



2021
MOORE COUNTY WRITERS' COMPETITION

CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL OF OUR WRITERS!

Special thanks to the generosity of the
DONALD AND ELIZABETH COOKE FOUNDATION
Moore County Writers' Competition Underwriter.

WEYMOUTH CENTER FOR THE ARTS & HUMANITIES
555 EAST CONNECTICUT AVENUE / PO BOX 939
SOUTHERN PINES, NC, 28388
weymouthcenter.org

Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities

Weymouth, the home of James & Katharine Boyd, was the heart of the Southern Literary Renaissance.

The Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities is a non-profit cultural center dedicated to music, literature, and conservation. The Boyd House and remaining acreage is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and was awarded a Certificate of Achievement by the National Wildlife Federation in 2003.

In the early 1900's, while passing through the town, encountering turpentine workers, and witnessing the devastation to the forest Hellen Boyd Dull asked her father, Pennsylvanian steel and railroad magnate, James Boyd, to help save the land. With the purchase of twelve hundred acres, Boyd established an estate which he called Weymouth to honor a favorite place, Weymouth, England. Rather than maintain it for his own pleasure, Boyd opened the land to townsfolk and tourists to enjoy as a natural park. Designed over a 24-year span by landscape architect Alfred Yeomans, plans included bridle paths and carriage lanes laid out so as not to harm the trees.

The land was passed down to his two grandsons, James and Jackson, who founded the Moore County Hounds (MCH) in 1914. The MCH is still active today on land originally part of the Boyd estate and now conserved for the public as the Walthour-Moss Foundation.

James Boyd, the grandson, was a poet and writer. He is the author of the Revolutionary War novel, *Drums*. After serving in WWI, James retreated to Weymouth as a permanent resident to write, ride, and manage the estate with his wife, Katharine. Together they entertained guests such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson and more, as Weymouth became a center of southern literary culture. Jonathan Daniels insisted that, as a place of hospitality for writers in the 1920's and 1930's, Weymouth helped launch the Southern Literary Renaissance.

After James died in 1944, Katharine oversaw the estate, its preservation, and established what would become the first nature preserve in the North Carolina State Park System. Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve was established in 1963 with an original gift from Katharine Boyd of 403 acres after the death of her son Daniel. Her wish was to preserve the woods as they were when her son played in them as a child. An additional 153 acres called the Boyd Round Timber Tract

was purchased after Katharine's death in 1977. Set in an area more known for horse farms and golf courses, today Weymouth Woods is a 900 acre, limited-use area that portrays the natural features of the sandhills region. Throughout the woods are remnants of the turpentine industry, pines carved with the V-shaped cuts, and boxes for collecting pine sap. The home of James and Katharine Boyd is now the Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities. It is a cultural center dedicated to conserving the remaining 26-acre estate as a natural preserve and park, including the formal gardens designed by Alfred Yeomans, and the Longleaf Pine Forest. The Boyd House, a 9,000 square foot Georgian manor, still serves as a writer's retreat and residency, the site of poetry readings, book launches, music concerts and recitals, as well as fine arts lectures and dramatic performances.

James Boyd's study is the home of the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, established in 1996.

The Weymouth Center estate is also the gateway to the Boyd Round Timber Tract and the extensive trails of Weymouth Woods. Plan your visit soon!

For more information about Weymouth Center and the Boyd family, please visit our website at weymouthcenter.org. Donations are gratefully accepted.



Moore County Writers' Competition

Since 1986, Weymouth has hosted the annual Moore County Writers' Competition, generously underwritten by the Donald and Elizabeth Cooke Foundation.

The competition seeks to promote writing throughout Moore County and honor the work that goes into creating superior writing.

Note: Weymouth Center neither edits nor corrects submitted works.

2021

MOORE COUNTY WRITERS' COMPETITION

Early Elementary Nonfiction - Krista Bremer, Judge

First Place

James Franklin*Sharks*4

Upper Elementary Nonfiction - Krista Bremer, Judge

First Place

Caroline Franklin*The Man Who Changed the World*6

Middle School Nonfiction - Krista Bremer, Judge

First Place

Katherine Davenport*Foster Care and Foster Concerns*.....10

Elementary Poetry - Malaika King Albrecht, Judge

First Place

Logan Gay*A Nook Full of Books*16

Second Place

Caroline Franklin*Stars and Stripes*18

Third Place

Gracie Bender*The Seasons*19

Middle School Poetry - Malaika King Albrecht, Judge

First Place

Claire D. Kirby*Freddy Teddy*21

Second Place

Isla Burns*Magic of the Library*22

High School Poetry - Malaika King Albrecht, Judge

First Place

Ella Pate*Stars*24

Adult Nonfiction - Krista Bremer, Judge

First Place

Sandra Fischer*What the Thief Could Not Steal*26

Adult Fiction - Deonna Kelli Sayed, Judge

First Place

Ellen Marcus*Not Today*.....34

Second Place

Rebecca McNamara*Excerpt from an Eastern Empire Novel*40

Adult Poetry - Malaika King Albrecht, Judge

First Place

Daena Rae Vandre*Thursday*51

Second Place

Shannon C. Butler*Still Growing*53

Third Place

Colette Bachand*COVID from the Elderly Point of View*55

Honorable Mentions

Ellen Marcus*Reclamation Razed Hallowed Ground*57

Iris Llewellyn Angle*Unknown*59

Special Thanks To Our Judges
for the
2021 Moore County Writers' Competition

Krista Bremer (Nonfiction)

Krista Bremer is the author of *A Tender Struggle* and the associate publisher of *The Sun* magazine. Her creative nonfiction has won several awards including a Pushcart Prize, a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship, and a Rona Jaffe Foundation award. Her essays have been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *The London Times*, and elsewhere. She has also been featured on NPR and in the PBS series *Arab American Stories*.

Deonna Kelli Sayed (Fiction)

Deonna Kelli Sayed is a published author, TEDx speaker, and performer. Her work has appeared in various anthologies, including *Everywhere Stories: Short Fiction from a Small Planet, Vol. III* from Press 53. Her work is featured online at *Red Fez*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Manifestation*, and *The Dirty Spoon*. Deonna is the Membership Coordinator for the North Carolina Writers' Network and the PEN American Piedmont Representative. Learn more at www.deonnaiswriting.com.

Malaika King Albrecht (Poetry)

Malaika King Albrecht is serving as the inaugural Heart of Pamlico Poet Laureate and president of the North Carolina Poetry Society. She is the author of four poetry books. Her most recent book is *The Stumble Fields* (Main Street Rag 2020) Her book *What the Trapeze Artist Trusts* (Press 53) won honorable mention in the Oscar Arnold Young Award and was a finalist in 2012 Next Generation Indie Book Awards. Her chapbook *Lessons in Forgetting* was published by Main Street Rag and was a finalist in the 2011 Next Generation Indie Book Awards and received honorable mention in the Brockman Campbell Award She's the founding editor of *Redheaded Stepchild*, an online magazine that only accepts poems that have been rejected elsewhere. She lives in Ayden, N.C. on Freckles Farm with her family and is a yoga instructor, Reiki practitioner, and equine specialist in mental health and learning.

NONFICTION
EARLY ELEMENTARY

SHARKS

by James Franklin

Sharks have really rough skin. Their skin is made up of small teeth called denticles. The Bramble shark's denticles stick out like rose thorns. The megalodon, which is extinct, could grow up to eighty feet long! Their teeth could grow up to seven inches! They were two times bigger than the whale shark, which are the biggest sharks alive today.

