

# Front Porch Review

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Speck  
- Jonathan Phillips

The store owner looked at the watch quizzically and then cast his eyes up at the clock in his store. The timepiece on his wall wasn't anything special from what I could tell. In fact it reminded me of one of those old models from my elementary school – the ones which made a hollow *doink* before moving to the next minute. At present it read 12:45. My watch was four hours ahead of that. The store owner looked at me with indignation.

"You don't want the motor fixed?"

"No, just a polish," I said.

"It won't cost ya nothing," he said matter-of-factly. "I'll charge ya twenty-five bucks for the whole job. Just have to replace the springs."

"Just a polish," I repeated.

"You know, the bottom left part of the glass face plate is cracked. This really isn't worth doing even a polish on. You could buy a whole new watch."

"No thank you. Just a polish,"

Riding in the service mini-van home, it dawned on me that it had been a long time since I had glanced at that timepiece. Years, in fact. Almost as long as it had been since I allowed myself to think of Mr. Marley. I had no photos of him but it wasn't hard to reconstruct his face. There were no letters either.— no proof beyond my own word that we had even known each other. And I preferred it that way.

But being displaced from one's house because your arthritis is so bad it limits your walking ability unearths some treasures long since forgotten. My house was being torn apart and the belongings sold so I could move into a home. Not a house but a home, where I was sentenced to spend my last days. At sixty-eight this was as planned as everything else in my life, which is to say not at all. But my brother didn't have the time or inclination to bestow upon me the empty bedroom in his house. He only wanted to make sure the money from my house would cover as many expenses as possible, proving once again to me that family is simply a word.

Mr. Marley wasn't family. I'm not even sure he had been my friend. But as I was driven home from the store, I kept seeing his face, and hearing that crisp, coarse voice of his as if he was standing in front of me.

I don't have many memories of 1985 other than those of Mr. Marley. I guess Live Aid was kind of a big deal, especially to a guy like me who at one time fancied himself a future punk rocker. Somehow my idea of punk never made the punk era. Our band, emphatically called War Pussy, had rebellious lyrics paired with angry guitar riffs – nothing as melodic as The Clash, nothing as dirty as The Sex Pistols. By 1985, our group played covers a few times a week at a local bar called Toadies. It was a chance for some middle-aged goof-offs to jam like we once did when we thought it mattered. In truth, it hardly mattered except to us. Our drummer Tommy used to say it was our morphine. One set was like an injection of sweet liberty from of our semi-miserable lives.

Tommy used to work down at the Toys R Us as a manager. And he hated kids. Me, I found a full-time job at K-Mart, a company that fallen on some hard times but trying to rebrand itself with a new line of clothes by actress Jaclyn Smith. And that's

where Mr. Marley found me.

Mr. Marley was hard to forget, and not just because of his wide-brimmed glasses or nervous demeanor. It wasn't even his incredible stare, his eyes nearly bulging out of his lenses as if they had been supplied with an extra squinting muscle. It was that he was determined to keep all the other aspects of his life from sidetracking him from his goal that day he walked into my K Mart. It was his power of singular purpose.

I should explain that Mr. Marley wasn't an extraordinary customer. If anything, the only thing that struck me upon first sight of him was the idea I should run the other way. He was just another one in the long drudge of society who entered our store on a daily basis, looking in some way to vent their frustrations of the day on the easiest victim: a hapless K Mart employee. At least, those were my original thoughts.

I remember the first day because it was the same day as Live Aid, Saturday, July 13, 1985. I was late to work because Meghan and I spent the better part of the prior evening in a marathon argument. This one began over the fact that I picked up yellow and not butternut squash at the grocery store. It wasn't as egregious as some of my other offenses (wrong toothpaste, no dryer sheets), but it was all that was necessary in those days. So, because of my lack of attention to detail, I suffered. I hadn't slept well, either, which meant I had the pleasure of having Meghan act as my alarm when I slept through the original one. I had often thought *Meghan – In the Morning* would have made one fantastically humorous radio show.

My tardiness aside that day, my manager Theodore Blevins, or T.B. as he liked to be called (a rather fitting nickname as he was about as infectious with his negative energy as tuberculosis), was on me from the moment I arrived. I think he enjoyed pointing out my deficiencies, something he had in common with Meghan. I considered pairing them up on a date but Meghan no doubt would have found a way to turn that litigious. Public defenders really are good attorneys – they're just grumpy as hell. As many loopholes as Meghan had exploited to earn victories for truly awful people, I was certain that in my case she'd become an even better prosecutor.

That's where my mind was when Mr. Marley was upon me. I don't think Mr. Marley was angling for me in particular. I think he found me just as a tourist stumbles upon an open vista on a trail while misreading a map. I just happened to be going over the signage we'd posted on our 2-for-1 Firestone oil promotion, when he was there, hobbling along, with a staccato beat – walker, two-steps, walker, two-steps. If he could have raised himself onto his toes, he would have been walker-waltzing.

"I have a problem," he announced.

"What kind of problem?" I asked.

"There's a speck on my carpet. It won't come out with soap and water. I've tried. And I've tried all sorts of cleansers: Mr. Carpet, Resolve, Scotch Guard, Bissell Fiber Cleansing, vinegar and bleach."

He didn't move when he spoke, as if all his energy was being focused to his mouth, which had this sort of over-enunciation thing going, his lips forming each phonic precisely. And he didn't make eye contact. Again, I couldn't tell if this was because he was completely set on his purpose or he was blind. If I didn't know better, I'd have recommended he contact Ian Fleming for a role as the next James Bond super-villain. He could be the unassuming, elderly assassin – the guy who holds an entire arsenal in his walker.

"Check aisle seven and see if we have something there that might help you. Have you tried.....?"

"I don't want another cleanser. Those other products were your recommendation. I want someone to do something."

"I didn't recommend them."

"Well, someone here did, and that might as well have been you. Guilt by association, young Turk."

"Would you like me to call a manager, sir?" Sir was a word I used when I was dubious I could help someone. It appeared to offer a sense of respect but was really a term of disdain, as if I had to elevate someone so as to excuse myself and find someone better than me who could handle a ridiculous request.

"Someone needs to come clean it," he said rather matter-of-factly. "How much?"

"Why don't you call a carpet cleaning service, sir? We don't do that kind of thing."

"By the way you're dressed, you could use some money. Would twenty dollars do?"

I found myself drawn to his odd way of persuasion. Considering Meghan was my girlfriend, I was beginning to think I had a thing for abuse.

"I don't think you get what I'm saying. I can't just leave my shift here."

Unbelievable! I was defending my job, a job that paid little, worked me hard and came gift-wrapped with an abusive boss. What was I doing? This wasn't how I planned my life. My original plan after I learned to play guitar was to make enough money playing locally to produce a demo to send to record companies. The production part had worked out but the demo reels were sent back from every label, most of them damaged. During production of the next batch, the master overheated and the tape melted right in the middle. At that point money dried up faster than the Sahara.

"I'll throw in twenty more. Are we through? Yes? Good."

Before I could get off my step-ladder, old Mr. Dance Fever had sauntered away, expecting me to follow. And for some ghastly reason I did.

T. B. spotted me as I was heading out the door, and he wasn't having any of it.

"Mr. Connors. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that at 2:00 you think your work day is over, seeing as you believed your day started at 10:30."

