

Ataraxia Quarterly

Mountain, River, & Sea Productions

Edited by Grover Lunabocci

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Help me to journey beyond the familiar
and into the unknown.

Give me the faith to leave old ways
and break fresh ground

I will trust in the darkness and know
that my times, even now, are in Your hand.

~PRAYER OF ST. BRENDAN
Irish Patron Saint of Sailors



**MOUNTAIN,
RIVER,
& SEA
PRODUCTIONS**



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Ataraxia Quarterly, what is it? Well, I'm a word and art guy. I've written stories and drawing pictures since I was a kid. I especially love weird words that don't mean what you'd think they'd mean. Look at the Latin based word for beauty: pulchritude. It has to be one of the ugliest words human have ever come up with, but it means beauty. That's where I got ataraxia. It is a Greek based word that means *a state of serene calmness*.

We need more of that in our lives today. So this is our first issue. In this issue I have a deck of tarot cards that I illustrated. Well, I drew them on paper first. Then I took those drawings and used them to help me illustrate them digitally in black and white like the fisherman on the opposite page here. That's how they stayed for a long time, but then I thought I'd get AI to help me colorize them. So the cards you see in this book are a combination of my art and AI colorization and a formatting.

I completely understand some people's negative view on AI. I don't like the data centers' use of water or power, but I believe that AI isn't going anywhere. You can't unring that bell, and it is a once in an era technological discovery in the history of mankind that will change a lot. I hope we use it to advance our species by creating art, finding cures for diseases, and solving social issues, but who knows? That is why I made the illustrations into tarot cards. No one knows what the future holds.

The writers and poets in this book are from all over, but most of them are from the Stormy River Writers group and Ric's Open Mic "Poets on the Pier." So I hope you like it. More than that, I hope it puts you in a state of serene calmness as you read. Thanks,

~Grover Lunabocci

1. MORTALITY



MORTALITY AMONG THE YOUNG NEBRASKANS

By Cliff Taylor

Drunk and young in my buddy's farmhouse
we sat in the living room and roared
about the things crisscrossing through us.
None of us had hardened yet. All of
our dreams still had a chance and
it didn't seem silly at all to seriously
consider them. At the entrance of his
gravel driveway was a dead cow that had
been dragged there earlier in the day.
The smell of pig shit pervaded everything.
The immortal starry heavens of the
Plains twinkled overhead. Our friend
Tim brought over his pregnant girlfriend
and we marveled at the new life
in our midst. "Touch my belly,"
she said, smiling and salty and
sweet in her own way. I placed my
Indian hand on her smooth stomach
and felt the miracle in there, speaking,
sleeping, slowly entering our world.
"Unreal," I said, as if I were touching
some glowing creature a Bigfoot was
holding in its hands for me to experience.
Our lifetimes were splitting all around us
and we were having as much fun as we'd
ever have, before some of us disappeared,
before some of us found our path out
and cheerily moved on to other times.

ROUNDING ERROR

By Sean Davis

Ever since I got back from the war I've had the sneaking suspicion that I'm not really here. I'll smell some diesel fuel from an obnoxiously large truck, I'll see a flash of light, or I'll feel some quick pain in my side, and I start to believe that somehow I'm still sprawled out on my back in the middle of a badly paved road with the sun glaring down at me. This isn't real. You're not real. I think to myself that maybe I'm still in Iraq, right after they blew me up in that ambush in Taji. I think maybe I'm dying slowly and my whole life up to this point has been one big delusion I never deserved, a trick my brain is playing to keep me distracted as I bleed out slow-like.

I still think that sometimes, twenty years later.

This happens to me when something in my life is going in a positive direction. I know about survivor's guilt, PTSD, TBI, and all sorts of other depressing acronyms. I even know that feeling like I'm slowly bleeding out in a firefight that occurred almost a generation ago is not rational, but it happens because experiencing, acting, and actively participating in the war means that maybe I don't deserve good things.

I have a great life. I've been married to a very beautiful woman for 17 years, and I live on the Oregon Coast where I get to raise my fourteen-year-old daughter. I have two big dogs and a big expensive house, a house that if I had seen it as a kid I'd never believe it possible that I would ever live in something this nice let alone be able to buy it. And sometimes when I get sad, because that does still happen a lot, I might tell a friend that I shouldn't be this happy.

And they always say, "Of course you do. You deserve it. All the shit you went through."

But I don't believe anyone deserves anything, and the reason is very sad, but I'll tell you why. If I did deserve something, that belief would light a very long fuse, and that fuse would burn all the way back to those Kurdish kids we saw one day after the Blackhawks dropped us off on the outskirts of Baghdad one morning. What the

hell did those children do to deserve what happened to them? And what about Mustafa? Mustafa was just twelve and his parents were killed, so he ran a small shop all by himself behind an Iraqi Police station. I'd go into his shop sometime during every patrol and got to see him almost every single day for months. I even bought him a coffee pot and coffee beans from the PX because Iraqis only drank tea, and I wanted coffee when I stopped by. He was a good kid and always had a hot cup waiting for me.

He was killed when some shit-head drove a car full of 155 shells into the police station and blew it up.

I still see the faces of all the children, especially my favorites: Mustafa, Nasim, Omar, and the kid we called "Oh My Shit." We called him that because he would always say it, "Oh my shit. George Bush, number one!" or "Oh my shit, Davis, there are no bad guys around here," or "Oh my shit, Davis, Jay Z is the best." We treated the kids the best we could, gave them money, gave them food, gave them water. They liked us. They liked us so much that they joined the Iraqi Army because they wanted to be soldiers like us. They were no older than my son and daughter were when they sent me to Iraq, but these battle orphans didn't have birth certificates, so they could say they were old enough to enlist and no one could prove different. Plus, Iraq needed soldiers badly.

They were killed. All of them. And the fuse burns to this big bomb in my head: why did they deserve that? The only answer I can come up with after thinking about it for years is that no one deserves anything. I know that some people might believe this means we live in a chaotic universe without rules, and some people may believe that living in a universe that isn't governed by some notion of justice by an undefinable higher power is terrifying, but this isn't true. My truth is that the overwhelming majority of existence makes no sense, and human beings are still here.

We love to believe we can figure all this shit out, but we can't. Not really. Mankind has invented mathematics, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus, but if you really think about it, we can't even count to one. Try it. Start at 0.1 and tell me when you get to one. Look at the sun. According to our brightest minds the sun weighs 2.192×10^{27} tons and the surface temperature is 9,920 degrees Fahrenheit, but it floats weightless in a void that averages -455 degrees Fahrenheit. Giant balls of fire and gas that weigh more than the human mind can understand zip around in icy nothingness. How

do you explain that?

And who the hell are we to think we need to figure it out? We're not the rule; we are the exception. The universe is 99.99% nothingness. Even we, the little bits of stardust that became sentient meat, are mostly made up of nothing. Every atom in our body is 99.99% empty. All that we are, and all the matter in the universe, is just a rounding error.

So being next to nothing and not believing I deserve anything may sound sad and scary, but it's the opposite. If I believed that everything happened for a reason and there was some sort of just higher power looking out for me, that would mean that those children deserved to die horribly. If I deserved all that I have right now, doesn't that justify the war? Doesn't that justify all wars?

Look, here's the thing, we get to borrow $7 \cdot 10^{27}$ atoms, give or take, for a limited amount of time, a hundred years or so, and then we have to give them back. The First Law of Thermodynamics says that matter in a closed system can't be created or destroyed, so all the things that make us us, the star dust, chemicals, and electricity, is on one long journey that only includes us for a minuscule amount of time on this cosmic scale. So, we need to ask ourselves, what are we going to do with that small amount of time you can control?

That said, many people get through their trauma or addiction issues by finding god. I won't argue with you, and if you bring it up I'll just nod, and find a polite reason to excuse myself. Who am I to tell you what to believe when I can't even prove that any of this is real.

2. THE MATYR



CHRIST IN AMERICA or THE MARTYR

By Logan Garner

“You have bleached me
to a threadbare shroud to
wrap around your
Convictions
to strangle those
strange to you.
I am yours—
loving-god-become-weapon.”

RAISED ON DUST & DOCTRINE

By Norton Lovold

I entered the world in Bismarck, North Dakota, on January 18, 1949. Forty miles to the northeast, our 360-acre farm on the prairie. Bismarck held the title of state capital, but our life was in the margins. The land gave little. Much of it fought crop production, and to keep food on the table for my mother, me, and my three siblings, my father had to work another job.

