

THE HUTCHLIT REVIEW



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THE HITCHLIT REVIEW



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“Take the risk of thinking for yourself – much more happiness, truth, beauty, and wisdom will come to you that way.”

-- Christopher Hitchens

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Poetry

Hunting Mushrooms with Mina

Ed Meek

I went hunting morels with my Sioux friend Mina.
We took her Mustang GT into the woods outside Missoula.
When the fire road ended we got out to forage.
She was my eyes and knew where to look.
I was along for the ride. She lifted leaves
and poked through thatch
to find them crouching in damp quarters,
secreted in moss and duff. They were
long dead shrunken dwarfs
buried in their hats, their bodies
a stump beneath their shaggy, fetid heads.
They'd wept for years and moist riverbeds
coursed down their spongy faces.

"What about these?" I asked
pointing to a yellow disk, speckled with white freckles.
"Death cap," she said. "I can poison you with that."
Her long black hair reflected light and my eye
caught the tip of the blade
she kept on her hip.

We ferried our mushrooms to her cabin
just south of town. With garlic, butter and salt
they were savory as meat.
They stood up
to the grilled loin of the deer
she'd taken with her bow
and butchered with her knife.

"What do you think?" she asks.
"I'm wondering how we won."
"Germs and guns," she says.
Outside we share a pipe
while the moon silvers her hair
and stars colonize the Big Sky.
"Teach me your ways," I say.

Royal Rendezvous in August

Ed Meek

Two Monarch butterflies hook up in mid-air.
Not the mile-high club, these acrobats
tryst shamelessly just off the ground—
no net needed. The orange and black-lined wings
flutter like Japanese fans
keeping them aloft in dizzying flight.

Why not alight on a butterfly bush
where they can relax?
What's the rush?
A one-minute stand
and they're off on their own.

A black and blue Swallowtail
spies jealously on.
Better find a mate soon, friend.
It's August and the long flight
from Maine to Mexico
is coded into your being
like the patterns on your wings.

Gypsy Moths

Ed Meek

Slinky caterpillars, fuzzy brown and red-dotted--
fingers with half a dozen legs,
drop from above onto your neck
and crawl down your shirt
in search of food.

They remain hungry
even after denuding
every deciduous tree in sight
until the trunks stand naked
like skinny kids in the middle of summer.
Now they're stressed like the rest of us,
susceptible to fungus and disease.

Intelligent design profiles butterflies
with their sun-splashed yellow
and orange polka-dotted wings.
They could well be queens
or kings of their domain.
But what kind of god
would fashion gypsy moths?
Each stage of growth worse:
from egg to larva to pupa to moth.
Fecund females lay 1000 eggs
beneath the unsuspecting bark of trees.
You'd think their saving grace
might be that by summer's end
they die—thwacking into window screens
desperately searching like the rest of us
for the light. But no.
They'll be back again
to feast on our canopy.

#SheFiguresItOut (212)

Juditha Dowd

Treetops at eye level
that was the problem

from an upstairs window
she saw between their leaves
the firmament

what was it but carbon and gas
colder than ice
empty as diamonds

Below on the ground
her planet was getting hotter
too hot to live on

It burned her soles
and flamed her sheets

What would she believe
without the stars

Fred, Half Dead, Beethoven in His Head

Holly Day

You can't talk to Beethoven
on a bus stop in Chicago
because you'll just get lost.

Lauded as a genius,
he can't give good directions
because he's dead.

Ask Fred about Beethoven
his hands waving wildly with excitement like
the vibrations coming up through his feet.
conducting symphonies in an empty room.

Fred will tell you how planets hum
give directions to angry flocks of pigeons
lecture on string theory
like harpsichords, and how Beethoven was more
of a transcriber than a composer.

I picture the two sitting together
lost in deep conversation.

There once was a woman who
Holly Day

prayed for just one little baby
she didn't care what it was

but the only baby that came
fit in her palm and would not move

small, too quiet, curled tiny
it did not cry. morning came

she sat by the windowsill, rocking
the quiet cradle with the tip of her finger,

singing songs about all the things
her child would never see.

Love Your Neighbor (Among Other Ambivalences)

Gerard Sarnat

Last child of poor uneducated Orthodox Jews
who emigrated from Russia's Pale to Chicago

only one born inside the United States, Father
was of course sent to a *cheder* religious school

where Yiddish-speaking rabbis used whips to
train him to use his right hand to write; it failed

but motivated Daddy to become a card-carrying
atheist choosing Christmas Eve to get hitched.

Following this path, I never entered a temple,
including on High Holidays, exceptions being

close friends' bar mitzvahs, common among
those of us living in LA which many parents

considered their true Promised Land with great
weather plus distance from Old Country roots.

Although I'd loved *Zeyde* and *Bubbe*, Pops'
Mom 'n Dad we lived with in a 3rd-floor cold

water apartment until I was two, I continued
to dis all rituals before ironically marrying into

another very observant household requiring
for my family's sake that I at least shut up to

tolerate observing *Shabbat* well as our kids
attending Hebrew day academies. Turned out

having a dedicated day of rest wasn't so bad
plus candle-lighting, drinking grape juice,
savoring braided *challah* together Friday nights,
sniffing spices for Saturday's *Havdalah*, slowly
became times I learn to look forward to -- despite
Poppa reluctantly attending in his withholding
way, always claiming Gerry'd been seduced.
To Poppy's chagrin, subsequent grandchildren
received similar moderate "spiritual" upbringing
in what otherwise appeared totally secular life.
Thus these paradoxes regarding a pair of docs:
both Father then Son were physician-scientists
enmeshed in never-ending sine waves of action
and reaction to previous generations' traditions.

Sharpie
James Scruton

—*September, 2019*

It's how he sees himself,
in swift bold strokes
bludgeoning nuance, feeling,
redacting fine shades of meaning
to make room for the storms
in his head or another place
he can brand, maybe Greenland.

Always in the black, more ink
than he knows what to do
with. He's a sharpie
all right, the very sharpiest
he says people say. And permanent.
Watch him cover that smudge,
the fake one there, under
the stub of his thumb.

Postulancy

Jan Ball

Saturday afternoon in the postulancy, Karen and I kneel on the white tiled bathroom floor that Kathy Koestler and I scrubbed on our knees in the morning for daily work as carefully as if we were getting paid.

Kathy is one of the former aspirants who entered the convent after elementary school; whereas, Karen and I are considered more “worldly” by convent standards since a group of us entered after high school.

We polish our shoes on newspaper with four other postulants who are supposed to be praying the rosary aloud, angelically, not socializing which we only do at the evening recreation hour, but Karen and I take this opportunity to joke about an item we see in the paper.

Suddenly, Karen’s face loses its smile as she bends her head down to vigorously buff her *old lady* black shoes like the shoe shine guy at the airport.

