

FEEL THE PULSE



Vol 1

*A special thanks to Joshua Crook
for his contributions in the formation of, editing, and graphic design work for SHR;
for his inspiration and dedication to the writing craft;
and for his hatred of semicolons and love of Garamond font.*

EDITORS' NOTE

Since 2016, our small writer's workshop has had the desire to publish clear, honest writing and to discover and connect with other writers. Upon this first publication of *Steel House Review*, we would like to thank the authors whose work has been published within the following pages. We are excited to share their pieces with you and we hope you love their stories as much as we do.

We would also want to thank members of our writing workshop, both past and present for their contributions to this publication and to the craft. Our growth would not have been possible without the late-night beer-fueled discussions, long distance video calls, philosophical meanderings, and the novels, short stories, and poems we have shared with one another.

It is no small thing to share your piece of writing with the world, and we commend authors that appear here, in future publications, and in general for the work that you do to bring life to story.

Write with merit, edit with lucidity, and observe with honesty.

SHR Editing Team

SHR Editing Team

Taylor Elise, Taylor Watkins, J.D. Wolfvrrath, and Hannah Wolt

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NAMESAKE

HANNAH WOLT

Just outside the Lubbock loop on County Road 6900, infrastructure gives way to crop circles and amber fields baked dry under a big Texas sky. If it wasn't for the blue canopy it might seem as if the whole world had gone sepia, an echo of old earth scarred by ranching and cotton crop and dust bowls, stretching far as the eye can perceive.

Geography has a funny way of hiding out there in the open. Vast networks of broad crevices invisible. Drive too fast and you'd blow right past the turn off to Yellow House Canyon. A few stop signs from town, their red octagons stark against the empty spaces, Ransom Road branches right and wanders into small and monotonous suburbia, its tanshingled houses blending into their resident landscape.

Just there over the precipice, the muddy blue waters of Lake Ransom Canyon peak out from the shallow canyon floor. A slight detour down the hill ambles along the shores, and innovation is probably not the first word that comes to mind. But look up at just the right point, through just the perfect gap in common roofline, and you'll see it there perched on the cliffside – a spaceship, a rusted pachyderm, an inverted portal to something otherworldly. *Steel House*.



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Steel House's sculptor, Robert Bruno, was born in Los Angeles, California in 1945. He spent most of his childhood being shuffled from one divorced parent to the other. As a boy spending his school years with his mother in Mexico City, he fell in love with the city's romanticism, and in kind discovered his love for sculpture. When he was just fifteen, a family friend caught sight of an impressive figure he had sculpted stepping out of his bedroom wall, and soon enough the piece was photographed and featured in a magazine.

As a young man, Bruno headed off to Dominican College in Racine, Wisconsin, where he began long term relationships with both steel work and Patricia Mills. The two married in 1969 and moved off to live near Bruno's grandparents in California. There Bruno took up work as a department store salesman to make ends meet, and began working for a local jeweler, where he was able to let loose his passions for design. All the while he was experimenting with different sculpture techniques, mediums, and inspirations from his grandparent's backyard. During this time, he returned to steel sculpting which, according to architecture critic Mark Lamster, was "the kind of provocative work that...challenged the authority, seriousness and relentless formalism of doctrinaire modern art."

In 1971, Bruno and his wife moved to the dusty plains of Lubbock, Texas where Bruno began teaching art and architecture classes at Texas Tech University. However, his eccentric teaching methods and practices made for a short-lived tenure in academia and he parted ways with the university soon thereafter. During this time, Patricia Mills had been cultivating a career in environmental work with the local water district, and, ever the inventor, Bruno took it upon himself to design an irrigation unit more efficient than the current system. The design was adopted quickly across large swaths of the Southwest, and in a short time, P. Mills and R. Bruno's small company, P&R Surge Systems, was making millions. By 1973, living within the comfortable income of their new business, Bruno began work on what would become his truest passion, the *Steel House*.

Here, it's important to note that while words such as "construction" and "building" would suit the purposes of most other birth-of-structure stories, they need not apply here. To Bruno, this was not architectural design, nor was its plot of land a construction site. It was a work of art, and its plot of west Texas dirt was his studio. His inspiration for the home was actually a previous sculpture he had created – a slightly smaller scale pachyderm made of the same weathering steel – which now resides respectfully in front of Texas Tech's School of Architecture. His daughter, Christina Bruno, remembers her father going out and sitting beneath the sculpture to eat lunch, "And he thought, 'Maybe if I built this on a larger scale, it could be a house to live in.'" Since the state of Texas allows anyone to build their own home, and since the floor plans of the house didn't quite reveal the odd nature of its exterior, Bruno was granted building approval, and he soon got to work – though he would never be in much of a hurry.

If there were any one word that summed up Bruno's sculpting practice throughout his work on *Steel House*, it would have to be self-reliance. He insisted that nearly every aspect of its creation be the work of his own two hands. When his concrete pilings went up and he needed a hydraulic crane, he designed and built the crane himself. Throughout the sculpting process, he purchased and welded together each and every pound of quarter-inch steel plate scraps. Occasionally Bruno would enlist the help of a loyal employee's younger brother or ask his daughter Christina to spend time with him while he worked. "He found it ridiculous that architects conceived of something and drew it and then gave it to somebody else to build," said Mark Gunderson, a Fort Worth architect and Bruno's longtime friend. "The intimacy and the immediacy of one person working with one material over time was what he believed artistic practice was about."

For thirty years, Bruno continued sculpting and re-sculpting portions of *Steel House*. He added curving walls and disjointed staircases, piecemealed stained-glass windows and a footbridge by which to enter like that of a space ship. Shortly before his death in 2008, Bruno remarked that “The motivation here is really to do something that has some aesthetic value. I’m not particularly concerned about having a house. I built it because I like doing sculpture.” After Bruno’s passing, *Steel House* was placed under the care of his loyal friend and former employee, Henry Martinez, who now offers tours to curious west Texas visitors.