So no, I never bought into the *Little House on the Prairie* version of rural America. Farm life offered no sense of reward from hard labor, no romance, no clean moral lesson. It meant work. Relentless, dull, punishing work. And not much in return.

We stayed there until I turned fourteen, right up to the point when the homestead house nearly came down around us. After that, we moved into the nearby town of Center.

Like much of the rural West, North Dakota carries a past steeped in hardship, violence, and bigotry. Immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany, and Russia settled there in great numbers, but they did not arrive on empty land. Treaties had already granted that land to Native people who hunted it, fished it, and lived from it. Railroad barons and the U.S. Army understood it another. Once gold turned up in the Black Hills and the railroads pushed west, offering free land to immigrants, Native people became inconvenient. So the country forced them onto reservations and called that progress. In truth, it looked more like apartheid. Westward expansion beat with a dark heart.

A lot has changed since then. These belief systems,

though, stayed. Around me, people wrapped themselves in patriotism while cursing government interference unless they stood to gain from it. They praised religion too, provided it protected their place in the world. Beneath all that ran something uglier: fear of people with different beliefs, different skin colors, different politics. Women, meanwhile, seemed to enjoy only the rights strong men felt like allowing them. That was the atmosphere I grew up in.

Those beliefs shaped my childhood. Jesus, Manifest Destiny, white righteousness, suspicion of outsiders, indifference toward people of color, contempt for anyone outside the fold. I inherited all of it before I knew enough to resist it.

But I read, and reading started to pry things loose.

Books reached me before politics did, before history did, before experience could. Like everyone else, I absorbed the local orthodoxy. Even so, cracks began to show. Our farm sat only three miles from a Missouri Lutheran church, and nearly everyone within that little orbit belonged to it. Looking back now, I see something more than devotion. I see a community with the shape and pressure of a cult.

One moment still stands out. A traveling missionary told me that only those who believed in Jesus Christ could enter heaven. That struck me as cruel, even as a child. What about people who never heard of him? What chance did they get? Instead of answering, he told my mother I was a nasty child and ought to be punished. What he meant, of course, was simpler and meaner: heaven belonged only to people who accepted his version of Jesus. That moment stuck. From there, my questions only multiplied. Religion first. Then the Bible. Then all the rest of the stories adults told with such confidence.

By then I had already discovered my escape route. Books, daydreams, solitude. Whenever I could slip away from weeding the shelterbelt or fixing fence, I did. I would sit somewhere quiet and disappear into my own mind, especially if I had a book with me. Farming never called to me. Hard,

repetitive, joyless, it seemed built to crush curiosity. My father may have felt the same, though that belongs to a different chapter.

Then reading nearly vanished from my life. Around seven or eight years old, I realized I could no longer see clearly. Soon after, encephalitis put me in the hospital for weeks. Misery came with that, but so did one unexpected gift: someone finally understood that I needed glasses. After that, the world sharpened into focus. So did the page. Thick lenses followed me from then on, but at least I could read again.

Lewis 32 School held only thirteen or fourteen students spread across eight grades. One room. A horse barn. Outdoor toilets. That was the whole operation. The lucky kids rode horses to school. My brother and I did not. He had four years on me and a habit of running away from class. My father answered the problem the way many fathers did then, with a hard spanking. I took the hint and stayed put. In those days, nobody questioned that kind of punishment. People treated it as ordinary.

School, though, gave me something the farm never could. The *Weekly Reader*. Books on history. Books on geography. A sense that the world stretched far beyond our fences and church walls. Geography especially mattered. Civics too. Schools have let both subjects wither, and the country shows the damage. Those lessons taught me early that power rarely tells the truth about itself.

One article from the *Weekly Reader* still sits in my memory. I read about the CIA's role in the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, and even then, even at that age, I knew something about it felt wrong. That may have marked my first real glimpse of the split between America's self-image and America's behavior.

Now I'm seventy-seven, old enough to look back and see not a straight line but a crooked, stubborn trail. I started as a Christian farm boy in North Dakota. Then I wanted to become a New York beatnik. I devoured *Mad* magazine and

comic books. In college, I turned radical, marched against war, marched for Civil Rights, and imagined a life built on rebellion. Then love complicated everything. I got drafted because I fell hard and could not bring myself to flee to Canada. Later still, through one contradiction after another, I ended up a filthy capitalist.

That, finally, explains why I have to write this story.



3. THE BATTLE



The Poetry Is in the Battle

BECOMING INTERTIDAL

By Rodney L Merrill

On the Oregon coast, resilience is not a heroic battle against the sea. It is quiet, more like the intertidal zone. There, mussels cling to rocks. Waves tear some away. Anemones close when the surf comes rough and open when it passes. Nothing here stays the same. Everything changes. Intertidal life is built to adapt. Coastal towns are the same way.

Take Nehalem. In 2007, heavy rain came. The river flooded. It came fast. Water swallowed roads, yards, and first floors of homes and businesses. When it left, floors were warped. Gardens were full of silt.

Neighbors checked on neighbors. People hauled ruined furniture to the curb. Others cooked meals. They talked about rebuilding. They talked about raising their houses. Some moved upstairs. Others raised their electrical systems.

The town talked about floods. They talked about how “a once in a lifetime event” happens once every few years. People asked: What now?

What Nehalem learned is what the intertidal zone has always shown— that you cannot go back. After a storm, the tide pool is different. Some creatures are gone. Others move in. Algae grows on bare rock. The system only lives because it changes.

Coast communities are learning. The question is not how to bounce back. The question is how to live with water. The water will keep coming. It will come stronger each year.

On the Oregon coast, resilience is not defiance. It is paying attention. Read the signs. Adjust. Building a viable future means becoming intertidal—ready for what comes in, and what goes out.

UNCLE KIRK

By Lynn Robertson

The flight attendant watched him angle sideways, duck his head, and collapse his shoulders before he stepped through the doorway into the plane's cabin. The opening diminished, as every inch of available space was filled in the brief moment of his passing. The preceding hand extended a boarding pass forward into the cabin. Like an afterthought, the trailing arm followed behind the rest of his body. Last to enter was a laptop computer case clutched in a massive hand. Definitely an aisle seat, she thought as he emerged, uncurling his 6'8", 320-pound body. But the seat assignment she was handed placed him next to a window.

Using a pleasant, hospitality-toned voice, she said, "We have several aisle seats available on this flight. You might be more comfortable if you can stretch your legs, Mr. Riley."

Nodding his head as he spoke, a shy smile lifting the corners of his mouth, he said, "No, thanks, I wanted a window seat."

He maneuvered sideways down the narrow corridor between rows of airplane seating. Doubled over, he slid beneath the overhead compartment and folded into knobby blue-gray upholstery by the window, his knees denting the fabric of the seat back in front of him. His large hands gently positioned the hard, narrow case of the laptop on the upslope of solid thighs.

Shortly, the stewardess ushered a couple, a father and young son, to the two remaining seats in the row. The father, staring at the tousle-headed, wrinkled bulk residing in a seat two-thirds the required size, turned to the attendant with a "You've got to be kidding" look. The look was ignored as she efficiently settled the child between the two men, leaving a promise to return with peanuts and apple juice.

The child, politely curious at first, eyed his neighbor covertly, watching large fingers lightly tap the plastic shell of the computer case with impatience. In another moment, the child's attention was caught by the flash of a diamond ear stud as the window seat companion turned his giant head and winked in his direction.

"Do you want to see what's inside this box?" the large man asked.

Before the father could utter a word of caution, a computer screen was unfolded and a tiny series of quick clicks revealed the skeletal structure of a sauropod. In neon green, the outline of a long-necked, long-tailed dinosaur glowed against a black background. And, as the boy watched, the large, clumsy-looking hands began to use a cursor-like tweezers to pick up and delicately thread an array of internal organs beneath the skeleton's rib cage, heart, lungs, and stomach.

"Is that a diplodocus?" the boy asked. "They are vegetarians and only eat plants."

"Almost." The stranger said. "Same family, same design, but a slightly smaller cousin. And yes, he is a vegetarian too. He eats leaves, ferns, that type of food, but since he has a small head, he doesn't have many grinding teeth. That means he has a big stomach, or maybe two of them."

"Oh, I think he has two stomachs. Can you give him two?" The child leaned over the stranger's heavy arm to get a closer view of the screen, his cautious enthusiasm revealing a slight lisp.

"I can do that, and I will give him a big heart too, to pump blood from the top of his head to the far end of his tail. That is a long way. It takes a lot of strength."

