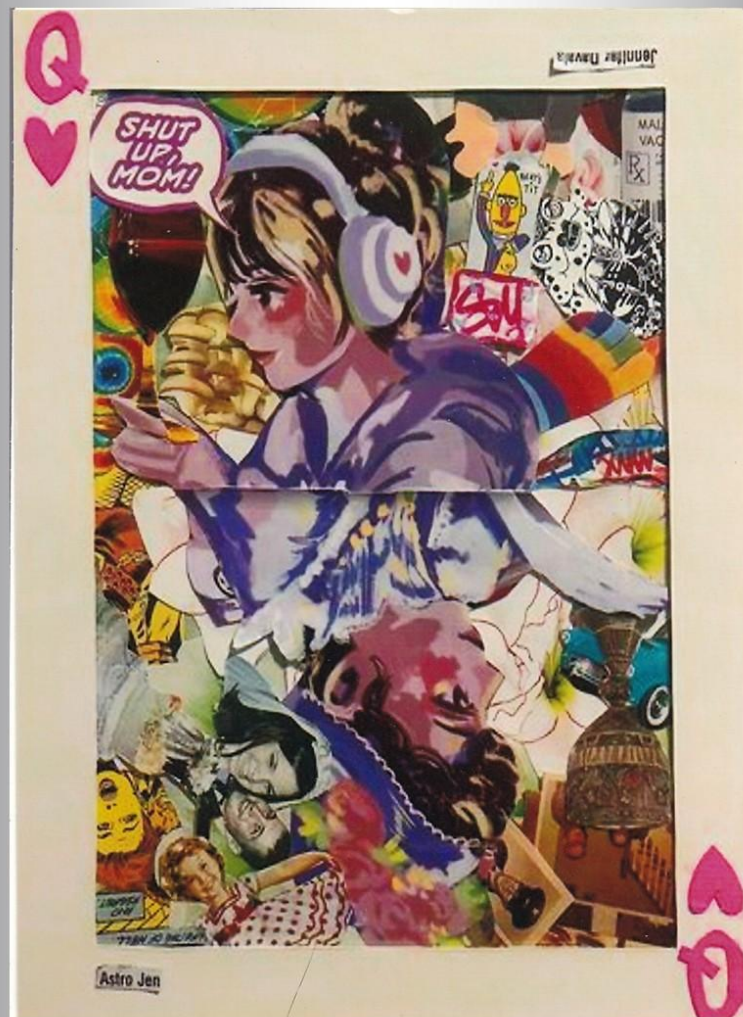


The Anthracite Journal

Vol. 1 Issue 1

June 2026 W



Queen of Hearts Original Art by Jenny Devala

Table of Contents

“A Thin Sandwich,”	<i>Craig Czury</i>	<i>1</i>
“Things I Love to Shoop For,”	<i>Diane Funston</i>	<i>2</i>
“Longing,”	<i>Diane Funston</i>	<i>3</i>
“Resolutions Revisited”	<i>Mary Anne Abdo</i>	<i>4</i>
“Well Sky,”	<i>Mary Anne Abdo</i>	<i>6</i>
“Rent Free,”	<i>J Purdy</i>	
“No Drama,”	<i>J Purdy</i>	<i>7</i>
“A Mile In My Shoes,”	<i>Tracey Hogans</i>	<i>9</i>
“Alien Festival – Carbondale, PA, 11/8/25,”	<i>Tina Gelly</i>	<i>10</i>
“Absence,”	<i>Susan Bloch-Welliver</i>	<i>12</i>
“Leaves,”	<i>Susan Bloch-Welliver</i>	<i>13</i>
“The Approaching Winter,”	<i>Nathaniel Houser</i>	<i>14</i>
“Protest Summer Redux,”	<i>Brian Fanelli</i>	<i>15</i>
“Awaiting the Rail Line to NYC,”	<i>Brian Fanelli</i>	<i>16</i>
“Poetry in the Subway,”	<i>Kathy Bednarek</i>	<i>17</i>
“Yard,”	<i>Kathy Bednarek</i>	<i>17</i>
“I’m Still Trying to Find Myself,”	<i>Tracey Hogans</i>	<i>18</i>
“Ash,”	<i>Tina Gelly</i>	<i>19</i>
“My Graduation Photo Was A Mugshot,”	<i>Cass Heid</i>	<i>20</i>
“My little poem found a home in a fabulous lit mag after I sang to the birds,		
	<i>Cass Heid</i>	<i>21</i>
“Star Falling,”	<i>Brianna Booker</i>	<i>22</i>
“A Whore’s Manifesto,”	<i>Brianna Booker</i>	<i>23</i>
“Poem for Nunzio,”	<i>Marty Gallo</i>	<i>24</i>
“Why I Sleep (elegy),	<i>Moni Page</i>	<i>26</i>
“Yes, she grew up in trailers,	<i>Melissa Liberatore</i>	<i>27</i>

“It’s a Slow Kind of Death,”	<i>Melissa Liberatore</i>	28
“On the Train,”	<i>Gina Morrison Zaloni</i>	29

Haiku – Tanka – Little Poems

Featuring

*Tom Clausen and
Michael Czarnecki*

Selected Haiku and Tanka Poetry	<i>Tom Clausen</i>	31-32
Selected Little Poems - Daily Spontaneous Poems	<i>Michael Czarnecki</i>	33-34

Art and Poetry Fusion

Cover Feature:	<i>Jenny Devala – Words and Art</i>	35-38
“Queen of Hearts”		
“Rod of Asclepius Emoji”		
“Abstain”		
“Gilead” Collage		
“Memory” Collage		
“The Abyss and Me,” Original Acrylic Painting and		
“Stream of Consciousness,” Poem	<i>Anastasiya Fluegel</i>	39-40
“Words,” Poem and Painting		
“Trickster,” Photo and Painting		
“The Lace Works Clock Tower,”		
	Photograph by <i>Alice Taylor-McGraw</i>	
	“The Clock Tower – Poem. <i>Lorrie Loughney</i>	41

more poems.....

“Weaving,”	<i>JC Roberts</i>	42
“Losing a Child,”	<i>Tracey Hogans</i>	43

“The Weight of Tears,”	<i>Lorrie Loughney</i>	44
“Inverse,”	<i>Kimberly Crafton</i>	45
“The Queen of Nothing.”	<i>Kimberly Crafton</i>	46
“Nothing to Write About,”	<i>Kimberly Crafton</i>	47

Essays, One Acts, and Prose....

“Adventures with Al and Erma,	<i>Roger Funston</i>	49
“A Neighborhood Bar Goes Downhill”	<i>John Baldino</i>	51
“The Sweater,”	<i>Marcie Herman-Riebe</i>	54
“ Why This Scranton Native, Horror Movie Lover, and Lapsed Catholic Avoided <i>The Exorcist</i> for So Long,”	<i>Brian Fanelli</i>	55
“Dear Kitchen Sink,”	<i>Diane Funston</i>	58
“Shout Out Your Dead!”	<i>Terrence Dwyer</i>	59
“50 Years,”	<i>JC Roberts</i>	65
“To the Kid Standing at the Edge of the Crowd:,”	<i>Jai Montag</i>	67
“The Raisin Lady”	<i>Ted LoRusso</i>	68
“So Much to Grasp,”	<i>Craig Czury</i>	71

A Thin Sandwich

but nutritious
this small book
small bites at a time
like the little rat bites Monk and the boys
took out of my bucket sandwich
when they weren't throwing dynamite at me in the mines
little pranks
each poem a little prank theorem
knowing there's no such thing as absolute
each line an absolute leading to the therefore of it all
little defeatist punchlines gnawing at the fiber
just roll your eyes
do you have all your absolutes in order
I've sunk mine between the joists
behind the medicine cabinet of my old house
knowing whoever comes in to clean up after me
will shovel all this nonsense into a dumpster
DOWN TIME IS CLEAN UP TIME
reads the sign over the planer chain at the sawmill
I'm not sure my dear friend
as with all other distractions that keep life seeming normal
how to respond to your cancer

Craig Czury

Things I Love To Shop For

Vintage items are the best.
Clothing that traveled other places,
worn by dreamers and doers.
Linen, my favorite, breathes in
breathes out, other lives, other lines.
Velvet, soft yet strong, loved for centuries
by aristocrats and bohemians,
long swirling skirts, gauze, taffeta.

Old furniture next, worn patina
of skin against wood grain,
hand-carved with skilled hands
bringing out the soul of the tree
in tables, chairs, hand-hewn animals.
Lace curtains at the windows.
Not enough to hide the view,
just light frosting to frame visiting wildlife.

I could shop anywhere.
But unearthing treasure is not
unbridled consumerism.
It recycles the past into the useful present.
It passes from one to another
without garish comment.
Old toys sparkle playfully on display,
cut crystal invites more celebration,
vintage items with spirit,
valuable once again.

Diane Funston

Longing

I know I shouldn't want you.
You're clearly no good for me.
But I think about you, a bit too vividly.
The shape of you, the way you look, top to bottom.
The way I know it'll always be good.
Every encounter as satisfying as promised.

Maybe it's the time of year
that makes me want you more.
The kiss of coolness, long country drives,
memories of the last time I gave in.
It is a weakness to lose willpower.
I know I'll return to surrender.

You elicit so many fine memories.
The lake, the carousel, band concerts at the shore.
Mostly with others, but so often just you and me.
I feel as though I devour you with haste,
but often it is a slow melting pleasure.
If not for guilt, or shame, or practically
I'd be at your door every day.

Such foolishness on my part.
To try and get past the added weight
you make me carry the burden alone.
I lick my lips in anxious denial,
I will not surrender this time,
I will not hold you, will not bring my mouth so close.

I drive away with pedal to the metal.
Left the scene just in time.
You are at the same corner, advertising yourself.
Full frontal boldness, my mouth so parched now,
you linger under that old sign so welcoming,
Frozen Custard
you'll be the death of me if I allow it.

