just about any way they liked. Oftentimes, I would burn hundreds of calories frantically running about the restaurant only to receive a big fat zero as a tip.

Eventually, I had had enough, so I decided to leave behind big-city life and move to a much smaller town near the coast with the intention of finally pursuing a college degree. I promised God and myself that I would never serve people again – at least not in such a demeaning way. It was time to serve myself. I wasn't sure how I would survive financially once I arrived in Greenville, but I was confident that God would always provide (well, that's what I'd always been taught, anyway).

I'll admit that I was uncomfortable being in a new place. For months I searched for a job as a waitress. I submitted a lot of applications, but no one called me back, even though I had five

years of experience in a much larger, faster-paced city. I started to doubt my decision to move.

Four months after arriving in Greenville, and just when I began giving serious consideration as to whether or not it might be best to return to Charlotte, I received a position as a tutor for an afterschool program at a local middle school, which had the added benefit of complementing the degree I eventually hoped to complete in English education. God suddenly gave me the opportunity to be part of something larger! In fact, just after being offered this new position, I heard Him say to me, "You didn't move all the way to Greenville to do what you were doing back in Charlotte."

On my first day of work, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that God had called me, and that these kids needed me. They needed a role model, a tutor, and a friend they could trust.

As I entered the classroom that morning, to my surprise I saw several young faces greet me with a smile. But the desks, I noticed, were haphazardly strewn about, and the whole room smelled of dirty gym socks.

A young man with Cheetos in his hands and orange muck smeared all over his face came up to me almost right away. He asked, "Um, and who are you supposed to be?" Everyone was quiet as they awaited my answer.

"My name is Ms. Alyssa," I replied with a smile.

"Oh," the boy replied. He then simply turned around and walked away, and the rest of the students continued doing whatever they were doing when I first walked in. Some of the excitement with which I had arrived that morning quickly began to dissipate. I became apprehensive, worried that perhaps I had made the wrong decision by accepting this new job.

After snack time, we went outside to play, where students suddenly flooded me with questions.

"Where are you from?" they asked. "Are you Chinese? Do you like Chinese food? So, are we actually going to have fun in this afterschool program? Do we have to do homework? Are you married?" On and on it went. The questions came so quickly that I barely had a chance to answer!

After about ten minutes of relentless interrogation, the kids finally ventured out onto the playground, where they began a game of tag. Most seemed like they were playing simply to take out their aggression on other students they did not like. It suddenly occurred to me that if anything happened to any one of them, *I* would be the one held responsible. So, I got up and began walking in the direction of the grassy area where they were playing.

"Jake, keep your hands off Matthew!" I yelled. No one heard me because of all the screaming. "Do not push each other!" I yelled again. But the kids totally ignored what I said. *Well*, I said to myself, *if one of them gets hurt, at least I can say I tried*.

After recess, we came back in and spent time on homework. About half of the students actually applied themselves, but the other half were still in playground mode: harassing each other, arguing, smart-mouthing, and being obnoxiously loud – all of which distracted those who were trying to make progress.

"Okay guys," I said calmly, "let's stop talking and settle down. Let's get serious now and focus." Slowly but surely, they finally calmed down, but not after some persistence on my part.

Just a few minutes passed when I noticed two kids fussing with each other in the corner of the room.

"Daquan and Jeremy, stop messing with each other," I said firmly.

"I didn't even do anything!" Jeremy shouted. "He started it. He was talking about my momma."

"Well how 'bout both of you guys stop talking, like I asked, and we wouldn't have this problem."

Jeremy was unfazed. "Why are you always trying to come at me? I don't even know you, lady, and you keep calling me out!"

At that moment, I couldn't help but wonder again if in fact I had made the right decision by accepting this position. *Was I in over my head? Could I really handle middle-schoolers?*

"This is the last time I will tell you," I said to both boys. "Go to your seats and pull out your homework *now*."

Jeremy huffed as he stomped back to his seat. He slammed his backpack on the desk and pulled out his homework. I watched, all the while restraining myself from saying what I really wished to say.

"Jeremy, what's wrong?" I asked.

"I hate homework!" he replied, as he crumpled up a piece of paper.

"Why?"

"Because it's pointless, and I don't get it."

"Well it's a good thing I'm here, right? Let me see it."

As I began to walk toward Jeremy, he jumped out of his seat and balled his fists. "No!" he said, gritting his teeth. "I don't like you. I don't like homework. And I don't like this afterschool program. All you guys do is yell at us. I'm never coming back." He stomped out of the classroom, slamming the door behind him.

Naturally, I was frustrated, and I began to ask God why he put me here. At least in Charlotte, I wasn't always dealing with people

who were angry or out of control. Many of these kids disrespected me, and this made my blood boil. I paused to take a deep breath, and as I did, I heard God say, "You said you never wanted to serve people again, but what you don't understand is that one of the most important things in this world is to serve others the way Jesus served others. These kids really need you." For a moment, I tried to envision what life was like for *me* back in middle school. Surely, I was much worse than these kids. I had a poor attitude nearly every day, never did my schoolwork, repeatedly got into fights, and disrespected my elders. I suddenly realized that at one point in my life I was no different at all from these kids!

I walked out into the hall and caught up with Jeremy.

"Hey," I said to him. "I'm sorry that you feel like I am trying to call you out. I'm here so that you can succeed and do well in school, hopefully so you can have the opportunity to go to college one day. If you don't understand part of your homework, that's normal. I can help you. In fact, that's one of the main reasons I'm here. There are other kids that don't understand either. You're not the only one, and it doesn't make you dumb. If you need help, I'm more than happy to help." After my mini pep-talk, he just stood in silence, staring off blankly at the wall behind me.

"Okay," he said quietly. "I'm sorry. I just have a lot of frustration built up inside of me, and I don't know how to deal with it sometimes. My dad died, and my sister is always in and out of jail. And my mom doesn't care about me."

At that moment, my heart broke for this boy.

I then understood why I was there: to serve these kids, to show them love and encouragement, to help them get through the hard times, to be there for them, even when they drive me crazy.

You never know what a student is going through at home, or what challenges they might be facing.

I want to be the person I wish I had had in my life when I was their age. I want to invest in this next generation of children, some of whom are suffering and need a little extra encouragement and guidance. For the first time in my life, I truly desired to be a servant.

I hope the good days will outweigh the bad. But at the moment, I'm just glad that I get to be part of something larger that helps to make peoples' lives a little better.

February 14th *by James Bardon*

Slowly, inch by enormous
inch, the spiders have
become our friends, the leaping

bears have become our
brothers, accepted us as
confidants in this ludicrous

free-for-all for survival.
And we, even when we least
expect it, know of a

trembling deep in the guts
when we're finally here
together, but at last

as always, alone.

Brooklyn *by Alyssa Xiong*

My stiff body stands
in the middle of the mourning and suffering
sidewalk, growing weary from dirty footsteps.
I rest my eyes to know reality.

As the spirit of Jack Daniels wrestles down my throat,
My knees fall weak in the midst of
souls that pass me as loud whispers.
Foreign and hurried murmurs fill the sky.

Rattling movement sweeps past my feet,
with the stench of old cigarettes
rubbing off the bums.

I inhale the distant food trucks,
India, Cuba, and Jamaica
dissolving in the depths of my mouth.

I open my eyes and see
a never ending story of Brooklyn
that lies beneath my feet.

Lullaby *by Kimberly Rivera*

At night I lie awake, constantly thinking
of you. Constantly thinking.
The thoughts sing, and my feet move,
Swaying side to side.
The smooth sheet fabric provides no resistance
to my dancing feet.
My legs are restless with worry.
My swaying feet are all that keep me from jumping
off the ledge to insanity.
A quiet, steady, calming pace,
Slower than the beating of my angry heart
Which would have me committed once again.
But the gentle motion of my feet soothes me,
And I am safe from myself.
This kinetic lullaby sends me to sleep,
Then dawn arrives, and my feet meet the floor.

A Veteran's Choice *by Joe Clark*

I am a veteran, and like other local veterans I go to the Veterans' Center here in Greenville for my healthcare. The medical staff treats me well, and as far as routine examinations go, I have no complaints. However, I have found that venturing beyond a simple examination can result in an odyssey of farcical proportions. At least that has been my recent experience of trying to have a cyst removed.

The cyst at the center of this adventure is just a small bump on my back. Though medically innocuous, it hurts my vanity, especially with beach season just around the corner. It doesn't cause me quite as much anxiety as my thinning hair, but walking around the beach exposing a bump on my back that looks like it could conceal the vestigial eye of my twin that I consumed in utero . . . well, let's just say it causes me some discomfort. Anyway, I had already been told during my last checkup at the Vet Center that removing a cyst was a simple procedure. After all, it was just a cyst, not a malignant, ten-pound tumor or a vestigial eye. I could probably even have it removed in the office with just local anesthesia, or so my P.A. led me to believe. All I had to do was to schedule an appointment.

Hence begins my odyssey. In February I visit the Vet Center here in Greenville to schedule the procedure. The physician's assistant who examines me confirms that it is a cyst, that removing it is fairly simple—but that the "surgery" can't be performed at the Greenville center and that I will have to go to the Durham V.A. Medical Center. I had not really considered having a small cyst removed "surgery," and I am not thrilled about driving to Durham, especially since Greenville has a hospital, a surgical

center, and numerous doctors who could perform the surgery. But I understand that I am dealing with the V.A., and I want the bump gone.

So the next month during my spring break, my wife and I drive the two hours to the Durham V.A. Center, where we wait another hour or so to see another physician's assistant, who also confirms that it is a cyst, that the procedure to remove it is pretty simple—but that said procedure cannot be performed at the Durham hospital either. Now, the Durham V.A. Medical Center is a big, rather impressive complex. I can't imagine why they can't take care of a simple cyst. And if the Durham Medical Center can't handle removing a simple cyst (or vestigial eye), then I wonder just what medical facility and team of surgeons can. To find such medical marvel, the P.A. tells me I need to contact the Veterans' Choice program, which will direct me to a service provider outside the V.A. that will perform the surgery. So my wife and I drive the two hours back to Greenville, my cyst (or whatever) still with me.

It should be pointed out that the Veterans' Choice program was established in 2014 as a result of veterans not being able to get timely treatment at their local V.A. centers. The Choice program is supposed to connect vets to nearby doctors within the V.A. network and allow them to receive healthcare within their community. Thus I chose to use the Veterans' Choice program to find a doctor in or near Greenville that could perform the procedure.

A week or so later I am contacted by someone from the Veterans' Choice program and am scheduled to see a doctor in Belhaven, which is fifty miles away from Greenville, not exactly what I consider nearby. Nor am I aware that Belhaven, regardless

of its location, has a hospital or a surgical center of any sort. However, after being sent from Greenville to Durham and back to Greenville, I am just thankful to have found some doctor who can perform the delicate cystectomy. Indeed, I can't wait to meet this surgical savant and see the state-of-the-art facility that is equipped to handle the excision of cysts.

So on the day of my appointment, my wife takes off from work—again—to ride with me the hour or so to Belhaven. Of course, during our drive through farmlands and hamlets, my wife is questioning why we have to go to Belhaven to see a doctor when we live in Greenville, the medical Mecca of Eastern North Carolina. "At the very least," she asks as we pass through Washington, "why couldn't we have seen a surgeon in Washington? It too has a hospital and is only half the distance." I tell her that Belhaven is probably the home of a top secret V.A. cyst research center. We continue to ponder these questions as we drive the rest of the way through the increasingly rural landscape.

