

WEST TEXAS

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At Sixteen Months: Brown and Gold

KATHLEEN AGUERO

My grandson plucks a marigold
poking through a neighbor's white fence,
crushes it between his fingers
while I try to remember
if it's poisonous. Three days later
he's alive, so I cross the marigold
off my list of potentially lethal flora
toddlers might put in their mouths.
So far he has not harmed himself
by falling while carrying a stick
and poking out his eye, something
my mother assured me would happen
if I ever ran with a stick in my hand.
Though he tugs hard at the baby gate,
he has not pulled it down. Though he has banged
on the window, he has not shattered it,
cut himself, or fallen to the pavement
two stories below. He has not
turned from brown to blue
during a tantrum and has grabbed
the dog's whiskers without being bitten.
He bulldozes his way. He prods
and he pushes. He tires to put the whole
of the dangerous world in his mouth
while I follow him ready to snatch
the worst away. When tired,
he wobbles, he falls, he cries
but the next day he's walking again.
Golden marigold petals stain his brown hand
as he carries his stick and so far
no one thinks it's a gun.

A Brother's Suicide

VICTOR ALTSHUL

Just to see what would happen,
I tossed a small rubber ball
off the rear of a train
hurrying along at fifty-five.

It bounced and rolled a long, long way,
was bouncing, rolling still
before it vanished from my sight.

Hop off a train
steaming along at fifty-five—
you will likely bounce and roll
and bounce and roll
quite a way before you stop.

“Why Do I Have to Die?”

ACE BOGGESS

—Philip Levine, “My Son and I”

I’ve just gotten used to the sense of my skin,
consciousness in it whipping a still sea.

A lie. I won’t feel right if I live
to a hundred & eighty. Crookedness

never dwindles. I look wrong, too,
in these clothes—baggy flannel & cargo pants,

loose like a plastic grocery satchel
hooked like a flag on thorns of a rosebush.

I want to live, keep going, find meaning
in something, leave something meaningful

behind. That’s not to say sickness
has taken me on its long, inelegant carriage ride

or that I expect my enemies to target me.
Tomorrow or in twenty years I might

slip the curb & greet a milk truck face to face.
Second Friday after New Year’s, I could

forget myself & lean into an accidental overdose.
In ten seconds, I may fall on my writing pen

as I race upstairs to answer the phone.
Response waits for every question.

I don’t want it. No matter the complaining,
I’d prefer to go on being

as if I've won the lottery, lost weight,
learned to dance, embraced all humans left.

On the Loom

CLAUDIA BUCKHOLTS

A brown cat sleeps beside a dying man
on a white hospital bed. Outside, cicadas
gun their little trucks in shrubbery,
singing of their seventeen years
underground. A bumblebee dives into
a red four-o'clock flower, a furry insect in
functional brown suit disturbing the

grace of a petal, a flash of yellow pollen,
basket slowly filling, flowers buzzing.
Beside the gazebo, I watch an orb spider
suspended from a greenbriar vine
weaving its elaborate web; another weaver,
Moirai, dips her shuttle, gathers the
woven thread. Who can know the pattern

of the weaving until it is complete?
Unease whispers through the tapestry
of the day, a red moon rising over a
gray field, the shape of a mountain
summitted in cloud. The dying man
taps his fingers on the sheet, the brown
cat purrs against his ravaged heart.

Gathering Night Crawlers

GRANT CLAUSER

As a boy I savored April nights
for creeping over damp grass
in the yard the way a spider
sprawls across its web.
The worms' slick bodies
stretched over the ground,
reaching and contracting
as I held my breath
for stillness, then slowly
released, easing my fingers
behind the creatures
to grab them before they
pulled back into the earth.
With no eyes or ears,
they felt each step erupt
through the dark, the hyper
beatings of my heart.
I'd take my coffee can of wrigglers
to the trestle or the dam
toss a hook and sinker
in the rain-souled creek
and hope for magic, because
that's what it was, a kind
of prayer, or really a prayer,
that the work of laying prone
at night would pay off
in pulling something great
from the darkness, a hope
that when I reach out
something reaches back,
usually a workday brown,
or better, glossy rainbow,
but rarely, when I'd given

up the day for gone, a slight
tug on the line would turn
up gold, the heaving gills
of a palomino trout that I
could carry home like a man,
lay it on the kitchen counter,
blood still pumping from its mouth,
and father would place his hand
on my shoulder, without words
say that I'd done well.

In January

ALEJANDRO ESCUDÉ

A yellow apartment yellows
more and more with midday sun;

a bald, black man on a cane
stands on the dead grass in front.

He is my father, if my father
were standing in yellow warmth

and reaching for me, instead
of, as the man is doing, gazing up

and away. The sunlight erases
his eyes, so they are living slits,

the sun spills still more light,
and the dry breeze becomes wet

with the light of a passing joy
that's mine. Right now, and then.

Winter Prairie Grass

CAROL COVEN GRANNICK

You backward-bend together, all strands a group
in the frozen wind, brush heads dipping.
No wind, no snow or frost can break you,

though the test repeats as if unproven
for the many years
you've been digging in for the flourishing, come Spring.

Minnows

VINCENT GREEN

The night she left
me, we were at a
movie. She stroked my
cheek with the back of her
hand the way my mother
had before she died.

That night I dreamt of a
river from my youth, my
Grandfather and I seining
for minnows. The net
swept around the sandbar and
ballooned like it was pregnant.
We pulled it up and
let the water run out to
reveal hundreds of silver, shinning
minnows sparkling in the sunlight.
I wanted to hold that moment
forever before they became bait
and were gone.

The Earth

RICHARD JONES

Whenever I stand on some height—
a roof's edge or a balcony high above the street—
my mind thinks about jumping.

Beneath the endless dome of the sky,
I can't *not* picture it—
the body twirling in space as it drops.

