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"Midwinter Tid-bits"

I'm sitting in my office, staring at the keyboard. Quite certain that I want to say something, but not so sure of what I want to say. Does this ever happen to you? Finding yourself a technological variant of tongue-tied? What do you do to overcome that hurdle? Do you step away from the keyboard, put the computer in sleep-mode and do something else until you can find the starting point? Perhaps you tug out a composition notebook, sharpen a pencil and make lists instead: groceries you need this week. Books you've promised yourself to read. Or do you catch up on your administrative duties? Clear the inbox, so to speak. Sit back down and determinedly send out all those emails you've been promising. Or are all of these things terribly clear flags that reveal my age. Wow, you're old, you're thinking. Everything you just talked about are things I never do.

Yeah, I'm older than I was this time last year. More than is normal, whatever that means. I forget what that's called, aging faster than your chronological age. An existential hiccup in relativity, where your face still looks good but your hands and neck give you away. In actuality, my neck isn't something I can even see. I stopped trimming my beard just after Thanksgiving – I mean winter was coming and I needed to work on my sword-handling. Yes, I was behind on that mangled pop-reference, too. It's my approach to the world that is the tell-tale. I'm four or five of the seven dwarfs: grumpy, sleepy, dopey, hesitant and attitudinal.

Am I watching too much television? Probably. I have the time, after all, and what better use for time than to waste it? At the moment, I'm letting a manuscript *ferment* – that time you give something you've written before you come back and shred it-edit. How else can you work up the courage to murder your darlings? I've started something new, and it smacks of the thing I just finished, so I don't have a lot of confidence in it. So I'm mostly...uninvolved, right now. There's no sitting in coffee-shops perusing Facebook. No walking up and down the grocery aisles seeing what canned vegetables are on special. No more flipping back and forth between the news-outlets to see who's more unhinged. And I don't do most of the other social media and communication tools that are available out there in the app-verse. I've been specifically instructed by my daughters to avoid Instagram and Snap-chat, for reasons that apparently don't require explanation, because they have provided none. And suffice to say, Tik-Tok's popularity eludes me.

I always assumed that when I hit an age-benchmark like...wherev-

er the hell I am at the moment, I would be recognized by my choice of shoes, or the indelible deli-mustard stains on my shirt. I thought I would go gently into that good night humming along with something or other from the playlist in my head and young people would think “whoa, way to jam, old man.” Ironically.

But it seems that I’m slip-sliding away, technologically. This past year I ignored so much in the interest of my WIP that I missed out on what a *subreddit* is. And a *substack*. And *subsmash*. Don’t even mention any sub without real tuna. Frankly, at the moment, anything with the prefix “sub” in it is not my favorite. Subdural Hematoma comes to mind.

I feel like what’s happening is that things are mutating so quickly that I’m always about forty-five minutes behind. I’m late, hopping on the following train, the uncool one, the one that stops at every station and gets me to work tardy no matter that I have a seat and my ticket is transferrable. What is the cure for this? How can I get back into the mix? Why do I even want to get back in the mix? What is wrong with me?

Take a breath, fella. Go outside and walk around the block. You’re not getting old, you’re acting old.

And let me clarify: I’m not...worried about becoming my parents. I’m neither smart enough to be like them, nor have I had the serious world-experience that they did to form me into someone worthy of being part of the greatest generation, if you follow that sort of naming convention. I have, however, an observational curiosity about my own development along the way and find it interesting that my musical tastes lean toward the bookends – Steely Dan and...Billie Eilish – something, I think, that a therapist might be able to wheedle loose from my cerebrum, but I’m not going there. I mean, you know, into a doctor’s office. I don’t have a hazmat suit, but I do wear an old olive-green Navy coat and a scarf, and my mask. Although by the time you read this, it may be summer again. Perhaps I need a different mask, something with Edwardian florals on it. Yes, that’s just the thing.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

getting caught in the rain...

"The Power of Music"

by Ron Torrence

Rachel opened the door of her townhouse to see Patrick, Bay City's leading impresario, pick nervously at the sleeve of his navy-blue blazer.

"I'm in a terrible jam!" he said.

Rachel glanced over his head at the main spire of Bay City University and the early moon rising above. Patrick was the most colorful character she'd met since coming here to teach music theory and violin five years ago. Always in a tizzy over his latest problem. But a good heart she thought.

"Drink?" she asked.

"A dollop of Fireball would help."

On her way to the kitchen Rachel looked thoughtfully at the priceless violin she'd set on her piano. Special delivered just that morning.

Drinks in hand Rachel led Patrick onto her small patio to enjoy the spring evening. No sooner had they sat than Patrick's eyes pleaded to Rachel through gold-rimmed glasses.

"I need a big, big favor." He clutched the glass with both hands. "Next week is the inaugural concert of our beautiful new hall."

"I have my ticket."

"Of course. Everybody who's anybody in this state will be there. I somehow manage to get Hillary Hahn for the inaugural concert and a week beforehand she shuts a suitcase on her pinky and can't play."