Finally, I stop snickering and look sideways to see another pair of big black shoes under a black habit and then hear the voice of our postulant mistress say, “We don’t want your type here.” Type?

She says, “Praised be Jesus Christ” as she swirls around like a lithe dancer to leave us and we give the response, “Now and forever, amen” looking down at the floor, learning to be humiliated.

St. Benedict's Church
Jan Ball

Tonight, St. Benedicts again
for Rachmaninoff's Vespers,
a setting for a chorale where I made
my first confession: *Father, I stole
a strawberry and talked back
to my mother three times.*

In these acoustically sound walls,
I wore my First Communion
veil and hand-me-down white dress
at seven and even then day-dreamed,

walking up the aisle too soon
to the communion rail,

spoiling Sister Basil's perfect plan,
so that she scolded me on Monday
morning, sucked in her thin cheeks
tsk, tsking, training for Catholic guilt,
and even though Sister Mary Modesta
had chided me dimpled and smiling
for my mistake, the next year in fourth
grade yanked me out of an oak church
pew that I had been

gnawing like a beaver
while I knelt bored during Lenten
Stations of the Cross.

Finally, I was absolved for my grade
school transgressions when I returned

to the old neighborhood
for my Dad's memorial mass

wearing the scratchy black habit
of the School Sisters of St. Francis
like all my teachers wore, pious as St.
Terese of Liseux on a gold tinged holy
picture passing rosary beads through
aesthetic fingers.

Page Two: St. Benedicts

After seven years I left the convent,
married, had children, taught, gardened,
swam at Equinox, read Dostoevsky
for book group, traveled everywhere,
and returned to St. Benedicts

to sit in a pew for Rachmaninoff's
Vespers tonight.

Aubade

B.J. Wilson

I hang around now after the meetings, face
still used to the floor, dust,

recovery pamphlets
Becky T. and I stack back in the bin.

She's ok though it's still *shit at home*.
We agree it gets better with spring.

But it'll be a while before we can leave this meeting
with evening's light—

this church's windows stay black,
like Sunday night baptistries

when I was a kid. No stained glass noon-blue—
waves reflect shadows

rippling behind a pastor wet to the waist,
summoning someone else

toward the water—
what appeared to a boy down in a pew

a bathtub, one in which he was not
ever clean enough to wash.

After the meeting, the steeple points to blue rivulets
winding through a black sheet of clouds.

Nocturne

B.J. Wilson

In moonlight, the potted palms on mom and dad's patio
shine green, though the drought's snuck yellow in their leaves.

My brother shines too: spits rainwater, lines memorized
which he rapped once to our grandfather over the phone.

They say, they flow, *yo: I forgive you for always accusing me
and my art of atheism even when I was just as a boy.*

His emphatic arms thrash like fronds in a thunderstorm. Yo.
Having missed Christmas, he assumes his gift, wrapped tight

on the divider, is just another Gideon Bible, not a pocket planner
with a biblical passage inscribed on grandpa's business card.

Fiction

Christmas Tales

Connie Woodring

It's my first Christmas here, December 25, 1945. Christmas in an insane asylum is a real kick. First of all, there are no Christmas trees or decorations because the patients would destroy or eat them. Miranda ate a glass Christmas tree ornament many years ago, and it tore up her stomach so bad she couldn't eat anything for two months. Why did she do that? According to her, Jesus said to her, "eat my body and you will be in pain for the rest of your life. This do in my name, for Christ sake!" She still tries to eat any sharp object she can get her hands on. She particularly likes paperclips, so the staff have to stand guard over the nurses' station at all times. In spite of this, Miranda manages to ingest forbidden fruit and is often in the medical ward with stomach pains.

The way I know it's Christmas is because the Ladies Auxiliary volunteers came and sang carols to us. This was a very kind gesture that was lost on most of the patients. I, of course, being (ahem) sane, tried to be appreciative of the out-of-tune version of "Silent Night" sung by the six gray ladies. They became very flustered when my fiends Ida, Violet, Myrna Loy (I didn't think it really was Myrna Loy, but that's who she said she was) and Miranda started to sing in perfect out-of-tune mimicry. Of course, they added their own unique lyrical touches: "Silent Night, my only night, holy holy hole, gone to hell in a hand-me-down" etc. I actually preferred the patients' version but clapped politely and said "Merry Christmas to all" as the gray ladies quickly left. They had peculiar quince-eating smiles. I suspect they hoped they wouldn't catch what ails all of us.

Christmas dinners are supposed to be special. Wheelchair patients are lucky. They get to eat on the ward. Those of us who can leave the closed ward enter the tunnels and follow in line to the cafeteria. Before I tell you about the cafeteria, I want my readers to imagine Christmas in the tunnels. There is no joy, decorations or presents in them unless you like millipedes, smelly ground water, piss and rotting fungus or mushrooms.

Someone was shouting and barking like a dog and blocking our entry into the cafeteria. It was Jack, the Jesus Christ from Ward L1. (There was also a Jesus on Ward T3 and N2, but they both looked like Peter Lorre.) He pronounced: "I am born today. I am sixty years old today and born today in the town of Chicago, Maryland. I am here today to save us all from hell and Christmas dinner made of boiled shit and you all make me sick for needing a

savior. Parasites sucking my blood. Save your own damned souls and leave me in hellssholekillthemJapbastards so I can eat this shit and spit on all of you.” You get the idea.

Although I would have enjoyed being blocked from the hellish place called Cafeteria A (a huge room that always smelled like brussels sprouts, but they were never on the menu), Jesus Jack opened the door for us so we could enjoy our Christmas dinner: turkey with brown circles in the meat, mushy green beans, mashed potatoes with something hard and muddy tasting in them, gravy that tasted like waterfat and rice pudding. Miranda screamed when she saw the pudding, “The maggots are moving in my pudding” and threw it in Ida’s face. Since Ida has no teeth, she can’t eat much more than pudding. She happily licked it off her hands and stained dress.

Yes, I thought, this is Christmas as it should be.

State of Church

Tom Misuraca

The priest raised his arms and said: “Let us pray!”

The congregation bowed their heads in silent prayer.

“And while you pray, try not to notice how dirty your pants are. Try not to think about how embarrassed you will be when you gather with your fellow parishioners after mass. This wouldn’t have happened if you used Norax Laundry Detergent. Norax makes your colors shine and your whites their whitest. Amen.”

“Amen,” the congregation replied.

It was bound to happen. Commercials inserted into Sunday worship. Yes, the churchgoers were annoyed, even more than moviegoers were when they began playing an hour of commercials before movies. People may have complained outside of mass, especially on social media, but nobody took action to stop it.

As he gave out communion, the priest said: “The body of Christ. Brought to you by Wheaton’s Bakery. Whether you’re making a peanut butter sandwich or transubstantiating Christ’s body, think Wheaton’s. Available in your grocer’s bakery section.”

