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Winners

by Thomas Pack

Carrie hated becoming someone's good luck charm. She'd seen it happen a dozen times. She'd seen it all. At least one specimen of every type of human was in her line every day: the drunk who called her "a cute little filly"; the bubbly party girl incapable of understanding the bets ("Now this trifecta thing, what's that?"); the serious gambler who, win or lose, never showed emotion; the moron who got mad at her when he lost; the pest who always got back in her line after he won.

The man in the dark blue suit was becoming a pest. He had won big on the first race. From then on he stood in her line even when it was the longest. Now, waiting patiently behind an old woman scratching around in her purse, he grinned at her and winked. Carrie wanted to scream, "If I were lucky, would I be working here? Wearing this puke green polyester uniform? This costume for losers?"

But she had used up her allotment of rudeness. The track had a strict policy: three instances of showing a customer anything less than the utmost courtesy and you were fired. Mr. Singer had caught her twice. The first time, a leering slob leaned across the counter and said, "Well, little filly, think you can go the distance?" Carrie told him to go to hell.

"I have to put up with that?" she asked Singer as he wrote up a reprimand for her file.

"You have to learn to handle customers without being discourteous."

The second time a tiny man with twitchy hands adopted her as a lucky charm. He won big after he spilled his drink on her counter. From then on he not only waited in her line but even sloshed his Mint Julep at her. She finally told him she wouldn't sell him any more tickets.

Now she could think of no more wonderful way to end her career as a pari-mutuel clerk than shouting at the man in the navy blue suit. She knew his type: an executive playing hooky from his office, skipping out on his easy, high-paying job with no fear of reprisal. She would grab him by his lint-free lapels and establish a track record for discourteous behavior. If Singer somehow missed the tirade she was going to unleash—which was doubtful because he often seemed to appear out of nowhere to bitch about something she had done—she would call him over and repeat it.

But now she was beginning to think she should use her last allotment of rudeness on the old lady, still digging around in her purse to find the singles to pay her paltry bet. "Two dollars on Madcap's Choice to win," she had said, which was not the way people were supposed to wager. They were supposed to state the dollar amount, the type of wager, and the number of the horse.

"What number is Madcap's Choice, ma'am?" Carrie asked, even though she could look it up on her computer. Instead she let the old lady spend a year searching her racing program. Now she was spending a decade rooting through her purse, a brown vinyl thing so old and brittle it had cracked in a dozen places. As she looked for the money, she laid items on Carrie's counter—a packet of tissues, lipstick, peppermint candy. She looked up at Carrie, who instantly gave her a wide fake smile.

Suddenly the strap on the lady's purse broke and the bag tumbled from her shaky hands. Carrie, rolling her eyes and mouthing a prayer for the strength to get through her shift, heard stuff clatter across the floor in front of her window. The old lady stared at the mess with her hand in front of her open mouth as if she had witnessed an accident as horrific two school buses colliding.

The executive stooped and gathered the lady's trinkets and handed them to her a few at time. She thanked him for each one. As the lady struggled to refold a coffee-stained map, Carrie saw the executive—under the guise of bending over to pick up more junk—stuff something in his pocket. Carrie was astonished. This rich bastard was going to steal from an old lady?

The woman finally packed everything back in her purse and paid her two dollars. The executive walked up to Carrie's window. Before she could vent her rage she noticed Singer in her peripheral vision. He stood at the window next to her getting some sort of printout from another clerk's computer.

She wanted to scream more than ever, but instead she said, "That was nice of you to help." She hoped the sarcasm in her voice was slight enough that it wouldn't reach Singer's ears. The executive stared at her. She whispered, "That was nice of you to pick up everything and give it all back." She placed only the mildest emphasis on the word all.

The executive said, "Uh...I...I forgot to give her something." He quickly pulled the thing from his pocket. It was a faux rabbit's foot, a mass of polyester fluff, dyed neon pink. He said, "Please keep it in case she comes back." Then he dropped it on the counter and walked away without placing a bet.

She hung it on a thumbtack behind the counter. At first she thought she would give it to the next person who imagined she was a good luck charm. "Take this and leave me alone," she would say. But soon she began to notice that whenever she got irritated with someone, she could glance at the rabbit's foot and it would calm her. It was so pink and fluffy—so absurd and cheerful and rebellious hanging amid the computer cables and the official notices of work procedures—Carrie grinned whenever it caught her eye.

Then the lady came back. After the fourth race she came up to the window so out of breath she couldn't speak. Carrie gave her the lucky charm, and the lady said, "Thank you so much. You do your job beautifully."