Rodney Fox was going spear fishing for morwongs when he got bit by a great white shark. Young tiger sharks go to the midnight zone. It is the third zone. The area around Bermuda have the most sharks out of the whole world. There are five zones under water; the sunlit zone, the twilight zone, the midnight zone, the abyssal zone, and the hadal zone. Did you know that not all sharks live out in the open ocean? One is the bull shark that lives around coral reefs.

Sharks have something called Ampullae of Lorenzini which detects magnetic fields coming off of prey. The helicoprion shark, which is extinct, had a tooth whorl that they could use like a saw. The mako shark can swim up to 30 mph. Whale sharks have an international holiday on August 30. The hammerhead shark has sensors in their head but the hammerhead has more than most. Each blade of the hammer contains a large organ for smelling prey, and the skin is dotted with jelly filled pores for detecting movement.

NONFICTION
UPPER ELEMENTARY

THE MAN WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

by Caroline Franklin

During the Renaissance, brilliant minds and talented artists brought out their most famous works, but one man was both brilliant and talented. He painted the most famous artwork in the world, but also brought his mind to the modern age. His name was Leonardo da Vinci. As a boy he worked for Andrea del Verrocchio, a renowned artist. When older, Vinci built weapons for Duke Sforza in Milan to defend the city. Afterwards, Leonardo da Vinci settled down and painted the Mona Lisa.

On April 15, 1452, Leonardo da Vinci was born. Neither his mother nor his father wanted him, so he went to live with his grandparents. While outside, Leonardo drew nature. Everything he created looked so alive and real that even his father, who had abandoned him, realized this. Leonardo's father, Ser Piero, sent him to Florence to work for Andrea del Verrocchio. While working there, Leonardo learned to sculpt, paint, and draw. Additionally, he learned to make his own paintbrushes and paints. Leonardo da Vinci stayed at Verrocchio's studio for thirteen years and became a master and a member of the guild.

While studying art, Leonardo read everything he could and taught himself math, science, and history. After thirteen years in Florence, Leonardo heard about Duke Sforza in Milan. The Duke wished for someone to build weapons to defend the city, which was constantly at war with the other city-states. Leonardo left his hometown to work in Milan. Everything that the Duke wanted Leonardo to create became reality. When Sforza's nephew was married, Vinci made a huge stage set and put on the play known as The Feast of

Paradise. While in Milan, Leonardo also made canals, found a better way to heat up the water for the duchess's bath, and worked on a twenty-four-foot-high statue of a horse that he never finished because all the bronze was used to defend Milan from the French. Sadly, the city was taken, and the model horse was destroyed. Near Milan there was a monastery that the Duke planned to be buried at. Sforza ordered Leonardo to paint a fresco inside the monastery. He chose to paint *The Last Supper* on the wall of the dining hall, and in 1497, it was completed.

When finished with *The Last Supper*, Leonardo traveled around Italy and worked on his own ideas and inventions. Vinci believed that one day humans would fly. In an attempt to do this, he invented wings. No one knows if he built them or even tried them out, but eventually the Wright brothers built the first airplane, four hundred years after Leonardo died. What a visionary Leonardo was! After designing wings, Leonardo worked for another Duke. His name was Cesare Borgia. Leonardo created many weapons of war for the Duke. Some examples were a giant crossbow and a contraption that had long blades sticking out of the side. When the bladed weapon was strapped to horses, no enemies could get close enough to attack. At this time, Leonardo completed his most famous painting in the world, the *Mona Lisa*. The painting was made for a farmer's wife, but Leonardo loved it so much that he kept it with him wherever he went.

Leonardo da Vinci was an amazing painter but also had a mind like no one else. Leonardo studied art with Andrea del Verrocchio at Florence. He went to work in Milan building weapons and sculptures for a duke. Traveling Italy, Leonardo painted the *Mona Lisa*, the most famous painting in the world.

He never gave up on his projects and kept trying to innovate. Leonardo was determined to learn and create as much as he could. He wanted to discover new ways to fly and fight. Leonardo was a man who changed the world.

NONFICTION
MIDDLE SCHOOL

FOSTER CARE AND FOSTER CONCERNS

by Katharine Davenport

Did you know that around 80% of kids in the Foster Care System obtain mental health problems? The foster care system is a flawed system that needs to be revamped to best serve our most valuable resource, our children. Many children continue to struggle with unaddressed mental health issues and inadequate resources inside their homes. This makes it harder for kids to form relationships. An absence of these relationships can increase signs of depression, resulting in kids becoming more troublesome and becoming less independent.

In the U.S, kids can be placed in foster care from birth all the way to eighteen where they're expected to live on their own while not having much, if any, family support. Many also admit to low education levels, mental health issues, and not knowing how to develop relationships. These struggles start from an early age and have a compounding impact on each other.

The first and main struggle of youth in foster care would be the prominent level of mental health issues. The mental health of these kids often is unaddressed, and not being diagnosed. If they're diagnosed with something, they may not always get Medicare to be able to address and treat it, or they have access to it in one home, but not in the next. According to Peter Pecora's article on mental health, there's a lack of mental health screening of kids who come from out-of-home care. Since there's already a high number of youths who occupy interconnected issues, but do not get screened, the percentages of mental health issues would clearly be much higher. If kids are screened and they're covered by insurance,

they're not met with what their health needs. Whether these kids get their mental health issues from their original homes or their placements homes, the system needs to be considering that these kids need help. If they don't start screening or providing more medication, then how's that benefitting the children?

Home resources aren't permanent nor implanted, making it the second main struggle. Kids can stay in their foster homes anywhere up to two weeks. This means that the kids are constantly having to move around and endure temporary stays at each of their houses. This makes it harder for kids to form new relationships. If they already put a lot of trust and faith into one family but then the next day, they must leave to go to a new home for whatever reason that the social worker may think that that it's best. Now, the social workers do undergo a lot of work, however, there's been many cases where they just try and get the job done and just place kids in homes they think is best, rather than seeing where kids fit in the most and where they're provided with appropriate and necessary resources like medication. In a Psychiatric Times article (Challenges and Strategies in Foster Care) Jeanette Scheid states,

"Children in foster care often experience placement changes. Maintaining continuity of care during treatment within a single organization as well as ensuring that comprehensive clinical information transfer occurs when children transition to new treatment providers presents a challenge..."

verifying the challenge in obtaining continuity, the need for continuity, and the lack of continuity in health care for foster kids. This constant moving doesn't only affect how kids

form from relationships, but it also affects their early childhood. In the early years, children start forming their identity based on the influence of the people and community around them. Moving kids to different homes at a young age can lead to kids not having the time to identify with any one family or community, and therefore the opportunity for them to learn to trust and depend on another is denied. This is a huge loss in their early years, and is proven to lead to mental issues, along with not knowing how to handle certain situations, because they are removed before having to cope or react to a situation. Also, the lack of choice to move or when to move to a new home is not made by these children, so a sense of helplessness and frustration develops with them.

The third main struggle is that youth in foster care are not prepared for being an adult. This isn't exactly the kid's fault, but rather a result of no one preparing them to be an adult. When they turn 18, they're told to fend for themselves even after constant moving changes, abuse, and mental health issues. This constant moving change increases their ignorance of knowing how to form bonds in the future. The abuse that intertwines with the mental issues isn't benefiting these youth either. Many studies show that these kids don't often graduate high school, some will get pregnant, and some will live on the streets. When kids are fortunate enough to graduate, they still lack the family support that gives young people confidence in the real world. Without the preparation for being an adult, and without the support of someone having your back, or someone to seek advice from, it is extremely difficult to survive the transition from childhood to adulthood, and the odds of success in building a fulfilling life and a family of

your own are truly against you.

