

failed ~~haiku~~

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raymond *and* terri french

'Failed' Editors

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wine at dusk. . .old friends discuss their remaining years

Haiga by Terri and Raymond French

Cast List

In order of appearance

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Chen-ou Liu
Christina Chin
Elizabeth Crocket
Marilyn Ashbaugh
Helen Buckingham
John Hawkhead
Gary Hittmeyer
Bryan Rickert
Maureen Kingston
Hemapriya Chellappan
Charles J. Knowlton
Paul Beech
Tia Haynes
Shloka Shankar
Christa Pandey
Joanna Delalande and Oscar Luparia
Marilyn Ward
Barbara Tate
Marta Chocilowska
Lori Minor
Manoj Nair

Stuart Bartow
Tanya McDonald
Susan Burch
Kristen Lindquist
Zane Parks
Dave Bonta
Pris Campbell
Lew Watts
Mark Meyer
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Guy Stephenson
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Ray Rasmussen
David J Kelly
Ingrid Baluchi
Mark Gilbert
Rafał Zabratyński
Robert Moyer
Gary Ford
Cyndi Lloyd
Peter Larsen
David Oates

The World Smaller and The Distance Colder

dark emptiness
of tree-lined streets
Wuhan Metro

coronavirus ...
this snowy silence
of Asian tourists

Toronto's Medical Officer of Health has issued an Extreme Cold Weather Alert early this morning. On my way to the subway station, I see a group of Chinese Canadians in hazmat suits giving out customized hand sanitizers. I take one and read the bold-font messages on its back: "ignorance has reached epidemic proportions" and "stop the spread of racism." I wonder if it is possible to stop toxic behavior with the correct message. Before I figure out the answer, the screeching subway noise derails my train of thought.

Chen-ou Liu

BOO

Clusters of villages skirt our trading town beside the rising and falling riverbank. Along the trunk road, my favourite place is the truckshop at the railroad junction. A short distance further down the bend, just out of view is my house, bathed in the light of an occasional full moon, frequently surrounded by the relentless discord of twilight crickets, frogs and cicadas. Bedtime is no fuss, my sisters and I are often exhausted by nightfall. Mum has only to tuck in the high four-poster bed netting.

ghost under the bed
three little girls' feet
scrambling

Although the town is within cycling distance, we are too young to ride so we get around on foot. Buses are few and infrequent. Box buses plying the route chug past three vast cemeteries. The historic one in town, on the museum grounds, is well lit.

the fear
will-o'-wisp
I've never seen

Not too far away is a Catholic cemetery wedged between the cathedral and a golf course. There's a third on a hill in a sparsely populated area, a prominent Taoist cemetery opposite the Carmelite Monastery.

pitch dark
after the fork road
we huddle close

Christina Chin

Misread

I find a bench that's in the sun and begin reading my latest purchase from the used bookstore. I look up after reading a poem to see a man shuffling by. I can see a bottle poking out of his pocket like a crocus in the springtime. He points to my book of Bukowski poems and grins when he says, "I'm just like him." I smile back hesitantly and reply, "A bit of a drinker?" He chuckles before he carries on. "Nope, a bit of a poet."

wastepaper basket
the lottery ticket
a winner

Elizabeth Crocket

<http://www.Elizabethcrocket.com>

Wyoming Witchcraft

Amid switchbacks, hairpins, and the precarious pitch of the pre-Cambrian boulders, dinosaurs once ruled. Traveling through the Big Horns, I feel puny as a gnat. Thirsty at Poison Creek, I lose my appetite at 9,000 feet. Deprived of sea-level oxygen, my thoughts saunter to sinister. I shake it off and grab for Google—no service moans my mobile. I now understand the quaking of the aspens. Like a crippled cow, I limp into Crowheart where neat Wyoming whiskeys cannot settle suspicions that my expiration date desires a rendezvous.

altitude sickness
the many faces
of self-deception

Marilyn Ashbaugh

LONG BAD FRIDAY

cold calling god

Propped up by my sainted twin pillows, chocolate and
codeine.....panaceas both.

s
sacred
a
r
e
d

Helen Buckingham

Lure of the Earworm

Our maiden aunt cradled witch mischief in her blood. Out of other adults' earshot, her tales grew dark and mysterious, soaring about on cracked-leather laughter; her favourite the one where an earwig sought out a child's inner ear—drawn by the lure of soft juvenile wax. She whispered how it chewed into soft tissue to lay pulsing eggs where they could not be got out, and how grubs coiled about into infantile madness. . . And then a wild rush as she chased us upstairs into giggles, shrieks and dreams:

old fairy tales
the children want to hear
different answers

John Hawkhead

“Trick or treat!”

exclaimed the little boy at my front door. He was dressed in some kind of costume I didn't recognize or maybe it was parts of different costumes worn together. A normally dressed middle-aged woman, who I assumed was the boy's mother, was standing a few paces behind him and off to the side.

I stood there kind of dumbfounded for a couple moments as it slowly dawned on me “it must be Halloween.”

I live alone, have no children, and Halloween has been on the wane here in the U.S. since I think I was a kid. No one had ever come to my house on this particular day, so I'd completely forgotten about it.

Candy. The kid wants candy. I said I'd be right back and went to search. I eliminated the rooms I was pretty sure held none, such as the bathroom, bedroom, basement, etc. The kitchen was where I wanted to focus. I opened the cabinet where I would normally keep my snacks and did not see a one. Not that I adhere to any kind of strict super healthy nutritional regimen or anything—it appears I had just run out of candy and snacks.

I started to get a little more desperate as I rifled through other cabinets. Canned chili - no, canned tuna fish—no, various hearty cans of soup—no, boxes of powdered Jell-O—no (and there was really not enough time to actually make any Jell-O). It was not looking promising.

After the fact, someone said I just should have given the kid money. It never occurred to me. No one except my grandmother had ever given me money on Halloween.

“There you go—a nice healthy banana—almost ripe” I said.

At least the poor kid was polite enough to hide his disappointment as best he could as I placed my banana in his bag with all the “real” goodies.

glowing pumpkins
a cold wind skitters
candy wrappers

Gary Hittmeyer

Daisy

Grandpa died so she became ours. Having grown up wild, I don't think she liked to be in our fenced in yard. When Daisy was a pup a horse kicked her head after getting startled. That's how the dog lost one eye. It's cliché to say that every boy needs a dog and every dog needs a boy. But that's how it was. One scarred up imperfect dog for one scarred up imperfect boy.

online dating
my perfect match
in dog years

Balseros

While sitting seaside with him at the little coffee shop, the old man quietly stared out into the distant blue. “What are you thinking about?” I inquired.

“Well, I’m thinking about how a mile in the ocean is a long way to swim in the dark. Amidst the struggle to stay facing the shore and the rhythm of breathing, the mind plagues you with thoughts.

Thoughts about how I gave some rafter the last of my money to drop me into the water.

Thoughts about how Castro’s men took everything from me. My clinic, my medical practice, my home.

Thoughts about about how hard it would be. A man of my age starting over. How hard I’d worked only to end up with nothing.

I’ll tell you what I didn’t think about. I was scared to think of my wife and two daughters that got out safely before me. I tried not to think about how no one but that rafter knew I was even in those waters that night and that no one, not even my family, would know if I died out there.”

Café Cubano
about two ounces
of home

Bryan Rickert

When Form Follows Function

Blast the ice jam? Too many unknowns. Channel dredge? Riverbanks unstable. The pilot loads his crop duster with coal bottom ash from the local power plant, plots a trench run through the bottleneck. Mission: Melt the Death Star threatening his farm.

erasing words
from text. . .
climate cha

The Candidate

(for Robert Ingersoll and Christopher Hitchens)

Library shelves the world over are devoted to the lives of saints. Their stories inspire, relate how common folk came to God, or how God came to them, in times of great suffering. The saints kept faith, remained true in spite of hardship and harassment. What of nonbelievers then? The freethinkers who answer “none” on surveys of religious affiliation? Who are their saintly heroes? How have they managed to maintain nonfaith in the face of persecution?

drawing a line

I'd like to nominate clay-man Mr. Bill to serve as Patron Saint of Atheists. Mr. Bill was a martyr-character in Saturday Night Live video sketches of the 1970s. Week after week, the poor fellow was tortured—choked, electrocuted, julienned—by a faceless bully named Mr. Hands (or Mr. Hands' henchman, Sluggo). And though Mr. Bill would plead and pray, nothing deterred his tormentors from their appointed task. The passion playlets always ended the same, with Mr. Bill's gruesome, Grand Guignol death.

in the sand. . .

