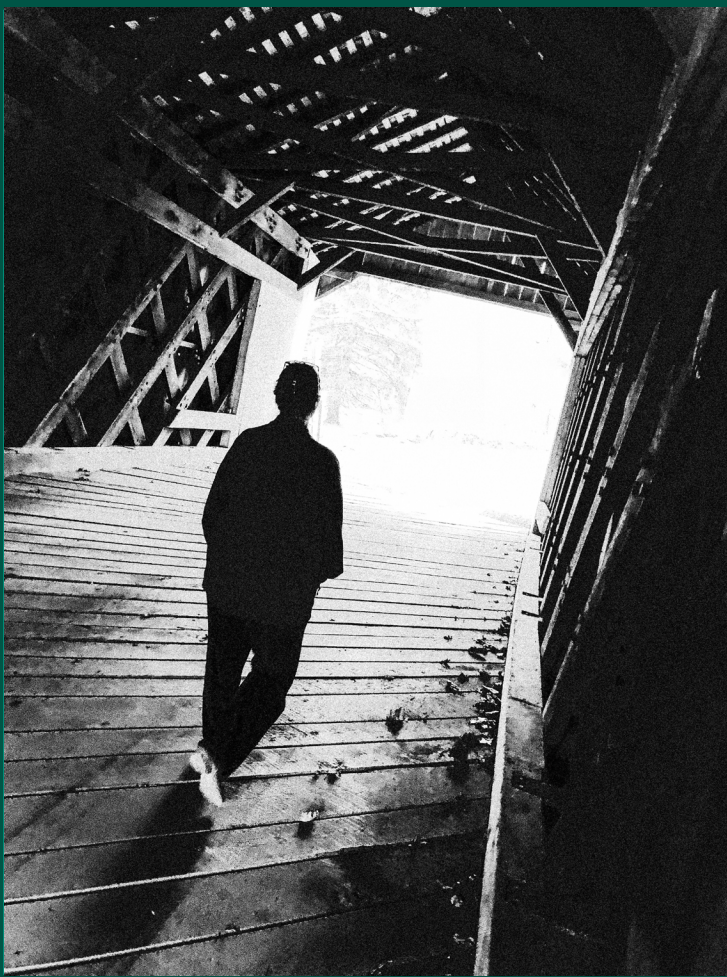


Kelsey

REVIEW

2019

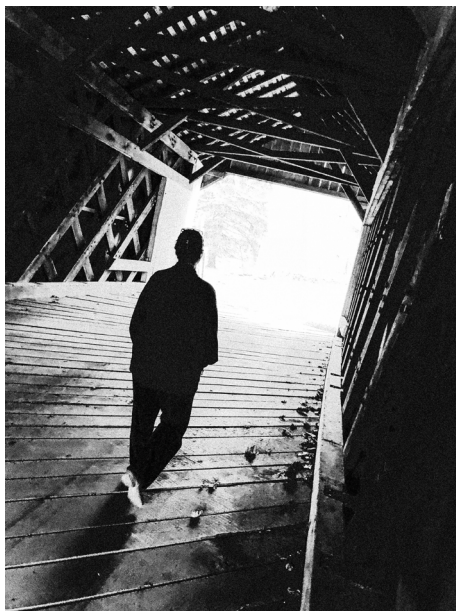


MERCER

COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Moving You Forward >>>

Kelsey REVIEW



Fall 2019

Volume XXXVIII



MERCER
COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Moving You Forward >>>

.....

Upon request, the *Kelsey Review* is available in alternative format for the visually impaired.

Kelsey Review 2019

Copyright © 2019

It is illegal to reproduce any part of this publication unless written permission is obtained from the individual author.

ISSN 0451-6338

The Kelsey Review is published annually by Mercer County Community College, 1200 Old Trenton Road, West Windsor, New Jersey 08550.

Manuscripts for the *Kelsey Review* are solicited exclusively from people living and working in Mercer County, New Jersey.

E-mail: Kelsey.Review@mccc.edu



The Kelsey Review is published by Mercer County Community College with the financial support of that institution and the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission, through funding from the Mercer County Board of Chosen Freeholders and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a partner agency of the National Endowment of the Arts.

As a community-based publication, we welcome sponsors and supporters interested in joining the *Kelsey Review* and other MCCC endeavors.

From the President...

MCCC is delighted to share with you the work of many local writers and artists in the *Kelsey Review*. This year marks *Kelsey Review's* 38th issue, and it is a pleasure to see how this journal continues to serve the community by sharing the work of talented individuals who live and work in the larger Mercer County area. This literary journal is just one of the many ways the College shares the cultural wealth of our area.

Mercer County Community College directly serves thousands of county residents, and indirectly tens of thousands through its many ties to the community. WWFM broadcasts quality programming to the county and even the world through the internet. Kelsey Theater stages a wide range of drama for county audiences, who also have access to the college's Art Gallery. Our nationally-ranked MCCC athletic teams offer chances to root for stellar local athletes. Learn more about the college and Mercer County at www.mccc.edu.

Kelsey Review is available in print as well as online, where it can be shared world-wide! To keep up with the *Review* year-round, "like" the publication on Facebook.

The *Kelsey Review* is distributed in part through the Mercer County public library system and funded by Mercer County Community College and the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission. Each edition of the *Review* presents professional-quality poetry, fiction, non-fiction and art that provokes thought and with luck, inspiration. Enjoy what you find here.

Sincerely,



Jianping Wang, Ed.D.
President
Mercer County Community College

.....

From the Editor...

Each year I put together the new issue of *Kelsey Review*, I feel astonished at the amount of local talent we are lucky enough to publish. This year is no different. From the well-crafted poems of Lauralee Leonard that open the issue, to Barbara Krasner's moving fiction that ends it, we have an issue brimming with all the stuff that makes us human. There's humor (see "A Loaf of Bread, A Jug of Milk"), there's love in its many forms (see "For My Father," "*77," "The Museum of Broken Relationships"), there's disappointment ("Dancing with Paul,"), and there's the past, always haunting us (see poems by Steve Smith and Wanda Praisner).

Of course, there's much more—more fiction with memorable characters and more poems with memorable images. We've even been lucky enough to get several pieces of art for this issue, from the black and white cover photo, to other photos from poet Lauren Fedorko, and even sketches from cover artist Dave Olson. These pieces of art complement the haunting but sometimes humorous tone of the pieces in this issue. Also, for any of you superhero fans out there: we even have a superhero story! (See "Nemesis" by Michael Zimmerman, new to these pages.) Also new to these pages is local student Gwen Bernick, whose poem blew us away, especially given her young age. Finally, we have two reviews of books by local authors: Donna J. Gelagotis Lee, and Nancy Demme, who you may remember from previous issues of *Kelsey Review*.

Contributors new and old, thank you for sharing your work! The work of a writer can be lonely sometimes, which is why it's a thrill to be able to share all of this work, sown in silence, with our local readers and even wider online audience. Readers, enjoy!

Jacqueline Vogtman
Editor

Table of Contents

“My Mother’s House,” Lauralee Leonard	2
“Cousin Francine,” Lauralee Leonard	3
“Jackie, Patty, Mother and Me,” Ilene Dube	4
“For My Father,” Lauren Fedorko	10
“Wander,” Lauren Fedorko	11
“Dancing With Paul,” Judith Salcewicz	12
“What I told my therapist friend when he asked me what it was like growing up in Edgewater,” Steve Smith	14
“Boulder Lake, WI,” Nancy Scott	15
“Blanketing Fog,” Lauren Fedorko	16
“Honor Bright,” Donna Wolfe	17
“*77,” Gwen Bernick	22
“The Museum of Broken Relationships,” Elane Gutterman	24
“Delicious Embarrassing,” Dave Olson	25
“What If,” Joanne Sutera	26
“The Lilies of Frida Kahlo,” Arlene Gralla Feldman	27
“Free State,” D.E. Steward	28
“A Loaf of Bread, A Jug of Milk,” Allen Appel	32
“Jonah’s Wail,” Leonora Obed	34
“Nemesis,” Michael Zimmerman	35
“Which Why What Where and When, at School in Ireland,” Lavinia Kumar	42
“A Caring Hand,” Dave Olson	43
“All That Comes,” Wanda Praisner	44
“Enough,” Barbara Krasner	45
Book Review: <i>Intersection on Neptune</i> by Donna J. Gelagotis Lee, Jacqueline Vogtman	53
Book Review: <i>The Ride</i> by Nancy Demme, Jacqueline Vogtman	54
Contributors	56
Editors & Staff	59
Submission guidelines	60

Cover Art

“Kathleen’s Bridge,” Dave Olson

Editorial Board

Jacqueline Vogtman, *Editor*

Roberta Clipper, *Fiction Editor*

Luray Gross, *Poetry Editor*

Ellen Jacko, *Poetry Editor*

Layout: Daniel Migliaccio

LAURALEE LEONARD

My Mother's House

It's the bricks of it -
how the red is quiet,
laid out end to end
in small repeating
rectangles, held together
with a simple grey mortar.

It's only a facade
she'd make sure to remind us.

No matter.
Inside is the beginning
of all the stories
I'll ever tell.

LAURALEE LEONARD

Cousin Francine

Two dozen yellow roses
brought to you that icy night

a meager gift
for what you did

lifting my father
into his final days.

ILENE DUBE

Jackie, Patty, Mother and Me

In the 1960s, my mother belonged to the Jackie lookalike club. Wearing her hair in a bouffant, she studied Jackie's couture in *Women's Wear Daily*, then bought the *Vogue* patterns.

My mother subscribed to *House Beautiful*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *1001 Decorating Ideas* and decorated our Brooklyn home to look just like the White House. She bought upholstery fabric from a discount store in Boro Park where the shop owner swore up and down that these were the fabrics Jackie used.

From a recipe in *Lady's Home Journal* my mother learned to cook the Beef Wellington Jackie's chef made famous.

She once saw Jackie – in person! – rummaging through a sale bin at Bonwit Teller, in search of a hat. My mother could hardly move, let alone speak. A sale bin! She watched as Jackie picked up a navy blue bonnet with grosgrain ribbon. She felt it, checked inside, then put it back and disappeared. When my mother could compose herself – she could hardly remove her eyes from that hat – she picked it up and brought it directly to the sales clerk, not even trying it on. There is a three-year period in our family album during which my mother is wearing that hat in every picture.

One afternoon, my mother and brother and I took the subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan. My brother was the same age as John John, and I was a year older than Caroline. My mother dressed my brother in a suit that itched so bad it made him hyperactive. I wore a coat with a black velvet collar and a bonnet tied under my chin.

The man who sat across from us smelled like liquor.

"Ain't no one goin' to believe who I rode the train with," he kept saying.

We just sat there quietly, as if we really were Jackie and Caroline and John John.

We got off in Little Italy. We walked by a cobblestone alley way, and as we turned our heads to explore the unknown, we saw a man peeing into a garbage can. My mother turned away, pretending not to notice, and I copied her, but my brother – John John – just stared. I wondered if the real Jackie and Caroline and John John ever saw a man pee into a garbage can.

When I graduated from college, Caroline went to work at the Metropolitan Museum, and then to law school. I got a job operating the press camera for *Flatbush Life*. It was a good job – I was paid more than minimum wage and got to mingle with journalists.

During break, I read the *New York Post*. It was the summer of Patty Hearst. I loved her the first time I saw her picture, wearing military fatigues, a black beret, and pointing an automatic. At that moment, I knew she was my Jackie. She had the same aristocratic air as Jackie, the same classic beauty, but she was so much more my type.

.....

Like Patty, I was born in 1954. Patty grew up in San Simeon, a castle. I grew up in the White House. We both took piano lessons. I once rode a horse too. She came from a publishing empire and I was working my way into one.

There were only two reporters for *Flatbush Life*, and they covered everything – crime, local government, grand openings of new stores, and fetes at the Prospect Park Boat House. Sid was the editor-in-chief. He told people his name was an acronym for sudden infant death syndrome. He wore the same thing every day, Army fatigues and combat boots. His hairline was slightly receding. I developed a wild crush.

All day long, I thought of things I wanted to tell Sid. In my head I rehearsed the conversations. But then when I was with him, I couldn't think of anything to say.

At night, I dreamed about him, and put myself in the dreams wearing combat clothes like Tanya's. If I ever had to accompany him on an assignment, I wanted to be prepared. On my meager wages I bought a vest with lots of pockets and a large rucksack in which I'd tote his tape players, notebooks, anything he needed.

He was my very own Cinque. He never locked me in a closet or brainwashed me, like the real Cinque did with Tanya, but I imagined he could. His eyes were dark circles, and when I looked into them, it was like looking into infinity. I'd do anything he asked.