"I am actually helping a customer."

"That man out there. The one who bought nothing? You certainly can spot a good one, Connors. Maybe I should promote you to the head of sales. What are you doing?"

His question caught me off guard but I realized that while he was spewing his vitriol, I had been mouthing the words along with him.

"Your stock boy here was helping an old codger with a car problem," Marley interrupted. "I came in here for some oil, which your stock boy here was incredibly kind to recommend, and then my car wouldn't start. I thought since K-Mart only hires the best employees in their automotive areas that this kid might also be able to drive me home and help with my carpet problem," he continued.

T. B. swallowed whatever words had risen to the point of his larynx just before he could get them out. And me, I was just amazed that a man with a walker could move so fast. I knew cats that couldn't move their asses that quickly, and they're from the tiger family.

"Might he?" continued Mr. Marley, "Be able to help, that is?"

"Well, sir, Simon here might be able to help you. But as the manager maybe I can get you over to one of our service advisors..."

"I want this boy right here. Are you telling me you hired someone incapable?"

"Of course not, Mr..."

"My name is of little consequence, and you probably couldn't remember it anyway. Now don't keep an old man standing when he doesn't have to. Simon will be back when I'm through with him."

I found myself in Mr. Marley's rather dark and dingy apartment, staring with him at a tiny area of his wall-to-wall ivory carpeting where, he insisted, there was a stain.

"Right there," he pointed. "That sucker won't come out for nothing."

"Right where?" I asked quizzically.

"There."

I didn't see anything. I mean, I was staring at the same area he was, right where he was pointing his crooked, arthritic finger, and there was nothing there except worn ivory carpet. But since the old geezer had stuck up for me in front of T.B., I felt obligated to remove whatever odd particle of nothing he saw.

"Yeah, that's a nasty one," I said sounding as concerned as I could. "And you've tried everything?"

"Everything."

Trying to come up with a viable solution, I took my first real look at his apartment. Besides the gashes of sunlight that stabbed their way through the broken and damaged blinds, there was a sofa with some kind of floral pattern that sat smack dab in the middle of the living room, a little too close to a small 19" television set. There were dozens of analog clocks in various states of repair all over his shelves and tables, and dozens of watches on his desk and credenza, many of which contained a layer of dust that could be used like tree rings to measure the last time Mr. Marley worked on them. He must have been a watchmaker. Either that or obsessed with countdowns.

I christened him "The Chronographer." His super power was manipulating time, which made sense really since a) he was still alive, and b) he got me back to his apartment during my work day. I was being paid for this.

However, Mr. Marley was still staring at the spot on the rug, and I began to wonder why this spot was so important to him seeing that it had clearly taken his attention from just about everything else. I mean, it's one thing to want your apartment cleaned. You can hire any number of people to clean your house. But this wasn't about that because the rest of his apartment was a mess.

"Nice place," I said.

"Don't bullshit me kid. You wouldn't know a nice place if it fell on you."

"Well I know what isn't a nice place."

"Honesty. Now we're getting somewhere. You might have some value yet, Simon Connors."

Watching him hobble over to the sink in the kitchen, the one that had a few dirty dishes in it that looked like they could have been sitting there anywhere from two to thirty days, I wondered how a man with this body could have such a sharp mind. After all, it took me three to four repetitions to remember someone's name, and he had memorized mine after hearing it once, and not from me.

I watched him dig under the sink through his cleansers and other bottles, removing them one by one, and I'm telling you, if I had slung a robe over the man and painted him green, I'd have had a live replay of Yoda from *Return of the Jedi*.

"You sure like watches."

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not, it's just you.... well..."

"I'm fascinated with time," he said. "People are always trying to get to another situation. Always looking ahead, wishing the present would vanish. I, on the other hand, think the present is just fine."

But all I heard was, 'Fine, the present is. Vanish I won't.

I knew little about watches except that my father gave me my first watch when I was nine. I broke it five days later, and that was last one he ever gave me.

"Is this your job?"

"I'm eighty-nine years old. I'm retired, you Yeti."

He backed out finally, and as he did so, I made the sound effect of a truck shifting into reverse, "Rum um um um um."

"What are you, retarded? Stay focused on the job at hand. You're my employee now. And if you have to come here every day until this spot is removed, I'll see to it that you will."

"But sir... I can't..."

He hobbled over to the rug with some lighter fluid in his hands. He stood over the area he insisted was dirty, put the lighter fluid down and lit a match.

"Wait! What are you doing?" I ran to him.

"Fine, don't help me. I'll burn it out."

And he asked me if I'm retarded? "Stop! We'll find something."

"Good." And he smiled.

For the next few days, I brought products from our shelves to Mr. Marley's, becoming an expert in all things carpet. And each time he criticized or ridiculed them and occasionally me. But on the third day, after my custodial episode du jour failed to remove the mysterious speck, I noticed that he wasn't working on the clocks and watches. They were all dead or broken. It was as if the moment one of these time pieces stopped working, he simply went out and bought a new one. I wondered why he wouldn't do the same with the carpet. I must have gotten sidetracked in my thoughts because before I knew it he was standing in front of me with a watch dangling from his hand.

"Do you know what this is?"

"A watch?"

"This is a rare Omega military watch from World War Two," he said rather smugly, as if it would mean something to me. "Notice the time?"

"Eight forty-three? Breakfast?"

"June sixth. I told him I'd give his mother his things if he died. I didn't."

"Why not?"

"Some things you just don't want to let go of."

With that he went back to the table and set it down. He picked at another timepiece and starting scraping away at some dust. The whole place hadn't been cleaned in so long, I felt like I was wearing a new scent called 'MUSTY.'

"March 11, 1956, eleven forty-five in the morning."

"How do you remember these things?"

"I don't always."

And then it hit me. He wasn't repairing these watches and clocks to make them work again. They were his photo albums. There was barely a picture to be found in the place but Mr. Marley had a watch that marked nearly every special day in his life. And if the day was special enough, like the day he proposed to his wife, he told me he had removed the battery or pulled the pin at the very moment he could, a chronometric photograph.

There was a Bulova he picked up from a street vendor in Germany when his wife and he honeymooned in Frankfurt in 1951. He had a rare Patek Phillipe Chronograph he found in some pawn shop in Northern California, frozen on May 22, 1971, 3:47, the day his daughter graduated from Cornell. And then there was a vintage Rolex stopped on December 31, 1984, 2:01.

"Don't touch that," he said as I ran my fingers over it. I had never held a Rolex before. It was heavier than I expected but it was a female's watch. Not something he would have ever worn. "No one touches that one, not even me." He replaced it in its display case and set it gently back on his wall unit.

"Have you ever thought of selling some of these?" I asked. "You could get a better TV that's for sure."

"Nothing means anything to your generation, does it? If you haven't cashed out or turned it into some electronic entertainment thing-a-ma-jig, you guys can't understand it."

"You do realize you're showing a K-Mart employee valuable watches. How do you know I wouldn't jack these?"

"I don't. For some odd reason I trust you."