Next came the weaving of muscle fibers across the skeletal frame, shoulders, haunch, and abdomen. The cross-hatching of long, thready muscle from anchor point to anchor point looked like a patchwork quilt when it was complete. Finally, the child watched the stranger coax thousands of tiny

lines and subtle color onto the screen. The leathery stamp of a reptilian's skin stretched over the bones, wrinkles appeared at the knees, neck, and other flexible joints.

"Does it hurt when a dinosaur stubs his toe?" the boy asked.

"Does it hurt when you stub your toe?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you have your answer." The man said. "But we can give him some protection from that, thick toenails, or claws, or perhaps hooves."

"Thick toenails, I think, maybe just a few claws."

"Good choice." And the man with the cursor obliged.

The boy's excitement grew as the artist drew shadows behind the creature and lifted the image out of its flat frame into three dimensions. The man rotated the image so the child could see it from different angles, then with a single tap on the keyboard, light flashed across the sketch and the eyes of the drawing appeared to catch the brilliance, to hold it steadily on the screen.

While the child followed the development of the drawing, lost in the anticipation of what was being revealed, the father watched the man.

It was fascinating to follow the effect of small, efficient movement and precise attention to detail emanating from a man who did not possess any element of delicacy in his outward appearance.

Absorbed in watching the image of the extinct creature grow from a flat drawing to a lifelike 3D image, neither father nor child noticed time passing until the flight attendant urged them to fasten their seat belts. An hour and a half of flight time had slipped by. The plane was landing.

But, not until the newborn dinosaur stretched, blinked

his yellow-green eyes, and walked beyond the frame of the monitor, elongating his neck to look out a twenty-first-century window, did the artist close the case. Uncurling from his seat, the artist joined the exiting line of travelers, followed closely by the last passenger to deboard the plane.

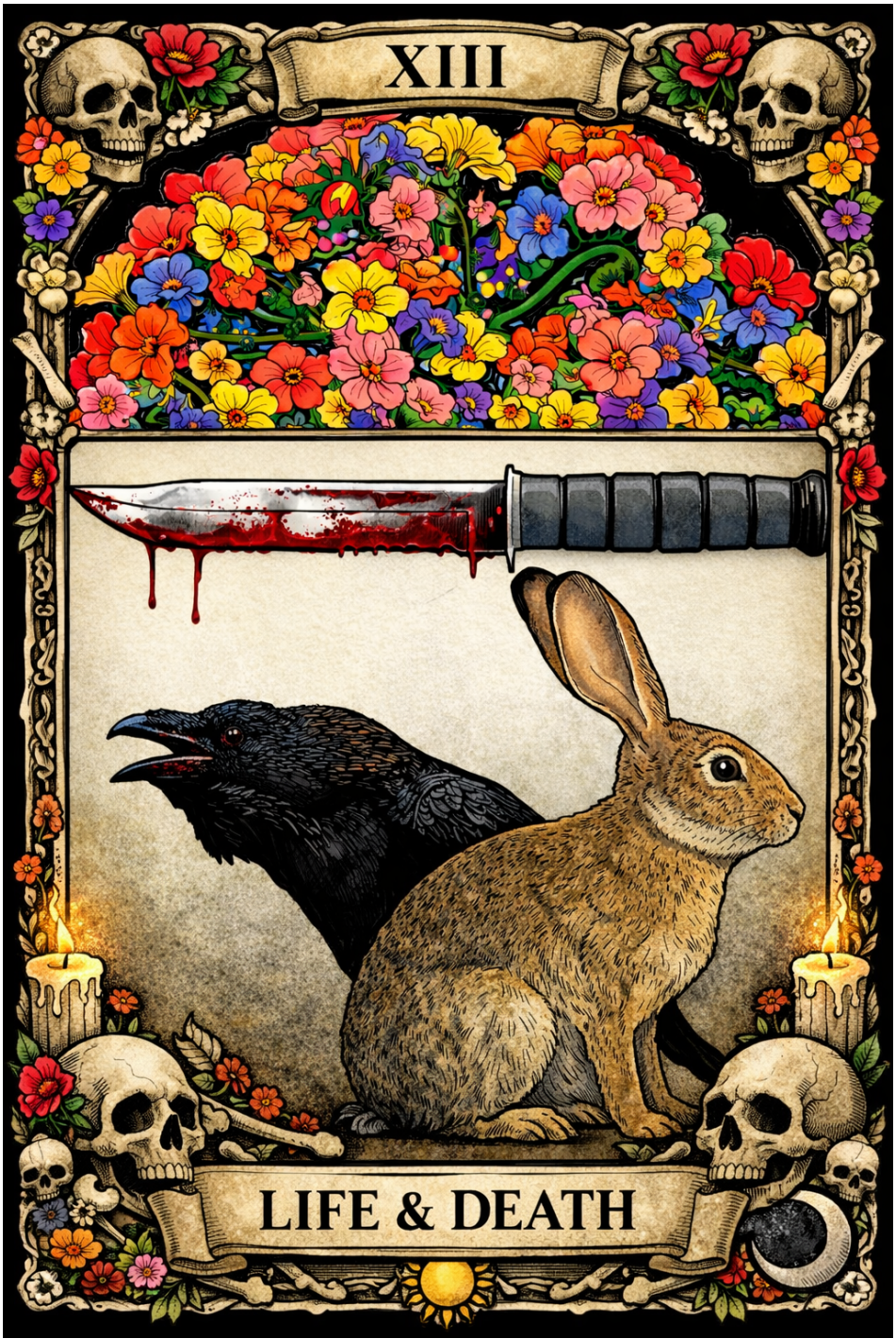


TIGER, TIGER, I KNOW YOU

By Rodney L Merrill

Tiger, tiger,
what are you doing here
beneath a moonlit ocean sky?
Tiger, tiger,
why are you engaged in battle
with an ancient mind—
and in its own domain?
A tiger attacking a stag,
an octopus engulfing a squid,
this is the nature of things.
A tiger out to sea,
at night, under a full moon,
tooth on tentacle,
an octopus ready
to pull him to the airless deep?
Tiger, tiger, I know you.
Fighting tentacle after tentacle
knowing I cannot win,
knowing poetry is not somewhere else,
not in a warmer, more hospitable place —
it's here, in this cold water,
in this exact struggle.

4. LIFE & DEATH



STEPPING OFF THE BUS

By Jennifer Nightingale

We are all mortals on this bus
No one knows when or where they will step off
Yet we know each of us will
Watching fellow passengers disembark
We remember entwining burning hot fingers
Squeezing down to give courage and comfort
Or just our raw and silent presence
My sister raged at her nurses and doctors,
“You know I am going to die.
Why the hell don’t you listen to me?!”
She raged until she lost her voice
and never spoke again.
My friend Beth smiled and told me that she loved me
My father had a beatific stare and my mother’s clock
ran down,
Until it stopped
We rode this bus through mountain passes
Snow blinding us to what was to come
We rode the bus through summer
And sang old favorites in four parts
Yet we kept riding
Lurching forward as the bus made a stop
Sometimes in a dank fog, cold and unforgiving
A passenger was grabbed by the collar and thrown off
Violently, unexpectedly and without a chance
For a decent good-bye
When my turn comes
I hope for an early morning with a soft pink sky
And all the dogs I have ever loved waiting
for me at my stop
I will not greet the moment with rage or acquiescence
But with curiosity, anticipation and gratitude

THE SONG SOUNDS DIFFERENT NOW

By Brad Pietzyk

I learned we listened to the same music
from a newspaper article about his death.
That's the first detail that returns—
not a memory, but a search result.

The last time I saw him
we shared a bus seat after a long day.
He hid the annoyance of sitting by the boss,
and by the end we were laughing
like we might have been friends
if life had given us more time.
The details are the memories I wish I had.
The rest has slipped downstream.

When he died—
a sudden break upstream
in something I thought was solid—
the river inside me shifted.
The bedrock cracked.
The current changed direction.
What once ran clear
became unfamiliar.

Shock gave way to duty.
There was no room for anything else.

At the podium in the Soldiers' Chapel,
I said all the right things.
I spoke of bravery,
of healing,
of moving forward.
But that was the last day
I believed I was a leader.

Thoughts, like silt,
clouded the truth in the waters.
Through that haze
I saw only hatred.
I believed I had not lost one of mine—
But I had lost one of theirs.
I believed I would never be forgiven.
Every face felt like a glare.
Every silence felt like blame.

My grief swallowed me whole.
I no longer trusted myself
to read the people I was meant to lead.