On Wednesday nights, we put the paper to bed at three or four in the morning. Most of the staff went out to a bar in the neighborhood. Nobody ever officially invited me, but I knew that this was my chance to get closer to Sid so one night I tagged along.

The name of the bar was O'Reilly's. Two typesetters, the art director, the publisher's assistant, Sid and I sat at a distressed wood table, glassed over with polyurethane resin. Besides the *Flatbush Life* staff, there were two men and a woman sitting in the back. The woman had long gray hair, parted in the center, and she sat there quietly, looking at Sid.

Everyone at our table drank beer. Sid drank bourbon. The bartender refilled his glass four times. I ordered a glass of sherry. One of the typesetters, Bijac, asked me if I'd ever seen the tattoos Sid got in Vietnam. I shook my head.

"Show her," said Bijac.

Sid placed a hand on Bijac's head, then pounded into it with the other hand. Bijac laughed. Sid drank half his bourbon, then rolled up his sleeve and showed me his bulging muscle, covered with ink. I wanted to feel it. I thought I would faint.

"Show her your scar," said Russell, the art director. "Did you know that Sid had a tumor removed from his head?"

"Hey, tell her my life story," said Sid. He turned to me. "Let's get out of here." I followed him like a little kid following a big brother. I was surprised to see it was starting to get light out. We walked up Newkirk Avenue, and he took my hand in his.

"I was bald for almost a year," he said. "First they shaved me for the surgery, and then the radiation."

.....

Sid drove a maroon Matador that had gray remodeling compound on the driver's side doors. We drove down Flatbush Avenue, over the Brooklyn Bridge, and into Chinatown. It was breakfast time, and I thought he was going to take me to Dim Sum. Maybe we'd meet with some other journalists. Instead, we parked on a deserted street. There was a parking meter that was loose in the ground. Sid asked me to help him, and together we lifted it from the ground – it was the heaviest thing in the universe – and dropped it into the trunk of his Matador.

Sid drove to a shipyard in Red Hook. It was still predawn, and I figured this was where a lot of hit men took their victims. I was scared, but Sid didn't have much to say. He got out a sledgehammer and tried to bust open the parking meter. He was working up a sweat, and his face looked red and fat. I sat in the car, waiting. If I were my mother, I'd have needlepoint or knitting to occupy me. I thought about all the places my parents were probably calling, trying to find me.

He came back in the car and exhaled in exasperation. "It's no use," he said. "They make those things so they're impossible to open. Help me lift it back into the trunk."

Sid drove me to the office. I guess he didn't know what else to do with me. He pulled up alongside, and I opened the door. I was waiting for him to say something, but he didn't, so I got out. As soon as I closed the door, he sped away.

Everyone came in late on Thursdays. Sid usually took the day off to rest. Since I was there, I opened the office at 9 a.m.

I called my parents and told them I was still at work. They were frantic to know where I'd been, and I told them I'd fallen asleep on the office couch and hadn't heard the phone ringing.

Sid came back in the afternoon. He was unshaved and seemed nervous. "I have to talk to you," he said. We went into the dark room, where I operated the camera. "I need somewhere to stash the meter," he said. "Can we keep it at your place?"

I looked into those dark eyes. They controlled me. I believed that somewhere inside him was a good person who'd been through some difficult moments. I wanted to know his story. "Sure," I said.

"I'll drive you home after work."

A little later, the gray-haired woman who'd been staring at Sid in the bar came into the office. She asked for him. He went up to the reception area to talk to her. The front of the office had big glass windows, and from the street it looked like a store. I saw Sid grumble, and I saw the woman get angry. Finally he reached into his pocket, took out his wallet and gave her some money. She took it and left.

I was right – there was good inside of him.

I was ready to go home, exhausted from not having slept, but I waited until 6 p.m. when Sid gave me the signal he was ready. I walked with him to the Matador, wishing he'd hold my hand. I walked close to him, brushing up against him. He didn't seem to

.....

notice. He was busy thinking about his meter.

I gave him directions to my house, and he drove very fast, then braked hard at the corners. One time I nearly went through the windshield (there were no seatbelts in his car). We parked a block from my house, and when he opened the trunk I saw he'd wrapped the meter in a blanket. Also, thank you, he had a hand truck. He told me he found it in front of a store down the street from *Flatbush Life*.

We pushed the hand truck up the street and passed Mrs. Goldstein, a neighbor.

"Mother's getting a delivery?"

I nodded.

I opened the front door to my house, and Sid wheeled the meter right in on the pale blue plush carpeting.

"You live here?"

I nodded.

"By yourself?"

"With my parents and John John."

"You're kidding."

"I'm saving for my own apartment. I don't make that much."

"What are you going to tell them about this?" He looked at the meter.

I shrugged.

"Where should I put it?"

I showed him my room. We stowed it under my bed. I tidied the dust ruffle.

"Where are your parents now?"

I told him they were out at the theater.

"And your brother?"

"At basketball."

"OK. What do you have to drink?"

I led him back to the living room. I opened my parents' liquor cabinet. He looked inside, shuffled a few bottles, then took out the bourbon. I went to get him a glass, but when I returned I saw him on the sofa, drinking from the bottle. I used the glass

.....

.....

to pour myself some sherry.

“What time do your parents come home?”

“About 10.”

He stood up, took a gun from his pocket, and put it on the glass cocktail table. My mother never allowed us to put anything on that table. “Why don’t you come over here and sit next to me on the couch?”

I walked over to the pale blue crushed velour sofa and sat at the other end.

“Come a little closer.”

I slid over a bit, then watched as he put the bottle of bourbon on the glass cocktail table. He unlaced his black combat boots. I mentally calculated what time I’d have to get him out of there in order to clean up before my parents came back.

He leaned over and started kissing me. Then he unbuckled his pants. “We can talk later,” he said. “Let’s get relaxed with each other first.”

I could hear the Wedgewood figurines on the cocktail table vibrate as he relaxed into me on the pale blue crushed velour sofa. I kept thinking, what if my parents come home early.

When he was done, he put his clothes back on. “I better go,” he said. “We’ll talk tomorrow. I have to think about what to do with the parking meter.”

The next day, I called in sick. I was exhausted. I didn’t want Sid to see me like that. I wanted to sustain the impression that I had the strength to endure days without comforts, that I had what it took to be a journalist.

I lay in bed, dreaming about assignments with Sid, reporting from the field. I pulled the covers over my head and heard the doorbell rang.

Jumping up, fixing my hair, I went to the door. “Who is it?”

“Police.”

When the police came to arrest Tanya, I’d read in the paper, she was so excited that she wet her pants. They let her go inside and change. I led the police to my bedroom and lifted the dust ruffle. I hoped they couldn’t tell, by the messed up covers, that I’d been thinking about Sid.

I soon learned that stealing a parking meter is punishable by five years’ imprisonment. But I didn’t have to go to jail. My father got a lawyer. Of course I never went back to work at *Flatbush Life*. My parents moved us to Connecticut. I don’t know what became of Sid – my parents made sure of that.

My father set me up on a date with a clerk in the law firm that got me out of going to

.....

.....

jail. He held my hand on the second date.

“Don’t you dare tell him about that character who got you to steal the parking meter,” my mother cautioned.

Tanya married her bodyguard, and I married my lawyer. My mother took me to get my hair cut and colored just like Lady Di’s. She bought the *Vogue* pattern and made my wedding dress. I let her do these things.

LAUREN FEDORKO

For My Father

I want him to live forever
In his silence I watch him edge the Kodak velox photo paper with calloused thumbs.
This isn't the first time.
He is tough, but he is soft when it comes to memory, family.
There are so many pictures--my father's wide, curious eyes as an infant,
One in the Atlantic clinging to his father's swim trunks,
His first day of kindergarten, a big grin, and a lunch pail weighing down his left side,
Perhaps one on his birthday--balloon in hand, face so serious.
Even as a child he reminds me of his adult self.
I am lost in the black and whiteness of memory
As he narrates each moment with detail and certainty.
I find myself wanting to explain to all the people who have misunderstood his stern-
ness for cruelty and tell them how much of a sentimentalist my father is.
I want to go back in time and tell myself this, too.
As he shuffles the last photograph to the back of the pile he sighs.
He's silent for a moment
I know he's getting older and I just want him to share his memories forever.
After some time, he neatly packs them up,
Slides them into their original envelope with his mother's handwriting,
And places them on my lap.
"Have them.
You'll get them when I die anyway."
I want to give them back.
Tell them they're still his.

LAUREN FEDORKO

Wander



Dancing With Paul

Rumba. Fox Trot. Tango. Cha-cha. Waltz. In my junior year at Bound Brook High School in 1967, nothing was worse than social dancing in gym class. Did anyone enjoy the obsolete dances? It was hard to imagine anyone ever had. My friends and I complained to our parents. We received no sympathy. They had endured many of the same teachers.

Dance class began with a bellowing bullhorn.

“Two lines. Boys in one. Girls in the other.”

We slouched into formation.

The amplified rasp continued, “Walk straight. Don’t look at the person across from you. Just pair off.”

We did, then it got worse. The music started. Discomfort reigned. Boys made gross remarks to embarrass the girls and make them forget about clumsy feet stomping on their toes.

My coping strategy was to count, avoid eye contact, and pretend not to hear my partner’s obnoxious words.

“Hey, did you hear about the couple who got caught doing it in the back seat of a car? They were so scared they got stuck together.”

Two, three, four, look at the door. Wait, is that even possible?

“‘What’s new pussycat?’ Hope you’re nice and juicy. I’m unchaining the dog.”

Ignore and count. Do not react. One, two, three, don’t talk to me.

“You can stop your quest. You’ve found the best. Can you handle the big boy?”

Gross. Four, five, six. Why is dance class never quick?

If ruddy cheeks were a sign of good health, every girl in gym class was hale and hardy. As much as we hated the crude remarks, telling our teachers wasn’t an option. Who wanted to be a rat fink? We steeled our ears and clenched our teeth.

Each day was the same until Paul asked me to dance. He talked to me as if I were a person. Imagine that! He asked for the name of my dog. We discovered our families liked boats and that we both water skied. The gentle touch of Paul’s hand on my back helped me relax. I knew he wouldn’t play my bra straps like guitar strings.

Paul was able to beat the random partner system and dance with me every class. His brown curls and green eyes made tiny butterflies dance in my stomach as he cut

.....

between two boys in the line across from me. I stopped counting dance steps. In Paul's arms, I became graceful.

Gym class stopped being torture.

Paul was also in my history class. Our teacher, the football coach, spent more time talking about games than the material he put on the test. Paul, like me, was not a football fan. He would stretch his neck to see the doodles I made in the margin of my notebook. His freckled nose was adorable. I tossed my straight blonde hair over my shoulder and rolled my eyes when our teacher assigned a long term paper.

"Do you think he'll read them?" I asked Paul.

"Let's see," he replied.

We conspired to type nursery rhymes into the middle of our ten-page term papers. My hand shook a little when I turned in my assignment. I usually followed the rules. I felt like a rebel. It was exciting. Would our teacher notice? He didn't. When he didn't comment on the cow jumping over the moon or Mary's little lamb, we knew he hadn't read our papers. Paul and I felt betrayed but buoyed by our ingenuity.

I liked talking to Paul in class. He was a friend, just a friend. I hadn't been on a date and couldn't imagine anyone interested in a poetry-writing bookworm, not even Paul.

Each day, when the bell rang, I rushed out into the hall. I was leaving class with my books pressed against my chest when Paul ran up to me.

"You don't want to go to the prom with me, do you?" he said.

"No," I answered.

"Okay," he said and ran down the hall.

I hugged my books tighter. *Yes, I do. I want to go to the prom and I want to go with you.*

I wanted tell Paul that I meant yes when I said no, but I wasn't that brave. I could say he startled me because I didn't even dream anyone would ask me out, but I didn't. I said nothing.

Paul never spoke to me again. I missed our conversations.

I didn't go to the prom. Instead, I stayed home and worked on an orange and yellow striped A-line skirt I was sewing.

My mind was elsewhere. The sewing machine needle pricked my finger. I squeezed out a tiny drop of blood.

This is great. My family will think I am crying because my finger hurts. They won't know the real reason.

STEVE SMITH

What I told my therapist friend when he asked me what it was like growing up in Edgewater

when me and my friends leaned against the brick façade of the liquor store covered in the pale yellow light of street lamps. We spent our nights smoking and shifting from one foot to the other, hands jammed deep in our coat pockets, hoping some old drunk would stumble along and agree to buy us a six pack, surrounded by the ditches of torn down factories like in a graveyard as Manhattan glittered like a giant stage set in the darkness across the Hudson River.

We formed a family united against our parents and teachers and local police who didn't seem to care, we drank too much, experimented with pot and smack, most eking our way through high school, some dropping out altogether, taking whatever the summer would bring, caddying at the golf course, stacking boxes on loading docks, carrying refrigerators up staircases for beer money.

