



3ELEMENTS

Literary Review



Cherry Tree

**Surveillance
Menu**

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THE GIFTS OF A KNOTTED OAK

Johnson Cheu

Back then, I wanted the gifts in a knot-holed oak, the integrity of Atticus Finch. *To Kill a Mockingbird* required 9th grade reading. When the dismissal bell rang, no one moved.

Back then, our hands held print & paper. No deleted references (now, restored) to Harriet Tubman & the Underground Railroad. No parent objected, demanded a *Please, Select* menu of education, race, history. No one pulled their kids out.

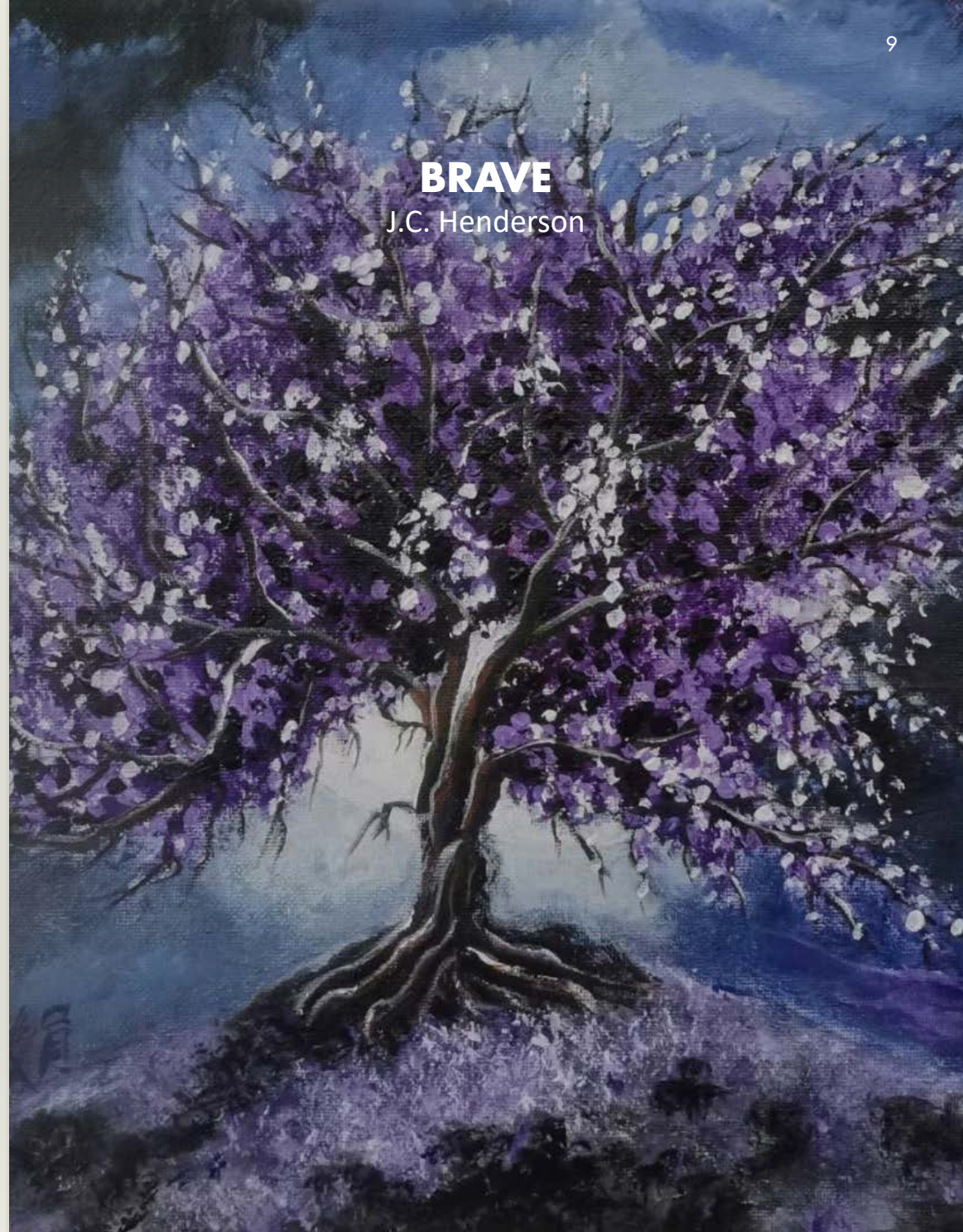
Back then, print meant touching vintage newspapers, those photographs of hoses turned on African Americans. Not viewed distanced through LCD. Back then, war, weapons, & mass destruction occurred *over there*,

which made America & childhood feel as safe as Maycomb. As an adult, though, I don't want shielding, surveillance—the internet can't revert into paper-cup phones & strands of string around a knotted oak.

I want our ugly or beautiful news, its truth carved from the cherry tree of our democracy, a society reading freely, widely, ardently, so we forget to move when the bells ring.

BRAVE

J.C. Henderson



HOW TO WRITE ANIMAL STORIES

Aimee LaBrie

Front porch, Giltner, Nebraska, Sunday, May 27, 1972

MY mother drives off in her green Buick, honking the horn. She has sprayed herself with Oscar de la Renta and her smell mixes with the hay and manure from the farm. We see her disappear beyond the bend in the road where the cherry tree stretched up toward the sky.

My grandmother holds my hand. She says, “Wave goodbye now.”

I think this means my mother will never return. I go into the backyard and lay my head on the dog, Oscar. He’s on a chain near the chickens but not near enough to bother them. His fur is soft and gray. He’s a German Shepherd with floppy ears. I put my head on his chest and listen to his heartbeat. He’s alive.

Even though my mother comes back, I believe that, like my missing dad, she will drive off and stay gone.

I don’t know if she will take me with her, or if I even want to go.

Living Room, Tuesday, September 9, 1977

My grandma and I like Jimmy Carter as the president. She smokes L&M Menthol cigarettes and I smoke candy cigarettes and we listen to Walter Cronkite with his long white sideburns tell us about the election. She is nervous and keeps fanning herself with a menu from the one Chinese restaurant in Lincoln.

I like Jimmy Carter because of his Southern accent and his daughter with my same name. She wears pigtails and has freckles and looks shy. We would be friends.

He gets elected. We celebrate by drinking ginger ale and eating Cracker Jacks.

We like Jimmy Carter because he has a dog named Grits, a border collie with a fuzzy collar of fur and a lolling pink tongue that makes him look like he’s laughing. Oscar has died, along with Patsy, Duke, Lady, and Conehead. All our farm dogs go in bad ways, either shot by other farmers for getting into their chickens or hit by cars on the road outside of our house.

My grandma and I cry every time, and then she makes me Cream of Wheat or a Spam sandwich with American cheese on top and we look in the wanted section of the paper for our next dog.

Wallis Payne’s house, every other Saturday in 1983

Wallis Payne’s dad takes us horseback riding every other Saturday. Her parents are divorced because the dad cheated on Wallis Payne’s mother with a younger woman and then married the mistress. To make up for it, he buys Wallis whatever she wants.

Nike shoes, Jordache jeans, plastic horses. This means he pays for my horseback riding too.

I feel like the poor relation, but it is true, I couldn't go without him paying, even with my babysitting money.

On this Saturday, Wallis screams at her mother for fifteen minutes before we leave. I cannot hear what her mother is saying but I can smell her cigarette smoke. She smokes all the time, day and night, but I think she is exotic with her gravelly voice and her daytime robe wearing. She teaches fifth grade, but not my class. All the students like her a lot, but they don't know that she listens to Anne Murray's "Snowbird" twenty times on repeat on the record player.

When Mr. Payne pulls in front of the house, he sits there, idling until Wallis and I come out. She always sits in the back seat with me to make her dad like the chauffeur.

I don't think he wants to be there either. He taps the steering wheel and turns up the volume on the radio. I like the back of his head because it's tan with white lines in it, like he's a movie star. Dad, dad, dad.

Wallis Payne is lucky in so many ways and she doesn't even know it.

Buick Century Sedan, Tuesday, March 5, 1985

My mother has an affair with a married man, and we leave Omaha with him to escape small town gossip and constant surveillance and judgement of the church ladies.

Alan is an ordinary guy. He lives in town and is a pediatric

dentist with a practice attached to his house. His wife is named Sarah. I like Sarah because whenever I have to wait for my mom to get her teeth cleaned, she lets me pet their dog, and she gives me three Mint Milano Pepperidge Farm cookies, even though the sugar could cause cavities. She listens to me talk about a science project I am working on, or a boy I like who has braces, or my fears about nuclear war. She never treats me like a kid, always listens and asks me questions.

I am afraid of Alan, whose big booming voice makes me grip the edges of the dentist chair. I never trust him because I don't understand why he trusts me; why he doesn't worry I might close my mouth on his gloved fingers, or suddenly sit up when he is drilling, causing the drill to sink into the soft roof of my mouth.

When my mother and Alan get together, Sarah vanishes with the dog in the night, leaving the water running in the sink so that the pipes burst.