Some kind of odd look must have painted itself across my face because Mr. Marley looked up at me, as if he was digesting the words just as I was. Rarely had a silent moment existed between us since our paths had crossed, and it felt as if a heavy fog had rolled into the room, forcing things into a cautious but peaceful grace. I couldn't remember the last time someone had said anything nice to me. Not at work. Certainly not at home. And Mr. Marley, with his curt, bombastic tone was the last person I expected it from.

"Don't go getting all weepy-eyed on me, Connors. I don't love you or anything."

"Yeah, well you're not exactly cuddly," was all I could think to say.

"Walk, Connors?" he asked.

Once outside we ambled along a path in Frick Park, under a bridge and through some of the rolling hillsides that make dingy Pittsburgh come alive in autumn. He went on and on as older men do who have seen more than one human should with stories of love and loss, of tragedy and victory, and of happier times.

He told me how his brother and he never really got along, and it was his one regret. He wasn't sure how it started though he believed that his time spent in the War changed all his relationships. He returned a hero while his brother, whose flat feet prevented him from achieving some great accomplishment overseas, was simply a guy back home. It was something I identified with as I couldn't stand my brother ever since he'd become a successful Wall Street broker. All he could talk about was stocks and where to put my money, as if I had any.



"It's almost five o'clock," he said glancing at the Seiko on his wrist. "Your shift is almost over, isn't it?"

"My shift? Why are you concerned about my shift?"

"Connors, I've seen enough to know someone is unhappy in his work. Why do you work there if you dislike it so much? You're still young."

"I don't feel young," I answered.

"Then do something to feel young. This TV generation sure does sit around a lot and wait for things to happen to them. No one's writing you an invitation to find your future. But I can't imagine K-Mart is it."

I didn't have an answer; for once not a single thing came to mind about why I was still working with T.B. Nothing, except I thought about how lucky Mr. Marley was, whether he knew it or not. His life was instilled with a purpose. The men who went to that far off land understood why. It was honest. And when they came home, the country wanted them back in the worst way. That generation – so much was about survival and family. I had never understood who I was exactly, and it seemed to me a lot of the hippie kids didn't. We listened to rock n roll, watched television, fought authority and what had we really achieved? Put on our Walkmans and disappear into our headphones. We had just learned to live in co-habital loneliness.

I don't remember what I said to him. I just remember passing back under that bridge under a warm sky and thinking the possibilities were still out there.

T.B. didn't like the idea that I was skipping nearly three hours daily so I could head over to Mr. Marley's house and work on his carpet. If he had been brighter, he would have realized that Mr. Marley's threat of telling his *thousands of friends* about the asshole manager at K-Mart who spits on old people was bogus. Mr. Marley didn't spend time with anyone. Yet T.B. was obsessed with people seeing him as a man in charge, a true leader. He was going to bring K-Mart back into relevance in the forthcoming variety store onslaught he would lead. His store would lead the way, a shining beacon to all other K-Mart stores to never give up, never surrender. Now you know why he was never in a good mood. Reality packs a nasty punch, and in this case, I was the Muhammad Ali of anti-fantasy. After three weeks of frequenting Marley's apartment during business hours, T.B. took an even greater dislike to me, if that was possible.

"Just what kind of wool do you think you're pulling over my eyes, Connors?"

What I should have said was, "I don't know what you mean, sir." What came out was, "Do I need to mention a specific type?"

Severance pay in hand, I walked toward home. In the rain. Without an umbrella. Except I didn't go home. I went to Mr. Marley's, about five minutes closer and a heck of a lot more interesting. And I buzzed his apartment.

Even though Mr. Marley always escorted me to his apartment, I knew no answer was a bad answer. And when someone exited the building, I leapt inside. His door was locked, and after several failed attempts with my shoulder proved I was no superhero, the manager let me in after I told him my concerns.

He looked like he was sleeping, except his mouth was turned aside at an odd angle, even for someone who I assumed snored. For the first time he didn't appear angry or tired. And the way he laid summoned an image of his younger self imposed on his remains – the younger vibrant Marley – the person. While the manager went to call the

paramedics, I looked at my watch... and pulled the pin.

Four forty-five post meridian. I looked around my new sparse surroundings: a twin-sized bed, a chair with a side table and a television hung on the wall. I realized the old Seiko on my wrist was as important to me as anything I owned. Because after I returned home from Marley's apartment, I packed my things and told Meghan I was moving out. It was hardly a tearful goodbye. She asked simply why. And I wasn't sure I knew myself. It was just time.

The band continued to get together occasionally but time wasn't on our side. Most of us were getting married and having kids.

I ran my fingers over the gold-plated links and closed my eyes, wishing I could still play the guitar. It was my solace during my most stressful times. Now my bent and crooked fingers failed me.

"Dinner time, Mr. Connors," an aide peeked into my room.

When I opened my eyes, I saw it for the first time. The contrast against the ivory carpet was what made it almost invisible. I blinked, and it was still there. A speck on my carpet.

And nobody is able to see it but me.

## What You Lost Along the Way - Keely Cutts

You will walk up the stairs, turn left into the vestibule and knock on the door. This is the beginning, with the map spread across the table, little X's to show you the path and a bright red backpack on the floor. You will forget to pack your second favorite bra, and you will break the discount GPS in the first two hours. When people ask about the trip, they will mean the canyon and the lost water, the long fall and her broken bones but this is what you will remember, standing in her living room, her excitement a tangible echo all around you.

Pressure from the media, from your families, will push you to a commitment too quickly. She will go from being a girlfriend to being The One under the lights of a camera as you smile for pictures and kiss for crowds. Instead of the story of how you met – a chance hook-up at a shady bar – the moment that defines you will be the twenty-mile hike to find help. The thigh of your right leg will bear a scar of your journey, long and jagged and entirely out of your control.

But it is her hair you will remember, glowing in the morning light. The scent of tea tree oil caught up in the tight dark curls. You will think that maybe you might enjoy camping, that life can't be all about cracked sidewalks and public transportation. In the wildness, in the quiet, you think you will find yourself, that you will find yourselves together. You will have time to consider if good sex is worth a lifetime of open-mouthed chewing and a collection of creepy ceramic babies.

You will find your way out of the woods and lose the power to dictate your own path. Weekend families, cell phone service and restrooms with running water will greet you, the first precursors to your return to civilization. The first audience to your accidental heroism. You will become a beacon, physical evidence that love wins, and all you will remember, the moment that will feel the most true is standing in her apartment that morning, watching her smile and thinking that after you return from the canyon, maybe you should break up.

Untitled  
- Pamela Blake

The glory days are gone  
the silken effortlessness of language.  
Now I wait in line for a word.

Thoughts unfastened flee to the spare room  
huddling out of reach in the wait.  
Patience patience.

I am not deaf and dumb  
some days the Universe rises in me  
leaving my sight neon glazed.

A raucous whirl of thoughts the scent  
the shade the shape need order  
Patience patience.

We will sit together with our longing  
an abacus of conversation held  
between us, beaded with words.

I push a word along the gut string  
answering another word  
and then again a word.

## Winter's Icy Beauty

- Anita Soupir



Transference  
- Martha Phillips

Crescent moon  
in early morning sky  
No hot water  
Wondering why.

Season akimbo  
Leaves half gone  
Geese simply walking  
Everything's wrong.

Maples quite crimson  
Oaks rusty red  
Ash trees burnt brown  
Brimming with dread.