I think it's high time we rescue Mr. Bill from his penny-dreadful fate. Fellow atheists, can I get an Amen for this noble soul? Vote your conscience. Vote to elevate this Play-Doh prince of humanism to “nones” sainthood.

driftwood

Maureen Kingston

Soulmate

"Everybody wants to be famous," I tell him. "In the matter of an hour, a 15-second video will get you thousands of followers. Can you believe it? Would you like to be famous? " I ask my husband. "Hema" he answers, "I want to be a Biryani eating champion."

road trip
now and then we stop
for a selfie

Hemapriya Chellappan

Child Abuse

As children of the '50s, we were children of the children of the "Great Depression." Seen but not heard and told to feel appreciative of the roofs over our heads, clothes on our backs, and food on the table. But, we survived because we accepted it as the norm. Second hand smoke, no bike helmets or seat belts, fish sticks and hot dogs, paste on a school ruler, polio shot blisters and the "Red scare." Most importantly, we survived our fathers' wrath. Most of us anyway. They came home from the war with demons. Men during that time didn't talk about it. Instead many sat in dark rooms with their bourbon and the glow of a Lucky Strike, And when the mood hit they doled out the punishment. You froze, you ran, or you fought. Mothers were helpless and laws were useless. When these fathers pulled in the driveway, the laughter stopped. Not all dads were abusive, but many kids came to school with unexplained bruises and even worse, unwarranted shame.

his dad
before the beating
another belt of whisky

Charles J. Knowlton

A RUBICUND GENT

I was always the odd one out, that bit older than the other students, the only married man. Come lunchtime, they'd clear off to a pub somewhere, leaving me to a packed lunch in the car, reading Ray Bradbury.

The year was '72. Elton John's 'Rocket Man' climbing the charts. Flower Power. Hare Krishna. All That.

Our math lecturer was a razor-sharp, rubicund gent whose differential calculus hurt my brain. A kindly gent too. Seeing my situation, he bestowed upon me the nickname "El Haya" (Spanish for "The Beech"). Guess he hoped it would endear me to the other guys. But no, it didn't.

in my own bubble
a different
language

Christmas came around. And on the last morning, our rubicund lecturer startled us by jumping up to sit on the front of his desk.

No good trying to teach us anything today, he said. We could finish at lunchtime. Would anyone like to hear about his time as a Spitfire pilot during the war? He'd served in the Med.

We put our hands up. All of us. And for the rest of the session he regaled us with tales of high altitude dogfights, shooting down enemy bombers, and getting shot down himself. He was rescued from the sea. Given a new Spit. And on one occasion, strafing a Nazi airbase, concluded with a victory roll.

glimpsed now
the jigsaw pieces
that make the man

I stumbled over the stony carpark with the joking, jostling lot. They were off for a festive jar or two. Didn't say where. But hey, I had a tree to dress at home.

Paul Beech

What Could Have Been

There are not many decorations in our home. However, above our bed is a large painting given to us by my mother. In swirls of green and yellow a stranger kneels at an altar. We were told it was painted during a candlelight service while the artist looked on. And even though our faith has long since disappeared, the painting has travelled with us from home to home. It's as if we still need that prayer.

forgiveness
how the dust
settles

Unspoken

Tomorrow I'll have my priorities right.
Tomorrow I'll want to play more.
Tomorrow I'll put my phone down.
Tomorrow I won't ignore them while I write.
Tomorrow I won't yell.
Tomorrow I won't overreact to their mess.
Tomorrow I'll meet them where they are at.
Tomorrow I'll love them as they are meant to be loved.
Tomorrow I'll be the mom I want to be.

shopkeeper's bell
writing every story
but my own

Tia Haynes

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Click

Clutter. There are countless ways to justify its presence. Inspiration. Security. Knowing-where-what-is-just-where-it-is. A skewed sense of balance that prevents things from toppling over. And so on. But I can't seem to ignore the spam folder or wait for items in the trash to simply empty themselves after a month has elapsed. No, these need to be gotten rid of pronto. I now know what I need—a cursor for the real world.

as if fulgurous the genesis of an idea

Shloka Shankar

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Indian Whirlwind

Once again we find ourselves in India, birth land of my husband and second home for me. Over the last half century we have visited many times and have seen the country change from a poor nation with a subservient colonial mentality to a proud tourism nation. No longer can only foreigners afford to travel and appreciate the ancient historical sites, the blue waters and sandy beaches, but masses of Indian people can now travel and see for themselves. The lines to enter the Taj Mahal wind twice around the huge building and congeal on the broad path in front, obscuring the reflecting pool where fifty years ago we could sit on a bench and take "the" photo. On the festival day of Diwali we visit the pink city of Jaipur and its surroundings. The Old City is packed car to car and body to body. Unable to stop or get out of the car for a photo of the Hawa Mahal we come back the next day to an unexpected scene.

after Diwali
plastic trash everywhere
modern India

More paved roads have come to the country, even modern four-lane highways. But in the countryside the pavement is often barely two cars wide. Instead of a sidewalk there remains a broad strip of dirt in front of the small roadside shops. With the monsoon months in the past, the daily sweeping in front of the stores and thousands of motorcycles parking on the dirt strips, dust swirls into the air. It stays suspended and mingles with smog from truck exhausts and village cooking with dried dung patties.

a bell of haze
over the whole country
a billion people

Christa Pandey

NEW SEASON

The world was covered with a mantle of melancholy until yesterday. Cold raindrops on the window were flowing silently with my sorrows... Sometimes, when the thread of fate seems to escape from my hands, I could frighten even the sunrays. It's like that, but I know spring will shine through this window once more. . .

sunbath
after rainy days
I'll dry my soul

And just this morning, as every year, the green dawn is awakening my hopes... I want to be like Juliet again: to stand on my balcony, between the earth and the sky, close to the precious shyness and quiet beauty of my muscaris and tulips. Now is the time to walk with a light step, to think of nothing, to look at myself indulgently, even to repeat some mistakes of the past. To smell this new season until I'm drunk. . .

April breeze
it does not matter
who I am

It's spring, and I don't need to seek beautiful dreams any more: they will come on their own, like colorful butterflies, driven by the fresh wind. . .

Yes, I also know happiness doesn't go on forever. It has the shape of soft and white passing clouds. Will I be able to stop on the paper all these joyful moments, making them last for a while more?

eternal cycle—
the daylily and I
blooming for a moment

prose - Joanna Delalande
senryu - Oscar Luparia

A Woolworth's Special

It was 1970, my boyfriend and I were staying together in a bed and breakfast. I wore a cheap wedding ring as in those days you weren't allowed to share a room unmarried. On the first morning at breakfast I received an indulgent smile from the landlady. . .

imitating newlyweds. . .
she asks how many sugars
in his tea

Marilyn Ward

QUINTESSENCE

He puts the telescope on the deck, yanking its tripod legs into submission, looking at the place where an oak tree stood until this afternoon when he had his nephew cut it down, leaving a gaping hole in the yard and four squirrels homeless. Now he can see the sky. The meteor shower is coming, prime time 2--5 a.m., the weatherman says.

There's echoing inside the vacuum created by the surgeon's scalpel. Somewhere in the third heaven the screaming, swirling stars are descending.

he says he'll see her
tomorrow. . .
the hospice nurse

ONLY CHILD

Monday the real estate agent suggested the house be cleaned of personal possessions before listing and each day I make the 50 mile round trip to sift the residue of my parents' life. I'm tired, bones ache, mind aches. One more drawer to empty. A box on the right, garbage bag on the left. I ease myself onto a stool and wonder if I'll get back up. The glare of the 60-watt doesn't help the headache and silence echoes from darkened corners. . .

empty husks
the locusts move on to
new housing

Barbara Tate

Limelight

The mime enters stage left, only his face and hands loom out of the darkness. He embraces an imaginary woman, covers her face with kisses and caresses her skin. He doesn't pretend that she exists, he just forgets that she is not there. When the curtain comes down, the spotlight focuses on the black-clad figure smelling a rose.