Diane Funston

Resolutions Revisited

Wrestling with quilts.

My conscience tells me
not to switch on those brainless
silica screens.

Instead a promise to devote—time
enamoring classical musical works.

Bundled up in an Irish shawl
this bitter Saturday morning.

Not bearable for any songbird,
before seven thirty ante meridiem.

Instead I hear music from my cranial stereo.

“A Time for Us,” in Italian.

Would Leonard Bernstein approve of my arrangement?

The mix of words and symphonies,
tumble as only creative minds can perceive.

Are there scenes in life we should never intrude upon
underneath the grape arbor?

Are there slivered moments meant to be witnessed—
from white, to black, and to color?

Should snippets of time
allowed to be viewed?

I want to delve into words,
for making musical declarations.

Sadness,
anger,
love,
compassion,
wisdom,
question,
and retrospect.

I want to feel every part of my humanity,
as my body quakes after each performance.

Mary Anne Abdo

Well Sky

There is no Alzheimer's disease between these walls
Families will not have copious amounts of guilt
leaving their loved one,
in a home that is really not a home.
Residents will be known as human beings
and not a census number.
The smell of urine—
will be replaced by the freshness,
of a June morning meadow.
Books to sign in and out of will no longer exist.
And locked doors will fade away.
To be replaced by opened porches and opened familiar doors.
People will respect the wiser population
by listening to their book of life.
No meds with side effects will enter anyone's body.
Banish the rules of what to eat.
What to wear...
Where to sit...
No small spaces to dwell in.
No restrictions from being your true independent self.
Wheelchairs, walkers, and canes
will be melted down into swings.
Reaching the levels of laughter that make your heart soar.

Mary Anne Abdo

Formatting

My words have become the deepest pit of drudgery.

Keeping long mind-numbing hours to edit.

To the point of screaming.

Making sure every font is correct throughout the manuscript.

Checking and over-checking

the table of contents making sure it is cohesive

between the spaces of four pages.

Two spaces over to center and five pages are out of sync.

Staring at my office window from time to time.

As afternoon turned into a late-summer moonlit night.

My cat is fast asleep on the ottoman.

And my husband turned off the TV in our bedroom.

With my famous last words, fifteen more minutes, echo,

through my closed office door.

I have become a crazed yet solitary island in a sea of words.

As the parameters of this book ebb and flow onto the keyboard shores.

Waiting for my signal to click,

publish.

Mary Anne Abdo

Rent Free

I hate that you live rent free in mind
That the universe uses you to speak to me
Laugh at me
While I wait for some kind of response from you
To give me validation this is real
Sitting in my apartment
With my cat
Alone
You are out there somewhere living your life
While living rent free in my mind

JPurdy

No Drama

Living in a world with no drama
It is truly priceless
Just doing my thing
With friends
A cat
Never give others drama
And will never accept it
Just doing my thing
Living with no drama

JPurdy

A Mile In My Shoes

To walk a mile in my shoes
Would be very hard to bear
Because the pain of a broken heart
Is something not many are aware

There are many miles in this life
To walk while you are gone
There is a tear for every mile
But we continue on

We trudge along and hope that
You are waiting for us there
With that smile on your face
The one that can't compare

I wonder if you're happy
And I wonder if you see
How sad we are that you are gone
And the love we have for thee

Walk a mile in my shoes
Feel the pain of loss
Then maybe you can understand
And your judgment won't be so harsh

Tracey Hogans

ALIEN FESTIVAL – Carbondale, PA, 11/8/25

In '74, a red lit object

Was seen flying at night over this small coal town.

Some teens saw it fall into a lake

And called the authorities who then came around.

The witnesses saw a pulsating glow

In the water which was later pronounced

Merely a lantern (post-dive, a prank)

Which someone had flung in mischief, and it sank.

Also, however, the citizens noted

A flat-bed truck, tarp-covered, took

Something large away from the scene

And following that they closed the book.

Now 50 years later we celebrate

In this run-down town that once had boomed

When coal was king of industry,

But anthracite now is just entombed.

At the festival today we don foil hats,

Wear large-eyed masks, capes and paint,

Make music and the folks are fed

To memorialize the incident.

It's so like the people in this town
To make the best, accept their lot.
Was it a con, or did legendary events
Pass them by like coal, come and gone?

Tina Gilley

Absence

My grief flies above me, hungers, hovers, seeks its prey, dives down, catches me by the throat.

Its white wings whip their tips glow in darkness barely visible.

It partners with me, speaks for me, offers a flight. I say no.

It offers friendship, I doubt.

Its wings flutter fast, put me in a trance, bring memories tinged with pain.

I close my eyes, see us anxious for time, see grief set me here, devoured by its appetite, uncomprehending yet open to its teachings.

She hears his absence.

Silence scratches.

The dog aches to be pet, wants his touch, settles into the day.

It recedes into another, swallowed whole.

The dog accepts her palm as the woman accepts solitude.

Each moment presents decisions moves her forward gently or abruptly into her future.

She discerns its shape attempts to make sense of obscure shadows seeks the source of light.

Her eyes penetrate the darkness.

Cheekbones lit like hills under a blue moon.

Scattered illuminated rays provide confidence.

Maybe that's enough.

The crook of her mouth moves upward.

Lavender drifts to tantalize.

The earth calls quietly in a moist, husky voice.

Her hazel eyes respond.

Susan Bloch-Welliver

Leaves

He towered over her in worn denim jeans, soft fleece.

His bark-like hands reached for hers.

His craggy eyes missed nothing like a bird of prey.

He thundered to his truck, rattled furniture.

Leaves blew through the window and lay strewn about the carpet.

He'd say it's a bitch trees live longer than me.

They laughed as they searched for their glasses and keys, wondered where the time went.

When they were young, they wanted to grow old together.

Hadn't given the reality much thought.

They planned what organs to donate, what to do with their bodies.

She makes plans now for his body.

Remembers the shelter of his shoulders, when he bent to kiss her in front of the evergreens.

Three egrets rose, white wings lifted in harmony.

She watches their broad, graceful strokes.

Rides on their backs as the night embraces her, carries her away.

He was nearby.

Susan Bloch-Welliver

The Approaching Winter

My toes freeze under the snow,
As I think of warm hugs from mother,
She used to cover me in blankets on snow days
As my brother and I dunked marshmallows in hot cocoa
Dunked basketballs at the YMCA
While our sisters learned to swim.

My legs twitch to trumpet beats, a musical flow
As I jive with a Jack & Coke in one hand and you in the other.
Oh, how we look up at the gray skies to wish for sunrays.
Afternoons where the street musician plays 20 Christmas tunes and never goes loco.
Where cots draped in fur blankets don't fill the basketball court of the YMCA.
Where the artificial lights have not grown dim.

The heater is broken; the house is damp without you here.
I sat alone with a Jack & Coke by the fireplace to keep warm this year.

Nathaniel Houser

Protest Summer Redux

Summer 2020 blazed,
unquelled by our choking window AC,
or fans that sputtered and faltered.

That summer, we took a knee, honored George Floyd,
bowed our heads in silence at Courthouse Square,
some masked, despite humidity as heavy as hand over mouth.

Now, another June, images of LA-
a Mexican flag billowing against tear gas clouds,
a single protester, his fist raised

against National Guard troops joining ICE
and chants of, *We're all legal here!*
We're all legal here!

Your hand slips into mine
as we sit in our sunroom on the opposite coast,
listening to a nest of baby mockingbirds squawk and tweet.

Somehow, summer inches along,
far removed from the blare of sound cannons
as we try to forget the dread

hanging over us like the memory
of that summer five years ago.

Brian Fanelli

Awaiting the Rail Line to NYC

When I tell you about the promised progress,
the proposal for a train to New York City,
you shrug your shoulders and say,
I'll believe it when I see it.

I tell you that they've secured funding,
just need to update the rails,
that the train will chug along
by 2028, maybe 2030 at the latest.
You shrug again and repeat,
I'll believe it when I see it.

To you, it must feel like a false promise,
a waning light over our hollowed-out,
industrial landscape, this city with potholes
wide enough to swallow tires,
with bars on every block,
with a landfill that chokes the air,
promises a legacy of cancer
with each breath we take of that putrid air.

I'm the believer, pointing to headlines
about designated funding for the rails,
proposed timelines. I like the idea that on any Saturday
we can ditch our aging city for Manhattan,
for the Strand, for record shops, for restaurants
that offer more than pizza with American cheese.
I've always liked the idea of escape,
as much as you love big cities,
On lazy weekends, I imagine us
seated on a passenger line as that train
snakes around another bend, powering forward,
delivering us to the big city where we can pretend
we never have to return to those chipped and faded murals,
those smokestacks, that landfill, those whispers
how this place was the stop on vaudeville tours
between NYC and Philly, the perennial in-between.

Brian Fanelli

Poetry in the Subway

Words resemble dust motes in the light.

If you could see all the crap in the air it would drive you crazy.

A poet is someone pointing at the light saying: "There!"

Kathy Bednarek

Yard

A yard around a home is part of the house.

Zippping around so fast on the riding lawn mower

I see the cat, the ghost cat, the white one

with tan patches

still walking through the front flower bed

like it was last summer.

When I look back upon where I had been

I rest for a while, smelling the distress signals

from the grass and I know

the sunset isn't personal and

a house is still a home once something is gone.

The rings I make.

The ripples I create.

The cat I pick up from behind the upright

never played a song

but it was there when I played the scales.