Before we leave our house, I say goodbye to the window wells where I frequently rescued frogs, the cows I visited across the road, the weathervane shaped like a rooster. I know somehow that we are never going to see any of these things again; the John Deere lawn mower in the garage, the chickens at the Lambert's, and Wallis Payne and her mother, who gives me a pair of clip-on cloisonne earrings to remember her by. Worst of all are the feral mama cat and her kittens who live in the barn. What will become of the abandoned cats? Who will feed them? How will they fend for themselves?

When I ask about these things, my mother's mouth becomes a tight, thin line. "They're fine. The people who bought the house

will take care of all the animals.”

I don’t believe her. I feel a loss for the green hose in the yard, the red pitchfork, every piece of that place that I will never see again. I try not to think about my grandmother’s worried face. She hands me a five-dollar bill and tells me to call collect.

I focus instead on the cats because I cannot see her standing there, the sun hitting her face, making her look old.

Just before we get into Alan’s station wagon, I sneak a kitten into the car with me under my T-shirt.

We are doing fine for a while. The kitten purrs against my chest. After a couple of hours, she wakes up and lets out a mournful meow. I cough to cover the sound and talk as loudly as possible, which is weird since I haven’t said a word before that moment.

My mother turns in her seat. This is the year she starts to wear head scarves like a woman from an old movie, a woman who belongs in a convertible. “What in the world is wrong with you?” she says, laughing with Alan.

The kitten meows and Alan sneezes.

“You did not,” my mother says, trying to see what is going on in the back. Alan sneezes again, then blows his nose into a handkerchief. The kitten jumps from my hands, scratching, and shoots under the front seat.

The car skids on the road. “Whoa, there.” Alan pulls over. We sit in silence for a moment. The kitten, now free, begins screeching from underneath the seat. Alan sneezes again. “Can you deal with this, please?” he says to my mother. His nose is swollen and red. He gets out of the car and walks down the road, blowing his nose

into that handkerchief.

My mother says, “Goddamnit.” She gets out of the car, and squats on the side of the road, reaching under the seat to get the kitten. When she finally grabs hold of it, the kitten scratches and claws. She lets go, the kitten runs up her arm, and lands on all fours on the side of the road.

“Shoo,” she says to the cat. It is a small orange tabby with round marmalade eyes. “Shoo now!” She stomps her foot. The kitten jumps but won’t move.

A truck drives by, a giant black semi with flames along the frame, and the kitten, scared by the sound, flees into the stalks of corn.

My mother gets back in the car and slams the door. Alan returns, his handkerchief folded into his front pocket. He tips his head back and drops Visine into his reddened eyes.

“Good to go?” he booms. He pulls onto the dark strip of highway.

I wish then that another huge truck would come and smash us flat. Or maybe just flatten the two of them, and I could fly through the back window and into the corn, find the kitten, and bring her home safe.

We drive away. I press my face into the back seat. The weight of loss sits on my chest like a stone, but I refuse to cry and alphabetize books I love, starting with A and working my way toward Z.

Rhonda’s house, Schaumburg, Illinois, Some time in 1987

Our neighbor the vet is always taking in discarded kittens people find on the side of the road or near dumpsters or by empty college dorm rooms at the beginning of summer. People leave the kittens in cardboard boxes on her doorstep and, once, in a garbage bag with the top tied shut. *What if she had been on vacation?* a person might wonder.

I am fifteen and realize I might start believing the world is ending if I listen to too many of her stories.

That night, I help Rhonda and her mom feed the kittens with eyedroppers and baby bottles. The mama kitten has been hit by a car and it is just luck that someone found her babies in a square of yellow grass near an abandoned car. That's if you believe the story told by the woman who brought over the kittens in a diaper box from Walmart.

There are six of them, and they look as if they'd just been born. Their eyes are not even open yet.

We sit up all night in the bathroom with warm milk from the microwave, taking turns feeding them and putting them under a heat lamp. When they're little like that, they fit into the palm of your hand. They make tiny sounds, not meowing, just sounds that seem stuck in their small throats.

Rhonda thinks they will live. Rhonda is twelve; a young twelve who still holds her mother's hand at the grocery store and still half believes in magic and will knock on the back walls of closets in case there is a wardrobe that might open up behind the row of coats.

Rhonda keeps saying, "I think they're feeling better now," every time we feed them. Neither one of them asks if I need to call

home to tell them where I am.

We rest for two hours and then go back and do it all again. "This is the critical time," her mom says. She makes us hot milk with cocoa, like we need it to keep our strength up, as if this were a wartime effort I read about in *Little Women*.

That night, after Rhonda and her mom fall asleep foot to foot on the long yellow couch in the living room, I tiptoe into the bathroom to find the kittens.

I realize before I get into the room that I am holding my breath. I know in my body that they are dead, all six of them, dead and stiff like the baby bunny I found outside in the garden the year before.

I turn on the light and lean over the box. At first, I can't see the bodies at all because they are under a blanket. I lift the blanket. All six of them are curled up together. I reach down and touch each stomach with the tip of my finger.

A part of me wants them to be dead, not because I don't like them, but because Rhonda believes so much that they will survive. And if they are dead, something in me can freeze forever. I keep waiting for that to happen anyway. Bad things happen, and I check my body to see where it lodged, how much damage has been done.

If the kittens are alive, it means that a part of me is saved, or at least there is a possibility of me not turning to stone like Medusa in the legend we read about in ninth grade.

I lift the blanket. I see the kittens. It is the same as with every pet. They survive until they don't.

Something in me shifts, and I want to write it down, to make it real.

LOOKING FOR A NEST

William Brown



ASH SEASON

Brandon S. Roy

The boy was barefoot. The sun had quit.
Ash drifted westward, soft as sleep.
He walked the backroads where fences sagged
and things with names had lost them.

A cherry tree stood off the path.
Barren. Black-limbed. Its branches
like the fingers of a drowned man, lifted in prayer.
No birds. No bloom. No fruit.

The old diner leaned into the weeds,
windows shot out with BBs or grief.
Inside, the wind paged through a faded menu
meat long gone to rot or myth.

He sat. Listening.
To nothing.
The creak of time.
A crow coughing up silence in the rafters.
A camera blinked from a rusted eye
surveillance of the dead or the dying.
The boy did not pray.
He had no god.
Only hunger.
And the road, gray and endless,
like the pages of a book
no one would finish.

JUST A FEW MORE INCHES

Frank Kelly



AND WHAT HE SAW THERE

K.G. Ricci



SECRETS AND PIES

Bradley J. Collins

IT'S yard sale weekend on Maple Lane, and I'd put my neighbors under surveillance long enough to feel safe mixing among them. I knew all their names, where they worked, what vehicles they drove, along with daily schedules.

I'd uploaded my neighbors' names to contacts at the Agency. Analysts told me no one in Maple Lane was a threat. No criminal records. No ties to the murderous regimes I've helped topple. A couple across the street owned two yappy chihuahuas who sounded like firecrackers set off in a cookie tin. Otherwise, it's a quiet neighborhood.

Morning light filtered through my windows as I crimped the crust on a fresh pie, which I'd made for the community bake sale. The proceeds would go toward constructing a pocket park. I danced, an awkward little shimmy, even though no music played. It felt good to help build something after a career fomenting destruction.

My house came with a cherry tree in the backyard. I'd never baked anything in my life, unless you count the time I slipped cyanide into the breakfast tart of a despot. Most people don't know you can make cyanide from cherry pits. That knowledge came in my first week of training.

I remembered being terrified during missions, but I possessed no recollection of how my fear felt. Was I shaky? Sweaty? My dangerous ops occurred years ago, blurred by time, so distant they seemed like movies I'd half remembered. Only Afghanistan remained vivid, unforgettable. Often, I'd wake in the middle of the night, soaked in sweat, screaming, or I'd hear a car backfire and almost leap out of my skin because my brain interpreted the sound as the ratatat of AK-47s.

I watched Ms. Jackson, who lived next door, placing paperbacks onto tables strewn across her lawn. I spotted an F. Scott Fitzgerald collection. Precious few things excited me, but I buzzed with an electric thrill from finding rare books. I imagined myself on the back patio, lounging in the shade, reading. Might I fall asleep? I've never had a patio or reading time, so I wasn't sure what to expect.

Ms. Jackson's gorgeous nephew, Henry, hauled books out and organized them. He's fifty-five, with salt and pepper hair, more muscular than most men his age. Henry's been over the last two days to help his aunt set up. I'd found excuses to strike up conversations with him. I felt like a schoolgirl, butterflies in the belly we used to call it, as Henry and I talked about his aunt's hydrangeas and how the muggy heat seemed worse than in prior years. I'd been putting on makeup for him, imagining his strong

arms pulling me close.

When I researched Henry, I learned he spent three decades at the State Department, with postings across the Middle East. Something about his sharp movements, the way he scanned his surroundings, set off alarm bells. I'd been around enough military men to sense his background involved combat. But I found no record of him serving.