The wafer was placed on every person’s tongue. There was a noticeable difference in taste, sweeter than before. If you didn’t find God this Sunday, you were guaranteed to find a new brand of bread. There was a coupon for it in the church bulletin.

The sacramental wine was from a nearby winery. Bottles were on sale at the local liquor store for cheaper than a cup of Starbucks coffee.

When the mass was over, the priest said: “The mass is over, now go in peace. But for true peace of mind, trust Allhands Insurance. Allhands has the whole world in their hands.”

The churchgoers filed out of the pews and out of the church. Instead of going home for a family dinner, they were going to that liquor store to stock up on the blood of Christ.

Nonfiction

Memento Mori

Leni Marshall

My mother died. She was 62. She had lived in the hills outside a small town in northern Idaho. My brother and I scheduled a memorial service for two weeks later. He left to attend a conference, and I began to sort through the detritus of my mother's life, a multi-layered accumulation of quasi-meaningful stuff. Her friend Christine stayed at the house with me, to keep me fed and to run interference with condolence calls.

Christine and another of my mom's friends, Marge, both were the same size as my mom had been, and they were frenemies, and they decided to go through her clothes together. Christine wanted to begin without Marge. To keep her from raiding the closet before Marge arrived, I emptied the dresser out onto my mother's bed. In the back of the underwear drawer, we found two Anaïs Nin erotic novels - intellectual smut.

My mom had been open in talking with me about sex, far beyond the bird and the bees. She told me about working for researchers who developed the cervical cap, and about sight-seeing in Puerto Rico the morning before her first abortion. So I was surprised, and a little amused, to find Nin's novels in the underwear drawer rather than out in the open.

Marge arrived. She looked at the pile of clothes on the bed and asked, "Did you find anything good?"

I knew Marge well enough to share the humor: "Well, we found two Anaïs Nin novels in the back of a drawer." That's when things started to get weird, and I suppose it was my fault for mentioning the erotica.

Marge asked, "Did you find any vibrators?"

Wondering just where this conversation was going, I drew out my answer: "N-n-no-o."

Marge kept talking. "I've wanted a vibrator for a long time, but this town is just too small. I can't walk into a store and buy one, because people would see me and they would know. And if I ordered one through the mail, even if it came in a plain box, the people in the post office know about those boxes, plus I would start getting all sorts of sick-o junk mail. And I can't order one online. The email I would end up with!"

I tried to assure her that some sex toy companies are quite discreet, but I couldn't convince her that her reputation would be safe. Honestly, I didn't try for very long, because I felt odd having this discussion with a friend of my mother's. Marge kept saying, "This is just too small a town. Everybody knows everyone's business."

Trying to end the conversation—I was *sure* this would shut her up—I said, “Marge, I live in Minneapolis. Do you want me to buy you a vibrator and bring it when I come back for the memorial service?”

She turned to me with gratitude in her voice: “Oh, *would* you?”

I heard myself saying, “Of course. No problem.”

Oh. God. I had just signed up to walk into a porn shop and buy a vibrator for my mother’s friend.

After Marge went home, I gave myself a good talking-to for volunteering to do such a thing. I pictured myself walking into a sex store, finding the vibrator section.... Then I remembered the variety of vibrators—did she want plug-in or battery-operated? Would she like one with a clitoral stimulator? Ribbing? Was she more interested in width or length, or both?

I found myself asking Christine what kind of vibrator she thought Marge would like. Christine had no idea what the options were. She suggested I call Marge and ask her, which probably was good advice, but I really didn’t want to give Marge a phone lesson in Vibrators 101. Instead, I emailed her the URL of a sex-toy company whose website was mature enough to not feature naked women with undulating body parts.

As I was typing the email, Christine came in and asked if I would be willing to get one for her, too? I sighed, but felt it was only fair. Christine wanted to know what her options were, so I left the computer on the website I had just emailed to Marge. Christine sat down and started looking at vibrators. I left to sort through the cartons in the upstairs closets.

Four hours later, I had been through dozens of boxes. I was tired and ready for dinner. I went to find Christine. She had not moved from her seat in front of the computer. She had read the description of every vibrator and every dildo on the website, more than a hundred of them, and she had read **all** the customer comments for each item. She also had found other websites, with more vibrators and more ratings. She knew what her options were, and she had decided on two items. As you perhaps already know, sex toys have names. The two she chose were Slender Sensations and Little Zinger.

For the record, I’m all in favor of people, in the privacy of their own bedrooms, doing whatever pleasurable, intimate things they enjoy. But if you’re going to ask your friend’s daughter to buy you a sex toy, please take a moment to think about her feelings. Or maybe, I should say, “Never offer to buy vibrators for your mother’s friends, because they might tell you exactly what they want.”

Christine had asked for an anal vibrator and a butt plug. Not just any butt plug, but one with a built-in finger sleeve, so that anal stimulation could

happen without people getting poop under their fingernails. And I was supposed to walk into a store in a town where I lived and buy these things.

Back at home, with the memorial service less than a week away, I didn't have much free time. I let my fingers do the walking. I called up every smut shop in Minneapolis and St. Paul to ask if they had Slender Sensations and Little Zinger. None of them did. I gave up and ordered them from the website, plus the vibrator Marge had selected. The toys would not arrive before I went back to Idaho, but I could box them up and mail them out once I was home again.

The night before my mother's memorial service, relatives and friends packed every inch of her small house. Marge sat on the sofa, lost in the weight of everyone's grief. There was no place where we could speak alone, so I sat down next to her and tried to be discrete: "Marge, that thing you asked me to bring back for you? I had to mail-order it, so I'll send it along next week."

"Oh, I had forgotten all about that," she said. On automatic pilot, she added, "Thank you." Evidently, she didn't think that expressed enough gratitude, and she paused to think of something more to say. The words she eventually found are a standard expression, but there are some circumstances in which the phrase she used is entirely inappropriate. Now, I can laugh about it. Right when I heard Marge say it, though, my response was visceral. For an instant, my brain froze and the world paused.

To put the moment in context, I remember that my mother's death was peaceful. She was at home. She was not in pain. My brother and I were with her. When I die, I want to go like my mother did, surrounded by love. Just as my mother's friends did the night before her memorial service, I want my community to unite in helping my children grieve, and to celebrate my life with songs and stories.

One of the lasting legacies of my mother's death, though, is this: a risqué story. Her friends asked me for objects that reveal and fulfill intimate sexual desire. And in doing so, they gave me an inadvertent gift. Invariably, when I recall my mom's death, laughter mixes with the tears, because I remember the evening when I told Marge that her vibrator would arrive in the mail. Her dazed brain finally came up with an additional phrase of appreciation. She turned to me with a generic smile, patted my hand, and said, "Thank you, dear. I'll think of you every time I use it."