Patrick rolled his eyes to the

sky.

"Short of Joshua Bell who could I find to replace her?"

"Well," With a sideways glance at Patrick Rachel took a bigger than usual sip of vodka tonic. "On such short notice—"

"A name's come up. She's never performed in public but she's a legend to most every music lover around here. Under the circumstances I thought maybe she'd agree to give her first public performance."

Rachel stood like a startled animal.

"Please *please* say you'll do it."

She stumbled to her kitchen to gulp a glass of water.

Patrick came up behind her.

"You all right?"

"You've put me in terrible spot."

Patrick touched her shoulder lightly.

"I know how hard this is for you. I shouldn't have asked. But I'm so desperate."

Rachel stared into the sink heart hammering like a little girl watching herself swirl down the drain.

"I hate to let you down," she whispered. "But you know how I am."

He nodded sadly.

"I just hoped against hope."

He turned to leave. "I can find somebody from the school so don't worry about it. But absolutely

nobody would have been as riveting as you."

Rachel listened to his footsteps slow fade down the hallway. She edged away from the sink. Just perhaps—at long last— tonight might be different. She hurried to catch Patrick at the door.

"Can I call you tomorrow?"

"There'd be just enough time," Patrick face lit up with hope.

Rachel shook her head ever so slightly.

"Maybe—"

"I'll be by my phone."

Rachel watched him stride down the brick sidewalk into the turn-of-the-century neighborhood of Bay City. She remained in the doorway to gaze up at the line of stately elms rising through the late dusk into a surprisingly bright blue sky above.

She shut the door. Just one step back into her living room and second thoughts already. Like Sisyphus she rolled her yearning to play up the hill only to have panic topple her back to the bottom.

She paused by the glass coffee table to pick up the letter that had come with the violin. Ironic—the letter from Laura Biddle and now the concert. Laura had been the neighbor across the street all during Rachel's childhood. Her spiritual mother until Rachel graduated from college and moved far away.

Dearest Rachel,

It's been an effort to compose this. You and Bobby were so close until you parted ways in high school. I know that broke your heart as it did mine. Your mutual devotion to music was

such a bond I thought you two might get married someday. But that was never to be—

Now it's my sad task to tell you that our precious son Bobby died after routine surgery. He fell victim to an infection and never left the hospital.

But Bobby's tragic death brought inspiration too. No matter how hard things were he always found the way to something better. After his wretchedly unhappy marriage ended in divorce along an equally unhappy accounting career, Bobby returned to the violin—the great love of his life. He enrolled in the Oberlin Conservatory three years ago and just recently graduated with honors in violin and music theory. Then he won the grand prize at the George Szell music festival and a contract for a year of recitals throughout America.

So you see dearest Rachel though Bobby's life was cut cruelly short it ended in personal triumph because he died reunited with his deepest purpose. His father and I placed the score of Bach's Chaconne in his hands as he lay so peacefully. You know how much he loved the D Minor Sonata. That's what he played in Cleveland. If there is any meaning to this universe we feel that Bobby lives on somewhere with the music he loved so much.

Despite what happened, you were his true love. His father and I feel that he would embrace this gift of his beautiful violin.

Please play it. Perhaps it will help you break out of the terrors that have silenced your music far too long.

Rachel had sprawled on the couch sobbing for her old friend and for a short while her lover. Her feelings for Bobby never completely died. After all these years to find out they had stayed with him too.

She set the letter aside and went to the piano to pick up the violin. She ran through a few scales and tuned it, luxuriating in its rich tone, then began Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata which she and Bobby were to play in the recital that never was. She felt his presence playing beside her once again.

A knock at the door brought her back.

Rachel set her violin back on the piano. She slowly opened the door to see her best friend John Taylor, the ruddy well-built pianist who taught a master class in the studio next to hers.

"There've been the rumors," he sputtered. "People say you're the genius who's never played. But I never could have imagined what I just heard!"

Rachel stepped back like she'd been slapped.

"I had no idea anyone was listening!" She struggled to regain her composure. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Fifteen minutes."

If it had to be anybody, thank god it was Johnny.

"How . . ." he struggled for the

words.

Rachel motioned him to come in.

"I had no inkling," he said edging part way through the door. "I've overheard a few notes when you demonstrated something in class. Just from that I knew you were extraordinary."

He shook his head in disbelief.

"But my god!"

"Now you know," she said softly. With a little wave she motioned for Johnny to come the rest of the way in.

"Please let me play the piano part with you."

He walked past her to sit gingerly at the piano as if the slightest misstep would cause her to vanish in a puff of smoke. That sent her pacing around her living room, catching a glimpse of her slender figure in a window like a Whistler shadow haunting the house. She stopped in front of the window.

"Did Patrick send you?"

She peeked over her shoulder to see him nod sheepishly.

"He begged me to come over right away. Said you might play."

"I don't think I can."

She lapsed into silence.

"Please let's play the Schubert together."

She waved her hands as if warding off the devil.