Finally, we arrive at our destination—what appears to be a glorified double wide trailer. Just the façade I expect of a top secret cyst research center. Once inside, I check in with the receptionist, who asks if I am there to see the cardiologist. I tell her that I'm not: I'm there to see another doctor to have a cyst removed. After scanning over the appointment papers I received from Veterans' Choice, she says, "Oh no, it's happened again." As if on cue, the other nurses in the office all give us a silent look of lament, watching as the all-too-familiar scene plays itself out. The receptionist then proceeds to inform me that this office is not a surgical center and that they have never heard of the doctor I'm supposed to see. Plus, according to the paperwork I show her, I am supposed to be there for radiology—not a cyst excision. In fact,

the Belhaven office has no x-ray capabilities. Nor, as I am now realizing, is it a top secret research facility.

My wife, who is not happy, explains that we have just driven an hour from Greenville for this appointment. The receptionist apologetically tells us that I am not the first vet to show up for non-existent services. Indeed, it seems like vets from all over North Carolina (I assume just North Carolina, but maybe nationwide) are directed by the Veterans' Choice program to trek to Belhaven to have the wrong services performed by the wrong doctors. And like those other surprised and frustrated vets, so too my wife and I leave the Belhaven doctor's office—I slightly amused (even a bit relieved that I wouldn't be cut on), and she more than slightly not happy.

As we are driving out of Belhaven, the cell phone rings. It's the receptionist from the doctor's office we just left. She is so appalled by what has happened to us that she has tracked down where my appointment really is supposed to be: back in Washington. After getting the number to the Washington office and thanking the receptionist for her efforts, my wife calls the Washington surgical center and is told that the surgeon is still available, but that we need to be there in 20 minutes. So we frantically drive back to Washington. At this point, I'm expecting the "surgical center" to be a van parked in an alley and my "surgeon" to be some guy wearing a leather apron and wielding a bloody box cutter.

Approximately 20 minutes later, we arrive at the Washington surgical center, which I'm relieved to see is not a van in an alley, and we are ushered into an office where a lady—a veterans' representative—is blessing out some Veterans' Choice administrator over the phone for sending me to Belhaven. After she puts the Choice administrator on hold, she apologizes

profusely to me and tells me that I'm not the only vet to be given the runaround. She then gets back on the phone and continues to chastise the Choice administrator for its shoddy service to vets. Now during all of this, I'm beginning to doubt that my cyst will be removed today and, frankly, beginning to hope that it won't because it's close to lunch and I'm getting hungry. So I tell the representative, who is still in the midst of a heated telephone conversation, that if we have to reschedule that we will just reschedule. At the mention of "reschedule," my wife glares at me. She is not inclined to make a return trip. When the lady finally gets off the phone and finishes railing against the V.A. bureaucracy and apologizing again, she sends me to an examination room where I finally see the doctor, the correct doctor. And, I am glad to see, he is not wearing a leather apron or wielding a bloody box cutter.

After examining me, the doctor confirms the obvious: it is a cyst and removing it is simple. However, he doubts that he can do it today because my Veterans' Choice authorization is just for an office visit, not a surgical visit. Additional authorization will be needed. My wife adamantly assures him that the veterans' representative, who is still on the phone with some administrator from Veterans' Choice, will get such authorization and that we are ready to have the surgery *today*. He smiles patronizingly, says he hopes so, and leaves. Once again, I tell my wife that I'm good with rescheduling the operation. She warns me not to say the "r" word again.

A few minutes later, the doctor returns and gives us the bad, but oh-so-predictable news: I'll have to come back to reschedule the surgery. He does, however, facetiously add that he can perform the surgery today in the office—*if* I will consent to having

it done *without* anesthesia of any sort, which he does not recommend. My wife, not to be so easily dissuaded, assures him that I'm tough. He says, "I doubt he is that tough." "Seriously," she replies, "don't you have a pain stick or something that he can bite on?" Once again, the doctor gives her that patronizing smile and says, "They don't make pain sticks that big." Before my wife can browbeat the doctor into performing the surgery on me—*sans* anesthesia or pain stick—I thank him for his time and hurry my wife back to see the veterans' representative in the front office.

The veterans' representative, who is clearly frustrated, tells me that nothing can be done for me today, that I will have to go back home and wait to be contacted to schedule an appointment to come back to the Washington surgical center—not to have the surgery, but to complete some more paperwork and schedule the surgery. Then I will have to make a third trip to Washington to have the surgery. Just to illustrate further the utter absurdity of the Choice program's bureaucracy, the lady tells us that after she faxes the authorization form to the Veterans' Choice office, that she is required to wait 30 minutes before she can fax the attending doctor's notes. Although it would seem to make more sense and be more efficient to fax the form and notes together, Veterans' Choice requires that they be faxed separately—at least 30 minutes apart. I'm not surprised. If anything, I'm surprised the wait is only 30 minutes.

Thus we leave Washington—my wife, my cyst, and I. Driving home, I think how ironic the name Veterans' Choice is for this program. The name suggests that the program expands veterans' options for receiving quality, timely medical treatment and that veterans actually have real choices for their healthcare. The reality, though, is that veterans have few choices for getting medical

treatment through the Choice program and the V.A. in general. For by choosing this poorly designed and implemented program, veterans choose to travel to remote corners of the state, futilely searching for medical treatment and finding only that they have wasted a lot of time. At least that is what I have found after traveling the four hours to and from Durham, the two hours to and from Belhaven, not to mention the two days my wife took off from work and the expense of driving 320 miles to have nothing done. I cannot imagine what I would have to go through if I actually had something serious, say something *Brian's Song-y* tragic like . . . leukocytosis? I hate to think how far I would have to travel, how many wrong places I would have to go, how many appointments to make appointments I would have before I would get the help I needed. Not to mention the hours spent separately faxing authorization forms and doctor's notes.

Thankfully, I don't have a serious affliction, and hopefully, I'll have this cyst removed before our next beach trip. In the meantime, I cannot help but feel sorry for some vet from Farmville who, even as I write this, is on a ferry to Ocracoke for an ingrown toenail.

A Wife Foresees Her Husband's Death *by Tabitha Miller*

after William Butler Yeats

Many nights he has met his fate
Far away on the desert sands;
Fighting strangers he does not hate,
For a purpose few understand;
He chose to return despite pleas,
To take the place of a father;
Devildog, friend, US Marine,
An unknown face, yet still a brother.
Though law and duty bade him fight,
And public men and jeering crowds,
A hero's impulse of delight
Causes his death beneath the clouds;
His childish whims, his manly woes,
At that he was and dreamt to be,
Forever lost in Heaven's glow
As he stands post and waits for me.

Wiggle Room *by Joy E. Moses-Hall*

Sometimes the way to come out is to wiggle a way in.

Elizabeth and Joanne were a way in. Or maybe a way out.

Elizabeth and Joanne were our alternate egos. They were our Cinderellas, our inner mice masquerading as mustangs.

In the social confusion that comes of ordinary lives dipped liked wicks into the beeswax of military society at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, Elizabeth and Joanne burned themselves into our psyches. They were our civilian flames.

My best friend, Patty, and I were female cadets at the Academy in 1978, just two years after women were first admitted to the U.S. service academies, and the male cadets at the Academy hadn't quite gotten used to the idea. The senior class was proudly devoid of females. The junior class women, the fearless first females, on the other hand, came at us like friendly fire, determined that we not besmirch their blazing trail.

In an arc of progress traced directly from Susan B. Anthony to 1976, the thirty or so women of the junior class were the first women to ever attend the Coast Guard Academy. Hard-boiled in the vinegar of hostility, tried by the fire and flint of physical threat, only the hardest, most willful stuck it out for four years of college and Coastie. These were the women who rewrote the rules of the military lifestyle, who raised barracks civilization to a higher plane and then covered it with bathrobes, who rephrased the androphilic words of the alma mater, and who populated every women's sports team to fill out the skimpy rosters. Winnowed to only a dozen by graduation, they were not a timid bunch; even the most squeaky-voiced possessed a determined spirit and a cold stare.

But we were about to sully their noble history with silly princess fantasies.

Patty and I brought to the Academy limited female experience. Neither of us wore nail polish or ear jewelry, or bothered to feather our brows. For most of my life I'd had the boyish, easy-comb hair of a soldier. My hair, left to its own intentions, favored the electric look of an Albert Einstein, but three inches beneath it I dreamed of smooth, raven-black silks cascading like a waterfall over my ears and down my back.

My mother dammed it with a flattop when I was ten. I looked like my brother's twin. Strangers greeted us with, "Hi, boys." I was mortified. Now, I was at the Academy, domicile of the shorn, and strangers still viewed me as manly.

But Patty had been born blonde and bombshell and never strayed, no matter how short her hair.

Neither of us thought tiny hair should be the only option.

So, after a frigid February Friday fluffy with flurries, we boarded a train for New Haven, Connecticut, close to the Academy, but not close enough to run into other cadets. This was a secret mission. Already I pictured my Elizabeth as a cloaked heroine, glamorous and shimmering and abundant-haired, flaunting a British accent. We were just one wig-shop away from sporting the ultimate in counter-military princess hair.

Until now, the only time I had ever been abundant-haired in the barracks was the night of the dress rehearsal for the cadet musical, *South Pacific*. In the chorus, I played dual roles: anonymous Navy nurse and unnamed Polynesian damsel. For the first, I looked the part, but the other required an extensive disguise, beginning with something long, dark, and parted in the middle.

The wig made an effective hat, and in the Connecticut winter wind it cascaded over my ears.

I made my way down the corridor, tossing those raven-ous locks.

"She's heading for the girls' room."

"Stop her, she's unauthorized!"

If they'd had weapons, they'd have drawn. But they were armed only with stiff creases and glossy shoes.

Enemy stares ogled the long, remarkable tresses of hair. I turned around and grinned.

"Excuse me, Miss . . . hey, you're . . . where'd you get the hair?" My startled classmates looked at me in a whole new light.

"Are you in a play, or were your ears cold?" These guys knew a lot about cold ears. We had been issued aviator winter caps and today's orders were for ear flaps down.

In the wig shop, trying on the hair of a hula dancer, I could look very different from myself. I would be my own fantasy twin, my own mirror image. Elizabeth looked like everything that I was not: a glam girl, a show-stopper, a long, sweeping brunette as close to floor length as I could afford. I was looking for quantity, not quality. I practiced flinging my new locks over my shoulder, tossing and twirling strands across my face, cocking my head to one side to see the new charms flowing down my back. Imagine Rapunzel. Imagine Miss Piggy. I was a Breck girl. I was Elizabeth.

She would also be everything that I was not: she walked tall and bold, confident of her hair, adoring every breeze, unlike the real me shuffling along invisibly. Elizabeth had daring adventures—winking at men, flirting with strangers, singing

loudly in church. She did things I wanted to do, meant to do, but never seemed to accomplish as me.

I took Elizabeth shopping around town on Saturdays, and bicycle riding, and to Disney World for spring break. I tried jogging with her off base. We were not permitted off campus except on Saturdays, but we could jog anytime, anywhere we wanted, as long as we didn't stop running and wore the proper gym uniform. But I didn't want her to get sweaty.