Kathy Bednarek

I'm Still Trying to Find Myself

I found a place inside myself
I didn't know existed
That place inside
Where grief dwells – unresisted

I thought that I knew all of me
But I was wrong
It is a place of heartache
And it is very strong

I imagine there are more places
Inside of me to find
Places that are hidden deep
Inside my troubled mind

I see glimpses of these places
And try to bring them to the light
But they resist – they won't be swayed
Until the time is right

They stay hidden
Deep within my soul
And bide their time
Digging deeper holes

Will I ever find these parts of me?
The parts that define the self
I hope someday that comes about
Since I am still trying to find myself

Tracey Hogans

ASH

An oval convex portrait of my father's mother
Used to hang on the wall over his green pleather chair.
I never met her—she died before I was born,
And at 12 he left Italy to work in America's mines.
He didn't speak of her much but
it must have meant something that he hung her there.

At night watching TV, he'd puff on his pipe,
Then dump the embers into a two-tiered ashtray.
He'd let me press the top and most would flush
Into a lower compartment hidden away.

After he died we moved to a small apartment
With no room. My aunt burned much of our stuff.
Maybe it was not her intent, but I was young,
So I don't have much to remember him by.

This happened today 50-odd years later.
Grandma Maria now hangs in the hall.
When I went to dust the frame, for some reason,
I took a close whiff and found
A faint sour smell, a trace of smoke
From the tobacco dad bought in an orange paper pack
Wrapped in cellophane.

Here was my Madeleine.
My dad and his ash, for a moment,
came back again.

Tina Gelly

My Graduation Photo Was A Mugshot

...thankfully, the navy leather binding conceals my booking numbers,
but the gold seal that catches the flash of the camera
is the disingenuous sheen of lip gloss on a lamprey.

My smile doesn't reach my beady eyes devoid of the glimmer
of what lies beyond the sailor's knot
that binds us lower animals to sunkissed yacht club members:

A shared drive to survive that I cannot afford to switch off,
much less sip sparkling water

- And form other *acquired* tastes -

after my daily tennis lesson,

but I can hide my wall of teeth just long enough to smile

when you ask me what's next

when the co-workers I have now

tell inside jokes about how I'm too stupid to wipe tables -

so instead I say,

I'm going to Disney,

and watch the pipeline stretch before me like a long hallway

lined with exits blocked by statistics

ending an era of beaten odds.

I was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Science six years after I ascended onto dry land,
and now I'm quickly running out of oxygen.

Cass Heid

My little poem found a home in a fabulous lit mag after I sang to the birds

Some poets write about the moon
The ocean, tide pools,
Frolicking with your love
Picnics in the spring
The sun kissing your nose
Changing leaves
Cranberries peaking out of snow
Nature walks hand-in-hand
Admiring the glitter on the lake
In the setting sun
The stars
Surroundings worth taking in
And they emit gratitude
For everything that made them
When their eloquent perspectives
Resonate enough to be admired
Accepted
Find a home

I pine to write from
A place of reverence
For the damp crevice
Devoid of the life
She sucked from me
From where I stretch
And feel summer's warmth
Smell turmeric and cardamom
Wafting up the street
Hear birds on wires like
Music notes, cicadas
In the backyard, giving
The sun a voice

When dandelions crawl through sewer grates,
Their resilience mocks me.

Cass Heid

star falling

We're chasing lightning bugs in the field,
Homework and street lamps buzz
We follow Orion's belt,
Find the little dipper,
And Lizzie gets the flashlight
That makes me crumple
When the girls who got curves before me
Made phases of the moon mean something more
And I shoved new feelings to the bottom of my bookbag
Along with abandoned assignments
I had new things to study
Why couldn't I answer
Jess, when she asked who my crush was
In third-period math today?
 $Y=mx+b$ but
What about me?
"Make a wish"
While Jenny tells me to blow candles out
Cause I ain't seen Mama for two weeks now
I continue shucking corn as my after-school chore
Do the hanging of the school clothes at sundown,
Finish the washing up before bed
Sasha asks me to kiss her under the street lights
And I hope the stars rain on us
While we wait for the rapture only she believes in

Brianna Booker

A Whore's Manifesto

After Cameron Awkward-Rich
Here is a list of things I enjoy more than having sex:
Nothing;
Except baking.
Losing track of time in the grocery store.
Peeling pomegranates and eating the seeds,
One by one from between my forefinger and thumb
While pretending to be a mouse.
Being mad at the children on the other side of the house
Who use the parking lot like a playground.
Overpriced lattes,
Free wine,
Roller Skating circles around teenagers,
How the stars scare me into hiding.
I fantasize about a world
Where a man will love me for more than my body,
One that won't leave when I'm sick;
Instead, he cooks me dinner,
Feeds me soup,
Rubs medicine on my chest
Without getting hard
Or at least apologizing if he does.
So yes, in one version of the story, "whore"
is a synonym for masochist;
For self-saboteur.
In the other version of the story,
Love rises early and eats my brownies for breakfast.
Love is a man who understands that I am healing from the last one,
That I may always be a work in progress.
I won't be leaving and
I won't be shamed
By questions like "What do your parents think?" and
"Don't you think it's a little weird?"
Because when he says "want,"
He is talking about more than holes
And that is sexy.

Brianna Brooker

Poem for Nunzio – Marty Gallo

Birth me and forget Grandfather
Black iron lungs creep from the mineshafts
Workers dripping and stripped
Rending Earth from Earth
Birth me and forget Grandfather
Fuel your funeral pyre
Legacy erased in anthracite pain ignitions
Smoking whisperings of memories in the mines a man making deals
mediating between rough men and men with money
A place just outside the city
Tables that sacrifice a week's wages
Smoking cigars in the back
Gaetano wheezing watching
Nunzio negotiate

Coal is taken from the soul
It is extracted from populations through labor
Coal comes from inside the body It can be grown with the aid of
aerosolized crystal seeds they latch to the lungs
Their shape replicates itself until
crystal spires emerge from the alveoli
Miners martyred on a black crucifix

Birth me and forget Grandfather
Pierced with spires of coal
The coal is a memory of you
The inheritance of death and cancers
The inheritance of knowledge
The inheritance of history
Blocked by the son
Your family has forgotten me
I am dead to them
Birth me and forget Grandfather
I see your history sneaking away as the dead rise against your knowing myth

Bury me Grandfather and I will know as the dead know
I will feel as the dead felt
I will suffer as the dead have suffered
I will rise as our dead history rises
I will remember the dead
I will remember the dead.

Bury me Grandfather
And I will see as you have seen
I will know as you have known
As I have been forbidden to know
Birthright I have been forbidden to know Malicious actors that turn you into a
weapon of unseen evil
Perhaps even this is your doing
Bury me Grandfather and I will transform your legacy
I will exhume us both.
I will know.
I will remember the dead.
I will remember the dead.

Marty Gallo

why I sleep (elegy)

you ask me why I sleep so much,
and I won't tell you that my dreams are the only place
that I can still see her smiling at me.

I won't mention that,
even though I know that
she's only a by-product
of a nightly neural process,
(I still can't wait to see her face).

I can't tell you that
despite these fleeting moments
and flashing images
of her
being completely fictional

they're the only moments
with her,
of her,
that I have left.

You ask me why I sleep so much
and I tell you that
I like soft pillows
and plush blankets,
and the feeling of getting rest.

Moni Page

Yes, she grew up in trailers

wore K-Mart sneakers hand-me-down clothes
from her cousins
she was hungry a lot
disheveled
unstylish
awkward
over-compensatingly boisterous while away from home
but definitely intellectual
 teased for always
 having her nose in a book
 four eyes
 nerd
what, you think you're better than us?
miss know-it-all

yes she grew up in trailers
against her will
her mother died in one
yes she liked to learn

devoured those books
 like her life depended on it
 because it did
 not better than anyone
 just different
constantly a work in progress
 chasing aspirations of
 doing better for her
 navigating better for her
 living better for her

yes she grew up in trailers
but she'll be damned if she dies in one
and she no longer feels guilty for not wanting to

Melissa Liberatore

It's a Slow Kind of Death

where you keep walking around
doing the things—
but you have no sway in your step
grief has whittled you down to a nub

the blade sharp and precise
a pile of flesh walking in monotones
no wind waving vibrant hair
just shades of grey laid out in a labyrinth in front of you

no real direction or desire to even choose one
a hamster skeleton slowly walking the wheel
rung
by
rung
cycling through the thoughts in your head

I'd surrender to the fucking goblin king at this point
you can't really explain how you arrived
amnesia keeps you rooted in this new reality
meander around as if in a dream

what you want just at the tip of your brain
a dangling carrot you can smell but not see
sometimes I miss the color
but you exist there

and that's more terrifying than perpetually grey aimlessness
it might kill me to feel warm again
no ...
I'll chill here

out of your reach
evading your touch
just walking dead

Melissa Liberatore

On the Train

I'm riding the train!
I just love the train.

It's raining outside but it's dry in the train.
So hot outside but so cool in the train.
The roadways are jammed, but there's no jam in here.
Horns honking out there, but so peaceful in here.

I'm watching the people enjoying this train.
Women with headscarves, scrolling on phones.
Women with children sitting on laps.
Two teenage girls laugh
One tall and one fair
One short and one dark
Both carefree and light, in their school uniforms.
They feel free in this train to do as they please,
To tell stories and laugh, to joke, and to tease.

This train is the old Sri Petaling Line,
But it's clean and it's bright, no graffiti in sight!
This train has a driver.
And I swear he holds the doors
When he sees me running.

This train has pink cars. They are called Women's Coaches.
Women in bright saris sit down next to me.
Did they catch my admiring eye?
When a man sits in here, we pretend not to see.
But the railway guard appears and will give him a look,
Nod his head towards the door.
Suddenly, seeing pink walls, the man jolts and then bolts,
Dashing off to the next car.

We sneak a look and can't hold back our smiles.

Now, sitting with men is just fine with me.
But it's roomier here, so I ride the pink car.
I can see men in the next car falling asleep
In their work clothes with headphones, nodding off.
Their tranquility deep and sweet.
Two boys in their prayer clothes, going home from the mosque.
Is it Friday so soon?