"Rachel it's just me. Your friend John."

Struggling to calm herself, Rachel turned from the window but remained rooted to the spot.

"At least share this with someone who cares for you so much."

Hesitantly Rachel went over to

pick up the violin. Before she could back out John began the opening bars. He really did play well.

Schubert took care of the rest of it. For the next twenty minutes their friendship merged with the music.

"To finally share this," she said after the last note.

"I'm here as long as you need me."

But the passageway to her past pulled her back all too easily.

The days after the tragedy of that first-grade play grew into weeks then months. Her father had taken only the slightest notice of the whole affair from the beginning. Mother never mentioned it again. Rachel's parents grew ever more preoccupied with their own lives until Rachel felt invisible in her own home. She slipped into a private silence where any hope of speaking to other people became mummified like a bug wrapped in the spider web of mutism.

Rachel resumed pacing the living room. She paused by a Degas dancer.

"He was blind when he sculpted this."

She brushed her fingers over the crescent curve Degas had molded in the dancer's body capturing the moment just as she reached behind to catch her foot in midair.

"My life's so ruled by fear I can only perform for a sculpture."

"Has no one ever heard you play?"

"Just a handful of teachers who won my trust. But only in the safety of their studios. That's why my

degree is music theory. I could never do the recitals for a degree in violin."

She'd had a few sporadic affairs, the kind a reasonably attractive woman can get into. But it was hard to put her trust in a man.

Playing Schubert together like this had strengthened her trust in John.

"You've been a good friend."

She took a deep breath . . . it was now or never.

She returned to the window seat to begin her story.

"The terrors began when I was in a first-grade play. It morphed into a case of selective mutism that lasted for years and years. Meaning I only spoke to a select few people. Never with anyone else.

"Anyway a teacher had transcribed a P.D. Eastman story for the stage. About a lost little girl searching for her mother. She meets a succession of animals and asks each one if it's her mother. At the end Mother herself was to walk on the stage and say, 'I am your mother.' Presumably to rapturous applause. She'd lobbied relentlessly to get that little part. It was her sole interest. I was just a prop."

Rachel got up from the window seat.

"Would you like a beer or something? I need a drink."

"A beer would be great."

She returned with two Yuenglings.

"I can't get over how your mother tried to steal the scene from her own daughter," John said.

"She was center stage. I was always in the wings, the late-in-life baby she didn't want. It took years

of therapy before I understood that. As a little kid what do you know but the rejection? Mother always blamed my unexpected arrival for her broken dreams."

Rachel sipped the beer.

"This is our beginning,"

Mother hissed at me. Clutching a bouquet of flowers she shoved me onto the stage. I'll never erase from my mind those first steps in front so many people. I had to walk all the way to a scared boy wearing a dog costume. I don't know how I made it as far as I did."

"It must have been pure terror."

"Paralyzing. Before I got to the boy I just stopped, frozen, arms dangling by my sides and peed my pants.

"I ran off the stage wailing. All I wanted was to throw myself in mother's arms. Instead she threw her bouquet on the floor and walked away without a glance at me. My teacher swept me up in her arms but no mother's hug."

"Did your mother ever hug you?"

"Never."

She clenched her fists.

"Music is as important to my life as breathing! But I'm so straightjacketed by fear I can never perform. It feels like I've been living in an asylum!"

She looked beseechingly at John.

"Every day first thing when I come home is play Bach. Year after year every partita, every sonata. If I can never share my music with the world it feels like I'm going to die!"

John came over to take her

hands in his.

"You're not doing this alone one minute longer."

He let go of her hands to lean back on the seat.

"Maybe playing triggers your fear, but music can set you free too. Let me tell you a story. It's about a little boy who halfway through first grade couldn't read. No one thought he'd succeed any time soon."

"You?"

"There was a lot of talk about holding me back a year. Better yet a special school for kids who weren't bright enough to keep up with normal kids."

"Obviously that wasn't true. What happened?"

"My Great Aunt Marion arrived. She was kind of my fairy godmother."

"I had one of those." Rachel glanced at the letter. "Guess I still do."

"Aunt Marion had heard all the family talk about me so it wasn't long before she appeared at the door. 'I won't have this nonsense about Johnny!' She announced she would stay until she straightened it all out. It so happened she specialized in learning disabilities. The next day she started a series of tests. Turned out I was dyslexic."

"A defective child! My parents were ashamed. Nobody was to know. Aunt Marion shushed all that. She began a special reading program and within two months I was reading with the rest of the class."

"You did it!"

"The program used touching and feeling to break the reading

code since dyslexics can't learn by phonetics. She sat me at a piano to make a musical game out of it. To everyone's astonishment I was gifted."

"And the rest is history," Rachel said.

"It was a miracle."

"I had a miracle too," Rachel said.

"Please tell me about yours."

"One day in elementary school I sat at the back of music class hiding in my cocoon of silence. A kid came by to shove a small violin in my hands without the slightest notice of me."