Looking down from a tower or rampart,
the thought alone makes my knees go weak
and spins my head with vertigo.

And yet I can't help myself.
On a cliff's crumbling ledge, I'll lean forward
until I lose my balance and start to fall.

Then the wings of my arms
windmill me backwards
until I regain my footing on the earth,

which is neither round nor spinning,
I tell my pounding heart,
but flat, and perfectly safe for me to stand on.

Bat

YASMIN MARIAM KLOTH

For SS

You asked me in a letter once
if I see things, like ghosts
and visions
I could say yes, because
I have dreams
that often tell me something
real will happen
Tell me things that were meant
to be kept as secrets, like:
My husband will propose; or
My ill mother will die.

But I don't see like you see,
like the time you told me
a bird or bat (because, who really knew)
flew down from the ceiling,
a wing in your blond hair
while you wrote
late at night

I hear.
My home is haunted and
the ghost moves freely between rooms.
Sometimes you can feel her
as if you left a door open
and let a cool breeze walk in.

This ghost is strong and she
moves entire doors when I'm not looking.
It's not until after I've crashed
into the doorframe,

the weight of my body behind the fall;
It's not until after I hear
the sound of my breath leaving
my body in a quick puff of air
that I think, "I swore the door was
two inches to the right."

I'll tell you not to worry,
that the bird in your home,
is in your head.

You'll say that I need
to work on my depth perception.

I wrote you in a letter once
that I might be losing my mind.
You responded:
"A bat is a sure sign of death."

We've frightened ourselves
like school children hiding
in the corner of a home when
the lights have gone out from a storm

With nothing to see but the shadows
wet leaves make in the window
or hear, but the sound of the rain.

The Yellow Transparent Apple Tree

LEONARD NEUFELDT

The tree stands under that patch of sky
that overlooks our lives, unlike the eternal
orchards of the Louvre, their apples
smooth as Eve's full breasts hand-shaped
perfectly by dream sparks
in the garden's green

The summer I learned to read
Father photographed our apple tree taller
by half than I in my sailor suit.
You can't see the sheen of the oozing
fracture at the first branch,
but you can see the bole's thinness
from the ground up
and the implausibly small shade
on the boy's bare feet before
he steps out of the picture to go
inside the blue and white house
to practice on a half-sized violin
still too large for him, turns

to an old newspaper distracting the dust
of his father's shelf, headline
bleeding black, a ship below
darkened by water and havoc of words
moving with his lips: "Six hundred
sailors lost." The boy sees a ship
cut into equal halves, sailors
rising like apples, how the surface
gathers them four and five
at a time to be carried up the steps
onto the porch, laid out on the table
until there are no more

I'm walking with my son,
taller than me, into evening
between the sun and trees, past
apple crescents drying on cotton-
white racks to where
fragrance of ripe apples clings
to the air. Before us
in the crush of shadows and grass
a large apple split almost its length,
the flesh plain and white,
and all around a litter of golden apples
bruised by small sharp moments of light

Dead Center

KENNETH POBO

In spring I potted up dahlia tubers,
gave them a head start for summer.
Some do well. A Lucky Ducky
wove a smart yellow cap. A tardy red

Spartacus grew slowly, finally
bloomed in October. I looked
into the large blossom, saw it
looking back at me.
An Alien dead center told me
that nothing could save
my dying planet. Methane
would seal up my lungs.
A plastic sea would rise and rise,
blotting out countries, millions
on the run. Governments would
take cyanide capsules.

The Alien went silent, our yard
covered in truth. Time thought of me
as a delicious chocolate.

Conjectures

LEE POTTS

In a book picked from a yard sale pile
between music boxes, dried varnished gourds,
and candles that were a gift and never lit.
A forgotten photo wedged in where
the last reader left off.
Like an extra illustration unable
to advance the story,
unbound, ready to fall out but
shelved since the seventies.
His wife took this picture, I guessed,
of him hungover and half off the couch.
I imagined a marriage, far less sweet
than the novel I paid a nickel for.

She didn't really like
car key parties, and hated
what their nightstand drawer held.
The kind of things not offered up for sale
to early bird neighbors on any Saturday morning ever.
Intimate bric-a-brac she finally double bagged
and shoved deep, after dark,
into the can already at the curb.
All of it gone and long forgotten
years before their children
returned, as children often do,
to empty out the house.

Jealous of Jenny Junior

GERARD SARNAT

Bawling cuts to my chase.
I wept seven years ago
at our oldest's wedding.

Since then totally *nada*
until my father's death.
For days it won't stop.

Might be a problem
for some other adults
but not at all for me.

My risk is staying dry,
getting too distracted
by life's usual errands,

not stewing enough.
We just got Mommy
a new white poodle

to really attach to
like the little toy
when I was a kid.

It's much easier
than then to feel
true sibling rivalry,

open the floodgates
about Mom choosing
home with her pooch's

pups rather than attending
high school graduation.
Now I can howl like a cat.

Nails for the New Year

NANCY TAKACS

As Aubrey spins me a circle
of white gel powder
and sparks of ruby,

my old friend opens the door
and sits down with Kathy
to sift bottles
for the perfect blue.

Parting ways four years ago
over her betrayal,
a lie about me to a friend,
an apology,

I've never called.
Both in the front window
we're quiet as it snows,
then raise small questions.

Her timbre
quavers. Her cheeks have new
contours. She asks
for my new number.

We have to turn away,
for the women
to hold our hands still.

Such small canvases we are,
as they wipe away slivers
from any cuticle
that weeps,

asking us if we want roses,
or jewels, heads down
as they conjure shiny filaments
to embellish us for the new year,
with the finest brush.

The Augury of Yellow

ERIN WILSON

August—I notice just now
how you take my breath away,

not in awe
but in movement.

Goldenrod, funeral flowers,
arrived while we slept.

August,
your beginning is yellow.