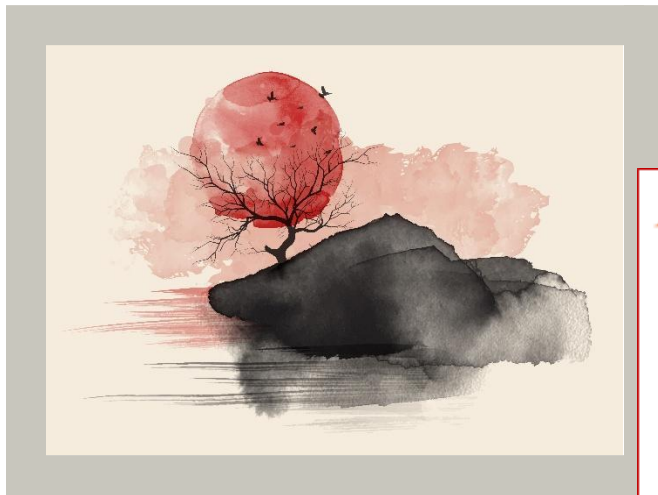
So little time left
To savor this place.

The lady living in the speaker
Announcing the stations
So happily, so eagerly,
Has become a good friend.
In here, I know what's coming next.
In here, I don't work. I just sit and think.
No meetings in here, no conflict in here.
No shouting ever. No arguments here.
I do love this train. This peaceful pink train.

It's calm and it's quiet. It's safe in this train.
No guns in this train. No guns in this country.
No shooting in here. Or anywhere, in fact.
Can relax in this place, in a pretty pink space.

I'm going back home to my own country soon.
Won't think about that now.
Because here I am safe,
Calm and cool.
On the train.

Gina Morrison Zaloni
Malaysia, 2025



Haikus,

Tankas,

Little Poems

featuring:

Tom Clausen

Michael Cznajewski

dwarfed
by too much
Statue of Liberty

halfway
to our destination
the humanity of our cabbie

without fanfare
I drag the dead branch
to the brush pile-
another day risen
and fallen from my life

Simply Haiku 2003 Sept. issue

we work briskly
into the momentum of the day
a long list of what to do,
once all there was
was to fall in love

Poetry in the Light (online site) 2000

cloud gazing...
I thought about it
but wasn't sure
what I'd do
with an empty mind

gusts no.22 fall/winter 2015

the rise and fall
of the cicada's song,
my own heart
quietly recording
what it can

Lynx 2000 (first online issue)

Tom Clausen

Little Poems – Daily Spontaneous Poems

Michael Czarnecki

#2336 (6/5/2021)

while hiking Acadia
running into other hikers
conversation ensues
often leading to
me reciting a poem
impromptu readings
something I've so missed
spreading poems orally
to real live people
in front of me

#2734 (7/13/2022)

Frost's poems resonate for me
Jeffers' poems resonate for me
Snyder's poems resonate for me
T'ao Ch'ien's poems resonate for me
do poems I write
resonate for others

#3490 (8/8/2024)

this poet
known for being
road poet
is also
a much at home poet
could easily hermit
on Wheeler Hill
if it wasn't for
all those dear friends
who can only be seen
by going out on that road
if it wasn't for
those dear friends
still yet to meet
if it wasn't for

Wanting to share poems
with others
out there on the

#4140 (5/23/2026)
those hitchhiking days
so many decades ago
helped form
who I am now

#3779 (5/24/2025)
when I'm gone
if you want to look for me
I'll be on Acadian shore
or maybe on Route 20
or maybe on some hiking trail
or maybe in your house
or maybe in a library
or maybe sitting in woods
or maybe on Wheeler Hill
or maybe can't be found at all

#4140 (5/23/2026)
those hitchhiking days
so many decades ago
helped form
who I am now

*** Editor's note: Michael has been recording these numbered poems daily for over 11 years from wherever he lays his pen for the night. Simple, poetic observations that serve as a living journal of one poet's journey.*

Art, Photography and Poetry Fusion



Our first cover, “**Queen of Hearts**,” comes to us from local multimedia artist **Jenny Devala**.

I first encountered Jenny while she was performing at a local open mic with **Poets Live!** I said “hello” and introduced myself, asking her if she was a poet or a musician as she strummed her acoustic guitar. She peered over the neck of her instrument and, with a slightly crooked grin, answered, “Yep.”

Since then I’ve listened to her music, her original poetry channeling the voices of *The Beat Poets* who influenced her, and poems reflecting on God, spirituality, and gender identity. Recently I ran into her at a local Art Fair at *Voodoo Brewing* in Scranton and was captivated by the collage pieces she had done. Here are some more of Jenny’s work and poems

35.



Rod of Asclepius Emoji

Weird,
the rod of Asclepius disappeared
when I hit send.
Did it show up on your end?
Just a blank space between an angel and the medal.
He asked me to consider a butterfly,
he asked me to consider a Robin.
A fish, an elephant and kangaroo
and then there's you.
What is right action?
Sky blue egg and the phosphorescent beacon that haunts you in the night.
Scarlet, blush, and a shade of gray that knows that it knows, that goes where it goes.
And then there's you, let's pour over your review.
Act natural, more natural than that.
Good, very good.
I think.. is it?
Is there any other place this song can take place in?

Jenny Devala

Abstain

il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel
I walk with a phantom limp
A slight absence aphasia
A light abstinence asphyxia
The fallen world
The sunken place

Conjunction junction

Pan flash function

Well the DSM says that depends if you're cool with it

And physics change across state lines, and I am inclined
to say that they do.

The states are true but the states aren't true

I plead for your belief in my value

If it's granted I am indebted

If I pay it right you'll be indebted

And if I pay it right you'd never know

I will love the contours of his face till the day I die

Chiseled by truth

The black gradient nonexistence beside and inside

I left for cups with a bit more suction

Stuck in the no place

Fixed, in place

Further from what you want

I think of formalities

Is it even fair for me to leave the house?

Statistical scope aperture appetites

The phantom presence is felt by someone close

If I want any companionship i must live with the phantom

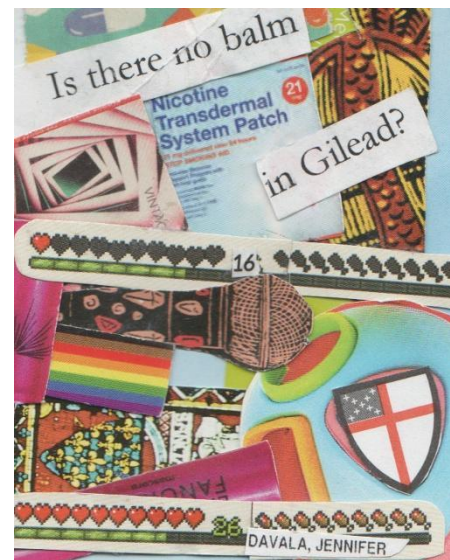
If i cast it off it never gets far

Roses wilt and die absent labyrinth schematics

37.

Apple of my eye fall among the absinthe orchids

"Gilead" - Collage



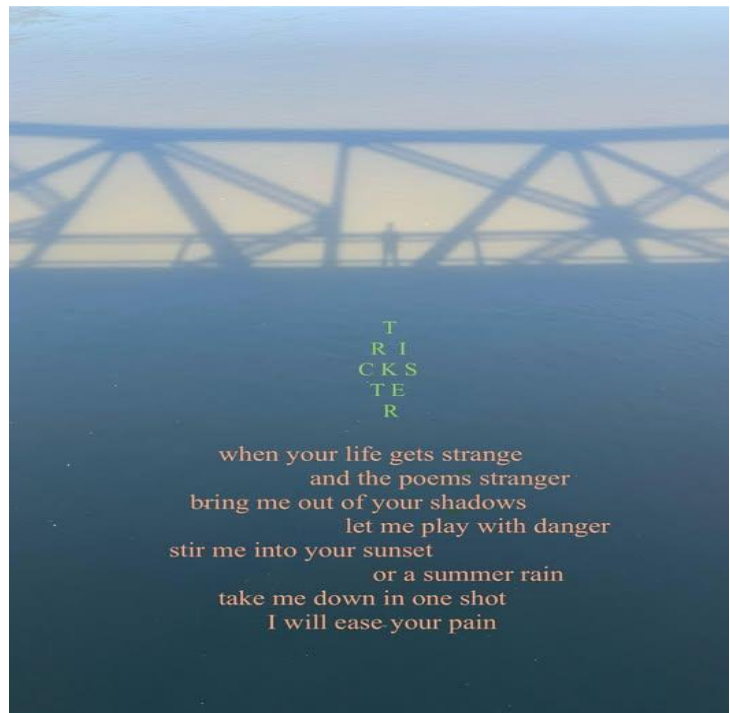
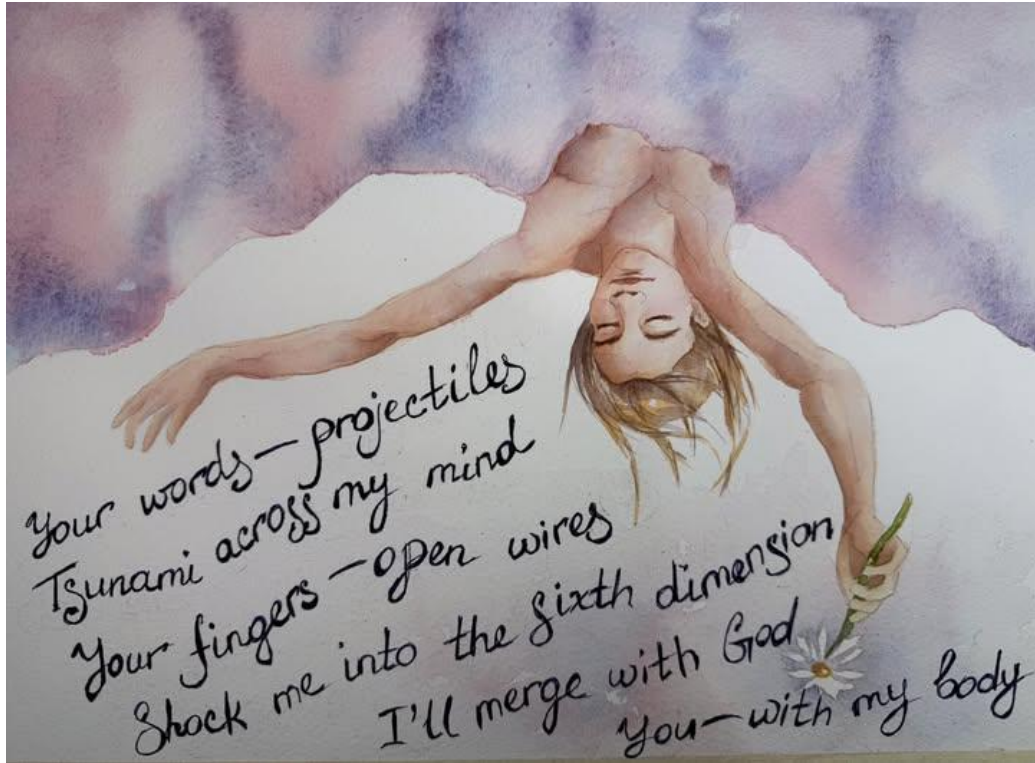
Slowly, all too slowly