Winter's quiet  
Lays in wait  
The last warm day  
To infiltrate.

To still all sound  
All rhyme that swell  
And stop this poem  
Let it freeze in hell.

Tinnitus in February  
- Kevin Casey

Spring frogs sing inside my head  
these long winter evenings;  
they seem to shout their shrill refrains  
along some latticed skin of ice  
that crazes over frozen mud,  
or by a pulsing spate that hammers  
out its chorus onto flags of fractured slate.

But the pond now lies submerged  
beneath the Hunger Moon, its ache  
encased within the season's bitter rind.  
And no water flows, just the rushing  
in my ears, out of season and of place –  
a surging wrapped in the sibilant whispers  
of this drowsy house, still drowned in snow

# Turrets

- Joan O'Sullivan



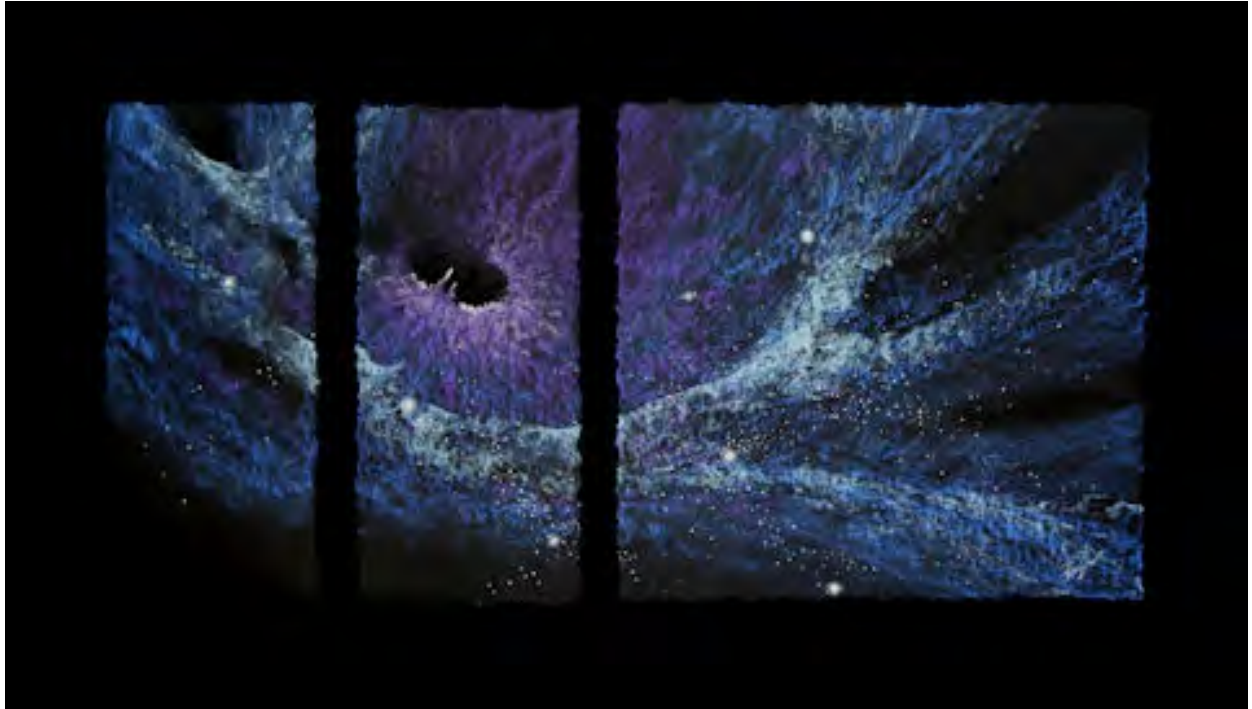


The Withering Elms and I  
- Paul Bernstein

The wind awakes  
the wasting artfulness of elms.  
They brush the heavens  
stroke them shyly into leafy green  
and I am innocent again.  
If like a child I choose  
to paint the world to suit myself  
till sun and sky collide,  
tinting heaven to an emerald dream  
then let me be.  
For I am old; my limbs are brittle,  
my trunk thick, but my roots still sip  
the honeyed earth, my sap  
still rises with the morning sun,  
and I am free to toy  
with words and worlds  
bright and green as new spring leaves  
unfolding from the withering elm.

# Star Spin

- Flo Hayes



Star Spin is an impressionistic piece based on Hubble photographs.  
It is a pastel measuring 22.75 x 39.5 x 1.5”.

Quasi una Fantasia - Almost a Fantasy  
- Itala Langmar

The painter's work,  
pale abstractions of  
non-Euclidean geometry,  
hangs bathed in light,  
entities self-invited  
like distant relatives  
consolidated against  
the fading of youth.

She said: I wanted people  
to forget about food  
about the cost of living,  
aging, the visceral  
ingratitude of kids.  
I wanted to rescue them  
from unnerving banality,  
the obsession of shopping,  
the terror of death.

I do what I do disregarding  
the stock market, the art stars  
their trends and dictates.  
I do what I do by building  
erasing caressing . . .  
My works are my lovers  
I keep them tied to my jeans  
until they can stand  
hermetic and graceful  
all by themselves.

I make no plans in advance  
consult no avatars,  
the clouds, only the clouds  
let me know when I am done,  
when a piece has become  
*Quasi una fantasia.*

picnic in an empty park  
- Zack Heon

I love using  
the wicker picnic basket  
we had bought together  
at Jerries Department Store but

I thought we had agreed that distance  
made a relationship impractical  
I thought we had agreed our past  
made platonics impossible.

Yet here we are drinking  
moscato under a covered bridge  
that leads to nowhere  
with no one watching

except your old lab – Eden  
who I brought a bone  
which she nibbles  
while leaning against my side.

Still, I suspect that  
when you agreed  
to meet in this secluded park  
it was just to give this old dog a bone.

I shall go down to the sea

- Suzie Sweetland



Periodicity  
- John Shaw

in the morning,  
count the birds-  
seven sparrows (four in the front  
three in the back)  
two robins in the side yard  
under the shade pine,  
and a cardinal on the tree's  
lowest branch.  
there are cracks in the street pavement, a scar  
allowing a tuft of cockspur  
grass that is run over  
again and again by bicycles.  
after lunch, pennies counted from  
a mason jar equal  
five hundred  
sixty  
seven,  
sixty-eight.  
no more –  
the afternoon heat affronts  
as you walk out the  
kitchen door, seeking  
to hide from the  
sun, move the matchbox set  
around the wraparound  
porch to the shaded side  
and build a loop track  
that sends cars flying off  
into the side yard  
where tomorrow,  
there may be two cardinals.

Morning of My Daughter's 40<sup>th</sup> Birthday  
- Al Ortolani

The grass along the road is a motion detector, bent  
by gravity, burrowed by mice and rabbits. In this  
early November rain I walk to my classroom, eyes

trained on the sidewalk, myopic, focused  
on the earthworms stretched like pencils on the sidewalk.  
Across the parking lot, what remains of natural prairie

has been cornered between two lengths of highway.  
The hawk turns on his wing. The cottonwood,  
alive with yellow leaves, drops messages

from high school girls into the laps of boys.