I briefly contemplated wearing a disguise to the sales, hoping no one would decipher my identity. To become a spy, one must hide in plain sight. Hiding proved harder when I was a younger woman, a high-stakes game where one wrong move led to bullets and blood. Back then, I disappeared into wigs and makeup. I became other people—Ilsa, when in Munich, Sophie in Paris, and Katerina in Moscow. These women had lives, jobs, stories that were not mine, stories invented by Langley, and rehearsed by me until they sounded natural. None of my aliases had emotions, none of them loved anyone. The first rule of spying was to eliminate attachments, and I'd excelled. I have no one in my life. Good job, me.

I retreated to the bathroom. The face in the mirror was enough of a mask. Deep lines were etched around my eyes and mouth, and gray streaks threaded through my once black hair. Beneath the wrinkles, an angular beauty.

No one would look at me, not deeply, that's the gift and curse of being a sixty-year-old woman. They'll think I'm someone's grandmother. Maybe they'll ask when I retired. I'm ready with a backstopped cover story for this last stage of my life.

I'm Esther Conrad now, a former antiquities dealer who spent

decades traveling across Europe and Asia. Scattered around my new home were enough statues and paintings to fill a small museum. I'd spent my first two weeks of retirement memorizing the provenance of those items, in case anyone asked where I'd found them. In reality, Esther died at six months old, and the Agency repurposed her social security number and forged me a birth certificate.

"I'm Esther, nice to meet you," I said to my reflection. My outfit today: a low-cut floral print dress for Henry's benefit, and walking shoes, because my vanity could not compete with fallen arches.

Fear bloomed, a collar around my throat. I wasn't scared of being tortured or killed. What twisted my stomach into knots? If I blew my cover, I'd have to start over somewhere new. I liked the trees here, the way the maples swayed in the breeze, a hush, like the tide rolling in. I liked the idea of permanence, of digging in and staying, not running for once.

All my books were neatly stacked on shelves in the library. It would be a pain to stuff them into boxes, quite literally. Both my knees were devoid of cushioning, my back often froze up, turning me into a statue, and I was down to one kidney after getting stabbed by a gun runner in Tangiers fifteen years ago.

After walking outside, I found a crowd milling around the sales, and unfamiliar cars parked on the street. I couldn't research so many people. Retreat or trust my training?

No one would die if I failed to acquire the Fitzgerald collection. I'd be cross with myself, and then I'd talk to my therapist, and the longing would fade. But I found the idea of giving up unsettling. If I couldn't manage yard sales, then would I molder in my recliner,

would I melt into the walls, alone?

Henry caught me lingering on my front porch, and when he smiled, all the doubt drifted out of my body.

I carried my pie with both hands. Approaching Henry, I flashed a bright smile. “Is your aunt putting you to work?”

“Aunt Mary said I couldn’t have any lemonade until I sold something.”

Mary loomed, closing the sale of a rolltop desk. Beside her was a pitcher of bright pink lemonade and cups.

“Earn your keep, Henry,” she said with an unyielding tone.

“Help me,” Henry said to me, hands folded together in mock prayer.

“I need to drop off my pie.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

I caught Henry’s gaze lingering on my chest. Men could be such simple creatures.

We walked at a languid pace, hewing to shaded areas along the sidewalk. For a long minute, neither of us spoke. I couldn’t recall when I’d been comfortable sharing silence with someone. My mind wasn’t racing. I wasn’t thinking about mission objectives, nor was I looking for escape routes.

Henry stopped suddenly, digging both hands into his pockets, rocking on the balls of his feet. Nervous? Worried? I hadn’t known him long enough to diagnose the pinched skin on his forehead.

“Would you come to my place for dinner tonight?” he asked.

“Oh...”

“Oh, as in, I’ve made a fool of myself, or oh—what a brilliant idea.”

I’d never been on a real date. After my mother died when I was seven, I spent the next ten years in an orphanage. The nuns were tough, but fair, waking us at dawn, requiring us to keep tidy rooms, and slapping us on the wrists with rulers if we were disobedient. I remembered Christmas morning, feasting on cinnamon rolls, and ripping open one present, because the nuns wouldn’t spoil us. We received socks or underwear, and skipped down the halls because those simple gifts meant something to us.

We’d lived a cloistered existence. No boys. No movies above a G rating. My first kiss had been with my longtime roommate, Diane, an awkward collision of chapped lips in a sweltering Buick. The night before I left for college, we declared our love for each other. I could not remember whether I’d meant those words or if I’d been so desperate for her touch that I would have said anything.

“What will happen on this date?” I asked.

“We’ll eat food, ordered off any restaurant menu you like, because I can’t cook. We’ll talk about something more interesting than the weather. I bet you’ve got fascinating stories.”

My gut instinct told me this man was dangerous. My muscles coiled, ready to run or fight. “You’re very persuasive. But why me?”

“I’ll tell you tonight.” Henry pulled out a business card and handed it to me.

I read the card aloud. “Henry Jackson—Aluminum Siding Sales.”

It sounded like a cover, and not a very convincing one. His phone number and address were listed under his name.

Before I could force the card back into his hand, Henry drifted

toward his aunt and helped load her rolltop desk into the back of someone's truck.

I'd have bet every penny in my retirement fund that Henry was a spy. But if he wanted me dead, why was I still holding my cherry pie, breathing in the summer heat? A spy would've poisoned me and made it look like a heart attack.

Our interaction didn't add up. I needed an objective outside opinion.

I met my former handler at a diner after sending him everything I knew about Henry. Carl was a bear of a man, over six feet tall, with an unkempt beard and tree trunk arms. We sat in a vinyl booth, the sound of conversations mingling with the scraping of knives and forks across plates.

He leaned forward, eyes wide. "Is your cover blown?"

I scanned the other customers and noted a rear exit behind the counter. A tight band of panic wrapped around my lungs; every breath required focus. I was on high alert. Heart racing, clammy all over, feeling as though the walls were pressing against me. "I'm not sure. Something's off about Henry."

Carl's shoulders tightened. "I called in favors from sources at the Pentagon. Based on your read of Henry, I figured he was ex-military."

"Is he?"

Carl shrugged. "My sources couldn't find anything on Henry, but they found a Delta Force squad with highly redacted missions. One of the operators—codenamed Hank—recently retired. It might be your guy."

I dug my fingernails into my palms to keep from screaming. Of course, I'd fallen for a trained killer.

"Or maybe Henry genuinely likes you," Carl continued.

I'd learned to trust Carl, especially when my life depended on him. He'd saved me in Syria when an operation against Assad's brutal regime went sideways, and I needed an exfiltration route. Carl had communicated via radio bursts, directing me to a shipyard as SVR agents hunted me. I recalled their bullets pinging off my taxi, the glass windows shattering as my driver yelled, and I nearly bled out. When I got trapped in Libya, during the civil war, Carl landed a plane outside Tripoli and fired rounds from an M2 Browning, forcing Gaddafi's secret police into retreat, and we escaped. Fear had never poisoned my thoughts or actions, because I knew Carl would rescue me.

Carl recruited me to the Agency. We'd met when I enrolled in college, and discovered I possessed a natural ability to learn languages. My advisor enrolled me in Spanish I, and by the first semester's end, I could speak fluently. I learned French, German, and Russian. I'd spent hours in the library, poring over examples of common phrases until I cracked entire dialects, body humming, because I couldn't quite believe I was finally good at something.

Carl found me after I wrote a paper on using computer programs for translations, which I'd submitted decades before applications like Google Translate. He came to my dorm and sold me a story about how my skills could help save America from our many enemies.

I remembered feeling as though I might burst, a heady mixture of joy and hope taking over my body. Carl had seen my potential.

To him, I mattered. I'd been without a father figure my entire life, and Carl tapped into my need to prove myself. As an orphan, I often felt as though the world had forgotten about me. How many nights had we gone to bed hungry? How many times had parents met with me, only to choose another girl? I'd lost count.

Carl made me believe I could live a life of purpose. My lack of attachments would be a strength.

He sipped coffee. "Paranoia was necessary in your former life, Jane."

I leaned forward, teeth bared. "I'm Esther Conrad. Don't slip again."

"Sorry...it's hard to keep track of all your identities at my age."

His hair was snowy white. I'd spent so much time worrying about my age that I'd forgotten Carl had fifteen years on me.

"You're right. I'm too wound up."

"Afghanistan changed you. But I promise, no one is hunting you. We got out clean."

As a spy, trusting people was always difficult. After Afghanistan, it became impossible. In Kabul, I operated under the identity of Sienna Collier, a logistics expert bringing medical supplies to Doctors Without Borders. I met a young doctor, Sam Kline.

During the days, we talked about supplies and how to triage the wounded. At night, we'd sit in my quarters, listening to old jazz records, and Sam would talk about the farm in Iowa where he grew up, and I'd tell him scripted lies about the life of Sienna Collier.

One night, Sam opened up, telling me horror stories about the patients he'd lost.

He was on the edge of my bed, reeking of blood and sweat, bawling. And I held him. He was thirty years younger than me, and Sam awakened a mothering instinct I didn't believe I'd ever feel.

"I'll get you out of Afghanistan," I'd said.

Sam had looked up with such hope in his eyes. "How?"

I didn't tell him I was a CIA Agent, but I said too much. I told Sam I could get him a ride on a C-130 and gave him the plane's coordinates. The Taliban destroyed the C-130 after Sam leaked the base's location. The Agency had tracked poorly encrypted texts from his phone.