Soon jewelweed
will hang her saffron heads.

If July
is jumping into the lake,

then August is the echo
the rocks bear.

Turtles' thoughts
maintain
all August-long,

then tilt
toward mud.

**Imagine Some Tinkling Curiosity
from the Years Back**

JON YUNGKANS

after John Ashbery

A dirty white couch was dumped in the middle of a parking lot,
arranged catty-cornered, as though placed inside a living room.
Days later, a plastic baby gate leaned against the couch's back.

I'm waiting next for a mahogany hexagon end-table to appear,
my dad's black coffee in a tan mug with large black snowflakes,
a mug from a set my mom had snagged on a Mobil gas fill-up.

I'm pausing for the lunar reflection on a black Spanish-style,
station wagon-sized Packard Bell TV cabinet, its blow-out-
the-wall sound when Dad cranked "Man With the Golden Arm,"
just to see what would happen. On quieter days, the wood's
furniture polish nosed me as I homeworked on affluent shag.

I'm eavesdropping for a maple Philco's soft, unvarying coercion:
the phono cabinet where, steady as sun and moon, my brother
played five LPs of Christmas songs, until I broke the Bakelite arm.
He hieroglyphed those surfaces—three years of committed wear.

Fresh white lines moonlight immaculate asphalt. Nothing stirs.

I'm waiting.



Goodbye to the Circus

MARK RALPH BOWMAN

At least the hair looks good. I brush it into curls and speech marks. Doesn't always look good. Sometimes I want to cut it off or dye it red like Rihanna's.

So I'm feeling good. Like always morning after Year Ten Drama Club. We do improvisation and stage fighting and stuff with Mr. Connelly. Nice how we make it look like somebody's hit us really really hard or like you've hit somebody else without really doing it. Stage fighting is awesome. Mr. Connelly says it's a vocation is acting. You don't choose. It calls you.

Last evening we did a load of exercises Mr. Connelly said come from traditional unarmed combat in Japan.

When I walk out the house the sun's shining for the first time in weeks. Dad calls "Have a good one Angel" out the bedroom window. I tell him to shut up.

That postman, the fit young one as wears shorts showing his muscly brown legs, he's going up next door's path.

"Angel!" he calls over the fence.

They're sat on the bench near the bandstand. Three idiots together. To be honest, Michael's all right. On his own. Snogged me. Year Eight. Never tried again. That hurt. Way I'm looking he would now if them two losers weren't hanging about.

I don't walk past them. Go round the edge. I hear Michael singing. Look round. He's walking same speed as me.

"Nellie the Elephant packed her trunk and said goodbye to the circus." Pushing out his stomach and waddling along. In step with me.

"Off she rode with a trumpety trump, trump, trump, trump." He flobbers along doing trumpety trumps. One of his mates points his phone at me. I walk faster. Michael walks faster.

“Trumpety trump. Trumpety trump.” Flobberty flobberty flob.

Correction – he’s not all right.

Have to hurry for my train. Stand behind Carrie Mountjoy in the queue for the barrier. She walks through. Three ticket inspectors clocking her legs and her arse.

I follow her at first. Get pushed about by other blokes stood on the platform clocking her. Same ones every day.

I get down the end. On my own. Look at my phone. There’s me walking through the park. Michael’s trumpety voice. Lads sniggering. I think of them showing the video to each other laughing.

The railway track starts singing and rattling. They’ll be squeezing up against Carrie Mountjoy. There’s nobody up close to me.

“Trumpety trump, trump, trump, trump.” Michael’s stood just in front. Singing under his breath. Staring like I’m not there. Never going to snog me again. I can’t hear him no more cos the noise of the train. I can see his mouth going trump trump trump. See the train out of the corner of my eye. All right.

I step forward. Drop my shoulder into his back and shout

“No! No! Catch him!”

He spins off the platform in front of the train.

Even on the CCTV it looks like I’m trying to grab Michael to stop him doing something stupid. The headline said

“Nellie’s Saving Bid.”

Columbo

BRANDON FRENCH

Dear Jim:

You asked me why I like the TV show Columbo so much so here's my answer. One of my favorite episodes is the 2-hour story featuring Donald Pleasance as a vintner because I learned a lot about fine wines from that one, although I don't drink anymore—a long story I'll tell you about some other time. Anyway, watching Columbo also teaches you about the mistakes murderers make even though they think they're so much smarter than Columbo because he likes to play dumb to fool them.

The other thing I like about Columbo is that we know who the killer is from the outset, even if we've never seen the episode before, because we watch the murder happen. Columbo knows, too, even though he never witnesses the murders, because he's got a great detective's instincts about human nature. But even though Columbo knows who the murderer is, he still has to prove it. That's his *peripeteia*, which in Greek philosophy means 'discovery.' Columbo's journey is to discover the proof.

I learned about *peripeteia* in Frank Kermode's book about story telling (are you familiar with it, Jim?) It's called *The Sense of an Ending*, which some showoffy writer ripped off for the title of his novel, but don't get that book confused with Frank's brilliant one because there's no comparison, trust me.

Frank says there are a limited number of stories in the world and we already know all of them. But a good storyteller makes the discovery interesting, with unexpected twists and turns which convince us that each story is different, even though it isn't.

If you understand what I'm getting at, Jim, that's a good sign. I guess you could call it a kind of test. And after all, I am a school teacher (albeit retired) and you know how we love to administer tests, ha-ha. But seriously, Jim, that label "compatible" on some of the pictures, which is supposedly based on a

“scientific” assessment, is ridiculous, have you noticed? I specified “no religion” on my profile and they said I was “compatible” with a fellow whose favorite hobby was praying!