We waited for the police in their squad car to show up and tell us to stop loitering and that they hoped we would get drafted soon.

We dreamed of escaping, hitting it big in Las Vegas, winning the lotto, becoming the next middleweight champion of the world, being the next John Dillinger.

We went to a funeral for one who jumped off the George Washington Bridge on a bet, and another who was found blue-faced in his bathroom, a syringe dangling from his neck.

My therapist shook his head and said, "Wow! Those were really insane times, you're lucky to have made it out of there." And I said, "Yeah I was lucky," as if I wasn't still cast in that pale yellow light.

NANCY SCOTT

Boulder Lake, WI

That summer we spent hours
in the rowboat, casting line;
then a tug, and the bait was gone.

I'd tap rhythms in my head,
blunting a scream if another fish
got away. Most bass we caught
we ended up throwing back.

Too small, Dad said, twisting
the hook from the fish's mouth.
Big enough, I grumbled
as my fish wriggled away.

Fishing is about patience.

On the day patience paid out,
I felt the rush—a string of
small mouth sizzling in the pan.

Do you remember?

On the dock, a ragged rowboat,
overturned. The air grows chillier.
I stare across the frozen lake,
rub gloveless hands and wait.

LAUREN FEDORKO

BLANKETING FOG



Honor Bright

To his daughters, Gordon Forminder was the funniest, handsomest dad in the world. He let them ride on his shoulders and sit on the lowered rag top of the convertible and wave their hands like beauty queens. They learned to dance in his embrace, their arms clutched at his waist, their sock-clad feet resting on his size 12 loafers. They learned to love poetry from the sound of his voice. At the dinner table, he asked them questions about criminal cases he was trying and listened to their answers. When he won a big case, he celebrated by bringing them presents like mahogany bass ukuleles and clock radios. He helped coach the swim team and bought the entire team matching shirts. At birthday parties he was the fun dad—getting everyone to help drag stuff out of the garage to create a bicycle obstacle course complete with ramp.

He schooled them to respect their mother. “Each person in this family gets one vote, but your mother gets two,” he would say.

He taught Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church. And whenever he promised something, it came to pass. They knew that everyone respected and admired him, and, by association, that respected and admired the entire family, but they hadn’t realized how far he would go to keep things that way.

It all started when Missy interrupted her parents’ conversation from the backseat of their brand new, Lucerne Blue Cadillac El Dorado by asking, “What’s a whore, Daddy?”

The Forminder family was on their way home from an afternoon of golf for Lillian and Gordon and swimming for Missy and Julie at the Beaumont Country Club of Nashville, Tennessee. They had the top down because it was a sunny afternoon and the breeze felt good. Had her father been going any faster, he might not have heard the question, but he was going slowly so as not to muss Lillian’s hair, and he did hear.

His back stiffened and his hands tightened on the steering wheel. His eyes swiveled to meet his wife’s quick glance.

“Where did you hear that word?”

“From Bobby Grunninger. He called me a ‘whore.’”

“It’s not a nice word. I don’t want to hear you using it again. You understand?”

“Yes, sir. But what does it mean?”

“You don’t need to know.”

.....

Missy kicked the back of the seat, “Just asking.”

“You got a problem?” Gordon asked.

“No, sir.”

“Now Gordon,” Lillian said.

“What? What?” His throat pulsed visibly.

“Nothing,” she said, with a tilt to her chin and a sideways glance that said, they’d talk about it when they got home.

That night was an important one for the Forminder family. Gordon, the newly elected president of the city’s Bar Association, was hosting a cocktail party at the family home on Candlestick Lane. He should have been thinking about the politics of this event, but his mind was on Missy’s question. His neck burned under his collar, and he felt as though strong hands were constricting his throat.

The honor of his family was his paramount concern. That someone should call his precious little twelve-year-old girl a “whore” was unthinkable. Something had to be done. No time to waste. Rumors spread and reputations could be damaged forever in a matter of hours.

While they dressed for the party, Lillian said, “Bobby Gruninger is an insecure little boy who probably doesn’t even know what the word means.”

“Oh, he knows all right. If he doesn’t now, he will by the time I get through with him.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll have to talk to him and his parents.”

He reached for the gun he kept locked and loaded in the nightstand.

“You won’t need a gun for that.”

“I may need to impress upon him the seriousness of his offense.” He checked the rounds in his Colt forty-five.

“You do not need a gun to scare that boy. You’re scary enough as it is,” she said as she kissed him and straightened his tie.

He stopped her, wrapping his hands around her wrists and looking down into her eyes, “This is serious. What makes him think he can say such a thing to my daughter? I cannot allow it.”

“Of course you can’t.”

.....

“I’m going to give that boy a ‘come to Jesus’ talk.”

“Maybe you should sleep on it. We have the party. I could use you here.”

“Nothing you say is going stop me,” he said, shrugging into his suit coat. He was 6’4” and moved like a teenage basketball star, both awkward and sure. “They won’t even know I am gone.”

She lifted up on tiptoe to look him in the eye and wove her soft hands around his neck. He glared right back.

She sighed, “I love how much you love our family. Please be careful.”

He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her silky hair. Her dancer’s body twined against him. He felt stronger and even more determined to protect what was his.

“I’ll wait until they’re on their second drink, then slip out the door to the garage. If anyone asks, I’m on the phone with a client.”

He left at 8:10 p.m. and was back by 8:45. The party was buzzing, and he could hear Rosemary Clooney on the stereo. He caught Lillian as she headed down the back hall toward the bedrooms. He put his arms around her and dropped his head to her shoulder.

“I couldn’t do it.”

Her knees buckled slightly, and she reached for him. “Of course not. I never thought you could.”

“His dad was standing there unable to speak, his mother was crying, and I couldn’t even take out the gun.”

The first call came at eight a.m. the next morning from Missy’s classmate Luke Miller. Lillian woke Missy, so she could take the call.

“Just wanted you to know that Bobby called and apologized,” Luke said.

“What?”

“Bobby called and apologized.”

“For what?”

“For calling you a ‘whore.’”

Missy flushed as if with fever. “Why would he call you?”

.....

.....
“Cause your dad said if he didn’t call every boy in the sixth grade and apologize, he was going to go back and shoot him.”

“He didn’t!”

“Yep. Bobby said he meant it.”

“No.”

“Let your dad know I called, OK?” It was more than a casual question.

Jaxon Fuller was next.

“Just wanted you to know, Bobby apologized.” Missy felt like she watching a train wreck in progress: the engine going off the track first, the cars piling up behind with a significant boom.

And so it continued for the rest of the day on both the house line and the girls’ private line, “Boom.” “Boom.” “Boom.”

That night, they were sitting in front of the television watching *Old Yeller* on the *Walt Disney Show* when Missy leaned against his chair.

“Dad?”

“Yes, Missybear.”

“I can’t go to school tomorrow. I can never go back again.”

“Why not? You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Why’d you do that?”

Julie climbed on the other arm. “Yeah, Dad. You scared those boys so much. Missy will be an old maid before she gets her first date.”

“It was mortifying,” seconded Missy.

“You’re a good girl. You have honor. I’m not going to let anyone take that away from you or besmirch your reputation.”

The girls silently considered this. If they hadn’t had it before, they did now and a weighty thing it was, “honor,” full of portent and responsibility.

Finally, Missy said, “That’s not how it feels.”

“Would you really have shot him?” asked Julie.

“We’re family. I trust you girls in all your actions and will support you in all you do.”

.....
“What if I shoot someone?” said Julie.

“I’ll take a gun and make sure they’re dead.”

“Just like that?”

“We’re family.”

They believed him. And from that moment on, nothing was the same.

No matter how much older they grew, the girls never forgot. They had a large square family room with two couches and a coffee table flanking the fireplace where they like to play cards with the boys they dated. When their Dad came home, the boys would jump to their feet and practically salute.

Eventually, to stop scaring their boyfriends, Gordon agreed to add a master bedroom wing with a separate entrance, so he could enter the house without disturbing the girls and their nervous dates in the family room.

The girls’ popularity reigned through high school, into college and well beyond. To state that the girls were virgins when they married is to state the obvious. Perhaps their very inaccessibility made them irresistible. What it did to the marriage bed is anyone’s guess.

They weren’t the only ones affected. It’s said, for years Bobby Gruninger cruised their street listening to the echoes of music and laughter emanating from the walls of their family room behind which he knew they were spinning their 45s, dancing the shag and playing penny poker with a vengeance, his nightly journey a pilgrimage, an acknowledgement of what one word had cost him.

I first heard this whole story at the home reception following Gordon’s funeral. People had enjoyed a few drinks. Many of the in crowd from junior high and high school were present.

Suddenly into one of those lulls in conversation I heard the words, “Not like Bobby Gruninger.” An awkward pause halted the hum. I asked Missy, “Who is Bobby Gruninger?”

She gave a rueful glance at Trip, one of her earliest boyfriends, and decided to tell the story. When she got to the word “whore”, he gallantly broke in, “Goddess. She was becoming a goddess.” Other men nodded.

The retelling of this long-ago story prompted raised eyebrows and sideways glances and some shaking of heads.

I said, “And he was never allowed in the house again?”

Missy said, “God no,” and looked at me like I had beans for brains. “He would have been shot.”

I believe she believed it.

.....

GWEN BERNICK

*77

We went to a theater together in a town
where everything moved. The taxi took us home
& asked for payment in love, but you didn't
have enough for me after. I asked later if you liked the show,
and you told me you didn't know how. I call
everyone with your area code until I reach your mom.
She doesn't know what to do with all
of the love I give her, says it's filling up the room
like a hot air balloon. Tomorrow morning
you will see this on the cable news and swallow it,
and then the TV room will be empty,
and we'll have to go to a show again
so we don't have to talk. I don't know what to do
with this. How to reconcile it all. How to ask
for more.

Day after day folds into the night before us, almost
entered & completely full. The sky looks
like a dark bowl over our heads tonight, like
the dark, rusty bed of a pickup truck
& I always wanted that with you. I couldn't wash
the soot out of the creases in my hands,
all Macbeth but you were never my lady.
I see the sun rising now, but blood moons don't wane
and you are always, still, always in the sky with me.
Tomorrow morning this whole wooden pier
will be behind us, and we will lounge in ice-water
out of the blue. You know it but
you don't like to say it. I know that but I do
anyway. The wheels on the bottom of this boat
drip gleaming from the street. A trail
of wet sorrow and a little snail crossing the street
after dark. You said we had to get home
and I wanted to stay until a dark pickup truck
with big clips on its rear rolled past all slow
and dangerous, all past and mad with memory.

You were all just a badger or a showlight,
and I didn't know how to be nothing for you.
But you still write my name in present tense
and I love you for it, and the phones

.....

are always ringing, star 77, the park empty even
in the night. The benches up and roaming, splintered,
without us this town moves unhindered. Without you--
without you-- the cars roll by faster and faster
until the blue moon sets in the morning.
The pier unfished for centuries, full
of smog and water, jellyfish roaming
under the round, wet bellies of water balloons. This town
was always moving, even when we were still
together. I wish we could still talk about wandering
without having to do it. I wish you'd still wonder,
and that the day hadn't past, and that another one
wasn't crouching heavy above the stomach
of the river when we exit the theater. The taxi cabs
still running, deep into the morning.