Did he do it for money? I'd never know. Sam disappeared into the mountains, and I never saw him again. Two pilots died because of me, and sometimes the guilt hit me so hard I couldn't move.

I pushed away my egg whites, staring at Carl. "How do I trust again?"

"When you figure that out, let me know."

**

I spent the next three days at home, debating whether to ignore Henry or confront him. I couldn't sleep more than an hour or two a night, and I'd barely been able to force down meals. I was unraveling, fixated on whether Henry desired me romantically. Or was he luring me into a trap?

Using his business card, I Googled Henry's address and drove across town, finding his ranch house on the shore of Lake Springfield. I had a Ruger 9mm in my purse, a combat knife hidden in the heel of my shoe. Carl provided backup, lurking in a Winnebago, ready to rescue me.

I knocked on Henry's door, and he answered, wearing shorts

and a polo that highlighted his muscular frame.

“I knew you’d come,” he said.

With a practiced motion, I drew the Ruger and aimed it at his chest. “Let’s talk.”

Henry’s face crashed, from a smile to a flat line in a second. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“It does.”

I followed him inside. Henry sat at a kitchen island. The Cubs game was on the television in the living room. He muted the sound.

“What do you want with me?” I asked.

Henry rubbed his temples. “This was not how I wanted our date to go.”

“Answer the question.”

“Or you’ll kill me?”

“Underestimate me at your peril,” I replied coldly.

“Good line,” he said, sadness choking his voice. “My name’s not Henry, any more than yours is Esther.”

“You don’t know me.”

Henry pulled out a bottle of beer and drank a generous portion. “I was in Afghanistan. Part of the Delta Force team that hunted Sam Kline. He’s in a blacksite prison.”

I should have felt a wave of relief, but I was coiled too tight, not ready to believe Sam had been caught. Why hadn’t the Agency told me Sam was brought to justice?

“When you showed up living next to my aunt, I recognized you. Your picture and communications with Sam were shown to my team.”

I stumbled backward, almost losing my grip on the Ruger, as I

fell onto Henry’s recliner.

“Who sent you?”

Henry shook his head. “No one sent me. You happened to buy a house next to my aunt, that’s the truth.”

“What are the chances?”

“A million to one, probably worse.”

Henry raised his hands high and slowly approached. He stood barefoot on the carpet as the air conditioning rattled.

I bolted for the door. “You could be prosecuted for revealing your mission. I could be locked up for listening.”

Henry followed, reaching out before I turned the knob, gently taking my hand. “I believe fate brought us together.” He pressed closer. “I trust you with my life. I saw you rescuing doctors when American forces were pulled out of Afghanistan and everything went to hell.”

I remembered our evacuation as a blur of screams and gun smoke, so vivid the acrid scent burned my nose even now. Lowering the gun, I returned to the recliner. “How could we ever trust each other?”

“Let’s start with dessert.” Henry walked back to the kitchen, opened his refrigerator, and brought out the cherry pie I’d baked for the community sale. “I thought it’d be a romantic gesture to buy what you made.”

“I could’ve poisoned it.”

“I’ve read your file. You wouldn’t hurt someone unless they deserved it.”

“You don’t know me. I definitely don’t know you.”

Henry used a butter knife to carve out two pieces of pie and

plated them. He offered one to me.

“I’m not risking my life for pie. You’ve had days to lace it with cyanide.”

“Come outside and watch the sunset with me,” he said.

We went to his back porch, a hundred feet from the lake’s edge. A sailboat bobbed on the water, and the wind picked up, stirring the treetops.

“I like you. I think you like me. We’re both survivors, let’s build on that.” He took a big bite of cherry pie, crumbs adhering to his five o’clock shadow. “It’s dry.”

“It is not.”

“You’d have to taste it to be sure.”

I grabbed a fork and carved off a tiny piece. But I hesitated, still unsure I was ready to let go of my old self. “Someday we’ll have to talk about the things we’ve done.”

“Maybe tomorrow morning.”

“What makes you think I’m staying the night?”

“I’m an optimist.”

“Could you love a cynic?” I asked.

“Cynicism is a symptom of a broken heart. I’m a fixer.”

“Some things can’t be fixed.”

He brushed a lock of hair out of my face, stared into my eyes. “We’ll figure out how to live in this world. Hopefully together.”

I thought about Sam Kline, and the two pilots who’d died because I’d trusted him. Was I different now? Had I learned to spot red flags?

“A friend said that no one is hunting me,” I told Henry. “I want to believe that’s true.”

“Then believe it. I’ve hurt enough people in my life. The last thing I want is to hurt you.”

The sadness in Henry’s eyes seemed genuine, and I wondered who he’d hurt and who had hurt him. The only way I’d ever know was to stay.

I took a bite of pie, the taste of cherries sweet on my tongue. “If this is poisoned, my handler is going to murder you.”

Henry leaned closer. “Is he watching us now?”

“Yep.”

He laughed, a melodic sound.

“Do you like F. Scott Fitzgerald?” he asked. “I bought my aunt’s collection.”

“The last thing I remember about my mother is her sitting on our porch, reading *Gatsby*,” I said. “I never took the time to finish it.”

“You have time now.”

Henry wrapped his arm around my waist, and we stared at the sun setting over the lake, a crimson smear, fading and fading. I tossed my Ruger into the water, and we watched it sink.



BEFORE THE TIDE

Rachel Foley

I need to see my father.

I breathe in salt and cedar, thick in the air as I step onto the tarmac. My mother used to say she could hear the coastline in my voice whenever I was near the ocean.

My dad waits inside the terminal, waving enthusiastically, his thick, unruly hair a stubborn patch of wildness. For a moment, I hold onto it—the vitality, undimmed by the recent diagnosis. I want to freeze him here, framed in the windows of this tiny airport, alive in a way I want to believe is permanent.

The doctors say his cancer is aggressive—prolymphocytic leukemia, the T-cell variant. The name catches in my mouth, the syllables still awkward and unfamiliar. His life, they said, is now measured in months. Six, maybe twelve if it's caught early. And we did, somehow, catch it early. Like catching the tide before it pulls the beach clean. There's nothing to stop it, only a little more time to watch the water roll in.

I move toward my father, weaving through the strange tension airports hold—beginnings and endings, people hugging and smiling and crying. It's a space that can feel like desperation or hope, depending on the moment.

"Hey, kid! Good to see you."

Forty-three and I'm still his kid. He pulls me into a one-armed hug—the awkward embrace of a man who never learned to say I love you out loud. I lean into it longer than usual, trying not to measure how many more of these I might get. We stand by the baggage carousel, the clunk of the conveyor blending into the terminal buzz until Dad points to the largest suitcase inching closer.

"That must be yours," he says, lifting it with the ease of a man who is not yet sick. He mock-groans and shakes his head, the one he always does when I show up with more luggage than sense. Maybe I do. But how do you pack for a dying father?

Dad fills the car with chatter and I listen, grateful for the ordinary. He points out a curve where the blackberry bushes grew thick that summer, and the new turnout where you can see the bay on a clear day. He tells me about the courses he's taking: *Ancient Complex Societies* and *The History of Nuclear War*—like he's searching for what lasts, even as everything falls apart.

I want to ask: how bad is it? How much time do we really have? But the words lodge in my throat, so instead I joke, "You're the reason I have too many degrees and can't keep the same job for long." We are both too curious, too restless. He laughs, easy and relaxed. Then his face shifts to serious.

"When I'm gone," he says quietly, "you'll be okay."

I nod, but the weight of it settles in my chest.

We pull up to the split-level house that was never mine and climb out of the car. The cherry tree is long past blooming, though is stubbornly holding its leaves well into the fall. Inside, it still smells like home: lemon from my mother's endless cleaning, and the scent of leather softened by time. Beneath it, the faintest trace of coffee long gone cold, and tobacco, though Dad hasn't smoked a pipe in thirty years. Evening light spills through the windows. I've always loved this about their home—the light. So much of it, flooding every corner. It feels defiant, all that brightness, as if the house itself refuses what's moving toward us.

The CBC hums low from the living room radio—news, a snippet of symphony, voices rising and falling. Mom has snacks in the kitchen, the menu always the same: cheese and crackers. She flits about, her nervous energy scraping the edges of the room, and a tight breath escapes me. I want to tell her to sit down, but I press my lips together to keep the words from spilling out. I move to help her slice apples for the plate instead, but she waves me off. Her hands move constantly, as if being busy might keep everything else at bay.

I pop a piece of cheese in my mouth and sit at the table. Dad immediately comes to join me, pushing past the awkward silence with his usual energy.

"It's Oka," he says, oblivious to the tension with my mother. "You know the history, right?"

I do, but I stay silent.

A few summers ago, my husband and I followed a dirt road through Manitoba fields until we stumbled upon a Trappist

monastery selling cheese. My dad told me of this before—how the Oka Trappist monks made cheese in Quebec, how the recipe traveled west, carried by generations of patient hands. I'm not built for patience. Not usually. But today, I let him tell me again of cheese made between prayers and devotions, the kind of act requiring a slow and steady faith I've yet to find. I memorize my father's voice as if it might be the prayer I need for what's coming.