In your case, though, I’m more optimistic. The thing is, I don’t particularly enjoy long walks on the beach, or candlelight dinners, or some of the other cornball things like ballroom dancing in the living room that some people put in their personal profiles because they think that stuff sounds romantic. What I do like to do is think. You could say thinking is my hobby, but it’s more like an obsession. A magnificent obsession, to borrow the title of that Rock Hudson movie in the 1950’s (did you ever happen to catch it on TCM, Jim?).

Some men actually like to watch me think but that’s no fun for me. I don’t want to shock you by saying this but it’s like having someone watch you masturbate. (I hope that doesn’t turn you on, Jim!)

My last boyfriend was a great thinker and witty, too. We were an item for fourteen years but he was married and the girlfriend always loses out in those situations. That’s why I had to stop drinking, because after Alex broke up with me I was a mess for several years. But I’m all healed up now and sober as a judge, if that expression still makes any sense after Brett Kavanaugh.

By the way, some fellow on the dating site recently messaged me that I was trying to drive men away with my on-line profile, but I’m really not trying to do that and I hope you don’t think so, Jim, especially if you like Columbo and you’re a real thinker and not a Republican, although I have to admit that Alex was a Republican and I still loved him.

Spoiler Alert: I adore animals and have many of them. Two dogs, three cats, two turtles, a rabbit, two parrots, a rooster and a leopard gecko. I tell you this right up front, Jim, because there was a guy recently who “liked” me but he turned out to be deathly allergic to animals and acted like I wanted to kill him when he came to take me out for dinner and spotted the menagerie.

In addition to animals, I have many good friends, but a lot of them have moved to Montana and upstate New York and Belarus and Long Beach so I don't get to see them very often. It can get lonely, I have to admit, when the only man in your life is a dead, one-eyed actor playing a fictitious character in a TV series that ended in 2003.

Anyway, you know enough about me by now to decide if you're interested, Jim. We could just meet for coffee sometime, no biggie, or go see a movie together, there's a new one about a female detective who turns out to be a serial killer that I'm really anxious to see.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Tammy

Freemartins

CAMILLE MEYER

Giant land eroded and what fell through the clouds underneath it accumulated into land far down below. No rain came, crops failed, and the giants starved before and even after they ate their own children. Jug did not have any so when she saw Q's children all alone she quickly swallowed them whole. Something happened to the sixth child inside Jug so that then there were five.

Q was plenty starved himself and figured out who ate his children. Jug was now his property and so he went looking for her. While Q hunted Jug, giant land stopped breaking down. Fields were planted, the crops grew and the giants repopulated. The pursuit changed: Q didn't want to eat them anymore now that he could feed them. He chased Jug to the very end of giant land. She was so scrawny from running. She hadn't time to touch the five children in her belly. Exhausted, Jug fell over the edge and down the skies on the ground far below. Her belly broke freeing Q's children but they only grew up to be human.

In Reverse

CAMILLE MEYER

Jug, the smallest giant with the biggest hands, stood among the humans again. Most of her fit in with them but it was the parts that did not which mattered more. Looking around where she'd fallen this time, Jug surveyed few resources of significant height. Her hands were still the biggest thing, so she used those to reach home. Her giant hands stretched higher and higher up the human skies and disappeared through the clouds.

Jug got a good grip on something that felt like dirt. While the humans were looking the other way, she wrested giant land out of heaven and repositioned it below human land. There suddenly wasn't a cloud in the human sky. Jug dragged her baggy arms to the end of human land. She took one step off and fell back into giant land.

The giants hit their heads on human land. For that reason, giant land had to go back on top. Q, who caught Jug mid fall, put her right back in human land. Q and all the other giants squatted as Jug's hands got a grip and pulled giant land out from under the humans and put them back where they used to be.



The Story of What's Not Done

MELISSA KNOX

A yellowing newspaper clipping big as my high school diploma hung opposite the toilet. I wondered why the owners of our rented cottage had framed it. Why on the wall opposite the toilet and washing machine?

The shower stood close enough to mottle the page. Were you supposed to read before you sat on the toilet? After? Halfway through the announcements of engagements, weddings, and wills, the name of the owner's "eldest daughter" and her fiancé appeared. No red or gold pen outlines the notice, as it might if my mother had been in charge. No arrows. No shiny stars. No exclamation points.

Toward the bottom, after a string of Miss (never Ms., and this in 2003) so-in-sos, the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Etc., marrying Mr. Whosises, I found an unexpectedly contained firestorm: The marriage between Miss Josephine Somebody and Grenadier Judson Whomever will now not take place.

Jane Austen's descendants could base a Netflix series on that. If I'd lived in the world of our hosts, I asked myself, what sort of person would I have been? I went to school with girls whose families, derived from the original Four Hundred, owned houses in East Hampton, employed uniformed maids. I have a vague acquaintance with basic rules of such families, like the one restricting your appearance in the newspaper to the occasions of your birth, your engagement, your marriage, and your death. Not one of those girls had ever seen her mother squeal, "Your brother's been arrested for the wrong kind of cigarettes!" scandalizing her small-town guests by vaulting from the dinner table to rescue him, still reeking of marijuana, from the 26th Precinct police station. No, those girls didn't do scandal. Scandal was "not done." I envied this rule for a very long time.

I remember other, unspoken rules. In first grade, I invited a

classmate to my birthday party. Her mother, who lived on Park Avenue in the seventies, phoned my mother and said, “we don’t go to that part of town.” That part of town, the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Riverside Drive and 113th street, is currently prime real estate, but back in the sixties it was *déclassé*—because residents belonged to the middle class. My piano-teacher father from a small Southern town, my grandmother’s failure to be admitted to The Cosmopolitan Club, didn’t rate. Nobody in our family got listed in The Social Register.

My classmate’s mother offered regrets when she turned down the invitation to my seventh birthday party. She was a lady-who-lunched, who never left Park Avenue except to shop on Fifth, who went to “the country,” for the weekend, or flew to Europe. I felt shamed by the rejection, which told me once and for all that I wasn’t one of them.