Fun with Theophobia

Kelly McCullough

It's possible that in a more mundane sort of environment I might have ended up with something other than a highly adversarial emotional relationship with religion and religious display, but we'll never know, because I was raised by my agnostic/Taoist/deist grandmother and my intermittently psychotic mother who, having pulled a bad card from the brain chemistry deck, has had occasional bouts of paranoid schizophrenia during which she becomes highly religious while being a quietly sane atheist the rest of the time. So, my childhood was pretty much an alternating series of hi-everything-is-calm-and-fine-and-areligious periods punctuated by shorter but much sharper rounds of everything-is-terrible-and-god-is-back-on-the-menu shitshows. This particular dichotomy has left me with what I have come to refer to as a theophobia-tinged atheism that mostly works well for me as a guide to navigating life...except when it doesn't. Because, as it turns out A) it's hard to avoid religion in America if you want to have friends or interact with other humans' life events and B) I kind of have a thing for cathedrals.

I usually run into my problems from column A when it comes to celebrating the lives and loves of my fellow humans. Now, I can usually manage to stick around through a wedding or a funeral, particularly in smaller and more modern venues where the weight of religion doesn't feel as heavy, but even those can leave me in a pretty rough state. Back in college one highly religious service of the "we are not worthy, we are worms" type left me speling a standup comedy routine about putting the God back in Waiting for Godot on the way home and on and off for days after. Though my wife says she found it funny, she also tries to keep me out of that sort of situation.

I think I've only been to three non-funeral/wedding services in my life, and only one as a consenting adult. There was the Christmas Passion Play thing that I got roped into by accident when I was eleven or thereabouts that left me clinging to the ceiling but did not involve an an all caps incident like the SUNDAY SCHOOL EXPERIMENT, or that one time I decided to go with my wife, her sister, and my mother-in-law to a thing at the church where my M-i-L used to go as a teen and I was NOT INVITED BACK.

The SUNDAY SCHOOL EXPERIMENT was my mother's one non-psychotic religious interaction with me. In an attempt at putting me more in synch with my rural North Dakota peers she decided that I should probably go to the local Sunday school. My main memory of the event is that I found the whole thing confusing and unpleasant and the picture of Christ

that they sent me home with was disturbing in a "man, this dude looks depressed" sort of way. It is my understanding from my grandmother's later account of things that it strongly suggested that I not return because 1) I was a "disruptive influence" and 2) that I "asked a lot of inappropriate questions," and also that 3) I didn't have a "proper respect for authority." Which, to be fair, is what my student evaluations mostly read all through my pre-college academic career. On the upside the hippie school I ended up in for grades 1.5—12 was mostly down with points 2 and 3 and willing to accept 1 in limited doses.

The mother-in-law incident was a bit more socially awkward. My M-i-L is fairly religious in the conventional Christian manner, my wife is an atheist, and my S-i-L is a convert to Judaism. The idea of the four of us going to church together was problematic from the start. When the pastor turned to the evils of leather jackets (I wasn't wearing one at that moment, but I own three) and the idea that Jews were never going to get into heaven, things went south rather quickly. My wife and her sister are both clearly much better at religious poker face than I am because at the end of the sermon the pastor invited wife, S-i-L and M-i-L to come back any time while somehow managing not to see me standing in the middle of the line or speak to me. For reference I am a 200lb bald weight lifter, and almost a foot taller than M-i-L and S-i-L. It took a heroic effort on his part to render me invisible.

Now, on to the cathedrals. As you can see, I have a fairly straightforward relationship with overt religious displays—they fill me with a deep and abiding sense of alarm for reasons noted above. Unfortunately, I'm also a sucker for cathedrals as art, a passion that grew out of the sequence of art history courses I took in college. Most of the time, this works out all right. Either I decide I'm not up to the stress and pass them by, or I brace myself and go in to look at the arches and stained glass and amazing stonework and my sense of aesthetics overcomes my sense of alarm leading to a net positive experience. And then, there are the other times...

Like Glasgow Cathedral, where everything was going great as I wandered deeper and deeper into the tombs and chapels under the church and then turned and found myself face to face with a reliquary. At which point my sense of *oooh, art* ran straight into "I'm in a giant stone box filled with religion and...I need to get out, RIGHT NOW." I managed to hold it together fairly well as I fast walked up the stairs to the main level and across the incredibly long expanse of floor between me and the door. But then the door handle jammed and I couldn't get out. Panic attack time. Heart racing like a rat in a maze slowly filling with water, which at that point could easily have been supplied by the sweat pouring off me. A few minutes later, when one of my friends found me sitting under a tree outside, soaked in sweat,

breathing raggedly and roughly the color of skim milk, she observed that until that moment she'd always thought my professions of "theophobia" were a bit overblown, but she was now convinced and "Are you going to be all right?"

I was, though I wasn't able to convince myself to go into a church again for a couple of years after that one, which was my most recent such attempt when I walked into the absolutely beautiful Our Lady of Guadalupe in Puerto Vallarta, looked around at the iconography, and bolted. It gave me a flashback to the panic attack I had in Mexico City at the Metropolitan Cathedral way back in 1982. I was 15 at the time and I had not yet figured out my theophobia or its source in my childhood experiences with religion and caregiver psychosis. It was, however, an important clue on the trail that led to my current spiritual satisfaction with being a cheerful atheist.

Now, if I could just convince the rest of the world to stop holding events at churches and myself to stay out of cathedrals...

The Heart Attack

Atash Yaghmaian

The sun is setting as he comes down the block, dressed in jean shorts and wearing a small leather pouch around his waist. He smiles when he sees me, takes me by the hand, and sits me down on a wooden stool. Next to us are several old Turkish men sipping apple tea. We are at the “Chai Lav You” cafe across from the Galata Tower in Istanbul. We eat feta, olives, and honey with pita bread.

He tells me how grateful he is that I came all the way from America to see him, for just a few days. I’m reminded now that I don’t have to impress him to get his affection, or to pretend that I’m someone else to get his respect. He knows, too, that he has to be himself around me. It’s strange to think there was a time when I feared him. It’s strange to think there was a time when I didn’t have a father.

It was December 1989. He brought me to the Tehran International Airport. I was carrying only a small suitcase that held a few shirts and jeans. I didn’t want to take too many clothes that belonged to the past. I wanted a fresh start in every way.

“Are you sure, Atash?” He kept his eyes fixed on the boarding ticket in his hand.

“As sure as I can be,” I said.

“I don’t understand you,” he said. “First you don’t want to get married. Then I find out your mother arranged a marriage to your cousin. Then I help you break off the engagement. Now you’re going to America to marry someone else?”

“It’s going to be okay, Baba,” I said. “It has to be.”