Today, the minimally-furnished interior of wood, steel, and stained-glass resembles that of ramiform cave more than home, its rooms and passages branching off at twisting angles and uneven levels. In its perpetual and intentional state of unfinished, the 2,200 square foot, four-legged creature sits at 110 tons on its perch overlooking Lake Ransom Canyon. Come evening time, as the sun sinks away setting a fire of reds and golds and purples behind it, *Steel House’s* burnt orange encasement smolders in the warm glow, and in a way unique to its structure –its defiance of traditional form and embrace of autonomy – it exists nearly as one with the place, an embodiment of harsh-plains resilience, beauty in the mundane, and an ode to its creator, Robert Bruno, and his interminable pursuit of craft and creation.

The quotes that appear in this piece are courtesy of the extensive research and writing of: Lamster, Mark. “Unfinished.” *The Dallas Morning News*. January 30, 2015. <http://res.dallasnews.com/interactives/steelhouse/>.

FICTION

“Literature is a luxury; fiction is a necessity.”

- G.K. Chesterton, *The Defendant*

GENTLEMEN OF THE SHADE

APRIL KHAITO

Dick Porter shuddered as they moved like a sigh through the black silence. The thunderous roar of takeoff, of applause and cheering and the hammering of heartbeats, had fallen away with the earth. The four-man crew, like sailors submerged, peered out through portholes across the Siberian stretches of space.

Their ship had been christened *Ay Ata*, in English *Father Moon*. It was someone's attempt at cleverness, he supposed. He'd listened to his commander make a big fuss of it during the pre-departure briefing. "Father Moon and Mother Earth"—he'd swept his hand from sky to land—"the two bound for eternal union." He'd said their mission was a vow to the people of earth, their journey there and back a ring wedding the two peoples in perpetual communion. Dick didn't know if all that were true. All he knew was this: they were headed to the moon, they expected to find life, and he was due a fat paycheck when he got home. Beyond that? Well, beyond that, there was space. And a hell of a lot of it.

It was after his shift, after the mind-numbing monotony of staring at the control panel of a vessel that controlled itself. As the flight engineer it was his job to monitor the unchanging figures if only to ensure the gravity stayed constant, the air stayed fresh, and the course stayed true.

"Do you think there'll be women?"

"God, I hope not. At home I have to deal with four daughters. Four! Can you imagine?"

Garcia and Munro were at it again, pacing the hallways as they so often did when they had trouble sleeping in the endless night. He shut out their voices. He'd heard the same conversations often enough to memorize their rhythms.

These were the unanswerable questions that filled the steel corridors, winding themselves into speculative tangles: Would there be women? Would they be raising children? And would those children be kicking balls through moon-dusted streets with the marble earth hanging in the sky like a pendant? Would there be men carving into the land with pickaxes, hammering away under the light of a million trembling torches, extracting resources to fuel the fires of a hundred ancient towns? Would the women hang gossamer fabrics on silken lines and open windows in the springtime to perfume rooms with supernal vanilla breezes? Would the Lunar people be like them? Would they feel the communal hum of living, the crescendos and chasms as they did? Or would they be alien in every sense of the word?

But of course these images were fantasy, summoned through a collective subconscious rife with portraits of small town America. A child could no sooner play a viable game of catch on the moon than he could breathe the air. No human child, anyway.

Now Dick lay in his cot, thinking not of backyard barbecues or Main Street parades, but of the way the moon had looked through the ship's insomniac eye. There was something about its

glow, the glacial chill of it that had put him on edge. He couldn't help but feel as the passengers of the Titanic must have—that he was on a collision course with fate.

He pushed the thoughts from his mind, rolled over and shut his eyes. It wouldn't be long now.

“Be ready to adjust your lungs, men.”

Dick reflexively felt for the touch panel at his chest.

“And remember, there's only silence out there as far as the ear can hear. Check those radios now. We don't want to lose communication. I'm talking to you, Munro, I'm not going to be miming out there.”

Munro spit into his empty Coke can and nodded. They all adjusted their earpieces and slid the visors down over their faces.

“But what about communicating with them?” Garcia asked through the radio and gestured to the metal door which held back the answers to a crowd of questions.

They swiveled their heads to it.

Commander Sherman shrugged. “Maybe we'll have ourselves a game of charades.”

The ship's external door slid open, exhaling its bated breath into the lunar night. The men fingered their chest panels and took breaths as hesitant as a baby's first steps, filtered though they were. Sherman stepped out into the haunted silence first. He was followed by father of four, John Munro, inquisitive David Garcia, and finally Dick Porter. The crew came down the ladder and took their first buoyant steps on the moon.

“There's no one here,” Munro said, scanning his eyes across the ashen landscape.

“What'd you expect? A hero's welcome,” Garcia said.

“Shut up, Dave.”

Dick was silent. Sure, they hadn't expected anyone to roll out the red carpet for them, but they'd all expected to find something, anything. But there was nothing as far as they could see, just rock and dust blending into static.

“Fan out!” Commander Sherman barked. “We haven't got time to waste. You know the drill.”

They set out in each direction, four men spreading like petals in a compass rose. Sherman went south into a valley of craters, Garcia picked his way west over the rock-strewn wasteland, and Munro chose the sandy plains to the north. Dick had no choice but to go east toward the barbed cluster of mountains. With any luck, he'd find something on the other side.

At first the one-sixth gravity took some getting used to. It was as if he had spent his entire life wearing ankle weights and now they had come off. There was a lightness to his movements, a nimbleness, and he had to remind himself to use less force when pushing off the ground. With practice, he fell into an habitual rhythm.

It was easy to forget where you were when you walked. When he stepped, his boots dented the soil in nearly the same way they would have on the banks of the Missouri. His legs fell into the same tempo they had beat thousands of times before. After a time, his muscles and joints ached in

the same places they always had. Be it here or there, the act of walking was a kind of self-induced hypnosis and he almost forgot he was not on familiar earth.

He reached the base of the mountain and climbed.