My mother clears the plates, the clatter loud and jarring. She busies herself with the kettle and makes tea as if it could save her from the conversation she refuses to have.

"We should get down to it," Dad says, steady and practical.

Doctors say there's nothing to do, not yet. As long as he's asymptomatic, it's just surveillance. When it starts, though, it moves fast. Best guess is eight months, though no one wanted to say that out loud.

He keeps his hands folded on the table, fingers intertwined, calm. I look at those hands, the same ones that built the fence, fixed the sink, taught me how to drive and how to plant a garden. They look steady now, but I know they will betray him.

We move from timelines into logistics, bending death to our human need for order. There won't be a funeral. Just cremation. Ashes to ashes. Dad wants to be scattered at sea, and I wonder if that's even legal, but I don't ask. I think of the ocean floor, dark and thick with the dust of the dead. Heavy. Murky. Not like this house, full of light. Not like my dad.

"There's nothing you need to do," he says. "The house, the money, power of attorney—it all goes to your mother."

Nothing to do. Except learn, somehow, to live without a father.

I just nod, knowing we are not a family that talks about feelings.
Words swallowed whole—that's my inheritance.

"There," he says. "That's it." And he clears his throat the way
he does when he's said all there is to say.

I glance at the windows and how the evening sun cuts through
the dust hanging in the air, illuminating it in long gold stripes.
Tomorrow my mother will sweep it clean, but for now it shines as
it falls to the ground. You cannot see light without something to
reflect it. Maybe grief is like that too—visible only when it catches
on something.

We sit, the low hum of the CBC threading through the room,
voices rising and falling in half-heard news, half-forgotten music.
His hands stay folded on the table, steady, impossible, as if stillness
could stall what's coming. I don't move. To stand would be to
admit it—something begun, unstoppable—and I feel it, the pull of
what lies ahead, relentless, like water dragging us on.

ROOTS OF A RISING SUN

Linden Kohut



THREADBARE GOLD AND GROUNDHOG SOUP

Patrick G. Roland

Never met a pope,
but I kissed the forehead
of a man who believed in miracles.

My grandfather only ever wore red flannel
trimmed in gold and silver.
A 24-karat crucifix hung
from a silver figaro with repeating links,
eternity forged in metal.
Each loop a clash—yin and yang.

His wedding ring was worn thin, like a key ring.
He said it was his grandfather's and someday
it would be mine. He never took it off,
even after his fingers swelled around it
like an old cherry tree swallowing
a length of rusted barbed wire.

I used to feel for that ring
when I held his hand in the hospital.
Dig my small fingernails into the divot,
watch his eyes for pain
he never showed.
Popes lie in state in St. Peter's Basilica.

My grandfather's wake was in Grandma's kitchen
because death was personal,
and once the body's gone, the rest is memory.

We remembered him with Grandma's groundhog soup,
just ground beef and green beans,
but he convinced the neighborhood
it was some rare delicacy.

He once scribbled Groundhog Bourguignon
onto a napkin and taped it to a restaurant window
like a menu, laughing until he coughed blood.
“Only the finest for a man of God,” he'd say,
raising his spoon like an aspergillum.

My grandfather died in his sleep.
I often wonder what he dreamed at the end.
Grandma found him in the morning,
gripping his thread-thin gold ring—
his worldly treasure.
He didn't need a Square or stained glass or state.
He had a kitchen. A bowl of soup.
A lifetime of quiet surveillance from his porch swing:
watching over grandkids he never expected,
eyes sharp under bushy brows,
noticing every missed curfew,
every scraped knee.

I wear his ring—
thin gold hanging loose
from stainless steel, for balance.

Some things aren't meant to shine.
They're meant to last.

BENDING

Enrique Garcia



\$5/LB

Jill Grunenwald

HE asks, “How much?” and I gesture to the sign above the wooden crate of strawberries. The price is written in the kind of balloon letters you’d see on a chalkboard menu, large and thick in slick black marker. Alongside the price is a cartoon drawing of a neon pink tap-dancing strawberry wearing a top hat and monocle. Management probably asked some stockboy who majored in Art and now lives at home and works the graveyard shift because who the fuck majors in Art in this economy?

When the man repeats his query, I realize he’s not asking about the price of produce.

The overhead light flickers with a buzz, like a fly getting zapped. My right eye twitches. It’s been doing that for weeks. The guy at the walk-in clinic said it was probably due to stress or lack of sleep. Charged me \$75 and recommended yoga. Suggested it might help with my weight, too, not that I fucking asked. Low impact, good for the joints. Said I have such a pretty face. The

intake forms asked for the contact info of my regular doctor. I wrote down the name of my third-grade teacher.

Under the jaundiced light, the strawberries look ill. Like they tap danced a little too hard. Like that story about the girl with the red shoes. Or that dancing plague I heard about on some true crime podcast between ads for mail-order mattresses and mail-order meals.

The light zaps again. It's far too bright for this hour. Normally I'd shop at the market on the corner near my apartment. The one with the cherry tree logo where the produce is cheap and the ginger cashier turns as pink as the tap-dancing strawberry every time I say hello. But it's not open 24 hours, and this is what happens when your pervy manager decides he'd rather have you working second shift so he can surveil you through the glass of his office door without anyone else around asking questions. And you would quit for a better paying job with better hours and a better manager, but it's the best you can do with your degree because who the fuck majors in Theatre in this economy?

The stranger asks his question for the third time.

The tap-dancing strawberry tips his hat to me as I do the math in my head. It would be enough to cover my rent for the month. On the other hand, I could end up a topic sandwiched between ads for mail-order mattresses and mail-order meals. Either way I'm basically saving money. #SelfCare. #GirlMath.

I grab a carton of berries then another and follow the man outside.

Six weeks from now, I will find the strawberries shoved in the back of the fridge coated with a layer of white fuzz. As I toss

them in the trash, I'll remark to my roommate they remind me of a stuffed bear I won at a carnival once when I was a kid.

WATCHING OVER THE GROWTH AND CRAFT

Mary Amato



THERE ARE NO CHERRY TREES IN BLACKHEATH

Wayden Rogers

and no holsters for the guns the *skollies* point two-handed to heaven to shoot down the God that forgot this bleeding geography. Things are often best described by what they lack. Look at me, I am a boy shaped around an absence called *Love*. My mother, a woman forged around a pit christened *Faith*. Some days, when it's hard, I have to remind myself that she's blameless—we cannot account for what was missing when we got here. I live in the part of town where I'm told to leave behind anything luminescent before I walk out the door. Here, the body is a menu you can order off of with the price of a bullet. But I step out anyway. I'd learnt there are some things you can lose that cost more than your life. My aunt once said, *We're under God's surveillance 24/7*; could He explain how my body slipped out from beneath me? I'll be the first to tell you: *near* doesn't promise safety. Because once the metal rains down in showers, warm as a dying star, it's those with the guns stuffed in their pockets that are found lying on the tar. A body pooling around a still-heart & the only cherry tree in Blackheath tattooed on his back.



SURVEILLANCE

Natalie Christensen

THE CHERRY TREES

Kevin Koch

THE young tree's bark looked like it had been blasted by shrapnel. After it had survived a few winters, I had thought the tree tough enough to withstand the gnawing of our backyard critters—usually rabbits—so I'd removed its protective trunk covering. And now here it was, its bark shredded, tattered, peeled.

If I'd had a backyard surveillance camera, no doubt it would have sighted a much larger critter—probably a deer buck having wandered in from the nearby woods—scraping its velvety antlers across the newly-exposed bark of my young cherry tree, third in its line of succession.

For how long do we protect those we love? When do we tell them they're on their own? And when do we know they're gone?

An old cherry tree stood in our front yard when my wife and I moved into our house thirty-six years ago. It would bloom a brilliant white each spring, and then by July ruby red cherries

magically lit it up like a midsummer Christmas tree.

The recipe for preparing them was simple: there was none. I might surrender a bag or two for a cherry pie or a fruit bread, but for the most part, the menu was simply tart cherries pitted and piled atop a bowl of cereal or ice cream or stolen directly from the tree each time I passed beneath its branches while mowing the lawn.

I would freeze at least twelve bags of pitted cherries, pulling one out on the first of each month to enjoy them year-round.

Our oldest son loved to climb into its branches and sit there for hours. “What are you doing when you’re in the tree?” my wife would ask him. “Just thinking,” he’d say. What better response need there be? Although they didn’t like the tart cherries, all three of our kids as well as my wife would help me pick them. For a while. Then the task was mine to finish off.

Within a few years of our moving in, the tree began dying. Skeletal branches claimed more of the tree each year. So we planted a second front-yard cherry tree, tart of course, and watched it grow as the old tree slipped further toward death. We cheered the new tree’s first two cherries, then a handful the following season. Meanwhile the old tree finally died. It had not been a tree of our own planting, so I was not overly pained at cutting it down. But how do you explain this to your son, for whom the tree was his place to think?