After she left, clutching the rabbit's foot as if she were afraid it would hop away, Singer tapped Carrie on her shoulder and made her jump.

"I've noticed a positive change in your attitude," he said.

She decided to stop at the drugstore on her way home and see if they sold pink fluffy rabbit's feet.

Fred was winning for a change. His small bets on the first three races paid off. Instead of sticking to his own handicapping system—betting on favorite jockeys and horses from top farms—he used his wife's strategy—picking a horse based on it's history of winning races of the same length as the one on which he was wagering.

The strategy was working well, and on top of that the cute strawberry-blonde clerk seemed to be interested in him. She kept sneaking looks at him so he made sure to always get in her line.

It was fun but harmless. He adored his wife. Which is why, despite his winnings, he felt guilty—not about enjoying the attentions of the clerk, but about spending the day at the track, using his wife's handicapping system when she thought he was looking for a job.

Six weeks ago he had been laid off from Wilson Systems Inc., a software distributor. His eight years of service and steady promotions—from office manager to inventory manager to inventory director—hadn't been enough to save his job when Wilson was acquired by a larger company.

His severance package included eight weeks of help from a top outplacement firm, where a man with a ponytail met him with a phrase he doubtlessly had used many times before: "I'm sad about the circumstances, but I'm happy to be able to help you." Fred diligently followed his counselor's advice and went through the firm's programs, but few companies seemed interested in him. He hung around the outplacement firm so often he thought he saw pity in the counselor's eyes.

So he started going to the track—at first, just a couple of hours a few days a week, then several hours every day. He didn't want to go home and tell his wife the job search wasn't going well, but not because she wouldn't understand. She would. And somehow that would make him feel worse. Accepting her support and comfort would make his sense of failure even more profound.

But now things were looking up. He was winning. He looked at his program to remind himself of his bet for the fourth race—six-furlongs with a field of twelve. He would put twenty dollars to win on number ten, Proud Dancer, a 1-2 favorite, and five bucks to place on Madcap's Choice, a 30-1 long shot, but the horse had placed in a couple of other six-furlong races.

He waited in line, wondering if he should wager more than usual, when the elderly woman in front of him dropped her purse. An amazing assortment of stuff spilled at his feet—matchbooks, amber plastic pill bottles, eyeglass cases, a metal bracelet, several small smooth stones. Fred started grabbing pill bottles and handing them to the woman. She thanked him for each item.

Then he picked up a rabbit's foot. He looked at the furry thing and suddenly thought it was more than an accident that the woman had spilled her purse. It was fate. The rabbit's foot was a sign of more good things to come, and it would be an excellent souvenir of the day his luck changed. When the woman turned back to the clerk, he bent to gather some matchbooks and stuffed the lucky charm in his pocket.

It was an impulse he regretted as soon as he acted on it. He felt silly and ashamed, but, after all, the rabbit's foot was a negligible novelty, a two-dollar trinket he couldn't imagine the woman missing or even caring about if she did.

She finally gathered her belongings and finished placing her bet. When Fred walked up to the counter, the clerk said, "That was nice of you to help."

Was she being sarcastic? Oh no, did she see him pocket the lucky charm?

She leaned forward and whispered, "That was nice of you to pick up everything and give it all back."

Oh, no, she did see him. His luck hadn't changed at all. He mumbled, "Uh...I...I forgot to give her something."

He pulled out the rabbit's foot, dropped it on the counter, and scurried away without placing his bets, not only because he was embarrassed but also because he realized any more wins at the track would be hollow victories. He suddenly had to tell Gale the job search wasn't going well. "It's okay, honey," she would say. "We'll make it somehow." He knew he had to learn to appreciate how lucky he was.

Martha had squandered her life in a place called Worry. She thought of it that way: a real place, a land where everything that could go wrong eventually did. She became aware of how much time she spent there when she heard a talk show doctor say excessive anxiety could suppress the immune system. Then she thought how ironic it was—and how typical of her—to worry about how much she worried.

So she decided to do something a bit impulsive, maybe even crazy. For once she was going to have fun. She was going to the track. Twenty years ago, Bill had taken her there a few times. He stopped because he thought she didn't enjoy it. "You don't yell for the horses," he said. "You don't talk to people or have a drink or anything. You just sit there."

But she had enjoyed it. Even though she couldn't participate, she loved watching her high-spirited husband live his life. Of course, she worried his appetites for food and drink and expensive but still smelly cigars were going to give him a heart attack (and, as it turned out, she had been right for once).