## Angel on High

- Joanne Faries





A Friend in Need  
- William Ogden Haynes

John Berringer ascended the front porch steps of the two story house in the historic district of Cedar Falls, Iowa. At the left end of the shady porch was a wooden swing suspended from the ceiling by rusty chains and to his right was a wicker seating arrangement of two chairs, a loveseat and a low table. There were large potted palm plants on each side of the entrance; the oak door with a large central window had been refinished and outfitted with new brass locks and handles. He could see into the front hall through a delicate lace curtain, but his view of the staircase and large oak coat rack was distorted by the optical defects of what was probably the original window glass.

Berringer saw no doorbell so he knocked three times. There was no response so, before turning away, he gave it three more good raps. After the second series of knocks, he heard a whirring sound and saw, through the wavy glass, a man slowly gliding down the stairs toward the entry hall. When he reached the bottom, he stood and plodded deliberately toward the front door. After unlocking the dead bolt, he opened the door and inspected Berringer from his brown straw fedora to the suitcase sitting on the porch in front of him. "A mighty hot and muggy day to be peddling your wares, my boy" he said.

"That it is" Berringer replied. "You wouldn't by chance be disposed to give a tired salesman a cold glass of water."

The old man smiled and opened the front door wide. "Happy to, son. It would be nice to have some company."

When Berringer stepped into the entry hall, he could see the ornate mahogany railing of the staircase and a chair lift attached to the side wall. Most old homes like this had no or poor air conditioning but the thermostat in this house must have been at seventy degrees. It sure felt good compared to the upper nineties outside. The old man closed the front door and extended his hand. "I'm Henry Parsons."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Parsons. My name's John Berringer." Henry Parsons looked good for his age: a thick shock of white hair, rimless spectacles, even teeth, and a strong jaw line. Parsons motioned his guest to a settee in the front parlor and disappeared through a swinging door into what Berringer assumed was the kitchen. Parsons returned with two sweating glasses of ice water, which he placed on coasters atop the oak coffee table.

Sitting opposite John and after taking a sip, Parsons said, "I'm wondering how you can convince an old man that he needs what you're selling. When you reach the age of eighty, you tend to get rid of things rather than buy more."

"Oh, I never have trouble with that, Mr. Parsons, because I'm selling whatever it is you need."

Parsons looked quizzically at my suitcase. "Well, you must have a line of some product to sell otherwise why bring a sample case?"

"That," Berringer said "contains my clothing, toiletries and a few other personal items I need while traveling. I couldn't really have a sample case for what I sell because every customer has different needs."

Parsons took another sip. "But how do you know what people need? How did you pick me to call on?"

"I do a lot of research on the Internet. You'd be surprised how much information is out there about almost anyone. For example, I already knew your name before I came to visit. On

your next birthday this September you'll be eighty-one. I know you have a son and a daughter-in-law who are in their fifties and live in California. You also have a grandchild who you see whenever you visit your son but in the last few years you haven't gone to the west coast as much as you used to. I'm also aware that your son and his family only come here once a year because of the distance and their demanding jobs."

"I don't much like people spying on me, Mr. Berringer" said Parsons, standing.

Looking up, Berringer said, "I wasn't spying on you, sir. All of this is public information, and it's there for anyone who wants to see it. I assure you my only reason for investigating you was to see if I could be of service. Big companies do it all the time by watching what you buy and which Web pages you log on to so they can place ads on your favorite sites, send you emails and do phone solicitations. Have you ever had a phone call from someone asking if you want one of those walk-in bathtubs?"

Parsons smiled. "Every week I get calls about that. And I get calls about insurance that will pay my final expenses and more calls about burglar alarms, diabetes care and catheters."

"Well, that's what I mean. All those companies have investigated you to some degree, and they know you live alone, are in your eighties with medical issues and have some money in the bank. That's all I do when I choose a person to call on. But I certainly understand if you're upset by my visit, and I'll respect your wishes if you want me to leave before we discuss how I might help you."

Henry Parsons again pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen, returned with a fifth of Jim Beam and sat next to John. "Thought we might freshen up our water while we talk business."

"I wish I were the type of salesman who didn't mix business with pleasure, but, alas, I'm not. Top me up, Mr. Parsons."

Parsons poured a couple fingers worth of whiskey into their water and ice. "Now, let's hear what you have to offer."

Berringer took a long draw on his drink. "Ahh, that's the ticket! The first thing I'd like to talk about is what you need, what you dream about and what you are most afraid of."

"I don't need anything material. I have my house, furnishings, belongings, and I own everything outright. No debts, a nice family; although you're correct, I don't see them very often. I've got enough money for food and bills with plenty left over. So there is nothing I need. I don't dream of having a bigger house, more possessions or more complications in my life. So there is really nothing I particularly need, much to your probable dismay."

Berringer smiled. "You haven't told me what you are most afraid of."

Parsons had a faraway look in his eyes. "I guess the thing I fear the most is losing my faculties and being put in a nursing home. Nothing worse than rotting away in some assisted living facility with my son and his wife coming to see me once a year. Even if they moved me to California, it would be the same thing, only with more visits."

"Do they ever talk about putting you in a nursing home?" Berringer asked.

"It's started to come up more over the last two years. They talk about how nice it would be if I moved to California and got an apartment in one of those assisted living places. They say it's not a nursing home, just a place where I can get as much help as I need. But I know the game; you start in assisted living, have a fall or a stroke and end up in some other wing of the place with all the vegetables. I couldn't stand that. My wife died ten years ago in a nursing home. She begged me to let her die, but there was nothing I could do to help her."

"So, how do you see avoiding that scenario?" asked Berringer.

“The only solution I can see is to hope that I die quickly and painlessly while I’m still in control of my life but no one can pick and choose the way their life ends, so it’s a crap shoot.”

“What if you could decide when your life ends?”

“You mean commit suicide? I could never do that. I wouldn’t even know how. And besides killing myself could cause a lot of guilt and pain for my son and his family. I’m sure they would hope that I would just pass away with no muss or fuss.” Parsons got up again, went to the kitchen, and returned with a bowl of mixed nuts.

Berringer took a handful of nuts and washed it down. “Let me tell you what I did for another gentleman last year. He was in his eighties like you when I first met him, and we made an arrangement. He lived on his own another three years and then, one day, fell and broke his hip. Something went wrong during the hip replacement surgery, and when he woke he couldn’t talk and was very confused. They sent him to rehab but he never succeeded in getting out of a wheelchair and his mind was never the same. So, he went to a nursing home where he was confined to bed and had to be helped into his wheelchair every morning. All they had to do there was arts and crafts and bingo, and he hated all of that.”

Parsons grimaced. “That’s what I’m talking about, John. Exactly the situation I don’t want to be in. So what did you do to help him?”

“I follow all of my customers closely. I call them every week, just a short call to find out what is happening in their lives and how they are doing physically. Also, I pay them a visit, like I’m doing now, several times a year just to see them in the flesh. If the time comes when they are going to relocate to a nursing home, I follow them even more closely to see how they are doing in the new environment. Most of the time it’s fairly predictable. They tell me in one of the calls that they are moving, or they have an accident and miss one of my calls. If they don’t answer one of my calls, I find out the reason why and where they are. It’s usually a medical problem, and the person is in a hospital or rehab center. If the person ends up in a nursing home, I pay them regular visits over a period of time and talk with them about what they want to do. When they decide they want to check out, I give them a couple of pills so they go to sleep and never wake up. It’s quick, painless and no one knows the person has decided to end their suffering.”