He still didn’t get it. In America, there were possibilities. College. My own friends. Decisions about whom to love, what to wear, how to act. And most important: an escape, at last, from my mother. He of all people should have understood that. Her jealous rages. Her paranoia about drinking water at her in-laws’ house for fear of being drugged. Her belief, from the moment I was born, that I was the source of all her bad luck. How could he not understand my urgent need to get away, as he himself had done so many years before? Or maybe he did, but the weight of acknowledgment was too great to bear. Either way, here he was, standing beside me.

The plan was simple — at least I thought so: since the U.S. and Iran had no diplomatic relations, my father was going to chaperone me to

Bucharest, Romania, via Vienna, and hand me over to a certain Mr. Tabrizian, a distant relative and a rug manufacturer with diplomatic connections in Romania. Mr. Tabrizian would then get me a student visa from the American embassy and put me on a plane to be picked up in New York by his nephew Ali, another distant cousin I'd never met but intended to marry. What could go wrong?

On our flight to Vienna, I was amazed by how quickly the Muslim women took off their headscarves, folding them neatly and storing them in their luggage, as though they belonged to the memory of a distant time and place. "You can take yours off too," my father said. And then, in his philosophical way: "People's faith was a lot stronger when it wasn't forced on them."

I took off my headscarf slowly, still unable to shed the fear that I'd be stopped by the Morals Police. He took out a pack of cigarettes and put it on the tray table in front of us.

"These are for us," he said. "I think it's time you smoke openly."

I was surprised that he knew about my habit. I'd never known him to take notice. But I took a cigarette and let him light it for me. Each time my father took a drag, I took one too, copying his gestures. We smoked in silence.

By the time we got to Vienna, we were both exhausted. We split up to get our kicks in our separate ways. I went to the airport prayer-room to take a nap on one of the carpets there; my father went to the nearest bar to knock back a few beers. Alcohol was hard enough to get in Iran in those days, but beer was nearly impossible. A few hours later we boarded our connection to Bucharest.

On the plane, I realized something was very strange. Aside from my father and me, there were only three other passengers. "Why is no one going to Romania?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," my father said.

It was December 17, 1989. Though we didn't know it yet, the Romanian Revolution had broken out the day before.

We touched down in Bucharest with the most graceful landing. My father kept his nose pressed to the window, like a little boy, waiting to see the airport materialize in front of us. The plane didn't taxi into the terminal, however. It stopped right in the middle of the landing strip. A covered military jeep with soldiers pulled up to the side of the plane. They all carried guns. I looked at my father, but he seemed calm. "It's not like Iran here," he whispered softly. "Don't worry." He walked cautiously in front of me, out of the plane, down the rickety metal stairs, and onto solid ground. No one came to meet us.

The door of the jeep opened and a man inside motioned all five passengers to get in. “How do you do, sir?” my father asked the man in English and sat down in the back, but no one answered him.

“Baba, what’s happening?” I said. “This seems worse than Iran.” But my father said nothing.

The jeep drove us to the entrance of the airport, where a group of soldiers stood, nodding their heads in the direction of a small, open counter that we were apparently supposed to walk toward. There, the soldiers demanded our passports. They studied these for a while and talked to each other in Romanian. One of the soldiers kept turning to us and asking, “Iran? Iran you from?” in broken English. He kept asking, as though he wanted to make sure we knew what we were confessing to. “Yes,” we said, not understanding. “Yes, Iranian.”

“This your wife?” one of the men asked my father. My father let out a loud laugh. The soldiers didn’t crack a smile.

“No, daughter,” my father said, getting serious again.

“Not in passport. Why she not in your passport like other daughters?”

“First marriage,” my father said defensively.

“There is plane back to Iran tonight?” one of the soldiers asked out loud.

“Yes,” his partner answered. “Plane at six tonight.”

“Back to Iran?” My father started to get upset. “No. No! We don’t go back to Iran tonight. We want to see Mr. Tabrizian.”

“Follow these men,” the soldier ordered.

Within a few minutes, my father and I were seated in what was obviously a small detention chamber. The room was cold and there were no windows. I had to pee, but the door was locked and there was no one to ask. “I’m sorry Atash,” my father said. “We were so close.”

“It’s not over,” I said. “Once Mr. Tabrizian finds out, he will come and get us.”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to work,” my father said. “We’re going to be sent back to Iran before Mr. Tabrizian can find us.”

The door clicked open and more armed soldiers came in, asking us to follow them.

“I can’t go back to Iran, Baba. I won’t make it.” I started to cry.

The weight of my admission hung heavy on his face. I could see all the stories that had been told about me flashing across his forehead: “We don’t know what’s wrong with her ... She drank a whole bottle of bleach just to make us look bad ... It’s a wonder she didn’t die ... She’s possessed.”

“Yes, I know,” he muttered.

Within a half hour, we were back in an airplane bound for Iran. The engine started to roar beneath us, and as I looked out the window at the new country I was sure I'd never see again, I felt a jolt next to me. I turned around and saw my father sitting up straight with his left arm stiff in the air like a statue.

"Baba?" I asked. "Do you need something?" His eyes were closed, as if he were meditating, but his hand was raised above his head, now crunched into a claw.

"Baba!" I said again. "What are you doing?" Sweat was pouring down his face and there were tears in his eyes. Other people began to notice. One man got out of his seat and leaned toward my father, speaking to him in Romanian. My father seemed not to notice. Suddenly, his body launched itself out of its seat onto the floor, where he lay convulsing, his left arm still frozen above his head. The woman next to me gave out a yell, leapt over me, and put her hand on my father's chest. Oh my God, I thought, He's dying. Flight attendants came running up. I dropped to the floor too. "Baba *joon!*" I cried. "*Nar!* Don't leave me here!"

I heard the plane engine stop. The flight attendants were loosening my father's collar and yelling to each other in Romanian. I heard that universal word: Hospital. A few moments later a medical crew was on board with a stretcher. They took him out of the plane and into a van parked outside. I followed and tried to push myself into the van with them, but the crew wouldn't let me in. The door started to close and I took one last look at my father. I grabbed his hand through the half closed door, and for a moment his eyes opened a crack. The smallest sliver of a smile spread across his lips. Then he was gone.

I stood on the tarmac, totally confused. Why had my father looked at me like that? Was he sick or not? I felt angry. I didn't want to be left with those mean men and their guns. "Take me back to Iran, Baba," I cried, even though he was gone. "I don't care anymore about getting away. Let's just go home."

Some guards came up next to me and took me back inside the airport. Once again, they led me back to that room with no windows. This time, however, they didn't lock the door. They knew I had nowhere to go. In a while later, one of the guards came back with a little tray of food that included a chicken sandwich, an apple, and a Pepsi. I ate the food and soon felt a wave of exhaustion come over me. I lay down on the floor and fell asleep.