We walk back home holding hands.

in his arms
the scent of jasmine
till morning

Marta Chocilowska

Batteries Not Included

When the doctor told my mom she had to clean my room before I could come home, I'm pretty sure she expected to find razor blades; not alcohol, a vibrator, and a stack of playboy magazines.

mood stabilizer
another dose of
her intolerance

All the Accessories

I don't understand why mom was in denial about my liking girls. I mean, I tried dropping her several hints along the way. Like cutting all my hair off, belting out the lyrics to I Kissed A Girl, and don't even get me started on my obsession with Drew Barrymore in Charlie's Angels.

playing pretend
my barbie kisses
another barbie

Lori Minor

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[loriaminor.wixsite.com/poet](#)

Growing Season

Summer holidays at Grandma's. I am five—maybe six years old. We don't know if it's the food, the sultry hot weather or the well water, but one morning when I wake up there is a wart growing on my face, right on my nose. We try the usual home remedy, tulsi leaves mixed with turmeric mixed with ginger and all the other spices that Kerala has to offer. But the wart keeps growing. Not that it hurt. But as it grew it obstructed my vision. I could not look straight without having a larger part of my sight blocked out.

So grandma and I made the round of the village doctors first. An ointment and a few sugary pills did not help. Next was the Ayurveda doctor whose herbal concoctions gave me the jeebies.

When both didn't work, Grandma made an appointment to see the temple priest. One look at the wart and he said that the evil spirit had entered my body. An auspicious day for the Pooja was set up. After the chants and the fire offerings, the priest took out a blade and neatly sliced the wart from its base. A quick dab of turmeric on my nose. "throw the wart behind your head, straight into the fire. And start walking home. Do not stop. Do not look back. Keep walking until you reach your well and pour a bucket of water over yourself." So, I started walking.

Indian summer. . .
roadside periwinkles
brush against me

Manoj Nair

THE END

In my British Literature class we are reading the final two chapters of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. I am aware that not all the students have read the assignment, but I think most have. The novel has a haunting beauty that I can't shake, don't wish to. The hero is modeled after Mary's Husband, Percy, and I think it fitting that a poet be the last human on earth. A poet to muse an unending eulogy for the human species. And it is fitting that he visits a museum, wanders the streets of Rome, its malarial ruins, searches for signs of human life in abandoned rural cottages. In case you haven't read the novel, I won't discuss the ending, if it really has an ending. I don't think novels ever really end, though they all have a final page. Even the unfinished ones. . .

looking down from the hilltop
chimney smoke
rising and drifting away

CLEO

Cleaning the long neglected top of my kitchen cabinet I find a tuft of fur, brown, black, golden, and realize that it belonged to my long dead tortoiseshell, Cleo, buried somewhere in the garden. On a whim I think that if I were a billionaire, I could bring the fur to a cloning clinic, grant an endowment, and have Cleo remade. But would that cat be Cleo returned? Would she be gentle, independent, eccentric like the former Cleo? Would she be an exact replica? Would I know the difference? Maybe she'd be malevolent, like Church in Stephen King's Pet Semetary. Cleo liked to sleep up high on top of the cabinet. Would the new Cleo pounce on visitors, fangs bared, or attack one of the present cats, Elvis or Maggie? It's good not to have too much money. But now I can't remember. Did I toss the fur outside into the wind, or flick it into the wood stove?

feeding the neighbor's starving cats
wolf moon
near midnight

Stuart Bartow

Early Signs

My best friend is a chicken named Spot. A plump hen meant for the butcher block rather than the arms of a six-year-old girl, she submits to my tender affections with grace. I follow her around the yard, tell her stories, teach her the ABCs. I even manage to get her into the shallows of the plastic wading pool before Mom hoists her back onto the lawn. But meat birds, even those lucky enough to become pets, aren't bred for long lives. When her heart gives out, I am devastated. I've hung all my love on this hen, and now she's gone. At school, my teacher isn't sure how to react. After all, it's just a chicken. But when my turn comes to feature someone I love on the "Special Person" bulletin board—a board that has showcased my classmates' grandparents and siblings—she allows me to pin up a photo of Spot in all her frumpy, speckled glory.

house party
hanging
with the cat

“You’re Listening to KSLC, 90.3 . . .”

I fall in love first with his voice. College radio, classic rock, past my bedtime if I had one. From my dorm room four flights above the station, I pad downstairs in my slippers, tank top, and lounge pants to listen to his show in person. Zeppelin, Floyd, Hendrix, The Stones. Some nights his friends are with him in the studio. Tonight they’re not. Station ID and the phone number for song requests. On-air and off, his voice as smooth as his hands on my shoulders, massaging away the tension of a paper on Joyce. My left bra strap keeps slipping down. He keeps returning it to its place. A gentleman, even as I am slouching, wanton with his touch.

that keyboard solo
in "Riders on the Storm"
our first kiss

Tanya McDonald

The Other Me

Answering my doorbell, I find a girl who looks like me, except thinner and disheveled. Turns out it's another me, from a parallel world.

"May I come in?"

In a sweeping gesture I let her in. "What are you doing here? How did you get here? I have so many questions. . ."

"Looking for something," she says, while looking around my house.

"For what?"

"I'll know it when I see it," she says, "something sacred."

I frown, knowing I have nothing like that in my house.

Just then my family walks in the door. Instantly I know by the look on her face what she's looking for.

the other me
not squeamish at all
about killing. . .
the fly
never had a chance

Susan Burch

End of the Road

high noon
fighter jet flyover
stirs up the coyotes

We come in from the desert where we've been camped to grab a burger and fries at a dusty little diner in the nearest town. Seated in a booth, we're waiting for our food, hands curled around glasses of Coke wet with condensation, when another customer enters. A middle-aged guy: balding, wire-rimmed glasses, plaid shorts. "What do you recommend for a guy who's just driven 2,000 miles?" he calls out, overly loud. Without missing a beat, as if she's asked every day, the hostess answers: "Barbecue pork on rye."

ghost town
a roofless shed full of blue
core samples

Kristen Lindquist

www.kristenlindquist.com/blog

Next to Godliness

mom wipes the smudge
from my friend's forehead
ash wednesday

It was done so quickly Gunner couldn't say a word. Mom's a stickler for neatness. And how could she know? In this small southern town, Catholics are a rarity. Exotic. And then, they're going to Hell. As Southern Baptists we can barely imagine Methodists and Presbyterians going to Heaven. And as for Catholics, there's no way. Nobody minds my being friends with Gunner. Maybe I will lead him to the one true faith. Maybe.

Zane Parks

School of Quietude

I was way out there. Where? In a hummocky grassland ringed by snow-capped peaks. I looked out the back door and the land seemed to be moving away from me at a rapid pace, as if I were watching from the back of a train. But I descended the steps and sat on the ground: it was moving with me. The cabin had been set down in the one place on earth that was so still, it was possible to sense the planet's rotation. I gazed 'round at the mountains and nothing else happened in this dream, but when I woke I was filled with a serene contentment that lingered for hours. I sat on the toilet and gazed at the floor's grid of small, dark blue tiles with white grouting. If I relaxed my eyes just so, the view out of each eye overlapped with the other by one tile's width, which imparted a hallucinatory depth to the grid, as if it were some sort of cosmic street view or prison block. To focus was to retreat into my own familiar cell.

taking
moonlight for snow
cheap vodka

Failed State

The failed state is defined by its collapse—like surf, built on a foundation of wind. Disaster makes it go, abetted by a certain sadomasochism bereft of safe words. The annual cicadas advance with their buzz saws, nematodes unwire all the outlets and hummingbird pendulums drive the clocks toward silence. One by one, the picturesque seaside towns are taken over by expatriate phragmites.

ocean
leaving a hermit crab
one medicine bottle

Abandoned by the international community, the failed state's citizens insist on going about their lives, opening their empty arms to each other as if that could ever be enough. Some take refuge in alcohol or religion. Their bellies swell with improbable crops invented in distant laboratories, and their night sky, too poor for constellations of its own, must share the same stars as everyone else. Oligarchs and warlords dispense the only prescriptions: a bullet for whatever ails you.

outshining the moon
in the harbor
a quarantined cruise ship

But ours is a developed nation: we believe in teamwork and never, ever team. Military conscription is a thing of the past; now, obedience is a lifestyle choice, and those in need of jobs can be counted on to welcome a new, for-profit prison. The U.S. Army recruiting ad says There is nothing on this green earth that is stronger than a soldier. Cocooned in our personal entertainment systems, we crowd the

streets and highways twice a day, darting glances at our provisional neighbors.

remote-control war:
kids in Waziristan fear
the clear blue sky

Dave Bonta

davebonta.com

Breaking Bread

Hungry and tired, we hole up in an empty anchorage near the mouth of the Chesapeake. The wind has been howling all day, waves high, leaving no hope for reaching Norfolk, where supplies can be had. We're almost out of food so I set out our crab trap and hope. Trot lines work a lot better but we have no bait. Finally, one crab rises when I check.