Something should be here, he thought. Unlike the masturbatory Arecibo message of the 20th century, a broadcast sent solely to stroke the ego of man's technological prowess, the message sent a month ago was aimed directly at communicating with alien life. The message read: *Are you there?* Dropped like a message in a bottle, it was set to drift along a familiar tide, to wash up on the shore of Earth's closest neighbor. And it had been answered. Not in indecipherable code or hieroglyphic scrawls, but in English: *Yes, listening.*

There was a time not so long ago when this would have been dismissed as some elaborate hoax. The moon was not a place that could support life—at least not life in the way they understood it—and if that fact weren't enough, they'd gone ahead and checked anyway. Both the Americans and the Chinese had found the moon to be a cold hunk of rock, not to mention the millions who, over the course of centuries, had stared up through telescopes at the barren surface. But times had changed and humanity was no longer shackled in their small cell of the universe as they had once been. It was on a lunar flyby that a cruise ship had reported something strange: what had looked like plant life on the moon's surface, a patch of green amidst a sea of dust. Subsequent flybys were unable to verify the report, but a message had been sent anyway, mostly to settle the betting pool.

Yes, listening.

Was that why they had imagined a people akin to them in size and shape? A common language and thus a common species? Maybe the Lunarians dwelled beneath the surface—a colony of moles tunneling the land into Swiss cheese? Or were they in the soil itself, hibernating in monochrome and awakening in viridian? Why had they assumed intelligence came in a standard form?

The mountain grew steeper and Dick was forced to hunch forward to climb on all fours, groping for purchase on rocks that turned to dust in his hands. His breathing was labored through the support lungs, the metrics of which were displayed along the glass visor at the right of his vision. His boots, though lighter than any he had ever worn, felt like a prisoner's shackles. As if that weren't enough, his skin was rubbing raw beneath the collar of his uniform and there was no way to adjust it with his helmet on. The minutes dragged on, but still he climbed. He told himself he was doing it for the paycheck as he saw the zeroes lined up like neat little eggs in a row, but there was something else. Almost two hundred and fifty thousand miles from Earth and he could admit it: he was curious.

"Anything?" Garcia's voice was static in his ear.

"Nothing here," Munro answered.

Dick reached the peak's apex.

"Porter?" Sherman asked.

But he wasn't listening. Beneath him the valley rolled out like a carpet, a lush oasis of forest and fern veiled in mist. A cream-colored ribbon wound through its center—giving life to vegetation that shouldn't be there, watering where no water should be. Beyond the horizon, a halved Earth floated in the gelatinized black. Continent-ridged and cloud-covered, it was like a disembodied brain.

"Porter!" Sherman snapped.

“Sir,” he answered like a man asleep. “Sir, I’ve found something.”

At first, going down was easier than going up. The path into the valley had been a smooth one and with the exception of a few weightless tumbles in the rockier places, it had been less strenuous than the climb. The radio communication had scrambled as he descended, but he didn’t worry. He knew they’d be coming after him. Anyway, he was too anxious at his discovery to wait. Protocol be damned.

He’d almost reached the end of the decline when the atmosphere changed. The weightlessness he had experienced was replaced with the suction of gravity. The next step he took came down hard on the path and his trailing foot caught on something—a rock? A tree limb?—as he tried to steady the imbalance. What resulted was not a feather-light fall in which he had time to regain his footing, but instead a sprawling, head first dive to the ground. He tried to brace himself, but he didn’t get his hands up in time.

His faceplate came down hard on a rock and cracked, spidering into a web he groped at with gloved hands as he rolled over. The metrics for his lungs flickered...and died. Not that he’d needed confirmation he’d lost pressure in his suit. There was a small hole in his visor where the sharp edge of the rock had punctured; he was squinting through it.

It was disbelief that hit him first. This couldn’t be happening. None of it was real, none of it. Not the valley or the river, not the hole in the glass, not even his very presence on the moon. He was dreaming, that was it. He was back home, dreaming about the mission he was about to go on. Wasn’t he breathing after all? And that was just not possible given the circumstances. But when he hadn’t woken after the shock began to subside, he thought maybe instead of dreaming he had died—the life ripped from his lungs—and that would make this...heaven? Don’t be foolish, he told himself. Somehow, someway he had survived. He stood, choosing to ignore the unlikelihood of this fact, and continued into the valley.

Around him he saw plant life unlike any he’d ever seen before. Not in all his travels or captured by any lens had he seen such variety. Flora burst as supernovas in psychedelic colors. Tree branches were bent lines connecting distant constellations. Pollen spiraled through the air in Milky Way swirls and—with a brush of his hand—diamond bright dandelion seeds fled like shooting stars. A galaxy was held in a dew drop on a single blade of grass. Everywhere he turned there were boundless infinities contained in microcosm as if all the universe had been tended in this garden, harvested and shipped in rocket cargo holds to the blank corners of the universe. Unloaded and unpacked, the ivy fingers pushed to stretch the walls of space. If this weren’t heaven, it was a good imitation, he thought.

As he walked, he heard the grass whispering under his boots. He stopped and listened. Another step and he heard it again and—and yes, there was the murmur of the river in the distance and the faint parchment rustle of trees above. He slid the cracked visor back and yelled. The sound echoed back. But there was no sound on the moon. There wasn’t a medium through which it could travel. Then it must be the plants, the oxygen from the plants, he realized. So this was how he could breathe.

He went on, knowing that life breeds life.

“Is anyone out there?” he called.

Something tickled the corner of his eye.

“Who’s there? Show yourself!” His heart beat wildly in his chest.

Again there was a twitch of movement at his periphery.

“I mean you no harm.” His voice shook. Was that what he was supposed to say? Or was it “I come in peace”? He was a stick and throttle man not a diplomat.

Ten seconds passed.

He heard rustling nearby. It seemed to be coming from the outskirts of the clearing.

Twenty seconds gone.

Then, just as he was about to continue on in his search, she came through the trees, seeming more animal than woman. She was naked and would have been indecent had it not been for her curtain of hair. Her eyes were trained on him, probing him with the sentience of a camera lens, the subject beheld and exposed. She was lithe and petite in stature, but her presence was of something grander, more feline. With the narrowed eyes of a jungle cat, she captured him in her gaze. He was in the center of the small clearing and feeling more vulnerable with each second she dissected him in the glint of her knife-sharp eyes.