Fifteen years later
I understand the river never returned
to what it was.
The illusion of forgiveness,
the fantasy of going back—
both washed away.

I see now that others
carried weight equal to mine,
or heavier.
I wish I had told them
it was okay to hurt,
to lean on the people they loved,
to be vulnerable.
I wish I had told them
I loved them.

And I hope—
for all of us—
that we can learn to live
with the rivers we have now,
changed and changing,
shaped by breaks upstream
we never saw coming.

THE ORANGE BRIGADE

Tom Keating

I was careful with the coffee tray. It held four coffees and one tea and some donuts for my guys in the VA hospital lobby.

Everyone who comes to the VA hospital spends time sitting in the lobby, waiting for a meeting with a doctor, or a blood draw, whatever they need. All of us are in the lobby because our bodies paid the price for our service.

It is a large lobby, with many comfortable upholstered chairs placed in the center of the lobby floor. VA clerks sit behind the long counter on the left, and the Eye and Ear clinic is on the right. Flags for all the services and the new Space Force hang from the high ceiling. A photographed portrait of President Donald Trump is displayed above the information desk. The doctor's offices and labs are behind the elevator cluster near the information desk. Occasionally a nurse in blue scrubs would appear from the doctor's offices and shout out the name of a patient for their appointment.

Baseball caps proclaiming people's branch of service or places where they served are de rigueur: Desert Storm, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam.

Our caps all say Vietnam. My group calls itself the Orange Brigade. We suffer from exposure to Agent Orange, the defoliant, hence the name. Monday is the day we usually meet and wait for our appointments. Pulling chairs into one corner, we wait for our name to be called and talk about the Red Sox, or the Bruins, and the state of the country. There were ten of us originally. Now there are five of us.

I make the coffee run to the café just off the lobby and bring the tray over to the group. Gerry, a former Marine with Parkinsons reached for his coffee with trembling hands. I always half fill his cup, so he doesn't spill.

"Thanks, Tim," he says. Before his illness, Gerry was a lawyer. His tremors look to be worse than before, and even with a walker, he drags his feet.

I give Jim, a six-foot five ex-paratrooper, his large black coffee, and a chocolate-dipped donut.

"Mama's milk," he jokes. Thanks, brother." Jim played pro football before the Army drafted him, now he is thin and frail. He was a paratrooper, in the thick of the battles in the Ia Drang valley. When he came home, it was difficult for him to adjust; lots of brawling and drinking. Two marriages went bust as well.

Shirley, who served in the 24 EVAC hospital in Saigon, accepts her tea. Her migraines have gotten worse. When she first joined the group, she spoke of her time in the war. "So many boys, so much hurt," She left nursing after the war.

Charlie grabs his large mocha coffee, and a honey glazed. An Air Force vet with raging diabetes, he uses a wheelchair because his legs can't support his obese body. Shirley nurses her tea and shakes her head at Charlie's gorging.

"You want to go into a diabetic coma?" says Shirley.

Charlie shrugs at Shirley's comment. "Hell, I'm dead already. The Air Force killed me. I sprayed that stuff from the planes. "He took a bite of the donut. "When the VA diagnosed me, I was shocked. I have to take insulin shots. I can't eat what I want, or drink what I want. That's no way to live. Fuck it, I'm doing what I want."

I sip my decaf and Splenda and say nothing. Everyone makes their own choices. I'm an Army vet, the youngest in the group at sixty-seven with an ischemic heart. When I returned from the

war, I married, raised two children, and was happy till my first heart attack at fifty.

A nurse comes out of the clinic office and shouts, “Wentworth, Gerald!” Gerry shouts “here!” and grabs his walker to stand up.

“Carry on, folks! See you guys’ next week.” Gerry straightens up, turns smartly with his walker and shaky legs over to the nurse.

Jim shakes his head and says, “Man, Jerry will be lucky to be here with us next week. He’s getting worse.” Charlie laughs, Shirley just sips her tea. It worries me that Gerry **was** worse, and in spite of his bravado, he knows it too.

Another nurse appears and shouts, “Brackett, Charles!”

Charlie nods to us, says, “See you guys’ next week,” and wheels off. Jim says aloud what we all were thinking,

“I bet Charlie aint gonna make to next week.” Shirley nods in agreement. We are quiet for a minute or two.

I turn to Jim and ask him how he is doing, and he says,

“Middlin, boy, middlin. My belly hurts all the time, and they wanna cut out my insides and put me on a bag. I don’t wanna do that, but I guess I have to.”

Shirley says, “Do it, Jim. You can live longer with the bag.”

Before he could reply, the nurse comes out again, “Kearney, Timothy!” Raising my hand for the nurse, then offering it to Jim, I tell him.

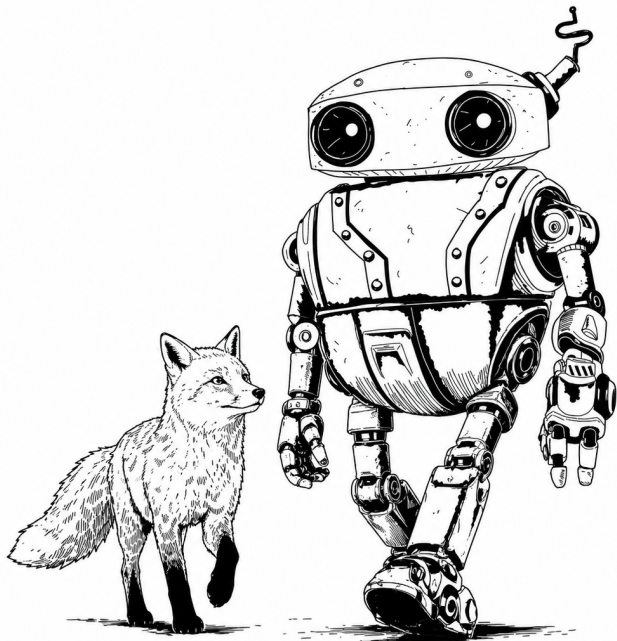
“I WILL see you next week!” I smile.

“For sure, brother, take care,” he says. We shake hands. I bump fists with Shirley who smiles up at me.

Walking toward the nurse I look back to our corner of the lobby. Jim, wincing at the pain in his stomach, is slumped in his chair. Shirley tries to comfort him. I stare at the two empty



chairs, Charlie and Jerry. The Orange Brigade body count is rising. I take a deep breath and follow the nurse.



5. FORTUNA



MIDNIGHT AT THE LAUNDROMAT

By Diana Johnson

The non-stop cascade of tinkling coins is a Las Vegas strip miracle, a gambler's ultimate payday, and one of the best nights of my life.

I run in search of more hampers to fill with increasing mountains of quarters and dimes. It's a waterfall; it's a windfall; it's the generosity of a busted change making machine! It is also the result of a whole day's worth of other peoples' dirty clothes come clean and my filthy hands absconding with the cash proceeds.

Will I confess to using the gains from the washers and dryers as my personal slot machines gone wild? Good timing, I muse, it has always been my habit to put off chores until the end of the day.

Viva Procrastination.

Viva Mel's Laundromat on Highway 82.

The non-stop cascade of tinkling coins is a Las Vegas

HENNIE'S YOUNG MAN

by BrunoSalt53

My phone lay next to me on the park bench. When it rang, I glanced down at it. Henrietta Smoot, it said. I hesitated. We hadn't spoken in several weeks, and I didn't know what to expect. She could run herself down again, get angry, or ask me about my stay in Madrid. In the end, it didn't matter. I never ignored her calls. I tapped the speaker icon.

"Jaz?" she probed tentatively.

"Hey, Patches," I replied unenthusiastically.

"I was wondering. The phone rang forever," she chastised. "I almost hung up."

"Sorry. The wind's picking up here. I was just buttoning up my jacket," I lied because I am false at times. This seemed the right time.

"Where are you? Still in Madrid?"

"Yeah, I am. I like it here. You at home?"

"Where else would I be?" Her tone was sharp, snide even. She lived alone on the farm where she grew up, in Alliance, Nebraska. It was no longer a working farm, not since her folds died a few years back. I liked her parents.

"Well, I dunno," I said, "I was hoping you'd get away from there for a while. Get a hold of yourself." I could be snide, too, but I didn't like to be.

"Well, I bought a ticket to Switzerland," she declared, striking back.

I froze.

“Jaz, I’ve had enough. I’ve really had enough. It’s just”

She fell silent. I figured she was waiting for my reaction, but I also suspected she didn’t really care much what thought. She was just letting me know.

“Why, Hennie?” I sighed.