Mid-afternoon, a power boat rushes into the anchorage. We know it's gotten even rougher, since power boats go from dock to dock, rarely anchoring. We hail them and it turns out they have no food at all, Norfolk is also their hoped for destination, so we invite them over. I cook the crab and pick it clean, then drop it into a big pot along with our last big can of tomatoes and one of mixed vegetables. That, along with the last of our bread, is enough for seconds and full tummies. Afterwards, sated and happy, we drink rum until midnight, breathing in salt air, sharing old secrets.

day moon
those people who fade
from our lives

Day to Day

Last Cat crouches in the backyard grass, watching for the hooman to set out his dinner. He waits until sunset to rush from his home under the shed across the street. He won't go near until the hooman leaves, but he's glad to have a meal to fill his belly now. No more digging around loose garbage or going without.

A Small Cat has been living inside. She often stares at him through the sliding glass door. He wonders how she bears losing her freedom. Not for him. Never ever.

Three nights ago at mealtime he saw the hoomans through the window crying. Small Cat is missing. No more nose to the glass. He has a new bowl when dinner is brought out. Somehow he knows it was hers. The scent of her is in the rug on the bench.

That night is when the man hooman started calling him Last Cat. Small Cat has become Gone Cat. He likes the name. He repeats it to himself when he's back under his shed across the street. Last Cat. Last Cat.

shooting star
somebody's wish is lost
to the night

Pris Campbell

<http://www.poeticinspire.com>

Never seen

It's been hard, and many's the time I've been tempted. But overall it's been well worth the years of strict self-discipline. Without it, dinner parties would be a nightmare—one can only sit so long within a bubble of silence. I do try to break out, of course, but I've learned it's far better to be singularly ignored than face the scorn of a polite smile.

And so I often wait until dessert before I whisper that I've never seen *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *The Sound of Music*. After the dropped forks and jaws, someone invariably asks me why not, and I give my standard shrug. But the truth is that if I did I'd lose something precious—the ability to stop a conversation, to turn heads, to make myself visible, just for a moment.

family christmas
sounds of a TV
beyond the panic room

It was hard to believe Jerry used to be a body builder

but then no one guessed it was me who once played with Ella Fitzgerald. Other clues were more obvious, and by the time the last folded slip of paper was opened on the stage most of the audience had returned to what staff do at holiday parties, which is drink.

guy in a kilt another wee nip of scotch

I can't remember whose idea it was, but the entire management team had agreed to participate. All we had to do was write down one secret from our past and drop it into a hat. It was supposed to be fun but Robert, our CEO, had seen a deeper purpose. "It'll put a human face on management," he'd said, with complete seriousness.

downsizing the empathy masquerade

We'd almost lost the audience when the first secrets were unveiled: who once found a dolphin stranded on a beach? (Betsy); who voted for George Bush by mistake? (Chris); whose car has run out of gas three times (Joel)? But then came Jerry, one hundred and thirty pounds of skin and bone draped in a suit, raising his hand to shrieks and howls of disbelief.

Oh, and Ella? It's a long story. . .

again grandpa forgetting which version

Lew Watts

Amplifier

turn the damn thing up!
I'm trying not to hear
what's going down

it's got a parametric equalizer & phase-shifted vibrato loudness
feedback contour—if I want, there's gain n' sustain treble boost metal
distortion & reverberating auto-wah—add to that compressed
fuzztone a rotary filtron flanger toroid triode tube bias—even
overdrive digital delay with resampled acoustic tremolo tape
loops—all in a hand-wired antique boutique tweed cabinet.

pink noise tweaking all the effects knobs in my head

the blues in the night

. . . but it's just another dark, rainy, wintry mid-morning; might as well be the dead of night. No sun, no birds chirping, a charcoal gray sky and blue-gray acrid chimney smoke rising from wet houses. Constant rain patters the black bleak street. Not even a shadow to cast. Almost three months like this now. Well, ok, it does seem rather apropos these are the months when most of them took their leave, nine or ten and counting; that's how it is. Anyway, I never could write a love poem, could never play a cheerful tune on guitar, read the happy news, paint a pretty picture—the way I am. The dog might just put up with this nonsense awhile longer, but I'm not sure. I'd light up a Lucky Strike if I still smoked.

the memorials. . .
I buy prayer candles
by the dozen

Mark Meyer

Getting By

It's newly winter and the last of the berries and nuts have been collected. Grasses and edible foliage have died off or been consumed. While located in the city proper, our neighborhood borders a state park and we often have a variety of birds, squirrels, and deer that move in as park resources wane. To help the local wildlife survive the cold, all of my neighbors put out suet, corn, and seed. We also have many other creatures that the neighbors try to dissuade with "humane" traps and webbed fencing, though these foxes, raccoons, opossums, and such are only trying to survive the same way the "desirable" animals are.

the homeless man
jailed for panhandling
a hot meal

Grix

[Twitter.com@metagrix](https://twitter.com/metagrix)

<https://www.metagrix.com/>

Last sonnet

It's been nearly two years since I wrote my last sonnet. It's good, I think, well constructed, though without rhyme; it does have the requisite volta.

I might never write another but I'm glad it gave me an outlet for those feelings at the time. I can't bring myself to re-read it these days, because things were very dark then.

You see, it tells the story of a murder-suicide and in it, I am the murderer.

first person—
too close for comfort

Guy Stephenson

Accent

It's rules, not zoos, said six year old Virginia Lim, walking away from a game of rock, paper, scissors, which I tried to explain to her. My accent was thick like sweet and sour sauce made with too much starch, too distinct, even for the streets of Chinatown. My tongue was tangled in syllables of a language not my own. In college, my drama teacher made me practice tongue twisters, the feather farther than the father. Then I changed my major to English, where my accent was no longer an issue. It was concealed behind words I would write, words I had never heard, only read in books, which I never pronounced. Their nuances and inflections got lost between the lines of ink on paper.

girls' talk
my father corrects
my grammar

Jackie Chou

Summer Love

We're pretty lucky her bedroom is at ground level, and that her window faces the back hillside, its gray boulders like old men trying to peer in on her comings and goings . . . on her luster.

I'm only thirteen but the bicycle grease on my face looks like war paint—so I might need a new name to go with all this musk: Strong Bear or Brave Hawk. Something she'd really dig. Something that could even make her faint, like all those girls did for Elvis.

For whatever reason, she smells like iron and mint tonight. But also the sunshine from earlier today. In the quiet of our embrace, I hear bat wings getting on after moths. And her mother's television. Mostly, I hear my own heart.

How have I not known this before? Who kept it from me for this long? If someone took it away I'd die—I know I would die—and never care about anything else. But not before I managed a strong grip with my own bare hands. Not until I held on long enough to pull her straight through me with all of her beautiful lies.

two week anniversary. . .
I beg for just one peek
of our tomorrow

Grandmothers

They came from a dark and inspiring time—when the sound of a wooden spoon tapping the sides of a steel pot was not thought to be a diminishment of their power; but, rather, just one of the thousand manners with which they felt their way through the long years of poverty, war and inevitable grief.

"Pick up the broom for yourself and dust the world off to clear a better way to God," was their advice at the supper tables.

flowering dogwood—
the weight of freedom
on her hips

Andrew Riutta

Awakening

A clay bird feeder on the windowsill of my room has gradually become a platform where the flying creatures demonstrate their talents. I wake up daily to the orchestral show of sparrows, doves, mynas, and pigeons who stop by to peck on golden wheat grains. To enjoy sweet melodies, I sit near the window, close my eyes and feel the strings of rhythmic chirps take me away from the cacophony of metropolitan life.

early dawn
my thoughts lost
into the hymn

Hifsa Ashraf

Books and Leaves

On the fourth floor of the library, I see the old Cambodian poet who I saw cry the day before during his first time in a U.S. grocery store. Now, among endless stacks of books, he is on his knees, kissing a large volume. I stop, step back, and watch from a distance. I would never interrupt such a moment. When he goes, I go to stand where he'd been. Walt Whitman Walt Whitman Walt Whitman. . .

respect your elders
my father taught me
kneeling in leaves

Geoff Pope

Birthday

Christmas morning. The traffic is light. I watch the road while he drives too fast. Emergency room in the nearest city. I am wearing a tight baby blue dress with a wide bib of white lace. Then, naked and ready to deliver, I refuse to remove the blue ribbon tied with a bow on top of my head.

virgin birth
even though I wasn't
born yesterday

what she said

growing up, my mother was always saying things. . . They come back to me, out of the blue, the only color she wore the last fifty years of her life. When my husband had his green light pedestrian accident that kept him in a wheelchair for months. I called her every day while I got my steps in the hospital and care facility hallways (I never left until he could come home too.) On my cell, my mother's excited voice—you're doing wonderful, wonderful! Echoes of my childhood. She was practical, artistic, and idealistic. She loved my third marriage. She saw Rick as a hero, and her eyes lit up at every meeting. Where did you come from, she'd say in amazement. But it was her last comment, the last thing she ever said, that gives us the secret, unspoken key to her wonderful life and vision, and to our own survival.

ends and beginnings
she chose
the humble now

Kath Abela Wilson

Superfood

To my distress as a child, Mama was into health food long before it had a name. I craved pre-sweetened cereal, powdered sugar donuts, or best of all, chocolate covered glazed Krispy Kreme donuts—and Coke! Mama said these were not healthy. We didn't have them at our house.