Contrary to the fact that most foster kids weren't and aren't prepared for adulthood, some will argue that the foster care system provides a lot of good and it's not the workers' jobs to care for each individual child, let alone parent them. They also might argue that most kids who aren't in the foster care system are just as equally not being raised by parents on what to expect in being an adult either, therefore claiming it is normal for kids to struggle through that transition. Others think that at least these youth should be thankful that they are living in a home for a certain amount of time and that they had a roof over their head.

As discussed, children in foster care systems have three significant hurdles to be productive citizens in society. Mental health issues are one hurdle children have to overcome from a very early age stemming from the original source that led them into foster care in the first place. The inability to find stability is another hurdle in that the children live lives where they are constantly having to readjust to new families from time to time. And finally once they finally reach the age of 18 they have not been set up for success and have to overcome much more than 16 year olds who grew up in much better situations outside of the foster care system.

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therefore claiming it is normal for kids to struggle through that transition. Others think that at least these youth should be thankful that they are living in a home for a certain amount of time and that they had a roof over their head.

Since these adolescents never really had an opportunity to bond and develop in a family setting, this results in an inability to be a successful independent, along with contributing to society since giving to people hasn't been modeled to them before. Furthermore, it's very hard to reproduce what you don't know and what you're not used to.

POETRY
ELEMENTARY

A NOOK FULL OF BOOKS

by Logan Gay

Books

Hiding in a nook

The books took me places

A giant shoe with laces

A fox with a bow

The king was so low

A prince that turned into a frog

A king that ate like a hog

A sword in a rock

Animals that talk

A toad that walks

A Jack and the beanstalk

Seven tiny men

As tall as a hen

A spider that makes words

A farm with birds

Two mean sisters

As bad as a twister

A girl with long hair

Three big bears

Three brave warriors

Walking in the enemies corridors

A bridge to a magical land

A pirate without a hand

A knight fighting a dragon

A ship battling a kraken

Three christmas spirits

Their tale of the afterlife and the old man who hears

A boy named Tom
He did not have a mom
A turtle and a hare
A thief that does not care
A dog that is wild
A thief that is exiled
Reading was fun
And right now my writing was done

STARS AND STRIPES

by Caroline Franklin

I am a sign of my country
I stand tall and proud
Placed on a pole waving in the wind
My brilliant colors of blue, white, and red.

I stand in parks, airports, and towns
For people who look up and remember who they are
hey are the citizens of their nation
Believing in their freedom they won in the American Revolution.

I was made during that bloody war
At George Washington's command
Betsy Ross, a mother of one,
Skillfully sewed stitches into me
I rose into the air when many battles won.

I was there when the Union ended
The war that split the country in half.
Years after, a conflict sprang up around the whole world
America fought fearlessly on two far sides of the earth
I flew for freedom in front of our lines.

But who am I?
That is the question to ask
Who is this mysterious flag that represents our nation?
My name is the American Flag.
I stood proud and tall for hundreds of years
And still will never fall
My country is America the Beautiful
Recognize me as the flag of stars and stripes.

THE SEASONS

by Gracie Bender

While the sun shines,
The flowers bloom!
Kids dance,
Parents laugh!
The lake shines,
All throughout the season of spring!

The sun burns brightly,
While dogs chase a ball,
Parents relax,
Kids play in the pool!
The ocean roars,
All throughout the season of summer!

The Moon is glowing,
It's chilly outside,
Kids in costumes!
Adults handing out candy,
The leaves are all orange!
All throughout the season of autumn!

The sun is nowhere to be seen,
It's freezing outside!
Adults inside,
Kids outside playing in the snow!
The plants are sleeping,
All throughout the season of winter!

POETRY
MIDDLE SCHOOL

FREDDY TEDDY

by Claire D. Kirby

Freddy Teddy was overdue for the store,
So he gobbled up his pancakes,
then wanted some more
But he first needed to feed his brontosaurus and then
Dance with the rooster, the crow, and the hen.
Finish his homework (of which he had none)
And shoot a cockatoo with a make believe gun.
Prance with the lions, and attempt to jump through
The flaming hoops at the circus, Yahoo! !!
Acquire a taste for the yolk of an egg,
Then play Fortnite with his best friend Greg.
Take a trip to the beach (but sleep in Rome)
And spot the Queen of England in her mighty dome.
Snip the hair that was growing miles out his nose,
Brush his bald head, then trim his toes.
"Accidentally" eat his dog's treats,
And blow a large kiss to any girl he meets.
Sometime today he knows he'll be doing SOME chore
But having that as a plan makes his whole day a bore
But, do you want to know what he DID do all day?
He bent his neck searching for a button he lost in the hay.

MAGIC OF THE LIBRARY

by Isla Burns

A library is where books come alive
A library is where imaginations thrive
Rather romance or gloom
You can go back one-hundred years in just one room
The world is changing every second we look
Then we capture it all in just one book
The excitement the mystery
Through a magical world it carries me
A happy ending to a sad story
Just like the letters that spell glory

POETRY
HIGH SCHOOL

STARS

by Ella Pate

Running through the forest, with quiet feet,
Feeling the wind rustle your light-weight hair.

Enjoying the subtle brush of warm heat,
Smelling the soothing scent of crisp fall air.

Surrounded by many colorful trees,
Reds and browns; natural serenity.

Seeing the blue sky, calm as the deep seas,

Looking down so high above the city.

When the day grows dark, and the shadows long,
Colors blending from the bright warmth to black;

The songbirds cease to sing their happy song,
The night beginning to take the world back.

The stars shine bright, little pinpricks of light,
Bringing happiness to the dark, dark night.

NONFICTION
ADULT

WHAT THE THIEF COULD NOT STEAL

by Sandra Fischer

The thief entered our daughter's house six years ago and began stealing bit by bit. At first she thought she was imagining things but when losses became more prevalent she investigated and found that the thief was real and would keep stealing. The thief had a name, Primary Progressive Aphasia, and it was taking Sarah's husband, Chris.

She first noticed Chris having trouble forming certain words or his hesitation in the middle of a phrase; he'd stop and search for the right word to fit what he wanted to say. The employees of the business he owned began noticing the lapses in speech and other ones in his managing the business. He began making mistakes in orders and paying bills. Clues were mounting that something was amiss.

Spring came and the dogwood in their backyard burst into bloom, spreading a canopy of white blossoms over their deck. Tulips stood tall with cuplike petals opening to the sun. All about us was evidence of the season of rebirth and renewal. Nature was oblivious to the thief that had come. It was a paradox of life and at the same time a reckoning of our own seasonal nature.

We sat under the deck umbrella, Sarah and I, as she told me about the neurologist's diagnosis. Chris had PPA, a form of Frontotemporal Dementia which differentiates from Alzheimer's by attacking younger people like Chris. I tried to process the technical terms but the words, "no treatment, no cure, loss of speech, terminal" all clouded my mind and bubbled up into my throat. Swallowing could not keep the reality of its presence. We wept.

Thus began our long journey onto a path we thought

was reserved for us parents, people our age who would yield to the natural deterioration of mind and body. We thought we were the ones destined to exist in that hazy, hell-like place of eventuality until the thief took us a few cells at a time. But it wasn't us the thief was stealing; it was our son-in-law at age 48.