"The instant the violin touched my hands I was born! As if I'd always known what to do, I tucked the violin under my chin and found out I could change the sounds by moving my fingers around. I'd just seen *The Wizard of Oz*. Hearing it once was all I needed to play "Over the Rainbow" all the way through."

"The tuneless screeching of all the instruments, the desks, the room, the school all disappeared. I'd entered *my* world! I'd never leave it. Never! When I finished, I looked up into the wide-open eyes of the music teacher."

"Oh my goodness gracious Rachel!" she said. "How did you do that?"

John glanced at the silent violin on the coffee table.

"I was so lost in the music I didn't realize the teacher could hear me over the din of the classroom. The panic came as soon as I realized the teacher had been listening. But in the days after she was so supportive I slowly began to trust her. She was the first teacher

I'd talk to. She got me a better violin. Even convinced my parents to agree to violin lessons against their better judgment."

"Patrick said you might do this concert."

"I said maybe." She shook her head. "Not yes."

"What changed this from no to maybe?"

"A second miracle. A boy across the street loved the violin as much as I did. From the beginning we were inseparable."

"We took music lessons together. Practiced together. We played duets, made up songs. I began opening up to more and more people. Then in high school we dated. I was head over heels in love with him. The love he returned further eroded my fear. He talked about a public performance we'd do together. He'd done many but of course I never had. I finally said yes. At that moment I *knew* I could do it."

"What happened?"

The pain came back as if it was there and then.

"What happened Rachel?"

She looked into his eyes as if seeing him from far away.

"Bobby and I were music geeks. But you have to understand how handsome he was."

"You must have been a beauty yourself."

"I was so excruciatingly shy kids called me emo. Bobby was my lifeline to other people. He was involved. One of the most popular kids in the school."

She shrugged.

"There was this super-pretty cheerleader."

John groaned.

"On the brink of breaking out of my fear Bobby fell for another girl. Of course the concert never happened. I was shattered. It toppled me back into the mutism again. In the fifteen years since I've been able to come out it socially, but my music is forever silenced."

"Not forever Rachel. Not this time."

"Maybe."

Rachel went on to tell Johnny about Bobby's return to his spiritual roots. How he broke out of a terrible marriage—yes, it was that cheerleader—and how he turned away from an accounting career to come back to his violin. And the untimely death that silenced his gift.

"His personal triumph lives on don't you see? Just as his mother said."

She allowed herself a little sliver of possibility.

"Is it my turn now?"

"I have an idea," John said.

"You have a circle of friends who understand what you're going through. You know how much we pull for you to break out of this."

Rachel nodded.

"Maybe we have only a week but I'm sure we can do it. Tomorrow we'll play some Schubert together."

"That would be nice."

"The day after Sue will come buy and we'll ease into some trios. The next day Mark and Jocelyn will come over and we'll do some string quintets. Then the fifth day you'll play the chaconne for me. The final day we'll all return and you'll would run through your entire pro-

gram for us."

"This is cognitive behavioral therapy," Rachel said accusingly.

"Have you ever tried it?"

She shook her head.

"It's been suggested more than once but I've never had the nerve."

"When I had terrible stage fright as a kid it worked for me. Besides it'll be with your best friends."

"Well..." Rachel pondered the task before her. It was like climbing a hill to get to the concert mountain. "Considering the warm wonderful friends you mentioned... maybe I can do it."

John glanced at his watch.

"I'd better go now. You have a busy week coming up and it's important to get some rest."

* * *

On the other side of the curtain the murmur of a swelling audience grew relentlessly. Rachel begged her hands to relax their finger-tight grip on the violin before every note turned to stone.

Patrick observed her anxiously.

"You okay?"

Rachel nodded with much more determination than she felt. Patrick joined John to peek through the curtains. She softly ran through a quick scale seeking comfort in the rich tone of Bobby's violin. As her bow glided over the strings she became like a child again when each new violin had spoken to her with a unique voice.

Patrick scurried back.

"It's filling up fast!"

His excitement didn't help her nerves.

"A horde of your friends from

the university are out there."

At that moment she decided she couldn't do it. Just as she turned to run off John was at her side.

"Oh no you don't," he said.

He gently led her to the curtain.

She hesitated.

"Only you can do this," he said stepping back.

She stood on a razor edge of fear that slashed into her skin, her bones, all the way to the very guts of being or not being...

"Put your trust in Bach," John's voice was like a gentle push not Mother's brusque shove so many nightmares ago.

With a deep breath Rachel stepped out on the stage to seek her freedom.

Instead, the throng of faces floating in a sea of red seats beneath glittering chandeliers brought her face to face with a rising cobra head of terror.

Through gathering mists of delirium, she watched herself step onto a bridge arching over a pond. She gazed down at schools of brightly colored fish flashing in the light. A little girl floated among them in a billowing white dress. The girl's eyes slowly closed. Her lips parted to surrender, Rachel yielding with her, in a last dying scream.

The Bach score spread out at the end of the bridge just as John said it would. With a deep breath she put her faith in that.