He had the strangest sense then, a feeling that the sands of time had compressed to glass and in it he could see himself reflected—a boy crouched on the edge of a glade not unlike this one, a deer in the place where he now stood. They were a band of boys playing in the woods near his house and had spotted the deer during a lull in their make believe. One of the boys had flicked open a pocketknife and set to sharpening a stick.

“My name is Richard Porter and I come from Earth,” he said officially while trying to keep his eyes from roving over her exposed navel-less midriff, her trim legs. Here stood the answer to Garcia’s question—a woman—but with not much more than form in common with his four daughters.

“Do you have a name?” he asked.

The way she looked at him then, it was as if she had been expecting him, as though his presence had been somehow foretold. Her appraisal of him was less one of surprise and more of confirmation, a check marking of his attributes.

Without a word, she turned and disappeared into the brushwood.

“Wait! Don’t go.” He started after her, but she was quicker than he was, unencumbered by the bulk of clothes.

Initially he thought he had lost her. The brush was thick and snagged his suit, slowing his progress. Through the thicket he caught sight of her going into a grove of trees along the bank of the river. By the time he reached its edge she had stopped and was looking up toward the branches, reaching her hands to press the leaves between her fingers. He hesitated, suddenly fearful she’d see him. A chill slithered up his spine, but he shook it away. It was irrational. She posed no threat. If anything, she must be fearful of him. That must be why she’d taken off. Forget how she had looked at him before. It was entirely possible emotions were conveyed differently in her culture. He was the alien here, he must remember that. He brushed dirt from the front of his suit and walked toward her.

The grove was lit in an elfin light and, looking closer, he realized the trees pulsed as if with internal electricity. In their branches, clusters of apples hung by slender stems. They were apples in

every characteristic but color. They weren't painted in harvest hues, no reds or yellows or greens. Instead, they shone in speculum silvers and the lights and colors of the valley blurred on their mirrored skins.

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching her. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

She picked one of the apples and handed it to him in cupped hands as if in offering. He wondered if this was customary. Like dates in the Middle East or tea in China, was this part of the Lunar greeting? He took it from her.

He looked at his distorted reflection in it and saw that despite the natural curve, it was a perfect mirror. Surely trying to bite into this would be like grinding your teeth on glass.

"Please," she sibilated.

Was it safe to eat? But what if he refused? Their first encounter with Lunar life might be undermined—and over what? An apple?

"Please," she said again. "Eat."

He bit into it. Its rind broke easily and its flesh was ripe and sweet. The juice filled his mouth and had the faintest hint of spice. It stung his lips like chili pepper.

She grinned. With the tip of her sharp fingernail, she wiped the excess juice from his bottom lip and lifted it to her own mouth. As he chewed it all suddenly became clear. The folds of understanding unfurled.

He knew.

If you followed the river out of the valley it would part into four and cascade over the surface of the moon and into the ceaseless ocean of space. The deeps would fill deeper and life would spring up just as it had over billions of years. He saw them all now, beings from planets too plentiful to count, filing into rockets and testing the waters. He shut his eyes and felt his mind roll back through time.

He watched shadows cast from aligned stones at their first erection. He raised altars, kowtowed to golden gods and walked in funereal processions. He took part in ceremonial rites while the black oiled pits bubbled and lizard beasts conquered the land and skies. He watched a billion stars compress against his eyelids.

And when he swallowed, his eyes flew open. All of time sped by in Rorschach inkblots: the Magna Carta and The Communist Manifesto; The Black Death and penicillin; the Montgolfiers and The Manhattan Project and—the history of the world he knew and histories of worlds he had never seen sailed into the future. An ever-expanding eternity spread like black mold in his mind.

Those adolescent summers of balmy love and sweltering lust were not even a split second in comparison. The winters—all those frigid Februarys as a boy he thought would never end—were gone in the space of a breath. The little things that had given him joy—the clink of ice cubes in sweet tea, cleats clouding dust on first, the midnight embers of a campfire—were nothing more than pixelated dots of the bigger picture, points that lent color and depth to the totality. And it was all so perfectly clear what he must do...

Return to the ground.

He knelt and shoveled dirt away with his hands, exposing roots that connected like highways in the orchard. He pushed them aside, digging the length and width of his body. The soil was fecund

in his hands, the color of chocolate and consistency of brown sugar. There was something sensual about it, the smell pheromonal, the warmth like a lover taken to bed. He dug deeper. One foot. Two feet. Three. The apple's venom fired his synapses and blazed through his veins. Four feet now and two more to go.

While he worked the woman picked three apples from the lowest branch of the nearest tree. She fogged them with her breath and polished them like sterling silver against her hair. Turning her keen eyes to the mountain ridge, she awaited the others.

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DEVIL WIND

TRACY SHAWN

Set in 1970s Malibu during a ferocious wildfire (and inspired by true-life events), a seventeen-year-old girl is on the verge between freedom and a future clouded by her neurotic upbringing.

Maureen Wilder studies the limbs of a nearby oak and inhales the scent of salt-laced wind mingled with parched earth. Agitated, she fingers her puka shell necklace as the feverish October morning presses down. She scurries to her car, chest constricting with a dread she cannot name and a burning sadness in the pit of her stomach she doesn't understand.

Maureen revs her VW Bug's sputtering engine. With their high-pitched voices squeezing through the static of her radio, the Bee Gees croon about staying alive. Maureen frowns, but doesn't want to take her hand off the wheel to change the station and hopes the next song won't be disco. Wind jets through the window, whipping her straw-colored hair across her face. The car strays just a bit over the yellow line. Still, she jerks the wheel and taps the brake. She must keep everything steady.

Even though her back is sticky with sweat, goose bumps tingle her forearm hair, a weird reaction that happens every time the Santa Ana winds forge their coastal-bound flight from Mojave Desert to the Malibu coast. She doesn't want to be late to first period, so she steps on the gas. But right before the highway's entrance, Maureen slows down and finds herself turning the car around, surprised by her own actions. She has never ditched school before.