We sold our house in the low country in 2016 and moved to Southern Pines, NC an hour away from Sarah, Chris and our two young granddaughters, Olivia, and Sydney. Being closer meant we could enjoy attending the girls' soccer games, piano recitals and volleyball meets. That was good. It meant working-helping with chores around the house, cleaning out Chris' office when he could no longer work and had to give up his business. It meant spending time with Chris while Sarah worked full time, taking him to speech therapy or to an aphasia support group meeting. Soon it meant supervising him so he would not wander away. The thief was at work.

When the sun sits on the horizon over the ocean at sundown, it's hard to imagine how fast the giant orange orb we view slips away. Ninety seconds, that's all it takes before it's gone. It appears to sink into the ocean itself, like a quenched fireball, and swallowing the day with it. I pocket that vision in my mind and take it out when I need to slow down, to consider the treasure it was, the reality that it is. Our lives slip into time's horizon second by second.

And it was so, with the sun continuing to dawn and set on our days fraught with new horizons and new realities, the reckoning of life's fragility. When a thief comes we learn things and we adjust. We learn how to let go of what we thought was of value or importance. We look for ways to

secure what is left and to be on guard for what the thief might steal next.

Dealing with Primary Progressive Aphasia forced us to learn about how it manifested itself and how to manage new behaviors. While Chris' disease was a grammatical variant, mainly attacking his ability to speak and communicate, he demonstrated other behaviors of it too. He wandered out at night-seeing and talking to people who weren't there. He vacuumed the carpets two or three times a day and made nightly trips to the fridge to consuming large amounts of ice cream. Compulsive behaviors came in one form or another as part of the disease. The thief was clever in taking his rational abilities.

The one thing Chris did that was perhaps his way of keeping the thief at bay was to maintain his physical activities. Chris loved swimming, biking, golfing, and running, so he continued to do them after his diagnosis for as long as he could. When he announced he was going to participate in the half-Ironman in Raleigh, we encouraged him with some reservations. We knew he had run several marathons and his life goal was to do the half-Ironman. We also knew it would be a challenge for him to process all the logistics of transitioning from the two-mile swim to the fifty-nine-mile bike ride and then finish with running a half-marathon.

All the members of the family agreed to do whatever we could to help him participate even if he could not finish. Oh, what a day it was! The whole family was there to cheer him, shout instructions and wait the long eight hours until his name was announced as having completed the challenge. How proud we were when he received his medal! It was a ray of sunshine on a dark and winding path of his journey-and

ours. The thief could not steal his joy or ours that day.

Any life journey requires us to respond to whatever appears along the way. Each of us sought ways to manage how we walked this new path. Sarah said it was like being a widow while her husband was still living. Olivia struggled with anger at what losing her dad would mean. He would miss her high school graduation and not be there to walk her down the aisle as a bride if or when she should marry. Sydney wrestled with trying to remember how his voice sounded. All of us asked God to show us how any good could come from this loss. We prayed, we hoped, we laughed, we cried, we hugged, and we walked on step by step. The thief could not steal our faith.

Perception is driven by our heartbeats and our listening to them. I don't know exactly when the day or moment came, but it did. The only word we could get Chris to say was a form of "yes," mostly a hissing sound. Nor did we know the distinct time his steel blue eyes rivetted ours and we couldn't determine what he knew or understood. To gaze upon them was like staring into a deep well of water that sparkled on the surface but contained depths we could not reach.

Non-verbal language is powerful and if hugs or handshakes could heal, Chris would have gotten better. He loved to do both and strangers weren't exempt. He couldn't speak, but he would smile and offer his hand to someone in line at the grocery or walk up to the waitress at the cafe and give her a hug. Most people were gracious when we signaled or whispered about his condition. The thief could not steal his warm personality or love of people.

We tend to compartmentalize outstanding memories whether pleasant or dreadful. The day Sarah moved Chris to a

care home sits in my abysmal album, tear-stained, the stabbing of our hearts with the finality of it reverberating again. This was--the last time he'd walk out of his home's door, the last time he'd sleep in his own bed, the last time he could do any of the things he knew and enjoyed in that haven with his family as husband and father. The thief was taking him from the home he knew but the thief could not take away the care he and his family needed at this time.

Separation anxiety is usually associated with the experience children have when parents leave them on their first day of school or day care. We adults experience it too and when the separation isn't temporary, it's worse. The empty bed, the vacant chair, the place mat at dinner without a setting--all reminders that someone is missing. Chris was that someone and he experienced it too. The thief had taken his presence but it could not take his spirit or the love for him that remained in the hearts of his wife and daughters.

While his new "home" was in a residential neighborhood that looked like any other family home, it was a licensed care facility. Walking inside one would think it was a regular house. It boasted a living room, kitchen, and dining area. The difference was the four bedrooms housed residents like Chris who needed full time care. Sarah had taken him there a few times in advance, showing him his new room, decorated with family pictures, his marathon and Ironman medals and a comfy chair. Nonetheless he tried to venture out the first few weeks he was there. It looked like home, but it wasn't. The thief had taken him from the one he knew, but the thief could not steal the safety and daily care he needed in this new "home."

Chris could have visitors and while he was still able he

could go offsite. We would take turns with his dad and stepmom going to visit him and he could visit overnight at their house or ours on occasion. Two close friends from his church began visiting him regularly every week, taking him for walks in the park or to water aerobics. We would take him out for lunch or to do some shopping. Sarah visited often as did Olivia and Sydney, bringing him snacks, watching movies with him, using a white board to communicate with him. The thief could not steal the devotion of those who loved him who gave time to spend with him.

When COVID came in 2020, that thief stole from many people and stole our ability to have contact visits with Chris. So, we used Facetime and visits through an open window to his room; we sent cards and photos to let him know he wasn't forgotten. The thief could not steal our resolve to stay connected.

Chris' disease like all terminal illnesses progressed and his body yielded to its subjugation. He began falling, having trouble swallowing and sleeping more. The days planned for him came to an end on June 18, 2021, when he breathed his last. To most who simply knew he had a terminal illness it would appear as if the thief had stolen all of Chris Lannom. The truth of the matter lies with those of us who knew him, who loved him and who walked the journey with him.

The thief could not take Sarah's devotion she pledged when she married him and the faith she had that gave her comfort and strength to do all she could for his best care. The thief could not take the memories she had of joyful times with her husband and how he showered her with his devout love.

As a father, Chris was hands-on. He was crazy about Olivia and

Sydney and doted on them. He took them on his runs in a jogging stroller, took them camping, and loved dressing up for trick or treat with them. He spent generous amounts of money on gifts for them on their birthdays and at Christmas, but the greatest expenditure he made was giving them time with him. Both have treasured memories of how he enjoyed life and that he loved doing it with them. No thief can steal the measure of this father's love for his daughters or the legacy he left them about how to live.

How do you measure a man's life when it is taken? We look at what he left in the hearts of those who knew him, who saw how he traversed the awful journey of letting go of it day-by-day, with courage, with composure, with faith. One of the notes he left in his aphasia group notebook says it well: "Write it on your heart that every day will be the best day of the year." Chris' life was a testimony to that note.