Her belated attempt at living her own life did not start well. She got lost on the way to the track and was glad she had worried about her faulty geographic memory (a sign of Alzheimer's?) and brought a street map.

She finally found the track but couldn't figure out where she was supposed to park or which gate she was supposed to go in. By the time she got inside, she had missed three races.

She was trying to decipher the tiny type in the program, regretting her decision to leave the safety of her soap operas, when she noticed the name of a horse running in the fourth race: Madcap's Choice. This was a good sign. Sometimes Bill had called her Madcap Martha, a nickname he found funny because it so obviously did not describe her personality.

"I don't think we should take a vacation this year," she would say. "The money's too tight."

"Oh, Madcap Martha, let's just go."

So she bet on Madcap's Choice even though it was a long shot. Bill would be proud. But the pretty blonde girl confused her. The number of the horse? Where could she find that? Oh, yes, there it was. Number six.

Then Martha couldn't find her money. She worried the girl was getting mad at her, but when Martha looked up, the girl just smiled. Then the strap on Martha's purse broke, spilling her medicine, her eyeglasses, the variety of small good luck pieces she had acquired to protect her on her trips to Worry: a copper bracelet, a small brass pyramid, a four-leaf clover in a cellophane envelope, worry stones, and the rabbit's foot she had borrowed from her granddaughter.

Embarrassed to hold up the line, she was grateful when the well dressed man behind her started helping her gather her things. She tried to stuff them back into her purse quickly, but it seemed to take forever to refold her map. She finally got everything inside, found her money, and handed it to the girl. Then she hurried away. She stared at the floor so she didn't have to meet the angry eyes of the people behind her.

Sitting on a wooden bench in the sunshine, waiting for the fourth race to begin, she looked through her purse to make sure nothing was missing. Yes, she still had the map and her high blood pressure pills, but where was the rabbit's foot? She was especially worried about it because her granddaughter didn't know she had borrowed it.

Lucy, a tall, excitable teen who often talked faster than Martha could follow, had stopped for a quick visit the night before and accidentally left her backpack. Martha worried it might contain important homework, but when she called, Lucy said it was "no biggie." She could go without it for a few days. Martha kept it on her kitchen table so she would know right where it was.

She noticed the rabbit's foot clipped to the bottom of the backpack when she was leaving for the track. On a whim, she took the lucky charm. Now, how could she possibly explain it was gone? She rooted through her purse again.

Giving up the search, she looked up and realized she had missed the fourth race. She couldn't make out the numbers flashing on the board in the infield. She couldn't understand the voice on the PA. She had no idea which horse had won.

She tried to find the blonde girl's window. She could ask her who won, and maybe someone had found the rabbit's foot and turned it in. She walked up and down the concourse several times, passing in front of long rows of betting windows. At one, she stopped and stood in line for several minutes before she realized it was the wrong blonde girl.

Finally, she found the right one and handed her the ticket from the fourth race. Martha was out of breath from walking, and before she could say anything the clerk gave her a stack of money. Madcap's Choice had won. Martha's two-dollar ticket was worth $62.00. That was a thrill of a lifetime. Then the nice clerk gave back Lucy's rabbit's foot. That was one less thing to worry about.

How the Soul Leaves the Body

by David Abrams

Like rising from a nap
In the suffocating hour
Of a midsummer midafternoon.
On the pine nightstand,
A Chartres-blue vase,
Its dried flowers whispering:
"The water's evaporated."

At the uncurtained window,
A fly tapping, tapping, tapping,
The limitless green hills
Reflected in its thousand eyes.

On Becoming a Jesuit

by David Abrams

May II. Dull; afternoon fine.
Slaughter of the innocents.
—Gerard Manley Hopkins

One resolved match-strike and it was done:
The long scrape,
The blooming spark,
The whiff of sulfur,
The paper leaping from his fingertips.
Once in the candle, the poems curled like embryos
Then stretched as far as metaphor allowed.
Their ink-blood browned, bubbled in the heat then
The instress snapped,
The weave of alphabet unraveled.
Inscape plumed, gyred over his head.
Caught in the puff of his one, breathy cry,
The secular smoke lingered like a whore's kiss, then
Whirled straight to the flared nares of God.

My Tongue Has Flown to the Moon

by John Barbato

My tongue has flown to the moon
Today I have no more songs to sing.

My head a dandelion gone to seed,
thoughts scattered on the wind.

My body a piece of volcanic glass,
I could shatter with an atmospheric change.