Once she's back on the driveway, she sits in her car for several minutes, enjoying the thought that no one knows where she is. Then, with a mixture of joy and regret, she heads back to the house. After she shuts the front door against the morning's brilliance and enters the indoor dim, Maureen wonders if she's made a mistake. If she had gone to school, at least she would have been around other people. Resigned, she plops her backpack down. For a moment she stares at the ink-stained corner of the pack against the white shag carpet and smiles. She knows how much this would upset her mother, Joy, whose unhappiness trails behind her like a needy, old dog. Even though Joy (Maureen likes to refer to her mother by her first name when she's not around) is as skinny as a snake, she's staying the week at some weight-loss spa in Ojai.

Her father is supposed to be traveling alone on one of his business trips, but Maureen guesses he's brought his newest secretary—probably someone with some sunshiny name like Susan or Linda. Even with the bedroom door closed, she's heard her mother questioning him about late-night phone calls and innuendos that have slipped out of the cocktail-party mouths of his partner's wives. How pathetic her mother is with her eagerness to always buy into another bunch of his lies. Yet Maureen has often wondered about Joy's cloudy way of doing things. For instance, why Joy decided to name her Maureen after Maureen's paternal grandmother, who was despised by both Maureen's mother and father, was beyond her.

Shrugging, Maureen realizes she's thirsty. She slogs into the kitchen and opens the fridge. She tilts her head, trying to decide if she should invade her mother's Tab supply, but remembers the chemical aftertaste, and instead, pours herself a glass of cold water, mixing in a tablespoon of Tang. She saunters from kitchen to living room, fantasizing how bright the orange would stain the carpet if she let her glass slip out of her hand. Over the speakers, which stand like mini black towers sinking into the fluff of the shag, David Bowie sings about a young American questioning if he's still too young. Maureen warbles along but then stops, not being able to stand her own voice. She glances at the couch, but is too antsy to sit. Even with curtains open and music blaring, the house seems fairytale still, a place where nothing real is ever going to happen. A gull's cry permeates through the French door. She steps within inches of the threshold, then leans over and presses her forehead against the smooth heat of the glass, thinking of escape.

She heads to her bedroom to find her nest of bikini, terry cloth shorts, T-shirt and towel tangled under her beanbag chair. An unexplainable panic makes her feel as if she isn't moving fast enough, and she races to the front door, stopping briefly to scrunch her toes around the plastic bands of her flip-flops. Once outside, she calms down. The way sunlight gleams off pavement, makes it seem like summer has come back and she smiles, wheeling her ten speed from the garage. But when she notices the oak's bitter-gray branches, she stops. Maybe something bad will happen if she doesn't go to school. As a gust of air-born dirt swirls around her ankles, she pauses. Her heart races and she tries to soothe herself by envisioning how easy it will be to forge a tardy excuse. Eyes stinging, she rolls the bike back. Before she opens the garage door again, though, another thought invades: Maybe something bad will happen if she *does* go to school.

Against the wind, she pedals to Zuma Beach. She tells herself that she made the right choice, though her skin tingles in a menacing way that makes her wish she could jump out of her own life. Eyes narrowed to the glare, Maureen turns into the parking lot and surveys the wide plain of sand. On a weekend—or any day in the summer—Zuma would be packed, but today there's just some scattered moms by the shore, their little kids scooping sand into bright plastic buckets while surfers bob on the ocean waiting for the next set of waves. She spreads her towel on dry sand, lies face up to the sun, and sleeps without dreaming.

By the afternoon, Maureen's skin is already a shade browner and the Santa Anas are blowing even harder, creating plumes of offshore spray. Without hesitation, she runs into the surf, dives under a swell, and then swims beyond the breakers. Near the kelp beds, she floats with eyes closed, smelling the briny air and feeling the steadfast breeze across her face. For several minutes, she remains an anonymous creature with no thought. Yet too soon her fingers, numbed to the point of white achiness, can no longer move and she comes back to herself. She swims to shore with head out of water, and notices a faint orange hue in the sky, which she figures is a blown-in layer of L.A. smog.

After she emerges, the scent of fire makes her scan the beach, but she doesn't see any bonfires. She notices that most of the mothers have packed up their umbrellas and taken their sun-browned kids to the showers by the side of the parking lot's bathrooms. The surfers, though, are still in the water, their wetsuits black and shiny like seals.

Wind lashes against her skin, and she realizes that what she smells isn't a bonfire down the beach but unseen wildfire behind the Santa Monica Mountains as the smoldering scent of trees and brush invades her lungs. Squinting, she sees a small, dense fire cloud crouching over the lowest peak of the range. She unlocks her bike, telling herself that it's probably some spot fire that won't even make the news, but still strains to ride faster, the petals pressing against her flip-flop's thin rubber

soles. In less than a mile, the sunlight is dimmer, the scent of fire, sharper. By the time she gets to her house, a billow of smoke mushrooms over the mountains. It expands so quickly that Maureen is sure it's going to be as big as the 1970 Malibu Canyon Fire had been when she was a kid—that little girl with the pageboy haircut and huge bucktoothed grin—who never worried about what was going to happen next.

Under the muted sky, Maureen knows she has to evacuate, but freezes on the driveway. A coyote stares at her, its green eyes wide and wary. Up close, this straggly creature looks smaller and more vulnerable than the flashes of early-morning coyotes she's seen trotting through side-brush.

She holds her hand out. "It's okay."

His gaze steady, the coyote backs away. Then he bolts, his scrappy body fleeing down the road. A lump wedges in Maureen's throat, but she will not allow herself to cry. In the thick air, she finally wheels her bike into the garage and just as she turns around, her nineteen-year-old neighbor, Sonny, pulls up.

"We better get out of here," he calls. "You want a ride?"

Without thinking, she runs up to his van. "I can drive myself," she says, inwardly cringing at the nervous crack in her voice.

"Where're you going to?" Sonny raises his eyebrows and smiles as if there were nothing to be concerned of. Maureen likes how white his teeth look against his tan face.

She stalls, unsure of her answer. But everything around her has become murky-gray and cornflake-size ashes are already drifting down. "I don't know..."

"Look at the air; you don't want to wait any longer," he says. "You better get in."