Just before dawn, I heard the door open. It was my father.

"Baba!" I yelled, "You're okay!"

“Sure,” he said, smiling. “They have good hospitals here. I even met this nice doctor who comes from Iran ...”

I looked him up and down. He was clearly high as a kite. Whatever drugs they had given him seemed to agree with him.

“But your heart attack, Baba?” I asked.

“What heart attack?” he said, and sat down on the ground next to me contentedly.

“Your sweat? Your tears? Your arm in the air?”

His big, beautiful smile returned. “I faked the heart attack, Atash joon.” Then his smile faded. “But the tears and sweat were real. The whole time I was picturing you back in Iran and feeling what it would be like to have failed you once again.”

“You left me with all those men with guns,” I said reproachfully.

“Listen,” he said, “It’s going to be okay. The Iranian doctor at the hospital did some research for us. It turns out they aren’t sending us back to Iran now, just as far as Vienna. The doctor also phoned Ali. He’s going to make sure Mr. Tabrizian meets us in the Vienna Airport.”

“So Mr. Tabrizian is going to meet us in Vienna today?”

“No,” my father said. “It might take a week.”

“So what are we going to do in an airport for a week?”

“That’s a good question,” he said.

We spent the next days in the Vienna Airport trying to pass the time as pleasantly as we could. My father went back to his favorite bar and I wandered around — bored, but happy to be able to come and go as I pleased. I was just relieved that there were no men with guns, and I made a game out of watching the passengers and trying to figure out their stories.

Living in the airport wasn’t completely free from danger, however. We realized that if we were seen too much too often, we would be harassed by security. So while we slept every night in the prayer room, we made sure to get up early, put on new clothes, and change the patterns of our wanderings. My father bought us baseball hats — “disguises,” he called them. It was like being in a spy movie.

Fortunately, Mr. Tabrizian arrived four days earlier than expected. It was the afternoon of December 21, and my father was dozing off in a chair next to the duty-free chocolates. I was sitting some distance from him, in order to avoid too many people seeing us together, absorbed in my people-watching game. Suddenly, a voice over the loudspeaker said, “Nader Yaghmaian,” followed by some German words.

“Baba!” I yelled, running over to him. “They’re calling you!” He got up quickly.

“The information desk,” he said. “That’s where we have to go.”

When we got to the information desk, Mr. Tabrizian was already there. He was a sophisticated-looking older man, dressed in a trench coat and carrying an expensive-looking leather briefcase. He looked me up and down, obviously trying to figure out how this scrawny girl had created so much drama for him and his family. I realized I hadn't taken a shower in days.

“*Salaam*,” I said.

Mr. Tabrizian explained that we didn't have much time. “We have a connecting flight in less than an hour,” he said to me. “I have a ticket for you, Atash, but we have to make sure that the guards don't recognize you.” He took out a raincoat from his luggage and told me to put it on. “Put your hair up,” he instructed me. I went to the bathroom to do as I was told. In the bathroom mirror, I studied my reflection. I looked like the older woman Mr. Tabrizian wanted me to be.

When I came back, I saw that my father was holding an envelope Mr. Tabrizian had given him. It was full of American money and a ticket back to Iran. What's all this money for, I thought? The three of us walked hurriedly to the departure gate. My father explained that his flight back to Iran was leaving soon too. He winked at me and slipped something into my coat pocket. I put my hand inside and felt that it was money. My father gave a quick, strong hug and then we walked away in different directions. He didn't want to prolong the moment he'd been dreading for so long. I was nineteen when I said goodbye to my father. But in a way, that was the start of our relationship.

The Crucifix

Mark Lewandowski

In 1991 I started teaching in Biala Podlaska, a town of fifty thousand in eastern Poland. My college, a public institution charged with training future teachers of English, was in its first year and had only one class of eighteen students. The director rented a classroom and office space from a performing arts high school, which explained the out of tune pianos spanning the hallway. On most days would be Chopins banged on the pianos, weaving notes around the broken sentences of my lessons. Like a properly performed Wagnerian opera, the lines of my libretto and their piano fills often matched in tempo and volume. My students didn't seem put off by the music, but it often left me discombobulated. On the 3rd or 4th day of that first school year, during a particularly impassioned crescendo, I broke off mid-sentence and sighed. I must have raised my chin in exasperation, for only then did I notice the crucifix, within arm's reach above one of the students. Without a thought I squeezed between two desks and plucked it from the wall.

"We don't need this," I said.

I looked at the crucifix and smirked. There was nothing special about it: the cross cheap wood, and the Jesus probably nothing more than a cardboard figure encased in something resembling brass, not unlike the little batter atop the trophy I had earned on a little league baseball team in the summer after third grade. I stood there holding the crucifix, not really knowing what to do with it. At least I knew better than to toss it in the garbage can. Instead I placed it on my desk in the front of the classroom and carried on with my lesson. The students said nothing. From what I could see, they didn't react at all to my act.

The next day, after the good mornings, Arek raised his hand and stood up. He remained silent for a moment; his face noticeably reddened and shook. Looking back on this event I'm still surprised he was chosen as spokesperson for the class. Yes, his English was excellent—he was the only student in the class to have spent time mastering his abilities in the United States—but until he saw me falling down drunk at a bonfire some weeks later, he seemed very unsure of himself in front of me.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We had an election," Arek said quickly. "We voted to put the crucifix back on the wall. The Director said that it is okay with her, but we must ask you."

He sat back down, and scooted under his desk, scraping the legs of the chair on the cheap tile of the floor. I looked around the class. All the students had their eyes pinned to their desks. No one added to Arek's remark.

I was surprised. Neither the college nor the high school had a religious affiliation. I mistakenly assumed the crucifix was somehow an accident, or that perhaps an overzealous cleaning woman had put it up there one day. This was before I began noticing crucifixes and portraits of the pope in places like post offices. Poland takes its Catholicism seriously. Still, why would a group of college-going twenty-somethings want a crucifix on the wall? A few of the girls wore a crucifix necklace, but most of the students didn't seem particularly religious.

During my two years in Biała Podlaska I lived in a rectory which was nicknamed "Malbork," after the gigantic Teutonic castle just south of Gdańsk. (The nickname was well enough known that I never had to give taxi drivers an address. "Malbork," I'd say. The driver invariably guffawed, and off we'd go.) The second wing of the red brick edifice was still being built when I moved into the first wing. My flat was larger than that of most of my students, and I wasn't sharing it with parents and siblings. Two priests lived in equally spacious flats on either side of me. The head priest had a set of rooms to himself on the bottom floor, complete with his own private entrance. Students told me that every Sunday sermon contained harangues for more money to build the actual church next door, which at the time had walls only a few feet high. The head priest also called on parishioners at their homes to ask for money, and not just at the traditional time of Christmas. The rectory had to be built first, of course. Progress on the church was slow. And because money was short, the head priest had to rely on itinerant workers from Russia, all of whom were paid under the table. My students had no problem mocking the head priest of the parish for this. And then, there was also the matter of his personal life.