She felt the violin under her chin.

She raised her bow to release

—at long last— the *Chaconne*'s first haunting notes from their incarceration in terror. She continued from Bach's simple starting point to follow his inspiration, unfolding it like the time lapse of a flower that blossomed into ever-widening circles until her violin sounded like an entire orchestra. Rachel drove Bach's complexity, pushing to the very edge of his music, her passion surging with his but always with the virtuosic control he demanded, and she possessed along with few others in the world.

Her last notes reverberated from wall to wall. She'd transformed the concert hall into a cathedral for Bach's music. After a stunned silence, rapturous applause poured down like rain on a thousand windows leaving the embers of her fear smoldering under liberation's rising sun. ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

We took the afternoon off – code for cut class after lunch through the end of the school day. Her house was walking distance from the front door of our high-school, but it took a half-hour to scale down the slope of the hill behind the school, where the student parking lot was populated with kids skipping class, eating burgers, smoking Parliaments or Kools (or the occasional doobie), then slurping Scope from a green bottle and spitting it onto the pavement before going back to the grind. There was a path down there, so we weren't the first to ever have this idea. "Watch out," she told us. "I don't want my mom to hear from the busybody neighbors that they saw me wandering around the neighborhood on a school day."

Her house was nice. She made sandwiches – bologna and American on white – and we ate them and then took aluminum and web beach chairs out into her back yard. Jim and I took off our shirts and bared our pale, almost translucent flesh to try and get some April rays, and then she came outside in a bikini – same pale skin, but so much of it. I forced myself not to look over at Jim, and with more difficulty to not stare at her. There is something about being cooped up in school all winter in blue-jeans and sweatshirts that makes suddenly seeing the glory of the human figure a shock to the system, like pure oxygen or ice water. Or maybe the analogy should be reversed – a hit of pure oxygen is like seeing someone you like who doesn't know you like them.

She had three glasses in one hand, her fingers carefully clamping them together so they wouldn't drop. In the other hand – you understand that I only just now noticed this after she walked across her back yard – she had a bottle. "Thirsty?" she asked. Jim said, "always," which was much cooler sounding than I would have been able to be. I didn't know what it was. Johnny Walker, it turned out. Red Label – a level of detail it would take a few years for me to be able to discern intelligently. She handed Jim and me our glasses, set hers down on the grass and poured us each some. Way more than a bartender would have – she had no idea what a serving was, and neither did I. Perhaps Jim did, but I doubt it.

ET - cyberspace

“We Smiled At The Strangeness”

by Bill Gillard

It is the annual science fair, and I am a judge. I've taught high school Physics for twenty years now. I get called to do science fairs pretty often. Comes with the territory. This particular fair is in a town a few over from mine. Five high schools are here, and for two hours I need to feign interest in pH graphs, conductivity, fruit flies, and dissections done by students I don't know.

I am 45 years old.

I learn from a mousy boy's poster that a periodic comet is a remnant of the creation of the solar system 4.6 billion years ago. It is massive enough to be buffeted by everything gravitationally as it makes its chaotic orbit, its outsides bombarded by the solar wind. Not bad. Thanks, I say, and move along. The boy eyes my white judge's ribbon nervously.

Just after the kid who flipped nickels one hundred thousand times, and recorded each one (Good Lord!), is a poster about the melting properties of various winter road treatments. I don't like winter driving at all. A barbaric age we live in. The poster is unattended. On the right wing of the trifold is a photo of a mangled car at the bottom of a snowy ditch. I reach out to touch it and remember a friend I loved deeply, dead just like that on an icy road. Years have passed and the wound is still fresh.

I close my eyes to try to pull her image from my memory.

When I open my eyes, I see the girl who has come back to her poster. She has a paper cup filled with water. Water is melted ice. She smiles.

Her eyes.

So familiar somehow. But she is no student of mine.

And the crooked smile.

Nice poster, I say. Tell me about it.

Her project is more memoir than anything scientific. She tells me about her family—two younger sisters, her mother—how they slid into the wrong lane on an icy road, how none of them survived.

She tells me that they had been searching for a house—the first they'd buy. Her mother wanted a log home on a river so she could canoe. The girl argued that it would be too far to travel to school and she would have no social life that far away from other people.

Secretly, she thought that her mom was too picky, that they should just buy something and it would feel like home. You should see some of the places we lived before then, she says, tilting her head to laugh as if she is pouring a small cup of happiness from a pitcher.

Her father didn't come back from Germany after the divorce, even after the accident. That's

where he's from, the girl told me. She lives with cousins on her mother's side now. He's from Germany, she told me again and finished the water.

Our children—I have none—our children—this child—are chunks of dirty ice that hurtle out of the Oort Cloud, propelled by who knows what at 40 km/sec. They all start off intact and massive and seek the warm sun that, like all desires, blinds and burns us.

Our past is the tail of a comet, chunks of our young selves careening off gloriously into color and light, trailing away from our diminishing bodies.