We ate “real food”. Much of it raised on my grandparents' farms and orchards. Every morning we had a full breakfast—half grapefruit, bacon, eggs, grits and toast.

S&H Green Stamps
serrated
grapefruit spoons

But Mama did teach us about the ultimate, all-purpose food that remains one of my favorites. Nabs. I can't imagine life without Nabs.

Nabs work for any time of day. No time for a meal—grab a pack of Nabs. Power outage—Nabs to the rescue. Low on energy—always keep some in the glove-box of your car.

canned spinach
Popeye
missed the boat

But beyond these incredible uses is the very best characteristic of Nabs. You can open a pack of Nabs, eat two, put the opened package back in the glove-box of your car and they will be fine.

I don't mean they will be fine next week. I mean that five years later when you are desperate for a bit of energy you can dig around in

your glove-box, find that open package, eat the remaining Nabs and they will taste just like they did when “fresh”.

shelf-life
even the color
never fades

But maybe you don’t know what Nabs are! These snack crackers are sold in cellophane packages of 6 to 8 at every convenience store in the Southern US. Though they now come in a variety of flavors, the real Nabs are square, BRIGHT ORANGE crackers, between which is sandwiched something that may or may not be peanut butter.

simple fare
powerful
secret ingredient

Mama had boundless energy. As adults we struggled to keep pace with her on beach walks, ready to collapse in a heap on the sofa as she headed out for a few hours of yard work. We were sure it was her early life on the farm and healthy diet. It was years before we discovered her secret.

Mama’s lunch—
Nabs, a Snickers
and a Coke

Margaret Walker

Guise

For months she's been flirting with me, and I fall for it. Asking to read my poetry and sharing some of her own. She changes the work computer screen saver to a still of Shakespeare In Love--her tall, lithe, body much closer to Gwyneth Paltrow's than my short, squat, disabled body is to Joseph Fiennes'. But I believe. I believe that love can conquer all. A male co-worker asks if there's anything going on between us. He believes too. Notices the give and take of our mutual attentions and lunch-time exchanges of poetry journals.

And then it happens. She tells me she'd like to go out for a drink after work. I say yes, of course, because I'm stupid enough to believe. We walk into a dive bar that suits us both. She offers to go and get the first round while I pick out a table, looking forward to spending time with her outside of work, finding out more about her.

She comes back to the table, places our beers down as she sits, and fires off her first question. It appears she wants to get to know me better too. And she wants to do it miles away from work's Human Resources department, far removed from any chance of harassment repercussions. She's thought about this. Planned this moment out for months. Maybe even dreamt about it.

"So, you never told me what's wrong with your legs," she says.

I want to tell her that there's nothing wrong with my legs, they're just different. After all, they got me to this table, didn't they? She acts as if having a disability means I should explain myself to everyone I meet. Or maybe apologize to everyone I meet. It's my fucking body. It's me she's staring at in the eyes, my boundaries that she's crossed. It's me she's been flirting with for months, enjoying my gullibility and attention. My vulnerability and my words.

driving toward the moon
but never getting closer
unrequited love

I'm so caught off guard by her Jekyll and Hyde act, her betrayal, that I fall back into internalized prejudice. I don't say what I want to say. I begin to tell her my story, the three things doctors told my parents after I was born five weeks premature. That I wouldn't live. That I'd never walk. That I should be institutionalized. Three things my parents didn't listen to that changed them forever.

knotweed
the Ableism
tangled in everything

Michael Morell
Twitter: @MichaelNMorell

A Morning in Yacango

It's Day Five of our Peruvian road trip. We make an excursion from the town of Moquegua to the mountain of Cerro Baúl, which has the ruins of a Wari administrative centre on its summit. The mountain bears a striking resemblance to Ben Bulbin, which towers over the town of Sligo back home in Ireland.

after climbing it
my grandfather
dies suddenly

My three traveling companions set off to tackle Cerro Baúl. Because of a recent knee operation, I can't join them, so they deposit me in the nearby village of Yacango. I have a coffee in the local restaurant and get chatting to the Brazilian owner.

He tells me that today is the feast day of the village's patron, Señor de Gran Poder (Lord of Great Power), and that the villagers will be coming to have lunch there, after 11 O'Clock Mass. I stroll down to the church and catch the end of it.

I feel conspicuous as the only gringa, and a little disrespectful in my shorts. Some of the parishioners smile at me, others give me suspicious looks. I follow them up to where a figure of the crucified Christ rests on a bed of baby blue gauze on a portable wooden platform near the altar. He is wearing a richly embroidered blood-red velvet scarf which we touch in turn.

old habits
sign of the cross
die hard

Maeve O'Sullivan

Home Sweet Home

My brother's birth relegated me to the lowest rank of my family: not worthy of special attention. I was a stranger in my parent's house. I holed up in books, finding places willing to take me in. I moved into a large and complicated house with many interesting rooms and antiques. I was drawn into a magic wardrobe, pushed my way through mothballed fur coats, and found myself in an always-winter-and-never-Christmas land, full of fauns and dryads and naiads and dwarfs and animals and a black-hearted White Witch.

Things got interesting when I followed a White Rabbit with pink eyes down a rabbit hole, often changing my size unexpectedly. Nothing could stop me in Villa Villekulla, as a strong, independent, freckled little girl in braids, who lived by herself with a monkey, a horse, and a suitcase full of gold coins. And I didn't forfeit the boating and bathing in the afternoon, deep in green undergrowth with my friends, Water Rat and Mole, or dropping in for a chat with Mr. Toad, owner of Toad Hall, who possessed large amounts of money but not much brain.

mother's apple pie. . .

I question

the mirror

Antonietta Losito

When the Earth Stood Still

In regards to this pandemic, I have no idea what the future may hold. However, I do, at least, know this for certain: tonight's sunset, once again, temporarily righted my soul.

broken
time slips through
my breath

Tiffany Shaw-Diaz

afterpinkhaiku.blogspot.com

chain. . .chain. . .chain

untreated, a broken heart continually weeps; building massive amounts of fluid around an organ weak and struggling to survive, which in turn succumbs to pericardial infusion; allowing for a definite if not engaging closure.

year book photos
just before the dish
ran away with the spoon

Michael Henry Lee

π day, 2020

The news swirls quickly—number of cases, number of deaths, who is to blame, what to do we do? She calmly peels and dices six apples—three golden delicious and three granny smith. The apples are partially cooked in a saucepan. The crust was made earlier and chilled. She rolls out the dough into a thin circle and reflects on the origin of the recipe—“It is almost as good as mom’s.” The apples are added to the shell and baked at 375 degrees for 45 minutes. The aroma of apples, cinnamon and nutmeg fills the kitchen. We sit together in the sunroom and savor the varying textures and soothing flavors.

gray days
a light glows
in the kitchen window

Susan Farner

Peasant Words, Pleasant Memories

As a first-generation immigrant, I love life in the United States. However, each passing year draws me closer to my native country, which I left behind more than three decades ago. For many years, my younger siblings in Korea and I were too busy to stay connected. Now, as we age together, we exchange text messages several times a week. One thing we enjoy doing is to recall some of the rustic words we grew up with. Korean has a number of words equivalent to “ain’t” (am/are/is not), “y’all” (all of you), “gettin’” (getting), “git” (get), “larnin’” (learning), and “cain’t” (can’t). My siblings and I understand these Korean words but no longer use them in our professional lives. After mimicking our regional dialect, we have a hearty laugh—not because we despise it but because it brings fond memories from our days as peasant children. Lennis Leonard Broadfoot’s excellent book *Pioneers of the Ozarks* (2008) consists of interviews with native Ozarkians, many of whom speak a dialect called Ozark English. One of the interviewees, Miss Nancy Ann Rasor, states, “Me an’ Bill an’ Mary go barefooted all summer an’ work like the dickens, but we jist don’t like to wear shoes at all, ’cause they hurt our feet” (132). Imagine country people in Korea saying this in Korean.