In the other room a blank canvas stares at me,
looking for hours no faces appear.

My tongue has flown to the moon
Today I have no more songs to sing.

Constantinople

by Beau Boudreaux

He stood naked at one of two windows
she kept open in all weathers in her corner
room at the back of the bread building

as the sun rose he watched a man pulling
a handcart along the narrow alley
"below here, the moans"

and across the court a girl turning
her face from side to side in a mirror—
"aren't those sweet those questionings?"

From the temples around the stone plaza
he could hear the first matins
and to the west low clouds
shifted beyond the dulled bronze Domes of The Church

she begins slicing small pieces of bread
goat butter and chives start to fry
she is naked kneeling on one worn rug
thrown at an angle across the scarred floor

this is a reminder

she glances up at him and he smiles nodding
for no real reason in spite of the bells'
chime and the tanks crisscrossing the city

The Ecology of Mindfulness

by Beau Boudreaux

How the fingers
form a fist,
the wood chair hits

the upper portion of the wall.
For each minute
that passes the more and less

normal time soothed it becomes,
the spillway opens
on to the canal—

guilt tunnels through
much more than the actual
blow, the wasp of words.

Bartering with the Feegee Mermaid

by Suzanne Burns

I walk with her petrified trunk
Tucked in a shopping bag,
Breeze sailing the liberty
Of her lifeless fin so the decayed
Leather of sewn-together fish
And simian clucks its drumstick tail
In a ticker tape of discount bras
And bills-of-sale.

Like Barnum barked to his crowds
Hoaxes fertilized by the sweat
Of magicians' futilely gluing
The vertebrae of assistants
Sawed in half, I convince women
Who run boutiques that carry
My size of stocking or hat
To purchase a peek at loveliness
Rustling in my paper sack.

But I do not accept cash.
Scarves spun from the silk
Of worms spinning overseas, yes.
High-heeled boots, a cocktail dress.
(I confess I love black best.)
Black like my captive's body
Un-moisturized, mute
As a piece of fruit dulling
To rot on an overlooked vine.

Last week women traded couture
To answer my question posed meek
As the jaw of a mouse chewing cheese,
Purposeful, yet incomplete
In the mechanisms to growl
A rodent into a beast. Just a tease,
A prank promising shopkeepers
Satisfaction in the esthetics
Of desire hidden under tissue sheets.

The store clerks lacquered like dolls
Clamber for a glimpse of my make-
Believe, my creature of jungle and sea
Because they do not and will never see
The beauty of their own reflection,
And tire of placing bets on how soon
The appearance of anything radiant
Will make its way past the funhouse curtain.

** One of P.T. Barnum's longest running and most popular attractions. He bought the Feegee (Fiji) Mermaid from a fisherman who had stitched together the bodies of a fish, baby orangutan and monkey.*

Two Princes

by Suzanne Burns

if Elvis' twin Jesse Garon, stillborn, had lived

1.
As the Tupelo Twins bob their abdomens
In murky delta bogs, four hands finger
The frets of crawdad necks, not guitars,
Sixteen and stamping autographs in mud
Saturday night riding up with Chevy windows
Stained from kissing, canopy of bowing willows
And bayou stars arranged for the dance
Of romancing packs of Mississippi girls
Hungry to devour the tongues of identical lovers,
Presley mouths smooth as if where they frolicked
In the river, its mudmilk churned to butter.

2.
Roaring home as dawn stalks the fields of cotton,
Jesse and Elvis cajole through sore jaws future plans:
Partners in a swelling Georgia peach orchard,
Owners of a car wash with quarter waxes
And nickel shines, twin foremen divining plans
To build T-bone mansions and chicken-fried diners.
Silently they even dream of a two-throned castle kingdom
Rising from the smoky foothills of Tennessee as sun
Sneaks between the confidences of Southern brothers.
Sharper than the belly rub of serenading bugs,
One prince's laughter mirrors, identifies,
Then crowns the other.

Jumping Jacks

by Anne Colwell

All sweeping motions, however mundane,
retain drama. Even windshield wipers
battling November rain
could almost sweep
the night clear, find Venus
suspended from a quarter moon,
find the stars
executing their slow leap into dawn.

Our bodies' symmetries mean
synchronous leaps to connection:
the powerful sweep of the dancer,
limbs journeying out and back,
or even my father demonstrating
the jumping jack.

In truth, it's not to Graham or Barishnikov
my mind jumps,
but to my father in sunny suburbia,
furniture pushed against the walls
holding up the US Army Physical Training Manual.