She never had quite the courage to show up on the public grounds of the Academy. I thought of inviting her to one of the civilian-guest dances. It would be delicious to be welcomed as a girl, to be charmed and courted instead of looked beyond and endured. Oh, to dance in glass slippers! But the first females, the warrior women, would have seen through the wig like stepsisters through cinder dust. And even Elizabeth was just a wee bit wiggly.

She and Joanne might have been friends if Patty hadn't been so leery of Joanne's designs.

Patty's Joanne was a redhead. Where Elizabeth made me a new woman, Joanne was just a caged hairdo. Elizabeth thrived. Joanne mostly pouted in her wig bag. Patty's secret identity, it turned out, was to remain a secret.

One lonely Saturday afternoon thirty years before the selfie was invented, I put Elizabeth through a photo session. I posed my camera on a bureau and took potshots in front of it, hoping for at least a glimpse of Elizabeth. But, as a phantom wisping past a mirror leaves no remembrance, her image never appeared, although I did get some solid pictures of the bedpost.

Elizabeth's last public appearance was at a costume party after I became a civilian. She was the beard on a musk ox. Her glory days were over.

For Patty and me, the hour is past midnight, and we have been turned back into field mousies.

Vertigo *by C. G. Thompson*

He tried to decide, from his vantage point thirteen stories below, what kind of faces they had. They were gargoyles certainly. He'd read that they worked as waterspouts, keeping rain from eroding the building's façade. If they weren't working, if they were purely ornamental, they would be chimeras or grotesques. This group, however, had a job. Each leapt into a frozen position, hanging in midair, on guard at the base of the bell tower that crowned the building.

He could see three, but knew there was a fourth. Their bodies looked vaguely reptilian, thin and scaled, and their pointed ears were bat-like. Behind them the sky was washed with winter haze, throwing their open mouths into relief. Perhaps they had the faces of wolves or lions or jackals. In any case, they were thirsty animals, waiting for a cleansing rain.

Their open mouths also had a second, and perhaps more important function – repelling evil. Protecting a building and its valuables from invisible enemies was a duty their gargoyle ancestors had been entrusted with for centuries. He wondered how their success in that realm could be evaluated, or even believed. Maybe the sheer fact that the building was standing was evidence. It was the first skyscraper in the area and had survived the Great Depression as well as the untamed civic purging of the 1950s and 1960s. If they hadn't done their job, the neo-Gothic structure probably would be a parking lot, a rectangle of uninspiring asphalt, striving for nothing and getting it.

From his spot of relative safety, he remembered the photo of Margaret Bourke-White perched on a stainless-steel eagle gargoyle on the Chrysler Building. She was on her knees, calmly

peering through her Graflex, sixty-one stories above New York City. She loved heights, something he couldn't imagine. Just thinking of the photo made him dizzy. At that elevation, winds would have been strong enough to pull in grains of wheat from the fields of the Midwest, or, since it was the midpoint of the Dust Bowl years, perhaps a storm of sand. It would have been easy for her to lose her footing. Had the gargoyle protected her?

His neck was sore from looking up, and he dropped his head to his chin. He wondered if gargoyles got tired of looking down. It was a whimsical thought, a thought that would have irritated his parents when he was a teenager, and now would irritate his wife. So many ideas he kept to himself. Whimsy was supposed to be reserved for children, or pulled from a long dormant part of the mind when dealing with them. But how did that work? How did you access it if you never used it?

Sometimes Natalie claimed he was too immature to have children, that their ten-year-old daughter acted older than he did. He, on the other hand, worried that his wife never let Emily use her imagination. When he'd bought Emily a dragon plush toy for her second Christmas, Natalie protested that dragons were mythical, that playing with them was like playing with air. No matter that he brought up *Beowulf*, explained that great literature could be spun from that air. Symbols and legends still resonated in the modern world, he maintained.

He glanced up again, let his mind drift into the past, saw post-World War I crowds coming to watch as, floor by floor, the structure before him bootstrapped toward the sky. There would have been housewives escaping claustrophobic kitchens, schoolchildren taking a detour home, veterans seeking work and hoping to find it in the completed building. He could almost hear

the words and sounds that buzzed among them when the gargoyles began to materialize. Perhaps the quirky waterspouts seemed like creatures from a nightmare. Would anyone know they were meant to keep nightmares away?

If he voiced these questions to Natalie, she'd be impatient. She lived in the here and now, dealt with what was before her. The past didn't interest her.

He'd wanted to show his daughter the gargoyles, but Natalie insisted on taking her shopping. Not to the nearby pre-Depression arcade with gryphons at one entrance, where she might be able to put her imagination to use, but to a suburban mall, where the flavor of the city was too diluted to be discernible.

A building is a building is a building, his wife might say.

He coughed, awaking a dull pain in his chest. His eyes watered, and he cleared his throat, pictured Emily on the sidewalk beside him, brushing the toe of her sneaker against a dark spot of old chewing gum. She'd be bored at first, but he'd talk to her about the history of skyscrapers, how they couldn't exist without a confluence of events – the inventions of elevators, mass-produced steel, central heating. In a skyscraper, the outside walls didn't bear the building's weight, he'd tell her. A collection of people had dreamed those innovations. He'd reel off some of the names – Otis, Bessemer, Fuller. They would have been surrounded by skeptics, he'd add, those who would have claimed the ideas would never achieve fruition.

She'd probably think he was joking when he told her that steel began as pig iron. Maybe she'd laugh dismissively at the thought of metal pigs rolling in the mud. But he'd mention air again, describe how it was used to eject carbon from the iron. "So many invisible things have an effect in the world," he'd tell her.

He wanted her to know about metaphor, icons, art. Maybe he'd bring up practical matters first, then work his way toward the gargoyles. She'd be interested to learn how the bell tower once combated pollution, how each morning an inspector had stood at its three-light windows, training binoculars across the city to see which coal-burning furnaces emitted too much smoke.

Then he'd gesture toward the magical figures 124 feet up, ask her to guess why they were there. He'd hold his breath with longing.

At that point his cell phone would ring, Natalie calling. "What are you doing?" she'd ask. He'd be at a loss for words. So often he had no words when his wife asked what was on his mind.

"Looking at a building."

"It's 12:30. You should be eating. Find that place we passed last night, the one on the corner. Don't let Emily have anything with cheese. We ate too much pizza last night. Never mind. Put Emily on."

Emily would take the phone and retreat, lean against the brick face of a building as she talked. Girl talk, whisper talk. She'd giggle and bubble in a way she didn't with him.

When she finished, he'd try to draw her attention back to the gargoyles. He debated whether she'd glance skyward again or tap her watch with a fingernail, the way her mother did.

"Maybe they're holding the building up," he'd suggest. "Maybe it would fall down without them."

Would she laugh, or roll her eyes?

Perhaps he'd tell her that the telephone that was so much a part of her life was important to the advent of skyscrapers. It wouldn't be difficult to make a connection between phone, building, gargoyles. He wanted Emily, if not Natalie, to

understand that the utilitarian and the fanciful could work together.

He returned to the present and concentrated on what was in front of him, something his wife accused him of never doing. Beside the building, orange-and-white barricades blocked one lane of a side street, and a tall fence covered with green tarps shielded a construction site. He wasn't sure what was being torn down or repaired, but he heard the sound of a bulldozer. Two of the gargoyles had a bird's-eye view. He tried to guess how many structures they'd seen come and go.

The pain in his chest moved upward. There was only so long he should stand outside. He remembered the camera around his neck and raised it to focus its lens. He'd had the camera since he was a teen, still liked its look and feel, sturdy workmanship, the way its metal body responded to outside temperatures by absorbing warmth or cold. He wished he still had his telephoto lens, but that had been lost during a trip out West. With it, he would have been able to see more of the detail in the gargoyles. As it was, their exact nature would remain a mystery.

He saw the same three gargoyles through the viewfinder, knowing that from any vantage point on the ground, he'd never see more. He took it on faith that there was a fourth, hiding from sight like the dark side of the moon. From where he stood, one was almost head-on and would be nearly invisible in the photograph, blending into the side of the building. The other two appeared to be at different heights, an optical illusion.

He set shutter speed and aperture, opening up a few stops. If he went strictly by the meter, the building's details would fall into shadow against the bleached winter sky. He hoped the end result would be documentary but also atmospheric. He recalled Bourke-

White's iconic photo of the spire of the Chrysler Building, how her cross-lighting gave it depth and character, how the moody sky accented its mysterious, pyramid-like windows.

He was shooting in color, so he'd have less emotional range than she did, but he pressed the shutter release anyway, hoping the gargoyles wouldn't mind. It was another thought that would have made Natalie shake her head. Yet the gargoyles seemed so alive, so full of will and opinion.

He wouldn't be able to get the entire building in the photos, but the top few floors, offset by the gargoyles, were what mattered. Imagination would take care of the lower floors. He took verticals to emphasize the rising lines of the building, then rotated the camera ninety degrees and framed several horizontals. How many people had done the same thing? Did they draw inspiration from the figures, as he did? He hoped he could find a way to explain to Emily, at least, that on this particular day, the gargoyles eclipsed the sky, spoke to him

Across the street he heard the bulldozer grazing the ground and visualized the scaffolding that would come next. His phone rang, for real this time. He slipped it from his jacket pocket.

"What are you doing?" Natalie asked.

"Taking photographs."

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

"You need to eat. Get something to eat, then come pick us up – forty-five minutes, maybe?"

"Sure," he agreed, not really hearing. He sensed the climate-controlled air she was breathing, the featureless roof over her head.

"OK, then. Love you."

"Love you, too."

He returned his attention to the gargoyles, not wanting to leave. Although the building seemed deserted, he'd read that it housed a bank and a few small shops. He thought of the bank with its vault and safe-deposit boxes, the money and valuables there. He wondered if the gargoyles would extend their protection to him if he went inside.

He studied the glass doors of the entrance but remained where he was. A benign presence pulsed from the building, from the gargoyles' gazes crisscrossing its perimeter, but he decided it was a powerless one. He'd heard a tale, perhaps apocryphal, of a businessman who'd leapt from an upper window during the Depression. Only two of the gargoyles would have been able to see. He pictured them watching in horror, unable to intervene as the man climbed onto the ledge, gained his balance, plummeted into the void.

The winter sky remained glazed, and rain began to fall. He stepped beneath the overhang of the building behind him and zipped up his jacket. If the rain picked up, became a downpour, the gargoyles would be busy – diverting, redirecting, drinking their fill.

He continued to gaze upward, despite the soreness in his neck, his back. Did gargoyles ever get vertigo? He himself had it now. The sky swirled, and the sidewalk spun. He was in a literal and emotional freefall. He'd kept it to himself as long as he could, had masked his cough as a lingering cold. Now there would have to be a biopsy. Dark spots had shown up on the X-rays, "highly suspicious," the doctor had said. It made no sense, unless his short time as a smoker in college had come back to haunt him. The connection seemed impossible.