Parsons quickly asked “But aren’t you putting yourself at risk for being accused of murder? It seems like they would have some kind of investigation, and you could get arrested.”

“Surprisingly, when a person gets to be eight or nine decades old, they are expected to die at some point. Most people in nursing homes have significant problems and are only there for a relatively short time before they die. You rarely hear of someone in a nursing home returning to their house and living independently. There is almost never an autopsy or investigation because death is expected for these folks.”

“How many clients do you have?”

Berringer looked very sincerely at Mr. Parsons and said, “I never have more than five clients at a time. It would be too difficult to keep up with their situations since they’re located in different areas of the country. There’s also a time window involved. In the case of the man I told you about, I had to call him every day for three years. Then I had to go to the state where he was in a nursing home and stay there for several weeks while he made his decision.

“Think about it. Some people hang on for a couple of years, others last much longer, but I’m always there for all five of them when they need me. Since I’m only twenty-five, I have the time to invest and, barring an accident, I’m certain to outlive my clients. The man I told you about died several months ago and that left me with an opening. I have four others I am following so I have a slot for one more person. That could be you, Henry.”

“And what do you charge for this dedication, John?”

“I charge \$100,000 per case. But you don’t pay until after the service is rendered.”

Parsons was flabbergasted. “But I’ll be DEAD. How can I pay?”

“When you commit for my services, you put me in your will as a beneficiary for that amount. You tell your family we are friends and that I visit you often and call frequently. You also tell them and your attorney that I helped you on many matters you had difficulty with and that’s why you are going to remember me in your will. Of course, I’ll need a copy of the document after you make the changes. The fact is, I’ll be in contact with you much more than your family, and we’ll become good friends over the years. Remember also that I don’t get any remuneration until my job is done so I could go years without any salary from a particular client. Luckily, my customers overlap in their ages so almost every couple of years someone dies, and I earn a healthy income even though I have some dry spells. One caveat: if you die before you are sent to a nursing home, I still get my money. For instance, if you had a stroke next month, I’m still in your will. I hope that doesn’t happen but it certainly could.”

Parsons was staring out the front window again. “And what if I change my mind?”

Berringer smiled. “All you have to do is tell me and change your will. I must say, though, that has never happened. Most people find comfort in the fact that when the time comes they will not have to be kept alive against their wishes. It gives them a certain degree of control over their lives which is worth a lot to some people. If you change your mind, all I will have done is wasted some phone calls and perhaps some visits, but I’m traveling around the country anyway in my type of work so I really haven’t lost anything other than some time.”

Parsons stood and drained the last of his whiskey and water. “I’d like to think about this for a day or two John, if that’s OK with you.”

Berringer stood as well and sucked the ice out of his empty glass. “That’s fine, I’m planning on being in town until Friday, and I can pay you another visit. Here is my cell number. Give me a call if you want to meet earlier or if you want to forget the whole thing.”

That night Henry had difficulty sleeping. He’d gone to bed about nine and nursed another bourbon on the rocks while he read a book. That notion of control kept returning to his thoughts. It was nice that he could decide when he had enough of life in the nursing home. Another word that was circling around in his mind was comfort. It was the same comfortable feeling he had when he signed up for life insurance or insurance on his home. It was the comfort of having loose ends tied up and an escape hatch preinstalled in the nursing home. Old people spend tens of thousands of dollars to buy long-term care insurance to pay for the experience of vegetating in a nursing home. The insurance Mr. Berringer was selling gave you some control over how long the care was given, and you didn’t even have to pay for it until you decided to end it. And after you’re dead, why would you care about the money anyway? What did you have to lose? Berringer was not asking for money up front and was willing to invest years in keeping in touch. But what if Berringer was not there at his bedside when he needed him in the final hours of desperation? Again, why would he not be there? It would be his payday.

The next morning Parsons called John Berringer and told him to come over and finalize the deal. He didn’t need another day or two to think it over. When Berringer rang the bell, Parsons was waiting in the parlor. He answered the door, they shook hands and embraced, patting each other on the back. In the dining room Parsons had an insulated pitcher of black coffee. “Cream and sugar, John?”

”No, I live on black coffee . . . the stronger, the better. I really don’t have any paperwork for us to fill out, all you have to do is see your attorney and draft a new will that includes my fee

in addition to any other bequests. In my experience it usually takes about a week to get the paperwork done but you can mail me my copy of the will to this address.” John handed Henry a card with his name and a post office box address. “As soon as I receive my copy of the will, I’ll give you a call and let you know that we have a deal.”

Henry Parsons said, “I’ve already made an appointment with my lawyer for tomorrow morning.”

“I just want you to know, Henry, I like you, and I won’t let you down in this matter. As we get to know each other better over the years, we’ll become close friends. Eventually, I’ll be sorry to lose you but at least I’ll have the satisfaction of knowing this was a joint effort and I was there to help you out of a tough situation when and if you wanted me to.

“I’m leaving town this afternoon, and I’ll start my weekly calls after I get my copy of the will. Until then, take care of yourself, my friend, and please call me at any time, even if it’s just that you’re lonesome and want to chat. I spend a lot of time in airports and motels, and I’ll always be glad to hear your voice.” Then the men talked through several cups of coffee about their careers, childhoods and family histories. They covered a lot of ground in a little over an hour.

After one more handshake and embrace, Henry Parsons watched John Berringer stroll down his front walk and get into a Ford Fusion parked at the curb. It would be about a week before they talked again on the phone and another two months before they again shared some Jim Beam in the parlor.

Things went on for almost five years exactly as John Berringer had described. Henry received a weekly call and a visit three times a year. He looked forward to the phone contacts and relished the visits. On one visit John and he went to a local billiard parlor to shoot some eight ball and drink a couple of beers. During every visit they played poker and gin rummy on the dining room table and talked late into the night. At Henry’s insistence, John began to stay in the guest room during his visits instead of a local motel. Sometimes during his two-day visits John would help Parsons by doing minor repairs and some bigger jobs. Parsons would always say he could hire someone to help, but John insisted that he needed the exercise and was glad to be of service.

It was sunny on Henry’s eighty-fifth birthday. He was sweeping off the front porch when he unexpectedly dropped the broom. There was no feeling in his left arm and leg; he had to hold onto the door jamb to remain standing. Henry managed to get inside and call 911 before he passed out. This minor stroke kept him in the hospital for a week.

His son, Eric, flew from California and told Henry he was making arrangements for assisted living at a place in Ventura, not far from their home. He didn’t believe his father could manage the house in Cedar Falls and was worried about another stroke. When Henry returned home, his son arranged for a moving company to empty the house and stayed in the guest room until the moving arrangements were finalized, which would take about a week. Henry now used a tripod cane to get around. When he heard a ringing he moved as quickly as he could to the wall phone in the kitchen. It was John asking if Henry was alright. “I’ll be moving to assisted living in California next week after we close here.”