“I just told you. I’ve had enough. It’s crushing me. I can’t deal with it any longer.”

I didn’t know much about Switzerland, but she’d told me a few months ago, when she was all torn up about Trevor again, they had places there to help you end your life. I thought she was being melodramatic and told her so. She laughed. I worried nonetheless because Hennie was not typically a dramatic person. She always had the stoicism of a farm girl who grew up an only child.

But Trevor had worn her down ever since she gave birth to him eighteen years ago in LA. And now, in my estimation, he was where he belonged. In prison. In a drunken rage, he beat up his girlfriend, badly, because she turned her back on him when he demanded her attention. She was now half-blind in one eye and they had to reset her jaw twice. I never liked the kid, though I felt sorry for him from time to time when he was much younger. Not anymore. Hennie sensed this and it upset her.

“Sounds like you’ve seen Trevor recently,” I surmised. She made the six-hour drive weekly to the prison in Lincoln to see her son. He was eight months into five-year sentence.

She got choked up, stuttered. “He’s not eating. He cries when I visit. All those years, Jaz. All those years he will lose. He’s so young. I can’t stand it. I really can’t stand it. All those years are crushing me. Maybe if he’d had a father in his life. Maybe if I’d at least married his father, it would’ve made a difference.”

This was the gist one of her “rundowns,” I called them. That it was all her fault. She was a bad mother. She didn’t know how to love him. She didn’t know how to look after him. She let him upset her so. She was angry with him all the time. She

deprived him of the stabilizing influence of a father. She didn't give him a brother or a sister. She no longer had the money for psychologists. The list went on. And it began long before he was arrested. It began when they were still in LA.

She let loose with a version of her standard rundown, then cried for a few moments.

"I can't live with what I've done, with what I've failed to do," she stammered.

My common response: "He has only himself to blame. The bad decisions he makes, has been making for the past many years, are his alone." But she didn't like to hear this. Irritatingly, she insisted on being solely responsible for his mean-spiritedness and the harm he caused.

But this time, I changed tactics. "Come visit me, Patches. They have magpies here. I never realized they got this far. I'm on bench, in a park, along a shallow river. They fly overhead. They swoop down to the mudflats, get some sun, drink some water. Once in a while they land on my bench. Check me out. Remember how we looked for them on your parents' farm? You painted one once. It was a good painting. Do you still have it?"

"I meant to give it to you," she sniffled.

"Why didn't you?"

"I kept it to remind me of you. I don't know where it is now."

"Hennie, listen to me. There's plenty of room in my place for both of us. You need a change. I could show you around. Show you off even. I'd like that."

Patches was always a looker, even in those faded, patched overalls she wore when she was on the farm, which is where I tagged her with that nickname and she first kissed me. It was in the barn. That long kiss really tumbled me. Hard to recall a moment more thrilling in my young life. That was twenty-two years ago. We were both eighteen, freshman at the University

of Denver, visiting her parents on a weekend getaway.

“My parents always liked you,” she said. “I liked taking you there. We ate well and we relaxed, didn’t we? Except you were nervous on the back of my father’s motorcycle even though both my parents and I told you I’d been a master rider since I was twelve. The painting may be around here somewhere. I’ll look for it.”

“I remember. What unnerved me was we didn’t have helmets and your ponytail kept whipping me in the face. If you can’t find the painting, paint me another one. I can rent a motorcycle here.”

“Hah,” she exclaimed. I pictured her smiling a little. I was.

“Your dad was great. He introduced me around as ‘Hennie’s young man.’ Remember that?”

“You were embarrassed,” she recalled.

“Only for you. Weren’t you seeing Blake then?”

“Oh, don’t start,” she sighed. “We studied history together. That’s it. I never invited him to the farm. If you weren’t so thick back then, you would’ve known I had my eye on you. Sexy hockey player and all. But I had to start the kissing, you wuss.”

“I’m still sexy, Hennie.”

“Hah,” she snapped almost playfully. This was good. We were stumbling around, but this was good, I thought.

“I can get you a ticket,” I said.

“Christ, Jaz. What about Trevor?”

“What about him?”

“He expects to see me every week. I can’t let him down. It’s all I can do for him now.”

“You don’t think going to Switzerland would be letting him down?”

“It would, but I wouldn’t have to face the consequences anymore.”

“What about me, Hennie?”

“I’ve thought about you. I really have, Jaz.”

“Well, think harder. I need you, too. I still love you, you know.”

“I know,” she sighed deeply. “It’s a problem.”

“Never was before.”

“No. Except when I left for LA. To this day I don’t know why I did that. LA turned out to be so bad after I had Trevor. For him and me. So many triggers there set him off.”

“You wanted to write movies. You were a good at it.”

“I thought he’d calm down when we moved to Alliance. I thought my parents would be good for him. I grew up here. It’s a good place. I thought it would be good for him, too. But fuck, Jaz. Fuck, fuck, fuck. That poor girl. I can’t help her either.”

“What about your students?”

“They can always get another English teacher. Dime a dozen.”

“Hennie, you’re not thinking straight. Have you talked to anyone yet?”

“Just the people in Switzerland.”

“Christ, Hennie, I mean someone to help you, not kill you.”

She hardened. “Don’t be mean, Jaz. You know I feel too guilty. You’re the only one I can talk to.”

I had hardened, too. “Yeah, well, and where’s that got us? You’ve got a ticket to Switzerland, for Chrissakes. If you won’t

come here. I'm going there. You're not getting on any fucking plane to Switzerland. You hear me?"

Silence. Then a snuffle or two. A whimper. Then, "I'm sorry, Jaz. I love you" and she hung up.

While I ran to the apartment I'd been renting, I continually tried calling her back, but to no avail. "No fucking way. No fucking way," I kept shouting, to the surprised and stern looks from passersby.

When I reached my place, I called the sheriff in Alliance. Told him to detain Henrietta Smoot and why. He said he knew all about Trevor. He'd arrested the boy and would get over to the farm right away.

I grabbed my passport and a taxi to the airport, texting Hennie a million times, but no response. Before I boarded my flight, I texted her one more time: "Hennie's young man is on his way. He needs another long kiss in the barn and that painting."

My phone beeped as I buckled in.

"Okay," came the reply.



ASTORIA NOIR 1: CITY OF COLD RAIN AND LONG SHADOWS

By Grover Lunabocci

Small dots of snow hang in the air, reflecting the light of a bright moon; they float above the unnaturally tall man with the flame thrower walking down the middle of Marine Drive. This bulky giant with a bushy red beard and wild hair struts down the street, wearing a sapphire blue strapless sequin dress. His gigantic hairy feet spill out of matching sapphire blue high heels. Each scale of the sequin dress reflects millions of small square patches of light on the street and businesses on Marine Drive like a disco ball every time he pulls the trigger on the old flamethrower strapped to his back.

I usually keep to my own business, especially when the sun's down and the rain's puddling. Five minutes ago I was enjoying a cold beer at the Portway Tavern, but now I'm hiding behind a late model Honda Civic while a madman wreaks havoc under the Astoria-Megler Bridge with what looks like a Vietnam War-era flame thrower. Being the middle of December, the light drains from the day as early as 4pm, by last call in Uniontown it's darker than the chamber of a dead nun's heart, and last call was fifteen minutes ago.

"Yaaaaarn Gripper!" He yells in a low and hoarse voice while firing off another stream of liquid fire into the night.

"Yarngripper!"

His Scandinavian accent is thicker than Astoria Brewery's

chowder (it has bacon). The light from the flames gives off the illusion that his big bushy beard and wild hair are made of fire too.

After a good ten minutes of hiding from this cross-dressing gargantua, his flamethrower runs out of fuel or gets clogged up, so he unstraps the tanks to examine the various knobs and toggle switches. I grab the opportunity, and I do something very dumb. I run toward the giant with the intent on tackling him to the ground and holding him there until the police show up. The problem is that every step I take closer to this colossus, the larger he gets until I'm staring up at this towering mountain of a man in his blue disco ball dress. He has to be close to eight feet tall.