Life is a matter of letting go-of health, possessions, and the people we love when they die. A thief may steal them and we mourn their loss. But life is also a matter of our choosing to grasp what we have, to treasure what the thief cannot steal-the treasure of lives well-lived and loved as a legacy, the lessons learned in the process of living out our time together and the joy given us in the journey as we write each day on our hearts as those we can cherish. No thief can steal what rests in our hearts.

FICTION
ADULT

NOT TODAY

by Ellen Marcus

JoBelle stood all quiet like looking up into the rapture and thought, “Dear lord I can't be going to heaven today. I have a bucket of mop water cooling in the kitchen and the mop will sour. The okra is going tough on the stalk. I just bought my vinegar and salt for pickling. And my chicken's stewing for Sunday dumplings.” She felt herself going all light as she gripped the dishpan of peas she was shelling.

“No sir,” she said. “I'm right sorry but you will have to be getting back to me.” The air was being sucked out of her as she was lifting out of her rocking chair on the porch. She turned her toes under the wrung and grab the roughhewn porch post. “Now lookie here Mr. Lord and Savior I am not meaning no disrespect but I've got chickens to feed and clothes drying on the line. Start in China and get back later today. I promise I will be ready then.” Her chair set down hard under her leaden weight.

In a flash of light standing right in front of her pretty as you please was the Christ child himself. “Well now you might just be darker than I thought. Is it just me or I am wondering if you are the real McCoy. I mean look at yourself standing there with that confused look on your face. Mighten you just be Gabriel and if that be the case. Give the good lord my thanks just the same but I will be coming in the next wave.”

Jesus was flustered. JoBelle wasn't the first devout holy rocker that had put up a fuss this morning. The men had pretty much gone easy once he had pried their hands loose from their hunting guns, baseball bats, fishing rods, and gonads. As if the second coming would mean their last. But these old women who had rocked all their lives praying for him to come, saying it wouldn't be near soon enough till their misery was ended and they would rest in his bosom, had no inclination of rising peacefully. He had long ago made a point not to communicate one on one with humans as soon as he would then everybody was seeing him in their toast. He did have to admit some of the resemblances were uncanny but never the less coincidental and then he would have to answer a whole new batch of needy prayers. He gently rolled away the double yolker the fat chicken had just laid at his foot and studied the old lady on her porch.

She was not so old as stooped and worked down. Her hazel bright eyes snapped under the scrutiny. The old porch was sagging, the screens were full of holes, the screen door was off the bottom hinge and propped on a brick. She was not living in the lap of luxury yet she seemed right content to stay.

“JoBelle,” Jesus addressed her.

She shook her head hard. “No. No sir,” she said. “I haven't lived through 65 years of scrubbing anything and everything to keep a roof over my family's head to be addressed as JoBelle. Mrs. JoBelle I am proper and widowed. Thank you very much.”

Jesus smiled, “All right then, Mrs. JoBelle it seems to me you haven't anything to loose. In the heaven y'all sing about all the time of never having want, rivers of milk and honey and streets paved with gold. What are you holding on to? I mean I am not trying to talk you out of your eternal salvation. You were dunked once for sincerity and a second time for assurity so I am not second guessing your desire or convictions and won't leave you behind. But why is it that you don't want to ease your aches and pains and come on home?”

That set right in JoBelle's craw, “Home you say. Well home is where the heart is I guess. It ain't much to look at and after tending everyone else I got little time to tend my own. But it's mine bought and paid for all right. I expecting you be judging.” JoBelle rocked back in her rocker and crossed her arms. She looked Jesus up and down. “I'm thinking you ain't Gabriel. You carry yourself too tall as if you were born straight up for better things than stooping. Never been bent over in the pea patch at dawn, over the washboard mid-morning, tomatoes at noon, and pulling weeds at dusk. President Lincoln was stooped he had the weight of the world on his shoulders until his legs were taken out from underneath him. Yet here you stand straight and tall.”

Jesus squirmed a little. He had in fact been thinking of the woman down under in Australia who had balked at her deliverance and said, “Listen here Mr. Good Lord and all, a woman's work is never done. You think these sheep are going to shear themselves. It would be plum cruel to leave them to mat. Someone's has to stay around to see after the flock.”

It made good sense and Jesus has delayed his second coming for the better part of a year waiting for her to finish the

sheering and the carding and the spinning only for her to start the process all over again. He hated to inconvenience these ladies but it was past time he got the show on the road. The world was overpopulated, polluted and needed a little respite. The first wave was always the hardest batch but these old ladies were proving stubborn as mules.

JoBelle stood up and said, “Good lord I forgot my manners, now that I know I am not going to float off into the blue yonder might I get you a glass of iced sweet tea?” She walked into the kitchen and Jesus walked up the steps and followed her saying, “Well Mrs. JoBelle I prefer unsweet if you don't mind.”

She shot back, “Well I do mind. I have sweet tea. I don't serve flavored branch water. I steep my tea proper. It's not syrupy and it's not weak. I serve it with a wedge of lemon. Lemons have gone up a dime but the size of my wedges have stayed the same. I don't chintz on tartness. I suspect that will suit your highness.”

Jesus tripped over the cat that had ran out from under the table and grabbed a chair back to keep from falling. He mumbled, “Yes ma'am sweet tea would be just fine.” He pulled out the chair and set down and looked around feeling humbled. Her scrubbed kitchen was a colorful affair the walls papered with pages cuts from magazines of fancy jello molds, electric appliances, recipes, and Cadillac advertisements carefully pasted to the walls as high as JoBelle could reach standing on a chair. Her eye for symmetry and ascetics was keen. He was impressed. She had even ran colorful rickrack down the lines to partition perfect neat rows. To his delight she had cleverly pasted googly eyes on faces and sequined the hem of skirts.

“Why Mrs. JoBelle your kitchen is the loveliest I've ever seen. I've never really had the time to study many kitchens other than Mary and Martha's. But this is creation at play and I am taken aback. You have turned your home into a breath of fresh air.”

JoBelle had been carefully cutting a wedge of sweet potato pie. She didn't like it to sweet or too spicy. It was smooth, light, offset with a pinch of salt, and just a touch sharpness of cinnamon and nutmeg. Nothing complimented iced tea better. She smiled with her back to him and nodded. She had always known if god had ever been paying attention he would have appreciated her skill at deftly cutting clean lines with razor and a

straight edge, applying her homemade glue of flour, egg white and water and gracing her walls with the bounty that she would one day sit before in heaven.

She carefully turned around minding her arthritic hip and set his pie and tea down in front of him. She cut her own piece and took her glass of tea sitting down across from the good lord. She nodded a modest smile with lips pursed to hide her chipped front tooth. They bowed their heads for silent thanks and Jesus took a bite of his pie. His eyes got all soft and a tear slid down his cheek as he sipped from his chilled tea. He looked up at JoBelle and said, "You've got a deft hand at pie. It's beyond me to describe. There are no words."

He set there staring ahead and looked JoBelle straight in the eyes, "Now tell me this. I have to know. Your yard is swept clean and your hens are happy. The sky is crisp, clean blue, and the bare white sycamore limbs up against it are Mother Nature's mastery at her best. You have a well-kept beautiful home and you are smart and capable. Why then all these years praying to leave it?"