My parents had no clue what was “done” or “not done,” and though I strained to “belong” and figure out rules that seemed cruelly obscure, I never got past the notions that if we bought Wonder Bread or I named my doll “a nice, normal name,” as I thought, like “Susy,” or wore Peter-Pan collar blouses instead of weird V-necks, then we’d pass muster. Entirely out of my depth, I never went to social dancing school or knew what “debutante” meant until I was in college. There, I got invited to a fraternity’s freshman party, as I discovered, because “your last name doesn’t end in a vowel.” The fraternity catered, it turned out, exclusively to young men descended from Dutch reformers, Boston Brahmins, and Southern planters—although a few Catholics and Jews seem to have been admitted, on the grounds that they passed as Protestant. Money, or membership in the tribe of Kennedys, rendered these boys eligible for marriage among the elite.

The announcement of a marriage not taking place, the names of the guilty parties proclaimed in print, seems tantamount to public shaming. Why was such information hanging on the bathroom wall? Why hadn’t the hosts snipped

out that part? Possibly for the same reasons they'd left their daughter's engagement visible, but hard to find. One doesn't call attention to these things. If one must display them, and one breaks the rules when one does, then one does so discreetly. You'd never talk about taking a dump or throwing sweaty clothes in the washing machine, so it's marginally acceptable to place a marriage announcement up on the wall of the room where unmentionables are deposited—also a spot ideal for informing on a marriage that will “now not take place.”

I thought of my parents, whose marriage should never have taken place. For them, such an announcement would have been a godsend. I never really knew what my father thought of marrying my mother—I suspect he had gotten desperate, and considered my mother socially superior. She came from money, if not class.

My mother actually told me: “Well, I wanted babies. He was a man.” I sometimes imagine the whole thing getting called off—my father shouting “Hallalujah! I'm free,” careering off to a favorite bar with three male friends, all of whom buy him double scotches, slap him on the back, and say, “close shave, buddy.”

My mother I see buying a ticket on the Queen Elizabeth for a standard stateroom below decks. She'd be pale and teary, but she'd have pluck and her canvases and her paints. While lost in the rendering of a stirring scene somewhere in the Lake District, oil paint decorating her hair, a wild gleam in her eye, she'd meet a shepherd or a farmer who didn't mind her silly ways, marry, and live happily ever after. My father would have been better off as a player, squiring girl after girl after girl out for the evening, before returning to his true love, practicing the piano.

If their marriage should never have taken place, I'm the rogue daughter springing from the need to observe their mistake. I'm the one who enjoys framing thoughts on the wall of my mind. I'm yellowing with age myself, graduating to the time when I don't give a damn what anyone thinks. I'm putting up my thoughts where the shower won't splash them, and where, I

hope, they'll have better companionship than the toilet and the washing machine.

I'm surprised to find myself grateful I didn't grow up in the world of that girl whose mother wouldn't let her come to my birthday party. If I had, I might never have learned to tell my story—stuck in that elite world where talking about family matters is “not done.”

Poor old Miss Josephine Somebody and Grenadier Judson Whomever, the ones whose reasons for cancelling their marriage we never get to know—I wonder if either would have wanted, or been able, to tell the story of their failed romance? And I—had I come from their ilk, I might not have had a story to tell, since bad behavior, apart from getting drunk or letting your mother mastermind your wedding, is “not done.” Storytelling is just “not done.”

No, I'm not one of them. Bullhorn in hand, I'd blare from the rooftop news of the marriage that didn't take place. I'd scan that tiny print announcement, magnify it, add marginalia in bright colors, mount the work on a scaffold. To the tune of the Radetsky March, I'd Da Vinci the work of art down the street, billboard it, marry it to public consciousness.

Vitruvian man, move over. Proportion is to story as detail is to life. Big, bigger, biggest.

Haircut

Arthur Plotnik

"A haircut is a metaphysical operation." – Julio Cortazar

An elderly gent walks into a barbershop he's never patronized. One of the crew, a haircutter in his early twenties, motions him to an empty chair. The man, bald on top except for a scattering of feathery hairs, gives his instructions: "Leave enough side hair to comb over the ears, taper the back slightly, trim the sideburns, and please—don't touch any hairs on top." "No problem," says the barber, who turns out to be Jordanian-American, soon headed to Jordan to attend a wedding. The other barbers are also Middle Eastern, calling across the room in throaty dialects,

Meanwhile, on three overhead TVs, Croatia and Denmark slug it out in a World Cup Round of Sixteen. The young barber stares at the nearest screen as he sets the man up in the chair. "You follow World Cup?" he asks. The man shrugs, hoping his crucial instructions weren't lost in the crowd noise. He repeats them. The barber glances at him. "No problem."

So says the barber with a festive wedding party on his mind. But I happen to be the man, the gent, the guy in the chair. And this is not a joke.

What is it about that vestigial patch of fur we maintain on our heads? Why do we obsess on it? Nurture, shape, coddle, and cling to it? Devote shameful amounts of time and money to its dressing, clipping, and grooming? How did this cluster of follicles come to signal our potency, fertility, attitudes, the way people see us and how we see ourselves? That one—blonde, redhead, gray, dreadlocks, permed, buzzcut, quiff, man-bun, bangs, ducktail, Afro, comb-over, balding . . .

Some people might wonder about a bald guy so concerned with his last few hairs. Some barbers think it's funny. The old joke: *Elderly balding guy*— "I want a haircut." *Barber*— "Which one?" I'd heard them all, having been balding since my twenties. Over the decades I watched my pate assert itself like a dune pushing through sparse grasses. I was okay with it. I could still rely on a few tenacious strands plus side and back hair to underscore whatever statement I was after at the time—arty, rebellious, professional—whatever hair needed to do to synch with aspirations and help express a "self."

