

Rumble Fish Quarterly



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Editor's Note

I have not read *Maus* in nearly a decade, and while most of it has faded from memory over time, one quote seems increasingly like it never will. Upon the murder of a Polish Jew returning home from the concentration camps, Vladek Spiegelman comments, hauntingly, “for this he survived.”

Winning this year's contest is a poem that indicts that same dark, enthusiastic hatred that emanated from citizens who were inspired, rather than revolted, by the actions of the Nazis. In “Memorial on the Danube,” Katie Krantz commemorates her grandfather's murder while poignantly summing up the lopsided role that the Holocaust plays in her mind compared to others. The marker of her grandfather's grave, she points out, sits on land that has become a valued commodity.

Following “Memorial on the Danube” are five poems that emerge from radically different angles, each one of them uniquely compelling. “Photo from the Naissance of Behaviorism” cloaks an obstetrician in the language of an illusionist, generating an uneasy intersection. “Cc: Hades” combines fiery, modern lines with rigid poetic structure, in an effect akin to lava spewing out of Mt. Vesuvius. “The Closing of the Gap” pulls away, a train headed deep into the narrator's generational past, as the speaker mulls a missing tooth. “in solstice” bounces furiously around the page in a tornado of cosmic, pastoral, and urban images. Lastly, “Woman in White” ends our poetry section on a note of arduous dedication, abstracting the pain of infertility into stitches.

Leading off the fiction is “The Homebrew Time Machine Club,” a satirical story that injects a reflection of today's DIY culture into a landscape outlined in science fiction bona fides. “Wild & Wonderful” follows a young couple driving to the east coast as they process the magnitude of an oncoming change in their lives. Finally, “Recital,” an anxiety-ridden, often hyper-tense, story takes us through an extended, unending bereavement. We're absolutely thrilled to be celebrating our 2-year anniversary with this issue, and we hope you'll join us.

M.J. Sions
Associate Editor

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Poetry

Memorial on the Danube

Katie Krantz

I left a stone on my grandfather's grave today.

It would have been common practice if not for
His grave being the Danube, icy river,
And the marker a pair of shoes and a plaque
To commemorate my love, one of thousands,
Where his teeth scrape river stones in the current and
His skull, split in two like Zeus's with a bullet,
Is buried in the silt.

When we were seven, my friends played a game:
"Which of us would survive the Holocaust?"
I was always chosen for life--
Blonde hair, blue eyes, sure bet.
There was an innate need to remind them:
"No, I am a Jew."

I left a stone on a marker
That is hidden from the highway
By a two foot stone wall.
[Do not burden commuters with grief.]
When I stand over the plaque, I am visible,

Meaning that when Papá was marched
Through the city center,
To the busy residential street on the Danube,
Prime property today,
Shots could be heard (up to four hundred daily)
From Hungarian, not SS, not Nazi, rifles--
It was a citizen's arrest of life.

You heard it, Mrs. Chernowich.
He made your christmas wreath
In the same shape and color as the pastry
You eat as you watch his body fall.

His peacoat flutters like crow's wings.

The river runs Biblically red, the first plague,
With the blood of the non-survivors.
But do not turn to God, Arrow Cross--
The lamb's blood runs dry and
Moses [Sterne] died in Auschwitz last Tuesday.

My grandfather falls into the river,
Freezing, soaked, not quite dead.

I am left standing next to his shoes,
A hungarian Jew, near last of my kind,
Headed towards extinction.

Should I jump as well?

No. If my lungs fill with water,
No one will be left to say Kaddish for us.

This place brings light to a new kind of loneliness,
Sandwiched between a whistling highway with no crossing
And the river, over which I can see the proud-steepled Parliament.

I will leave on the next train, and only the stone will be left,
Buried beneath snow and time.





Photo from the Naissance of Behaviorism

DeAnna Stephens

In this tableau, a doctor in a black suit
holds a wand in a flutist's grasp, leaving space
between his hands for the newborn's left-fisted grip.

Misdirection lies in the gaze of his fair assistant,
whose outspread fingers are a weft of trembling reeds,
waiting for the weakened reflex, for gravity's defeat of instinct.

She seems to analyze the infant's left ear as it levitates
toward the doctor's black lapel. The shadow of the infant's hand,
a fear-splayed appraisal of air, spans the assistant's right arm.

The cosmic whorl of its crown enters the shadow
cast by the assistant's body, and that mystery speckles
the collar of her coat with the dark starlight of coarse film,

flickering into her dreams. Because the soft, white mice
and the monkeys sleep in cages down the hallway,
her wavering hands are the only offering of animal reverence,

the only retort for the scientist's passion,
prizing the conviction of every digit,
the corners of his lips keenly withdrawn,

like curtains revealing a rival's vain cunning.

Cc: Hades

Annie Woods

I am a car that won't start.
Persephone spends six months in hell; I wonder
who rips you open, pomegranate heart?

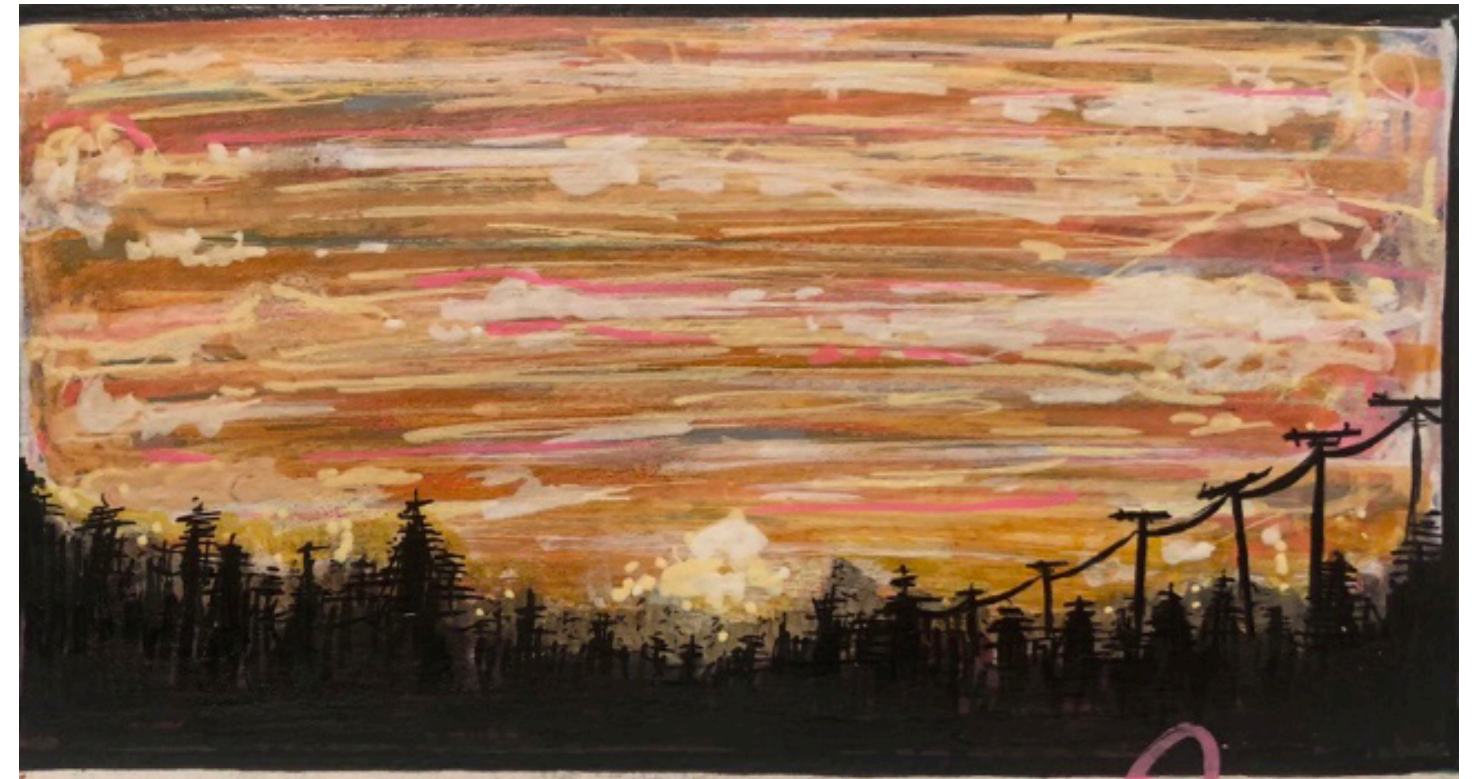
Saint Gemma Galgani fell into moments of rapture,
suffered strange, stigmata wounds, and died thereafter,
I am a car that won't start.