JoBelle handed him a folded napkin to wipe his tears and sat for a spell slowly eating her pie and sipping her tea. "I've known hunger lord. Not for food so much, if you live off the land you can always find something to eat. But I've known the hunger of unfairness. Of watching the Cadillacs drive by taking their pink cheeked kids to Sunday School powdering us with dust as my own kids walked to the fields in their clodhoppers unaware at that age that for some in this world, 'Mine is mine and yours is mine.' I paid more than I should for this pretty little sorry sandy patch and shallow well that's been known to run dry in August. I never got me a chance to learn reading past 14 and went straight into the fields working like a grown man because Mamma and Daddy had done the same. I've dreamed of being smart and gracing the halls of higher education but if I couldn't my kids would and every one of them earned themselves a degree. Every fever I nursed that couldn't afford baby aspirin for. Every cut I cleaned and worried tetanus would take hold. Every stitch I sewed so they could be presentable. I took every baby that old man felt the need to put in me never listening to me plead to wait until the moon had waned. That we may love each other without

another mouth to feed. Three babies I lost before they were born and I cried in guilt from relief. Two I bore and loved like no tomorrow and buried before they were toddlers. Eight I raised and loved and pushed away to toughen them up. I read to them until they could out read me. Every extra penny went to books and a world globe to prove the world ain't flat. You tell me when I was worn flat out tired and beyond my wits end what else could I do but pray for a reckoning. Pray for a little respite. Pray for a little help to come my way. Every morning my prayers were answered. I was a little more stooped but I could still get up with daylight and move mountains. So you sit there eating my pie and tapping your foot saying, come on JoBelle I haven't got time to wait for you to put things right. Well lord then I might as well rescind my allegiance because I am not going off half-baked and leaving things undone. It would be one thing if I dropped dead there ain't no disgrace in that. But I have a choice right here and now and I have to milk my cow. Have you asked yourself what will happen to these animals if they are not cared for? Who will open the gate? This land that has been cleared with the sweat of my back to be left to thicket and briar. These vegetables waiting to be canned only to rot on the vine? Come on Mr. Jesus did you even think this through?"

Jesus had finished his pie. He gave JoBelle a smile that just about knocked her shoes off. She felt love down to her soles. She smiled back just as beatific. Jesus saw the young JoBelle bright, pretty, and strong staring up at the heavens christening the stars. "JoBelle you are right. So very right. When it comes time to go I have found there aren't many takers. Don't get me wrong there are always a few opportunists that are ready to gamble that they can turn a profit. Tons of martyrs that want to be remembered for their suffering. As if. All the holy men and bible thumpers ready to prove the sinners wrong. But then there is you JoBelle you speak the sweet truth. Honestly I never thought the second coming was good idea. But daddy said you got to give them something to look forward to. He's been doing this too long. He's got it all wrong. All you need is a little encouragement."

JoBelle nodded. "It's nice to be acknowledged. I appreciate it to no end. It's all I ever needed. Just a little respect and to be considered an equal in creation. Dirt is dirt we come

from it and we go back to it. I don't mind being dirt. I just don't like being walked on.”

Jesus nodded and said to JoBelle, “Looks like we got a little work to do. You mind if we set your door straight and shore up your porch?”

JoBelle let out a whoop, grinning from ear to ear. “Well I'll I thought you would never ask. Let me grab my tool box. I've always said we will work till Jesus comes and then we will work some more. And while you are at it with that nice tall straight back I have the last row of pictures cut and ready to paste.”

EXCERPT FROM AN EASTERN EMPIRE NOVEL

by Rebecca McNamara

The Palace of St. Amorra sits on a precipice overlooking The Great Sea. On the Eastern side, a cliff face reaches from the sea in a puzzle of hazardous jagged rocks. The stones closest to the water have long since lost their sword like points, having been softened by millennia of churning salt ocean. As the wall of rock ascends, the stones become more and more treacherous. In the pockets between the rocks, dwarf pines dig their roots into the soil, their spindly fingers spreading like veins beneath the surface. The gnarled trees twist and turn at unnatural angles, some have grown into crowded clumps of intertwined branches, impossible to tell one tree from another. As the cliff face reaches the castle, more trees have found purchase in patches of soil nearing the promontory. Unlike the dwarf pines who have made their homes among the rocks, the pines near the palace grow taller and straighter the closer they come to flat earth. The palace itself sits above the landscape, a silent sentinel overlooking both land and sea.

The Western side of the castle has quite a different view. Large flat prairies dominate the landscape, clusters of pines grow few and far between until the grass butts up to dense forest. As the main vein of the Eastern Empire, The Squire's Road snakes along between the trees and across grasslands all the way from the palace to the far side of the island where a massive bridge separates us from the West. While much of the road is open to the grass and sky, sections inevitably have to pass through the thick forested areas where the daylight can hardly peek through the foliage.

While the Squire's Road is by far the quickest and

easiest route across most of the island, there are areas that have been known to be perilous for travelers. The closer one travels to the Western side of the island, the more dangerous the road becomes. Not to mention the thieves that hide among the thickly wooded areas, surprising weary travelers.

The road was named hundreds of years ago, for a squire that saved King Immen's life during the last major war with the Western Empire. The tale goes that while the king bravely fought against the barbaric Sokaan tribes, he was wounded by a spear that threw him from his mount and onto the blood-soaked ground. The immobilized king lay on his back, prepared to speak his last to the heavens when his squire, who was said to be fiercely loyal to the king came to his aid. He dragged the king to safety in the tree line, even as the king protested his rescue, ready and willing to meet the honorable death of a soldier. Joss, or Voss, the squire's name changes depending on who is telling the story, waited among the pines to see the familiar flash of a deep blue cloak donned by the king's knights. By the time the welcome sight arrived the king was weak and delirious. With Joss' assistance the knight hoisted the king into the saddle of his waiting horse, climbing on behind him and racing off toward the palace.

Unfortunately, despite the king surviving the ordeal he spent the rest of his life in misery. Having lost his chance at a valiant death, and in constant pain from his injury resorted to several years of too much drink and crestfallen solitude. No one knows what happened to Joss. Some say the king had him executed for not obeying his request to leave him where he lay, others say he fled for fear of just that. Regardless, the story is a dismal one. Eventually the king was found dead in his garden, leaned against a tall pine, a bottle in his hand and a

self-inflicted dagger wound above the jaggedly healed scar where the spear pierced him. Shortly after, The Squire's Road was given its name. Many protested it, saying it would certainly make the late king roll over in his grave as it gave people the means to continue to retell the story that plagued him until his death. Nevertheless, the name was given and so remains.

Those are the thoughts that meander through my mind as I peer from atop my bedroom balcony. I have been watching the road snake away across the landscape, eventually disappearing over a hilltop shrouded in mist. It's early enough in the day that the warming sun has not yet chased away the remains of last night's fog. A quickly passing but violent storm materialized last night, as is common this time of year. From where I sat last night, snuggled into my covers reading over yet another history book telling of kings of old, I heard the wind pick up and the first drops begin to pelt my windows and balcony door.

The sound for me was a welcome one. The storms that come and go in the summer months, even when the wind howls and the rain come in sheets, give me a sense of harmonious calm. The palace is always a beehive of bustling and gossip, the voices of servants and nobleman along with tradesmen and diplomats that often come passing through feel to my ears harsh and oppressive. Whenever I am able, I escape the palace and sit among the jagged rocks to stare at the sea, or take my mare for early morning or late afternoon rides across the fields. Last night I wasn't afforded that opportunity, so I resigned myself to my bed and my books.

As I read over the tale of the old king's misfortunes, I found myself thinking of my own father, who now sits upon the very

throne Immen himself sat upon in his glory days. Father is the last male of Immen's ancestry, unless by some miracle he is able to produce a son this late in life. I am the oldest of the Tersic girls, of which there are three. My twin sisters, Ara and Ella were born two years after myself. Father never says he is disappointed he did not sire boys, but I am certain he must feel the weight of it at times.