Haircuts were only part of my statement package, no big deal. And they rarely went awry as long as I could point to something resembling a part and guide barbers accordingly: *Don't touch anything above the part, leave the sides long enough to cover the ears, taper the back*. As a rule I could rely on traditional, seasoned barbers to hear me and do the job—just a nice trim. I didn't want a toupee or transplant or hair plugs. I didn't want a trendy chop from franchise hirees who had barely put away their toy scissors. I didn't need salon stylists or minimalists to shape a few hairs into art. What I wanted was a barber who could, according to my instructions, trim those hairs into *not nothing*.

Even with my scalp emerging over the decades, I was usually perceived as younger than my true years, taking after my mother's side. I'd gotten so used to being seen as "still youthful" that I was blindsided by an age at which being seen as anything but *old* is a rarity. And then that big number slammed into me. To the inheritors of the world I was officially history, cosmic dust in pants; but to myself I remained the person who was always there and still had form, substance, individuality, will, capacity for joy and sorrow. I could not, would not, lose my self-perceived identity, one of the last things we can strive to control along with the haircuts that help define it.

Elderly women and men, their identity in the world fading, often scrape some presence out of interchanges with their hair professionals—as they do with their caregivers, doctors, pastors, and bank clerks—people whose duty it is to look at them and listen and respond. A hairdresser’s attentions may be the most high-touch service of the lot. My wife thinks of it as a head massage. Sometimes, at retirement facilities like the one my (wig-wearing) mother died in, appointments at the hairdresser’s are more eagerly anticipated than visits from family, especially family with no patience for bantering, coddling, or true engagement.

Among a haircutter’s skills, bantering is as critical as scissoring as long as it doesn’t distract from the procedure. In certain cultures the banter rises to high art and entertainment. All I ask is a decent attempt. At one shop I patronized for a while I alternated between a banter-free woman from Albania and a banter-loving grandmother from the Dominican Republic. The Albanian was more efficient at a trim, but I favored the Dominican who coddled me, told stories, and effused over my crappy Spanish. On the minus side she liked finishing the job with a voluptuous application of gel though I’d asked her not to. I’d let it go, sweetly overruled like a grandson who doesn’t know what’s good for him, leaving with a glazed head.

“Jordanian wedding not like American,” my barber was saying as he began scissoring. “Is two big parties, one only for women, one for men. So much fun.” That was his jab at banter, and I appreciated it; but I feared he’d be distracted if I encouraged more of it right now. Besides, I’d become engaged in the World Cup match, watching the black-clad Croatian team dominate play with sneaky passes and steals. “Not so different here,” I mumbled to him, my eyes on the TV. I wasn’t seeing it that well—I’d pocketed my glasses. But I was feeling the calm that sets in when a barber first couches the head to position it. I surrendered to his hands and watched the ball bounce around the screen in a blur, mesmerized, occasionally side-glancing at the

gray fluff falling to my shoulders like soft snow.

I'd wandered into this shop only after walking into my regular place and finding that a new and unknown barber had replaced Frank, the last of a family haircutting dynasty and the last barber to understand my elderly-bald-guy's identity crisis. Frank had finally retired after soldiering on for years as a throat-cancer survivor. When I'd first met him, just months earlier, he looked like a cartoon figure, a lovable one, with a Bugs-Bunny grin between a white moustache and a knobby jaw that now lacked its underside. He could no longer vocalize, but communicated, even bantered, with a digital writing tablet and strained whispers. In my first visit he asked what I did; then, in pink script on the black screen, *What kind of writing? Where can I read it?* Gentle, attentive, quick to flash the toothy grin, he was adored by his customers and, as the shop's sole barber, always busy. I would have to wait but it was worth it: Frank was the barber I'd been yearning for after a recent spate of indifferent and sometimes talentless cutters, like the divot-taker in a shop called "Shearly Elegant." (The inelegant pun should have alerted me.)

But Frank was a barbering maestro and he listened, having as clientele many elderly men with a fixed notion of a haircut, one they'd developed over decades. Frank's own hair was dense and as sturdy as a scrub brush, but he understood that the fewer the hairs on a hoary head the more each mattered to the customer's self-image—and that the customer's self-image was the one that counted. It was as if Frank lived by the Biblical phrase, "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Luke 12:7), declaring that even such minute aspects of our lives mattered to the Creator. One barber I'd lately abandoned, a real sourpuss, had balked at trimming my hair as requested. "It looks lousy," he told me. "Cut it all off, you'll look a hell of a lot better." *Maybe so, I'd thought in that final visit, but not to me, and I count.* Like most people, he saw my scalp as eighty-percent empty, not a

precious twenty-percent full.

Sadly, by the time I'd found Frank he was already winding up his career, breaking my heart when he talked of imminent retirement. It was like finding love too late in life. One day I walked in to see a hulky stranger cutting hair, explaining that he'd bought the business. The place was full and I didn't have time for—or much interest in—waiting. I walked a few blocks to the nearest barber shop, where the young Jordanian beckoned me to a chair.

“Hey,” I called, turning away from the World Cup during a commercial. “Don't cut so much!” Even without my glasses, I'd noticed hair flying like wool at a shearing. The sides felt too shortened already and he was clipping at the top. “No top hairs!” I reminded him over the din of the place. “It's okay, it's okay,” he insisted. “I just trim ends a little. Don't worry.”

With a rueful sigh I conceded to what would be a summer cut during the hot spell we were having. Not the worst thing. And I didn't want to hassle the kid, who'd told me he'd tried studying for better jobs but found he “was only good for barber.” He'd been at it five years, which meant he'd started as a teen. I turned my attention back to the TV.

While a bad haircut can gut your spirits, a good one can restore them. When I was thirty-five, bicycling alone in rainy Brittany, a village barber not only raised my mood with a masterly razor cut, but closed shop, toured me through the local sites, and brought me home to a grand *festin* prepared by his wife. Just his debt to WWII American liberators of the region, he said.