The new tree grew quickly and soon took on almost legendary status in the neighborhood. For two weeks each summer, I’d climb the step ladder, straining to reach every last cherry. I picked cherries for several of our elderly neighbors and invited friends

to share in the harvest. We live on a popular pedestrian avenue, so friends and strangers would walk, run, or bicycle past and see me on the ladder amid the cherries. It was a conversation-starter, followed by an invitation for the passerby to pick and eat a few—with fair warning as to their tartness.

The tree kept growing and producing more cherries. Finally, I gave in and declared that the cherries at its crown—which I could no longer safely reach—were literally “for the birds.”

The kids kept growing, too. They went to high school, they went to college, they went off to their separate lives. I kept picking cherries every summer.

Then the “new” cherry tree began aging. Bits of bark loosened from the trunk. Sap stained the lower trunk from some invisible wounds. One summer it hardly produced. Was it destined to be cut down as well?

Let’s wait and see, I told my wife. The first cherry tree had come with the property; this one we’d planted ourselves, and I’d invested three decades into its fruit. We consulted an arborist and tried this and that for a while but eventually decided to leave it to its own.

Just how long can you hold onto a tree? Just when does one let go?

A tree for which you’ve invested your sweat also serves as a marker of time. In the years since we planted that second cherry tree, I’ve had much to celebrate: wedding anniversaries, kids’ graduations, books published. But I have also lost my mother, my father-in-law, a sister, and—just this spring—a brother to death.

Three of the neighbors to whom I gave cherries have passed away, one during the most recent cherry-picking season. A fourth neighbor hangs precariously on to life.

Our kids are grown, healthy, and doing fine—grafted, matured, and transplanted into their current lives. But as each one left home they left a hole behind, not unlike the empty space where the first tree once stood. I would like to freeze the joys and successes of their childhood years, and thaw just one memory once each month to re-celebrate throughout the year. But there were also worries, tears, and shredded dreams in those young years. Just the usual stuff of youth—schoolyard problems, a spurned friendship, loss of a first girlfriend, the kind of things that bruise the heart, first that of the child and then—probably more deeply—that of the parent. And their menu of present-day, young adult worries—again no different or greater than anyone else’s—remain my wife’s and my worries as well. If only we could call the arborist.

The front-yard cherry tree, the one we planted but had begun to age, has rebounded and has had at least two banner seasons since we first began to worry about its health. Passersby on the street still comment on its abundance.

Still, when we first discovered the old tree weeping sap and shedding bark, we planted that new, third cherry tree in the back yard just in case. I cheered its first two cherries in its second year of growth. Our hope was that it would reach maturity by the time the old tree finally gave out.

When I discovered that morning that some young buck (caught in our imaginary surveillance camera) had gored it, had made

shrapnel out of its bark, had almost completely girdled it, we consulted the arborist again. Again he said to treat it and wait to see what happens.

We expected it to die, leaving us with one old cherry tree up front, that one, too, perhaps on its way out. But buds formed on the tattered young tree this past spring, followed by brilliant white flowers, and then the green nubs and red fruit of cherries.

Maybe the cuts hadn’t gone too deep and the tree has healed itself. Maybe its future is nonetheless compromised, strained, and its years will be cut short.

But it’s alive right now, and so is the old tree up front. And in this season of harvest and loss, that is something to celebrate.

SPRING RAIN

Kevin Vivers

THE MAN WHO READ THE MENU

Dustin Triplett

HE started showing up around noon, every Tuesday, like it was something sacred. Like brunch with a ghost. Same seat. Corner booth, underneath the mildew-stained vent and the framed photo of a cherry tree that hadn't blossomed in twenty years. You could tell by the way the pinks had faded to jaundice. Like everything else in this goddamn diner.

Nobody knew his name. Didn't ask. Didn't care. We called him *Menu Man*, because the first thing he did, every damn week, was read the menu like it was a suicide note he hadn't decided on yet.

No order. Not a damn thing. Just sat there with that tattered menu, tracing the laminated edges with nicotine-stained fingers, mouthing the names of dishes like they meant something: "Country Fried Steak," "Denver Omelet," "Grilled Cheese, Add Tomato." He never ate. Just read. Occasionally sipped complimentary tap water. And when the waitress came by—always some hungover waif with a cigarette voice and mascara from three nights ago—he'd wave

her off without looking. Like priests ignoring confessions.

Eventually, he started talking. Not to us. Not to the waitress. Just into the air. Or maybe to whatever surveillance he assumed was watching him through the old smoke detector on the ceiling. The one with the blinking red light that hadn't blinked in years.

"They think I don't know," he said once. Voice like rust scraping off a forgotten pipe. "But I know. You watch long enough, you start seeing patterns. Surveillance ain't about technology. It's about patience. You watch long enough, the truth walks up and orders the Blue Plate Special."

Another Tuesday: "Used to be a cherry tree outside my mother's house. Real one. Not that print bullshit. She used to say, if it blooms late, someone in the family dies. I watched that fucker every spring like it owed me an explanation."

Then came the Tuesday he brought the briefcase. Black leather, cracked like dried skin. He set it on the table and didn't touch it for forty-five minutes. Just read the menu. Then, slowly, like he was peeling off a memory, he opened the case.

Inside: dozens of menus. All from here. Some ancient—like, before the smoking ban. Before the health department gave a damn. Each one scribbled on, annotated in the margins with looping cursive and manic block letters:

"This is where they hide the code."

"Wednesday's special was never real."

"Check behind the ketchup."

This man had become unhinged by appetizers.

That day, when the waitress tried to take his cup, he clutched it like it was a relic. "You don't get it," he whispered. "This place is

a map. They built it to forget. But I remember. I'm the last one that does."

We started placing bets on him. When he'd crack. If he'd eat. What the hell the cherry tree meant. Hell, maybe he was a prophet. Maybe the diner was God's waiting room. Coffee burnt to hell, toast like cardboard, and the truth scribbled under the specials.

And then, like everything else around here, he just stopped.

No warning. No scene. One Tuesday, he just didn't show. The seat stayed empty for a while. No one took it, like the booth had gone feral. Even the waitresses gave it space.

Until a new guy came in. Younger. Clean-shaven. Eyes like he'd just watched someone jump. He sat in the booth, ordered coffee. Black. Asked for a menu.

Didn't say much.

Except, once, to no one in particular:

"You ever wonder why they call it a *menu*? Like it's about choice. Like it matters what you pick. It's always the same ingredients, just rearranged to look new. Just like life."

And we all stared at that goddamn cherry tree on the wall. Still blooming. Still dead.

PARANOIA

Thomas Vogt



DREAMING ALONG TOGETHER

Akiva Israel, PRISON POET

In the untamed dark something is summoned—
 dreams that in my brain bubble up like booze,
 in dark water, nude—feeling I am dead,
 dreams take me there, where you wait—on shore,
 under the cherry tree.

Waking up, you're gone.

 Like a skyscraper, I rise to be used—
 taking on machines and suicides set to jump.

 Like a drunk's car crash, my mind is hauled off.

 Like a menu, nothing's there I can buy.

We wash in stalls, beside nude blurred flesh.

We piss, with permission. And shit likewise.

 At the plant, I make the body bags: cheap
 bat-black reusable sarcophagi—hundreds.

 That surveillance tower, painted in that shade
 like the cherry tree from my dream.

Till, I am there, again dreamhungry—sober
 still aware, you may be found nowhere else, but there.

PO AD LIB

Bethany Bruno

Feeds: PO AD LIB.

IT appeared one morning in blue ink on her whiteboard, just below her weight and care times—another piece of coded hospital language I wasn’t meant to understand. Another mysterious acronym in a sea of them, bobbing somewhere between hope and heartbreak.

I stared at those three words for a long time. After five weeks of bracing myself for bad news and interpreting every beep, chart, and monitor, here was a phrase so quiet I nearly missed it. In the NICU, everything meant something, and anything could mean everything. Where one small change could unravel everything or stitch something back together.

No one warns you that birth can drop you into another world. Where day and night are meaningless and your child’s life depends on machines that sound like alarms in a spaceship.

“Per os ad libitum”—Latin for *by mouth, as desired*.

It wasn’t a celebration, not yet. But it was a whisper of release.

My daughter, Charlie, arrived too soon, at only 34 weeks. I had spent the entire pregnancy trying to outwit fate. After a dangerous bout of preeclampsia with my first daughter, I followed every rule this time: no fast food, more water, less stress, early nights, and quiet weekends. I paused between Zoom meetings to lie flat on the couch. I rested when I should have been nesting. I thought I was doing everything right.

But at a routine check-up, my blood pressure spiked. Sky-high. Dangerous. I felt fine. That made it worse. Like my body had been holding a secret it wasn’t going to tell me until it was almost too late. I was admitted on the spot. No time to go home, no time to pack. Just a blur of monitors, labs, and IVs as they pumped me full of magnesium to keep my body from seizing. Twelve hours later, they wheeled me into surgery and took Charlie out.

It happened so fast my husband didn’t make it in time. One minute I was watching the second hand circle the clock on the wall, trying to steady my breath. The next, I was waking up in a dim hospital room, my body aching, my arms empty.

There was no baby’s cry. No skin-to-skin. Just the sharp scent of antiseptic, the buzz of fluorescent lights, and a nurse beside me, adjusting my IV line without a word. I stared up at the ceiling tiles, white and speckled, and tried to understand what had just happened.