My aunt told me she remembered hearing mother soothe him during the night while she was pregnant with my sisters, "It feels different this time, my love, I'm certain it is a boy. With Vi it was so easy, now this monster inside me steals all my strength! It must be a boy, already eager to learn blade and bow!" She laughed as she absentmindedly rubbed her swollen stomach as father watched her with a bemused smile, swirling his brandy around in his glass, he only smiled and nodded. Little did she know, her strength ebbed because she was not carrying one very determined boy, but two very tenacious girls. When my sisters were born, father was there at his wife's side as he was when I came into the world. When the nurses announced that indeed two girls had been welcomed as princesses that night, father nearly fell out of his chair in shock.

Of course, I remember nothing of that night, as I was only a small child myself then, but I have heard the story enough times to feel as if I can see it just as it happened. Father left the room shortly after assuring that both his wife and two newborn daughters were healthy. In the months following the birth of the twins, father became aloof and distracted. He would still do his kingly duty of court appearances and council meetings, but with little of the vigor he possessed before. Eventually his moodiness came to an

end and his usual vibrant personality returned, as if he resigned himself to his fate of raising only girls.

I cannot help but see the comparison with my father and his great ancestor. Immen's glory on the battlefield was stolen from him, the beautiful and valiant death that should have been his snatched away at the last moment. Is that how father feels when it comes to his lack of male heirs? Will he begin to drink too much? Will he be found somewhere on the palace grounds, having taken his own life? After all, the same blood runs through his veins. Although father has been nothing but loving and gracious with his daughters, I worry that pressure to choose a male heir will continue to build. I just hope it does not drive him to madness as Immen's demons did to him.

"Vi? Are you in here?" I jump as I'm shaken from my reverie and turn to see my mother's face peeking through my door.

Mother! Yes, I'm sorry I didn't hear you knock." She takes in my face and furrows her brow, "What is troubling you so early in the day?

"Oh, it's nothing, just lost in thought," I wave my hand dismissively but I know she is not convinced, she knows me better than that.

She raises her brows in question but looks away, walking over to my bedside and picking up the book I had been so engulfed in the night before.

"Vi.", she deadpans. "What? I needed some entertainment last night during the storm." I can see the physical strain it takes her not to roll her eyes, she sighs instead and sets the book back on my bedside table.

Vi, you know your father and I love you very much,

but-“ I know this speech well; I’ve been hearing it more and more the past months.

“Mother, do not start this please, not again.”

I have already started it and Gods be damned I will continue. You cannot continue to lock yourself up here with these dusty old tomes,” she gestures to the book she sat down and stares at me like she is considering throwing the book right into the fireplace.

I glance at the still gently burning embers from last night and move to stand between my mother and their dwindling heat. Now she does roll her eyes.

“I’m not going to burn your precious book, Vi, seriously?” “Well, I don’t know! I apologize but I haven’t finished it yet, and every now and then you get in these moods and-“

“And what?”, she glares at me with a sternness I rarely see from her but I see humor behind her eyes as well.

She is testing me, seeing how far I will take this. I consider my options as I meet her eyes. Mother has, over the years served beside my father as not only his wife but his closest confidant and advisor in all things. More than once I’ve seen her send grown men, soldiers even, red faced and hunched from the throne room when their requests or propositions did not meet her liking. She has such a confident edge to her, one that inspires most that cross her path to bow their heads and retreat to the nearest corner. It is not all because she is the queen, although I am sure that helps as well, but she had the same air about her long before she was crowned. Father says that was what drew him to her, her grace and confidence. She is not a woman to be trifled with, and shows no sign of ever losing her edge.

“Mother, I know you and father do not agree with my hobbies,” I gesture my head toward the book, “But we have much to learn from the stories of those that built our kingdom, so really in the grand scheme of things I am helping us all by gaining knowledge.”

I hope my little speech will deter her, but it doesn't. “Vi. You are sixteen now. You know your father and I are not able to produce more children in hopes of a boy, and that's fine!”, she raises her arms slightly then lowers them. “We only want what is best for you. Your sisters are...well they are who they are and we love them nonetheless for it but you must begin to take the notion of marrying seriously. Honestly Vi, do you truly not wish to be wed?”

I do what I always do in these situations, deflect. “Mother! I completely forgot to mention it to you but I was riding just the other day near the forest and I saw the most delightful sight! A group of travelers were coming and-

“VI!” She says my name with such sharpness and aggression that I flinch and look away.

“Do not try to distract me, Vivian. I am here to tell you that you will begin the process of choosing a suitor. Two days hence.”

Oh. Well. My full name was just thrown at me like a bucket of ice water was dumped on my head, this situation is worse than I imagined, though I knew it was coming sooner or later. I keep my eyes averted until my mother calms, she reaches out to me and grabs my hands in hers, scooping them up and resting them on her chest.

“Please, do not make the difficult for us. This is the natural order of things, and you can go nowhere living here

forever. You will need a husband, someone to look after you. I promise they aren't all bad.", she gives me a smile that turns up at the right edge of her lips, that's the real one.

I clear my throat and meet her eyes, hoping she can't sense my fear and disappointment. Wait. Did she say I was supposed to choose someone to marry, two days from now?

"Mother."

"Yes, Vi?", she stares at me, calm and collected as always.

"Did you say two days...from now?"

"I did. Your father and I have discussed it and we have arranged a celebration and invited the noble families from several of the Eastern Empire cities as well as some from neighboring lands. The Georgeers from the south and Higi from the North. I'm sure it will be a fantastic affair!", she looks thrilled, eyes bright and a full smile on her lips.

I do not feel any of the high spirits my mother seems to be possessed by. In fact, I feel my mouth go dry and all the blood drain away from me as if I am being sucked dry by a particularly unwavering mosquito. I stare at her, not knowing what to say or how to say it. The floor feels suddenly unsteady and I brace myself against my bedframe.

"Oh, for the love of the Gods Vi, no need to be so dramatic! You're acting like your sisters. We didn't announce it as an invitation to meet the future princess of god-knows-where. It's just a chance for you to meet a few new people, and if you happen to be taken with one of the young princes then so be it."

She says the last part as if it's final, she gives me a brief hug and smile, then saunters out the door as if she had not a care in the world.

Okay. Well, I guess looking on the bright side I'm not being paraded in front of a bunch of drooling noblemen. It's a party, like any other we have at the palace during solstice celebrations and various other holidays. How bad can it be?

The next morning, I rise early and head to the stables, looking for a way to soothe my frazzled nerves. I slept poorly last night, my thoughts continually drifting between my mother's party and thoughts of King Imman and his squire. I cannot put my finger on why that story in particular had sunk its teeth into my mind. I have read dozens of stories about the trails and tribulations of the old rulers and their subjects; many of them riddled with suffering, betrayal, and hatred. Perhaps I simply see too much of the old king in my father; perhaps I am wholly overthinking the entire situation. Regardless, I attempt to leave all those thoughts back at the stable as I bring my ride out toward a nearby overlook to watch the sea.