A vibrant, child-like drawing of a puppet theater scene, framed by a decorative border. The scene includes a blue puppet, a girl, a boy, a teddy bear, and a sign that says "Hello My name is Sherry Jenny". The drawing is set against a black background, and the entire composition is framed by a colorful border with geometric shapes and patterns. The word "MEMORY" is written in large, colorful letters at the bottom of the frame.

I want to rhyme my reality with my dreams:

Original Art by Anastasiya Fluegel





40.



The Clock Tower

A photograph hung on a
wall in town

made me stop to stare as it caught my eye...

The Old Lace Works Clock Tower upside down

Image caught in puddle under moonlit sky.

Once a commander, by everyone known,

workers yielding to its awesome power

Now sleeps in peace,

with hands still as stone

Bright face glowing in crumbling brick tower

Reflected image in eternal pose

The stories of two centuries are there

Each brick in the tower a poem flows

Each crack in the mortar a life so rare

Each morning calls us to mystery anew

What mark will we make in brick residue?

Poem By *Lorrie Loughney*

Photo by *Alice Taylor-MaGraw*

41.

more poems.....

Weaving

Always straight

Silent running deep thought words

life is constructed that way

It's what we learned

Say it quick, get it done, move on.

The page gives us depth

Not like “here’s a brick.”

But

Here lies a piece of Clay, sand, and shale

A Red copper-colored piece of your past

Being a poet

Using the words to say “daybreak”

Churns itself into

I fell heavy with sleep

to dream and roll

in deep silken Arabic veils

To wake with the sun

Beckoning me to continue on the journey

Being a poet

we spin the words

into cocoons

that harbor new wings

JC Roberts

42.

Losing a Child

I feel your loss so keenly

Sometimes it is hard to bear

The order of life has been broken

And I was not prepared

The world has lost all meaning

I feel your absence in my soul

My heart is broken at your loss

And nothing will console

My light is supposed to go out
Before your heart stops beating
My love will never wane
As long as I am breathing

Know that I will love you
For as long as I have breath
Although we are on different planes
My love did not stop at your death

I feel your love around me still
And feel your energy
I know your love is still as strong
As mine will ever be

Tracey Hogans

43.

The Weight of Tears

a thousand angels
dance on the head of a pin
How many more
Swim inside a single tear
Carrying sorrow away
Into grace-filled light
Of the peaceable kingdom

Where tears are dried
And there is no more sorrow
Angels return to dance again

Lorrie Loughney

44.

Inverse

foregone conclusion
Rumi says lovers
don't suddenly find one another
they were in each other all along
Kabir speaks of a mystic
tree with its branches in the earth
its roots in the sky;

a tree with flowering roots

key to the universe in verse

inverse the uni-verse in key

you walked across the room

my heart spun inverse inside out

my roots took to the heavens

exploding flowering into joy

your branches burrowed in soil our soul

and if you can figure this out says Kabir

something so ancient

conclusion for gone

Kimberly Crafton

45.

The Queen of Nothing

And crown me The Queen of Nothing

In charge of no one

Ruling over no lives

Proclaiming no thing

Adjudicating no quarrels

Pay homage to me, No Subjects!

And fill my tax coffers with no money

Sit by your televisions to heed my silent news flashes
Of cameras pointed at only clouds
And the miracle of birds flying across the blue
Write your letters to the editor
Decrying my blank law books
Telling no one how to act
And protest at the gates of my empty prisons
Send your children to their schools
Devoid of my agenda screaming out of their textbooks
And at their sporting events
Pledge your allegiance to nothing but the glory of
One nation
Under no preconceptions

Kimberly Crafton

46.

Nothing to Write About

Sift through thoughts
Like rooting through a sock drawer for the elusive match
Like flipping through crisp book pages for that one paragraph
Look at - then past - every thought
Judging it not durable
Not sturdy enough to hang a poem off
Too political

Too mundane
Not real enough
Too real
Not worthy
All the ways we shut ourselves up
Shut our minds down
And now we're supposed to open up and Speak?
I want to wail
But I don't know how
I want to speak anything that makes sense
But nothing seems to
I want to ACT
But every action only seems to drive the impossible divide deeper
I want to evaporate into silence
But don't have the luxury
And neither do they
This is not a new conundrum
What shocks us is its commonness

47.

When you find yourself in the worst place ever
A million eyes will greet you
A million voices – both now and from the past
Will say without speaking
Ah, so you're here now, too.

There are ways to move without thinking
And of course the opposite is also true

Ways to fly without flapping
And of course the opposite is just as true
I heard words today
Written from the brink of death
Spoken with more life than a human body could ever hold
About how closing oneself down to everything that is
Opens the doors to all that has ever been and will ever be
And that the things we have feared most our whole lives
Turn out to be what we hungered for all along

Kimberly Crafton

48.

Essays – Dialogues – Plays and Prose

Adventures with Al and Erma

Part 1- DMV Day

Today is the day I am taking my mother-in-law, Erma, who lives with us, and family friend, Al, who doesn't, to the DMV to get their Real IDs, after weeks of putting it off as low priority.

Neither of them drives, and they are not likely to fly anymore. But the day will surely come when not having their Real ID will balloon into crisis, as have so many other things.

I try to fill out the Real ID application online, but the website is glitchy, and I give up in frustration. I don't even try to book an appointment. Instead, I plan to walk in on a Wednesday at opening.

This is Erma's third attempt to get a Real ID. Name changes through marriages and divorces and not having all the needed documents resulted in two failed attempts. Normally anxious, she is on pins and needles about this visit, assuming the worst, as usual.

We are picking up Al at 8:30 am at his senior apartment building. Erma is already squirming in her chair at 8:15, purse and paperwork in hand. It is always a crap shoot if Al will be downstairs on time. Today he is. They both must be motivated. Wish I were.

We arrive at DMV 15 minutes before opening. The non-appointment line is already snaking around the building. But everyone files in quickly at opening. We are directed to the computers to fill out the applications. I rush over to move things along. They eventually catch up. The machines are ancient, with a detached keyboard. It takes me a minute to remember how to use this type of dinosaur. But filling out the application is easy enough.

At the adjacent stall, a middle-aged man is belly-aching about having to use a machine to fill out his application. I guess he expected someone would do it for him. He keeps saying, "I don't know how to use a computer." I would help him, but I want to get into the next line as quickly as possible, and besides, he's acting like an entitled asshole.

49.

Application file numbers received, I dash to the non-appointment desk to get a place in the long line. Again, they are lagging behind. In turn, each of them shows the clerk their paperwork. It passes muster, and we get assigned a number. Erma is convinced she'll get screwed at the window. It will be WWII if Al gets his Real ID approved on the first trip and she is denied again. Now the long wait. B008, Window 9, G005, Window 10, I 004, Window 14. There are lots of people milling around, and the wait will be long. We settle into the hard plastic chairs.

The freak show is unfolding as we wait. Most entertaining. Someone should tell a few of these women that their outfits aren't a good look. Someone, that is, whose wait in purgatory is over and are rushing for the exit. Or gently comment to the large man in low-rise jeans who's bending over that, although his time waiting hasn't broken his spirit, we can definitely see the crack when he bends over—some things you can't unsee.

The wait continues. B010, Window 4, G012, Window 6. Erma is sighing and sighing. Finally, our numbers are called one after another. Fortunately for me, they are called to nearby windows, and, thankfully for Erma, she has a nice young lady, so she sails through the process. Whew! Now the roller skates come. They each have to verify their information on a computer screen at their individual windows. I dash from one to the other, verifying each tap and check on their screens.

Next is the photo. The clerks at Window 18 are busy, and it takes a while for someone to come take the picture. Erma is ready to chew someone out, but I calm her down. Don't blow it now! I'm standing back as they're waiting to have their picture taken. People walking by think I work for the DMV, and I get bombarded with questions. Admittedly, the scene is chaotic, but some of the questions remind me of snappy answers to stupid questions from MAD Magazine. (Is this the end of the line? No, we're all standing backward). However, I am patient and helpful. Perhaps I should apply for a job.

Finally done, there's a collective sigh of relief, anxiety gone, all smiles. A most thrilling day. Now on to the next more relaxing adventure, grocery shopping.