The wind picked up, and he imagined heading into it, losing ground. He rummaged through his mind, seeking refuge. He understood that for him, refuge meant the past, even if it was a past he'd never experienced. Another photo came to mind, this time Bourke-White's image of the Fort Peck Dam in Montana. The dam was under construction, and two men stood at the base of its spillway, almost invisible in the shadows of its soaring gate piers. Conventional wisdom saw the photograph as an indictment of a looming, threatening technology, but he wondered if the men had viewed the towering structure as benevolent, life-giving, the source of a much-needed paycheck in the dark days of 1936. So much was in the eye of the beholder.

There was another photograph, too, workers assembling the dam's diversion tunnels. A pedestrian task perhaps, but the photo coaxed a fanciful and unexpected beauty from the utilitarian. Expertly framed, the row of tunnels defied perception, looked like a surrealistic painting, gave the illusion of a winsome, clear-eyed face balancing between a tilting horizon and a wedge of sky.

His dizziness passed, and the sidewalk came back into focus. He glanced upward and studied the gargoyles. He wondered if he could do as they did, cleanse himself, rise above what was happening in his life.

He pushed away from the wall, stepped into the rain. The parking garage was four blocks away. He'd tried to park on a lower level but had ended up on the top deck. By the time he climbed the concrete stairs, he'd be wheezing. At least there was a consoling view that awaited him, a distant mountain range painted in clouds and mist.

He stopped at a busy crosswalk and watched rain dot his pants and shoes. Perhaps it was a purifying rain. He'd forgotten to

eat, but he would arrive at the mall early, grab a sub at the food court, listen while Natalie and Emily talked about what they'd bought. Then, he promised himself, when they returned home after Thanksgiving, when he had prints of his photos to steady his thoughts, he'd work up courage to speak. He'd point to the gargoyles, tell of their origins in the ancient world, explain how they were dreamed into existence to scare away monsters.

Maybe Emily would believe him. Maybe he'd find a way to believe it himself.

Still Movement *by Sabrina Westerman*

Above, the sea
gull waits perched
between the air
currents. Hovering
in decisions, hesitating,
calculating, measuring, it
weighs the options
for lunch. A suitably sized
Hickory Shad would serve
nicely, but none volunteer
themselves. Smaller fish
glide by, but we are stuck
with the decision, settle
for less, or fly on.

My Father, My House *by Liza Wieland*

As I clean out my house, recently unwilling host to Hurricane Irene, I can't stop thinking about my father, who died nine months ago. I miss him more every day, instead of less, and the ravaged house feels like something more profound than an echo or a reminder; it's as if my father is here, mirrored in the walls, as if he *is* the house. I keep wondering about that. How is a house like a man?

I associate my father with four houses, in Houston and Pittsburgh, then two in Atlanta. He's near these houses but not quite in them, because to me, house means inside, and inside was my mother's domain. Dad was outside, away on business or playing golf. He loved to travel, and he loved the long view of a fairway. If he was inside, he was asleep, stretched out on the couch, a golf match whispering on TV, or more recently, dozing in his chair, a prayer book open in his lap. His eyes were blue-gray, not windows into his soul, more like a view outside into the world, skyward, or over an expense of cloud-shadowed water.

He thought my husband and I were crazy to buy this house, on the Neuse River near Oriental, NC, far from our jobs in California, and he thought I'd gone completely out of my mind when I quit my job to live there full-time. He and my mother visited us, and I think he came to understand its appeal, the ever-changing river, the expansive southeast view into the Pamlico Sound. He grieved with us after Hurricane Isabel flooded the house in 2003. He worried that we would let the house go and move back to Fresno, where my husband's family live. He liked having me 500 miles away, rather than 3000, though he still cried at the end of every visit. He was a man who cried, at the ends of

sentimental movies, during patriotic events, in the face of other people's tears.

Last December, he lost his left foot to diabetic gangrene and died twelve days later of kidney failure, in hospice. He had been on dialysis for nearly a year, four times a day, at home. But he hated being cooped up, house-bound, so he taught himself to use a more complicated dialysis machine that ran at night. He slept well, he said, soundly. In the morning, he was up early and out of the house, to daily Mass, to the grocery store for my mother, to meet former golfing buddies for lunch.

After the amputation, Dad was ready to get out of bed, get moving, get fitted for a prosthesis, start physical therapy. But his recovery was complicated and slowed by the dialysis, blood pressure issues, pain, his own impatience. He wanted to go home, but he knew the house would be a problem with its steep staircase and no way to set up a bedroom on the ground floor. On Christmas Eve, he contracted an infection, and was moved into intensive care. Pain management became increasingly difficult. He had bedsores, he couldn't swallow, he coughed up all the medication. I think something became clear to him there, in the intensive care unit on Christmas Day, snow falling on Atlanta, the place he'd moved from Chicago to escape just this kind of weather. I think he realized he could never escape. I think he saw a future of being stuck inside a house, on a couch, in a chair.

The day after Christmas, I was alone with him in the late afternoon, and he said, "You have to let me go." He was frightened, though, worried about his failings. He said he had not been a good father to me, but I told him he was wrong, that I was a writer because of him. I reminded him that when I was eleven, he'd understood something elemental and promised he'd buy me

any book I ever wanted. And he did. Later, he took a serious interest in my career. I gave him the galleys of my first novel, and he decided to edit, marking out all uses of a certain f-word, substituting *really* and *bad man*. Still, he would always ask, eagerly, hopefully, about whatever I was working on, "Am I in the book? Who am I in the book?"

I reminded him of all this, but it was small comfort. "I hope I make purgatory," he said. A nurse came into the room and heard him. "Don't talk like that," she said. "You're going to be walking around in no time." When she was gone, he said it again, "You have to let me go." And I said, "I know."

The next morning, he spoke to his doctor, who then told me he was going to take Dad off dialysis and write an order to admit him to hospice. The doctor said to me, quite sternly, "He's in his right mind. This is what he wants to do." The hospice counselor appeared a few hours later. Dad was wide awake, more conscious than he'd been for days. He was afraid we, my sister and I, our mother, would balk. He wept. "You have to let me go," he said. And so we did.

How is a house like a man? I think of people in books: *The House of the Seven Gables*, Manderley, Thornfield, Poynton, Usher. Houses are always being let go so that people can start new lives, freed from some part of their worldly burdens or the burden of the past. Still, I keep asking that question. How is this flooded house like my father? Maybe it's simply that loss calls unto loss, like deep unto deep. The rest of that verse in Psalm 42 is alarming and timely: *your waves and surging tides sweep over me*.

Hurricane Irene sent three feet of water into our house, wave after wave for six hours, washing away furniture, breaking glasses and pottery, tearing pages out of books, smashing and soaking

and stealing the stuff of our lives. People ask me if I'll leave or sell, and I say I will never let this house go. But I understand now that someday I may have to.

The vision of my father that returns to me now, as I try to find what can be salvaged, is another long view, from the open doorway of his hospital room, on December 26. He is out of bed, in a chair. He is wearing a hospital gown, so his legs are bare. And there it is, the left leg without the foot. It is incredible, awful, impossible. How can a man lose a foot and still live? This man, a hiker of fairways? I have to keep staring. If I keep staring, maybe it will make sense, maybe the foot will reappear.

I stood in the doorway of my flooded house and took it all in: the power of water to destroy. The wave action smashed the front doors completely off their hinges. Inside, the water must have agitated and then driven all the furniture—a couch, an armchair, a heavy oak dining table and five chairs, a sideboard, a coffee table—toward the fireplace. Two tall dressers lay on their sides, most of their drawers broken open, wet papers and clothes spilling onto the floor. I felt if I kept staring, I might see something, anything, that wasn't lost.

My father is staring too, straight ahead, maybe into the print that was hung in all the rooms on this floor: a window open, looking out onto a green island in a body of water. It's a soothing view, full of hope. *You'll get here*, it seems to say, *you'll get back here again*. My father leans slightly forward toward this picture, as if he wants to walk into it. But of course, he can't. He can't walk anywhere. The hospital gown is white, and his skin is translucent. He is still wearing his wristwatch. In four days, he will be dead. I don't know this yet. All I know is that he has begun to disappear.

The compulsion to look fades, though, when it comes to the neighbors' houses, which sustained far more structural damage than mine. I did not want to see it, such final loss.

When my father was transferred from the hospital to hospice, I couldn't watch. It seemed like a cruel trick, beginning with the increased dose of morphine to soothe him. Then I felt I was witnessing an assault or an arrest, these strange men in uniform, burst into his room, the transport stretcher with so many straps and controls that it looked like some medieval instrument of torture.

How is a house like a man? Maybe I'm asking the wrong question, or asking it the wrong way.

How is a man like a house?

There was always some mystery about my father, a profound silence. He told us that his own father had died when he was a child, but we later found out that wasn't true, that his father had left the family but stayed nearby and lived into my father's adulthood. My father spent twenty years looking for a line of work that would make him happy, but he never found one. His last job was as a travel agent. He carried a kind of emptiness inside, like a suitcase. I think he was waiting for God to fill him up, tell him where to go.

I think he loved golf not only for the long view, but also for the wide, empty spaces of fairways.

Which is what we still have, at our house on the Neuse River, the long view and an emptiness inside.

Where are you, Dad? I wonder these days, where did you go? Nowhere? Can nowhere be a place? Sometimes I duck into church and ask out loud. I listen to the silence, and believe I hear a

familiar question, and then I tell him yes, yes of course, he is always in the book. He *is* the book.

End of June *by Kimberly Rivera*

It was the end of the greatest June
When the devastating storm hit and tore it all to pieces.

I couldn't catch my breath.
When I did, I couldn’t keep breathing.
Let's not pretend you haven't felt it too.

The showers fell first from the sky,
Then from my eyes, and just as
The basement began to flood
The crevasses of my hands leaked a salty distress.

The satellite went out downstairs—Oh! The horror!
I could see no clear picture in my mind.
Frail memories fell like branches from the oak tree outside.
I lost it all to the storm at the end of June.
Mother Nature, mother, help me please!

Quiet's Violence *by Grace Wise*

The silence became a glass we refused
To break. We treaded around it carefully,
Each breath a nervous step closer
To unsettling the dew laid thick
On our bed of broken pieces.

Each wordless second stacked on the previous one,
Each unspoken thought grew stronger in its chains.
We begged the silence to choke our minds.
We begged the silence to make everything right
Because it was the noise that put us here.

But the silence is only what destroyed us.

Secrets within Her *by Houston Long*

A pain radiates from her thigh to the tips of her toes as she walks to an appointment eight blocks west. The office where Shelia comes to terms with her trauma is on the corner of W. 56th Street and 7th Avenue in Manhattan. Only two blocks to go, and her heart pounds the closer she gets because therapy sessions are torture. To her, it's like reopening a wound once a week and giving it another week to begin healing, but it's reopened over and over again. Today is October 13th, one year exactly since she was attacked in an alley along E. 146th Street. She taught a yoga class at St. Mary's Recreation Center on the south side of the Bronx at the time.

"Good afternoon, Miss Santiago. I'll inform Dr. Sutton you're here for your three o'clock. Take a seat, and he'll call you soon," a receptionist tells her.

Shelia smiles and nods, "Thank you."

The walls of the office are sage green with a floral boarder around the top, and the floor has light grey carpet. It's obvious the office won't be on the cover of a magazine or win an award for best design. Shelia sits anxiously waiting for her therapist to let her know he's ready for their session. She picks at her cuticles and stares blankly at an aquarium that's in serious need of maintenance. Algae paints the inside of the glass green, and the fish seem to be depressed in their unclean habitat. *The fish are depressed and living in a therapist's office.* Shelia giggles a little to herself as her thoughts of the fish continue.