“Sorry to hear that, Henry. You’ve had a good long run of five years living independently, and we’ve become good friends. Now you’ll be going to a place where you can get a little extra help. But it’s not over for you yet, my friend; you might like it out there if the facility is modern and there are some nice people to make friends with. I’ll visit after you get settled and give you a cell phone to use for contacting me whenever you like. I’ll still call every

week and visit several times a year. As long as you're enjoying your life, you won't need my services, but you know you can call me any time things get too much to handle."

The Azalea Manor Nursing home was at the end of a cul-de-sac off Loma Vista Road in Ventura, California. Berringer parked his car in the visitor's lot and signed in to see Henry in room 108. Henry was sleeping in a recliner with the television tuned to the weather channel. "Hi, Henry. Hate to wake you when you're sleeping so peacefully."

"Oh, John" Parsons said with a big smile. "I'm glad to see you! You were right, this place isn't so bad after all but I know I can always have another stroke, and it's nice to know I've got you to help me when the time comes."

Berringer handed a cell phone to Henry. "Just call me when you need me. I'll phone you every week just like before. I'm planning on visiting every three months. Maybe we can get in some card games, and I can smuggle in some bourbon just like old times. Hey, I noticed that cute little neighbor lady next door in apartment 106! You be careful, Henry, or you'll give yourself a heart attack." They laughed, and Henry's face flushed with a sly grin.

Over the next six months John Berringer was sad to watch Henry gradually slip into dementia. Despite his decline, Parsons seemed in good humor and was always glad to see and hear from John. They were friends and had been in close contact every week for five years. And when Henry died of natural causes, John was still in the will and \$100,000 richer with no risk and no guilt.

Sometimes it's not the act of killing that is relevant. Sometimes it's just the Henrys of the world believing, really believing, that they have an escape if they need one. It's funny the way the human mind works. His clients never do request to be killed, and John wouldn't do it anyway; never had and never would. The pills did not exist, just attention, phone calls and visits. John Berringer was selling nothing more than friendship, contact and the illusions of control and comfort. The important thing was that his clients believed it. They thought that they had options. But in the end, they all died naturally in assisted living. They didn't really grasp the point that assisted living, viewed in the obverse, was really nothing more than assisted dying.

## Dessert

- William Cass

Perched beside the beach, the Pelican was crowded on an unseasonably warm Friday evening in October in that part of California. Carol and Art, regulars, had their customary corner table. Carol had squeezed herself onto the bench seat against the wall, and Carl had settled himself across from her, his chair pushed back to allow for his girth. He was seventy, and she was sixty-eight; they'd been married forty-seven years.

Carol had been looking out the open window to their left at the waves for ten minutes before the waitress brought their drinks; a martini for her and scotch for him. The waitress didn't need to ask for their orders. Carol glanced at Art, and he was still studying his cell phone. He wore a rumpled T-shirt with the emblem of the company he owned. She wore a blue jumpsuit with curling gold brocade along the sides of the pants and across the chest. Her hair was dyed black, white showing at the roots. His was gray, short, disheveled. He slid a finger across the screen of his phone and grunted. She took a sip of her drink and looked back outside.

Another few minutes passed before the table next to them emptied. Carol turned and watched the busboy clear things away. A young couple approached him hopefully. The busboy grinned, nodded, and pulled the chair out for the woman. She thanked him, and the man slid onto the bench seat across from her. He was tall and fair, the woman dark, slender, with kind eyes. Carol watched him reach across and take her hand. Little more than a foot separated their tables.

Carol blinked, looked at Art on his phone, and then returned her gaze to the ocean. The smell of it wafted in the air, and the beach stretched a long way in each direction. She heard the ice in Art's drink tinkle. The sun lowered toward the horizon, the sky around it bruised purple and orange. A seagull called.

Carol heard the young couple order wine and appetizers to share. They exchanged pleasant conversation with the waitress. At one point, the three of them laughed together. Carol sipped her own drink and thought about the potted plants she'd cared for that day; over the years, she'd added to the collection until there were almost a hundred spread around their property. She thought about the afghans she'd been knitting for a homeless shelter during the afternoons while she watched television. She thought about Art sitting for hours at the computer in his study, doing what, she didn't know. She couldn't remember when he'd first begun sleeping there; it had been soon after he'd retired several years before.

From the corner of her eye, Carol saw the young man lift the woman's hand to his lips and kiss it. Outside, the bottom of the sun had touched the line of ocean. It seemed to her to linger there, then grudgingly lower itself until it blinked away. When she glanced over, the young couple was watching the sunset, too, still holding hands. The man smiled at her. Carol heard Art tapping the screen of his phone. She looked back out the window and was aware of the shuffle of feet, the hum of conversation, the soft rumble of the waves.

She watched the light fall quickly outside until the sky above the horizon was a calico cat. When she looked at Art, he'd turned his attention to a football game on a television mounted high in the corner of the bar. She watched his belly rise and fall with his hands folded around the tumbler on it until the waitress set their meals down in front of them: lobster tail for her and a cheeseburger and fries for him. They started in on their food in silence.

While she ate, Carol could hear bits of the young couple's quiet conversation. They talked about their days at work: she was a hospital social worker, and he was an elementary school teacher. They spoke about a play they were going to afterwards and of a hike they'd

planned for the next morning. At one point, their appetizers arrived, and they began on them together. Carol heard the familiar sound of Art's lips smacking together as he chewed.

Twenty more minutes passed. Except for their glasses, both tables had been cleared. The bar was less busy. Carol could hear the hush of the waves' retreat on the beach. She looked at Art as he grimaced at the football game on the TV. But when the waitress brought a large, candle-lit saucer and placed it between the young couple, they both turned and watched intently.

"Happy birthday," the waitress told them and went away.

The young couple smiled at each other, nodded, and blew out the candle together. A large wedge of ice cream pie sat in the center of the saucer with melted chocolate drizzled over its whipped cream topping and in a swirl around its base. The man took the candle out of the pie, held it across to the woman, watched her suck the whipped cream from it and set it on the table. Each took a spoon and cut off a mouthful of pie.

The man closed his eyes as he swallowed, opened them, and said, "Oh, my."

"Yum," the woman replied. "Yum, yum, yum."

Carol and Art continued to stare. The woman looked over at them and said, "It's our birthdays. His was last week. Mine is tomorrow."

Art nodded.

"Best wishes," Carol said. They were the first words either had spoken since before they'd driven from the house. "Best wishes to you both."

They watched the young couple eat the pie: mocha ice cream in a dark crumble crust. When it was halfway done, the man turned and said, "Would you like some? We'll never finish it all."

They shook their heads. "Thanks, though," Art said.

The waitress brought checks and set them down on their tables. Carol and Art let the narrow folder stay where she'd set it. The young woman put money in theirs. The man took another long bite, and she did the same.

"Enough?" he asked.

She sighed, "I give up."

They both smiled and rose from the table. Carol watched them find their way through the crowd and out the door. She looked at Art; he was still studying the pie. She did the same until they finally turned to each other.

"Well?" Carol said. "They did offer."

"We couldn't, could we? We can't."

She blinked, looking at him. "I guess not," she said. "No."

He frowned, drank off the rest of his scotch, then raised the tumbler in the air, searching for the waitress. She came over and took his empty. Art glanced at Carol, pointed to her glass, and raised his eyebrows. She shook her head.