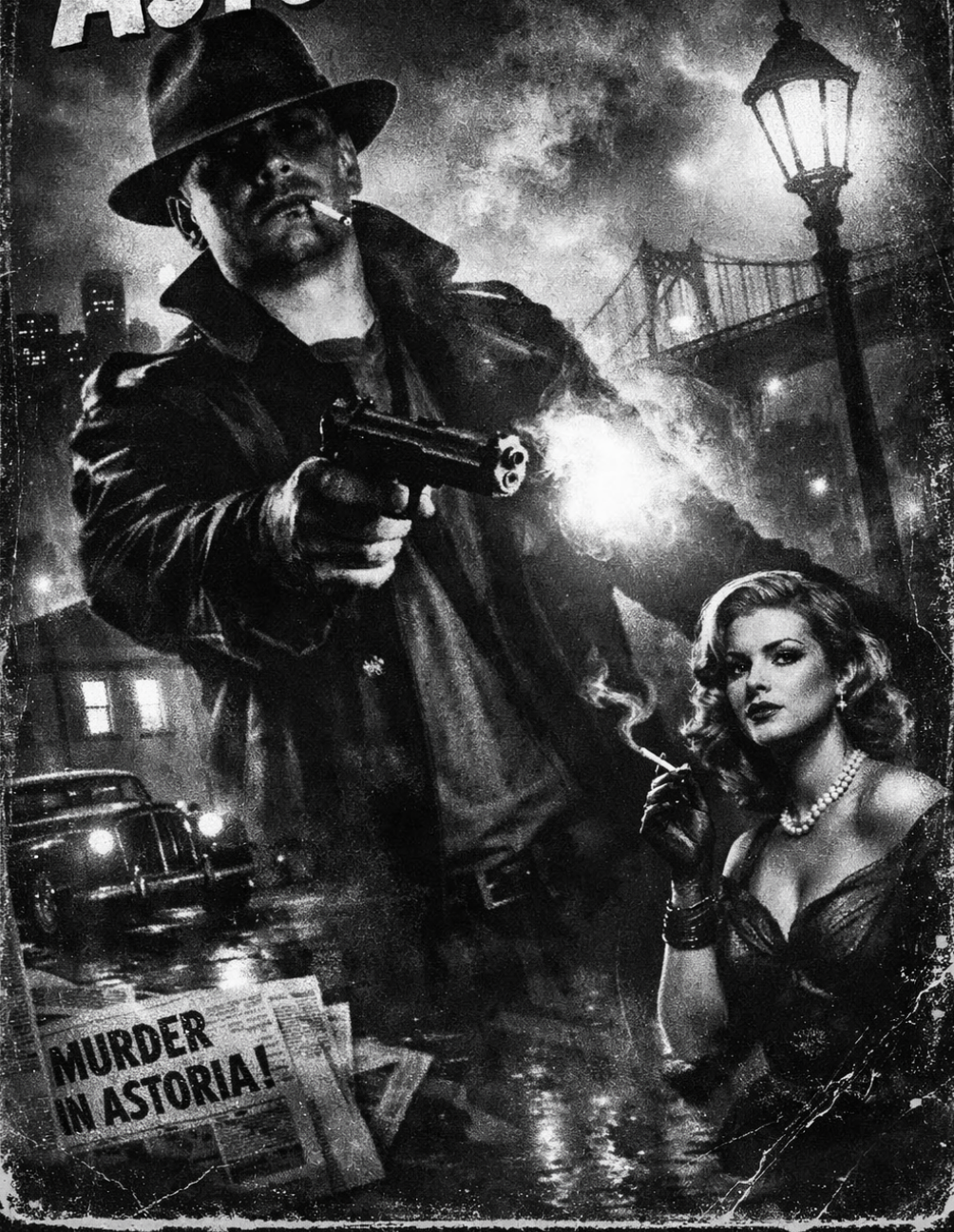
I'm a 6'2", 250 pound combat veteran who isn't a stranger to scrapping when the occasion arises, but this guy has arms like legs, legs like waists, and a legendary gut that must have drunk entire pubs dry. His large blue eyes roll in their sockets until his ice blues land on me like a hammer. His nostrils flare, he grits his yellowed teeth, and his eyes narrow as they size me up.

"What are you waiting for? Get him!" Another of the Portway patrons yells.

I nod quickly at her and look up at the giant ginger. "Hey there, big guy. You, uh, wanna stop?"

I don't know if he punched me or a mortar round landed, but the next thing I remember is waking up on the sidewalk with a freight train running between my ears and a shiner the size of Young's Bay. Blue and red lights flash off the buildings of Uniontown, and people stare through the windows of their houses to see what's going on. The wild giant of a man is nowhere to be found, so after telling Sergeant Randall and APD's finest what I saw, I leave too. On my walk home, I think about what happened. At first, I can't even remember him throwing the punch, but I sure feel the shiner swelling. I have to really concentrate to see the ham fist flying at my face in my mind's eye. In my memory, I can barely make it out, but somehow I remember the tattoos on his fingers.

ASTORIA NOIR





The next day, I'm in my office on the second floor of the Astoria Armory, nursing my black eye and swollen face. I've been in bar fights before, but this shiner is so bad it hurts a little every time I breathe. I hear heels clicking on the hardwood floor and then the steps right outside my office door. The three knocks on the door are stronger than I'd expect from someone in heels. I'm still not prepared when in walks this gorgeous dame. She's so fine that she'd make the pope break a stained-glass window to get a second look at her. Her long auburn hair curls around her face and down her long pale neck. Her dress is one of them tight fitting numbers in a dark purple tone that screams danger. It flows all the way to the floor, so I can't see her feet moving when she walks.

I watch her fold up this old-timey umbrella made of silk and fancy fringe, and that's the first time I notice her oversized leather gloves. In the days after this first meeting, I'll think back and try to make sense of what she wore and how she moved, but being there in the moment, I couldn't see anything past her big brown sparklers. A man could live and die in those eyes, and she knew it. Her smile finished the old one-two, and I had to swallow hard before asking what I could do for her.

“What can I do for you?” I ask.

Her face scrunches up like she's amused. She says in an exotic accent I can't place, “I'm here looking for the gentleman who stood up to a wild giant of a man last night, and by the looks of your injury I'd say I found him.”

“Stood up and knocked down,” I say. “You know that beast?”

“No,” she says and looks away. She breaks eye contact but her smile doesn't falter. “But I know of him. Very uncouth gentleman. A troublemaker.”

The way she pronounces her 'r's makes me think she's from Eastern Europe. “I'd call him a gorilla, but I never saw one that big. You know his name?”

“I know him by many names,” she says. “You must be very brave. You know, to stand up to him like I said.”

I laugh. “No, just drunk and stupid and looking for trouble.”

I feel her sizing me up and can't help but blush. That smile never leaves her face and she says, “So what is your name?”

I'm lost in those big dark eyes. “I can't quite remember.”

She chuckles a bit. “At least tell me what I could call you when I call on you again.”

“Grover. My name is Grover.”

She scrunches her little porcelain nose. “I do not like that name. What is your surname?”

“Lunabocci. And not that I'm complaining, but why would you call on me?”

“Not many people would have done what you did, Mister Lunabocci. That madman is after me, and when I saw you walk right up to him, I knew I had someone I could count on to help me.”

“You were there?” I ask, motioning to a chair so she can take a load off those gams.

“No, I cannot stay, but I would like to hire you to help me,” she says while taking a wad of bills out of a small purse.

“I don't do protection gigs anymore. I'm just some lug at the bottom of a barrel scraping away, and believe it or not I like it that way.” As I say this I give a closer look at her gloves, and there I see it. The same funny squiggly lines I saw tattooed on the mad ginger giant's fingers before he sent me to dream land.



“Well, Mister Lunabocci, I feel we’ve come to the end of our conflagration. I believe it’s time for me to continue my day. Take this,” she shoves the wad of cash in my hand. “I’ll be in touch with what I need you to do later.”

About a dozen unanswered questions spin around my head, but I can’t seem to reach out and pull one down. Nothing really matters to me except her sultry eyes and honey dripped voice, but I fight hard to part the fog. “I’m sorry. I didn’t get your name.”

Judging by the expression on her face, me saying anything but bye surprises her. “Well, my dear, you can call me Basilissa Persephanni.”

“Basilissa... I’ve never heard that name before,” I say.

“Basilissa is my title, Mr. Lunabocci. It’s royal. I must go. I will be in touch soon,” and then she’s gone as fast as she arrived.

“Well, Ms. Cecilia, I don’t know if I can help you. Like I said, I don’t do personal security anymore, and I don’t mind telling you that I can’t beat that guy.”

“Pias t’avgo kai kourefto,” she says.
“What?”

GROVER LUNABOCCI WILL RETURN IN:

Astoria Noir 2 - The Storm Cries Jarngreipr

6. POTENTIAL



Holography

By Kimberly O'Bryant

“Have I been too hard on you today?” she asks, standing safely behind her desk, scrolling through her calendar to set up the next session for two weeks out.