near retirement
the joy of watching reruns
of “Hee Haw”

America, a Land of “Great Expectations”

Growing up in Korea six decades ago, I heard people say America was paradise—a land of “great expectations.” All Americans were rich, the streets were paved with gold, and Made in USA meant the best quality. They said even lye tasted sweet if it came from America; I almost believed it.

lining up for free U.S. corn—
a faded photo from
the Old World

Having lived in the United States for more than three decades, I know the country and its multilayers. Many good people came my way, helping me with my class assignments, with my writing, and with my acculturation. They invited me to their Christmas dinner and helped me repair my lawnmower.

the first day in America
smiles from
strangers

Of course, I have met some spalpeens. In a rural gas station, a young drunkard greeted me, “Hey gook!” Obviously, he did not know that the Korean word for America is pronounced Me Gook. In a big city, a young man extended to me his middle finger, but the finger means nothing in non-Western culture. At first, I thought the young man needed Band-Aids.

MASH
the Korean boy speaks Korean
with a foreign accent

I have learned that no country in this world is a utopia. If, however, I were born again and had a choice, America would be my home; it remains a country of opportunity.

election day
no one can cast
more than one vote

John J. Han

Feeling a Bit Off This Morning, I Am

Convinced the fly that has pestered me all morning smells death.
Convinced the itch in the bottom of my right foot is a sign that all the
parasites in my body are looking for a way out. Convinced the
headache I woke up with is here to ruin my last day on Earth.
Convinced the gurgling in my gut will uncork me like a cheap bottle of
champagne. Convinced my heart is turning back to port.

morning stroll
the comforting pop
of a bad knee

Answers to the Questions I Was Dumb Enough to Ask My Parents

1. Well. . .

2. You see. . .

3. It was like this. . .

4. We tried. . .

family reunion
everybody misses
someone

Bob Lucky

Down at the Jackass Saloon

Again, we tell him to lay off the cowboy moves. Yet there's always a woman who can't help but ride him.

barroom strut
never less than
half cocked

Peter Jastermsky

Missing?

Scuttling underground out of the drizzle, I take steep steps two at a time. An essential government worker even during a pandemic, I wait on the subway platform and glance over at the “Smithsonian” placard on the wall. Around me this evening—no weary parents holding children’s hands, no one checking a crumpled map or glowing phone, no one joking amidst snippets of conversations in many languages.

sakura—
a busker plays
April in Paris

Elaine Wilburt

Out of order

I came back for a glimpse of Fuji, but desperately need to charge my phone. The viewing mound is quickly located again; the clear autumn sky must afford me a glimpse of the faraway volcano. The only clouds on the horizon are shrouding the peak!! Cursing my luck, I walk into Starbucks looking for a charging socket. An old man offers me a seat. He unplugs his charger; I nod and plug mine in. Photos of Shakespeare's House on his phone are proudly shown off; we chat about the genius of the Bard. I ask about the likelihood of the clouds clearing to allow a view of Fuji. "Patience, that's all it is" he replies.

whisky can
sweat mixes
with condensation

Tim Gardiner

Wedding

It was a hot day in mid-summer when our seven-year-old daughter decided to get married. She wore her communion dress, veil, the long white stockings. The groom, also seven, wore his only suit. The priest, our oldest son, wore his altar boy red and white. The bridesmaid, her sister, made a dandelion chain for her hair and carried sweet peas. The youngest brother held the flag.

When her father and I looked out the window and saw them gathered in the rose garden, we stood gape-mouthed—bride and groom kneeling in the dirt, the priest blessing them. It was then I saw the flower girls, their bouquets of roses, daisies, bachelor buttons, zinnias, baby's breath and some boxwood, our vases bereft. My husband snapped a photo just before the bride came running toward the house, sobbing. I don't want to marry him. Make it stop.

a dab of perfume—
fragrance
of summer's past

Among Normandy Cliffs

With the blue hinge of her body, she slips from one skin to another, sweeps away boundaries, trusts the wave's spiral, its long tongue of wind to transport her to alabaster cliffs that jut from the sea. Here among treacherous rocks her gold hoop earrings quiet the swirling waters. She seduces sailors with chansons. *C'est L'Amour* billows in the masts, whispers from each of her beaded scales. Body slippery with ripples, tail quivering, she is Demimonde of the Etretat Coast, spelling her lyrics into minds emptied of love, quickens them with song after song—assures them with a throaty version of *J. Attendral* (yes, I will wait for you).

Fueled with glasses of Gres Plant Nantisse, the sailors ease into visions, awash in *La Fontaine d'Amour*, and the lulling barcarolle of the sea. She closes in like coastal fog, brands their minds in searing song, slows heartbeats, blinds their eyes. In the morning, each man will awaken to a few lingering notes already beginning to fade. Strange to themselves, with achy heads, the sailors stagger toward hot brew. The crashing surf the same as yesterday.

the fires of midnight foxes
or the green shoots of rice
who can say

Jo Balistreri

Viral Christianity

An astonishing number of churches have discontinued their regularly-scheduled Sunday services during the coronavirus pandemic.

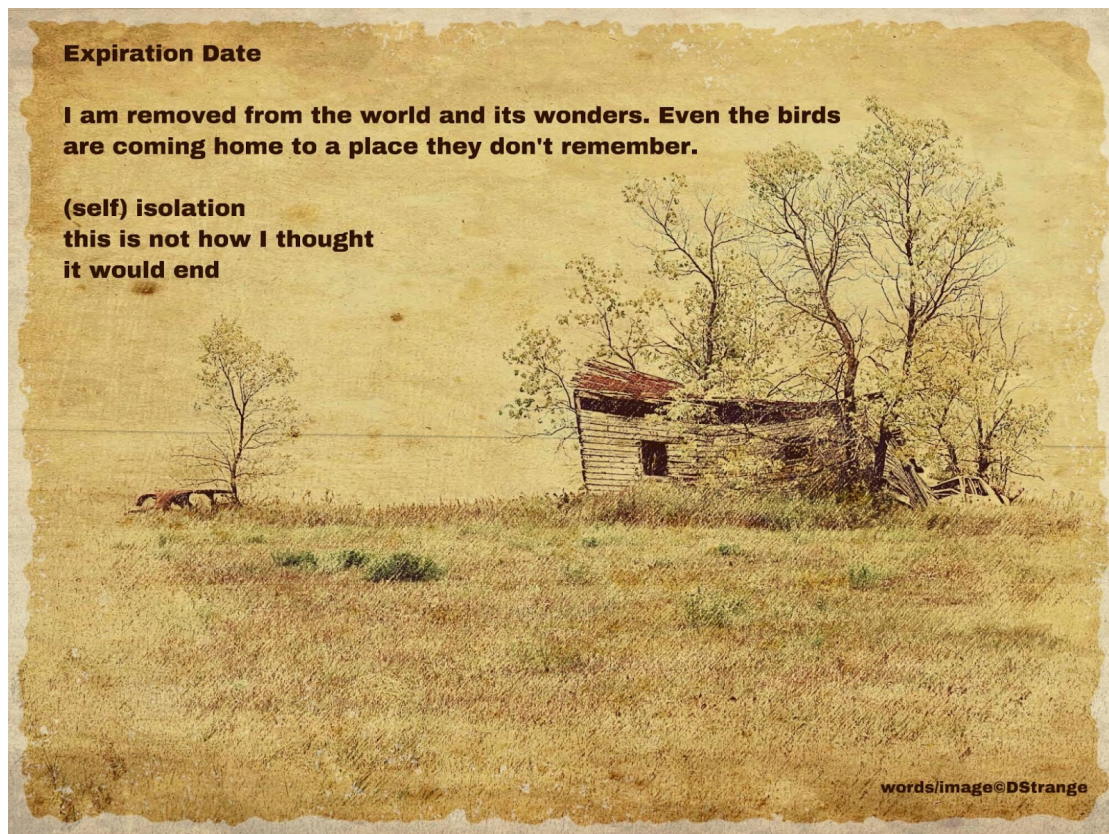
‘God is your refuge’
hand-printed sign taped to
the church’s locked door

Clergy in empty churches preach sermons that are streamed live to stay-at-home congregants. Those Catholic churches in which Masses are still said encourage congregants to sit far apart. Other precautions are also taken.

church
its holy water font filled
with sani-wipes

public service announcement
the faith-healer’s scheduled appearance
canceled

John J. Dunphy



Debbie Strange
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Birth of a Haiku Poet

My wife said she needs a new kitchen knife. Something really good. A friend recommended a Japanese knife, whose brand name I have since forgotten. Razor sharp, he said, unsurpassed. My research on the internet revealed many Japanese knives, one with the brand name Haiku. Then, I learned that haiku are not only Japanese knives, but also poems. They are apparently knife-written, because everything superfluous is cut off. It's perfect for a Westphalian man like me. We don't have any unnecessary words to give away. And then there are haiku magazines, haiku books, haiku societies. As it turns out, the latter are not gangs of knifemen, but societies of peaceful poets all over the world. I decided to join them, and began writing haiku myself.