Saint Lidwina, patron of the chronically ill,
by age nineteen, paralyzed, blind, and still—
who rips you open, pomegranate heart?

Saint Dymphna, deemed more crazy than daughter,
became mentally unhinged, decapitated by her father.
I am a car that won't start.

Chemical cosh, kept patients in a state of nausea,
crazy are we, Women of the Asylum, this new hypochondria—
who rips you open, pomegranate heart?

Hildegard of Bingen, doctor of the Church, told:
"The soul is not in the body; the body is in the soul."
I am a car that won't start.
Who rips you open, pomegranate heart?



The Closing of the Gap

Michael Foran

As we went through her things bagged with little thought
by nurse aides that came and went through her three-week stay
who sometimes sat with her at night and sometimes not
the clothing balled up tight, the thick red rubber bands
stretched white holding all she had when she left
after the fracture, that final slip that would leave her hipbone
beyond a mending that only more time could bring
something she no longer had in abundance
we could not find the tooth.

Unlike the jewelry ever present worn like combat ribbons
that roughly aligned with birthdays, anniversaries
and to bridge the gap between the arguments
and the occasional backhand that would come swift and explosive
to end a night of gin and lost discussions about the children
and who would take whom, the tooth was missing
no longer latched, or like the rings sealed behind large knuckles
beyond any gentle pull, that would take the undertaker
some time to loosen, to take back into the world of the living
the tooth was gone.

Coming home now to spend the last days in the room
made over when they stopped sharing a bed
a room that was empty long before until my sister was born
my mother propped up and frail the final blood cleaning
stopped at her request ten years after the first visit
that would circulate her waste until clean
and with each return visit, clean her memories as well
until all that remained was a sanitized version of a life
a mind only functioning in the present, in the now, smiles
showing that open space, the open door kicked in
almost eighty years ago when a random slip
the fall that would take that tooth
and leave it half imbedded in the ice
a tooth that would find its way under her pillow
and her father knowing that no good wish
would ever come true of this, would wonder how

the front tooth gap would weigh on his already quiet girl
a tooth he would wrap in a small cloth and hide away for decades
the space replaced by the porcelain imposter
anchored by twisting silver hooked and unhooked each day
then left to soak each night in a cup filled with water
quiet, magnified and fearful, to finally disappear
to dissolve, the gap opened one more time.

in solstice

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

in first light's cirrostratus flush/ cumulous bloom
unbound/ in halo
Earth stood heaven's bitter blast

trembled leaden slaps

& in great sweltering pluralities in sidereal midnights
we fixed our starry stars stretched out
in leniency's allowance in solstice's lustered

dimmet shored our nostalgia our breakfast cakes & jams
reminded that what we do iteratively this world reiterates

saw ourselves in flash & flare (qualms & scruples) seduced
in Northern Lights
repentant raw drunks
knocked sober forfeit/ lost & found/ *that* primrose path

we soft skidded sideways we drifted/ bumped up against the guardrail

it never snows so hard as in a single Sunday's scud & lift
lake's azure lapping as we wake

in yarrow in Queen Anne's Lace or in your case in Stork's Bill's
restraint/ roadside wearies we kept the fiery stir

blinded by the yellow of the sky
kept on shining in our black woolen suits

& *yes* in the house where we slept it was cold
but outside cafés buzzed streets binged tipsy
shot the moon

in spring melt's icy hiems husk we plunged in bees' butter
sweet tooth sap sticky chunk to wild
smooth comb & syrupy splint scooped

straight out from a Mason jar

we dug in our holes twice as wide as deep – a fork full of bone meal –
never plant a new one where an old one dies

we climbed the loon's cry/ the harrow/ our bodies' hummed
compared in light in turquoise stroke & mendicants' sighs

late-summer's naked slant

sleepless anchored/ in bister span our boats' survey/ our crest &
surge

so fast *so fast*

we made in poppy's reckless blaze appetites/ respite
our gaze the glittery filthy streets ah beauty *beauty begs*

& in clement spent in caution's lean return
in winter's recuperative slip made our amends

Woman in White

Katherine Gaffney

Before this wall, she hung in an alcove where,
mornings, my mother stood before her vanity
in stockings and underwear dusting color

on her face. In a long white dress that could be her
nightgown, the woman in white wades through grass-
thread holding her basket by its handle. She does not look

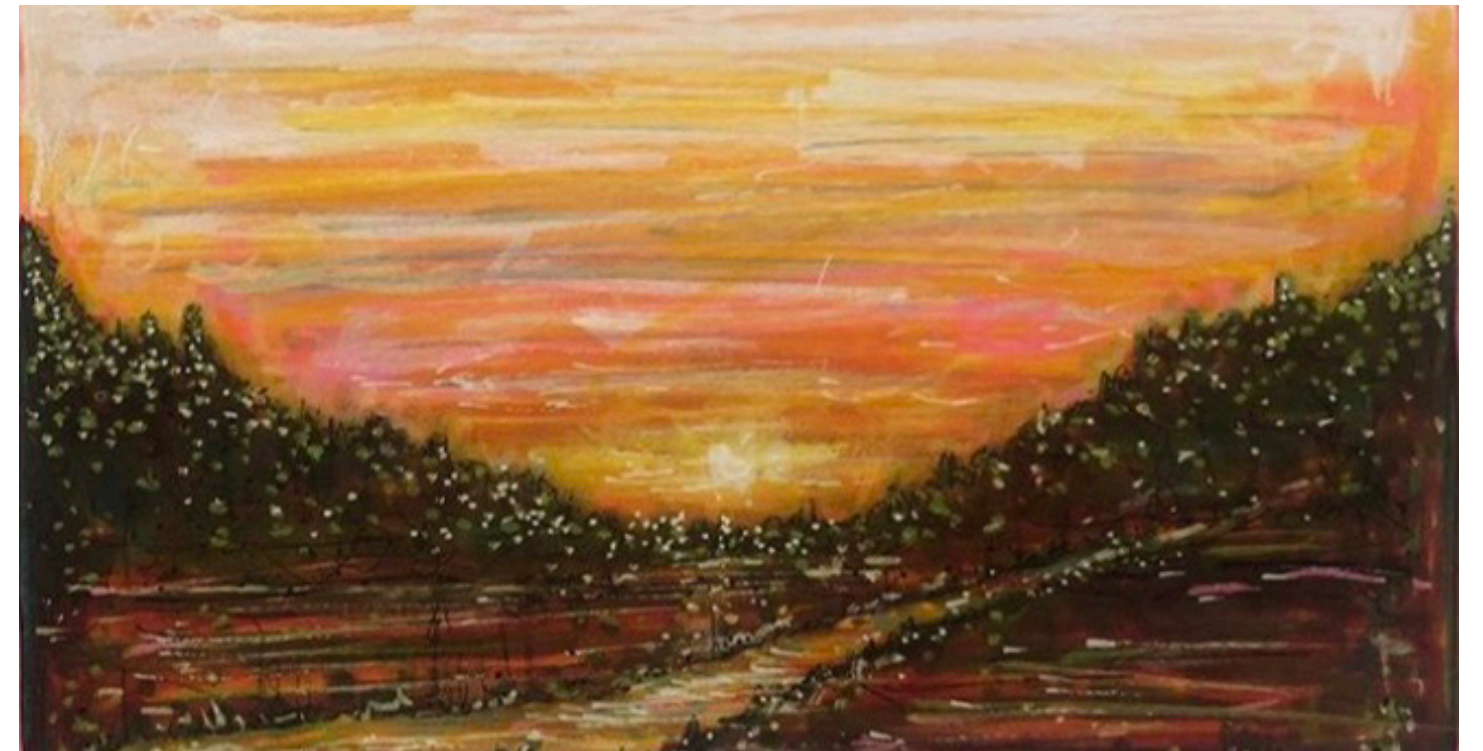
through the frame nor at the geese who stay near her
like toddlers. Because of me she stitched this woman,
lying in bed with a fragile, growing belly; because

of me, my mother wove thread through the cotton
as she laid in bed behind the vanity where she'd come
to hang her work. For nine months she stitched

cottages, a girl with her dog, this woman in white
in a field, set her work on the roundness holding me,
keeping thread-wrapped cards around her: a funereal

spray fit for Ophelia, but it was not herself she worried for
but me, having felt too many others pass through her
not yet bodies, but merely thick blood. Each backstitch

formed a toddler, a dog, a woman, a plea. She stood
before those pleas everyday combing my hair,
whiter than the woman in white's.