One morning between classes Arthur, one of my students, told me that the head priest had had a string of girlfriends.

"Mark, this man is so stupid," he said. "He goes to this house in disguise in a big hat and coat, but everyone knows his car!"

I told him about the priest living on the right side of me. I had nicknamed him "Devil Priest" because of the two horn-shaped birthmarks on his forehead.

"There are always young people going into his flat," I said. "Always alone. You don't think..."

"Of course," Arthur said. "I have heard these things about him. You must remember, in Poland, priests are like rock stars. They do

what they want. Even in Communist times they have cars and flats when nobody else does. Being a priest is a very good job.”

After the Peace Corps assigned me to the college in Biala Podlaska, Arthur met me in Warsaw and served as my translator when I moved into the rectory. I was nervous about living there. I wasn’t a priest and I had no intention of living like one. With some luck, lady friends would spend the night. If there were restrictions I’d ask the college to find me another place to live. I instructed Arthur to explain this to the head priest.

“Nie problema,” he said.

At the time I didn’t know the priests would see more action than me.

During the course of my first year President Lech Walesa would come under attack for naming a bishop one of his advisers. Many Poles, especially younger ones like my students, feared the tyranny of Communism would be replaced by the tyranny of the Church. There had even been talk of the government directly removing the tithe from paychecks.

“How do they get away with it, Arthur?”

“It’s not so simple,” he said.

I didn’t understand. Why did they want the crucifix on the wall? Maybe the students were just pleased that their voices could finally be heard about something. Maybe to them the crucifix wasn’t a symbol for faith in the Catholic Church. Maybe it was simply a symbol of faith in a much larger sense, not just faith in God, but faith in Poland. Their country was in the midst of extraordinary change. It needed the faith of its youth.

Heads still bowed, Arek and the rest of the class waited.

“It’s your class,” I said. “I’m only a guest.”

The next day the crucifix was back on the wall and no one mentioned the incident again.

‘In Heaven,’ She lied

Morgana Moore

I knew she was lying.

She wasn’t meaning to hurt me, it’s just that Death has a displeasing presence. He sits awkwardly in the corner of rooms, occupying doorways and corners, even when you really just want him to leave.

She said Grandma was in heaven because that was easier than knowing Grandma’s in the ground, and soon she’ll rot away into the earth. I never understood graveyards; sad, big spaces, full of sunken tombstones and crumbling marble. Gone and forgotten, for eternity, or at least until the fall of religion, when Asda would inevitably move in and bulldoze the lot for a carpark.

Village people are always complaining about not enough parking. One day, when the crucifixes are left in boxes gathering dust, and the church is used as nothing more than a community play centre for kids, they might happily welcome Asda’s new car park.

But why do we have to lie? My mum told me Grandma was in heaven because what else was she supposed to say? Grandma’s been left in the graveyard, and soon we’ll stop putting flowers on her grave?

When I die, I want to become part of the trees. My daughter will say to her own children ‘grandma’s in the ground, she’ll break away and feed the trees and the grass and the birds, and she’ll become a part of our world again.’

I used to ask to light candles for her. Not necessarily because I missed her—in truth, she was a woman I had never met—but because the ghost of her presence lingered around our home. In ways I wouldn’t be able to understand for many years, her passing was a life altering moment for the family. A freedom was found and nothing would ever be the same. And I saw this. From five years old I could see how Death was with us, a weird neighbour who sometimes dropped by, and probably would for the rest of our lives.

Death stood by me as my mum lit the candle and we thought of Grandma, and I thought about how I wanted my mum to know that I cared and I understood something big had just happened, and that maybe it would bring her comfort to think I thought of Grandma too. I didn’t want her to be alone in her experiences, and maybe this change, this passing, could be something we shared, even though I was only five, and there was still so much I didn’t understand.

Fifteen years later, my grandpa was dying. And, at the time, my mum didn't seem far behind him.

Death hadn't sat at my family dinner table for years. Then, one day, he was back, head bowed and just out of sight, like he had never left.

At night, he sat at the end of my bed as I lay awake, apathetic and disbelieving. He demanded nothing of me. No tears, no wailing prayers. Just quiet acceptance.

A year later I went on a ten-hour flight to Grandpa's funeral in Canada. I didn't cry. Not because I didn't love him, not because of any of the terrible truths and secrets I had learnt. Just because—

What's done is done.

At the funeral, they said he was in heaven.

My mum and I both knew this was a lie.

Faking Crazy

David Bailey

It's just me and her. Everyone else is out for a smoke. I have decided to quit. I have terrible timing. She sits across the room and the halogen lights froth her hair in mock righteousness. Her blond curls spill into her eyes and running mascara makes her look like Gene Simmons from Kiss. She opens her mouth. I tell myself to be the person she needs. She just talks because likely there is something she needs to get out. Just be that person.

I walk over to her and kneel beside the wheelchair. I stare directly into her empty eyes and see a flinch taper across her face. She does not expect this. She explodes. I dig in my heels and ride it out because it just feels right. The Techs look on from the nurse's station. They all write on their pads as she speaks. I think back to what the burly nurse said when they wheeled her bloat through the door.

“She says she is pretending to be crazy. You don’t pretend crazy.”

At least the rest of us are willing to admit our crazy. We can’t leave, but we can at least admit the crazy. She goes on like a wraith in Cocytus.

You don't think much of me do you? That's okay. No one ever does. Have you seen Divergent? My son likes it. He wanted me to read the book. He liked the book and wanted to see the movie. My daughter always says I say dumb things and she likes to joke that I don't read well. It kind of hurts my feelings but I love my children and I tried to read that book. It WAS a good book wasn't it?

Have you read it?

My husband used to read. He doesn't anymore.

I have a beauty shop. Did I tell you that? I cut hair. Men's hair. They love to make fun of me. I wish I could look into their eyes as they talk. I always believed you could only judge a man if you were looking them in the eye. I don't get to look into people's eyes that much. I don't really connect because of that. You have dark eyes. My momma used to say that made a man intelligent. I bet you're intelligent. You talk like you are.

The boy my daughter dated was intelligent but I never liked him. I did something bad David. I broke them up. Did I ever tell you that? I told stories about him. I lied about him because he isn't any good for her. At least that's what I thought. I used to get so mad at church cause they would sit together and they knew I couldn't get mad about it because everyone would see me and that ain't how you act in a church. But I lied. I lied and I lied and that boy cried when she told him she couldn't see him anymore. I don't even remember the lie that did, but it was a good one.