That same day, my husband wheeled me into the NICU. I still couldn’t feel my legs, but I knew I had to see her. Before we could enter, we had to wash our hands at a sink just inside the door—thirty seconds, up to the elbows, like surgeons. Then we signed in at a desk watched over by a security guard, as if we were

entering a military base. Everything about it felt cold, guarded, and controlled.

But what stopped me were the snowflakes. Dozens of them, cut from printer paper in soft, uneven shapes, were taped along both sides of the hallway like a handmade blizzard. The humidity of the sanitizer-filled air frayed some of the snowflakes at the edges or caused them to curl. Each one had a name scrawled in marker—*Emily, Josiah, Salem, Abdul*—written in a dozen different handwritings, some with hearts or stars drawn beside them.

Charlie's name wasn't there yet, but I knew it would be. The hallway stretched on and on, lined with the fragile proof of how many of us had been pulled from the regular world and placed here. Where seasons passed in machines and milestones were measured in grams, not months.

We were taken to what they called the intensive side of the NICU—the area reserved for the most fragile babies, the ones born far too early. We rolled past rows of glass containers that looked more like science labs than cribs. Inside each one lay a baby no bigger than a hand, skin translucent, limbs barely thicker than a pencil. They looked like fragile dolls hooked up to a million wires, monitors, and machines that never stopped blinking or beeping.

Near the end of the hallway, painted across one of the pale green walls, was a cherry tree. Its branches reached out across the wall like open arms, and nestled among the leaves were dozens of tiny plaques—memorials paid for by families who had lost a child in the NICU. Each plaque carried a name, a date, or a small message: *Forever our baby, Born too soon, Loved beyond measure*. The tree grew quietly in the background, a gentle reminder of both

what had been lost and what we still hoped to keep.

The lights were low, the kind of dim reserved for sacred places. Only a few overhead lamps shone down, casting soft halos over each baby's station. Nurses moved quietly between them like priests in a chapel, adjusting lines, checking vitals, and whispering encouragement to both infants and parents. Above each isolette hung a sign—some just the baby's name, others decorated with handmade banners or cut-out hearts, along with the number of days they'd been fighting. One baby had been there for one hundred and eighteen days. Its whole life, up to that point, was enclosed in a plastic container with portholes.

When I finally saw my baby, I could hardly breathe. After passing so many incubators with babies no larger than a soda can, I braced myself for something delicate and almost invisible. But Charlie looked bigger than I had imagined. She weighed five pounds, nine ounces—practically a giant in a room full of one- and two-pound fighters. Her skin was warm pink, not the deep red I had feared. A shock of bright blonde hair covered her head, soft and fine as silk.

She lay curled beneath a web of medical tubing. Her every breath was under constant surveillance. Machines tracked her heart rate, oxygen levels, and every twitch of muscle or pause in breath. The only silence in that room was mine.

A thin feeding tube snaked through her nose into her stomach, and small prongs delivered oxygen into her tiny nostrils. Electrodes pressed against her chest, each one blinking with a rhythm I began to memorize. I placed my hand on her abdomen and felt her warmth. Her leg twitched at my touch, and just for a moment, I let

myself believe she knew I was there.

Charlie stayed on the intensive side for a week. Then, quietly, without ceremony, she was transferred to the progressive side—a sign that she was stable enough to no longer need round-the-clock emergency care. Her new station was quieter, tucked beneath a soft overhead light. The beeping monitors still hummed, but they felt less urgent here, less sharp. Still, she remained there for four more weeks.

Every day, I asked the same question.

“When can she go home?”

Every day, the answer was the same.

“We don’t know yet.”

Her discharge depended on a dozen moving parts—weight gain, feeding, oxygen levels, and a fib episode. I learned how to read her chart. I tracked numbers like they were sacred. But behind every improvement, I waited for the backslide. One of the nurses once joked that there was a secret NICU discharge menu. You couldn’t order from it, but you could hope your baby checked all the boxes. No oxygen. No bradys. Full feeds by bottle. A steady heart. I stared at Charlie’s chart like it was a daily special I didn’t dare ask for.

In the NICU, nothing felt certain until the moment they wheeled you out.

Every day brought a new hurdle. At first, Charlie couldn’t eat on her own. The feeding tube stayed in while nurses taught her body how to coordinate the basic rhythm of sucking, swallowing, and breathing. When they finally removed the tube, I thought we’d turned a corner. But almost immediately, she started having

bradycardia episodes—her heart rate dropping without warning, her body forgetting to breathe mid-bottle.

Then came a day without oxygen, a tiny victory I clung to. Her face looked clearer without the tubing, her coloring more natural. I allowed myself to hope. The next morning, I arrived to find her hooked up again. Her oxygen saturation had dipped overnight. The nurses reassured me, saying it was normal, expected even. But to me, it felt like starting over.

The NICU was a rollercoaster without a map. Just when I thought we were heading toward the exit, the floor dropped out from under us. This went on for nearly five weeks. And I was there every single day, even if I only got to spend a few minutes with her. I needed her to know, on some level, that her mother was there.

At my postpartum appointment, four weeks after Charlie was born, I sat in the exam room waiting to be cleared. One of the nurses came in to check my vitals, and when she glanced at my chart, she paused. “NICU baby?” she asked. I nodded. She smiled and said, “I used to work in the NICU. Has anyone mentioned *PO AD LIB* to you yet?”

I shook my head. The phrase meant nothing to me.

She leaned against the counter, her voice low. “It means the baby is taking food by mouth as desired. It’s kind of a keyword among nurses. When you see *PO AD LIB* on the whiteboard, it usually means the baby’s close to going home.”

I repeated the words in my head like a prayer. *PO AD LIB*. I didn’t know if it would show up that day or the next or the week after. But now I had something to look for. A signal. A name for the thing I was waiting for.

I spent the next week in limbo, clinging to the hope that those magical words would appear on Charlie's chart. Every morning, I shuffled past the rows of isolettes and glanced up at the whiteboard, scanning for a change. But it never came. Around us, other babies came and went. Some had been there longer than us, some only a few days.

But in our little corner of the progressive side, most of them struggled with the same issue—bradycardia. Their tiny hearts would suddenly slow, just like Charlie's, often triggered by something as simple as drinking from a bottle too quickly or forgetting to breathe. We started calling ourselves “The Brady Bunch,” a name that made the nurses laugh. It helped to have something to call the thing that kept us all stuck there.

We'd been in the NICU so long that we knew every nurse by name. They stopped needing to ask who we were visiting. They knew Charlie. They rooted for her. The nurses would stop by, linger for a moment, and glance at her chart. She rested in a clear plastic crib with open sides, the kind used for babies who no longer needed the protective enclosure of an isolette. But she still had wires on her chest and a sensor wrapped around her foot.

“We thought today might be the day,” they'd say, shifting her blanket or checking her monitor. Their disappointment mirrored mine. Charlie was eating better. Her brady episodes were less frequent. But *PO AD LIB* still hadn't appeared.

One morning, I walked in as usual, tired but hopeful. I washed my hands at the sink, signed the clipboard at the desk, and made my way down the hallway past the wall of paper snowflakes. I wasn't expecting anything different. I had trained myself not to

expect anything.

But when I reached Charlie's crib and glanced up at the board, I saw it.

PO AD LIB.

Three simple words. Just letters, really. But I froze. My chest tightened. I read it again, to be sure. *PO AD LIB*. I had memorized those letters before I ever saw them. Now they were there, written in dry-erase marker just beneath her feeding schedule.

It meant she could eat on her own, whenever she wanted. It meant no more feeding tube. It meant her body had learned what mine could no longer do for her.

It meant we were finally going home.

On the morning of her discharge, Charlie had one last bradycardia episode. It was brief—just a flicker—and the nurses assured us it didn't even need to be charted. Still, it reminded me that even at the finish line, nothing was guaranteed. I worried that she would end up back in the NICU.

Two young nurses, both barely in their twenties, wheeled Charlie outside in her car seat. Her cheeks were full now, her tubes gone, her hospital band still wrapped around her ankle like a final tether. While my husband went to get the car, one of the nurses, a blonde with a kind smile, turned to me and asked, “Would you like a photo before you go?”

I shook my head. “No offense,” I said quietly, “but this is a moment in my life I don't want to remember.”

She blinked, a little startled, but then nodded.