Fiction



The Homebrew Time Machine Club

Charles O'Donnell

I brought the beer the night we watched Jesus die. Every meeting is potluck, but beer duty rotates, and that was my night. I wish I could say that I went all out and got some artisanal craft beer—it's not every night we get to see the Son of God expire—but how was I to know? Deke—it was Deke's demo night—promised a good show but didn't share details. He's done that before, hyped his demo but showed nothing but fizzle. So, I bought Miller Lite. No one complained. It's not like we're connoisseurs. We don't come for the beer, anyway. We're time-travelers.

It took Deke an hour to set up while Eddie went over club business. Eddie likes that admin stuff—treasury report, membership report, upkeep on the club temporal resonance chamber—but the rest of us glaze over. He droned on while we watched Deke, who was hooking up his array to the temp-res chamber about the time Eddie asked if anyone had items for the newsletter. No one answered because we were all keeping a close eye on Deke, who's not the most conscientious guy, and one wrong connection to the chamber can release a tremendous amount of smoke, like the time Ahmad rolled phases and fried the tachyon emitter. We had to air out the place for days. That was last year and we can still smell the ozone.

There's not a lot of room in the club house, and the chamber takes up a lot of it. We were all squeezed into the one corner that was left after Deke mapped out the space he needed for his array. It was a crazy tangle of resonators, at least twenty, which meant that Deke took an awful long time verifying their positions with the club laser ranger. That ranger is top-of-the-line, and the club dropped a bundle on it. Gee, we *had* to—if you're off by a millimeter you'll miss your target by days—weeks, if you're *really* sloppy.

Which is why we were all curious about what Deke had planned, because he *never* takes this much time for a setup. He'll usually slap something together and if he can get within a year he's happy. Not that night. He checked and rechecked every coordinate against the configuration on his console. When he downloaded the data from the laser ranger and the console went green, he flashed a thumbs-up and even Eddie stopped talking and he and Deke checked out the config.

"What's on the program?" Eddie asked, but Deke just smiled tight-lipped and bounced his eyebrows up and down like he was eyeballing a stripper.

"Fellas, tonight we're going to solve a mystery that's confounded mankind for millennia," Deke said, like he was making a speech. Olga winced when Deke said "fellas" and "mankind." She's the only girl in the club and she's sensitive about that kind of thing. We watch what we say, generally, but Deke slips up when he's excited. "I've been working on this matrix for weeks. If my calculations are correct..."

"Whoa, wait," Lionel interrupted. Lionel's probably the sharpest relativistic theorist in the club, but he's also the mouthiest, which is why not everyone pays attention when he talks, because he's so annoying. "Are you saying you haven't run this matrix before?"

"I *simulated* it," Deke answered, real sarcastic.

"Not the same," Lionel went on. "Eddie, don't we have a policy on first runs with the club temp-res?"

"Lionel, do we have to do this every time?" Eddie complained. "No, there's no policy like that. *Crap, none* of us have their own chamber. *We all* do our first runs in the club."

"*I've* got a chamber."

Eddie rolled his eyes like he always does when Lionel brings up the fact that he's the only member with his own temp-res, and a clean, commercial model, not a hand-built kluge like the club's.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Lionel, we know all about your \$200,000 Mitsubishi *Chrono*. Thanks for bringing it up *again*."

"I'm just saying, if there's a mistake..."

"I checked the hookup myself. The wires are right. *Do you* want to check it?"

A lot of smirking went on, because Eddie is the most anally meticulous guy we've ever known and if he says the wires are right, they're *right*, and besides, if the resonators are misplaced, like I said, you'll just end up in the wrong time. A little unsettling, maybe, but no permanent damage.

Lionel pressed his lips together like he wanted to say more but his mouth thought better of it. Olga snickered.

"Can we get on with this?" Deke protested.

Eddie held out his hands like he was ushering Deke onto a stage. "Right, right, you were saying, mystery of the millennia..."

"Exactly!" Deke pressed a button on his console. The lights dimmed as the chamber powered on, giving off a low-frequency hum which vibrated the floor. The resonators snapped on with a little shudder, then stabilized as the field strength built up, indicated by the tensometer on the chamber, and the resonators glowing purple, then pink, then pink-white, and then white-white.

“Feels like a strong one,” Olga said like she knew what was coming, her medium-length brown hair rising until it stood straight out like a wispy afro. The rest of us felt it, too—hair standing up on our heads, necks and arms; even my eyebrows felt prickly. Deke was going *old* for sure—*ancient*, even.

“What’s the most consequential event in history?” Deke shouted over the rising whine from the chamber, trying to sound dramatic. “What *one day* changed the future of the world and the lives of *billions*?”

We had no idea, of course. We’d been playing around with time travel for years, so we knew that even little, tiny things that no one would think twice about when they happened could have huge impact. A couple years ago Olga traced the Hindenburg crash back to a luggage porter in Frankfurt closing the door to an unoccupied bathroom. That was a good piece of detective work on Olga’s part, and it really made a name for the club. All the members donated to buy her lunch in appreciation, though Lionel stayed away like he does most times he’s not the center of attention.

Deke looked at our blank faces, then dropped his jaw and made jazz hands. “Seriously? Not even a guess?” But nobody guessed, because we’d almost certainly get it wrong, and none of us likes to look stupid.

“Then I’ll just have to spring it on you.”

He punched another button. The chamber hummed louder and higher; the resonators glowed brighter, and the temporal matrix formed up and materialized the target.

Ever since the Hindenburg, nobody questions Olga’s chops.

The scene went dark, so dark we couldn’t see until our eyes adjusted. The ceiling morphed into greenish-black clouds boiling like a vat of tar. The whine from the chamber got drowned out by wind howling over moans and screams and crying, making for a scary scene, but what it was we couldn’t figure out until lightning flashed with a vicious crack and lit up the landscape: a hill, topped by three humongous crosses.

“No *way*,” Eddie blurted.

The rest of us watched slack-faced, unable to get a word out. Deke jumped up and down pumping his fists, shouting “Nailed it, nailed it, *nailed it!*”

“Fake!” Lionel shouted over the storm. “It’s a *spoof*. *No one* hits a two-thousand-year target that close. This crappy temp-res can’t even *handle* that long a thread.”

“It’s not *crappy*,” Eddie protested, “and I’m reading the coordinates right off the panel: 32 C.E., ancient Judea.” He grabbed the thermal scanner to check the temperature of the cable locks.

“How hot?” Olga asked.

“*Hot*,” Eddie answered. “Deke, can’t keep this up for long. Better get to the main event.”

“How did he even know the date?” Lionel kept on. “There’re no exact records. It’s all fake!”

Deke came at Lionel flapping his arms like a goose chasing a toddler, eyes narrow

and lips stretched in a crazy grin. Lionel stepped back as Derek got within a foot of him, arms still flapping. “We *researched* it, asshole. We did our *homework*. Me and *Olga*.”

Olga smiled wide with the tip of her tongue between her teeth. “Lotta hours hanging out in dusty old first-century Roman archives waiting for some schlub to pull the right scroll. Pure luck, really, but it helps if you can *read Latin!*”

That shut up Lionel. Ever since the Hindenburg, nobody questions Olga’s chops.

“Deke!” Eddie shouted, holding up the thermal scanner, “we’re redlining!”

“Oh, okay, sure,” Deke responded. He twisted a dial on the console. The view in the matrix zoomed in on the cross in the middle, like a telephoto lens, straight to the poor S.O.G.’s face, a giant head hanging down and to the side, filling the array from floor to ceiling. I grimaced, and I’ll bet everyone else did, too, but I can’t swear to it because I couldn’t look away, much as I wanted to.

No painting, no movie, no crucifix I ever saw prepped me for that sight: he looked like he’d done a face-plant in a roll of razor wire, then gone fifteen rounds with Ali at his peak. The thorns, they were *nasty*—inch-long spikes from some mutant middle-east murder tree, pounded into his skull up to the hilt. The Prince of Peace was *beat up*.