"Shelia, it's good to see you. Come on back and we'll begin," Dr. Sutton says. Shelia is a little startled, but she stands on her achy feet and begins walking toward the door where her therapist

is standing. They walk into a room with dim lighting, which is said to create a more comforting environment for the clients. There's a desk in the back right corner with framed diplomas from Penn State and Columbia University. Dr. Sutton definitely has the education to do his job, but Shelia sometimes questions his ability to help her overcome past trauma. Toward the left side of the office is a large grey area rug with square shapes decorating it and two pieces of furniture on top of it. A sofa with its back toward the door sits facing an arm chair where her therapist sits while she irritably describes what he thinks is getting better.

"Come, sit down. I hope things have continued to improve in the last week," he says.

Shelia sits and crosses her legs. She puts her hands between her thighs to squeeze them tight whenever the session takes a toll on her emotions.

"Honestly, I've been better, doc. It's been a shitty week because all I could think about was today," Shelia says.

Dr. Sutton intently stares at her. "Yes, I see. Today is one year since your attack. Is there anything on your mind about today you want to discuss?"

"Not really. It's one year later, and I still have nightmares. I wake up screaming because I see him standing over me or holding me down with all of his weight. I feel like the torture will never end," she explains.

It was on her deceased grandmother's birthday that a masked man grabbed her from a sidewalk. The occasion that once made this day of the year special is now tainted with pain and trauma. Shelia was on her way to the bus stop four blocks from her job at St. Mary's Rec., but a guy pulled her into an alley. He pinned her against the cold brick wall of a building and held a hand over her

mouth to muffle her screaming. Shelia was terrified and confused. *I teach yoga classes to women who suffer this sort of trauma,* she thought.

The smell of his breath will always linger in her memory. He reeked of stale cigarettes and booze. He began fondling her breasts. Shelia attempted to shove him away, but he pushed her down to the cold ground. It was difficult to fight back as a five foot five woman weighing only 115 pounds. On the damp asphalt he held her down and ripped her clothes off. Shelia muttered, "Why me?" He put a hand over her mouth again. *I'm going to die. This is really it.* Her mind allowed her to think overwhelming thoughts. The masked man penetrated her with his hand. Tears began to roll down the side of her cheeks. She was wishing for death instead of having to endure the disgusting act of a man who has to forcefully take something from an innocent twenty-nine-year-old woman.

"I hope you enjoy this before you die," he told her. Shelia stared into the distance, begging silently for someone to walk by. Not tonight. Tonight, it's just her and her attacker in that lonely alley. Shelia began fighting by slamming her knee into him. When his left arm loosened she punched him in the mouth while kicking him however she could. It was too late though. He pulled a gun from his belt and fired. Shelia was in pain and shock from a shot to her abdomen. "That'll teach you to take it," he said before taking off quickly. Shelia drifted into an altered state and lost consciousness.

"He's in jail, and he's not getting out any time soon. Do you feel any closure from that?" Dr. Sutton asks.

"It is closure. It does not take back what happened though. I can't go to bed at night without the image of his disgusting blood-shot eyes and black mask staring at me."

A Thomas Kinkaid portrait of a cabin and a wheat field hangs slightly crooked on the wall behind Dr. Sutton. It's an easy escape for her to stare at it when the conversation gets dark. She imagines herself there, alone, as if it's the only place in existence, and it's her safe haven from the entire world. *I hate therapy, and I hate reliving this single day.* She thinks about saying her thoughts aloud, but controls her urge to verbally attack him for now.

"Have you tried meditation to fall asleep?" he asks her optimistically, as if there may be positive results, but it's the question that breaks Shelia's composure. She's sick of his suggestions of bullshit techniques, and she tells him constantly they don't work.

"No, I just want to forget it all happened! Is there a meditation for that, Doc? Is there an escape from the hell in my mind? No. I guess you would have prescribed it to me if there was." Shelia cannot take anymore. She lets her emotions take control and she begins squeezing her hands tight between her thighs.

"I understand you are still very affected by the attack, Shelia, but you have to be more social. I really think it would show positive results for you to get out more and reconnect with your friends."

She listens to him and wipes some tears from her face while thinking of a good comeback to this social bullshit he brings up during every session. *I'm social every damn week I come here. If I could bring a bottle of bourbon it'd be easier.*

After the attack, Shelia woke up to a loud beeping noise and nearby voices holding conversations. She opened her eyes to a blinding overhead lamp and the heart monitor beside her bed. An ugly white gown covered her body underneath the thin blue blanket keeping her just warm enough to not jitter. There was a burning sting in her stomach where the bullet went through.

"Shelia, are you awake?"

She heard the familiar voice, but couldn't see anyone for a few moments. When her vision cleared she saw her best friend, Jacque, standing by the bed. Shelia moaned while trying to reposition her body. She felt a hand caress her head.

"Don't move. The doctor said it wouldn't take much to pop a stitch from your wound," Jacque said.

Shelia was in a daze from the morphine being administered to her. She stared at Jacque for a few moments before the tears began to trickle down her cheeks. "Jacque, why did this happen to me?"

"Oh, honey, stop it. It could've happened to any of us. I'm just so happy you're still with me. I don't know what I would've done . . ." Jacque paused and put her hand to her face as she began to cry. "Shelia, they got him."

Shelia looked back at her friend intently. She wasn't sure if she had heard Jacque right. "My attacker?" She continued staring at Jacque and waited for her to repeat the words.

"They got him. When you were brought to the hospital they swabbed for any DNA that could have been left behind. The detectives said it's obvious you fought back."

It was clear now. Shelia remembered hitting him in the mouth. His saliva must have gotten under her nails. She wanted to be happy, but she still felt pain and shock.

"Shelia, you're lucky. He's been wanted for over a year. You're the only survivor."

"Wait. There are more victims? Why didn't they get DNA from the others?" Shelia was confused, but waited for a response.

"Yeah. He's attacked five other women. Detective Sanchez said you're the only one they found with his DNA."

Shelia lay there a few moments thinking about what she had heard. *I'm the only one who made it. I don't understand.* Guilt and anger mixed inside her. If they had found him before now she wouldn't have been his next victim, but she felt guilty because others didn't survive. "Jacque, who found me?" Shelia realized someone had to find her quickly if she survived.

"Denise from St. Mary's was locking up the center when she heard the gun shot. She saw him running, and when she checked the alley there you were, unconscious," Jacque told her.

Shelia didn't say much else because of the thoughts flooding her mind. She wanted to believe it was a bad dream, as if she'd wake up in her bed annoyed with the alarm clock screaming at her to get up. But it wasn't a dream; the physical and emotional pain reminded her it was reality.

Shelia spent nearly two weeks in the hospital, but since being released she's only seen Jacque twice.

"Dr. Sutton, I want to be social, but I feel like every time I see someone they will view me as the woman who survived an attack—not Shelia, but the victim who lived while the others are dead," she says. Shelia can't get away from it. She wants more than anything to be like she was before the attack, but it seems as though it'll never happen.

Dr. Sutton looks up from his writing pad. He stares at her for a moment and finally breaks the silence, "I think you are the problem. You have come so far; however, it's you who is limiting yourself, and life is too short to continue this way. If you want your life back, you have to take it back. It may sound simpler than doing it, but I have faith in you."

Shelia is speechless. *He's right. It is my fault. I've pushed my friends away, and I've secluded myself from the world.* She leans forward and rests her head face down into her palms. A few moments go by before she takes a deep breath and then exhales. "Doc, you're right. I'm tired of living this way. I pushed people away, and I've been living in fear for an entire year. It's like I'm the shell of who I used to be." Shelia pauses and looks up at Dr. Sutton. "I have to accept life must go on and accept this isn't the same life I had before the attack. It's not the same, but I can make it better by gaining my courage back." She hears the words coming from her mouth, but it's unclear to her how she will finally move forward.

Dr. Sutton is staring at her as if she may say more. Shelia sits back on the sofa and stares at the clock on the wall to the left of her. She's been here an hour, but it feels like an entire day. It is 4:02pm. The sun will be going down soon, and Shelia never walks after sunset, but today is different. She's made progress by realizing life won't be the same, but life certainly has continued without her, and it's time for her to catch up.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I think you should start by giving Jacque a call. I'm sure she misses you," Dr. Sutton says.

"I've known her for twelve years, and this has been the longest we haven't spoken. I miss her, and I'll give her a call when I leave here. Thank you, Doc."

"That's a great idea. Shelia, I know the sessions get difficult sometimes, but I think you're improving every week. Call me if you need anything before out next session."

Shelia nods and thanks him again before leaving his office. She gets to the glass door entrance and stares out for a moment to prepare herself for the world beyond. People are walking by the building in a rush to get home from their long days at work, school, or other obligations.

A sleek black Michael Kors bag hangs from Shelia's right arm. She reaches in and grabs her mobile with the intention to call Jacque on her commute home. The wind has picked up since she arrived, leaving her straight, dark brown hair a mess when she pulls the glass door open with her free hand. She scrolls through her contacts until she sees Jacque Adams. Shelia touches the name and holds the phone to her ear. *It'll be difficult to hear from the wind howling in my phone,* she thinks as the ringing begins. Shelia hears the ring stop mid-sound and Jacque answers.

"Hello?"

"Jacque, it's Shelia. I know it's been . . ." Shelia is interrupted by an excited squeal before she can finish her apology.

"Shelia! Is it really you? It's so good to hear your voice," Jacque says.

"It's so good to hear you! I'm sorry it's been so long. I'm leaving a therapy session, and I was thinking we could meet for coffee if you're available."

"Yes, I was just finishing up an art show. Give me a half hour. I'll meet you at Neil's! How's that sound?"

"That's perfect. Jacque, I'm so excited to see you," Shelia says with a smile.

"I'm excited to see you, too! I'll be there soon."

She feels joy flood her as she picks up her walking speed to make it to Neil's. It's a coffee shop by Hunter College where she and Jacque used to meet once a week. Shelia walks by law offices, doctor's offices, and hundreds of people, but none of it concerns her right now. She walks with a smile and thinks about how her friend may have changed her appearance. Jacque enjoys dyeing her hair. The last time they saw each other Jacque was blonde. She is naturally brown haired, but Jacque thought the blonde brought out her hazel eyes for the guys to better notice her. That was always her goal, give the men something to look at and find love.

Shelia continues her fast-paced walking to Neil's and hopes to see Jacque at a table waiting for her. She walks under the street lamps, but doesn't feel nervous like before when the sun was no longer in the sky. Her hair is still blowing back from the wind, so she quickly grabs an elastic band from her bag to tie it up in the back. Shelia turns the corner where Neil's Coffee is within eyesight ahead of her. She walks until she reaches the café, expecting to see Jacque sitting at a little bistro table by the window. *She must not be here yet*, Shelia thinks.

A gentleman with a hat and black pea coat walks in and holds the door behind him. "Are you coming in," the gentleman asks.

Shelia smiles, "Yes. Thank you." When she walks through the door there's a smaller crowd in the back corner sitting at a table. She notices only four people are in line, so she walks up quickly and decides to hold the spot in case the line gets longer.