In the black and whites, a PFC
stands at attention, arms at his side,
then legs wide arms overhead,
then back again. He is flanked
by arrows to show his progress (or lack)
as though he has wings, or
has made snow angels
on the perfectly white backdrop.

My father got the book in Basic,
no doubt. Then in Greenland
before his time was out
he went AWOL and came back,
scott free. He threatened the sargeant
that fire burns paper and the records

the Army couldn't replace
and the account the sargeant didn't know
how to could be undone
by one arch of the match.

Then my father flew back
to sweep my mother off her feet
(or so she said after)
and her belly rose like a loaf of bread.
She bore each of us, one after the other
until the four of us leapt around him
laughing, out of rhythm, out of breath.

There is nothing as impossible as
teaching children the simple grace
of jumping jacks. That going away
can be one motion with coming back.

"Like scissors," you said, "like wings,"
and we tried to learn the drama
of your sweeping arms, your going out,
your coming home.

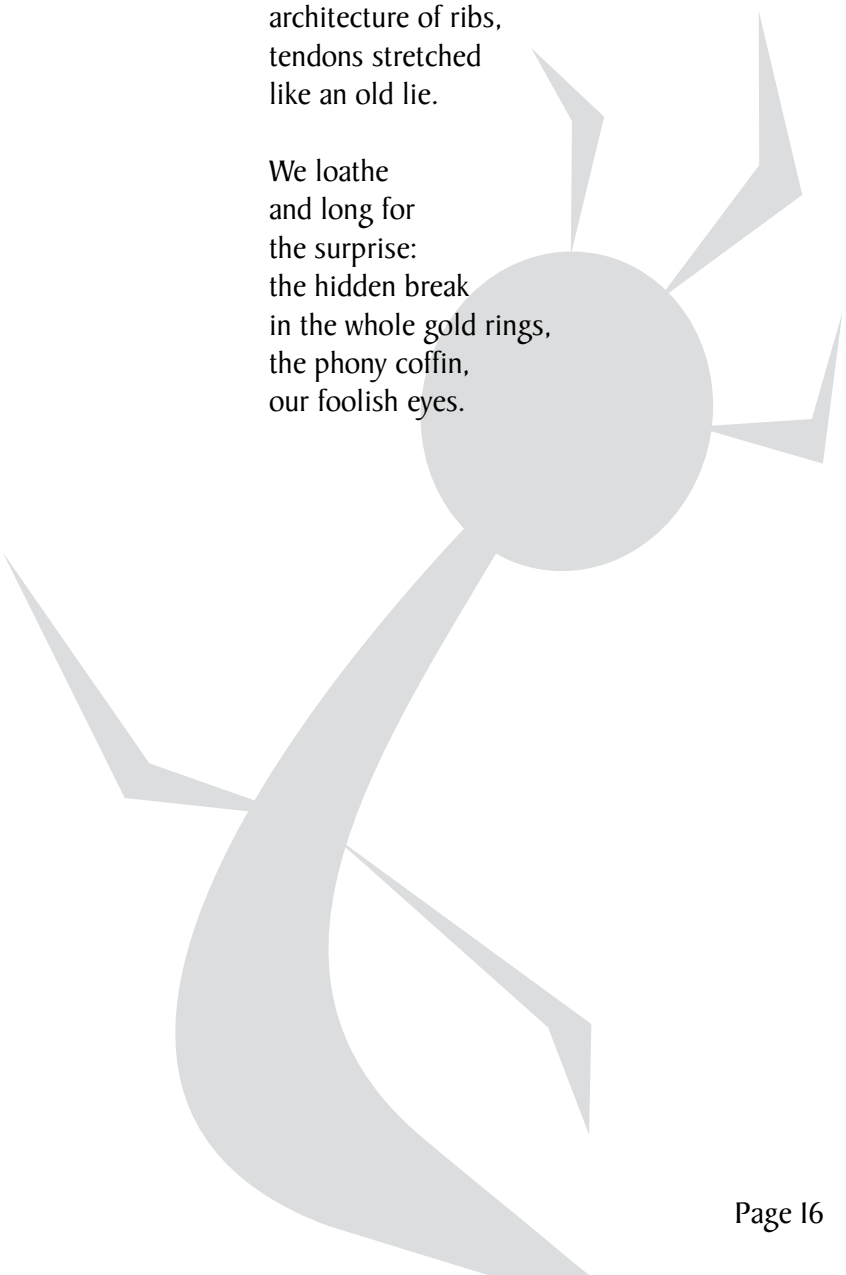
A Friend's Divorce

by Anne Colwell

Backstage after
the magic show,
you point out false doors,
twin doves, dusty
pulleys and cables,
the obscene machinery
of human love.