He was still alive, heaving with every breath, a good twenty seconds apart, like each one took it all out of him and he had to work up the strength to take another. But for all that, I couldn’t say from the look on him that he was in pain, or even uncomfortable. He looked like he was asleep, all tuckered out. It was the damndest thing.

Then he stopped—breathing, that is. He went past twenty seconds, then thirty, then a minute. His head twitched like he hiccuped and that was it. The biggest lightning bolt yet ripped across the sky, lighting up the scene like a strobe with a crack that hurt our ears. The wind whipped up harder than ever, and the lamentations went into overdrive. I took a long pull on my beer.

“Is that it, Deke?” Eddie shouted, pointing the thermal scanner at the B-phase cable lock.

“No! Not yet!” Deke answered. He went to the resonator at the corner of the array and gave it a tweak. The scene skewed and ran like a DVR in super-fast-forward, the storm noise playing at a high pitch, like screeching monkeys, until it went quiet and the matrix went dark. Deke stared at the console. “Olga?” he said, pointing.

Olga got her face right up to the console. She pulled out her pocket calculator and tapped a few keys, then showed it to Deke. “Do it,” he said.

She went to the corner resonator and gave it the lightest tap. The matrix flashed like a TV coming on, then resolved to a scene of another hillside, and what looked like a cave, the entrance blocked by a massive stone, barely visible in dim twilight just before dawn.

“Are you freaking *kidding* me?” Eddie whispered.

Deke was grinning like a hyena. He twisted the dial, enlarging the cave entrance until it filled the matrix. Sunlight struck the crest of the hill, then moved slowly downward. Every eye scrutinized the stone for any sign of movement. A pebble dislodged from the hillside, rolling down the side of the stone where it butted up against the cave, hitting the ground with a *chunk*.

The room was dead quiet. We all leaned in, holding our breath.

That’s when we smelled the ozone.

Things unraveled pretty quick from that point on. The scene broke up into splotches as the cable locks gave way and the cables snaked crazily spewing sparks like a firehose. Eddie sprinted for the emergency power off and smacked it with his fist. The matrix collapsed with a sizzle and the backup lights kicked in.

The bulkhead of the temp-res chamber was a scorched, smoking mess. We didn't know it at the time, but during repairs we found the overload took out not only the tachyon emitter, but seven of eight coherer cavities and cracked two insulators on the main bus.

"Fuck," Eddie muttered.

We all knew what it meant: at least a month of repairs and the entire treasury. That's not what we were thinking at the *time*, of course. What we *were* thinking was, What'd happened next?

We all looked at Lionel, the smug bastard.

"I guess y'all need a temp-res chamber, one that won't smoke itself to death holding up a two-thousand-year thread. Like, say, a Mitsubishi *Chrono*?"

Lionel was right where he wanted to be—the man in charge. Eventually, he agreed to let Deke and Olga use his *Chrono* to find out if that stone rolled aside, or if Jesus Christ was dead for good. But he didn't make it easy on them. They had to dicker.

Lionel's an atheist, after all.



Wild & Wonderful

David Kunkel

Three months in we decide to drive to the ocean. Spring's only just started, and people tell us Virginia will be cold as Toledo this time of year, but who knows how much longer she'll feel mobile. I wait for her cravings to start. For pickles and ice cream. Back rubs and foot massages. Twenty years old and I never seen the ocean. Well. I at least have to be able to describe it. Big, blue, stretched on forever, I have to be able to say, you know, we went when you weren't two inches tall. Drove out there in that same beat-up Volvo she takes you to school in, scared the brakes would drop out the bottom the whole way. So I tell her who cares if it's cold. Three months ain't so early.

We pack. Her cousin lives in Roanoke, and she says that's on the way, so we each bring a suitcase, four days' worth of clothes inside. Friday I get off work early, Monday I can feel a fever coming on. The forecast says rain and already the sky's gray, changed from bright and sunny as soon as we leave the driveway. Look at that I say. Would you look at that. She hardly listens, like it's my fault she's been to the ocean before. But we're on the highway, and a hundred fifty miles after that we're in Dayton. The sky gray.

The road around Dayton's crowded with construction and we sit in traffic. She fiddles with the radio and looks out the window, so I say you can tell winter's over. How come she says. I say there's only two seasons in Ohio and she smiles cause we both know, winter and roadwork. After that I say you ain't seen any cops yet have you and she says I told you to stop saying that. Ain't. I know you do it on purpose. Usually the police come out like crazy around the Dayton area. Crossing the border's great because there won't be any cops on highways in West Virginia. But in Ohio they pull you over for doing fifty-five in a fifty-fo. She says stop it you sound like an idiot, so I say listen. I put a true

to God mixtape in the tape deck. She can't believe the car even has one.

Now she looks straight ahead and has her feet up on the dashboard. You need a new car she says and I say for you, anything. She laughs like when she hopes I'm serious. The clouds are whiter now, and right when the first drop hits the windshield I'm saying I think we might've missed the storm. But it's only a drizzle, and it's only when we come up on trucks that it bothers me. I keep the wipers off as long as I can. She chews gum. When she chews gum she snaps it and it's snap snap like that while the rain starts down more, and her gum just snapping. The state line's an hour away and she's snap snapping. I turn on the windshield wipers. At first it seems fine. They go up along the glass, then pause. They come back. But when they come back they squeak, loud, and leave a trail of water behind. We can't see a hundred feet until they start up again then squeak on back.

God damn she says. Can't you get those damn things fixed. We drive more and she says can't you get them fixed. First the brakes now this. If only we can get to the state line I say and she says you know you have *got* to get those brakes fixed now. I mean Christ think about it. She rubs her stomach and I wonder if now's the time. I been keeping chocolate on hand.

The tape ends so I rewind and start it again. Through the wipers I recite the lines in my head. Some phrases I sing out loud and she looks at me. We already heard this she says. She hits eject.

For a while I drive on and it's the rain and the wipers. I squint through them to see the lines on the road. When we draw near a truck the water blurs out everything but the smudge of the brake lights and I say put the tape back in.

Put the tape back in I say.

Put the tape back in.

She looks at me like she can't hear me and snaps her gum. Is it so hard. Is it so hard to take the tape and put it back in the radio. Let's listen to something else she says. Something that'll make you talk like a normal person. Half a year together you know how I talk I say. She says I'll choose the music this time.

At least we're in West Virginia now. What I say. We're in West Virginia she says. Just passed the sign. You want to know something funny she asks me. The sign said wild and wonderful West Virginia.

I don't get it.

What's wonderful about West Virginia she asks. Unless you call trailer parks and road kill wonderful. I don't know what she's talking about. Nothing wrong with West Virginia I say and she if you don't think marrying your cousin's wrong. Maybe I'll marry your cousin I say. Do it. Maybe I'll marry somebody in West Virginia I say and then she lets the wipers talk.

At this point the road's down to one lane on each side and I tailgate a truck the whole next hour. The rain keeps on. It slows the truck way down and pounds heavier. But more water shuts the wipers up so finally we hear nothing but the drumming. Mountains rising up around us. I visited West Virginia plenty of times so I know what to expect. They start as hills, then grow a little higher, but still out the left window you know you'll see some flat ground with farmhouses. And think about how if you'd lived in a house like that growing up you could've gone out on weekends and run off with your

friends into the hills. Found some great sticks for swordfights, jumped off some ridges till you broke your leg. But then they just keep on going. It's hard to tell when you're in a real mountain but eventually looking out the window there are sharp drops on one side of the road and a wall on the other. Sometimes by accident you realize where you are and the scenery makes you stop to stare for a moment. The mountains aren't blue. Sometimes, purple.

Finally we merge into some more lanes and pick up speed. The car growls, only feeble, like the weakest little dog in the pack, like it might wheeze out and die from making a sound. I'm hungry she says. Okay I say what do you want me to do about it. Didn't you bring any food. Why can't we stop for lunch she says and I go not for another hour. I want to get through Charleston. And besides let's distance ourselves from this weather. Don't want to get caught in anything on the mountain. It's the fog you have to worry about she says. Rain's only water. She opens a new stick of gum.