"There you are! I've been looking for you!" Shelia hears Jacque from behind her. She turns to her and they stare at each other for a moment to observe any changes. Jacque puts her arms around Shelia and squeezes tightly. "I'm so happy to see you. You better not ever estrange yourself from me again, ya hear?"

Shelia smiles at her friend's positive warning. "Don't dye your hair blonde like a playboy model again, and I won't," Shelia says laughing. Jacque laughs with her, and they move forward in the line to order. Shelia smiles while searching the menu on the wall for an appealing item. She feels relief from a heavy weight being lifted. *Life is just beginning,* she thinks.

From Beautifully Broken: Recovering from the Heartache *by Sue Jefferson*

"Through the years as the fire starts to mellow
Burning lines in the book of our lives
Though the binding cracks
And the pages start to yellow
I'll be in love with you.
I'll be in love with you."

~ Dan Fogelberg, "Longer Than"

Nice song. Lovely sentiment.

But, no. That's not what happened. The marriage lasted 10 years—well before the binding cracked and the pages yellowed.

The outdoor wedding took place in August on the water under a canopy of Mimosa leaves. Using the pier as my aisle, I walked down on my oldest son's arm to "Longer Than," played and sung by my husband's friend. "Longer Than" was the perfect song for our wedding, sweet but not sappy, its simple metaphors capturing the essence of the commitment we were making.

Then one evening in April of 1999, my husband announced he was leaving. His explanation? We were "too different."

I froze and held my breath. Somehow if I didn't breathe I could make the moment stand still and go back to the previous one—when the marriage still existed. The image of the body of a chicken still twitching after its head had been cut off came to mind. I was that chicken, not understanding why I could not re-connect to the body of this marriage. I felt sick.

I prayed to a God I did not acknowledge but hoped was there. My prayer was the refrain from a hymn I had heard, "Eagles' Wings": "And hold you in the palm of his hand." "Hold me in your palm," I prayed. "Hold me in your palm . . . in your palm—and hold my husband, too."

I finally breathed and began to talk and cry—to no avail. It was over for him. I lay awake thinking: This can't be happening. I had sacrificed for this marriage. I was 46 years old. I had given him the last of the "young-ish" years of my life.

I spent the next few weeks trying to talk him out of it. I made an appointment with a marriage counselor. I sought help immediately through a local 12-step program. I cried silently, I cried aloud, I prayed in earnest to this God I had invoked. I was three people: One person was numb, refusing to recognize what was happening. One was mad as hell. And one was lost—still holding her breath.

At the mercy of an emotional roller coaster, I had never before been so out of control. My anger turned to rage, the intensity of which scared me. For short spaces of time, I threw things, hit things, yelled, screamed, cursed. I never broke anything valuable and I never hit anybody, but the rage found other ways to vent.

At my lowest point, I climbed into my husband's empty closet, curled up in the corner, and sobbed, wishing I could just fade away and forget who I was. My 15-year-old son heard me and climbed into the closet with me. "There's something wrong with me. There's nothing to me—nothing inside—*here* [pointing to my chest]," I wailed.

He held me and said, "Mom, there's nothing wrong with you. Of course there's something to you. You're my mom. You're going to be OK."

But I wasn't so sure.

The emotional pain was incapacitating. I couldn't get away from it. Even in my sleep, it came through in my dreams. My surroundings—my home, my office, my kitchen, my plates, my dog—everything was strangely familiar, but nothing was really the same, for I lived in that other dimension, the world of my pain.

That world is a strange place: Everything, from the mundane to the cosmic, is perceived through the filter of your pain. After a while, you discover that the only way out of it is *through it.*

I've come a long way from the fetal position in the closet. Using 12-step principles and support, I worked hard to uncover and redirect the thinking patterns that landed me there. It took time, each stage of the process bringing me closer to a sense of self and my place in the scheme of things.

Today I can honestly say I'm grateful for the pain, for it motivated me to change. Now, on the other side of the experience, life is good, the pain of abandonment a distant memory, integrated into the mosaic of my life. The dark night of the soul belies the coming of a beautiful dawn. Or as Alice Abrams puts it, "In life as in the dance: Grace glides on blistered feet."

A Guide for Modern Women on Living Well *by Anthony Holsten*

The bruises? They heal. The scars? Fade away.
Aside from "I'm sorry" there's not much to say
About living on eggshells and wondering when
The line will be stepped on—or over—again.

For now, just keep breathing and paint it on thick
And don't stop the smiles; if you must, call in sick:
The flu is a good one, or chicken—ptomaine!
Remember your reasons, though; don't use the same
One or people might wonder if there's something wrong
Beyond germs on a doorknob or food kept too long.

And shelter those children, you can't let them see
The fists or the punches or wishing to flee.
All smiles and sugar! And morning pancakes!
You show them they're good and they're in a safe place
Where angels are loving and kisses are warm
and big angry voices late night are the norm.
No need to tell teachers or coaches or friends;
Assure them you all will be fine in the end.

But when that day comes and you're ready to pack . . .
Just go.
Leave with nothing.

Don't ever look back.

A Fleeting Memory *by Anna Howell*

Freckled, blonde mirages
with skinned knees and sunburnt shoulders
chase gap toothed little brothers,
shimmering through August's humid veil.
Rust creeps up
the old '86 that never moves,
silently measuring the time
it takes for home to become small.

Grief *by Anna Howell*

When the swirling currents took you
down to Neptune's halls, I reached
to pull you to me,
but the howling Storm bared
its fangs and snatched me back.

And when the winds had finally calmed
I felt your absence snap and wail,
like the crack
of the ocean, in my bones.

Chicken of the Sea *by Joy Moses-Hall*

"So tell us, Miss Armstrong, how does human flesh taste?" The prosecutor leered in her face.

"Objection!" shouted the defense counsel, but Boatswain's Mate Lydia Armstrong held the prosecutor's gaze, and her eyes narrowed. Her lips tightened around the pencil she sucked like a cigarette, and her cheeks hollowed. With her right hand, she drew the pencil from her mouth with a little popping noise, and exhaled pencil breath into the accusing eyes of the prosecutor.

Her eyes scorned him. "Tastes like chicken, "she spat with gravelly contempt.

"Move to strike! Move to strike!" the defense counsel shouted frantically.

The prosecutor backed away from Armstrong. He raked her with righteousness from her pinned-up mud-colored hair, past the thrice-hashed chevron insignia on her collar and sleeves, to her crossed arms as she leaned forward on the witness table.

"Perhaps, Petty Officer Armstrong, you should explain to us exactly what happened in the ready boat, and how Petty Officer Stiles came to have teeth marks on his dead bones."

She shrugged, holding the pencil between her index and middle fingers. "I told you. We were out there for a month. He died." She smiled defiantly at the prosecutor.

The prosecutor blinked. His hard jaw set like marble. "Armstrong. Start on the 25th of August and tell us every detail of your life, every minuscule breath you took, until the ready boat came ashore on Aruba on the third of October. Everything." The silver bars on his collar flashed with emphasis.

"Objection!" shouted the defending lieutenant again. "Sir, she has already testified to these events."

"Captain." The prosecutor addressed the head of the martial court with surety. "Petty Officer Armstrong has volunteered her story, yet glossed over most of the events. I only ask for a more complete rendering. The inexperience of the defending officer has miscarried the truth." He smirked at the defendant.

Coolly, she probed the pencil eraser delicately with the tip of her tongue, meeting his eyes boldly.

The captain regarded Armstrong woodenly. "Overruled. Explain to us, Armstrong, all of your improbable story."

Armstrong drew on the pencil again. She dropped her eyes, and scratched graphite on the table in front of her.

"Armstrong." The prosecutor was impatient. "You slept in the port ready boat of the *Coast Guard Cutter Virtuous* instead of your rack below decks on the night of the 25th. Why?"

Armstrong glared. "Because Eliot puked on my pillow."

"That would be Yeoman Second Class Eliot? Christina Eliot?"

"Yeah, sir." Insolently, she tapped the pencil on the table.

"Lydia, please." The defense counsel, a wispy man with stringy clipped hair and horsey teeth, scurried to the table where Armstrong sat. "You're not helping yourself," he pleaded softly, blinking at her. "You're on trial for cannibalism, for God's sake! Now tell them the whole story, and save your own neck." His protruding eyes begged.

She glanced at him. If he did not win this case, he would be passed over for lieutenant commander. She recalled him aboard the *Virtuous*, smiling inanely even at the seamen who came to empty his trash. The prosecutor, however, she thought as she met

his cold stare, would no doubt badger his way through to admiral's quarters.

The wholesome eyes of the defense counsel beseeched her. The prosecutor stood over her, daring her to tell the truth. Abruptly, she spoke.

"Yes," she said, staring down at the pencil mindlessly tracing upside-down triangles, like cuspid teeth, on the table. "On August 25th, I slept in the port ready boat of the *Virtuous* because Yeoman Eliot vomited on my pillow.

"Why didn't you change the linens and sleep in your own rack?"

Armstrong scowled at him. "Because it was midnight, I'd just got off watch, we were rolling like a whore in heat, and I wasn't about to put my face in the line of fire for Eliot's next heave."

"You are referring, Armstrong, to the fact that the Virtuous was in heavy seas that night and that Eliot occupied the sleeping rack above yours?" The prosecutor's direct blue gaze denied her any advantage. "Were you alone in the ready boat, Armstrong?"

"Well, it'd be one hell of a time for a romp through the lilies, don't you think, Lieutenant? I had to lash myself in."

"Vulgarity does not become these proceedings, Boatswain. Were you alone?"

"Yes, dammit, I was alone. Got soaked out there in the rain."

"So you were alone in the ready boat at 0500 on the 25th."

"Yes."

"Yes, sir," he corrected her.

"Yes, sir," she mimicked.

"What happened at 0500?"

"Fire broke out in the galley."

"You saw it?"

"I heard it. Cookie—that would be Chief Subsistence Specialist Genuino—shouted, 'The oil spilling,' and then I heard a 'whoosh' as the whole vat of cooking oil ignited and spilled all over the mess deck. We were really bouncing around; they were fools to cook."

"According to the weather service, winds in that sector were about 40 knots, generating fifteen-foot seas," the defense interrupted, waving a weather report. The court ignored him.

"Go on, Armstrong. What happened then?"

Armstrong faced the prosecutor with distaste, but she answered matter-of-factly. "Nothing that I could see for about ten minutes. Then the general quarters alarm rang. By the time I got unlashed from the ready boat, even the flight deck was smoking. The crew was preparing to abandon ship."

"Did you ever appear at your GQ battle station?"

"Nobody did. General Quarters was on fire. Lieutenant Molden knows. He was there." She nodded at the defense officer.

Lieutenant Molden, hunched in a folding chair, nodded.

The trial officer glanced contemptuously at his counterpart for only a minute. "So you stayed by the ready boat to escape? Was this your assigned abandon-ship billet?"

"Yes. Sir," she added witheringly. Her tone softened. "Eliot used to joke that I slept out there in case Captain Osborne tried to abandon the ship without me—'Gonna be an Abandon Lydia, tonight,' she'd say. She told me to save her a seat so she could sleep in a few extra minutes if we had to jump ship." Armstrong smiled wryly.

"And why would you think Captain Osborne might try to leave you behind on a sinking ship?" asked the prosecutor.