ELANE GUTTERMAN

The Museum of Broken Relationships

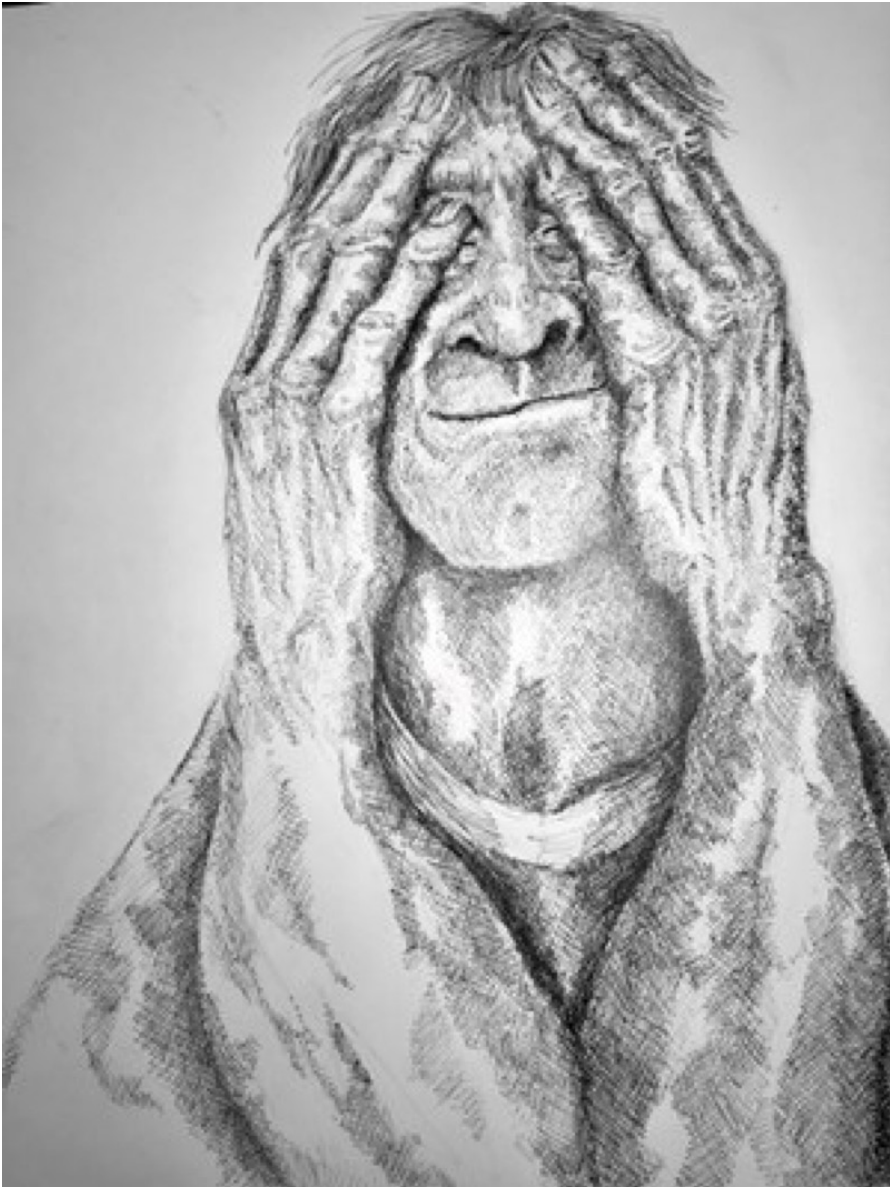
The original in Zagreb,
a satellite in LA.
A sculptor and a film producer
recast the ending of their four-year relationship
into an ongoing partnership.
A safe space to configure the hallowed turf
and emotional heritage
of many loves that dared to grow,
then withered, became lost,
yet were not forgotten.

Donated objects
are accompanied by a brief tale.
The ax from Germany:
she used to splinter
the furniture left by a former lover
into the smallest bits
after she decamped for another woman.
 The espresso machine from France:
 “He loved the coffee I made for him”
 “He loved me”
 “One day he no longer loved the coffee”
 “One day he no longer loved me.”
The stiletto shoe, from Holland:
childhood passion
that flowered before its season
and ended when the boyfriend at sixteen
moved away with his parents.
Twenty years later, a dominatrix,
she made the client lick her stilettos
before whipping him.
Then, she recognized him.

The collection has been on world tours
and garnered a European prize
for most daring museum.
I have not yet been there
though it draws me.
From my first marriage,
I would donate
my engagement gift,
a divine necklace,
beads mostly black.

DAVE OLSON

Delicious Embarrassing



JOANNE SUTERA

What If

after reading online profiles
we agree to meet at Starbucks

or Panera or better yet
at the university where there's

a stimulating speaker you'd
like to hear, and you're efficient

at combining lecture and dates
and I think I like that in a man?

But what if our photos, each,
soften the ravages of time

and you've lied about your age
by five years at least?

And what if I'm widowed
and you're divorced, and you can't

compete with my sainted husband
nor I with your bitter cynicism.

What if you're saying homemade
meals and domestic bliss

while I'm talking reservations
and world adventures?

What if when I drive at night
you're blinded by the glare?

The Lilies of Frida Kahlo

Diego Rivera kneels at my coffin. A huge man, he towers over me even in this position. In the crook of his left arm rests a cluster of calla lilies. He removes one lily and places it across my forehead; takes another for my throat. He tries to press two beneath my crossed hands. Death helps me resist. I hear a whispered:

“Niña, chiquita, Frida.”

His tears flood my coffin. I am drowning.

I relent as I always do.

“Mi niño, Dieguito—”

My tears slide to the sides of my temples, meander among my braids, over the silver, filigree ornaments and I remember other lilies...

“Niña chiquita,” he says as he places

lilies to my scars.

*A cluster of three bound with a narrow
red, satin ribbon
surrounds the stump of my right leg,
one across my abdomen,
one pressed between my thighs*

“La maja vestida.”

*I laugh and place one between his thighs,
stigma above stigma.
I am the lily—corolla, labia, style,
pistil, clitoris. He is the lily as well.*

“La maja desnuda,” he purrs,

*moving the stem along my—
Angeline, Marevna, Guadalupe, Paulette,
Helen, Cristina, and Louise enter the room
and I pull away.*

*“Frida, pata de palo,” And then, his mouth to the lily of the thighs,
he croons, “Niña chiquita...”*

He told me I was his diamond among inferior jewels but he would not—I turn from his tears...

*He is into the canvas
Laughing and shaking his hips
Pressing the brush to my breast
encircling the areola in cadmium yellow.
He is into the canvas,
Painting lilies in women’s baskets—
on the shoulders of men—
painting us
into the canvass...*

“We will have our flower days again, Dieguito,” I whisper to his sobs.

He presses his lips to mine.

I watch him leave, the remaining lilies in his hand to be painted, Perhaps, in the background of a canvass or placed upon the thighs of another corolla.

D.E. STEWARD
.....

Free State

Driving off from Gauteng and Johannesburg toward the Free State south across big and nearly treeless highveld into South Africa's interior

Fifty years ago drove north on these roads on the run toward Rhodesia and the newly post-colonial interior of Africa beyond

The day before yesterday back from Botswana and Victoria Falls sitting on a wall outside the Apartheid Museum beside a garrulous Shanghai woman and her affable Congolese husband we agreed what an amazing thing is the reality of an "Apartheid Museum"

When gunning in on a Kawasaki the white project boss of last night's international mayors' banquet, New York's Michael Bloomberg featured, elegant white tents now being taken down on the Apartheid Museum parking lot, chimed in about his racially oblivious rural Transvaal boyhood

The unfailing recurrence of good conversations in South Africa, intensified now in the idealism of post-apartheid egalitarianism, most here doing their level best to make it work, Saint Nelson's example emphatic above it all

Off the Rand down in the Free State at a toll-road rest stop a worse-for-wear thirtyish American was being patiently interviewed at an outside table by two local police

One a tiny woman with her uniform's patrol hat charmingly down over the tops of her ears, his car had been cleaned out

Offered help, he demurred, crime and poverty, ballooning population, poverty and crime

Not one white South African told about the plan to take a rental car from Joburg via Durban and the Eastern Cape to Cape Town failed to venture cautionary skepticism

But here we are on the road and in the highveld, Cape Town in a week or so

Crossing the ultimate provincial nation, eleven official languages and more in use, each major city characteristically distinct from the others, dramatic variations in weather and between natural regions

With its old polarity of Boer and Brit modified to have become branding of affluent and poor or nearly poor

Huge country with its dramatic oppositions, the highly formalized cheek-by-jowl with egalitarian liberalism

And penguins to cobras, palms to proteas, Zulus to *strandlopers*, the Kalahari to luscious KwaZulu-Natal, the icy Atlantic Ocean Benguela Current swerving off from the tropical

.....
Indian Ocean Agulhas and Mozambique Currents along the Cape

Fifty-three million people and poverty its bane

In many places here you are where you thought things were to be

In others you are in a Euro-derived semi-futuristic edgy compromise with the contemporary void

A resigned Anglo-colonial banality lingers too, an Ontario of the spirit

But a South Africa replete with unique, often vividly sizzling innovative imagination

Common objects and situations putting forth answers never considered or seen before

It is and has always been isolated, standing adaptively alone on the far end of the African world since the beginning

For nearly four centuries it was a voyage of months from Europe down through the tropics and across the doldrums

And last generation it endured various degrees of isolating international boycott

Half of last century internationally it was only Olive Schreiner, Cecil Rhodes, Jan Smuts and the orange stacks of the Union Castle steamship line

And its Boer Republic cast of mind, with Kapstadt up and running even before North America's New Amsterdam

The special character of its history with the agelessness of its antiquity behind, as only Olduvai, Turkana, and the long Great Rift Valley "cradle of humankind" has been

Fifty years ago when leaving Malawi, pulled off on the Great North Road at dusk in deep solitude on the western lip of the Great Rift

Agape at the vertical cooking fire smokes, the Kipengere Range, Livingston Mountains, out there as a backdrop in the far gloom of the dusk behind

In the depth of extraordinarily high-sky planetary scale

It was like seeing all of Africa through all geological time standing at the edge of Africa's zenith escarpment staring out into ultimates

No sound except for the magnificent trilling of a pair of Mozambique nightjars as they dipped and wheeled tipsily off into the void

Within a quarter moon rise

Already some pools of black in the bottoms far below

.....

.....
No traffic of course, there had been few others on the open bush road that afternoon up from Blantyre

In the peace of rural Africa in 1964 that section of the Great North Road was narrow, badly ditched and graded with caved-in culverts now and then

That evening at the edge of the Rift we stood agog

All of East Africa ahead

The dust felt heavy walking to the car

To switchback then down off the edge of the immense *krans* into Tanzania and Mbaya in the early night

Traveling roads and their valleys and passes that have been trekked forever in human-history scale

Bantu-speaking herders behind their cattle moving south, the South African 1st Division lorries trucking north to the Second World War's desert Campaign

The multitudes of recent refugees from the Kalashnikov decades of upheavals, Namibia, Rwanda, the Congo, Somalia, South Sudan

Now the lorry and bus road economy of modern African, south to north, from the Indian Ocean inland to the lakes and back

And in the same way to and from Lagos and the other West African ports

Trucks, the big Volvos, Scania's, MANs, Ivecos, DAFs, tarp-tied dusty, double trailers, cross continental, stoic drivers with their cooking fires on the roadsides at the customs shacks at the borders, for the overtaxed river ferries, waiting days, even weeks, at the Zambezi, in the Congo, at the branches of the Nile

Big trucks that move everything, people clinging to the loads, packed standing in the beds, hanging on the sides

That is Africa now

Trail dust, road dust, truck dust, blown and lifted that carries the bones of a million years of unchronicled peoples

And in the south, below the "great, green, greasy" Limpopo, the paved roads of South Africa itself, a big country without big rivers, richer than the rest

In historical times cattle people first pressed below the Karoo toward the Cape before the Portuguese, Dutch and English

Here near the Vaal now slice across the highveld south toward the Free State on N-3, the "Highveld Toll-Road," skirting Heidelberg, headed for Harrismith and the Drakensberg

.....
Cross the Vaal at Villiers, the classic Boer-Anglo demarcation, the river engineered,
between dams and their irrigative lakes nothing more than a nearly dry *stroom*

To slant out across the Afrikaners' old Orange Free State from the Afrikaners' Transvaal
for Cathedral Peak in the Drakensberg, and then the long coast of KwaZulu-Natal

In the old *Oranje Vrystaat* after a day of magnificent highveld breadth of sun and clouds,
approaching Van Reenen Pass, with awareness of sixty years of hitching, driving, riding,
independent roads, new roads, stupendous roads

The upswept vistas of Van Reenen Pass from open empty herding and farms with wind-
mills and windbreak groves hundreds of meters off the road, self-contained, the highway
dropping and sweeping down into KwaZulu-Natal

Muddy gravel road off N-3 to Winterton for the climb to Cathedral Peak's green seren-
ity of empty high-elevation trails, soaring ridges above nearly vertical slopes

Redcollared and longtailed widow birds and a South African porcupine in the high grass
and bracken

In the hotel, a call to ask how things were going, on the disposable cell phone bought in
a Joburg shopping center from the Sotho woman who activated it two days before and
tell her all is well

Nearby the border of Lesotho crosses by Cleft Peak at 3280 m., west of Cathedral Peak

Fifty years ago in Maseru, Lesotho's capital, a Sotho chief, leader of a rival faction of the
newly elected independent government, in his cups in The Lancers, the colonial club's
bar, proposed that I become his foreign policy advisor

But I was headed for the Cape

A Loaf of Bread, A Jug of Milk

I hate going to the supermarket by myself. My wife normally handles that task. She won't let me do it because she'd get writer's cramps preparing instructions for me on how to select produce. Sometimes I go with her so I can maintain my supply of snacks. On rare occasions she'll ask me to do the shopping if all we need is bread and milk.