“No. Your analogy, that the fantasy of my relating is holographic, really resonates with me.”

Though Jess was in her fifties, she was living on a forced budget, many months running her account down to under \$100 before her next disability check rolled in on the third. She was grateful to be paying the bare minimum on the turtle lady's sliding scale.

After her session, running over her allotted hour, she walked along the water's edge, not seeing any of the others, while tying up loose ends of the connections she was making, this town chock-full of retirees marching the paths and streets with their beloved fur babies.

She felt on an edge she had not walked for years, at least not since the last breakup by way of betrayal, the kind that always involved another woman, or women if she was being completely honest with herself. Yes, in all three of these cases, with past men she'd been madly in love with, it had definitely been plural: women.

Clark was a sex addict, and he really didn't see a problem with it. What he did on his own time wasn't hurting a soul, in his opinion. Pornhub was mainstream these days. Even schoolchildren were aware of the ease and privacy of seeing a little, just turn the sound down and head for the bathroom. His nephew Conner had lived with him in the trailer briefly last summer when his slut sister had been evicted for always feeling sorry for herself. At least, that's the way Clark saw it. She seemed to break into tears whenever he saw her. Not just a few

tears, but the kind that seemed to spray out suddenly like waterfalls, her snot dumping too, her grossly pulling her sleeves over her hand to wipe. The whole face would weep, though she was mostly silent in these wet giveaways, an ever-giving spring.

His sister, Jess, had gotten the same \$23,000 cut of the family inheritance when their father had finally croaked, succumbing to the prostate cancer Clark figured he'd procured after all those bottles of Lord Calvert and loving his dick too hard.

Served the old prick right that he, his sister, or the legal secretary who procured his last will and testament for \$400 cash, letting sister and brother know she'd lose her job as assistant if the attorney ever found out she was running a side hustle, so he guessed no one should be too surprised that this same dizzy bitch denied even knowing them at the stiffly burnt-orange-papered office on 3rd Street. Nope, couldn't ever locate his will, or the one he had claimed to have had made up all those years before by the illegally working legal bimbo downtown, the one their father had taken he and his sister out of countless times for being bottom-of-the-barrel losers.

In the end, the state had taken a large chunk for itself, and he and his religious ninny sister had gotten a split of the remaining \$46,000 and some pocket change. Clark's cut was in the bank for the most part, minus the money he'd used to buy a big screen along with a Radeon laptop for high-speed digitized delight. His stupid sister, on the other hand, was always broke and in and out of apartment complexes and lying boyfriends, so she'd taken her share and purchased a bargain-basement single-wide. She hadn't quite reached the baby-end requirement of fifty-five years to live in this particular park, but with her marionette lines and hard elevens reaching from her nose, in between her brows met at bunched troughs of forehead creases, nobody got around to asking to see her ID.

Though she had spent the previous night entirely sleepless, fretting over her imagination of them looking at her driver's license, reading 1976, and telling her to take her boxes and find some other place to lie, she was a firm believer in the Golden Rule, and though lying went against her principles, she'd prayed

for a sign, and it'd really been her only option. Right after opening her eyes, emerging from the world of God, walking along the Riverwalk, she'd seen a man jogging by with a Nike sweatshirt: JUST DO IT! She knew she had her go-ahead.

The trailer was somewhat charming, and the feature Jess liked best was the way the kitchen was part of the living room, with suspended cupboards shared by both rooms, all of their amber-colored, plastic-like glass inserts still intact. Granada was the color name. She remembered when her grandmother had replaced her old floor-to-ceiling farm ones for a similar set, and because she was an oil painter in her free time and had been showing Jess how to mix colors, and they'd been reading tube names, umber and prussian, she'd asked her the color of these golden panels, all smooth and beautiful with raised halos, and her grandmother had pronounced their name granada as one would teach a two-year-old a new word.

There was not a single crack in one of her panels, and she was so thrilled with this singular detail that, though there was an assault of smells, mold, cigarettes, greasy cooking, and an aroma of Avon tea rose coming from the sun-bleached and cracked bathroom vanity, she was happy to have a home. The carpets definitely needed to be replaced, and she was trying not to think at all of that hole in the back bedroom floor. But back to the kitchen cabinets. They had remained intact. She wiped away years of black with a few sprays of Windex and some elbow grease and wondered why nobody else had thought to do the same. She told herself that they weren't broken and showed pride of ownership with their continuous concentric holographic designs, at least for her to continue being proud of. These were the same circles she'd traced with her fingers at Grandma's house as a girl, the one safe place in the entirety of her life, the place she'd gone to when her alcoholic father let loose on her mother.

She reverently opened the first one and thought she'd put her journals and photo albums there, and her Bible right on top. She didn't have a great bookshelf and really not that many plates and glasses, though she still had the stemmed ruby-red glasses that had not been her grandmother's but were the exact

same ones. She'd purchased them at Goodwill, paying \$2.99 apiece. She felt it was a very expensive price considering one could purchase an entire set of new glasses, tall and tumbler, from Ross for \$8.99, but their glowing rosiness reminded her of her grandmother and better times.

After washing the gold countertops below, she placed her statue of Mary praying, a string of amber beads, and a large crystal she'd carried with her since being gifted it at a Phish concert in the mid-nineties with her druggie boyfriend, who at least didn't yell at her for opening a bag of M&M's wrong, a gift to her for having provided a Phish-follower miracle by giving him the extra ticket she purchased for him before he ran off with Miranda.

The young woman had told her if you are given a crystal, it has extra healing power, and she had believed with a full heart.

This crystal had always been full of love and magic, and she often laid it across her third eye to aid in pulling out dark energies. When she felt the stone was full of murky thoughts and couldn't carry any more, she took it for a walk through the dark wooded area behind the string of stores on Hanover Street and hid it at the base of her favorite Douglas fir for a few nights to recharge and cleanse for her next self-healing. She had a daily practice of asking Jesus to be with her, not daring to eat a bite of egg or toast in the morning without first asking for his help and thanking him for all he did.

On these crystal days, she spilled her heart out in tears, both of joy and confusion, usually pulling out her pocket notebook and pen and scribbling down her thoughts, her personal revelations combined with what Jesus revealed to her through spontaneous signs in her surroundings. Nature synchronicities, the way the branches reached out to brush upon her pants, letting her know that they were happy some people could still see and communicate with them. She noticed how the birds were always with her, skipping along from branch to branch. Hey, little brown bird, she'd say and coo to them in bird talk. The crows knew her for sure.

MOTHER

By Katherine Mowrey

“Well, shall we?” Madge asked.

She was shaking her blond head. They had come to go through the house one more time. They had spent an entire week cleaning it out. Years of hoarding had taken their toll. They hadn’t taken too much time to think, just packed box after box like two robots tasked with a job they did not want.

Madge and her sister, Hetty, were standing in the living room of their mother’s Cape Cod home. The two sisters stood side by side, Madge shorter, with blond hair and a light complexion, Hetty tall, with dark hair and an olive complexion. Same parents, but they looked different and had different personalities to match.

Old ratty furniture was scattered here and there, and there were obvious signs of rodents.

Hetty noticed the rodent poop. “That just gives me the willies.”

Madge glanced at her.

They both stood in silence, each in her own thoughts.

Madge remembered their mother had been a hard person. She had married young and lost her husband at a young age. She was tasked with raising her two girls.

She did not make a very good mother and never did things with her daughters that a mother would do with young girls.

Madge forgave her for that. She just had not had the life she wanted.

Hetty just remembered an embittered woman who hated the life she had been dealt and slapped first and didn’t care why or what had happened.

“Let’s see what else we have,” said Madge.

The two sisters moved from room to room, surveying as they went.

The big kitchen may have been the worst for wear. The door leading to the back porch was stacked high with empty boxes. You could just make out the backyard through the window.

The stovetop was gross with caked-on food, and rust had taken its toll on the burners and burner pans. The oven still held frying pans that were in no shape for cooking.

“Let’s remember to get rid of those pans,” said Madge. “Remember the sounds of Mom moving around this kitchen?”

Hetty snorted. “I remember the sounds of banging pots and pans because she had to cook something for us.”

They moved on to the family room. They stepped through the doorway, and there was the big picture window with the incredible view of the river and port and the ocean beyond. Today was a good day, no rain to mar the view of calm waters and ships waiting their turn to go out to sea.

“We ran around this room, through to the living room and back again, until Mom yelled for us to stop because we were driving her crazy,” said Madge. Her voice cracked a little.