"He didn't like the way I ran my boarding parties," she said shortly. "I always insisted on fully arming the whole team. Give 'em steel, not soft underbelly, to think about."

The prosecutor paused. "So this wasn't the first time you slept in the ready boat."

Armstrong caught herself in mid-triangle. She brought the pencil to her lips and toothed the eraser. "No," she said softly.

"Can you describe those earlier—escapades?"

"Objection!" shouted Lieutenant Molden. "Irrelevant?"

"Captain," said the prosecutor. "I wish to establish the accused's previous conduct under similar circumstances, as documented by these proceedings of Captain's Mast on the *Coast Guard Cutter Innocuous* three years ago when Petty Officer Armstrong was reduced to an E-4 for her presence in an unauthorized area." He held up a summary of the proceedings. "Let it be known that the accused, Petty Officer Armstrong, was demoted for occupying the *Innocuous* ready boat with the gunner's mate during the midnight and morning watches without permission of the Commanding Officer. The gunner's mate showed evidence of physical injury from the encounter, including bruises and bite marks." Triumphantly, he dropped the documents on the court table.

"Objection overruled," intoned the captain.

"So," continued the prosecutor, "tell the court the details of your previous—escapades—with Radioman Stiles in the ready boat of the *Virtuous*."

"There were no—escapades. I'm not a rapist, Lieutenant, preying on subordinates. I've known Stiles since middle school. We enlisted together." She wagged the pencil at him.

"Did you date?"

She snickered. “We went to a dominoes match once in the tenth grade.”

“Did you ever have,” the prosecutor asked, with a leer, “physical contact?”

“Yeah.” She leered back. “Stiles used to tap vulgarities on my chest with a pencil in Morse Code.” Her pencil ceased its nervous chatter on the table top.

“What?” the prosecutor asked curiously. “What did he tap?”

She glanced at the judgement officers and smiled sweetly at the prosecutor. “You’d rather not hear. It’s vulgar.”

“We’ll excuse it this time. Perhaps it’s important to understanding your intimacy.”

Armstrong smirked, and tapped deliberately on the table. She paused, watching the officers straining to remember the code. She tapped again. The prosecutor looked up sharply.

She smiled at him. “And things like that.”

The lieutenant cut in. “That’s enough. Thank you, Armstrong. So you had a relationship.”

Armstrong leaned into his sneer. “Yeah. I hated him.”

“You are under oath, Armstrong. Did you—care for—Radioman Stiles?”

“I don’t care for anyone, Lieutenant.”

The prosecutor watched her closely. “So you never, say, bit him, Armstrong?”

“I don’t like my meat raw, Lieutenant.”

The prosecutor cleared his throat and changed tactics. “You hold Boatswain’s Mate ratings, do you not?”

Warily, Armstrong watched him cross the room to stand at the end of the court. “Yes.”

“Yes, sir,” he corrected.

"Yes," she answered.

"Is it true, Armstrong, that as a Boatswain's Mate First Class you would direct the away operations of an abandon ship order; that is, you would ensure that all the lifeboats and ready boats got away from the endangered ship safely?"

"Ordinarily."

The prosecutor advanced to stand directly before the captains. "Then I submit that you, Armstrong, were neglecting your duty to the rest of the crew, leaving them to their own resources in the event of a dire emergency, because you were engaged in a show of passion with Stiles and were therefore unprepared for duty."

"No," said Armstrong evenly. "I always slept alone in the *Virtuous* boat. And I have not been charged with dereliction of duty, Lieutenant."

"We'll get to the unspeakable charges against you, Armstrong. Stiles was seen at the port ready boat on two occasions when you were absent from your quarters."

"We played dominoes on the seat. It was more level there; I'd release the gripes that hold the boat in place so when the ship rolled a little, we swung out horizontal in the davits."

"That's highly irregular, Armstrong."

"It was OK, Lieutenant."

The prosecutor sighed. "Why did you stay all night in the ready boat on those other occasions?"

Armstrong shrugged. "Fresh air. Lots of stars. No pukers."

"So on the morning of August 25th, while abandoning ship, Stiles just happened to show up at the port ready boat."

"We were both assigned to the port ready boat."

"Objection!" shouted Molden. Both Armstrong and the prosecutor turned, looking at the skinny lieutenant in surprise.

"You can't object to your witness's testimony, explained the prosecutor.

They'd both be in the brig by the end of this circus, Armstrong thought morosely; Molden for ineptitude, herself for improperly disposing of a carcass.

"I just want to corroborate Petty Officer Armstrong's testimony, Captain," Molden said to the court chief. "I have here the Watch, Quarter, and Station Bill from the *Virtuous* which does indeed assign both Boatswain's Mate Armstrong and Radioman Stiles to the port ready boat."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," muttered the captain.

"Captain," groused the prosecutor, turning his fierce eyes away from Armstrong. "I realize that you don't do very many cannibalism courts-martial in this district, but for justice to be served, we must at least adhere to the procedures in the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Not Robert's Rules of Order." He simpered belligerently at the defense. "The defense officer may not 'second' the testimony of the witness."

"Thanks you, Lieutenant," snapped the captain.

The prosecutor paced for a moment, then addressed Armstrong. "What happened after Stiles arrived at the port boat?"

Armstrong sucked on the pencil. "It was the real thing. Abandon ship. Provide. Stiles went to get blankets, food, water, anything he could, while I got the boat ready to launch."

"What about the others assigned to your boat?"

"What about them? They never showed up. Burned up, I guess."

"You didn't shove off early to ensure privacy for yourself and Stiles?"

Armstrong stared at the prosecutor in disbelief. "Are you suggesting that I was planning a foxhole romance in the middle of an abandon-ship?" She coughed incredulously. "Lieutenant, enlisted personnel with smoke in their eyes and fire in their ears and a thousand fathoms of ocean 360 degrees around don't suddenly take a break to plan a hokey-pokey on the Aloha Deck. Get your mind out of the gutter, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant cleared his throat and colored mildly. He tapped his notes. A puzzled frown crawled over his face. "How did you launch the boat from inside the boat?"

Armstrong smiled. "Pretty tricky, huh? When it looked like no one else was showing up, I set the winch to a trigger line and rigged us a couple frapping lines through a deck shackle that we could handle from inside the boat. I tried it once before when we did a boarding. Worked fine."

The prosecutor tapped his pen on his notes. "That's highly irregular, Armstrong."

"It was OK, Lieutenant."

The prosecutor pursed his lips. "So you shoved of as soon as you had provisions and set the winch."

"We shoved off at the last possible minute before the fire boiled us off the boat deck. We waited for them to show up. I was holding out for Eliot, but she never came. I finally hoped maybe she'd squeezed into one of the other boats."

"Then you shoved off."

"Yeah, then we shoved off. The paint on the transom was blistering."

"Did the other boats get off safely?"

"Damned if I know. Look, Lieutenant, those rules about gathering together in an orderly fashion and cheerfully

abandoning ship like it was a Sunday outing are a bunch of crap. All hell was breaking loose, people were screaming in the fire and grabbing provisions in the dark and feeling their way around, trying to find each other. The fire was cutting us off, and we could crust up and burn through just waiting for dead people to come up. No one could have got through that wall of fire, so we shoved off."

"So you and Stiles got away from the ship. Did you see any other escaping boats?"

"You ever abandoned ship, Lieutenant?" Armstrong tapped the eraser on the table as if to rid its tip of ashes.

"I'll ask the questions, Armstrong."

"Well, start asking useful questions, Lieutenant," she snapped. "When that little ready boat hit the water, pounded by monster waves that nearly flipped us, I headed straight away from the ship. Even the rules say that. Doesn't do anybody no good to catch on fire yourself, or get sucked into the vortex of a sinking ship, or slam into the side of the ship on a monster wave. So I headed straight out, about a mile. When we stopped, all we could see was fifteen foot seas and a patch of smoke behind us, and we couldn't turn back without capsizing. I spent the next day trying to keep the bow into the waves. Stiles couldn't get anybody on the radio. Seas too high. I thought for sure they'd all drown getting away in those seas even if they got out of the fire, but I guess Lieutenant Molden's boat made it, too. I'm a good boat handler, but we were damn lucky."

"Then what"

"We got to Aruba a month later," she said shortly.

The prosecutor frowned but didn't look up from his notes. "You had supplies to sustain you?"

"We had the usual emergency stores—mirror, flares, cans of water, fishing line. And Stiles had got some blankets, a can of cashews, binoculars, a flashlight, and a rain poncho from the bridge. There was a compass already affixed in the boat, and my dominoes were stashed under the seat. We had a pretty good chance of making it, because I'm a survivor, Lieutenant. It was OK."

"What happened after that day?"

"Ran out of fuel. Had to make a sail from one of the blankets and a paddle after a while. Scooted us right along."

"What was the weather like at that point"

"Still nasty, but better than before. The eye of the storm had moved away from us. But the seas were still heavy."

"And at what point did you decide that you had to eat the flesh of Radioman Stiles?"

Armstrong leveled a look of venom right between his eyes.

Molden leaped from his crouch near the door shouting, "Objection!"

"Sustained," murmured the captain.

"Withdrawn," smiled the prosecutor. "What did you do after you ran out of fuel?"

Armstrong weighed her words, tracing the triangles on the table. "Huddled under the poncho to get out of the rain."

The prosecutor raised his eyebrows.

Armstrong saw his look and stood up, her lips pursed. A strand of mud-brown hair tumbled onto her shoulder. "Captain, I'd like to plead the praying mantis defense and go home," she spat.

"Sit down, Armstrong," ordered the prosecutor.

The captain looked at her curiously. "I beg your pardon?"

"The lieutenant," Armstrong accused in a lieutenant sort of voice, still standing, "Seems determined to fabricate a contention that I, like a praying mantis, eat my men after procreating in a boat. I submit that the praying mantis is a protected species, and I should be permitted to go home with impunity."

"Shut up and sit down, Armstrong," the prosecutor commanded with exasperation. "What happened over the next thirty days?"

Armstrong sat down and shrugged "We fished. Played dominoes. Looked for pirates."

"Did you talk?"

"Of course we talked."

"Did you talk about what happened on the *Innocuous*?"

"Objection! Relevance?"

Armstrong kept her eyes on the table.

"Captain, I'm trying to determine if Stiles knew he was alone with a dangerous criminal personality."

"We talked about people we knew," Armstrong said sadly, not waiting for the captain's answer. "On the ship. In high school. Talked about ourselves. He told me about himself, about his sister's death from cancer, how he dreamed of going to college someday, how when we got to shore he couldn't wait to eat some thick pork chops and shoofly pie. And I told him about my own appetites and fantasies."

Idly, she traced more triangles with the pencil. "We'd play dominoes out there in the emptiness, with the sun beating down until it burned crust onto our eyelids, rocking in that damn boat and never stopping, cramped against the seats, terribly hungry and thirsty, worried about sharks and the savage world, and he'd talk about the place where he'd always wanted to settle down, a

little cabin in the hills of Pennsylvania, with green mountains and gray squirrels and no ocean. When I shut my eyes and he talked, I could feel the breeze cooling my blistered skin, and it calmed me."

She eyed the lieutenant. "Then he'd tell jokes to get me laughing. Sometimes he'd tap out the punch line in Morse so we wouldn't forget the code if our minds started to go blithery. He told some great jokes. Nothing I could repeat to the court—" she glared at the prosecutor—"but always good for a laugh." She let her eyes fall with a half-smile, cognizant of her surroundings.