She tells me things about her family—secrets. I feel compelled to reciprocate. A few years back, I met a woman on a beach in Maine, I want to tell her. We both stopped and stared at each other. We shared our names and tried to figure out how we knew each other. We tried everything, interests, geography, common friends, nor were our names familiar to each other in any way. She grew up in New Hampshire, me in New York City. She went to college in Maine, I in North Carolina. And so on. There was no overlap. And yet were were certain. We smiled at the strangeness and eventually parted.

This mystical loneliness, broken parts of us melting off into the void, pieces of us shattering, our bodies diminished second by second by the light and heat and mass that calls to us across the void of loneliness.

Her mother—dead for a year—wanted a log home on a river. Her

daughter, alone now, studies road salt. I teach Physics. An hour ago, I knew a lot of things. I was a judge at this science fair, for example.

Now, right this second, I know less than nothing. ❖

"God on the John: Thoughts of a Girl on a Train"

by Kerry Johnson

The scenes speeding by the window of the train take my eyes with them, back and forth, back and forth, mesmerizing me. Like the EMDR treatment we use to help trauma survivors process the scenes in their heads.

The train is taking me home to North Carolina, from New York City where I just spent a few days trying to help my 90 yr old father and his 86 yr old wife who both had emergency hospital admissions in the past 3 weeks and were discharged together to their Lincoln Center Plaza apartment. He had congestive heart failure, then had a pacemaker put in; she had a stress induced incident of transient global amnesia. They have financial resources aplenty, but their emotional and physical strengths were depleted. My sibs and cousin, from all over the country, are taking shifts of being there with them... helping with meds, cooking, doctor's appts., business paperwork. I had no idea how to help; I have nothing to offer.

As a social worker, I wanted to arrange for them to have some longer-term in-home health services. But as a daughter, I knew my father is an immortal god, and never needs helping.

Dramatic colorful graffiti goes

by the window. Back and forth go my eyes, trying to read the meanings of hundreds of unknown individuals, mile after mile.

Dad has always been independent, infallible, all-knowing. The family lore goes "He's never had a cavity in his mouth, he can fix anything, he can play almost any musical instrument, he knows several languages, he's an artist, a poet, a scholar, and a brilliant doctor". This man has held a powerful central role in our family (my husband calls it a cult), engendering in his six kids mixed bags of feelings, of shame, inadequacy, awe, respect, insecurity, anger, and sadness. Because all people want their god to love them, and the one thing Horton is not good at is loving.

Tenements now pass by the window, shabby crowded broken buildings, a peek into the underbelly of the cities along the east coast. Back and forth, my eyes try to catch a glimpse of all these lives, these families so poor they have to live by the tracks, each one with its own complicated dynamics and soap opera dramas, probably not too unlike my own. For miles and miles they go, their broken windows so close to my train window, one marked with a kid's stickers, another with a tee shirt.

Horton's independence is his own reality, his idealized romanticized view of the world, free of the burdens of other people's feelings. He is the tragic hero in his own novel. He is no mere mortal, and he won't even get old. How am I to convince him that he needs help walking, (and at this point 5 days after heart pacemaker implant, he even needs help getting out of bed and dressing)? How am I to convince myself?

I go up to his room several times to see if he wants to get up... he is sleeping, sleeping. It's afternoon now, and surely he must be awake; when I was a kid, he used to call me a sloth for sleeping in on Saturday mornings. This time when I peek into his bedroom, the bed is empty. I am startled by his voice right behind me saying, "I'm here". I turn to find him sitting naked on the toilet. Instead of turning away in embarrassment, I look right at him and speak with him.

Now there are trees going by, as we head south and into the rural countryside.... miles of trees. My eyes try to soak up the green, back and forth, back and forth, the lushness makes my breath come easier. There has been some heavy flooding and rivers have overflowed and the train is rumbling through amazing swamps, and then farmers' fields all under water. The power of nature makes me feel peaceful. Water will take us all.

The way Dad was sitting on the toilet was straight up, not lean-

ing forward like the Thinker, but straight up like a baby bird, his hair tousled, his eyes half open, and a peaceful look on his face, almost smiling as he said "I'm still half asleep". The patch of a bandage from his surgery stood out on his skinny chest as the only thing he was wearing, and he looked so vulnerable. And he looked okay with being vulnerable. In fact, he looked cute. The image flashed in my mind of a memory he has described in recent years. I think it was something he said in a taped interview by one of my sisters. He recalled when we were all very little girls it was his job to "tinkle us" before he went to bed, which meant getting us out of our beds and putting us on the toilet, where we would sit, mostly asleep and sometimes tipping over. He thought we were cute. He loved us that way.

Having crept very slowly through the tiny North Carolina towns of Wilson then Selma, where many stores are shuttered and I see small black children playing with a dog, and teenaged lovers talking in the gas station parking lot, the train is now picking up speed for the final lap toward Durham, where I will find my lover and my dogs waiting for me at the train depot.