Carol looked back outside where it had turned completely black; only the narrow, white curl of the waves was visible as they turned over near the shore. She thought about eating the pie with Art; she would have used the young man's spoon, and he would have used the woman's. She thought of the USO dance where she'd met Art all those years ago, how handsome he'd looked in his naval uniform, the erectness of his bearing, the promise in his eyes. She heard the waitress bring Art's drink and ask if she could get them anything else. He said, no, they were fine.

Carol glanced a last time at the pie, which had become little more than a small island of ice cream in a puddle of chocolate. "You're right," she thought. "Everything is fine. Just fine."



# Geometry of Beautiful Shadows

- Itala Langmar



Emergency  
- Tim Creswell

There were moments, sure, like the time we caught  
the hedgehog in the hole we dug at the bottom of the garden  
covered with twigs like the lion-traps in *Tarzan*.

But mostly it was lazy loops on bikes around the agglomerate  
playground with its plastic swings and broken glass.  
No 'peat bogs.' No 'fireweed' or 'lemongrass' –

trees were all council saplings, wire-sheathed  
to keep vandals out. The soil mostly rocks.  
The opposite of 'boreal.' I never saw a badger or a fox

but perched at the end of the runway at the air force base  
I watched planes arrive and leave. Before texting or tweets  
we reached for torches under our sheets,

pulled curtains back and flashed across the cul de sac –  
Dot. Dot. Dot.     Dash. Dash. Dash.     Dot. Dot. Dot.

Grout Pond  
- Anne Whitehouse

In a bowl between mountains  
the pond mirrored the sky:  
reflections of clouds  
and the blue dome of space

on the wrinkled fabric  
of the water's surface,  
where the wind raised whitecaps,  
and the sun sparkled like sequins.

Down a road nearly 200 years old  
meandering through a forest,  
I saw a moose munching apples  
in an abandoned orchard.

Witness to secret silences,  
a pilgrim to forgotten places,  
I listened carefully to what  
was not heard elsewhere.

## Fresh Air Afficiandos

- Joseph Glaser





January Afternoon  
- Carl Gloor

An appointment is suddenly cancelled,  
an unscheduled time begins:  
not breakfast with your friend  
or a movie that starts at seven,  
not swimming at the Y in the allowed period,  
but time like finding a twenty in your jacket pocket  
or that old sweater you really loved on the closet floor  
– a gift of time to notice the sun's setting  
a little later than December,  
to see a beautiful boy with standup purple hair  
and eight rings in one ear,  
a time to remember the winter cardinal who endures it all  
sometimes does pick the tree outside your window,  
for no particular reason, to sing.

Memory and Marketing  
- Lois Greene Stone

The route to the supermarket is familiar. I like the predictable pattern of my life that verifies I'm still independent. There's a comfort in calling some check-out people by name, smiling at the worker behind the fish counter, asking a trusted person whether the lettuce is worth buying. Is it the manager or a marketing trend, however, that currently causes uneasiness as I walk along the aisles?

I've read about dementia, and its silent squeezing into the brain. I've seen confused people and feel for them, hoping I'll never experience what they're enduring. Pretending I can ward off an old-age affliction, I do puzzles, keep brain-active, challenge myself, even brush my teeth with the non-dominant hand once a week. So what's the supermarket got to do with this?

A grocery list squeezed into my pocket seems to know its place; however, the aisle that's always held ketchup now contains paper products. My feet find the usual pasta row, but the pasta isn't there. What's happened to the breakfast cereal? Where'd the cleaning stuff go? I stand helpless and have a fleeting sensation of loss. No. My memory is just fine. Isn't it? I look at the slightly crumpled paper and am reminded about 81 mg size aspirin, and walk slowly to the pharmacy section and reach for the shelf that always holds those meds. Gone? Where's the aspirin? I wait in a short line and ask the pharmacist who tells me it's now on the bottom shelf where the cough drops had once been. Bottom shelf. The elderly take 81 mg aspirin and have difficulty bending to get something from the bottom no less reading the brand or generic names on the labels.

I decided to wait at the customer service desk to ask what rows are for cleaning items, condiments, baking, and so forth. The clerk answered but then said, "These do change" so paper towels today might be chocolate syrup next week.

Bulk has become big business. Where three single rows dividing merchandise had been is now one large section. It has a warehouse feel. World War II had my parents stockpile canned goods, paper products, batteries for flashlights, and such, and I'm uncomfortably reminded of blackout shades, air raid sirens, silk stars showing through window panes signifying a loved one was in the armed service. I don't want a carton of paper towels when I'd prefer to carry and then store a two-pack.

A supermarket chore requires me to remind myself that there's no dementia creeping in because I can't find the cereals or applesauce aisles anymore. Inability to automatically arrive at a canned soup section is not a 'senior moment' when soups have been moved to where International Foods had been only a week before. The challenge is repeating, "It's marketing and not my memory."



## Something About the Eyes

- Len Kazmer







Moments of Grace  
- Jo Stewart

All things are possible  
during moments of grace  
That is to say, energy  
flows in and around stones

Words do their share  
of pointing  
In the half light of morning  
I mourn

It is time  
I sort through remnants  
Trinkets and the talisman  
have lost magic

In my heart  
the bluebird sings  
It is enough

## Submission Guidelines

We publish thoughtful, provocative fiction, poetry, essays and visual arts.

Submissions are accepted year-round.

- If accepted, submissions may appear in any quarterly issue.
  - Biographical information will be requested for accepted submissions.
  - If your submission was previously published, please cite the reference.
  - Simultaneous submissions should be accompanied by a statement stating so.
  - If your work is accepted elsewhere prior to our evaluation, please notify us.
  - No erotica or works which rely on explicit language or gratuitous violence.
  - All work must be original and in English.
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- Fiction and essays can be up to 5000 words.
  - No novel excerpts
  - No memoirs
  - No genre fiction; e.g., horror, science fiction, mysteries
  - Fiction should deal with critical, universal aspects of human behavior.
  - Essays can be on any topic but must express a reasoned opinion.
  - Poems should have strong images and concise, evocative language.
  - Visual arts which elicit the comment, "How interesting!" are desired.
  - Submit visual arts as **.jpg** files; do not send **.tif** or **.bmp** files.
  - Accepted visual arts may be reduced to fit the available space.
  - Prose and poetry may be accompanied by one or more relevant photos.
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- Mac users, please be sure that your files are readable by Windows 10.
  - This magazine does not currently pay upon publication.

Accepted material will be edited. If changes are deemed significant, the contributor will be notified and given an opportunity to accept the changes or request that the piece be withdrawn from publication.

Send submissions to [gphillips938@comcast.net](mailto:gphillips938@comcast.net) Send 1 prose piece, 1-5 poems, or 1-4 photos at a time. For prose or poetry, type or paste your submission into the body of the email message. We will not open any unsolicited print attachments. Photos, however, should be sent as attachments. Include your name and e-mail address.

Please expect to wait up to one month for a reply. Occasionally, with email, there are technical difficulties. We cannot be responsible for delay or loss of submissions. To check on the status of your submission after one month has passed, please send a message to [gphillips938@comcast.net](mailto:gphillips938@comcast.net).

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