Maureen finds herself nodding, even though she wants to grab some clean clothes—and shouldn't she take her mother's jewelry box and fancy silverware? But her eyes are burning so badly that the thought of turning away from Sonny and his waiting van make her feel as if she'd purposely be jumping into a regret too big to forget. Without a word, she gets in and before she can find the metal buckle to seatbelt herself in, Sonny takes off.

"Man, this feels like it's gonna be a big one," Sonny says over the chugging of the van's engine. He peers out the windshield, his white-blond bangs hanging over one eye.

Even though her mother has repeatedly told her to never take rides from Sonny because he's a "pothead," Maureen feels safe in the rattly van with its smell of beach tar and coconut-scented surf wax. After an uncomfortable silence, Sonny turns up the volume of a Bad Company cassette and "Run with the Pack" blares so loudly that it's no use trying to talk. Maureen knows that it's not so much Sonny that her mom has a problem with, but his mother, Tricia. Constantly referring to Tricia as "that desperate divorcee," her mother has never invited them to any of their potlucks and is always spouting out mean digs like how over-frosted Tricia's hair is, or how unbecoming her mini skirt is—especially when Maureen's father is in earshot. Maureen steals a glance at Sonny's profile and wonders if he gets lonely too. Right after the tape ends, Sonny turns into the entrance to Zuma Beach and parks the van so that it faces the ocean.

Maureen sees that the sky has grown far too dark for the time of day. "Don't you think we should keep going?"

Sonny rolls down his window, but immediately coughs, rolling it back up. “We will.”

She holds back from coughing herself. “Do you have someplace for us to go?”

“My dad and stepmom live in Venice,” he answers. “But first I want to see if the fire makes it over the range.”

“I guess that would be cool,” she says, not really meaning it.

A family with three little kids bouncing around in the back of a station wagon pulls up. The worried-looking mom makes a rolling-down motion and Maureen cracks her window an inch.

“You two better get out of here,” the mom yells.

Maureen clears her throat and gives the lady a thumbs-up sign. The lady shakes her head and scrunches her eyebrows together. Maureen turns to watch the blank-faced husband as he backs their station wagon out, while the lady continues to glare at them, her sour-looking mouth spouting unheard words. Maureen guesses that she’s complaining about how so many youth of today are burnouts, sure that she and Sonny are perfect examples.

Sonny jabs her shoulder. “Look,” he says, his body turned toward the mountains.

Just a couple miles north, against the black-gray smoke, flames rage through chaparral.

“How can that happen so fast?” Maureen wonders out loud. “We better go.”

“We’re right next to the beach. We’ll be okay.”

Outside their window, the ashy-colored water looks like an entirely different ocean than the one Maureen had swum in just a short time ago. “Let’s not stay too long.”

Sonny’s eyes widen. “God damn, the fire’s acting like a crashing wave; check it—” A hacking cough interrupts him. He cups his hand around his mouth, and in a raspy voice continues, “These winds really whip things up.”

The flames surge down the mountain much faster than Maureen thought possible. She whispers the words, “devil wind,” the phrase her mother used after the Malibu Canyon Fire blackened acres of land, killing almost a dozen people who didn’t have time to get out. Sonny grips the steering wheel. Neither one of them utter a word while they watch the descending flames. When it reaches Pacific Coast Highway, the fire has become tsunami-sized, and in what seems like seconds, roars across both south and northbound lanes. Maureen can’t believe what she’s seeing. Fire jumping over the asphalt expanse of highway shouldn’t be possible.

“I wonder if our houses will make it.” Sonny’s voice sounds like he’s a little kid again.

Embarrassed for him, Maureen keeps her gaze on the fire. “Looks like it’s going to burn all the way to the ocean. It’s so big—and I haven’t heard any fire engines yet.”

Sonny backs the van out, his left eyelid twitching. He turns south on PCH and changes cassettes to some ‘60s band Maureen has never heard of. Patiently, he follows the line of traffic and after a couple of songs, sings along. Maureen likes how he doesn’t seem to care how out-of-tune he is. He trails off quickly, though, and turns down the volume. “Where’s your mom?”

“She’s in Ojai, and my dad’s on some business trip. What about your mom?”

He shrugs. “She’s on some casting call in L.A. She got it in her head that she’s going to act in soap operas.”

“That’d be cool.”

“It’s not going to happen. She’s testing for a part that’s way too young for her.” He clears his throat. “Her schemes always seem to self-destruct.”

They watch the news from his father’s house in Venice. Scenes of fire against night sky flash on the screen while they dine on Bugles and Squirt soda. Sonny’s father and stepmother are hanging out with neighbors in the kitchen, their clinking wine glasses and laughter floating over the newscaster’s sober voice. When he announces that some homes have burned, Sonny and Maureen lean forward. Before they can find out where, Sonny’s father shambles into the room and clicks the TV off. A toad-shaped man with hair tied back in a stubby gray ponytail, he glances at Maureen but doesn’t acknowledge her.

With an audible gulp, he swallows the rest of his sangria, and then nods slit-eyed at Sonny. “Your mother called. I told her you’re fine—she’s staying the night at some motel.”

“Why didn’t you let me talk to her?”

“I thought...” his father studies his empty glass, “I thought it would be good for you take a break.” He pinches off a heart-shaped leaf from a nearby philodendron and mutters the word ‘loser’ as if he’s talking to the plant. This and the potato-white fat of his feet bulging from the straps of his black leather sandals make Maureen want to spit in his face.

Sonny looks straight at his father. “She isn’t a bad person,” he says. “She tries.”

“Trying?” his father’s voice raises. “Your mother’s way of *trying* is just another trick she uses to make people feel sorry for her.”

Maureen sees that Sonny is staring at the pointed edge of the withered philodendron leaf pinned between his father’s sandal and the parquet floor. “At least she cares about me,” Sonny says.

“You need to stop buying into her little-lost-girl ways. You’re nineteen now.” He extends his arms as if to emphasize his point, the awful brown and tan-striped polyester shirt stained with crescents of armpit sweat. “You’re old enough to see through her bullshit.” He walks away, swinging his wine glass upside down by its stem.