It is like this.
Or like the way a body,
starved, shows too clearly
how it works
even in its failing,
ball and socket joints,
architecture of ribs,
tendons stretched
like an old lie.

We loathe
and long for
the surprise:
the hidden break
in the whole gold rings,
the phony coffin,
our foolish eyes.



Mean

by Anne Colwell

That winter was so mean
it refused to disappear
at first green.
In July, there were still
traces of December
at the wood's center,
in the shadow of leaves.
That winter hung
in the corners of August
like a bat
so even in the dog days
it would suddenly blow
cold. Its wings could
kick up a wind at dusk
recalling that this lush
day was anything but
timeless. It was a winter
so mean
it took two summers
to pry its hands
off the trunks of trees,
off the hedges and reeds
of this flat county.
And when July finally
dragged it over the woods,
it snapped the crowns
of pines; it kicked
sand from the coastline,
and it took one man,
one warm, beautiful man,
I would it had left behind.

Facile Cali

by Ruth Lepson

Natural not to talk of music
while men are working in the sun.
Rosmarie Waldrop, "Rhapsody"

it's a nearly silent morning
mourning doves rest on branches
sparrows lift

Christmas trim in the tropical garden
through the leaded glass

clouds move on
from this Moorish palace

*

taking pictures obsessively
finally nauseated by that as by commodities, stopped
saw :
sky moon and palm

the stucco houses half-lit like memories

*

can't get a handle on what's real
overgeneral
about even detail—
that's part of why
I like Tim—
like even his shadow

*

when windows are open—
smooth wind, noise
and clear hills
my eyes can feel

*

after he talked to me so long
I felt stalked (tight against)
probability of

*

why the lights across the bay tremble, nights

*

yesterday's flurry of snow's today's headline
next to many a color, the tiny surprise of ice

*

dreamt he curved our words into colors
parts of the neon sweep across the San Francisco night

The Street

by Ruth Lepson

sometimes it's boring to see this street
sometimes the street's what takes us

a pigeon puffs his iridescent feathered neck
jerks straight up
the other moves away
both go when they hear a crow

maple tree shadows

grass clippings blowing in clumps

houses peaceful cats their paws tucked under them

while the pines stay still
the maple trees move in the wind

sounds of mourning doves and jays
here every year

one morning cop cars everywhere

keep going the street reminds us
we're memory

it's simple as the white butterfly
as my neighbor's flag
or that one's sheets on a line

sidewalk weeds potholes
phillips street

Falling In

by Kenneth Pobo

Growing up many
warned me
about walking on
pond ice even if
it looked safe
it might crack
and nobody'd
hear me
scream nobody'd
come
but it was so
lovely especially
in warm sunlight
especially treacherous
and out I'd go
relishing leaves
embedded in ice
cracks
and I never
fell in
almost
wish I had
proven them right
almost wish
I'd have fallen
and had someone
jump in
after me
someone who'd fallen
hard
once before
and knew
how cold it gets
before it gets
warm again

Kitchen

by Kenneth Pobo

While you snore upstairs,
I eat Cheerios, the clock
covering me in a blanket

of dead minutes. Our
threats dig under linoleum,
a yellow feverfew moon
blooming in the garden—

I'm getting sleepy, but if
I wake you, would you
pretend not to hear? Maybe

our dreams will touch
since we can't or our
threats will flex wings
and fly around the kitchen—

I'll leave the light on. They
may be drawn to it,
fly into the bulb,

die before we open
morning's door.

Organizing the Stairs

by Laurel Snyder

I

Where there are no hills,

there are no valleys,

but there are sometimes

stairs and landings.

The girl doesn't count

those stairs, only pays

attention to them.

Consequently, she's fine.

2

The hill that isn't— gets made

from no earth and no stone,

is frequently covered

by nothing green,

and the valley is no amount of air.

Can you imagine how much there is

to miss? Can you picture an absence

greater than what might have gone?

3

The girl won't count each thing before her.

This stair makes need for the next stair,

and so on. Stairs in their proper order

are stairs. Otherwise, other stairs.

You have to assume something

if you want to get somewhere,

no matter how absent the world may be.

The girl knows how to arrive.

The Answer to the Puzzle

by Laurel Snyder

The answer to the puzzle

is the mauled bird on the sidewalk,

and the feathers.