Even with such a short list a trip to the supermarket will take me half a day. There are difficult decisions to be made! Strategy is involved. I know the dairy cases are in the back of the store so I scout for bread first. My wife doesn't tell me what kind of bread to get; she wants me to feel empowered. But there are just too many kinds from which to choose. They aren't even all in one place. The store has a bakery section with fresh French bread, Italian bread, long loaves, round loaves, skinny loaves, flat loaves. We don't eat much bread at our house – rolls and bagels, yes, but bread, no. Occasionally, however, one of us might want a peanut-butter sandwich or a slice of toast so we do need to have some bread on hand. I shy away from those fresh breads because they're preservative-free. At the rate we consume bread, mold would lay claim to most of it before we could. Our needs call for a spore-resistant loaf that can survive at room temperature for a month. I head over to the packaged bread aisle.

It's incredible how many different kinds of sliced bread a supermarket carries. The bread section stretches as far as the eye can see. There's rye with seeds, rye without seeds, and even one mutation that's part rye, part pumpernickel. There's Jewish rye and Jewish pumpernickel but no Gentile anything. Once, when I was in Boston, I heard pumpernickel called “dack rye.” I still have no idea what “dack” means.

White bread. Shelf after shelf. Country whites, rustic whites, brick-oven whites, Italian whites, adjective-less whites. There's whole-grain, whole-wheat and honey whole-wheat. There's one just called “wheat bread,” which makes me wonder: if it isn't whole, which part is missing? There's cinnamon-raisin bread, oat-bran bread, oatmeal bread, potato bread and multigrain bread. I used to love date-nut bread but I haven't come across any for years.

My wife leaves the choice to me but she sets limits on the sugar and sodium content so I have to study all the nutrition labels. This alone can take me an hour and a half.

Loaf sizes vary considerably: 16 ounces, 20 ounces, 24 ounces, 27 ounces. I select a 24-ounce package of generic white bread because, pound for pound, it's the cheapest but it means we're going to have to eat a lot of French toast if we want to finish it before it turns green.

I don't put the bread in my shopping cart because I don't have a shopping cart. I'm there to get two items. I've got two hands. Who needs a cart?

At the end of the bread aisle, which I have to pass in order to get to the dairy section, there are rolls. Dinner rolls, Parker House rolls, sandwich rolls, potato rolls, hamburger rolls, frankfurter rolls. I've never figured out why frankfurter rolls come in packages of six while frankfurters come in packages of seven but, since I'm getting neither, who cares?

.....

I dodge around a few shopping carts, make my way to the dairy case, and open the door with my free hand. I see whole milk, 1% milk, 2% milk, lactose-free milk, non-fat milk and non-milk milk – substitutes made from almonds or soy. I grab a quart of the non-fat milk. Non-fat milk. Some call it skim milk, which is grammatically incorrect; they should call it skimmed milk because the cream is skimmed off the top. With both hands now occupied, I flip the door closed with my elbow.

I make my way back to the front of the store, bread in one hand, milk in the other, and head for an Express Checkout lane. The sign over the lane says, “12 Items or Less.” It should say, “12 Items or Fewer” but we've already established that correct grammar has gone out of favor.

I shouldn't have to wait long to get checked out. Just one woman on line ahead of me. She's too wide for me to see what she has in her cart but, since she's allowed no more than 12 items, I expect to be out of there in no time flat.

It's her turn and she starts unloading her cart. She removes twelve cans of cat food, one at a time, and places them on the conveyer belt. The way I count, that's twelve items. To her way of thinking it's one item because “cat food” appears only once on her list.

The cat food is followed by six bottles of spring water, three bottles of ginger ale, five cantaloupes and a dozen individually-wrapped rolls of toilet paper. There's a little room left at the end of the conveyer belt and I'm about to set down my bread and milk but, before I can, she plops down a 14-pound bag of Scoop Away kitty litter. If she'd train her damn cat to use the toilet paper she wouldn't need so much kitty litter.

The cashier rings it all up, the bagger bags everything, and the woman places the bags in her cart. The cashier reads off the total. The woman removes her purse from the cart, fumbles through it, takes out a checkbook and asks if anyone has a pen.

I finally get out of the store, walk about a quarter of a mile to where my car is parked, and find it completely boxed in by empty shopping carts. The cart-return area is two aisles over and several icy stares dare me to leave the carts in a parking space.

I vow to never again go to the supermarket by myself unless, of course, someone comes with me.

Jonah's Wail

I want to sit at the bottom of the ocean and read aloud to you all your favourite picture books

I *saw* you before I knew your name.

You were the boy I mistook for Dad, when he was your age. You have the same eyes, the light brown irises that look best when framed by glasses. It's like your curiosity is so limitless, that it needs to be contained, within a sphere of myopia. Though, unlike Dad, you are a portrait in oil, not sepia, and cerulean dots your lids and chin.

I was twenty-seven when I first heard your name: *Ponciano*. That exotic moniker that was initially Dad's name, but which he relegated to a middle initial, because few pronounced it as it deserved: with the smooth vowels befitting a *tanguero*.

Call me naïve, but I never imagined an ancestor to be a *child*, an intelligent boy of eight whose future loomed so brightly before him, until his ship sank, that year before the *Maine* itself was destroyed and heralded the Spanish-American war.

When I think of the word *ancestor*, I almost always imagine Gravititas, not Gravity.

I think of one pulling the branches of the family tree downward, towards its arthritic knee, rather than upward, towards a Heaven of children too young to go home yet.

I've heard stories about you:

That you loved to stand within the Whalebone's parabola, at the Natural History Museum

The Whalebone that framed your height and physique in a manner not unlike the faux tortoise that outline your eyes: a tiny soul about to nosedive into Abyss

Which, in my limited vocabulary, is the Afterlife

The space beyond the Whalebone

The place where your Wail doesn't need a whale's cavern:

Where I whisper your bedtime stories, and you nod—

The verdigris of a voice in Shipwreck....

Nemesis

“Should we?” I asked. I shook the box of cards around and grinned in a way that was, I hoped, tempting.

“Okay,” she said. We unfolded the leaf of our beat-up game table. There was a bottle of red wine already breathing with two glasses next to it. “I’m sure it sounds egotistical, but I want to see how my cards work.”

“You’re part of the core deck, you know. Your buddy Gun is in here too. And Rocket. Alongside the comic book heroes, of course. Superman. Iceman, Spiderman. All the men.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes, turning to sniff the wine. She didn’t seem to detect anything unusual about it. In fact, she smiled.

We were in a small town off the edge of the Delaware River, snow pouring down in feathery bundles, warm in a two-story colonial. I’d lit a fire earlier. A man and his wife, carved above the 200-year-old fireplace, smiled down at me. His hand protectively gripped her shoulder. It was unusual for a colonial like this one to have any carvings at all. Most had fireplaces that were little more than brick pits, blackened from years of smoldering embers. That’s one of the reasons we ended up buying this place—I loved that carving.

The other reason was the seclusion. She was always worried some mastermind would try to kidnap me just to get to her. My identity was kept secret too. We hadn’t been out together in the world in five years, although she tried to make up for it by bringing the world to us. But nothing compared to an evening out with my wife. I missed it, and I knew she did too. I was sure of it. I had to be.

I had two lives. Stephen, real estate agent by day, reclusive husband to a superheroine by night. I was tired of both.

“Wine?” she asked.

“Wine not?” I said.

“Do you remember—” she poured us each a glass.

“That insane liquor store in Brooklyn? The Wine Not Shop? Yes!”

“They had that orange wine,” she said. “It was this sunshiny cross between rosé and white.”

“You want some? I can get some for next time.” I jumped at the chance to please her, like a dog.

.....

“If you want. Mostly I just wanted to remember.”

“Awww.” I understood that. I rested my head on her shoulder, which, by the way, felt like a normal shoulder. The super strength isn’t like you read in the tabloids. Her shoulder felt like a regular human shoulder capable of briefly lifting an SUV off the ground.

“Sweet on wine,” I said.

“But tough on crime.”

“Your new slogan?”

“Absolutely. Put it on a T-shirt.”

“Or the *New York Post*.”

“So—explain the rules.” We’d set up the cards on the table.

It was a card game where you acquired various superheroes to fight a villain and stop his evil plan. Only recently did they start including real heroes in the game, and a few real villains—none of the still at large, and certainly not The Nemesis—but all the scenarios were silly and unbelievable, like opening portals to dark dimensions or capturing prophetic babies. Silly stuff.

We sipped wine and played a few rounds, each time defeating the villain handily, while a chicken roasted in the oven. I talked about a house I sold recently. It was on the river, half of it an old brick façade and the other half quite new with white siding but sized to match its older, darker twin. Strange set up.

“That’s why you’re the best. The real real estate agent. It’s a house, it’s a duplex, it’s super seller,” she grinned, and then sighed.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m just mopey.”

“You better tell me,” I used the teasing voice we reserved for each other.

“I can’t reciprocate in these conversations about work. Top secret.”

“Hardly. Your victories are all over the news. Mine barely make the company newsletter. What is it?”

“I didn’t mean to bring this up. We’ve had this conversation before. It’s the same stuff. Sometimes I wish we could go back to before—I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize,” I said. Even though she was faster and stronger than any man, she still had this womanly habit of being sorry for things that weren’t her fault. I wanted to take these burdens off her shoulders, as strong as they were. That’s what tonight was for.

.....

She still mourned the past, like me. I'd stopped myself from blurting the thing that was on the edge of my tongue, that we could have a second chance if she walked away from it all. I knew her sense of duty to her country and the world always pulled harder than I ever could. The only way to get her out would be to give her no choice.

"I won't apologize. You're right. Sorry. Dammit," she grinned, rubbed at her eyes.

"You tired?"

"Strangely, yeah. Maybe we can eat some dinner and head off to bed early?"

"I'd love that."

"How were we ever out all night? We'd start at that wine store, pass the bottle around, cab it over to that bar under the bridge, the one with all the candles, and kiss until 3 am. Now I'm sleepy at 8."

"That was where you first met Gun, that bar under the bridge, wasn't it? Although he wasn't calling himself Gun yet, was he, he was still Felix Pugna then."

I felt the way his name poisoned my mouth. He was the handsome lady's man of the crew, and I'd seen a lot of tabloids with his face and my wife's plastered next to each other. I knew the rumors weren't true, but still—I'm sure people were throwing themselves at her all day. Movie stars, models, fitness gurus, even average Joe plumbers and the occasional young lady. Not to mention the other heroes. How could I compete? She loved me for her past, which I carried dutifully for her like a purse. I would always be stuck in her past, and I could never be a real part of her present or future.

"No, no, we didn't meet there. Remember, we got in a cab and the driver told us he knew another bar we'd like, and we said, what the hell. We met Gun for the first time at that second bar—"

"Fate. Or a government conspiracy."

"My life is one or the other. Unless it's the same thing. Dinner?"

I smiled. No one could go back and forth with me like she could. My co-workers were nice, and the clients were always grateful and interesting, but only she and I could talk about nothing for three hours. I missed her so much when she was away. But I couldn't tell her how miserable it was. It would hurt her too much.

"A bit more wine," I said, pouring slowly. Glass number two. This was the important one.

"Anyway. I do miss the good old days in New York. Remember that season we spent couch surfing? We lived with my old college roommate in Hell's Kitchen. Then we were in Staten Island for a stint with your mom. God that commute!"

"Mom insisted that we be home for dinner at 7. It was like being a teenager all over again, couldn't have sex, couldn't leave after dark."

.....

“She wasn’t that bad. I love your mom.”

“That’s because she’s not yours. You know, this reporter, as an experiment, did a similar thing for a year to see if it is actually possible to exist without renting a permanent home.”

“I’m surprised reporters have any time to do anything other than watch what the Nemesis will do next.” Her face turned dark. “Sometimes I wonder if he’s really that bad of a guy. It all seems like pranks more than anything else. Although—I shouldn’t be telling you this—but he found Gun’s wife. Tried to—anyway, he clearly has some ways of getting past all the security nets we have in place.”

“I heard about that.”

“How?”

“What?”

“How did you hear about that?”

“Gun’s wife and I—we keep in touch. Like a, spouse support group.”

She frowned. It was against the rules for us to be in contact with each other like that, but who else could understand what I was going through? I’d met Gun’s wife once, at the Met Gala, and she slipped me her email address and a note that said, “If you ever need to talk.” We’d both created free email addresses under fake names to avoid any scrutiny. Nothing romantic. Friends.

The dinner timer went off, temporarily releasing us from the clutches of some awkward conversation. “Let’s eat! Grab your wine,” I said, taking her by the hand and into the kitchen. Glass two and a half. Good.

We made a pan sauce together, she chopped the shallots a little bit more slowly and messier than usual and measured the vermouth, while I carved the chicken into neat slices. We ate, and it felt like the old days. It always felt like the old days for a while, and then she’d be off again. She’d be off again and we’d have a spat over something minor just before she left, and I was always left behind. I’d go to the real estate office worried my last words to her had been something idiotic like ‘Why am I always the one who puts away the dishes?’ I hated it. I loved her, but I hated this.