The morning air is humid, but the breeze off the water is refreshing as it tosses my hair and dries the sheen of sweat that covers my face and neck. I close my eyes and let the soft crash of the ocean below fill my ears and my mind, washing away my trepidation about tomorrow's affair. Suddenly, a cry sounds out, although it is muffled and far away. I open my eyes and start as a distant ship can be seen on the southern horizon, the brightly colored red and orange sails ripple as the wind pushes the vessel ever closer. So much for not thinking about the party, it seems our southern neighbors, the Georgeers, will be the first to arrive. I have met several of the diplomats and merchants from Georgeant over the years, though not for any length of time and certainly not enough to judge how I'd feel about marrying one of their young princes.

My stomach gives a nervous jolt at the thought and I decide I'm no longer enjoying my relaxing ride. The reality of the situation now sits heavily on my shoulders and leaves me with nothing but dread. I stroke my horses' mane and decide I will be living with her in the stables from now on, where I can avoid all the things that have come to be expected of a woman my age and status. Laughing at my ridiculous thoughts, I steer my mare around and head back towards the stable and my awaiting fate.

POETRY
ADULT

THURSDAY

by Daena Rae Vandre

I can smell the black,
sticky rubber moving further away
Covered in exhaust - exhaustion
Breathing hard through the fumes - fuming

If only I were a tree, I could understand
roots - rooting for stability
Covered in leaves - for leaving
I still wouldn't get enough oxygen

Left in the in between
Like a sunset - a hum of yellow
Yellow like the sting of a bee - just being
Will it ever be light enough to see

I swim to the bottom of the ocean
trying to find something to grasp.
Grasping at plastic straws - reuse me
And throw me back in so I can search again - gasping

I would never fit in your boat.
But, save me - life jacket, straight jacket, yellow jacket
Waves crash - the sound of crushing metal
Bringing me back to the sidewalk - crushed

Hold me to the air
Let me feel the wind - I am winded
Like a bluebird feather that catches the beat - like suede
shoes Dancing on your rooftop - but no answer

I open a new door.
The way to my own salvation - almost salvaged
My own raft - anchored like a pine tree - pining
for the depths of my soul

But, still, as the wind blows steady - I steady myself
for your scents that linger. Cents and pennies -
not worth anything ... but everything.
I must move through them - the fee to feeling, again.

I remember the memories you let go.
They blow through the wheat fields of dreams
They stick in the comers of my brain like pollen - I am
cornered
Stuck in amber.
I tuck myself in.

Amber waves
of fields turned to rivers - they wave goodbye
and wash away your worth.
Just pennies and scents.

STILL GROWING

by Shannon C. Butler

A young woman has long hair, hopefully with flowers or braids,
maybe a pen in her ear ..

A young woman cuts it short and wears that necklace that's
been put up ever so safely ..

She dotes on herself as well as she longs for someone else to ..

She sells herself on paper with paint and coal; through keys
with disciplined and passionately intentional amounts of
pressure ..

She barks when she wants to be silent and listens when she
wants to scream ..

A young woman finds a place to wear what she wants to wear;
to let her skin show through more than her ex husband ever
would have allowed ..

A young woman remembers that she exists with as much
purpose as the colour blue and enough brilliance to baffle even
the bravest of souls ..

She knows nothing of tomorrow; saves her money up well to
blow it frequently in fits of decadence ..

And she never smiles because she's told to, but because she needs
to, the most, when there is nothing to make her smile, at all ..

She is not a frivolous child, nor must she yet be a wise old woman ..

She is freshly freed and ready to meet herself, the terrifyingly capable mess of a woman that everyone knew had been laying in wait - just below the surface.

COVID FROM THE ELDERLY POINT OF VIEW

by Collette Bachand

They say it's the same storm
just different boats we are in ...
this storm pandemic, COVID-19

They say ... self-isolate, but my world was already so lonely.

They say ... just read a good book or watch a movie,
but my eyes don't work anymore,
I've not been able to read in years or see the TV right either.

They say ... go for walks in nature, it will refresh your soul,
but it's hard to roll a walker over tree stumps and rocks.

They say ... write cards to people you love,
but my arthritic fingers can't hold a pen.

They say ... this is teaching us to slow down ... really?
Haven't seen fast in decades.

They say ... just be grateful you can talk to grandchildren on
your computer or phone,
but I can't figure out my phone and have never had a computer.

They say ... wear a mask,
but I can't wear a mask and my hearing aids at the same time,
so now I can't hear ...
and now I can't breath,
and the steam from my breath fills my glasses

and now I can't see where I am going and am afraid to fall,
so I don't ...
go ...
anywhere.

They say ... just enjoy the quiet time,
but in the silence the ghosts have found me again
and I am afraid.

They say ... just give it time ... but mine is running out.

Same storm, different boats ... sure.
But others can mend their boats,
or swim to shore or wait out the storm.
My boat is disappearing over the horizon
and there is no one to see me off

RECLAMATION RAZED HALLOWED GROUND

by Ellen Marcus

Leaf litter soggy underfoot decay. Sinking into the cold dank
promise that life churns between my toes. I am rooted
within me a hard seed yearning for my own fear. A blinding
lightning strike burning hot across the wire grass savannah.
Heat cracking me open my, truth springs forth in plumes.

Down in the bottom land the wildfire rages the swamp pine
cone fans open spiraling up on the thermal winds lifting
above the inferno. Planting itself with feather-kissing
softness on the blackened sand. Torrential downpours force
feed rivulets into rivers. The seedling holds fast with tender
grasping roots.

I am the life that breathes whole forests into existence
standing tall against the infirmed overreach of clear cut
dreams. With dollar signs for eyes wood turns to pulp
feeding paper pushers, printing green backs. Reclamation
be damned this land is marginalized by man's demarcations
of narrow vision.

I am the mother of all nature whispering life into the fire,
"Raze at will." This sacred ground will rise up from the
ashes purged of the invasive exotic tangier roots, free-
climbers, clinger-ons. This land scaped by my hand, free of
plough and the toxic endeavors of man to tame me, uproots
his best laid plans.

In the darkness he dreams of containing me. Under the
cover I run renegade in duplicity abating his endeavors. I

am the wild darkness chest deep in my own grave
resurrecting life from my marrow. Holding fast to nothing.
This life of me is nothing more than patience waiting in
grace to burn up.

Truth is this seed. It has no allegiance other than to its truth
to grow. Grow beyond the confines or preconception. Grow
beyond the willing of definition. To grow beyond the threat
of ax and hammer. This seed blooms deep inside the
surotinous cone. Potential. Baptized of fire.

Under the tree the deerfly waits for the moment between
tolerance and vulnerability. The kamikaze sacrificial strike.

One swat will signal the swarm. Raggedy winged and
mottled ugly the day hums its fire warning. I am the quite
before the storm. Dormancy is my strength. To this land
every life will return.

UNKNOWN

by Iris Llewellyn Angle

I took a walk today, thinking of
Thoreau walking his Walden. He
always heads south or southwest,
richer earth and inspiring sunset.
Without realizing, I head west,
peeking sun guides my way.
Yesterday a snowstorm stopped
everything. No one moved, not
even the sun. Now a white patch
where purple crocus and brown roots
try to sneak through to be reborn.
I pick up a rock, a feather, and a stick.
I watch blue heron fly over Tinker's
Creek. A lost deer nibbles on a dead
leaf, eyeing me. A black water snake
sits on the path. I think it is dead. I
rustle branches, still does not move.
I walk over it as it slithers into the pond.
I walk on railroad tracks remembering
long ago how I learned to walk again.
Sun pushes me from behind. My shadow pulls
me ahead. If I followed the tracks would
I forget that day my world ended. Where will
will I begin again? I follow into the unknown.