The answer to the puzzle

is that things keep getting less lovely,

but more interesting.

When the girl falls

through the air

from the top of a very tall building,

she sees everything

rush past her in great detail

but with little promise.

Onlookers see,

“some girl cutting

through the air

like a knife cuts through water.”

They gasp and say, “How terrible.

That poor girl. It’s just awful.”

And it really is,

so either put that hand on this hip right now,

or listen to what I’m saying.

After all, it’s my poem.

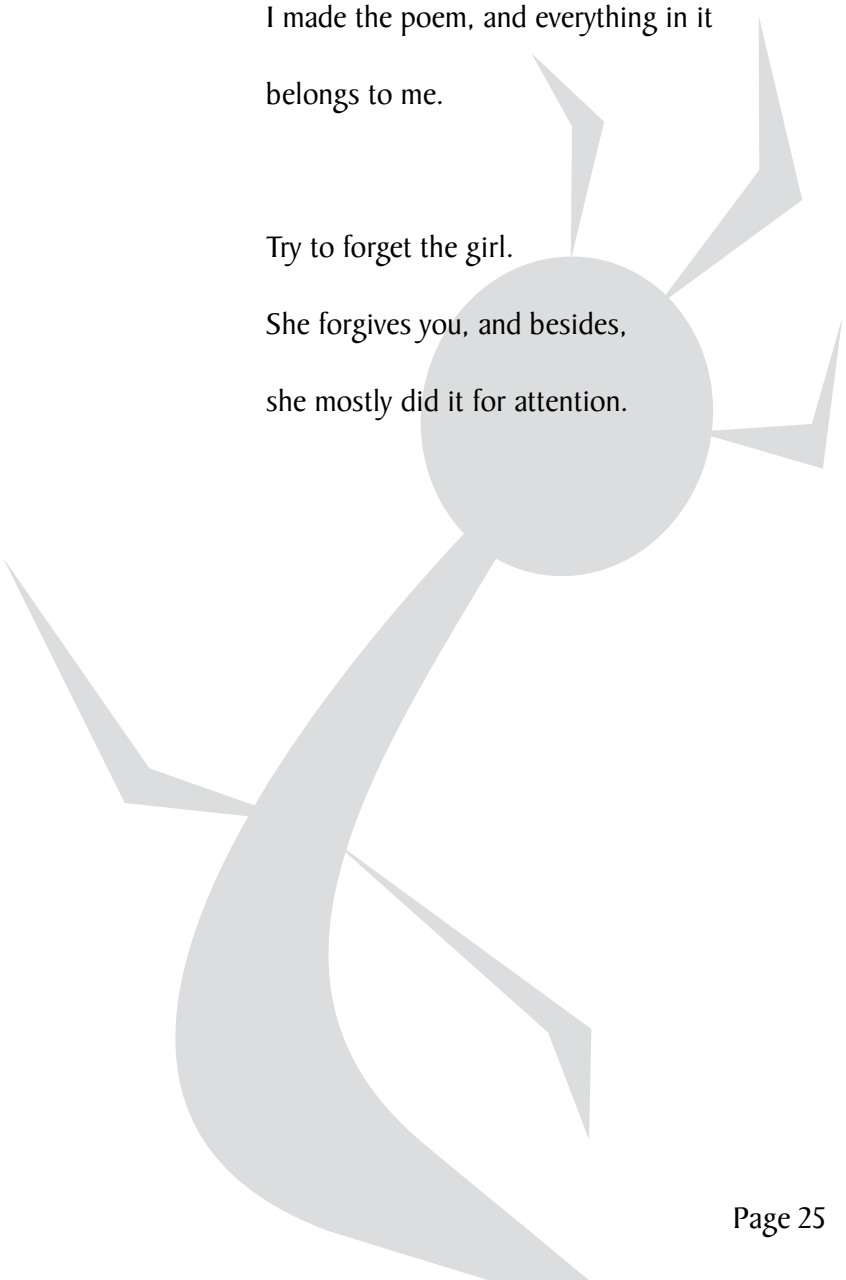
I made the poem, and everything in it

belongs to me.

Try to forget the girl.

She forgives you, and besides,

she mostly did it for attention.



Dead Reckoning

by Bara Swain

I dodge a stainless steel medicine cart and a nurse's aide — "Excuse me!" — with capped front teeth, silver, and sprint down the corridor. "Ma! Ma!" I cry, as I wrap myself around my mother in an uncharacteristic hot-dog roll embrace.

Ma peels me away.