“Perfect. I love it here,” she said.

“Me too.” If she loved it so much, why was she always leaving? Busy saving the world, keeping all the big cities from turning on their sides, just her and a few others between the earth and its total destruction. How could I complain?

“By the way, you made some good points about that movie we watched. When I thought back on it later. I even brought it up to some people at work, and they agreed.”

“We never talk about things like that at work. It’s all bomb threats here, biohazards

.....

.....

there. Would it kill the guys to throw in some water cooler stuff?”

“Well, that’s what happens when your job is trivial, like mine. I’m busy selling all those condos to yuppies.”

“Why don’t you leave it? I know real estate isn’t what you wanted. They can give you any backstory, any job, anywhere, you know? I’ll just make the call.”

“I like it here. I grew up around here, there’s nothing extraordinary about it. I know the people. I know what to expect at the water cooler now. It’s stable. It’s normal.”

“Unlike our situation?”

“Why don’t you leave your job? Is having the fate of the world in your hands really what you wanted?” I watched her every move. Her answer meant everything. And her face right now—said it all. That distant, glassy-eyed look. She wanted out.

“Maybe—sometimes I—” She shook her head. “It’s just something I have to do. I have these gifts for a reason, right?”

I sighed. “My job just passes the time between when I see you. It keeps my head from exploding with worry every day that you’ll come home, safe and whole. My job doesn’t have to be anything special. I don’t have a calling, not like you. I’m just—me.”

She looked sad. “Ok. Well—think about it.”

“I have. If I didn’t have the job, I wouldn’t get anything real done. I’d pace for a while, write for an hour, sit in front of the TV, and play with myself.”

She nearly spat out her wine.

“It’s true!”

“Men. I’ve never thought to myself, ‘Well, I’m bored. Guess I could masturbate.’”

“It’s a real thing.”

“I bet it is,” she said.

And we reached across the table, and we kissed, and everything melted away. I stood up from the kitchen chair, picked her up in my arms, and walked over to the stairs. “I can’t believe I can still pick you up, after the change.”

“Some of my power is metaphysical in nature.” She hopped out of my arms and picked me up this time. The whole world was a whooshing, colorful blur for a moment, and the blur was a modern art splatter, and my arm was just a color, an abstract suggestion of an arm. In a fraction of a second, she had transported us three flights to the bedroom.

“That was fast,” I said.

.....

.....
“Not as fast as normal. Must be the wine.”

I bit my lip and said nothing as she leaned in for a kiss.

While she slept, I watched snow falling on the pine tree illuminated by the streetlight outside. During these winter months, I'd stare out of the window for hours, wondering where she was and if she would be safe, or I stared down at my phone to see if the dreaded call had come in, the call saying she was gone forever. I stared and I waited, every night. How could I endure it anymore? Was this how she felt, waiting for some catastrophe to pop up on her next call to work? When she called out in her sleep, was she dreaming of the end?

Outside, the snow kept falling and, in the shadows, I thought I saw figures moving to surround the house. But that was impossible. They didn't know where we were or what I'd done. It was just the trees. They reached their needled hands to scratch at the windows. The house itself creaked and crept strangely. But we were safe here. I was imagining things.

As carefully as I could, stumbling by the light of my cell phone, I slipped back into bed with her, pulling the covers up to my chin and stretching out. I faced the ceiling and stared up into nothing. She rolled over and laid her head against my chest—she smelled like lavender and wine.

“I dreamt I couldn't save you.” She always mumbled in her sleep. Like a child caught in a lie, I could feel my heart going staccato, and I worried she would hear its betraying beat the way she could sense a criminal in the interrogation room. “You were swept up in the fire.”

“I'm right here.”

“I couldn't get to you in time. I was away, somewhere else, and the house had already caught, everything had—”

“You don't have to worry about me. I'm safe here. No one knows. As for the house, let it burn. There are others. You don't need to save me. It's me who gets to save you. It's my turn.”

I held her as closely as I could until she fell back asleep. I laid there, listening to the scratching of the needles against the windows and the whooshing wind. It sounded like a howl in the distance, plaintive and urgent.

I thought back to when she and I first met. She was standing a few feet away from me at some local bar, not quite a dive, not quite a fancy place either. I said to myself, if she's still alone in five minutes, I'm going over to talk to her. But she beat me to the punch by walking over to me. My mother always told me to stop thinking, start doing. My therapist too. I always resented the implication that thinking didn't count for anything. But in a world of heroes and villains, life and death on the news every day, thoughts don't count for much. And so I did something.

“Babe?”

.....

“Hmm?”

“Wake up.”

“What is it? What’s wrong?” She bolted up.

“It’s just—we have to talk.”

“I thought I heard—”

“Gunn’s wife. She told me about the cure. She told me there was a way to get rid of the powers, doctors didn’t know how it worked yet, some kind of natural muscle relaxer and adrenal suppressor, right? You never even mentioned it, but she and I talked about it. I know you could never turn your back on the world like that. The one thing you’re not strong enough to do. But I thought I could be the one. If I could get you to take that cure, you’d be—things would be different. We’d be together. You’d be alive. We could start a family, really this time.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m just sorry I did it this way.”

“What did you do?”

“The wine. They said it wouldn’t do anything to me since I don’t have powers, and yours would deactivate in a couple of hours.”

She jumped out of bed. “You poisoned me. How could you?” Tears. But this was what she wanted. She would see the good of it, I was sure.

She grabbed a bag from the closet, started throwing things into it. “Pack a bag.”

“What? Why?”

“There is no cure. That stuff works for 24 hours, tops.”

“What?”

“Goddamn it, pack a fucking bag!”

“Why? What’s happening? Allison, stop!”

“It was a trick. They depower us and then strike when we’re vulnerable. His idea. I’m sure it was his idea. And going through our spouses—genius.”

The bedroom light snapped on, abrupt and shocking. For a moment, the bedroom seemed strange and unfamiliar, the harsh overhead lights slicing through the intimate night.

“Sorry about this. You kids need a minute?” The Nemesis asked, pointing his gun at us both.

.....

LAVINIA KUMAR

Which Why What Where and When, at School in Ireland

In the language of trees there is a *wh-i-i-i-sh-sh*
of wind. We children in class together listened,
practiced, every sound in songs, stories,
history, sorrow, games,
the *where* cows huddled in afternoon shade
under oak trees in the middle of fields
where we flew our faery stories written
on backs of leaves, on winged seeds.
Why was never asked by night faeries
harvesting our message from rough bark gaps,
their hands rarely seen – only in twilight –
the notes merely a first clue for the race
which ended exactly one hour before dawn.
Then sprites rushed blade to grass blade,
a chase to uncover the next clue, a sign or hint
to unknot mischief of bad faeries,
and *when* our word-breezes led them
to blackthorn, wild cherry, grey dunes,
and bee orchid, they'd see costumed goblins
hide, clinging to fescues and crane's bill.
What faerie would not thank the wind, and us,
as they spit raindrops and dew at evil ones?
They loved to chase gusts of double consonants,
ghosts of children's chants, the *whish* of winds.

DAVE OLSON

A Caring Hand



WANDA PRAISNER

All That Comes

*Open my heart and you will see
graved inside of it, "Italy."*

Robert Browning

A night ablaze with diamonds,
the navy sky pinpointed
with planets and stars—
enough to tug a brocaded,
tasseled bell pull
to summon you back.

We glided past the Danieli
like Proust and Byron before us.
Cyclamen bloomed fuchsia,
crimson and white, despite
November chill and gloom—
I annoyed you, taking a picture
of the handsome gondolier.

We visited Empress Sisi's
apartment in St. Mark's Square;
Peggy Guggenheim's gondola
at the Maritime Museum—last
privately-owned one in the city;
I made you take me to the house
where Browning died.

Memories, like ghosts
to remind us what comes
with morning leaves by night.
Daily, sun sinks, bleeds
coral, violet and gray,
weakens—and overcome
by darkness, dies.

Enough

Mel Sonnenschein stands at the open window in his second-floor bedroom. Across the street two trucks pull behind the brick façade of the Sonnenschein Pyroxylin Waste Company, ready to haul discarded cellulose. He pulls down the shade and mops the sweat off his face with his monogrammed handkerchief. Herman Geist's words, "We're not losing our business to a lousy Jew," linger in his mind like Herman's cigar smoke on his good blue serge suit. "You'll be in for a bitter fight," Rudy Geist said when Mel ordered the brothers out of the building. They should only go back to Irvington and stay there. As president of the Sonnenschein Pyroxylin Waste Company, it's Mel's duty to protect his business. It isn't his fault that storing waste of cellulose shavings, sawdust, and trimmings turns a hefty profit. Even DuPont down on Schuyler Avenue is in the game, but its executives aren't breathing down Mel's neck with threats. And Mel's pretty sure the Geists aren't blessing them with their presence.

A new wave of heat rises to Mel's throat and cheeks. Enough already, it's Friday, almost Shabbos, time to put everything aside, at least for twenty-four hours. Enough.

"Only the air conditioning at the Regent could keep me cool tonight," he says to his wife, Alma, an hour later.

"It's Shabbos," she says, straightening his tie for him. "You go to the synagogue, not to a movie."

"I'm not sitting in a pew with sweat pouring down my nose into my prayer book."

"No need to worry," says Alma. "That shnazola of yours will prevent it from going anywhere," and with that, she tweaked his nose and smiled.

"Once this heat wave breaks, I'll go to *shul*," he says. He kisses her forehead. "Where's Dena?"

"Across the street by the river with the other kids. She'll be in soon."

As he leaves the house, he spots his daughter, braids coiled around her head like a crown for the princess that she is. He waves to her. Dozens of children sit on the shore of the river, their mothers navigating between them. Waves of plum and tangerine hover over the Orange Mountains in the distance. The scene of the summer sky and children by the water remind him of Coney Island back when he lived in Brooklyn. Shouts of people having a good time. But it's too hot for him and he heads toward the corner to walk the thirteen blocks uphill to get to Main Street and the theatre. It's the chauffeur's night off.

Just a few blocks south of the Regent is the synagogue. With any degree of luck, he won't run into anyone he knows. Max and Eva Kramer only go to *shul* on the High Holy Days, too busy with their general store across the street from River Valley's Roman Catholic Church. But Al Mintz would be there. What a pain in the *tuchus* he was.

.....

Mel quickens his pace while wiping the sweat off his face with his handkerchief. Alma's comment about his nose brings a smile. Sure, they had been matched, but it works for them. And they both dote on Dena, who at twelve is already becoming quite the young lady. At least she has Alma's nose.

Automobiles rumble along the cobblestone road, sounding like a brass band. There weren't so many cars when he and Alma first moved to River Valley. Nine years ago someone in his accounting office had handed him a brochure for Pleasant Manor Homes, built on the former site of a colonial Dutch estate. "Away From The City Outside The High Price Areas. Just a comfortable distance from New York, Jersey City, Hoboken and Newark, connected by excellent transportation, and well provided with its own city conveniences. \$20 a month buys a homesite." He laid out \$300 for a 50x100 lot. A place where Alma could have a fruit and vegetable garden and where Dena could play on the lawn.

It never occurred to him to ask whether there were other Jews in town. Once he moved in, Mel was the tenth Jewish man and made a *minyán* possible.

"Cellulose is a good, solid business," Joe Glick told him. Joe owned a brick building on River Road and was happy to lease it to Mel at a bargain price. Joe was the treasurer of the Pleasant Manor Homes land development company. The factory building was located along the river and Mel's residential lot across from it. Now that was convenience.

Mel founded the company and put it in his own name. His immigrant father, he of blessed memory, would have been proud. Even with the Depression, Mel could hold steady with his business and his house. As he walks along Main Street, he counts his blessings. Alma. Dena. His business. The community.

He doesn't look to see what picture is showing tonight. It doesn't really matter. He buys his ticket at the booth and feels a chilly blast as he enters. He takes a seat toward the back in one of the red velvet chairs beneath the largest chandelier he's ever seen. It takes up the entire ceiling before the balcony section.

He sinks into the chair and his shoulders relax. Those Geist brothers. The images of their brief meeting run through Mel's mind like a movie reel of their own, the insults burning through the celluloid and catching on his clothing.

He'd like to put the film in a can and have his own trucks haul it away where it could no longer do harm.

While the projectionist changes reels, Mel drops a coin into the soft drink machine in the back and gets himself a grape Nehi, aware that he shouldn't be handling money on the Sabbath. He holds the paper cup close to his face, allowing the carbonated bubbles to burst onto his face.