I could go for a drink she says after a while, then laughs. Get it she says. Could you stop I say. Snapping your gum. It's driving me insane. She looks at me and I see out of the corner of my eye, I see her lean in, I see her put her teeth right up to my ear, her molars grinding back and forth with a high-pitched squeak every time they touch pink, and that gum coming up to the backs of her teeth, her tongue pushing at the back of it, pushing, pushing. Okay she says. Sorry she says.

We're really high up she says next. I bet if you squinted you could see the ocean from here.

Now we're on a hill and I have to keep my foot pressed all the way to the ground to keep us from sliding

No I say. Stop joking.

We're high up she says. Wild is right. Now we're on a hill and I have to keep my foot pressed all the way to the ground to keep us from sliding down backward. If you got lost in these mountains no one could ever find you she says. Charleston's coming up and I keep my foot to the floor. But I was right. No cops yet.

You know about that hotel up here she says. What hotel I say. There's a hotel up here she says, but she knows I didn't know. Of course I didn't know. She tells me all about it. She tells me there's a hotel that has these bunkers under it where the government was supposed to go if we ever got bombed. Only now the bunkers must be somewhere else because everyone knows about these ones. If you stay you can tour them, these giant concrete hallways and ballrooms under the ground. Isn't that crazy. Of course I wouldn't know about that. She'll tell me about some movie I haven't seen yet, something really life-defining, and she'll make me promise to watch it with her. Of course she will.

We drive through Charleston and by the time we reach the toll she mentions food four times. Now we been in the car for ages and I'm sore, right in my low back, and it must be the seats. It needs new seats too. And brakes. So once we pass the toll, I say okay. Next exit with a McDonald's.

It takes longer than we think and she says now I have to pee. Ain't that typical I

say. Stop saying that. You're an adult, you know. I've seen your high school report cards. Your mom showed me. I say maybe you have to start saying it to realize what you're missing.

Eventually we get off. It's a long slow ramp and I practically coast without touching either pedal. At the end we look around but can't see any more signs marking the way, just a gas station with a single pump and a building barely big enough for two people to stand in. I have to stop there she says and I reply you think they have a bathroom in there. We're here for McDonald's so let's find McDonald's and I drive past the gas station, left, because it must be that direction. God I have to pee she says. I say shut up you're making me nervous and I drive a little faster.

The road narrows down to one lane again. We wind through trees. It curves back and forth in hairpins and I slow to a crawl. With trees so thick on either side and turns so sharp we can't see past a few feet anywhere. I go, turn, go, turn, wind like an intestine. Now I feel my bladder clenching too. Just let me out on the side of the road she says. God damn it sit still we're finding this restaurant. Right around the next corner. There's no restaurant she says. Let me out. A car will hit us if we stop. It will fly around the corner. Right into the trunk and shove the Volvo into her squatting, pantsless, the bumper through her stomach. It's right around the damn corner I say calm down hold it you're not five years old are you I wonder if now's the time we turn the corner I see an M. Oh thank God she says. Thank me I say. I told you not to get out. When we stop, she practically dives out the door and runs in.

I stay in the car for a minute. Even though it's late for it, snow covers the grass around the parking lot, dirty and charcoaled. Here our car fits in. The dirty white and rusted metal match the filthy red of the pickup trucks, the mud stains around all the tires. Outside, it's cold. Unless they can see it from the top of the mountain none of these people ever seen the ocean, but still their cars have backseats.

I walk to the restaurant and find it clean. New. Beige tiles in the bathroom and black toilets, stalls with solid walls. When I walk to the line she calls me over and we decide on our order, and I buy chicken because it feels too classy for burgers. We fill our drinks to the top and I say be careful with that. We won't stop again till we get there. Calm down she says. I am calm. On the way out, a big family blocks the door. They stand trying to organize themselves so I count. One, two, and ten of them. Most of the boys wear hats and the girls look like the boys with their short hair. All but the youngest one got two chins and she seems adopted, the only skinny one, the only dirty one. She shepherds them away from the door like only she notices us. We get in the car.

At the stoplight, we sit behind another truck, an uncovered one, coal piled up the top. Where'd this even come from she asks and I glance in the mirrors. The stoplight only leads to the McDonald's and I've never seen this truck before. Bad luck I say. Watch it start raining again too. We follow it back to the highway, and on each of the hairpin turns, it stops, its bed blocking both lanes, crawling barely around each curve. Once we hit the highway again we pass it.

We're both eating our food, but she's louder than I am. Her mouth hangs open and I hear her breathing through it. The potato mush from her fries. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel but she stops me again. On the right I see a yellow sign. But I'm too far past to see what it says. I only see the yellow diamond. Slowly I put down the sand-

wich and grip the steering wheel with both hands.

What's wrong with you she says but I eye the guardrail to our right and move to the left lane. To the right the mountain drops away entirely. We keep climbing and whenever the guardrail ends up on our side I switch lanes, and my knuckles hurt so I let the steering wheel go a little. What's up she says again. On the right I see another yellow sign and it says fog.

The highway crests a hill and begins to drop. My foot hovers over the brake and the clouds hang solidly white over us, like they could rain again at any minute. We keep descending. Now she sits upright too, gripping the doorframe, her salad discarded on top of my half-eaten sandwich. Her hand reaches to the plastic hook attached to the ceiling for coat hangers. I watch it edge up. Just as she touches it the fog starts. Can't catch a break at all today I say and she says seriously. By now, we let the hill take us some. I almost say keep an eye out for runaway truck ramps. Some cars are in front of us. But the fog gets real heavy and they fade out slow. We'll never see them again. We won't know what happens to them, but run up on them as they burn away. The road goes down still, and I say you'd think we'd've reached the bottom by now but she stares forward like she's died and I say ain't you got nothin to say but even then she stays silent. To test how far ahead I can see I watch the lane lines. I see less and less of them. Three dashes now. I slow down. The brakes catch and fail. We slide on down. I try again and nothing. We keep straight down and two dashes now. I press the brakes. But without the world around I can't tell how fast we're going or whether we're slowing down and I hold the brakes pressed all the way to the floor. One dash now. They aren't working and I hold them down and I reach out with my hand but I can't tell where to put it. I can't think fast enough and then I decide but can't put my hand there because we jerk to a stop and I slam against the seatbelt. Her hands are up by her mouth. One dash now. I pull over to the shoulder, turn on the hazards, and cut the engine. Guess we got to wait I say.

While we sit I tell her about how I came to West Virginia only once before I was ten years old. And how we drove to a camping site, back in the end of the summer, when a hurricane was coming through. At the time we thought that meant maybe a little rain for a day. We'd be so far from the coast. So we set up camp, and my brother and sister and I stayed in a separate tent from our parents. In the night it collapsed under a foot of rain and winds. Winds I remember as loud. All five of us slept in the car that night. From here, I say. From here I can't tell which way to the ocean. I can't hear it from here. And she looks at me with the worst eyes, like eyes that already know.



Recital

Kelley Vick

It's 7:30am—too early. Grandma and Granddad will stay in bed until at least 10. They're old. They need their rest. I squeeze my eyelids together, hoping I can will myself back to sleep, but I know the effort is useless. I've never been one of those people who can wake up and go right back to sleep, especially on a day like today. I finally give up and slide out from under the covers.

It's cool in the hallway outside my bedroom. Granddad likes to sleep at 65 degrees. I grab my purple robe from the back of the door and pull it around my shoulders. The hardwood makes little sucking sounds at my bare feet as I head towards the kitchen. *The Bible of Southern Cooking* is still sitting on the counter. Last night, we had shrimp and grits. Both my grandparents grew up in the south, and despite living in Brooklyn for nearly 40 years, they still cook like they're in Georgia.

Across the hall, my fifth-grade class photo stares back at me from the wall where they hang all the family photos, lined up like trophies side-by-side in mismatched frames. I haven't changed much in the last year. Same long brown hair, same round glasses, same flat chest. Lots of girls in my class have boobs now. Sometimes I think I'll never have any. Not that it matters much. I'm pretty sure no boys would talk to me anyway.

The truth is, I don't really have many friends at school. I guess I kinda keep to myself on purpose. It's different when you live with grandparents. They're so disconnected. They don't understand stuff, won't let me go out much. And I don't really want people to come over. I don't like all the questions.