It has always felt like Dad's love was somewhat removed, as if experienced through the filter of an expertly edited screenplay. That may be the best he can do. But now that I have seen my god on the john, I think I can love him better. Without the hurt and anger

which have contaminated my feelings for so many years. And I can accept that he is getting old and frail and needs some help.

Getting him to accept that is another story. After all, gods walk on water, not on walkers. ❖

"Playing With My Two-Year-Old Grandson"

by Carol Casey

You figure out how to unlatch
the new porch gate in two minutes,
relish the sense of power,
eyes singing with mischief,
you lock me out on the steps.
I knock and you open
then quickly close
before I get through
and wait expectantly
for me to knock again.

If I get too close, you retreat,
disappear but appear again
to let me know where
you are while I pretend
not to know but we both
know I know.
When I profess to cry
you can't help yourself,
have to appear to comfort me.

You relish the closing
and opening of the door
the hiding and appearing
the hearing me say, *I see you*
I see you I see you
now I see you again.
You can't get enough of it.
Isn't that what we all
need sometimes?

“Artist Statement”

by Hannah Feinsilber

I think we can all agree that 2020 sucked. Fear, anxiety, panic, sadness, and disappointment was felt across the globe. However, one thing truly blossomed over this terrible year, art. All around the world countless people turned to art as a way to express themselves, to cope with the loss of normalcy, and grow. I am one of those people.

The pandemic overturned but helped my life. It helped me recuperate when I was depressed and burnt out. In the last three years of college, I have always been busy. Every second of the day was occupied. I had three part-time jobs, two major research projects, difficult class loads, all on top of trying to have a social life. When the pandemic struck I lost my jobs, in-person classes, and many friends. This gave me something I had avoided for years, free time. Productivity was how I determined my self-worth. I didn't know how to cope or what to do with myself. At first, I felt so useless, anxious, and trapped. Being at home for an entire day was something foreign to me. As this newfound free time continued the exhaustion from the last three years of work, stress, and the new scary situation we all lived in caught up with me and brought me down. I lost all desire for school, work, and living. I just wanted to curl into a ball and sleep forever so I didn't have to wake up and feel sad, anxious, and useless.

In this free time and period of sadness, I picked up art again. Art was an old-time hobby I did in middle and high school. I used to spend countless hours getting lost in drawing and painting. I loved doing graphite portraits as well as detailed abstract doodles. However, with my busy college schedule art had fallen to the side. It was never going to get me a job or help me in my career. Therefore, I had determined that it wasn't a productive use of my time. In all this new free time I decided to try picking it back up to pass the time. I soon rediscovered my passion for art. It was a way that I could travel to distant lands, go on adventures, and reflect on life. I started painting for hours every night and I became utterly consumed.

In these hours of paintings, I began to realize how much I had needed this free time. My heart and soul needed this stillness and time for reflection. For years I had denied myself this time to think and process. I always chose to work so I didn't have to face the past or the present. But now I was confronting it head-on and growing into a healthier, more well-balanced person.

The painting of the cover of this magazine is one of the first paintings I did in my return to art. My artistic style is simple. My paintings don't have secret meanings or complex metaphors. They are simply an expression of my inner desires. This painting is my desire for travel and adventure. Travel and adventure is a huge part of what makes me, me. I love going on trips to new places and experiencing different cultures. Pandemic had banished this. Painting has been my way to travel and visit these places.

A month into my rediscovered obsession I decided I wanted to start selling my paintings and make a little money from my passion. I created a website, uploaded, and joined online art groups. In these art groups, I found that many people around the world had undergone a journey similar to mine in 2020. Art was how they coped and expressed their pain, frustration, and disappointment. They were turning the darkness of the year into something beautiful. They showed the light in the darkness. I was filled with a desire to help these artists. Their works deserved to be seen. I wanted to create a service that allowed them to focus on what really mat-

tered, their art. I completely redesigned my website and made it cater to serving other artists. I started reading books on marketing, contacting art magazines, galleries, events, and radio stations. Fein Artistry grew much faster than anticipated. In 2 months, 40 artists from 13 different countries joined. Fein Artistry and our artists have been published in 3 magazines (this one included), interviewed on international radio, featured in an art show, and won a grant to expand the business. I never dreamed that art, what I once considered an unproductive waste of time, would take me anywhere, but here I am. I hope to continue expanding Fein Artistry so that one day artists can focus entirely on providing their creativity and light into the world.