R. Funston

Follow the continuing adventures of Al and Erma, "Walmart and the Age of Independence," in our next issue.

50.

Sledding: A Neighborhood Bar Goes Downhill

by John Baldino

In a neighborhood bar during a snowstorm...

GIRL: It took you long enough.

BOY: It's snowing.

GIRL: Did you bring the sleds?

BOY: No.

GIRL: What do you mean?

BOY: I mean no. I didn't bring any sleds. Where was I gonna get sleds?

GIRL: From work.

BOY: I work at a hotel! Do you think we have sleds at a hotel?

GIRL: I want to go sledding.

BOY: Just because you want to go sledding doesn't mean that we automatically have sleds at the hotel.

51.

GIRL: If you loved me, you'd-a brought sleds so we could go sledding.

BOY: You're working!

GIRL: There's four people in the bar. I'll lock up, we'll make a few runs down the hill and then I'll open up again.

BOY: You're fucked up.

GUY 1: I'll go to Wal-Mart and get sleds.

GIRL: You've had five vodkas; you're not going to Wal-Mart.

GUY 2: I found these trays. They'll work.

GUY 1: They're not trays; those are sheet pans.

GUY 2: Well, regardless of what they're called, they'll still work.

GUY 1: Doubt it.

GUY 2: I'm trying them.

GUY 1: I'm in.

GIRL: They get to go sledding.

BOY: On trays.

52.

GIRL: Sheet pans.

BOY: Whatever! They won't work. Look, they're not even moving.

GIRL: They would be if you brought sleds.

BOY: Get me a drink.

GIRL: Get me a sled.

John Baldino

53.

The Sweater

SCENE: A table with many neatly folded sweaters. No two sweaters are the same. A sign hangs from the front of the table. It says: 50% OFF.

AT RISE: Loud Christmas music begins to play. Over that, we hear

ANDREW, who is offstage and coming over the PA system of the department store.

ANDREW
(off stage/over the PA)

Happy Holidays and Happy Black Friday to all of you early birds! We're happy you chose Brink's for all of your holiday shopping needs. Watch for extra savings all day throughout the store!

More loud Christmas tunes continue throughout the scene, per director's choosing.

ENTER DINA. She has a Christmas sweater on, carrying a handbag. She already has several items of clothing draped over one arm. She moves upstage of the table, as if browsing at imaginary displays.

ENTER TRACY. She, too, is in holiday attire, with a purse as well, and her own armload of clothes to purchase. TRACY and DINA briefly acknowledge one another when they approach each other to be polite and show that holiday spirit. Each woman returns to browsing.

After a few moments, DINA makes her way to the table. She goes to one side of it. She reads the sign. It pleases her. She starts to the back/upstage side of the table. She begins to look through the sweaters, but not yet pulling any out of the stacks. TRACY continues to move around the stage "browsing."

DINA stops. She sees the sweater she has come for. Maneuvering with her hands still full, she pulls the sweater out of the pile. She unfolds it. She holds it up in front of her, examining it. Maybe she was wrong. She folds it back up and returns it to a pile. She keeps looking.

TRACY spies the table. She moves behind it by DINA, who shifts a bit to make room. They both look. Each takes a turn pulling another sweater out to look at. They nod or shake their head at each other's finds. They go through at least two sweaters each. The feeling is still cordial, jovial. For now

By: Marcie Herman Riebe

Previously Performed at Diva Theater One-Act Play Festival

54.

Why This Scranton Native, Horror Movie Lover, and Lapsed Catholic Avoided *The Exorcist* for So Long

(In Honor and Memory of Jason Miller)

By Brian Fanelli

Friday nights were movie time with my dad. When I was a kid, he took me to the closest Blockbuster, where we browsed the horror section. I ran my fingers over the VHS sleeves – the dark holes of Jason's hockey mask, the knives on Freddy's glove, the black and white images of the Universal Monsters. *The Exorcist* was the one film I avoided renting with him. Always, I would see it on the shelf – the text in purple letters, above the image of Max von Sydow's Father

Merrin in the streetlight, the fog around him, as he prepared to enter the house. Even the cover seemed menacing. I didn't want to know what existed in that house.

It took me a long time to watch the film, until college, at least. Even then, my friends shared stories about the film. One of them, another horror movie buff, said each time he watched the film, something horrible happened to him, including a car accident. This, coupled with the strange stories about what occurred on the set, including a fire and various injuries to cast members, only built up the film in my mind. At some point, I finally did see the feature, hoping it wasn't cursed. It seems silly to think about it now, but *The Exorcist* has such lore surrounding it.

To be clear, I wasn't unnerved by the pea soup vomiting or head spinning, or even the infamous crucifix masturbation scene. I get why these sequences shocked audiences in 1973. Watching Regan (Linda Blair) curse at men of faith and at her movie-actress mom, Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn), must have been shocking. In fact, if you want to know just how chilling these scenes were for audiences at the time, look up the 20-minute documentary entitled *The Cultural Impact of The Exorcist* on YouTube. It's a fascinating time capsule of that era, featuring several interviews with folks who saw the film upon its release. Heck, even the Vatican got behind the movie since it scared audiences into the pews on Sunday morning. [Editor's Note: <https://youtu.be/ZfmlnJRO7to?si=XPTOOaxqfyPIsakN>]

As a whole, *The Exorcist* is a conservative film, even if its director, the late, great William Friedkin, was part of the rebellious New Hollywood movement. Not exactly Nixon voters. But the film proposes that only men of faith could save a 12-year-old girl from evil, especially after medicine and psychiatry fail. Is *The Exorcist* a backlash against the free love movement? Countless academic essays have argued that. Does evil fester in the house because Chris MacNeil is a liberal movie actress without a hubby? Maybe. You can certainly watch the movie and surmise that only traditional order and the standard, heteronormative family unit can save Regan. In a way, it's a precursor to 1980s Reaganism.

55.

Regardless of the possible social and political subtexts that may or may not exist within the film, it still frightened me, more than most horror films. It's not the grotesque moments that rattled me upon a first viewing. It's all those quieter, subtle moments, those discussions of faith and doubt. It's that scene where Father Karras (Jason Miller) sees the homeless man in the subway and the devil later challenges him, channeling the voice of the beggar, who, by the way, the priest turned his back on in the subway. Homelessness and apathy towards it are a real, tangible form of evil that exists, that we've all seen. It's the struggle Karras has with his faith and the way the devil toys with him, making him feel guilty about his ailing mom, too, who's left to a shabby nursing home because Karras doesn't have the means to provide much else for her.

Prior to that, it's the tender moments Regan has with her mom, like when she asks for a horse. Regan is presented to us as a sweet, harmless girl, so what happens to her via an outside force is more harrowing and nerve-wracking. We need her to survive because we see the most innocent version of her early in the film.

Beyond all of that, I was raised Catholic, and though I left the Church not long after my Confirmation in middle school, the way the film addresses faith still resonates with me. In fact, Karras' characterization and inner conflict is one of the strongest portrayals of a shaken faith that I've ever seen on film. And even if I left the Church a long time ago, I still grew up with the idea that evil exists, that maybe, just maybe, if I did something wrong, I, too, could be possessed. After all, if a demon could possess a kid like Regan, what about me? Yes, all of this is incredibly superstitious and foolish. I get that, but when you grow up attending church every Sunday and know the routines of the Catholic mass, some of the old ghosts still linger. The first time I saw *The Exorcist*, I certainly said a Hail Mary and Our Father before drifting to sleep. No wonder so many people ran to church after seeing the film. It presents the idea that yes, the devil exists, and yes, such a force could possess anyone at any time.

I also must point out that Scranton is my hometown, and it's Miller's, too. Though he was born in Queens, New York, his family moved to Scranton when he was a kid. He attended St. Patrick's High School and the University of Scranton. He was a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, not just an actor, and after time in LA, he returned to Scranton and served as artistic director of the Scranton Public Theatre, working and living downtown. There's something to be said for the fact that after *The Exorcist's* massive success, including Academy Award nominations, a rarity for a horror film, Miller returned to his home turf and mentored young writers.

Unfortunately, he fell to alcoholism and died of a heart attack at Farley's Pub and Eatery, which used to be in downtown Scranton. There's a bust of him at our Courthouse Square.

56.

Even though I never personally met Miller, the rumors about him persisted when I grew up. Folks talked about seeing him in the supermarket or at a bar. Instead of his groundbreaking performance in *The Exorcist*, or the fact he won the Pulitzer Prize for *That Championship Season*, they spoke of his downfall, of his alcoholism.

Miller's story is as heartbreaking as Karras' fate in *The Exorcist*. Karras invites the demon to leave Regan's body and possess him. Just as it does, he jumps out of the bedroom window, crashing and tumbling down those famous stairs. This harrowing conclusion is foreshadowed several times, with more than one shot of the steep stairs. Karras' character arc, like Miller's life, is simply tragic. I also don't know what it says about my scrappy, blue-collar city if one of its most famous sons died on a barstool. Scranton contains several Catholic churches and a bar on nearly every corner. It's a city still trying to claw its way towards some

kind of revitalization long after its mines closed. Yet, after the LA lights and Hollywood fame, Miller returned. I'll never forget that.

For me, Friedkin's film is such a masterpiece because of the way it deftly handles questions of faith. I don't care about Regan's scarred face or explicit sexual taunts against the priests. It's the film's quieter and character-driven moments that resonate with me. It took me a long time to finally watch *The Exorcist* after always passing it by at the local Blockbuster. As someone raised Catholic, its portrayal of real-world evil shook me, even if I left the Church years ago. I suspect this is why the film hit such a nerve and why Friedkin had such a masterpiece on

his hands. Other than maybe *Psycho*, *Halloween*, and *Jaws*, no other horror film was such a cultural event as *The Exorcist*.

57.