European barbering goes back to skilled-craft guilds and beyond, when barbers were also blood-letters and surgeons. (A barber pole's red and white colors are said to stand for blood and bandages.) Naturally there were incidents of butchery by the

incompetent—certainly nothing to worry about today.

The young Jordanian whipped off the sheet and I put on my glasses for a good look in the mirror.

He had cut my hair to the roots.

I'd been butchered.

Some heads—large ones, triangular ones, muscular ones—look good, or at least appropriate, when shaved clean. No loss of self or presence. Think Patrick Stewart, Magic Johnson, Sinéad O'Connor. But mine is a smallish head, oval, teetering on an unremarkable neck. Shaved does not work for me.

What I saw in the mirror was not my head at all. What I saw was an egg. A great big zed, zero. I was gone from myself.

To my wife, who sees me as a composite of all my selves and a love object, I was still me. But sure enough, a week later in a park in New York a child ran her little bike into me. "I didn't see you," she said. I believed her. Until my hair would grow back, there would be no self here, none to me and reasonably none to most of the world.

Not that invisibility is without advantages in late life. The dictates of fashion are now optional. Bizarre outbursts and misfired witticisms vaporize above the heads of would-be listeners. The burden of individuality is lifted as one disappears into Old-Folks wallpaper. No need to trumpet one's honors and achievements; they are over, unseen, of another time. All of which makes invisibility good practice for death or Buddhism or some relinquishing of the self, if that happens to be one's thing.

It isn't mine. Not yet.



Author Profiles

Kathleen Aguero's latest book of poetry is *After That* (Tiger Bark Press). She teaches in the Solstice Low-Residency M.F.A. in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College and in Changing Lives through Literature, an alternative sentencing program. She also conducts creative writing for caregivers workshops privately and through adult and community education centers.

Victor Altshul's second and third books of poems, *Singing with Starlings* (2015) and *Ode to My Autumn* (2017), were published by Antrim House, and two of his poems have appeared in the *Hartford Courant*. His work has recently been published in *Apricity Magazine*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Cape Rock*, *Carbon Culture Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *Chantwood Magazine*, *Coachella Review*, *Door Is A Jar Magazine*, *Existere*, *The Perch*, and *Studio One*. He is active on the board of the Connecticut Poetry Society and has given several readings throughout the state. Victor is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Medical School and is on the faculty of the latter. He has been in continuous private practice of psychiatry since 1967.

Ace Boggess is author of four books of poetry, most recently *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So* (Unsolicited Press, 2018) and *Ultra Deep Field* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2017), and the novel *A Song Without a Melody* (Hyperborea Publishing, 2016). His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *RATTLE*, *River Styx*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and many other journals. He received a fellowship from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts and spent five years in a West Virginia prison. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Claudia Buckholts received Creative Writing Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and Massachusetts Artists Foundation, and the Grolier Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Minnesota Review*, *New American Writing*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Southern Review*, and other journals; and in two books, *Bitterwater* and *Traveling Through the Body*.

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight*, Thames & Hudson, 2002 and *Heat*, Charta, Milano, 2008. His work has appeared in numerous journals including *The New England Review*, *New York Quarterly*, and *North American Review*. His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC.

John Chavers enjoys working as an artist and photographer. His work has recently been featured in *Oakland Review*, *The Emerson Review*, *Azahares Literary Magazine*, *THAT Literary Review*, and *The Healing Muse*. This coming September 2019 he will be a guest artist with The Gilfélag Society in Akureyri, Iceland.

Grant Clauser lives in Pennsylvania and works as an editor, writer and teacher. He is the author of the books *Reckless Constellations*, *The Magician's Handbook*, *Necessary Myths* and *The Trouble with Rivers*. Poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Poet Lore*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry* and others. Twitter: @uniambic

Alejandro Escudé's first book of poems, *My Earthbound Eye*, was published in September 2013 upon winning the 2012 Sacramento Poetry Center Award. He received a master's degree in creative writing from UC Davis and, among many other journals, his poems have appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Verse News*, *Phoebe*, *Poet Lore*, *Rattle*, and *Tuck Magazine*. His work has also appeared in various poetry anthologies.

Brandon French is the only daughter of an opera singer and a Spanish dancer, born in Chicago sometime after The Great Fire of 1871. She has been (variously) assistant editor of *Modern Teen Magazine*, a topless Pink Pussycat cocktail waitress, an assistant professor of English at Yale, a published film scholar, playwright and screenwriter, Director of Development at Columbia Pictures Television, an award-winning advertising copywriter and Creative Director, a psychoanalyst in private practice, and a mother. Sixty-six of her stories have been accepted for publication by literary journals and anthologies, she's been nominated twice for a Pushcart, she was an award winner in the 2015 Chicago Tribune Nelson Algren Short Story Contest, and her short story

collection, “If One of Us Should Die, I’ll Move to Paris,” was just accepted for publication in 2019.

Carol Coven Grannick is a poet and children’s author whose middle grade novel in verse, *Reeni’s Turn* (Fitzroy Books) will debut in September, 2020. Her poetry and children’s fiction have appeared in numerous magazines, including *Hunger Mountain*, *Highlights*, *Cricket*, and *Ladybug* and as writer and clinical social worker, she tracks and explores the writer’s emotional journey for Cynthia Leitich Smith’s Cynsations blog (The Writer’s Heart) and in the Illinois SCBWI Prairie Wind (The Inside Story), focusing on how to create and maintain emotional resilience.

Vincent Green’s poems have appeared in *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Country Journal* and *Cottonwood*. He has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Virginia.

Jeremiah Gilbert is an award-winning photographer and avid traveler. He likes to travel light and shoot handheld. His travels have taken him to over eighty countries spread across five continents. His photography has been published internationally, in both digital and print publications, and has been exhibited worldwide. His hope is to inspire those who see his work to look more carefully at the world around them in order to discover beauty in unusual and unexpected places.