“This makes you sad?” Hetty waved her hand around the now-defunct room. “She slapped us for running through!”

“I’m not as hard-nosed as you.” Madge had put the slapping out of her mind.

“I acquired it over the years of neglect and abuse.”

“You have got to let go of the past.”

“Why? She did such a number on us. It is hard to get past that.”

“She did the best she could under the circumstances.”

“No, she did not. She didn’t even try.”

“Why is that so important for you to harp on? She was who she was.”

“We have such different views of our life here,” said Hetty.
“She was a lost soul.”

“Bullshit,” snapped Hetty. “She wanted to live the life she felt she never had, and we just got in the way.”

“Let’s keep going,” said Madge. “We need to finish this.”

They walked down the hall, walls on both sides devoid of the pictures that had hung there. The outlines were still there from when they had taken them down.

“What a memory.” Madge twirled around her old bedroom.

Visions of her four-poster bed, memories of books and dolls and playing games on the floor flooded her mind.

Hetty just stood there, looking at her sister and wondering what was going through her mind. “Definitely not the same thoughts as mine.”

They stepped through the door of what had been Hetty’s room. “No good memories here,” said Hetty.

The room looked about the same as she had remembered. Empty except for the bookshelves that had contained Nancy Drew books, yearbooks, and her schoolbooks. No playing jacks on the floor. She had just stayed quietly in her room, hoping Mother wouldn’t start yelling about something, wouldn’t berate them for something she perceived they had done wrong. Like being born.

Their mother’s bedroom was one place neither girl wanted to venture into again. They did so cautiously, as if something would jump out at them.

They were never allowed in there, only when invited, and that was rarely, when Mother was in one of her better moods.

“There is really nothing here,” said Madge. Her voice was sad.

“Please. Don’t do that crap. There was never anything here.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” snapped Madge. “Stop it and get over yourself.”

“Of course you are this way. You were the baby. She didn’t get after you as much.”

“That is bullshit. Let’s keep going,” Madge said.

“I think we have covered everything pretty much. We need to clean up the rest of this and get this place up for sale. The sooner the better,” Hetty decided.

“We should decide if we want to do repairs on it.”

“Not too much, if we decide to do it. I don’t want to spend a bunch of money on this place. I want as much money out of it as possible.”

Madge sighed. “You would.”

“What does that mean?”

“You got Mother’s ring. Why do you want it?”

“Because I do. I should have it.”

“Why? So you can hock it for money?”

“Maybe. I should have it for all the abuse I dealt with.”

“That is just bullshit. You are so full of the poor-me syndrome.”

“Let’s not start that song and dance again. Nothing was fair for either of us. But I am keeping the ring.”

Madge let out a huge sigh.

“Let’s get this done,” she said.

They headed back to the kitchen and, like two robots, worked together to empty out everything.

They took all the empty boxes down from in front of the back door and stepped outside onto the porch. The air was crisp and clean, and they could just make out the river through the peekaboo view from a group of trees in front of them.

The porch produced more stuff than they thought. Broken dishes, old toys, and leaves and branches blown onto it from strong winds. They tossed the leaves and branches into the yard and loaded the rest into garbage bags to be hauled to the dumpster they had in front of the house.

Next, the kitchen. There wasn't really anything to be saved, so they broke down the cardboard boxes and put the gross pots and pans in a garbage bag. They had already checked the cupboards to be sure they had not missed anything. The rest of the house proved to be blissfully empty, and there were only a few items to be thrown out.

They locked the front door and walked down the steps together.

They turned to look one more time.

"Sorry for being so mouthy," said Madge.

"Sorry for being such a pain," said Hetty.

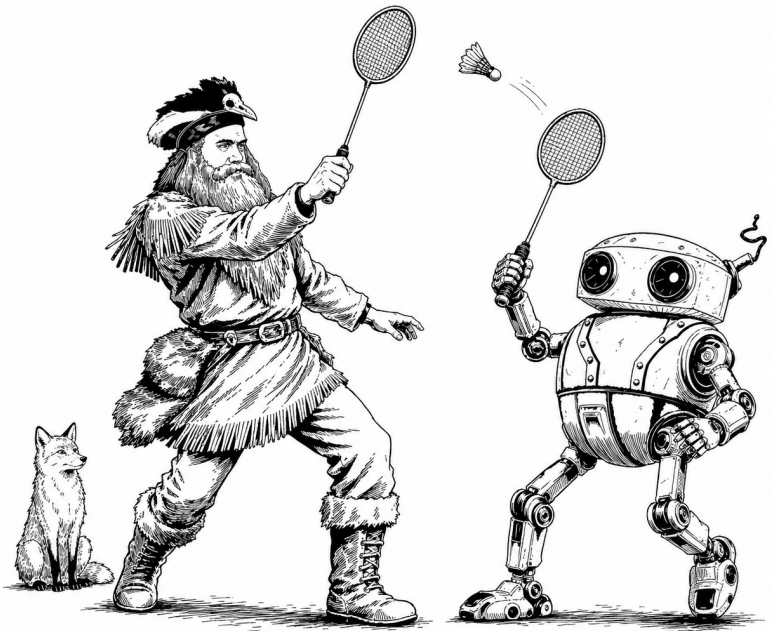
They put their arms around each other and looked one last time.

They would hire out any work to be done. They did not want to see this place again.

"There is that wonderful coffee shop just down the hill," said Hetty.

"I'm in," said Madge.

They walked away together.



XVIII



THE PERFORMER



ARTISTS & WRITERS

Cliff Taylor is a member of the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska and an award-winning writer, poet, speaker, and storyteller. He is the author of several books, including *Notes of an Indigenous Futurist* (Hema Press) and the recent essay collection *The Shining Hands of My Ponca Ancestors* (NDSU Press). A Nebraskan through and through, he currently lives on the Oregon Coast with his sweetheart of many years.



Jennifer Nightingale is a poet, novelist and prose writer. She is the author of the PNW coming of age tale, *Alberta & the Spark*. She lives in Astoria with Holt Moore and dog Mickey. They scour beaches picking up trash and seashells, turning them into local legends and powerful talismans



Rodney Merrill has lived in Astoria for 30 years. Writing both poetry and nonfiction, he uses plain-spoken language and ordinary moments to explore the pain and beauty of life. He has written extensively on grief since losing Kate, his wife of 40 years. Rodney has four dogs as housemates—Lily, Sally, Auggy, and Buddy.



Logan Garner is a current MFA student at the University of British Columbia. His work has appeared in The Elevation Review, Flying Island, Anthroposphere and many others. Author of Here, in the Floodplain (Plan B Press, 2023) and The Sin of Feeding Wild Birds (Broken Tribe Press, 2025), you can find him on Instagram at @logangarnerpoetry and at <https://www.logangarnerpoetry.com/>



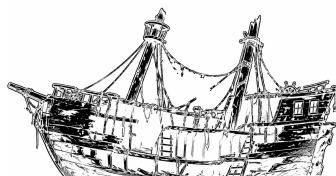
Brad Pietzyk is the co-founder of Rogue Cell Astoria, a non profit to fight veteran suicide in rural Oregon. He spent a career in the military as an Engineer and Mathematician, and now he resides in Astoria with his lovely family and Kuma a bear-like Newfie.

Grover Lunabocci had a very successful career in Europe as a the fifth generation circus clown, but he lost his passion for the grease paint and honking red nose, so he immigrated here to Astoria to edit and illustrate things like this magazine and write little stories that make him smile again.



Kimberly O'Bryant a local substitute-teacher and writer of poetry, dreams and most recently fiction, has always found writing a way to creatively circle the ever-changing truth of self.

Drawn to the stark, natural beauty of Astoria, she has called this place home since 1997



Tom Keating is a writer and US Army veteran of the Vietnam War. His five-star rated memoir “Yesterday’s Soldier, a Passage From Prayer to the Vietnam War” is the story of his journey from Infantry Officer Candidate (OCS) to conscientious objector in Vietnam and is available on Amazon. His latest book, “Elephants, Secrets

and Submarines, Stories and Essays,” will be available in December on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.



Sean Davis is a teacher, a combat vet, and the cooker of amazing Ribeyes. He loves to draw and write, but the most important thing to him is family and community.





Thank you to everyone who helped make this happen. Thank you to the Stormy River Writers and anyone else who loves to question, be amazed, and is okay about being a little lost, a little lonely, and a little weird. Art saves lives. This was made in Astoria by our small business, Mountain, River, & Sea productions. Always remember: The Poetry is in the Battle & The Poison is in the Dose.

~Grover Lunabocci