"Hello, Jean," she calls over my bottled hair to her first-born. "Thank you for coming."

My sibling nods, eyes vacant, a Do Not Disturb sign etched on her brow. "We missed the connecting train," Jean says, "at Newark."

"I forgive you," says Ma. Pat pat pat.

She looks like me – my distant sister, more or less. Here is the more: more frightened, more dandruff, more corrugation in her boxy face.

"Do you want to go to the lounge, Ma?" I ask.

Ma claps her hands. "That's a grand idea!"

Jean balks. She screws her lips and — "But won't it be too crowded?" — tugs a coffee-colored tress.

Here is the less: less accommodating, less bone density, less hair.

I squeeze my sister's skinny arm. "I think, Jean, we'll be more comfortable."

Ma, dipping slightly, pilots her I.V. pole starboard. I man the bow, Jean takes the helm and Ma breaks wind. Her pinched face softens and colors and – "Shhh!" I warn my sister – finally relaxes.

The visitor's lounge has two couches, six chairs, a round table, a toaster, a sink and a black and white TV. It has two Wandering Jews. Five, if you include me and my sister and my mother.

Ma looks wistful.

"What are you thinking, Ma?" I ask.

A nurse with rolling thighs washes her hands and hums Love Me Tender. Jean combs her hair.

"Do you want to play Scrabble, Ma?"

Ma tightens the sash on her striped hospital gown. "I want to live," she says.

"Well," I say, "can you play Scrabble and live at the same time?"

The doctor is late.

"He's detained," corrects the nurse.

"But do you expect him soon? My children are here —"

"Open wide."

"— and I want them to be present when —"

"Wider, please."

"NO!"

The chunky nurse appeals to my sister:

"I need," she says, "your mother's full cooperation if she wants to get well. Do you want your mother to get well?"

Jean gasps. I grasp my sibling's three-inch wrist and draw her – "Uh huh" — to her feet. We flank our dazzling Ma.

Ma says:

"I want to see the doctor."

"He's detained," says the nurse.

Jean trades in five letters. Ma reads the New York Times. I copy a number from a matchbook cover to my date book. If it's not my boss's cell phone – "Is it my turn already?" – then it must be Federal Express. Or my channel-surfing tarot card reader with the Schenectady accent and Seaman's furniture.

The nurse returns bearing gifts: a carton of juice, a pre-sliced English muffin and a tub of Mazzola. "Nathan!" she calls. "Heads up!"

Jean ducks. Ma jerks her I.V. pole with one hand and – "Watch it!" — shields my face with the other. The carbohydrate sails overhead, followed by the butter alternative and a husky laugh.

The nurse pitches the carton at our table: "Cheers!" — then sashays to the counter. "Nathan," she says, "you gotta be quicker than that! Or I won't share my lunch with you no more."

The receiving end wiggles his hips. "That don't matter to me, baby. Not so long as I get dessert."

"Somewhere," says Ma, "a village is missing an idiot."

The doctor nods. "And how are you feeling now?"

"Well," says Ma. "I'm still a little short of breath."

"And the pain?"

"Not as terrible."

"Anything else?"

"Well, I still haven't moved my bowels. But I suppose that's …?"

"The tumor, yes."

"In my abdominal cavity."

"Yes."

Ma sucks her lower lip. "So the liver biopsy was…?"

"Positive."

Still composed: "Is that good, Doctor? Or is that bad."

Stock-still: "It's bad, I'm afraid."

"Why are you afraid, Doctor," my sister says. "Do you have a malignant tumor, too?"

"And I should call Aunt Anita and cousin Mathew. And the library. Write that down."

"But he says there are treatments, Ma."

"Do you think I should call Sebastian? His second wife is pregnant again. Carol or Kirsten or some biblical name."

"Christiana," says Jean.

"That's right. Write her name down, too."

"Ma, we need to get a second opinion."

"Ron can teach my calculus class. I don't know who they'll get for the Promotions Committee. I should call the Dean, too, and the Union, I suppose. And – oh! I need to call my accountant! Write it at the top."

Suddenly: "Ma! Ma!" I cry. "I don't want to live in this world without you!"

"Baby baby baby. Come here, baby."

I press my boxy face against my dazzling mother's frame. She runs her fingers through my yellow tendrils.

"Ma," I choke, "what am I going to do?"

"Just live your life, baby."

Weeping: "But who will keep me safe, Ma? Who will love me?"

She reaches for me – my older sister. Gently gently gently, she pries me from our mother. "I will," says Jean. Pat pat pat.