The court was quiet. The officers in judgement averted their eyes. Even the prosecutor sat quietly on the edge of the desk, watching her.

She sighed. "I knew Stiles for a long time. If I had to die out there alone with someone, I'd choose him." Another strand of hair fell about her shoulders.

Without prompting, she went on, flatly. "We ran out of water. We made a solar still out of the poncho, but it didn't make enough." She puffed on the pencil, then put it down. "We got just a little bit. We argued. He said I should have it, but as I outranked him I ordered him to drink it. We ended up spilling the first day's yield, and then the idiot went and drank some seawater. It made him thirstier, and he drank even more."

She was still, the pencil at rest on the table and her hands folded neatly over her stomach. "He vomited on my dominoes, and started talking nutso. Went salt crazy. Got all weak and talked nonsense."

Silence ticked in the air.

"When he died, I covered him up with a wet blanket. I tried to preserve him until we could get ashore." She fixed a troubled look on the prosecutor. "Nobody eats their companions, you know. I

read that somewhere. It's revolting. And it just makes you thirstier . . ." She broke off.

"And then the birds came. Herring gulls. I never realized how big they were until they started flapping around my face, trying to get to his. I tried to shoo them off, but there were so many. I remember his eyes—they were there, staring vacantly, then the biggest gull stood over him, pecking, as birds will do, and they were gone."

"In three days, they picked him clean. I tried to hide him from them. I tried to pickle his body in the salt water so he could have a proper burial ashore." Desperately, she sought the eyes of the judges. "They pecked at his empty bones. Herring gulls will eat their own kind, you know." She stared around the courtroom. A leaf blew against the window outside.

"An arm was missing from the remains when you came ashore," the prosecutor prodded gently, after a minute. "What happened to his arm, Lydia?"

She looked at him with pain in her eyes. "I—I'm not sure. It might have fallen overboard when I shifted him, trying to preserve him in the seawater. A week or so later we—I—ran aground on Aruba."

At home that evening, Boatswain's Mate First Class Lydia Armstrong stood staring into her refrigerator. Acquitted. She breathed a sigh of relief. She was lucky to be alive, let alone free. Thank God she'd had enough food and water.

She reached for the grocery bag of belongings she had hastily stuffed into the otherwise empty refrigerator when the shore patrol had come for her after the confusion of wading ashore, begging for assistance, and making arrangements. In it was the

stuff she'd brought back from Aruba. She reached into the bottom of the bag, past the flashlight and fishing line, past the blanket. She was hungry.

She paused, and got out a roasting pan. It would be nice to have cooked food for a change. She preferred cooked meat.

She turned on the oven. It was a shame what hunger could do to you, she thought, with pain in her eyes. Poor Stiles. Damn Stiles. If he hadn't swallowed that seawater. . .

She delicately sliced off a morsel, chewing it thoughtfully.

Tastes like chicken.

Benevolent Apparitions *by Mary McAden*

As the sun set late that August evening, the air grew brisk, neutralizing the thick blanket of humidity that otherwise almost always surrounds East North Carolina Woodmen Youth Camp in the summer. There, about halfway between Kinston and New Bern, on land that three centuries ago served as Colonel John Barnwell's base of operations against the Tuscarora Indians, I served as counselor to thirty-five girls between the ages of eight and eleven. It would be my final night with these girls, whom I'd come to know and to care about deeply. The next morning, campers and staffers alike would return to their familiar lives—some eagerly, others with reticence and sadness.

After canteen, my troupe sprinted to the bathhouse as usual, hoping to get in and out of the showers before being teased by the older girls. That night in particular, I was grateful for this odd routine of theirs, because I was really looking forward to turning in early and getting a good night's sleep.

But a good night's sleep it was not. I witnessed something several hours later that would change me forever. A veil was lifted that would grant me a glimpse into an altogether different realm.

About an hour or so before the sun came up, I was wakened by a loud snore from the bunk above me. I quickly scanned the cabin, and it seemed as though everything was in order. I had every intention of drifting right back to sleep, of capitalizing upon whatever little time remained before wake-up call, but I suddenly noticed that standing at the head of my bed was a little girl, staring quietly at me. Although I did not have my contacts in, I could tell she was young, and that she had stringy blonde hair. I

also noticed that she was dressed in a hand-sewn, faded pink nightgown of the sort one imagines girls her age wore many decades or even centuries ago.

I initially assumed she was one of my campers—scared or homesick, perhaps—so I asked her what was wrong. However, she did not answer. She simply continued staring at me for a few more seconds, then turned around and began walking away. Just in case she needed help, I rose from bed with the intention of following her to her bunk, but instead of climbing into bed, she vanished mysteriously into the night! What was even more curious is that as she departed, she made no sound at all: not even the sound of footsteps could be heard.

While looking around for any trace of this little girl, I noticed that both of our cabin doors was open. The thick wooden outer door, which we very rarely closed at night so that at least some air might circulate about the room, was propped open as it ought to have been. But our screen door, which we normally closed to keep the bugs out, had been wedged ajar on the uneven concrete floor. Only at that moment did it dawn on me that I might just have seen a ghost!

I don't remember feeling any uncommonly strong emotions afterward, no fear, repulsion, curiosity, or even excitement. Just one simple thought entered my mind: *Well, that was weird*. I wasn't able to return to sleep, as I'd naively hoped, so I took a brief stroll to the bathhouse, which was located directly across from our cabin.

As I was coming back, I had the strange sense that I was being watched, so I stopped and took a careful look around. Lo and behold, not twenty feet to my right was that same little girl, this time standing beneath a lamppost, observing me in silence. For

some reason—nerves, maybe—I suddenly glanced away from her in the direction of my cabin. By the time I looked back to the place where she had been standing, she was gone! I must admit that at that point I became a little freaked out. I ran back to our cabin, locked both doors behind me, and jumped into bed, pulling the covers all the way up to my chin. Needless to say, all hope for even a smidgeon of shut-eye was gone.

During breakfast, I asked some of the girls under my care if anyone had tried to wake me up during the night. No one said they had. It seemed that something truly mysterious had taken place, and they were just as eager as I was to find out what had happened. Unfortunately, I was in no position to assist them. I was as utterly baffled as they were.

After the final award ceremony was over and all of the campers had been loaded onto buses, I went back to the cabin to pack up my own stuff. I remember still feeling a little unhinged, and even a bit anxious that I might see my little visitor again while gathering my belongings. Thankfully, I noticed nothing unusual. Either she wasn't in the vicinity, or she chose not to disclose herself to me.

While waiting for my boyfriend to pack his things, I told some of the other staffers what I had seen. Understandably, some did not believe me, but some counselors said that they also had experienced strange things, or had heard about similar occurrences from others. For instance, one said that an ominous shadowy figure had followed one of the lifeguards out of a storage closet. Another said that basketballs were heard bouncing in the gym at night when it was unoccupied. Still another said that strange noises were heard coming from the camp stage when no

one at all was there. Might the fact that the camp had been built in such close proximity to Colonel Barnwell's fort have something to do with these otherwise inexplicable experiences?

I've had a few years to mull over this unusual event. My interpretation of what happened is that the little girl was drawn to me because she liked how I interacted with the campers and that she, too, wanted someone who would befriend and play with her. Whether she was in fact a ghost I cannot say.

Although I did return the following summer for one more year of service as a counselor, I did not have any paranormal experiences. However, since having that one strange encounter, my eyes have been opened to the possibility that some other world beyond our ordinary sensory capacities may truly exist.

Contributors

James Bardon

Joe Clark received his master's degree in English from ECU in 1992. He taught at Roanoke-Chowan Community College Community College for 14 years before coming to Pitt Community College in 2007. He has a wife and a daughter, four cats, and a dog.

Anthony James Holsten is currently an instructor of English and Humanities at Pitt Community College. He has previously taught middle school, high school and college-level English and literature. In addition to his time in the classroom, he has also pursued a number of interests in the acting world as a performer, voiceover artist, director, and even co-authored the play *TwoLives* with his wife, Marlo. He and his wife have two sons. His writing has previously appeared in *The Wisteria Review* and the *North Carolina Literary Review*.

Anna Howell took creative writing classes at Pitt Community College.

Sue Jefferson lives on the Pamlico River in Washington, NC, where she enjoys kayaking, swimming, reading, writing, and playing with her "adopted" grandchildren. She chairs the English and Humanities Department at Pitt Community College and teaches courses in mythology and world literature. Her yoga practice helps her stay centered, physically fit, and spiritually connected.

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Mary McAden is currently a junior at East Carolina University, having transferred from Pitt Community College in Fall 2016. Mary is working toward a double major for a BA in Psychology and BS in Neuroscience. She aspires to be a neuropsychologist, working in Alzheimer's research and memory studies. In her leisure time, Mary enjoys digital photography, creating collages out of miscellaneous items, and painting, as well as reading literature and creative writing. Mary has been writing mostly poetry since age 14, but also dabbles in writing short stories and creative nonfiction.

Tabitha Miller is the Director of Teaching and Learning at PCC. Her mother and father encouraged her love of reading and writing through their own acts of creativity and passion for the written word in various forms. She has been writing personal poetry and short stories since the age of 10.

Joy Moses-Hall teaches physics, astronomy, and Earth science at Pitt Community College. She attended the US Coast Guard Academy, has a PhD in oceanography, and is the author of the novel *Wretched Refuge.*

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C.G. Thompson's fiction has appeared in *Main Street Rag*, *Main Street Rag Fiction Anthology*, *The Bitter Oleander*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*, among others. Her poetry has appeared in *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Pinesong*, *Sandcutters*, and *Pegasus*. She is a three-time finalist for the James Applewhite Poetry Prize.

Sabrina Westerman is an adjunct English instructor at Pitt Community College. Graduating with an associate's degree from Pitt Community College, she then moved on to East Carolina University where she earned a bachelor's in English with a minor

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Liza Wieland is the author of three collections of short stories, a book of poems, and four novels, including her most recent, *Land of Enchantment*. She teaches creative writing at East Carolina University and lives with her husband and daughter in Pamlico County, NC.

Grace Wise is an artist and an aspiring author. She is currently finishing up her last year at Pitt Community College before transferring to get her bachelor's in English. You may find her staring at stars, listening to Sinatra, or sitting on rooftops.

Alyssa Xiong took creative writing classes at Pitt Community College.

In this issue of Reedy Branch Review:

Alyssa Xiong, "Brooklyn"

My stiff body stands
in the middle of the mourning and suffering
sidewalk, growing weary from dirty footsteps.
I rest my eyes to know reality.

Joy Moses-Hall, "Wiggle Room"

In the social confusion that comes of ordinary lives dipped liked wicks into the beeswax of military society at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, Elizabeth and Joanne burned themselves into our psyches. They were our civilian flames.

C.G. Thompson, "Vertigo"

He'd point to the gargoyles, tell of their origins in the ancient world, explain how they were dreamed into existence to scare away monsters.

Maybe Emily would believe him. Maybe he'd find a way to believe it himself.

Mary McAden, "Benevolent Apparitions"

I don't remember feeling any uncommonly strong emotions afterward, no fear, repulsion, curiosity, or even excitement. Just one simple thought entered my mind: Well, that was weird.