HF

Contributors

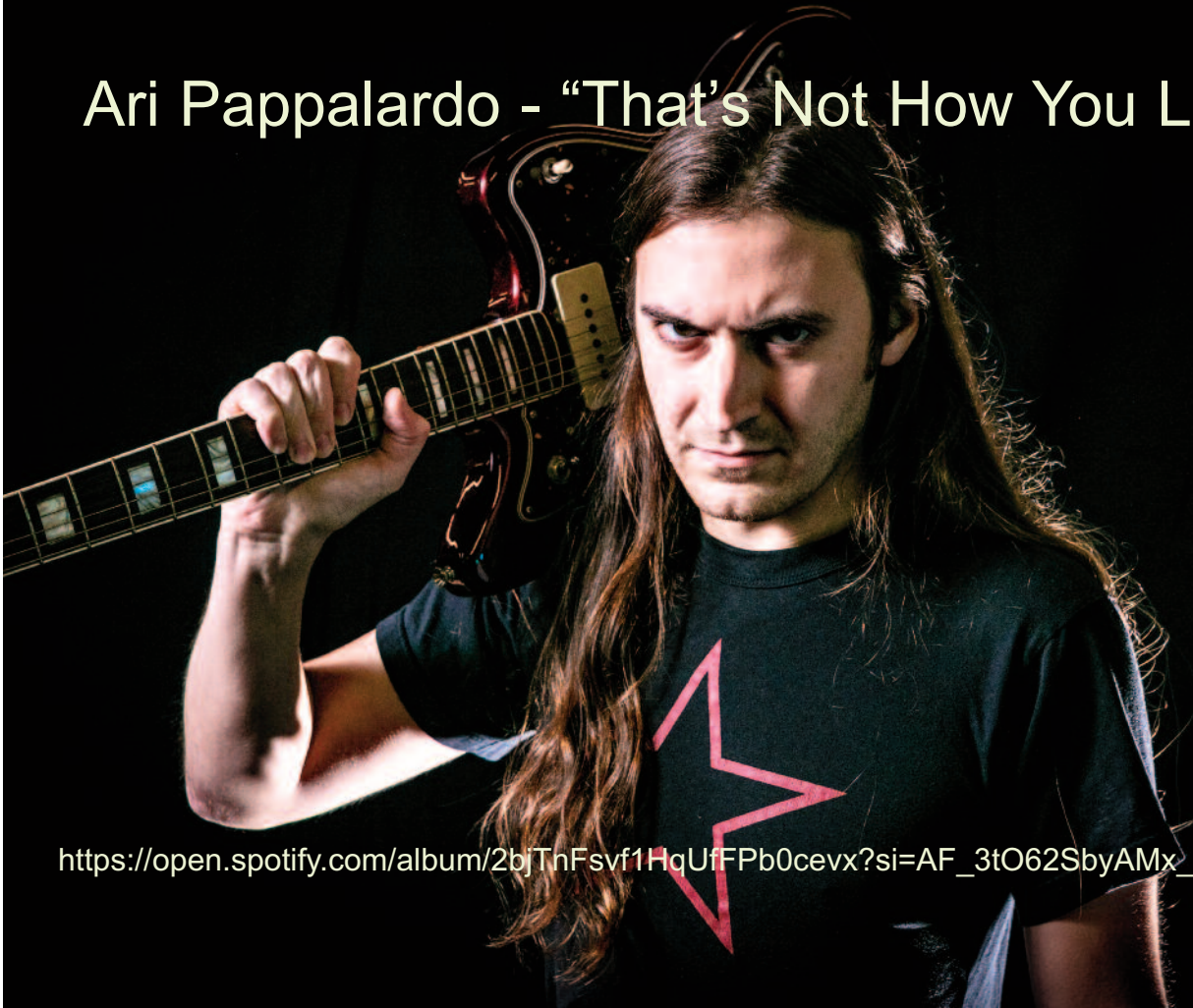
Ron Torrence published his first short story at age 50 and his first poem at age 80. Even so his fiction, non-fiction and poetry are pretty widely published.

Bill Gillard is an award-winning teacher of creative writing and literature at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. His writing has appeared in dozens of journals, and he is the author of the poetry collection, *The Vade Mecum of the True Sublime*, and two chapbooks, *Ode to Sandra Hook* and *Desire, the River*. He is co-author of *Speculative Modernism*, a study of the origins of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. He is the Fiction Editor at the literary magazine, *Masque and Spectacle*. He earned an M.F.A. from Fairleigh Dickinson University, is a recovering youth hockey coach, and lives in Appleton, Wisconsin, with his wife and two daughters.

Kerry Johnson writes, "...just a recently retired clinical social worker. With mixed emotions this past summer I gave up my Durham private psychotherapy practice of over 30 years, smack in the middle of the pandemic and political mayhem, to retire to my cozy quiet little home in the woods of Hillsborough where I practice the fine art of puttering, walking with my dogs, conversing with my chickens, meditating/ruminating with my goats, and philosophizing with my husband about this crazy world. I wrote my thoughts about my father after seeing him for the last time; he died shortly after that visit, on Christmas eve three years ago."

Carol Casey lives in Blyth, Ontario, Canada. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Prairie Journal*, *The Anti-Langourous Project*, *Please See Me*, *Front Porch Review*, *Cypress*, *Vita Brevis* and others, including a number of anthologies, most recently, *i am what becomes of broken branch* and *We Are One: Poems From the Pandemic*. Facebook: @ccaseypoetry; Twitter: @ccasey_carol; Webpage: <https://learnforlifepotential.com/home-2/poetry/>

Ari Pappalardo - "That's Not How You Love"



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