A momma just wants to protect her youngens. She just wants to keep her from makin the same mistakes. He was one of them Waynes that all go to church downtown. They are good ole boys and good ole boys don't pay for their sins. I was doing what she needed. I was doin because I knew because I saw what that boy was thinking because when I look in your eyes I see deep like the Bible says.

He is a good boy though. I did wrong. I don't like the man she's with now. He hurts her. I still see that Wayne boy sometimes at Freddy's famous fingers when I go there on Thursdays for lunch. I like to treat myself to that sometimes. He seems sad. I want them to get back together but I don't think they will.

I like you. I like your eyes. You look me in the eyes.

You remind me of my husband. He is a good man. He is a smart man. He reads all these big books with words I can't even say. He reads em and he understands em and he says different people have different kinds of smart and he loves me for my smart. We used to walk out on the river walk sometimes. It's been a long time since we did that. He used to come in to my shop sometimes and bring me Chicken from Freddy's just because he knows I like it. He told me to leave that girl and boy alone. He told me he still loved me when I did wrong.

He has cancer now. He sits in bed and moans all day and I wipe him and dress him and feed him, though most of the time nothing stays down. All he ever does is apologize. I tell him he doesn't have to but he keeps doing it. He isn't the man he was. I miss him. I feel guilty.

I faked a panic to get in here you know. I just wanted to rest. So, I had to fake it. I think I did a good job. My daughter talked to me before I came. I don't think she likes me too much anymore.

I...I don't know who is taking care of Chuck. I don't know.

I should. That's so strange. Do you think I'm not smart? Do you think I talk too much? I am sorry. I don't know why I'm sorry. I don't know.

The silence is. Her eyes wander from one door to the next. I think the real her has surfaced. I think she doesn't even know where she is. The real Christine has been hiding from the weight of it. The truth of what has happened. I think there is no one there for Chuck, no one there to wipe him or feed him. I think fear has found her after searching for a long while through the faking.

I have never seen another human cry the way she did. The pain, the guilt, the fear, the hatred, the anger, it all erupted and took her like an eagle snatching a rodent. She gripped my hand hard. By the time she was finished, there was no mascara left on her face.

Contributors

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Jan Ball's a widely published poet, with more than 300 poems published in journals such as: *Atlanta Review*, *Calyx*, *Connecticut Review*, *The HitchLit Review*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Phoebe*. She is the author of three collections of poetry: *Accompanying Spouse*, *Chapter of Faults*, and *I Wanted to Dance With My Father*, all published by Finishing Line Press. Her next chapbook, *Day Job*, is due out in May, 2020. When not working on her poetry, working out or traveling, Jan and her husband like to cook for friends.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Plainsongs*, *The Long Islander*, and *The Nashuaak Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *In This Place, She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski's Porch Publishing), *Folios of Dried Flowers and Pressed Birds* (Cyberwit.net), *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), and *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing).

Juditha Dowd is the author of a full-length poetry collection, *Mango in Winter*, as well as poetry chapbooks, short fiction, and lyric essays. She reads with Cool Women, an ensemble performing in the New York-New Jersey-Philadelphia area and occasionally on the west coast. With her husband and two Maine Coon cats, Juditha lives in Easton, Pennsylvania, near the Delaware River.

Mark Lewandowski's essays and stories have appeared in many journals, and have been listed as "Notable" in *The Best American Travel Writing*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* and *The Best American Essays*. He has also garnered numerous Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations. Mark is currently a Professor of English at Indiana State University.

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Kelly McCullough writes fantasy, science fiction, and books for younger readers. He lives in Wisconsin with his physics professor wife and a small herd of cats. He has more than a dozen novels in print or forthcoming either from PRH/ACE or Macmillan's Feiwel and Friends. His short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. His microfiction series *DragonDiaries* and *Badnoir* can be found on his webpage or by following him on Twitter or Facebook. He also dabbles in science fiction as science education, having written short fiction for the National Science Foundation and co-created a science comic for NASA and the Hubble Space Telescope. He also does a fair bit of silly performance art which can be found at: <https://kellymccullough.com/shenanigans/>

Ed Meek is the author of three books of poetry and a collection of short stories. He also writes articles, reviews and commentary. His work has appeared in many magazines, journals and newspapers including *The Paris Review*, *The North American Review*, *Cream City Review*, *The Boston Review*, *The Sun*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Boston Globe* and *The Boston Herald*. He has taught composition, creative writing and literature at the high school and college level. He lives in Somerville with his wife Elizabeth.

Tom Misuraca studied Writing, Publishing, and Literature at Emerson College in Boston before moving to Los Angeles. Over 80 of his short stories and two novels have been published (and a couple of poems here and there). Most recently, his story, "Wash Away" was appeared in *Every Day Fiction*. Tom is a multiple award-winning playwright with over 100 shot plays and 9 full-lengths produced globally. His musical, [Geeks!](#), ran Off-Broadway this Spring.

Morgana Moore is a Creative and Professional Writing student, currently undergoing an MA at the University of Derby in the UK. She writes for passion first, and money second, as she is yet to make any money. You can find her on twitter under [@morgana_moore](#).

Gerard Sarnat, M.D. has won prizes and been nominated for Pushcarts/Best of Net Awards. He has authored four collections, is widely published including by Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, Wesleyan, Johns Hopkins and in such magazines as *Gargoyle*, *Margie*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *New York Times* and *Voices Israel*.

James Scruton is the author of two full collections and three chapbooks of poems. Two new collections will appear this fall: *Crossing the Days* (Prolific Press) and *The Rules* (Green Linden Press). He is currently Professor of English and Associate Academic Dean at Bethel University in McKenzie, Tennessee.

B.J. Wilson holds an MFA from Eastern Kentucky University, a writing fellowship from The Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences, and a Pushcart Prize Nomination for his poetry. His poems have appeared in *Exit 7*, *New Madrid*, *Tar River Poetry* and elsewhere. His first collection of poems, *Tuckasee*, is forthcoming from *Finishing Line Press* in 2020.

Connie Woodring is a retired psychotherapist/educator/social activist who is getting back to her true love of writing after 45 years in my real job. Connie has a B.A. in English from Pennsylvania State University (1963-67) and an M.S.S from Bryn Mawr Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research (1968-70). She is currently pitching her novel, *Visiting Hours*, and a non-fiction book, *What Power? Which People? Reflections on Power Abuse and Empowerment.* Two chapters from the novel and two excerpts from the non-fiction book have been published. She has had 16 poems published in various American and British presses, including one nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize.

Atash Yaghmaian was born in Tehran, Iran, and has lived in the U.S. since 1990. She is a licensed clinical social worker with two decades of experience working in New York City public schools and Director of Wellness and co-founder of Harvest Collegiate, a progressive public high school in Manhattan. Atash is currently working on a full-length memoir called *My Name Means Fire*.



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