And my wife bought a knife, domestically produced – a really good one.

razor-sharp
only few syllables
hit the mark

Pitt Buerken

Once Upon a Year

All the kids in our housing society know that their Santa Claus is Mr Rao, my father. Every Christmas, he plays his part without a single false note bringing much cheer. Other times, when he goes on his evening stroll on the grassy patch that snakes through our homes, the kids do not look him in the eye or return his smiles. His shuffling gait interrupts their games. His painstaking attempts to draw them into a conversation by proffering chocolates irritates them.

A few weeks ago he died, the kids are heartbroken, some come up to me and ask if they will have another Santa.

wedged between rights and duties entitlements

Rashmi VeSa

Final Jeopardy

I am sick at home, and a young Alex Trebek is haunting my television set. Wearing casual sweaters and short-sleeved shirts, hosting Classic Concentration. A full head of dark curly hair, 1970s-styled moustache, shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest, appearing on Card Sharks. Far from the dignified arbiter I have grown comfortable with, he is all brash and youthful swagger, mocking me in my aged infirmity.

high noon
my own shadow
abandons me

Mark Forrester

Black Widow

I've been married four times (just between us, five) each one being the love of my life, very handsome and quite wealthy, but they are all gone—dead to the world.

My therapist Dr. Benson says it happens; I should move on and not tell anyone how many times I've walked down the aisle. That might scare them off. "You seem to attract men like a magnet. Even knowing your history I'm not sure why your previous husbands are gone under strange but understandable circumstances. Obviously, they were in love and obsessed with what I would call your paranormal sultry ways—almost like a spell. We'll never know, will we?"

As I was leaving he said, "Keep doing what you do best. . .making a man happy."

Tomorrow night, my first date with Dr B.

in the pine
a fly wrapped in silk
death in the cool of night

Carol Raisfeld

Twitter: @carol_red

Leapfrog

Grandmother used to read fairy tales to us as children.

I remember Sis getting moony eyed after listening to the one about the frog prince. She spent the next few hours examining every bush and looking under stones for anything remotely resembling a frog. But no luck! She almost despaired but I told her to persevere. Then she discovered a toad beneath the harrow. She wondered if it would serve the purpose. Perhaps the frog prince was in reality a toad prince. Girls in fairy tales were notoriously ignorant, she told me. I had to agree.

"Well, what's the next step?" she asked.

"You have to kiss the toad, of course," I said, pointing out the obvious.

"Yuck!" she said, grimacing. "Look at all those warts."

I had to admit that the creature in question was far from kissable. I suggested she just close her eyes tight and get it over with. She looked doubtful. I left her to her task and later asked her how things turned out. A little later I asked Sis what happened.

"I did kiss the toad...but he did not turn into a prince," she complained. Bitterly.

I patted her on the arm and advised her to kiss every toad she came across. No telling when she might turn lucky.

She said she might spend an eternity kissing toads and grow old by the time she hit pay dirt.

"And you can't marry a prince who is young enough to be your grandson," she groaned.

That was yesterday. Today Grandma read Snow White to us. Sis has been standing before the looking glass ever since. Muttering, "Who's the fairest of them all?"

My heart bleeds for my sister.

samosa stall

.....the Maharaja flaunts

his gold credit card

Sweet Lies Where The Sweet Lies

When I was six I looked forward to Diwali. Not because I was religious. Whoever heard of six year olds coming out in a rash of piety? What made me pant for more and more were the sweets offered to the goddess Laxmi.

About fifteen or twenty guests would assemble at our house, ostensibly to worship but essentially to tuck into the dinner buffet with gusto and a devotion rarely exhibited towards the idol.

I took it upon myself to supervise and guard the goodies. But of course a six year old can hardly be blamed for sampling the wares just to see that everything is all right. And so it came to pass, that after the deity was appeased and it was the turn of the devotees, Mom discovered to her chagrin that a particular dish of sweet kheer had shrunk in volume. Sad to say she did not believe me at all when I suggested that the goddess may have consumed it. Such a commentary on the parents of today. A very skeptical lot!

And I could have sworn there was a wicked grin on the face of the deity.

prayer offerings. . .
the Brahmin priest drops
a mantra or two

Gautam Nadkarni

An Unusual Awakening

Thursday, March 12, 2020, 5 a.m.

I wake up, roll over, stretch, start setting back to sleep and dreams, and realize my partner is stirring, is likely into one of her awake-in-the-early-morning spells.

“What’s up?” I whisper.

“Before I came to bed last night, I made the mistake of watching the news. The U.S. president announced that all flights from Europe to the US would be prohibited after Friday.”

“Friday? Tomorrow?”

“Yes, I know we’re pretty isolated here, but our family and friends aren’t.” she says.

“None of them are affected by the travel restrictions. So what’s on your mind?”

“It was just the suddenness of the announcement. And when I shopped yesterday, the shelves were mostly empty. It was quite a shock.”

I’m wide awake now. “Yeah, it is shocking how quickly this is unfolding.”

After a long pause, she continues. “At 5 a.m., things sometimes seem worse than they are for me, I’m in a bit of a panic stage and I don’t want to panic.”

Holding one another close, we talk about what the virus spread might mean for us in the near- and long-term future. “Not much we can do about it now,” I say. And we try to sleep, restless, each in our own musings.

At breakfast, the radio on, news commentators are discussing cancellation of events, and how Canada might cope with the Coronavirus. “Controlling the spread is the idea,” one commentator says. “Social isolation and testing are key,” another remarks. And they

talk on and on until we're full of statistics about infection rates and deaths and political squabbles and worries.

During the day, I think about my mother's parents, grandfather Gaetano and grandmother Guisseppa who immigrated by ship from Italy in 1906. I imagine them sitting near their radio while their young daughters play, feeling anxious and helpless, as we are now, while the Spanish Flu was wreaking havoc in 1918.

I never met them, rarely even heard stories about them. Shortly after the flu swept in, Guisseppa died of childbirth some said, of the flu others said. So far as we know, her newborn died shortly afterward. On our family heritage site he's listed simply as "male child (1918-1918)."

Grandfather Gaetano, my mother, 3-year-old Francesca, and her sister, 8-year-old Louise survived the flu, but not the aftermath. He died a few years after Guisseppa.

an awakening
my mother's songs
of sadness

radio news
pages being torn from
family trees

Ray Rasmussen

Down

trauma counselling
trying to forget
the future

Some people say challenging yourself to do new things helps you grow. Those words seem hollow as my knees struggle to combat the powerful gravity up on the 5m diving platform. I left my comfort zone a couple of flights of steps away, but I'm not sure exactly where. The edge. Despite not wanting to know exactly what five metres looks like, my eyes can't help returning to the edge. I shuffle closer. The world doesn't end. My knees don't buckle. Somehow the drop appears further than it did before. Might be an optical illusion, or the influence of adrenaline. There's a queue forming. I offer up my place to a young lad behind, but he's happy to wait. Okay then, out to the very edge. My mind knows it's water down there, but it looks too solid, like wet glass or concrete. All the sounds are louder. My knees have overcome their battle with gravity and locked solid. Am I stuck? When a hand touches my shoulder, the question is answered.

fight or flight. . .
I don't want to go back
to the real world

selective logging

Big family gatherings were always fun when we were small children—the other children were keen to play and aged relatives were prone to indulge the happiness of innocents. We, for our part, were oblivious to family politics and the latest diagnoses. Adults were ‘other’ to us, having achieved a form of immortality, like mature trees; huge, ever-present and sturdy enough to climb.