A couple of months ago, Grandma had a doctor's appointment right near my

school. She finished up around time for me to get out, so I guess she decided to walk me home. She was waiting out front when the bell rang. I saw her right away. It was hard to miss her. I'm not sure she could've made herself look any older if she'd tried. She was wearing one of those long "granny" style dresses that might look cool on a teenager or something but it just made Grandma look like a granny. Her turquoise reading glasses were still hanging around her neck on the chain, and her hair was pulled up in bun that looked like a cinnamon sugar doughnut. She'd been having foot problems, so she was wearing her "comfortable footwear," a clunky old pair of white running shoes, and she was walking with a limp. Billy Hamlin noticed her waving at me.

"Whoa, Tabitha. Your mom's, like, *really* old."

Excellent. Just what I wanted, to explain this all again. "She's not my mom, she's my grandmother."

"Oh, yeah? Where's your mom, then?"

"My mother's dead." That one usually shut people up pretty fast. But not Billy.

"Huh. Well, what about your dad?"

"He's working upstate. I live with my grandparents. Look, Billy, she's waiting. I really gotta go."

"Whoa. Your dad just, like, left you?" His voice was louder now. By this time a little crowd had gathered – five or six kids from our class and a couple of seventh graders. He had an audience and wanted to make sure everyone could hear. "What did you do, show him that picture you made in art class?"

"Whatever, Billy."

As I walked off towards my grandmother, I could hear a couple of other kids yelling stuff like, "your dad knows what a loser you are," and, "I'd leave you, too."

Grandma pretended she didn't notice. When I got home, I cried.

When I was really little, I lived with Dad in an apartment down the street. He hated grocery shopping, so we were over at my grandparents' all the time. We'd come for dinner every Sunday, and I'd usually end up staying with them one or two nights a week. One Sunday afternoon in May when we were getting ready to head over for dinner, my dad sat down on my bed looking really serious.

"Hey, Kiddo, sit down here for a second," he patted the space next to him. "Let's talk."

I finished squeezing the last three Barbies into my overnight bag and hopped up beside him. "Yeah, Dad, what's up?"

"You know I've been looking for a good job for a while."

"Yeah, Dad, I know."

"And it hasn't been easy."

"I know it hasn't."

"But I finally found something."

"Dad! That's great!"

I was so excited. Dad hadn't had a job for a few months and he'd been really sad and nervous. Sometimes he'd get really angry at the smallest thing, like when I accidentally spilled my juice all over the Sunday paper. He yelled; I cried. A few minutes later he came to my room and apologized. He said he'd had a lot on his mind and he didn't mean to take things out on me. I forgave him, of course. I always do. He's my dad.

Now that he'd found a good job, maybe he'd be happy again.

"But there's a catch," Dad said. "It's not exactly... Well, it's not really close by. It's a little ways upstate."

Now I was nervous.

"You mean we have to move? What about Grandma and Granddad?"

"No, Kiddo, you don't have to move." Dad put his arm around my shoulders. I slumped into his side.

"But I thought you said the job is upstate."

"You remember Bob Rushman, my old friend from school?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he bought an old farm just outside of Verbank a couple of years ago. He's running a CSA now – do you know what that is?"

"Yeah, it's like when Grandma gets those boxes of weird vegetables and stuff sent out from that place in New Jersey."

"Wait -- we're going to live on a *farm*?" Now I was really nervous.

"Right, well, Bob's sending out weird vegetables now and he needs someone to help out with all the deliveries and some other stuff around the farm. He can pay pretty good money, enough for us to get by on for now, anyway, and I'd be getting in early so it sounds like there's a good chance for a bigger job in the future."

"Wait -- we're going to live on a *farm*?" Now I was really nervous. "Dad, I thought you said we didn't have to move?"

"No, Kiddo, I said *you* don't have to move."

I froze. I felt like I was about to throw up.

"But – where will I – when'll you –" I tried to use my calm, big-girl voice, but it wasn't coming out quite right.

"You'll stay here with Grandma and Granddad so you can keep going with your music lessons and school, and I'll come back as soon as I can." He squeezed me tighter. "I don't want to leave, Kiddo, I really don't, but it won't be for too long. I'll just be up there for a few months getting things set up, and then I should be able to come back here for a while."

He left a week later. I felt sick the whole day. When it was finally time for him to leave, we stood in the doorway at Grandma and Granddad's for a long time, hugging. I was so sad for him to go and, at the same time, I couldn't wait for him to hurry up and walk out so it would all be over with.

"I love you, Kiddo," he said, holding my face in his hands. "Be a good girl. I know you will. I'll be back soon."

That was three years ago. I was eight. I've only seen him a few times since. He turns up on birthdays and most of the big holidays. I guess he's busy.

He'll be there today, though. He knows how hard I've been practicing. I heard Grandma tell him on the phone the last night.

He gave me the violin for my seventh birthday. That was my best birthday so far.

We went out to dinner at Giano's—I had spaghetti and Dad had lasagna —and then we went back to Grandma and Granddad's for dessert. Grandma made my favorite, strawberry cake. While we were licking the crumbs off our knives and forks, Dad brought out my present, a big box wrapped in pink paper nearly the same color as the icing, tied up with a floppy white bow. When I tore in and pulled out the violin, he told me I'd been dancing to the music coming up from Mrs. Hargrove's apartment since before I could walk. He said every time we'd visit my grandparents and Mrs. Hargrove was giving a lesson downstairs, I'd just sit and listen and rock back and forth in time with whatever song they were working on.

I've been playing almost five years now. I think I'm really pretty good at it. Mrs. Hargrove says I'm a "natural talent." I don't really like to play for a lot of people, though. I get nervous in front of a crowd. My hands start to shake, and I get all red and sometimes I feel like I can't breathe. I hate it. It's so hard to play the violin with shaky hands. So, the first few years, I didn't play in the recital. My grandparents said I didn't have to. But Mrs. Hargrove sat down with them last year and said she thought I should try it, that I had a chance at really being good at the violin—maybe even getting a scholarship or something—but I'd never be able to do anything if I couldn't play outside my bedroom. My grandparents have been encouraging me ever since.

This will be my first recital. I can do it, though. I know I can. I just need him to be there.

The church looks beautiful today with the sun coming in through the windows. Mrs. Hargrove says a church is the perfect place for a violin recital. "Excellent acoustics," she always says. She holds recitals for her students once a year, in the spring, on a Sunday afternoon after the church crowds have gone home.

I wish my mom could be here. Sometimes I miss her so much. I can barely remember her. I was only two when she died, but I miss her. It's funny how that happens. Maybe I just miss the idea of her. I think Dad misses her, too. He never talks about it, but I know he does. Every time someone mentions her name, "Remember that Christmas when Melanie made you dress up like Santa Claus?" or "Melanie used to love to play this song," he gets all funny and won't talk for a while. I never mention her. I hate it when he gets all funny.

Grandma says I look a lot like her. Everyone says it, actually. And Mrs. Hargrove says I got my musical talent from my mom. They were good friends, Mrs. Hargrove and Mom. At least, that's what Grandma says. I mean, Mom was a lot younger than Mrs. Hargrove, but sometimes really young people and really old people can be friends, I guess.

Mom met Mrs. Hargrove the same night she first met Grandma. I like to hear Grandma tell the story. She tells it about once a week.

"Your father was a bit of a rascal when he was younger." She loves the word rascal, uses it all the time. "And your granddad and I used to lay awake at night wondering what on earth would become of him."

I seriously doubt Granddad's ever lain awake at night worrying about anything. He can barely stay awake to watch a football game after lunch. But I always nod and let her go on because I want her to get to the part about Mom.

“One day he called and asked if he could bring a friend over for dinner. Well, you know I nearly fell over. He hardly ever made it home for dinner himself. Sometimes we didn’t see him for days.” She usually starts shaking her head at this part. “Most of his associates at the time were not of particularly strong character.

“But when he brought your mother home that night, I thought my prayers had been answered. What a beautiful girl! And so poised and polite. Honestly, I couldn’t figure out what she saw in Howard at the time. Turned out she was a wonderful influence on him, though, more so than I ever could’ve been.”

I know what Mom saw in him. I see it, too.

“Anyway, we were all sitting around the kitchen table—I think I made pot roast—and Mrs. Hargrove started playing the violin downstairs. Melanie sat straight up in her chair like someone stuck her with a pin. And, when she found out there was a music teacher living right downstairs, well, it wasn’t five more minutes before she went down to introduce herself. Your mother studied piano most of her life, you know.”