Dear Kitchen Sink,

You are probably sinking into the bottom of a landfill somewhere. Or, maybe you were saved and upheld as salvage for the younger generation to salivate over. Could be your luck. You're trendy now in certain circles. Now they call you a rustic farmhouse sink, run a couple thousand dollars. Rustic all right. You were an embarrassment to me when I was growing up.

You were cast iron and heavy, hanging off the kitchen wall with no cabinet beneath, not even a kitschy curtain to hide your unceremonious metal pipes and drain elbow. One large wide sink, chrome basic faucet, hanging metal soap holder. Your white porcelain was chipped in places, rusty in others. The brass drain hole was scratched and stained no matter how many times, as it was my job, I scrubbed that circular eye with sponge and Comet.

There was a shelf with a mirror above you. Each family member had a glass for a drink of water: mine, my mom's, my grandmother's, my grandfather's, and Uncle Lou's. There was a large metal pan for washing dishes, a dish rack to put them on so I could dry them with a linen towel, and a standing metal cabinet to the left of you to put them away. One of my grandparents washed in extremely hot water and Lux detergent. There was no Peach Thrill or hand conditioning Madge, the beauty parlor lady, liquid for us. Lux was cheap and did the trick.

Kudos to you if you're now in some bougie kitchen in all your farmhouse glory. You made it out of inner-city violence. You made it out before I did.

Diane Funston

58.

Shout out your dead!

The obituary column is a strange piece of reporting. A lifetime is culled into a few short paragraphs to create a denouement. The noteworthy or notorious merit professional scribes to recount their days, while the rest of us are left to a chosen relative who an aunt or sibling decides is “good with words.” Often the result is a hackneyed essay replete with a roll call of relatives and the deceased’s hobbies. If the family is willing to upgrade, the newspaper will print a photograph of the dearly departed. Those who have led the truly great life merit a multi-

paragraphed two-column profile in the New York Times. That kind of tribute elevates the obituarist to fledgling biographer.

This is not to say that necrology can't be literary. There is Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology, which in 244 epitaphs of fictional lives sums up everything an obituary should be—an honest assessment of the life that was lived. Secrets are exposed, lies uncovered, grudges sustained, jealousies revealed, and gossip confirmed. Nothing is erased by death in Spoon River; it is carried over to the next realm.

One morning, shortly after we were married many years ago, I saw my wife reading the obituary column in our local newspaper. It was strange to see Joan at 23-years of age reading through the section like my 82-year-old Irish grandmother once did. When I asked why she read obituaries her simple reply was even more shocking — “To see who died.”

“Who are you expecting to find?” I asked, wondering if there was something about her past I missed while we were engaged, like she was a zombie hunter or, even worse, a Black Widow femme fatale in training.

“Nobody, just checking,” she said and continued sipping her tea and reading.

I left for work that day thinking it was a phase that would surely pass.

59.

My paternal grandmother also had no seemingly lucid reason for reading the obituaries. I once asked her why she read the daily tabulation of the local dead.

“To know who I'll not be expecting to see at next Sunday's mass,” was her response in the soft Tipperary lilt of her voice.

At the time, my teenage mind was alarmed because I was sure she teetered on the edge of senility. It wasn't until I was a few decades into adulthood that I understood the Irish Catholic conviction underlying her response. The shock of not seeing friends Eileen Rogan or Bernadette

Cummings or Mary Donahue at mass would be alleviated by the knowledge their souls were at peace with the Heavenly Father. I haven't totally bought in to the premise, nor the gender specific designation of a deity, but in her world and the parochial character of my upbringing it made sense.

Still, Joan's daily review of the obituaries perturbed me from time to time. Granted it did allow us to attend the wakes of two acquaintances' family members that we would have otherwise missed. They were people on the periphery of our lives but important enough to attend their loved ones' wakes. It is remarkable the lasting impact one's attendance at a wake can have on the bereaved. Joan's unusual reading hobby provided a small loving touch to at least two individuals we knew and cared about.

"It's something my mother always did. I think it's an Irish thing," she told me when I again asked.

Then she laughed. "You know my grandfather used to say that was the first thing he checked in the morning. If his name wasn't in the obituary, he said he knew he was still alive." Joan lit up at the memory and then continued stride with another family anecdote.

60.

"Remember what your Aunt Mae used to say whenever she read someone's obituary?"

I drew a blank.

"I didn't know they were sick," she replied with a giggle before heading downstairs to the laundry room with a basket of clothing. These obituary discussions clearly did not arise at any point while we were dating.

Obituaries are traced back to the Romans, but since they get credit for everything, I suspect the idea was stolen from elsewhere. Reflections upon the dead had to precede the advent of togas and public baths. For example, Ancient Egypt existed for three millennia before the Roman Empire. Tomb hieroglyphics were a pre-literate graphic rendition of a person's life. Prior to that there must have been cave drawings honoring the deceased that some Neanderthal's spouse viewed in the morning over her breakfast of leaves, bark, and insects.

The one question I have about this recounting of a deceased's life is how it is handled by those who believe in reincarnation. Are they merely notes passed onto the future self? As in, here is what you did the first time around, don't mess it up again. Either that, or "Hey, you can't do any worse."

Then there is the unforgettable Resurrection of Jesus moment that dashed any ancient obituarist's hope of literary immortality. Christian belief is that Jesus was exalted into Heaven to sit at the right hand of God. His exaltation is an enhancement of life. Thus, no death means no obituary.

To verify this, I went to an expert. My Google inquiry indicated that there was no archived obituary for Jesus of Nazareth. However, if there had been, I'm sure Joan would have read it. To be thorough, I checked ChatGPT and, upon doing so, realized I gave a death notice to

61.

critical thinking. But I persisted. AI confirmed that Jesus did not have an obituary because he lived over 2,000 years ago in the 1st century A.D. prior to the practice of publishing obituary columns. But the AI genie waffled by saying the four gospels in the New Testament account for Jesus' life, teachings, and death. Could it be that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the first published obituarists?

Joan read her first obituary when she was twelve years old. She was a news junkie as a child and read the local paper from cover to cover. Being as thorough as she is, this invariably included her reading every single obituary. Curiosity about the once robust lives of the dead captivated her and the habit was formed. Soon she and her mother were comparing notes on the dead. Later, settled into married life and ever eager to assist in the growth of my law practice, she notified me whenever a local lawyer died. Those grieving clients may have needed the warm shoulder of a licensed and living lawyer to cry upon, but I never found the referrals to be forthcoming. Nonetheless, Joan's reading pleasure continued unabated through pregnancy, raising three children, nursing school, career, travel, and retirement. Although, in recent years it has met with competition from Facebook Marketplace. Predictably, she homes in on the estate sales.

Recently I showed Joan a clip from Monty Python and the Holy Grail wherein Eric Idle is traveling through the medieval countryside with a cart of dead people. They are victims of the bubonic plague and as he travels through a local village, he bangs a pot while shouting, "Bring out your dead!" It is a classic of British humor. Only the Monty Python troupe could make the Black Death funny. I expected her to join me in my mirth while watching the sketch but was disappointed when she didn't share my enjoyment.

"Don't you get it?" I asked. She shook her head "no."

62.

"It reminds me of the obituaries you read, except they're like saying shout out your dead!" I explained. Joan looked at me puzzled by the humor I found in the analogy. My further explanation of the slang meaning of a "shout out" as a sign of appreciation didn't even raise a smile from her. She went for her daily walk, and I re-watched the Monty Python video.

Whether we read them or not, the obituary column catches up with all of us. Sometimes it comes in quick succession. For Joan, that occurred in 2017 when her mother died after a brief illness. She wrote her mom's obituary with the help of her younger sister, Christine. Two years later she wrote Christine's obituary when my beautiful sister-in-law lost her brave six-year battle with breast cancer. I provided the final edits for the obituary and later gave the eulogy. Those were two obituaries I wish Joan never had to read, let alone write, but they celebrated the lives of two special women.

I still tease Joan about reading the obituary column and tell her normal people do crossword puzzles or Sudoku. But now that she reads the local newspaper online, the tales of the dead are instantly accessible on her tablet or I-phone. Wordle sometimes distracts her. A few years ago, I gave her my copy of Spoon River Anthology to read. Unlike the Monty Python skit, she liked this recommendation. Even though I still refuse to read the obituaries, Joan's fascination with them has provided me with an appreciation of the necessity for everyone to "shout out your dead!"

Terrence P. Dwyer

E-mail: terrencepdwyer@gmail.com

64.

50 Years

It's May 9th. 1976. I'm thirteen years old, growing too fast and learning too slow, all that's about to change.

The national news was pretty unremarkable, at least to a thirteen-year-old kid. Patty Hearst and the Black Panthers went on trial, Son of Sam silenced the city that never slept, and Jimmy Carter was making his political moves.

We had a supersonic Concorde jet take off, along with Apple Computer, the first email, and we saw Mars for the first time courtesy of NASA's Viking 1, much to Orson Welles's chagrin, who jokingly stated, "I saw it first!"

We had Angels on TV, Farrah Fawcett hanging on walls all over the country. Dorothy Hamill melted ice and hearts at the Winter Olympics, becoming America's sweetheart. Cubs centerfielder Rick Monday rescued an American flag from burning at Dodger Stadium. *Interview with a Vampire*, and Irish Rockers U2 were born on the pop scene, and Agatha Christie, and actor Sal Mineo all passed away. Just another day in the news for me.

I was busy trying to figure out the meaninglessness of life and individual freedom in Albert Camus' "The Stranger." A little over a thirteen-year-old's head, you might think, but there was this girl up the street, a few years older than I, who told me, well, she suggested stuff that, well, I'll just leave that there for your own speculation.