Sonny watches his father’s retreat, his mouth so downturned-sad that Maureen wonders if she should kiss him but ignores the impulse.

Finally, he smiles, his white teeth flashing the kind of grin that would make anybody think he found it all too funny. “I guess you can see why I don’t live with *him*.”

“I think your mom’s really nice,” Maureen says, meaning it. She wonders if she should try to call her own mother at the spa in Ojai, but can’t remember its name and figures that if Joy had even heard the news, she knows Maureen will take care of herself.

“I better turn the TV back on,” Sonny says.

The news has ended, and they sit hypnotized as the theme song for *Charlie’s Angels* starts to play. They fall asleep by the TV’s drone, scrunched on opposite ends of the couch.

While it’s still dark Maureen wakes up, her heart sprinting as if she’s had a nightmare. She hears Sonny stir.

“You awake?” he whispers.

“Yeah, I don’t think I can get back to sleep.”

“Let’s get out of here,” he says. “Let’s go back home.”

With barely a glance, officers wave them through the roadblock after Sonny shows his driver’s license. They drive up PCH, the smell of soot permeating the van. Small patches of still-glowing embers pit the hillsides while burnt shrubs stand, charcoal skeletons against the dawn’s hazy-blue light.

When they enter their street, Maureen holds her breath. All the houses are standing. As they go down the road, though, she sees that one house has been transformed into a blackened pile, while a row of houses next to it are left standing whole as if nothing has happened. A moment later, she sees that another house is reduced to one charred wall and chimney. It looks as if some kind of random wrath has been sent down from a careless god.

They pull in front of where their houses should be. Maureen’s is unscathed, its white stucco walls standing straight and alert. But Sonny’s home is gone. She stops herself from telling him that it’s going to be okay.

He lowers his head on the steering wheel. Maureen touches his arm, staring at the empty space where the oak used to assert its branches across the sky. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she sees a lady with shovel in hand, hobbling over the charred ground that used to be Sonny’s home. The bent-over woman looks like Sonny’s mom, but she appears much older and smaller than the chipper, head-held-up-high lady Maureen had just waved to the other day.

“Who’s that, Sonny?”

He lifts his head, and his jaw tightens, yet his mouth crumbles. “It’s my mom.”

They climb out of the van into charcoal-scented air. His mother doesn’t seem to notice them and trudges farther into the ashes, her petite fingers gripping the shovel’s splintered handle.

“Mom,” Sonny says in a soft voice.

Tricia’s head jerks up, her face pale and eyes swollen-red. “Sonny...you’re here.”

She’s wearing tight, rolled-at-the-ankle jeans and a sleeveless blouse, reminding Maureen of a worn-out Marilyn Monroe. Tricia wipes her nose with a tissue matching the same delicate pink of her shirt. With left eyelid twitching, Sonny leans in to give his mother a hug.

Stiffly, she gives him a quick pat on the back. “Listen Sonny, it’s going to be okay,” she says. “I’ll figure something out.” Maureen can tell that she’s trying to convince herself more than she is trying to console Sonny. Tricia looks back down and turns over the paper-thin remains of their home.

“Mom, what are you doing?” Sonny shakes his head, and Maureen can tell by the way he presses his hands over his eyes that he’s trying to stop himself from crying.

“I’m going to find my jewelry.”

Sonny exhales, his face to the sky. He turns to Maureen. “The Santa Ana’s have left,” he says.

She remembers the coyote's gaze and imagines bolting down the road herself. Instead, she takes Sonny's hand and leads him to her garage so that they can each grab a shovel to help his mother dig through ash.

Author and speaker Tracy Shawn lives and writes on the Central Coast of California. Her debut novel, The Grace of Crows (Cherokee McGhee, 2013), won awards for indie fiction, including the 2013 Jack Eadon Award for Best Book in Contemporary Drama and Second Place for General Fiction from Reader Views. She's written numerous articles for print and online publications and has recently completed her second novel.

NONFICTION

“Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.”

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

LAKE COHASSET

KRIS HARRINGTON

This essay was inspired by my frequent runs and hikes around Lake Cobasset, one of the three human-made lakes in Youngstown, Ohio's Mill Creek Park. When my father was dying of cancer, I sought solace on the park's vast trails, and the trail around Cobasset became my favorite spot because in that space, caught between the wooded and sandstone hillside on one side and the lake on the other side, I surrendered to my senses. "Lake Cobasset" is about change and constancy and about how the constant empowers us to accept the change, whether we do it boldly or timidly, depending on the season.

The lake is hued in mud tones with moss-slimes rocks, reflections of tree line and sky, leaf strewn edges, sunlight gems in the ripples. I discovered trail along this lake in the wandering-around days when my father was dying. I tried to forget his concrete gray, disease-bleakened flesh here. I mourned other things too, other people, other lives. All dead things. Gone things and gone people.

Dead and gone is mostly the story of this town. Once, the lake was drained for several months, and its earthen emptiness rectangled into a nearly-one-mile-long shallow pit. I thought I'd see a skeleton or some tires revealed where the mud water had once cloaked them. In this town, bones and broken-down objects, both sneakily-dumped, are ordinary. But there was nothing but the dirt and stone bottom. The lake was refilled, and it went back to hosting snappers and herons, forgetting that it was human made with human moods—sparkling, skittering, frigid.

Storms stomp loud and fast across the lake in the summer. I time it all wrong. When the rain comes with fat plops on the water, I hear and see it before I feel it, then suddenly, the wet pings on my skin. The sky shadows and the winds threaten the trees overhead. I am also thundering, all blowing clouds and electric bursts. Someone, when I was a little girl, taught me that just before a storm, the leaves start to turn over, and if you look closely, you can see them trying to tip their bottom sides up.

Before those leaves die in the fall, the lake blazes blood orange in reflection. When the leaves leave their moorings, they blanket the trail and water's edge, get sugared with those first flimsy snows and this place becomes a change place, where we keep a limb in each season for a little while.