racing upwards
to a new perspective
spring in my step

With the arrival of puberty, I grew steadily less confident about who I was and where I was going. Gatherings became more daunting affairs. Being neither child, nor adult, my peer group was suddenly complicated by conventions of taste and fashion. Even the simplest of questions could become an existential challenge. Conversations were often punctuated with long pauses.

summer of love—
too awkward to engage
with the subject

Now I’m old enough to be a grandparent, wise enough to try and avoid the politics, but not always quick enough to manage. The youngsters charging around between chairs and under tables surely see me as one of the ‘immortal’ elders. It seems churlish to disabuse them of this notion—they’ll discover soon enough. Innocuous questions like, “How are you?” can receive remarkably comprehensive replies, frequently leading to comparisons of ailments and medications.

autumn colours
an unexpected storm
may strip us bare

Lately, I've been going to too many funerals. A lack of faith doesn't prohibit my entry to churches, whatever the denomination. I've noticed that secular services are becoming more common; they don't exclude anyone. Sometime soon, I'm expecting to have a very deep discussion, and not necessarily with someone I know. Death has a way of bringing life into focus.

winterval—
it might be an intermission
it might not

David J Kelly
@motto_sakura

Nothing Doing

House hunting is not an easy task in Islamabad. Rogue realtors and property disputes are common. Once, at the point of shaking hands on a deal, the real owner turned up to prevent a complete stranger from stealing the down payment. The house hadn't even been up for sale.

It was with a jaundiced eye, therefore, that we inspected an unfinished building in the quiet outskirts. Up on the flat mud roof overlooking a pleasant stretch of river, water buffalo lumbered ponderously homeward through swaying pampas grass. Stepping back down to the tenant family's enclosure, we noticed a small boy rocking back and forth on a charpoy. A stout chain with a padlock secured him by an ankle to his bed. "He runs away," we were told. No hint of guilt or remorse. Merely a convenient solution for a twelve year old—with epilepsy.

We returned next day, but not because the property was of interest.

a bag of goodies—
home-made games to wile away
the terrible hours

Brief Encounter

An afternoon off, we decide to locate one of Ethiopia's hot springs. Picking our way along a rough track in the 4WD, we cover several miles before a cloud of dust rises ahead. Dressed in skin skirts with nude upper halves well greased to combat dehydration, a few young women drive their herd of long-horns across parched slopes. They ignore us. Three men, having nothing to do with such menial task, lope down towards us in the proud, graceful way Rift Valley nomads possess.

No surprise these tall, handsome people sport spears, ancient Italian firearms and scimitars. Territorial conflict between different ethnic groups in this remote region is rife. We're unsure as foreigners what to expect so our four year old is urged to scramble over onto the front seat.

Their smiles are dazzling. It appears they're looking for a ride. We willingly oblige, and wait. So, too, do they until it dawns on us suddenly they have no inkling how to open a vehicle door. Once squeezed inside, weapons poking all directions, the cabin fills with the gagging stench of rancid animal fat. Whoops of bravado edging by their womenfolk morph into a joyful burst of song and rhythmic clapping. Our daughter stares wide-eyed in wonder.

The journey takes us to some spot not far distant, no different from anywhere else, but the thump on the headrests and excited vocals indicate this is their destination. Again the doors are duly opened for them and off they disappear, laughing and chattering into the thorny scrub.

family gathering
flying embers
as tales unfold

Ingrid Baluchi

The Night Time Economy

It was Wednesday, around 6:30pm, the low sun sparking off the roofs of taxis before passing behind another concrete block.

They spilled out of the pub like they were taking the first steps of a medieval quest, waving poles made of beer cans held together by some kind of plastic harness. I don't think they were dressed extravagantly. Several were playing air guitar.

Although it seemed good-natured I did not make eye-contact. They were getting rowdy, already.

city center stag do
Bohemian Rhapsody
without the harmony

Mark Gilbert
@MarkgZero

Unit-y

Let's start with a silly question. How many grains of sand are there on Earth? Well, actually, a group of researchers at the University of Hawaii have already bent their heads over this problem. By their count, Earth contains roughly 5,000,000,000,000,000,000 aka 5 sextillion grains of sand. That's a pile of them, but still far too few to outnumber the population of stars in the universe which amounts to around 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 vel 1 septillion. Now, let's ponder on a bit childish query. How does a grain of sand feel on a desert? Rather inconspicuous, I guess, or maybe not?

in wind ripples
on the sand dune
time patterns

Rafał Zabratyński

VILLA CONTESSA

She never comes out of the apartment building without the baby, Nancy the bohemian single mother, waving at me on the balcony. She knows my roommate, everybody knows my roommate, Robin the Redheaded Whore, just a nickname someone gave her. Nancy comes up to our apartment a couple of times, sitting on the balcony, drinking Boone's Farm. Mostly, we bump into each other on the street, chatting, we never touch. My son is born, I move back with my wife, that summer Nancy's baby drowns.

chance meeting—
we could have been something
she slurs

Robert Moyer

Is This My Time?

*Ev'ry man, has a flaming star
A flaming star, over his shoulder
And when a man, sees his flaming star
He knows his time, his time has come*

Written By Sid Wayne, Sherman Edwards, Sung By Elvis Presley

I stand in Boston's Fenway Park in a light rain, clap and yell while watching my favorite team, the Toronto Blue Jays, challenge the Boston Red Sox for a playoff position. The winner will move on to the quarter finals.

The stands are full. We're fevered with excitement – in awe of being in this venerable old ballpark, feeling the exhilaration of cheering for our Blue Jays. The teams are evenly matched and as the game progresses, inning by inning, the tension grows.

Something about this scene, the excitement, the rain, the stakes, triggered a memory of a specific first date.

In eighth-grade, I wanted to approach a particular girl but was afraid to do so. Somehow, we were paired up to work together on a school project, and after a few days of working together, I managed to ask if she wanted to see a new Elvis Presley movie with me. She agreed. On that rainy evening, we took a bus to the theatre making small talk about the music we like.

Afterward, exiting the theatre into what had become a pleasant evening with a left over mist, feeling good, we walked home. Along the way we talked about our favorite scenes and songs, shared how Elvis made us feel the music. But too soon, all while my tension was mounting, we arrived at her door, my mind consumed with the question, do I try to kiss her or don't I?

eyes closed, I lean in. . .
"A Flaming Star"
plays in my mind

And, by the way, the Blue Jays lost the game.

Gary Ford

Infectious Urges

After the COVID-19 raid on toilet paper from all the stores, I decide to ration what my husband and I have left by using Mom's rule from childhood: only use four squares. This had been Grandma's rule, which came from her mother during the Great Depression when toilet paper was scarce and expensive—newspaper became the alternative. Turns out that today this rule doesn't work because of smaller squares and much thinner ply (just take my word for it).

Two and a half weeks later, I return to the store. Around me, customers touch items with their bare hands, and then rub a nose or swipe their mouths or pick at a tooth. The toilet paper shelves are still empty. At least people want to keep their asses clean!

felling trees. . .
one day it's like a miracle
it will disappear

Cyndi Lloyd

HEDGEHOG

Early morning mist hides the far side of this pond in a corner of Denmark. My shoes sink into mushy wet leaves as I start around the path. The water is the color of tea. A cuckoo starts up, sounding just like our clock at home but without the click, For a moment I half expect it to stop after six calls, but it's over two hundred o'clock by the time I'm halfway around the pond.

A rustle on my right, and a little ball of spikes and dead leaves rolls down the berm and stops at my foot. It is a hedgehog, the first I've seen outside a book of children's tales. In Danish it's called pindsvin, pin-pig, and I pick it up carefully. I wish I could see its pointy face, but it's too frightened to uncurl. Its spines press little pits in my palm, just deeply enough to make me put it down again.

The cuckoo hints that three hundred and sixty o'clock is high time for me to return to the inn for breakfast. The hedgehog holds its tuck half-hidden among the leaves, waiting for the bad thing to go away.

his red-faced rant
with ear-buds in
she sweeps up broken glass

Peter Larsen

State of Mind

After moving from Chicago to Dryden VA, population 200, I found it's easier being an absent-minded shopper in a small town. When clerks have seen you leave without your purchase one time and without your change another, they are less likely to think you're stealing if you start to leave without paying.

my little dog
hoping I've forgotten
she's already been fed
every year
her odds improve

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