As a nation, we were in the grips of Bi-Centennial Fever! We were turning 200 yrs old in July. Again, no big deal, just another day, right? It wasn't until I saw them moving the Liberty Bell to a new, glass pavilion on Independence Mall to accommodate the mammoth crowds anticipated summer visits on the news with my Pop that I felt a tingle. In that moment, watching it on the bed of a National Park Service flatbed, rolling down Chestnut Street in Philly, I caught the fever. "Red, white, and blue everything from here on out, Hermsey! From peanuts to panties, fer Christs sake!" Dad mumbled. "Nobody gives a rat's ass about us until it's time for a party!" That was true for everyone, including the Ol Man.

The whole neighborhood started to pop with preparations, and, of course, fireworks in May. School dismissed in less than a month, then summer, and three months of everything you could imagine, leading up to my high school years beginning in September.

I started to see tents, like at summer picnics, growing all over the Borough; in backyards, parking

65.

lots, and just about every vacant spot you could imagine! There were red, white, and blue banners across every street, in every store window, and every home.

Babies, toddlers, and young-uns too small to protest were dressed in patriotic regalia for the duration! My American Neighborhood was swelling with pride and anticipation for what was to come.

Sunday, July 4th, 1976, was cool as I remember, spared from the typical searing summer swelter, my buddies and I wandered out into the street after morning Mass, dead set on playing some ball, until we saw our American neighborhood. Everyone was converging on picnic tables and lawn chairs, smiling and helping each other carry everything from food and coolers to wherever there was space in any yard. We watched President Ford address the nation from Valley Forge with these words: *edited*

“In the two centuries that have passed, we have matured as a nation and as a people. We have gained the wisdom that age and experience bring, yet we have kept the strength and idealism of youth. We have achieved greatness as a nation and have contributed to the good of mankind. We face the future with renewed dedication to the principles embodied in our Declaration of Independence, and with renewed gratitude for those who pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to preserve individual liberty for us. and pray for the future safety and happiness of our Nation.”

At 2 PM, the entire nation simultaneously rang our own individual bells of freedom, something I'll always remember.

Today, May 9th, 2026, fifty years later, those words and actions don't exist in any recognizable context that I can see. I've lived in the same house for 26 years, more than half of the time since that day. I hardly know most of my neighbors by their full names, and if I ever just popped over with some potato salad and a six-pack during a barbecue? Well, it's a good thing I know most of our police officers. We've relegated ourselves to reclusive ambiguity. And a speech from our president? Watch the UFC. They'll have a recap

I still live in the past. I'd be the first person to invite someone over for a burger and a beer if that was my plan, and a front porch conversation sparked up in the meantime. I don't particularly care what you are, but who you are. At some point, we all disagree, but in the same breath, we need to watch each other's backs lest the wolves get past the front door. They call me a liberal tree-hugger for that; I have been for 50 years.

America, are you listening?

JC Roberts

66.

To the Kid Standing at the Edge of the Crowd:

I always notice you.

The kid standing just outside the festival, pretending to check your phone every thirty seconds like you accidentally ended up here.

Walking close enough to hear the music, but not close enough to feel seen.

Maybe you took three buses to get here. Maybe you told somebody you were somewhere else entirely. Maybe this is the first time you've ever seen people like yourself existing out loud in public. Not whispered about. Not reduced to punchlines. Just *alive*.

And I know that word doesn't sound important unless you grew up believing your future would have to be hidden.

I think that's why your eyes keep moving. You're not only looking at the festival. You're looking for yourself somewhere inside it. And I need you to understand something:

You do not have to earn belonging here.

You do not need the perfect outfit, the perfect label, or the perfect understanding of yourself. You do not have to arrive fully explained.

Identity doesn't always arrive like a lightning bolt. Sometimes it's slower than that. Sometimes it takes years.

And maybe tonight you'll walk through the crowd. Maybe you won't. Maybe you'll just stand at the edge long enough to realize the world did not end because you came here.

Honestly, that can be enough for now.

Because years from now, when you feel safe, you'll notice someone else standing at the edge of the crowd. Pretending to check their phone. Trying very hard to look like they could leave at any moment. And you'll recognize them immediately.

Because we always do.

I always notice you

Jai Montag.

67.

The Rasin Lady

1998

I'm the only waiter who waits on her because I'm the only waiter who can handle her. A walking nerve ending, she comes in once a week, usually around 5:30.

She seats herself. She has a job she's good at (school teacher), an apartment she takes meticulous care of (she does her own plumbing), and she pays all of her bills on time: she doesn't need a hostess telling her where to sit, thank you. She prefers one of the round four-tops in the center of the dining room. She comes directly from work, heavy laden with bags and totes that hang on her like Jacob Marley's chains. She not-so-discreetly scans the dining room as she places each bag

on its own chair, silently daring anyone in the room to snatch one. Bags in place, she sits. It looks as if she's hosting a tea party for purses.

First thing I do is bring her a basket of dark brown raisin rolls. The sight of the heaping bread basket calms her. It's the first food she's seen all day. She faces the room, crosses her legs, and begins to methodically pluck out the raisins, one-by-one, chewing them like they was bubble gum. I believe she is unaware that she chews with her mouth open.

Timing is critical. The minute she stops dismembering her raisin rolls – her efforts leave an unappealing debris field of discarded bread flesh strewn across her table – she's ready to order. It's always the same: a modified Grecian Salad. I have her modifications memorized, but she has to repeat them every single time due to trust issues.

“Shall I take your order, Agnes?”

“The rolls don't have enough raisins. Last week they had thirty. I counted. This week there's only fifteen.”

“Try another roll.”

“I did. It only had thirteen. You should say something to the chef.”

Let it be. Let it be. No use telling her we import the rolls and the chef has no control over how many raisins are in each one. “I'll inform the chef,” I say.

“I'll take the Grecian Salad,” she says like it was the first time she's ever ordered it, “with fried wantons from the Asian Salad. Extra red peppers. They don't come out of a jar, do they? Peppers in jars are a breeding ground for germs.”

“The peppers do not come out of a—”

“Are you sure?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“Yes.”

“The peppers are freshly roasted.”

“Good. Make sure the chicken is cooked, but not over-cooked, I don’t want it chewy. Dressing on the side. Shake it well. Throw on a ton of pumpkin seeds. They prevent cancer. Give me extra olives and feta, but on the side. Chop, do not slice the romaine. I like big chunks. Add five leaves of arugula. And I don’t want it for breakfast. Oh, a glass of house white wine. Make sure it’s cold.”

“Wait. Wine? You never order wine – ”

“I have a blind date,” she says. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen her smile. “He’s meeting me here in an hour. And then we’ll go somewhere. Maybe a movie. Bring me the wine after my salad.”

“Do you want me to wait on your salad so you can have dinner together?”

“No! I don’t like men watching me eat.”

I only pretend to write her order on my dupe pad; instead I write: “The Raisin Lady,” and hand it to Israel, the salad guy. Israel knows the order. He makes it. I serve it. After poking it with her fork a dozen times to make sure it’s exactly what she ordered, Agnes digs it. It takes her about twenty minutes to finish the entire salad.

I clear her plate, brush the dead bread from the table, and refill her water glass to make it look like she’s just arrived. I place a frosty glass of Pinot Grigio in front of her. She applies lipstick and brushes her hair. Primped, ready to go, she grabs her wine glass by the stem and twirls it with fingers from both hands. She waits. Ten minutes go by, and a nice young gent with horn-rimmed glasses, a plaid button-down shirt, and thick black hair walks in the front door. He approaches Jo Jo, the hostess. Passing by on my way to Barry and Monica’s table, I hear him say, “I’m here to meet Agnes?”

“I’ll need more than that,” says Jo Jo.

I lean in, whisper, “He’s here for the Raisin Lady,” and head straight for Barry and Monica.

Barry and Monica are the sort of regulars a waiter craves: they’re human. They eat here so often they know everything that goes on in the restaurant. They even got married here. We are their hobby. They are well aware of the eccentricities of the Raisin Lady.

“Is Jo Jo mad at us?” says Barry in a stage whisper.

69.

“She’s furious with you” I joke. “Why do you ask?”

“She sat us next to the Raisin Lady.”

I lean in, “Get this. Raisin has a blind date.”

“He’d better be blind.”

“Oh, stop, you” says Monica, then turns for a clandestine look. “Where is he? She’s alone.”

I look. The Raisin Lady is, indeed, alone. I ask Jo Jo what happened to her date.

“He took one look and walked out.”

Agnes waits an hour for her date to show. I don’t have the heart to tell her he’s on the lam. She gives up the ghost and asks for her check. I bring it, careful not to mention her date, or lack thereof. While signing the Amex slip she says, “What are you doing Thursday?”

“Working.”

“It’s Passover.”

“I know. We do a great Passover dinner. Gefilte fish, bitter herbs, the works. You should stop by.”

“A Seder with strangers?”

“Why not?”

“It’s a sin to be single at Seder. Will you sit with me...if I come?”

“I can’t. I’ll be working. But I’ll wait on you. We can toast Moses. You want me to reserve you a table?”

“No,” she says. She gathers her bags, tosses back the remains of her wine, takes a last look at the table, then turns to me, “It’s just Passover, not a blind date.”

She walks out.

From Ted’s Blog “Ted the Waiter”

Ted LoRusso

70.

So Much More To Grasp

beyond understanding
I write this into each poem as the only reason I write
If you can’t keep up with the jazz
listen for the music
Just may be the pitch
Pitch with wonder I leaned from Satchel Page
Pitch with amazement I learned thumbing cross-country
from traveling salesmen

who pegged me for northeast Pennsylvania
Scrant no Wilkes-Barre as soon as I opened my mouth
Not what I was saying
but how I was saying
Same difference last weekend in Estonia among Russians
I don't understand a word you're saying man but I get it
I get the gist
the air open between what you're actually saying
and what I think you're saying that's everything
Psychology For Dummies tells us at the moment of conception
you can't duck expectations
all you can do like poetry is bob and weave

Craig Czury