When my grandmother talks about my mom, she always gets all proud and braggish; you’d think she was talking about her own daughter.

“They were fast friends, your mother and Mrs. Hargrove. After that first night, I don’t think there was one time Melanie came over here that she didn’t make a point to go down and say hello to Mrs. Hargrove. You were taking violin lessons in the womb, dear.”

It’s 3:30pm. I go on at 4, I think. That’s what Mrs. Hargrove said. First Beth, then David, then me. I hope they don’t start early. I want him to have time to get here. There may be traffic. Granddad’s always saying the traffic these days is “a force to be reckoned with.”

My hands are shaking a little already. I hope the breathing exercises Mrs. Hargrove taught me will help. Deep breath in, count to five, deep breath out. Deep breath in, count to five, deep breath out. It seems to be working.

I went to see him once on the farm. Granddad drove me up for the day. He said the fresh air would be good for me. Dad and I rode around on the tractor and I helped him pick some strawberries. Then we boxed up some fruit and stuff so Dad could deliver it the next day. It was pretty great.

“Ladies and gentlemen, parents and friends...”

Is it that time already? I rub my sweating palms on my skirt.

“I’m so pleased you could join us here this afternoon. The children have been working hard all year and they’re very excited to share what they’ve learned with you today.”

When Mrs. Hargrove speaks, it almost sounds like she’s singing – must be all those years of teaching music. I like it. She always smells good, too, like flowers or something sweet. And she always wears bright colors. Today she’s wearing her special occasion scarf, a pink and blue one she always wears when she dresses up, fastened with a tiny gold violin pin.

“Beth Saunders will begin the program. Beth, come right up here,” Mrs. Hargrove steps to the side and gives a little nod to Beth as she walks to the front. Everyone claps. Beth looks a little nervous.

Where is he?

“Thank you Beth. That was beautiful.” Mrs. Hargrove sounds really happy. “Now I believe we have David Clifton. David, please --”

I can see a little sliver of light through a crack in the door; someone’s coming in. I hold my breath. Oh, please, let this be him. The door opens a little wider, and I can just start to see his outline against the bright light of the parking lot—a little shorter than Granddad, but still much taller than me, wide in the shoulders with long arms and thick legs. He pulls the heavy church door back in one slow, easy motion. I try hard to catch the little squeal of happiness in my throat before it escapes out my mouth. I get it just in time.

Dad strides in down the center aisle, and glances around for the nearest seat to tuck into, giving a little head bob, shoulder shrug, and sheepish grin that seems to say, “whoops, late again,” to anyone who makes eye contact. After a few seconds, he spots my grandparents in the fifth row. They’ve saved him a seat. He squeezes in and sits down just as David finishes his last few bars.

Is it possible to have a heart attack at the age of 11?

I’m up. I see Mrs. Hargrove stand in the front and gesture towards me, but I don’t hear what she’s saying. My chest feels tight. Is it possible to have a heart attack at the age of 11? I walk slowly to the front, violin in one hand, bow in the other, and take my place center stage, right underneath the big wooden cross. The sun is in my eyes, and it’s hard to make out any faces in the crowd. I think that’s a good thing. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. I decide not to count to five this time. One last breath and I pull the violin up underneath my chin. My right arm lifts the bow – my limbs seem to be moving involuntarily now -- and drags it across the strings. For the next five minutes, my arms and fingers play the part of “Spring” they’ve been working on for the past year.

When they finish, the applause sounds like thunder. I’m so relieved, I nearly fall over. My legs feel all wobbly and my heart is still pounding. But I did it. I really did it. And he was here to see it. I knew he would be. He looks so proud; that huge smile on his face is all I can see right now. I want to remember this moment – this feeling. I feel like I can do anything. I go back to my seat in the front row with the other students, but I hardly hear any of the other performances.

As the last girl finishes, I push off my seat and head straight back to the fifth row. My grandmother catches me first.

“Tabitha, my dear, you were just wonderful. Just wonderful.” She claps her hands as she says the last “wonderful.”

“Thanks Grandma.” I give her a quick hug then turn right to Dad.

“That was first rate, Kiddo,” he says. “When I closed my eyes, I thought I was listening to Vivaldi.” He reaches out for a hug and I’m finally in his arms. He’s wearing the cologne that smells like cedar and pepper, the same stuff he wore when I was little. It’s the best thing I’ve ever smelled.

“Whadda ya say we go get a few scoops?” my grandfather says, patting me on the

shoulder. “I know someone here who’s a sucker for mint chocolate chip.”

“Sounds good to me, Pop,” my dad says. I feel so happy I’m afraid I might explode.

The ice cream parlor is new but it’s made to look like one of those old timey soda shops. They have red and white chairs with curly chrome backs that look like hearts, and the guy behind the counter wears a red and white striped apron over a white collared shirt and one of those soda-guy hats that comes to a point in the front and back. He smiles when we walk in.

“Hello there! What can I get you today?”

My dad puts his hand on my shoulder and guides me to the counter. “Sir, today you have the privilege of serving the next great violin superstar.” He keeps his hand on my shoulder while he talks. “This little lady just finished her first violin recital, and she was incredible. Give her anything she wants.”

The man behind the counter looks down at me and his smile gets bigger. “Right away, sir,” he says and winks at me. “What’ll it be?”

“Mint chocolate chip,” I say. “Two scoops in a sugar cone!”

“Coming right up! And what about everyone else?” He looks up at my dad and then back to Grandma and Granddad.

“Same for me,” Dad says. “Mom, what about you? I’m buying.”

“Oh, I think I’ll have one scoop of pecan praline in a cup, please.”

Grandma always gets pecan praline.

“Pop, what about you?”

“Chocolate for me,” Granddad says. “Don’t know why anyone would ever want anything else. Two scoops in a cup, please.” He gives the man behind the counter a smile like they’re sharing an inside joke.

We all get our ice cream and sit down at a table by the window. The sun coming in feels warm on my face and I have to squint against the glare but I like it.

“Well, Howard,” my Grandma says. “How are things on the farm?”

“They’re good, Mom. Pretty good.” I can tell my dad wants to leave it at that. I wish Grandma wouldn’t press him, but I know she will.

“You’ve been up there quite a long while now.”

“Yeah, Mom, it’s been a while.”

“Any plans for coming home?” I see Dad’s back stiffen a little. My stomach twitches.

“As soon as I can, Mom.”

“Well, you’ve been saying that for years now, dear.”

“I know that, Mom.” Dad’s looking down at his little paper napkin, rubbing it between his fingers. “I’m trying my best to get things set up to provide a good life for Tabitha.” He glances over at me and I try to give him an appreciative smile. “Maybe I can make enough to send her to that fancy music school Mrs. Hargrove keeps mentioning.” He raises his eyebrows a little and glances over at me again and winks.

“Don’t you think a good life would include seeing her father more than once or twice a year?” Grandma still has a smile plastered across her face. I think in the south they must teach everyone how to say mean things with a nice expression. Grandma is

especially good at it. “I mean, how long can it possibly take to ‘get things set up?’ For heaven’s sake, dear, you’re basically a glorified delivery boy.”

That does it. Dad’s smile melts and his face gets all red. For a second, I think he’s not going to say anything, but then he puts what’s left of his cone down on the napkin and turns around in his chair to look my Grandma right in the eye.

“You know what, Mom, *this* is exactly why I don’t come back more. If it could be a pleasant experience just one *fucking time*, then maybe I’d come around.”

Whomp! Granddad slams his hand down on the table so hard I feel the air whoosh up on my face. “Don’t you speak to your mother like that!”

Tears start burning in my eyes and I stare at the ceiling to try to keep myself from crying. A few other people in the shop turn around and look at our table to see what’s going on. I want to crawl under the table and hide but instead I stay perfectly still.

Grandma sits straight up in her chair and stares out the window.

“Look, Mom, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. Really.”

“It’s okay, Howard. I’m used to it.”

“Well, are we all done here?” Granddad starts grabbing the ice cream cups and spoons and heading for the trashcan by the door. I haven’t quite finished my cone but I don’t feel like I can eat anything else now anyway.

“Yes,” I say. “Let’s go.”