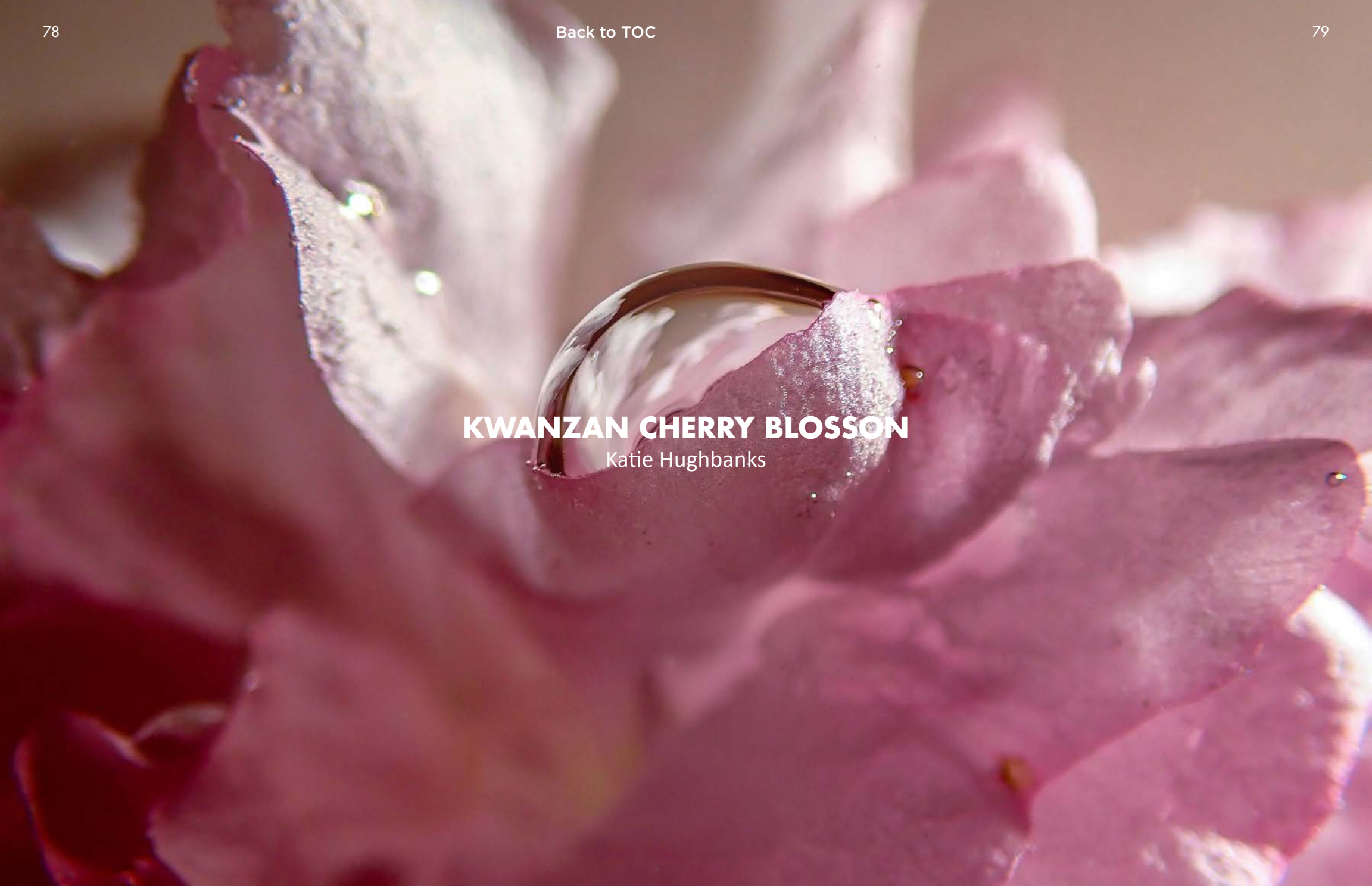
I think she understood.

Charlie is thriving now at four months old. She's nearly sixteen

pounds and smiles every single time she sees me. You'd never know how hard she had to fight just to be here. But I remember. I remember the tubes, the wires, and the prayers. I remember the nurse's voice when she told me what *PO AD LIB* meant.

It meant freedom. It meant enough.

It meant my daughter had finally found her rhythm.



KWANZAN CHERRY BLOSSOM

Katie Hughbanks

CONTRIBUTORS

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Katie Hughbanks (she/her) is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose photography has been published nationally and internationally in more than 70 magazines. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Blackbird Songs* (Prolific Press, 2019) and *It's Time* (Finishing Line Press, 2024). She teaches English and Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky.

Akiva Israel is a prison poet whose raw and unflinching work explores themes of incarceration, identity, and resilience. His poem “A Scared Fag in Jail” was published in *J Journal: New Writing on Justice*, and his poetry has also appeared in literary venues such as *Drunk Monkeys*, *American Dissident*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Caveat Lector*, and others. Through his writing, Israel offers a powerful voice from within the prison system, shedding light on the dark complexities of life behind bars.

Frank Kelly is a retired Family Therapist, poet, writer, and photographer. He lives in rural upstate New York at the edge of the Finger Lakes, where he writes a weekly column for the daily newspaper. His creative work has appeared in print and online, including in *Sun Magazine*, *Poets Online*, *The Ithaca Times*, and *The Cortland Standard*. His personal essay “Dear Me” about a cancer diagnosis took third place in a national competition that produced the anthology *Letters Never Meant to be Read: Volume III* (Rusty Wheels Media).

Kevin Koch is Professor Emeritus of English at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, where he's taught courses in creative nonfiction and nature writing. He is author of four nature-based narrative/informative books, the most recent of which is *Midwest Bedrock: The Search for Nature's Soul in America's Heartland* (Indiana University Press).

Linden Kohut makes art, mostly with charcoal and paint, in the prairies of Saskatchewan Canada.

Aimee LaBrie's short stories have appeared in *The Minnesota Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Swamp Pink*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Cagibi*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Cimarron Review*, *Pleiades*, *Fractured Lit*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Permafrost*, and others. Her work has been anthologized in *A Darker Shade of Noir: Body Horror by Women*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates, and *Philadelphia Noir*, among others. Her second short story collection, *Rage and Other Cages*, won the Leapfrog Global Fiction Prize and was published by Leapfrog Press in 2024. In 2007, her short story collection, *Wonderful Girl*, was awarded the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction and published by the University of North Texas Press. Her fiction has been nominated five times for the Pushcart Prize.

K.G. Ricci has exhibited in 27 galleries, including solo shows, and many more online galleries. His collages have been published in poetry and literary magazines nationally and internationally, online and in print.

Wayden Rogers (he/they) is a 21-year-old queer Coloured South African poet and final-year undergraduate at Stellenbosch University. Their poems explore the quiet ache of memory, longing, and identity. When not writing, Wayden can usually be found listening to sad indie music and refreshing Submittable a little too often.

Patrick G. Roland is a writer and educator living with cystic fibrosis. He explores life's experiences through poetry and storytelling, seeking to inspire others in the classroom and through writing. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Hobart*, *scaffold*, *Sacramento Literary Review*, *Maudlin House*, *Unleash Lit*, and others.

Brandon S. Roy has been published extensively for over two decades. People insist on calling him a poet, though he much prefers being referred to as Brandon. He doesn't really like talking about himself.

Dustin Triplett is a creative Swiss army knife—equal parts precision, unpredictability, and edge. He works primarily in poetry and creative nonfiction, where his voice thrives in tension and vulnerability. His writing is known for being raw, emotionally layered, and unafraid to dwell in discomfort. Dustin's work explores the messy middle spaces: the things we swallow, the words that escape us, and the feelings that claw their way to the surface despite our best efforts to bury them.

Kevin Vivers has been a photographer for over forty years and he is constantly amazed by what the world has to offer if one just takes the time to see it. Working with no preconceived notions as to what he is looking to photograph allows him to have an open mind and eye so that the images are very instinctual, reflexive—not spur of the moment, but watchful of those moments as they come into view.

Thomas Vogt is an aspiring poet, photographer, and city planner in Sacramento, California. He enjoys capturing the “everyday” through a pen, a lens, or behind a mug at your local coffee shop.

Shane Watt's map-based art practice seeks to challenge the need for centralized systems or rigid frameworks, emphasizing instead the fluid and contingent nature of knowledge, relationships, and societal organization. Watt's work rejects the rigidity of traditional art and cartography by defying singular narratives or fixed ideologies. By randomly gifting or hiding maps in public spaces, he decentralizes art and rejects the institutionalized commodification of creative work. This guerrilla-style distribution emphasizes direct engagement with audiences, breaking down barriers between the artist and the public. Watt's approach allows his maps to exist in the hands of individuals rather than being confined to galleries or collectors.

NEXT UP

Issue No. 49
Winter 2025

3ELEMENTS:

[Compass](#), [Rocking Horse](#), [Underpass](#)

Due November 30, 2025

Submission due dates are **November 30**, **February 28**, **May 31**, and **August 31**, for issues forthcoming **February 1**, **May 1**, **August 1**, and **November 1**, respectively, unless otherwise noted on our website.

There is no minimum word count, but please keep your fiction and nonfiction submissions under 3,500 words. Poems must be under two typed pages.

It is equally important that all three elements given for the specific submission period be included within your story or poem. Artists and photographers are only required to represent one element.

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STAFF - 3ELEMENTS

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Megan Collins is the author of the novels *Cross My Heart*, *Thicker Than Water*, the Barnes & Noble Monthly Mystery/Thriller pick *The Family Plot*, *Behind the Red Door*, and *The Winter Sister*, which was a 2019 Book of the Month Club selection. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University and taught creative writing at the high school and college levels for many years. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, her work has appeared in many journals, including *Off the Coast*, *Spillway*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*. (megancollins.com)

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END