He gulps the drink and returns to his seat. He realizes he's watching a new Busby Berkeley musical. He can't tell the difference between any of them, they all look and sound alike. But Alma likes them and he should have waited to see this one with her.

.....

The second reel is just ending when the building shakes. The evening paper said nothing of a storm and Mel does not have an umbrella. But thunder and lightning can't last forever and he can wait it out under the eaves of the theatre.

Another quake and Mel nearly falls out of his seat. Someone opens the back door and screams, "Fire! There's been an explosion!"

The ushers guide everyone out onto Main Street. Flames and smoke rise to the treeline off to the northwest.

"What blew up?" Mel asks one of the ushers.

"That cellulose factory down on River Road."

Mel runs before he even knows he's running. Down Main Street, down the boulevard toward the river and River Road.

He's nearing home when a third explosion nearly brings him to his knees.

If he didn't know this was River Valley, he'd have thought it was France during the Great War.

A cloud of fire engulfs the roof and walls of the Sonnenschein Pyroxylin Waste Company. A hail of bricks pelts the street and the half-naked kids run pell-mell. Flames shoot out in ticker-tape streams from the shattered roof, flapping at the cloudless sky. Burning flakes of celluloid shower down in blazing strips onto screaming men, women and children for about a quarter mile.

Hundreds of people fill the street, sobbing. Police and firemen. Women screaming, "Find my son! Find my daughter!" while calling out their children's names. Bodies limp along the street while others, wrapped in flames, move like meteorites toward the river.

Electric wires and their poles collapse on Joe's home, 100 feet from the factory.

Panting, Mel comes to his house on the corner of River Road and Diamond Street. It is wrapped in flames and he pushes toward the door frame. But a fireman blocks his path.

"You can't go in," he says.

"This is my house. Was my house. Where's my wife, my daughter?" He is crying and he pushes against the fireman, nearly pounding him on the chest. The fireman grabs his arms hard and shoves him away from the threshold.

Two firemen carry out two unrecognizable, charred bodies.

Mel stands there unable to move. Bile begins to float through his throat, blocking his screams. He pulls away from the fireman's grip. He holds his cramping stomach and crashes to the ground, heated from the fires. He grabs his lapel and begins to chant the mourner's Kaddish, "*Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'mayrabo, b'olmodeev'rochirusay, v'yaleech*"

.....
malchusay...” The vomit breaks through and he collapses in it.

How long he is there he doesn't know. Someone lifts him off the ground. A policeman.

“We have to take you in for questioning,” he says.

“What?”

“You're Mel Sonnenschein, right?”

Mel nods.

“This was your factory?”

He nods again. “But my wife and daughter...they're dead. I have to get their bodies prepared for burial.”

“That'll have to wait, pal.”

The policeman cuffs him and guides him into a police car. Screams fill his head.

“We have to drag the river for bodies,” one of the policemen says.

“The firemen already took them out of the house,” Mel says.

“The other ones, the missing children. We got unaccounted-for kids,” the policeman says.

“Where are you taking me?” Mel asks.

“Bergen County jail.”

Not even the local jail. What does Mel care. Alma gone. Dena gone. The business gone. The house gone. He may as well be gone.

If he had gone to *shul* like Alma wanted him to, everyone would still be alive. But he didn't listen. He put his needs first.

God watches everything.

Karl Messner, the assistant county prosecutor, and some New Jersey state officials pummel him with questions. Mel mumbles something about the Geist brothers from Irvington and their threats.

Messner doesn't buy it. “Rudy and Herman Geist are good, upstanding citizens. They would do nothing to harm your business.”

These German immigrants stick together. They're anti Semiten and it's each man out for himself. The country's in a depression for God's sake.

.....

The bail is set for Mel and he's got no one to call to help him. It's Shabbos and no one would pick up the phone. Joe Glick would, but he's held, too.

An investigation launches to determine whether the cause of the explosion is arson. The prosecutors hurl blame at Mel. Apparently, there's some labor law issue prohibiting the use of electric-pull switches near the cellulose. There's also the matter of not having a permit to store flammable materials. Mel knows nothing about these issues. He holds his hand against his heart, because he can't stop the burning sensation.

River Valley's mayor and six councilmen are ushered into the jail for criminal negligence. They didn't enforce an ordinance prohibiting the storage of flammables without a license.

No one had told Mel he needed a license. When Joe offered him the business, he didn't mention that cellulose nitrate was highly flammable and Mel was too naïve to ask. He had only learned that along the way. He would have gotten a license if only he had known. He would have put safeguards in place and spared no expense in doing so.

Mel overhears the final death count. Ten victims, including a six-year-old girl. More than 180 injured. All the area hospitals are helping and Town Hall's entire second floor has been transformed into an emergency treatment center.

Joe brings a civil suit against him and wins. Mel should never have gone into business with him. The first trial, at the grand jury level, indicts both Mel and Joe on charges of manslaughter. They launch an appeal. The mayor and councilmen are indicted, too.

Mel doesn't remember much about the time in county jail. Not the meetings with his lawyer, not the meals, not the cell. If he had visitors, he can't recall them either. He has a vague memory of someone telling him Alma and Dena were laid to rest in the congregation's cemetery. The guard shouting at him to shut up when he screams every night as the film in his head plays out the scene of River Road and the bodies.

He recites the *Sh'ma* every day and folds his arms over his stomach. But it's no good. Nothing can dissipate that slow, steady growth of gnawing guilt.

Ten people died because of him. His wife, his daughter died because of him. Nearly two hundred people injured because of him.

Bergen County's best investigators never determine the cause of the explosion beyond flammable materials and a hot day. And they can't decide just how dangerous pyroxylin is.

Mel is acquitted after a year and a half in the clink.

As he stumbles out, he waves the reporters and photographers away. He knows what the newspapers will say. A Jew caused this tragedy. A money-hungry Jew who didn't value life.

And he knows what the Jewish community will say. That he should have known better.

.....

.....

And they're all correct in their assessments.

If only he had gone to shul.

The twelve-year-old girls in the pew in front of Mel Sonnenschein annoy him. Every Friday night they show up as part of their bat mitzvah training. Every Friday night they remind Mel that Dena was once twelve and would now be 42, if things hadn't happened the way they did. Every Friday night Mel grits his teeth each time they giggle when Rabbi Bitner says during responsive reading, "glory and holiness, revered in praises, doing wonders."

On the one hand, Mel understands the giggles. The rabbi pronounces his vowels with a distinctive Midwestern twang. Mel also finds it comical that the rabbi has a scar at the base of his neck in the shape of a cross.

"Shh!" Mel hisses at the girls. No respect for the faith. No respect for tradition.

They stare at him wide-eyed, look at each other, and titter all over again.

Somehow he survives and after the service he saunters into the lounge for the *Oneg Shabbat*. A nice cup of tea, that's what he needs. Maybe a petit four or piece of rugelach. With any degree of luck, the Sisterhood bought pastries from Harold's.

"*Gut Shabbos*," Al Mintz says, shaking his hand. "May you have a good week."

Mel nods. A good week he hasn't had since before that summer of 1933.

"He's so sour," one of the silly girls mutters as he walks by to take a seat toward the front of the room.

Rummaging through the pastries, there's no *rugelach* or petit fours. He takes a bite of a cookie. Poppy seeds. He nearly spits it all into his napkin.

Only Max and Eva Kramer showed any kindness to him after the acquittal. They gave him clothes and a small apartment in the building they owned. Good people.

He helped them with their books and opened a small accounting business in their basement. The dankness suited him. He could hide among the cobwebs until school let out and Moxie Kramer jumped the stairs to get to his ham radio. But Moxie eventually left home for the Newark College of Engineering and the solitude returned. That blessed and cursed quiet. All he could hear were footsteps overhead and the occasional laughter of Eva Kramer as she quipped with her customers. God bless her, she brought him lunch every day. Good people.

There was no sign for his business. He only handled accounts through word of mouth. The Kramers referred their customers to him. He made enough to live on. Max and Eva died in the '50s and when Moxie sold the place to pizza people, Mel closed up his business. He stayed in his apartment and watched the Million Dollar Movie on Chan-

.....

nel 9 every afternoon at 4:30. The place suited him. He didn't need much, which was good, because he didn't have much.

He shuddered when he thought about his large house, swollen bank account, and the chauffeur. How often he had heard his own mother say in Yiddish, *man tracht un Gott lacht*. Man plans and God laughs.

"Hey, Mel, want a ride home?" someone now asks. Mel waves him away. It's Shabbos, no one should be riding.

He leaves the shul and walks toward Main Street. The cars still rumble on the cobblestone. It's been forty years since Mel moved to River Valley and the town still hasn't macadamized.

He walks along River Road and a green and white fence protects the remains of his factory, overrun now with vines and weeds. It's quiet. No one swims in the river these days. Only the high school crew team uses it. Now when there's a heat wave people stay indoors and take comfort in their air-conditioned living rooms. He walks until the screams clear out of his head. It's temporary. They'll be back and they'll clamor for his attention until the day he dies, which can't come soon enough.

He's now made a big square and is back on Main Street and his apartment at Sunset. He readies for bed. On the nightstand is a photo of him, Alma, and Dena, smiles frozen in time. The same framed photo he has installed at the cemetery. It reminds him it's *Yahrzeit* and he must go to their gravesites on Sunday, as he has for so many years without fail.

That's only one of his rituals. Early each morning he strides to the shul to be part of *minyán*. It's the least he can do. After his acquittal, he showed up every morning, only to be turned away. But over the years, the judgmental glances gave way to new members from Jersey City who knew nothing of the fire and pyroxylin company. They accepted him.

He volunteers at the Hebrew School to teach proper prayer technique to the kids, even the girls. To *daven* is a skill.

But none of the kids actually speaks to him. Occasionally he hears their whispered jeers about his loud, off-key singing or about the size of his nose. At least they say nothing about murder.

One Tuesday, after Hebrew School, a girl approaches him.

"You look sad, Mr. Sonnenschein," she says. What can she possibly know of his pain?

"Are you new here? I've not seen you before," he says. She has long brown hair, parted in the middle, and hazel eyes.

"I'm Elaine Altman. My family just moved here from Jersey City. We live in the River-view Apartments, you know by that old rundown factory."

.....

.....

“How old are you?” he asks. “About twelve?”

“Yes. I’m preparing for bat mitzvah. That’s what I want to talk to you about. Rabbi Bitner says because I came here so late that I need extra help with my *haftorah*. I thought maybe you could teach me?”

“You’re not afraid of me?”

“Should I be?”

“I’ll want to speak with your parents. To make sure it’s all right.”

“It’s just Mom and me. My father died. That’s why we moved here. We couldn’t afford the house anymore, although I’m not supposed to know that.”

Later that night, Mel knocks on 15E at the Riverview Apartments. He is at least ten minutes late because he nearly turned back a dozen times.

Elaine answers and his heart calms. She takes him by the hand and ushers him into the living room. She is the younger version of her mother, who gives him a firm handshake.

“Thank you for coming,” she says. “I’m Doris. I can’t pay you much, but we’d be so grateful for any help you could give Elaine.”

She makes room for them at the kitchen table and Mel gives the first lesson right then and there.

“I’ll come every Tuesday and Thursday night,” he says as he leaves more than an hour later. “Until Elaine’s bat mitzvah.”

Without fail, he appears as promised. Sometimes Doris invites him to stay for coffee and cake. A few times she asked him to come earlier and join them for dinner.

The giggly girls don’t bother him so much anymore. The Altmans sit next to him in the pew.

“You’re singing off-key again,” Elaine reminds him, squeezing his hand.

It’s enough.

Book Review: Intersection on Neptune. Donna J. Gelagotis Lee. The Poetry Press, 2019.

The poems in Donna Gelagotis Lee's *Intersection on Neptune* cover a lot of ground. As they move between the city and the suburbs, the past and the present, they compose a long love letter to New York and New Jersey, one in which certain local readers will surely see their experience reflected.

The book begins, in Part 1, with New York City. There are reminiscences of Coney Island, as well as more recent memories: In the poem "First Trip to Brooklyn After the Attack," she writes, "From here, we watch the country try on / freedom with a police presence, with / snuffed out candles, posters of the missing." Yet, even in the face of such sadness, Gelagotis Lee does not lose her sense of humor: In "Prayer for Gil Hodges," she writes, "Maybe God was a Dodgers fan / and no one knew it" (8). Part 2 focuses on the author's time in New Jersey, beginning with the poem, "What's American," in which she describes the experience of her immigrant grandparents settling in America. Then, in "Hunger and Money," she describes "how hunger and hope intertwined" (31), and in "Eggs," she summarizes that period as a time "when promise / was as golden as an egg yolk or a sunrise."