By the time we make it back to Grandma and Granddad’s it’s starting to get dark. Grandma usually starts cooking at six, but it’s almost seven and she walks over to her chair and sits down and opens up last month’s issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

Dad and Granddad are busy pretending everything is fine. They always do that when Grandma gets mad. Grandma gets really quiet and Granddad—Dad, too, if he’s around—pretends he doesn’t notice. One time a few years ago when I still lived with Dad, we came over early on a Sunday afternoon for dinner. Granddad was outside sweeping the front steps when Dad and I walked up.

“Uh oh, Pop. This doesn’t look good.” Dad was trying to look serious but he was having trouble hiding his grin.

“Oh, she’s in a mood, Son. I’d tread carefully if you’re going in there.”

“What’d you do now, Pop?”

“How the hell should I know?” Granddad started sweeping a little faster. “Obviously something, but I have no idea what.”

Dad motioned for me to go in ahead of him. We walked up the stairs to the second floor and into the apartment. Grandma was sitting in her chair when we walked in. She didn’t even look up from her book.

“You see your father out there?”

“Yep,” Dad nodded even though Grandma wasn’t looking. “He’s out front sweeping the steps.”

“Sweeping the steps? Good lord. Whatever for? We have a super who does that.”

“I know, Mom. Not sure what he’s up to.”

“He said —” I started to explain but stopped talking when Dad looked over at me and shook his head.

“What, Tabitha?”

“Nothing, Grandma.”

I looked back at Dad and he motioned for me to meet him in the back bedroom. “Tabitha, come back here and let’s see if we can find that old yearbook I was telling you about.”

When we got just far enough that Grandma couldn’t hear, Dad whispered, “Don’t get her all riled up again, okay, Kiddo? If we can just get her mind off of whatever it is, believe me, it’s better for all of us.”

I liked sharing this secret mission with Dad.

When I walked back into the living room, I headed straight for Grandma. I crawled up into her lap and put my arm around her. “What are we having for dinner, Grandma? I hope it’s chicken pot pie.” I knew it was. “I’ve been craving your chicken pot pie for days.”

“Well, sweetie, you’re in luck.” Grandma couldn’t help but smile, and soon she’d forgotten whatever it was she’d been mad about. Granddad came back inside a few minutes later and we ended up having a fun night. Dad seemed really proud of me. I was proud that he was proud.

Grandma’s been staring at the same page for the last five minutes. There’s no way she’s reading that slowly. Grandma’s a pretty fast reader. She reads all the time, always has a book on the nightstand by her bed.

Granddad’s pretending to read the paper and Dad’s making a sandwich in the kitchen. I guess he’s given up on Grandma cooking tonight. He asks if I want one but I still don’t feel like eating. I’m trying to work on a puzzle on the floor. Mrs. Hargrove gave it to me for my birthday, a picture of a girl playing a violin in a field of purple flowers. It’s kind of cheesy, but I like it. Tonight I can’t concentrate, though.

“I’m going to brush my teeth and put on my pajamas.” I make the announcement to the room but no one responds. They’re all too busy pretending to be busy. I walk into the hall bathroom and shut the door behind me.

They don’t think I can hear them, but I can.

“Howard?”

“Yeah, mom?”

“What was it? What was it that I did wrong?”

“Oh, come on, Mom. Don’t start on me again.”

“I need to know, Howard. What did I do to drive you away?”

“Nothing, Mom. It’s nothing to do with you. It’s just –“

“Well, it must’ve been *something*. A well-adjusted father doesn’t just abandon his only daughter. She plays tough, but she’s not that tough, Howard. Do you know that it took a year for that child back there to stop staring at the door, waiting for you to walk back in, like some kind of abandoned puppy?”

“Do you think I wanted to leave her, Mom? Is that what you think? Of course I didn’t. I didn’t know what else to do. I was out of money, out of options, and she was getting to that age where she starts to ask a lot of questions – questions her mother could’ve handled, but not me. Melanie always knew what to do, what to say, how to act. I don’t know any of that, Mom. Not a damn thing.”

It’s quiet for a long time. Then I hear my dad again.

“Thinking about Melanie makes me feel so lost. It reminds me of everything I

don’t know.”

I want to run out of the bathroom and give my dad a huge hug, tell him that I love him and I don’t care if he knows all the stuff mom knew. He’s still my dad and that’s enough. But I know I can’t. I can’t let them know I was listening. Grandma says it’s bad manners to eavesdrop. And she says good manners are one of the most important qualities a young girl can have.

My hands are shaking a little and it’s hard to get the toothpaste on the brush, but somehow I manage. Staring into the mirror and sliding the brush around on my teeth, I wonder what things would be like now if mom hadn’t died. Would I live with her and Dad in a nice little apartment down the street? Would she still tuck me in at night and sit on my bed for a while and talk to me about my day, and music and boys? Would I wake up in the morning to the sound of her and Dad laughing in the kitchen while they make their morning coffee? Would she come to all my school events and violin recitals and help me do my hair and buy me my first tube of lipstick and show me how to wear it so that I don’t look like a floozy? Would we all be happy?

When I get to the living room, I act like everything’s normal. Grandma plays the same game.

I finish brushing my teeth and grab the pink stripy pajamas Grandma left folded on top of the hamper for me. I pull on the pants, then the shirt. Deep breath in, count to five, deep breath out. It takes another minute or two for me to settle myself. I do a few more of my breathing exercises before I feel calm enough to grab the doorknob, twist to the right and walk out.

When I get to the living room, I act like everything’s normal. Grandma plays the same game. She’s got her smile plastered back on now.

“Hi, sweetheart. All ready for bed?” she says.

“Yep.” I look over at my dad. “Bathroom’s all yours, Dad.”

“Clean towels are in the linen closet.” Grandma’s voice is chirpy but she’s looking back down at her magazine.

“I don’t need a towel, Mom. I’m not staying.”

“What? Son,” Granddad looks concerned. “Surely you don’t have to go back to-night? It’s getting late already.”

“Sorry, Pop, it’s a long drive back and I gotta start work early in the morning,” Dad says. “And you’re right, it is getting late so I guess I better start heading out.” He starts getting up before he even finishes the sentence.

I feel like someone just punched me in the stomach.

“Howard, honey, we thought you’d at least stay the night.” Grandma’s let her smile fall. She throws her magazine into the basket beside her chair.

“Stay, Dad.” I’m trying to sound casual, but I’m nearly begging. “At least for a little while longer.”

Dad’s already crossing the room towards the door. “Sorry, everybody. I have to get back upstate. Early day tomorrow. And now that I’ve seen what kind of talent we’re

dealing with here,” he points his thumb towards me, “I gotta work extra hard to make sure we’ve got that money for Juilliard when the time comes.”

He smiles and cups my chin in his hand. “I love you, Kiddo. You’re growing into such an amazing young woman.” He stops for a second and then he says, “You remind me so much of your mother.”

I wait for the door to close behind him. Then I walk back to my room and let the tears fall out of my eyes. After a while, I stop crying.

Contributors

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David Kunkel writes fiction and poetry from his home in Madison, Wisconsin. His writing has appeared in a number of magazines, including *Bitterzoet*, *plain china*,

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Charles O’Donnell writes thrillers with high-tech themes in international and futuristic settings. His works include the espionage thriller “The Girlfriend Experience,” the political thriller “Moment of Conception,” and the dystopian novel “Shredded.” Charles recently retired from a career in engineering to write full-time, drawing on his experience leading teams in many countries to create compelling settings in faraway lands. Charles lives with Helen, his wife and life partner in Westerville, Ohio.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe is a poet and visual artist; she is the author of five poetry collections, “BEAST”, (winner, 2014 Stevens Manuscript Prize (NFSPS Press, 2014), “Sky Pilot” (Finishing Line Press, 2012), “Magnalia”, (2018 Eyewear Press Chapbook Competition) and “a daughter’s aubade/ sailing out from Sognefjord” (winner, Fledge Poetry Competition, Middle Creek Press, 2018). Most recently she is the winner of the Brighthorse Press Poetry Book Prize; her manuscript “in the bare bones house of was” will be published in 2019. Her poems have appeared in *The London Magazine*, *Comstock Review*, *Off the Coast*, *Narrative Magazine*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Bare Fiction*, *Matador Review*, *Ruminate*, *Crosswinds Review*, *Crab Creek Review* and *Sentinel Quarterly Literary Review (UK)*, among others. She has won or been shortlisted for numerous literary awards including *Fish Poetry*

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