Richard Jones is the author of seven books from Copper Canyon Press, including a new book of poems, *Stranger on Earth*, released in June 2018. Editor of the literary journal *Poetry East* and its many anthologies—such as *Paris*, *The Last Believer in Words*, and *Bliss*—he also edits the free worldwide poetry app, “The Poet’s Almanac.” A new book, *Paris*, is forthcoming.

Yasmin Mariam Kloth writes creative nonfiction and poetry. Her work has aired on NPR and appeared on npr.org. She co-translated a book of poetry by the French-Canadian author Mona Latif Ghattas called *Sails For Exile*, and most recently published a piece of creative nonfiction in the online literary magazine *Gravel*. She lives in Cincinnati, OH with her husband and

their young daughter, who is a never ending source of youthful inspiration.

Melissa Knox's book, *Divorcing Mom: A Memoir of Psychoanalysis* (Cynren, 2019) received praise from Phyllis Chesler, Helen Fremont, and Ruth Wariner. Recent work has appeared in *Lunch Ticket*, *Eclectica*, *Streetlight*, and *Empty Mirror*. *Concho River Review* nominated Melissa's essay, "A Whale of a Gift," for a Pushcart. She writes a blog, *The Critical Mom*.

Camille Meyer has appeared in print in *Storm Cellar*, *Gone Lawn*, etcetera, *Sleepingfish*, *Meat for Tea*, *Künstliches Licht*, *Big Bridge Magazine* and *Drain Magazine*.

Leonard Neufeldt was born in Yarrow, British Columbia, a hamlet of refugees mainly from Stalin's USSR. Neufeldt has resided in Texas, New Jersey, Indiana, Europe, and Turkey. He is the author, editor, or associate editor of eighteen books. He and his wife, Mera, live in Gig Harbor, WA.

Christopher Nielsen is a writer and photographer residing in California. He is currently working on a book of PhotoPoetry. He loves to travel the backroads and feels most at home in nature. Since the death of his wife of over thirty years he has written a number of poems that deal with loss, grief, love and hope.

Kenneth Pobo has a book of prose poems from Clare Songbirds Publishing House called *The Atlantis Hit Parade*. In addition to *West Texas Literary Review*, his work has appeared in *Nimrod*, *Atlanta Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Hawaii Review*, and elsewhere.

Lee Potts recently returned to writing poetry after a 25-year break. His work has appeared in several journals including *Ghost City Review*, *8 Poems*, *UCity Review*, *Sugar House Review*, and *Barren Magazine*. He also has work forthcoming in *Saint Katherine Review* and *Parentheses Journal*. He lives near Philadelphia with his wife and their youngest kid still at home. He is online at leepotts.net and Twitter @LeePottsPoet.

Arthur Plotnik is the author of nine books, among them *Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style* and two Book-

of-the-Month-Club selections. Among his many publications are award-winning essays, biography, short fiction, poetry, columns, and a YA novel. He studied under Philip Roth at the Iowa Writers Workshop and worked for the American Library Association and others as magazine and book editor. He lives in Chicago with his wife, the artist Mary H. Phelan.

Mark Ralph-Bowman has worked in Uganda and Nigeria and is now based in the UK. His plays for both adults and young people have been performed in Nigeria, Birmingham, Manchester and Oxford. His non-fiction and critical work has appeared in international journals such as *Africa Now* and *Index on Censorship* and on the BBC World Service.

Maria Riley, after working for almost a decade as a social media consultant, now solely focuses on her first loves: writing and photography. Her work has appeared in *New York Family Magazine* and *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal*. She is currently working on a memoir, *Falling Waters*. She posts her photo journey on Instagram @lifeofrileynyc.

Gerard Sarnat is a physician who has built and staffed homeless clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. He has been nominated for Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards and is published in academic-related journals including Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Virginia Commonwealth, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan and the University of Edinburgh. Gerry's writing has also appeared widely in such outlets as *Gargoyle*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *MiPOesias*, *Margie*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Danse Macabre*, *Canary Eco*, *Military Experience and the Arts*, *Cliterature*, *Brooklyn Review*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Review* and *The New York Times*. His piece KADDISH FOR THE COUNTRY was selected for pamphlet distribution nationwide on Inauguration Day 2016. His poem "Amber of Memory" was chosen for his 50th Harvard reunion Dylan symposium. He's also authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014), and *Melting the Ice King* (2016). Gerry's been married since 1969, with three kids plus four grandkids (and more on the way).

Nancy Takacs's *The Worrier* poems received the Juniper Prize for Poetry and was published by U. of Massachusetts Press in 2017. In addition to winning Pushcart Prize, she was the 2018 winner of the 15 Bytes Poetry Award and a finalist for the National Poetry Series. Previous books of poetry include *Preserves*; and *Blue Patina* — winner of the 2016 15 Bytes Book Award for Poetry; and four chapbooks. A former wilderness instructor, she lives in Utah and Wisconsin, where she hikes, swims, gardens, and teaches workshops to poetry lovers with early Alzheimer's.

Erin Wilson's poems have appeared in, or are forthcoming in, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Adirondack Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The Curlew*, *The Meadow*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Juked* and *Kestrel*. She lives and writes in a small town in northern Ontario, Canada.

Jonathan Yungkans is a Los Angeles-based poet, writer and photographer with a love for the sea and local history and the outlook (and resulting questions) of an outsider aware that he didn't quite fit into his surroundings. He received his Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Redlands and spent subsequent years as a teacher, magazine and book editor and truck driver. He is currently in the MFA Writing program at California State University, Long Beach. His works have appeared in *Lime Hawk*, *Twisted Vine Literary Journal*, *West Texas Literary Review* and other publications.