Not all the poems are paeans to place, however. An undercurrent in the book is a focus on the experience of women growing up in the mid-20th century. In "Zeal," she describes the change in dress code for school girls, when girls were no longer forced to wear skirts to school. In "Women in the Neighborhood," she discusses the still-problematic power dynamic that existed when women were first entering the workforce: "If they worked, they earned / more freedom, as they were paid and could buy / whatever their husbands agreed to" (49).

While the poems have their focus in New York and New Jersey, ultimately they are poems of the American experience; in fact, some of Gelagotis Lee's poems are addressed directly to America. Even more than the American experience, however, the poems call to mind the deeply human experience of time passing—longing for the past, mourning what has been lost, trying to hold on to memories. She writes: "I wish I could replenish the past / with a hormone, time / like a heartbeat." This book—like all literature—is an attempt, and an enjoyable one, to preserve those memories so they are not lost.

Book Review: The Ride. Nancy Cathers Demme. Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2019

If you're a veteran *Kelsey Review* reader, you may recognize the name of author Nancy Demme; we've published her thought-provoking fiction in the *Review* quite often over the last several years. It was with high expectations, then, that I anticipated reading her new novel, *The Ride*, and it did not disappoint.

The Ride is an apt title for this book. Of course, it refers to the many rides that protagonist Diego Ramirez finds with a motley crew of strangers—truck drivers, old women, salesmen. But it also calls to mind the “ride” of life, with its ups and downs, its many vicissitudes, and the growth that happens when a person travels through it. Finally, though, the title also highlights the experience of reading the book itself—an emotional journey for the reader.

Diego Ramirez is a boy of fifteen running away from his abusive stepfather. He also happens to be a pyromaniac. His compulsion to set fire is most dramatically enacted in the backstory, in the barn Diego sets aflame with his stepfather inside. Diego escapes his home and hitchhikes, receiving rides from strangers, some of whom are kind, but most of whom are dangerous in some way. Particularly, we see Diego vulnerable to predatory men who mirror the predatory behavior of his stepfather. His journey through the book could be seen as one moving from innocence to experience, but that's too simple. Diego had already been experienced by the time we first meet him; he felt he had sinned and was guilty. So his transformation in the book is also a movement back to innocence.

The book's use of setting is one of its biggest strengths: it takes place in Texas, near the Mexico border, and the landscape is described in such a way that the reader can imagine it even if one has never been there. Diego is Mexican, and while he understands some English, throughout the book he has trouble communicating with those giving him rides. The use of both English and Spanish in the book reflects the borderlands setting.

Indeed, the borderlands setting, as well as the choice of character—a young Mexican refugee, a vulnerable victim trying to find help—is one of the aspects of the book that raises it from just a good read to an *important* one. Diego's story could be the story of any immigrant fleeing their home, and the strangers Diego meets could be any one of us. Will we show kindness, or will we turn away? Demme's book, an exercise in empathy and grace, an image of both the ugliness and beauty of humanity, gives rise to these questions and more.

.....

.....

Contributors

Allen Appel was born in 1937. He received his BA in English from Brooklyn College in 1959, and his subsequent career involved developing computer applications. He moved to an active adult community in 2003, where he writes for the community newspaper.

Gwen Bernick attends the College of New Jersey, where she studies English. She has been a writer for as long as she can remember and a poet since she began to call herself one. She was the editor-in-chief of her high school literary magazine, *Northern Lights*.

Ilene Dube is a writer, artist and filmmaker. Her short stories, poetry and personal essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Atticus Review*, *The Bookstore on Lafayette Street* anthology, *Corvus Review*, *Former People*, *HerStory*, *Huffington Post*, *Iconoclast*, *Kelsey Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *The Grief Diaries*, *The Oddville Press*, *Parhelion*, *Penny Shorts*, *the Same*, *Soft Cartel*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Unlikely Stories* and *U.S. 1 Summer Fiction*.

Lauren Fedorko, M.Ed., is an Adjunct Professor of writing at Rutgers University, teaches AP Literature, and advises the GSA club for her students. Her passion for writing is longstanding and ongoing, composed mostly of poetry and creative non-fiction. She enjoys exploring, good company, photography, and traveling the world every chance she gets. Her work has been previously published in the *Kelsey Review*.

Arlene Feldman is a graduate of the Brooklyn College MFA/Creative Writing. She is a retired New York City High School English teacher.

Elane Gutterman is Chair of the Literary Arts Committee at the West Windsor Arts Center, where she is also a founding board member. Her poems on family, travel and community have been published in *The Kelsey Review*, *Patterson Literary Review*, *U.S. 1 Summer Fiction Issue* and *NewVerseNews*.

Barbara Krasner teaches in the English and History departments of Mercer County Community College. She holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts, and her fiction has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Jewishfiction.net*, *Jewish Women's Literary Annual*, and other publications. Her middle-grade historical novel in verse, *37 Days*, is forthcoming from Kar-Ben/Lerner Publishing in 2021 and a young-adult historical, *Matchless*, is forthcoming in 2020 from MB Publishing.

Lavinia Kumar's books are *The Celtic Fisherman's Wife: A Druid Life* (2017), *♣ The Skin and Under* (Word Tech, 2015). Chapbooks are *Beauty. Salon. Art.* (Desert Willow Press, 2019), *Let There be Color* (Lives You Touch Publications, 2016), *♣ Rivers of Saris* (Main Street Rag, 2013). Her poetry has appeared in US, Irish, & UK publications. Her website is laviniakumar.org.

Lauralee Leonard resident of Mercer County since 1995, has been a medical writer since 1992. She attained the Master's Degree in Narrative Medicine from Columbia University in 2014. Her poems have been published by the *Kelsey Review* and by *US 1 Worksheets*. She is currently serving as an Assistant Fiction Edition for the *Bellevue Literary Review*.

.....

Leonora Obed's poem was inspired by portraits of her ancestors in the Philippines, their associations with maritime life and the Spanish-American war. She is a freelance writer and professional Fine Artist specializing in oil painting. She has lived in West Trenton, N.J. since 1979. Her poems, prose, and papers have been published in *The Kelsey Review*, *Wild about Wilde Newsletter*, *Bronte Studies Journal*, *The Sculpture Foundation's Ekphrasis series*, *Hopkins Variations: Standing round a Waterfall*, and *The Journal of the Short Story in English*. Her paintings have been exhibited at New Hope Arts, Artsbridge and the Bucks County Arts Festival. She enjoys gourmet cooking, piano, and ballroom dancing, and she looks forward to every World Cup Soccer.

Dave Olson has been a construction worker, a school bus driver, a student, and a teacher. He is in his 24th year in the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District where he works as a special educator. He is married and has two grown sons; his family is everything. He has had drawings published in the *Kelsey Review*.

Wanda S. Praisner, a recipient of fellowships from the NJ State Council on the Arts, the Dodge Foundation, PFAWC, and VCCA, has work in *Atlanta Review*, *Lullwater Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Latest book is *To Illuminate the Way* (Aldrich Press, 2018). A resident poet for the state, she's received fifteen Pushcart Prize nominations, the Egan Award, Princemere Prize, Kudzu Award, First Prize in Poetry in the NJ Writers' Conference, and the 2017 New Jersey Poets Prize.

Judith Salcewicz, a retired teacher and member of the Lawrence Writer's Group, has published essays, short fiction, and poetry in *Women's World*, *Kelsey Review*, *US1*, *Right Hand Pointing* and other publications and is working on a historical fiction novel based on the lives of her grandmothers. Her play, *Lost and Found*, was featured in this year's Playfest at Lawrence Library.

Nancy Scott has lived in Mercer County since 1966 and has been managing editor of *U.S.1 Worksheets* for more than a decade. She is the author of nine collections of poetry and one novella. A second novella, *Cold War Blues*, is scheduled for release in 2019. As an artist working mainly in collage, she has exhibited her work in numerous juried shows in the area. Her website is www.nancyscott.net.

Steve Smith attended the school of Visual Arts NYC where he earned a BFA. A fine artist as well as a poet, Steve's poems have appeared in the *Kelsey Review*, *US 1 Worksheets*, *The NJ Journal of Poetry*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Nerve Cowboy* and *The Barefoot Muse*, as well as *The Midwest Prairie Review*. Steve resides in Pennington, New Jersey.

Since college, **D. E. Steward** never has had a pedestrian job, and has nearly a thousand credits and *Chroma One through Five* (Archae Editions, Brooklyn, 2018).

Joanne Sutera writes short stories and flash fiction reflecting the underbelly of society, plays that explore relationships and dark and acerbic poetry. She nourishes her passion by taking classes, attending seminars and learning from writers she admires. Currently, she belongs to several writers' groups in the Princeton area, yet still finds time to procrastinate. She is published in *Zest Magazine* and *US1*.

.....

Donna Wolfe serves as a reference librarian at the Lawrence Headquarters Branch of the Mercer County Library. She writes with Room at the Table (the RATT Pack) and directs the Fiction Writers' Workshop at Lawrence Library. She has published in *The Courier Journal* and *U.S. #1*.

Michael Zimmerman is a writer of short stories and poetry, as well as a middle school Writing teacher in East Brooklyn. His previous work has been published in *Cutbank*, *A & U Magazine*, *The Painted Bride*, *Wilde Magazine*, *Caravel*, *Aji*, *Arkana*, *8 West Press*, *Steam Ticket*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, and *Zingara Poetry Review*, and various anthologies. He is the 2015 recipient of the Oscar Wilde Award from Gival Press and a finalist for the Hewitt Award in 2016. In 2018, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his story "Doppelganger" in *Two Cities Review*. Mike lives in Brooklyn with his husband and their cat. Learn more on Instagram @mazaffected.

Editors & Staff

Roberta Clipper is a fiction editor of the *Kelsey Review*. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of California at Berkeley and is a full Professor at Rider University. A fiction writer and poet, she has published many stories and two novels, including *The Bride Wore Red* and *Fifty Fifty*. On a Fulbright-Nehru Fellowship, she served as a visiting professor at the International Institute of Information Technology in Hyderabad, India during the Monsoon Semester (fall), 2009.

Luray Gross is a poetry editor of the *Kelsey Review* and is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Lift*, published by Ragged Sky Press of Princeton, NJ. A storyteller as well as a poet, she works extensively throughout New Jersey and Pennsylvania as an Artist in Residence.

Ellen Jacko is a poetry editor of the *Kelsey Review* and earned a BA in English Literature at Rutgers University and an MAT in English Education at Trenton State College. She has had a variety of post-graduate experiences including the study of twentieth century British poets at Exeter College, Oxford University, England. For nearly forty years she taught at Allentown High School in Allentown, New Jersey. Additionally, for fifteen years she was a member of the adjunct faculty at Mercer County Community College.

Jacqueline Vogtman is Editor of the *Kelsey Review* and an Associate Professor of English at Mercer County Community College. She received her MFA in Creative Writing-Fiction from Bowling Green State University in Ohio (where she served as an assistant editor of *Mid-American Review*) and her BA in English/Creative Writing from The College of New Jersey. Her fiction has been published in *Atticus Review*, *Connotation Press*, *Copper Nickel*, *Drunken Boat*, *Emerson Review*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Mud Season Review*, *Versal*, and other journals both in print and online.

Submission Guidelines

The *Kelsey Review* is published each Fall. Submissions are open from January 15-May 15. We respond no later than August 15th. The *Review* considers submissions from those who live and/or work in the larger Mercer County area. Use our electronic submission system, Submittable (<https://kelseyreview.submittable.com/submit>), to send us your:

Short Fiction

Length: approximately 4,000 words maximum

Poetry

Send no more than six pages

Essays, Creative Non-fiction, and Reviews

Length: approximately 4,000 words maximum

Artwork & Photography

Upload as a jpg file (Black and white only).

Writers and artists who appear at Mercer County events such as poetry readings are also eligible. Organizers of such events should encourage those who work and/or live in the area to submit short non-fiction critically informed review of the event; the editors will contact the writer/artist to extend an invitation to appear in the *Review*. We see this as an opportunity to promote such literary and artistic occasions and venues within the county.

We invite proposals for non-fiction articles on any topic relevant to the people, history, businesses, educational institutions, artistic traditions and/or government of Mercer County and the surrounding area.

Except for art and poetry, the *Review* generally only accepts one item per author.

Electronic submissions: We accept all submissions through our online submission system (see above). We no longer accept submissions by postal mail (or email!).

- All rights are retained by the author. *The Kelsey Review* remains available online after publication.
- Each year we nominate up to six published items for the Pushcart Prize. See www.pushcartprize.com for more information.
- We accept simultaneous submissions. If we accept an item placed elsewhere, it is up to the author to clear any conflicts upon acceptance to *KR*.

Send questions via email to Kelsey.review@mccc.edu, and find us on Facebook!

Jacqueline Vogtman
Editor

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....



MERCER

COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Moving You Forward >>>

www.mccc.edu