I think about the autumn evening jog when I surprised a young mother with two leashed dogs and one toddler on the narrow stretch of path between hillside and the lake. I turned sideways to slip slowly past them when the German Shephard caught my arm in his teeth. He jerked his head to tear my skin, but I wrenched free and felt another chomp at my leg before I escaped altogether. Pity pulled itself up into my mind through my fear and anger. I looked at that young mother and saw my own mother, born and raised in this town, married at nineteen, three kids by twenty-five, always holding too many leashes, always more than she could handle.

And sometimes the lake is that tricky white-blue under the same kind of trick sky. Winter. The bare branches ink over it like some ancient basic script.

One time on a warm winter day and under the trick sky, I hiked in my sneakers along the trail. I came upon a two-inch thick stretch of melt-slickened ice, and those sneakers couldn't get a hold. I landed hip to ice and slid nearly into the water, stopping myself with a lucky tree grab. I pulled and shimmied across the ice until I reached another tree, this one rooted in the steep hillside. So, I thought about my choices. The hillside was nearly vertical, as impossible to trek as the iced-over trail. I could go back the way I came, but I'd already traveled those three miles, and dusk was coming.

In the end, I took those slippery sneakers off, tied the laces together and flung them over my shoulder, the way we used to carry our sneakers when we were kids—the sudden need to feel earth under bare feet overwhelming the realities of bee stings and sharp stone cuts as we pad footed through the little piece of woods that was left at the end of our street after the freeway went in. I scooted naked footed along the watery ice, tweaked anxious and a little gleeful at the weirdness and only-me-ness of it all. Although it took me while to cross the half-mile, iced-over stretch of trail, I made it back to my car before dark, wet and spent.

Come spring, the lake wakes up slowly and then all in a rush with its deep-green-blue, still cold-thick water. Melt and mud and buds. The starting-again time is messy on the trail, ankle splashing mucky, patched between the shade chill and the sun bursts that feel just a little warmer than they ever feel again. The trail horseshoes three times, and as I trek through the glow and splatter, I count the curves, one, two, three.

I hear the birds first, finch and sparrow and hawk, then the bullfrogs. It's too soon for the heron, but I watch the lake for him anyway because when that shy silver-blue creature lights, his wings spread so wide, they seem to shift the wind.

Kris Harrington writes place-infused creative nonfiction about her lifetime home, Youngstown, Ohio. A lecturer for Kent State University, Kris's work has appeared in Dictionary of Literary Biography, The Sun, Jenny, River and South Review, Science-Based Vulnerability: Scientists and Poets Resist, among others. She has also been a featured reader at local art events including YSU's Summer Festival of the Arts, Slice of Life, and Women Artists: A Celebration. She coordinates and directs The Strand Project, a full-length theatrical production of original dramatic monologues. Kris is a sometimes runner, an avid hiker, and an always wanderer. She lives in Youngstown, OH with her husband Jim, daughters Miranda and Gillian, and several rescue pets.

ANOTHER DOG & PONY SHOW

BILL VERNON

This story dramatizes one of those kinds of experiences that you can't forget. Memories of such experiences, particularly from our youth, hang like a backdrop I suppose in all of our minds. Sometimes we're conscious of them, sometimes not, but their persistence implies their importance, guiding and affecting us in the present. Oddly, why they're important is not always clear. This experience happened to me with just over a year left in the USMC. Writing about it helped me understand it better.

Hope and hype are two different words, and neither is reality. We all knew that, but Hollywood's aura glowed on the California shore just ahead, confusing us. The Marine Corps' habit was hurry up and wait. The hurry-up benefited command. The wait afflicted us peons with completion interruptus, frustration and anxiety. We knew all that. As usual, we were ending and beginning something, no reason for euphoria.

Still, fleeing the *USS General W. A. Mann* on cattle cars, we gabbed excitedly. Dumped at a San Diego Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) building named PROCESSING, we cursed, knowing the sign meant arrival but no release. Our puppeteers promised tomorrow. We resigned to one more short wait.

And it actually happened, that is for all except for seven of us. Pinned against a wall out of the way, we watched 800-plus other Marines receive their paperwork and cavort blissfully onto busses for a ride to railroad, bus station or airport. The sight was too much. I couldn't stop myself from asking, "What the hell, Sarge, what about us?"

An E-5, the man who'd pulled us aside said, "Don't worry about it, Lance Corporal. I'll take care of you as soon we're done here."

It took the seven of us another hour to clean up the room. Only then did he explain. We seven had special duty offers. "Fall in. I'll march you to the school right now."

I said, "Wait a minute, Sarge. Just give us our orders and we'll scam."

He said, "If that's how it worked, you'd have 'em in your hands. Now 'Ten-hut!'"

We marched out of the large room up a street to the front door of an adjacent building. "At ease." He stepped inside, handed paperwork to a PFC at a desk, "They're all yours," then departed, abandoning us without a word. And so I entered Limbo.

The last bus from Processing had long since disappeared. It occurred to me that I hadn't found out my buddies' next duty stations. We had shared experiences with two typhoons, blizzards, survival training in jungles, live-fire exercises, war problems, ship-board life, plus other sometimes degrading, sometimes elating experiences. We were brothers. A few words of parting would have been nice.

I also realized that our old outfit, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, was defunct. We seven were the only ones left, and now we had even more waiting to do. The situation was irritating.

Five minutes later a tall man appeared in full khaki uniform, including tie and head cover. A sergeant major, the highest enlisted rank. Sergeant majors were not approached lightly. I'd never spoken to one except to say, "Yes, Sergeant," when receiving an order.

Oddly, this one smiled. "Congratulations, men. We selected each of you to attend our highly rated Communications and Electronics School because of your record, your test and aptitude scores. My name is Steve Wilkes."

Steve? Now I got it. Phony. We'd never dare call him that. Plus, he shook hands with each of us, then gently ushered us inside. "Let's go through our facilities. I'll have instructors explain a few things, and you can begin identifying the specialties that interest you the most."

Farther inside, he said, "Men, shall we start with a typical classroom?" as if asking us for permission.

This tour of a place I didn't want to see took another nerve-wracking hour. We entered classrooms where instructors explained machines, applications, methods of learning, and lengths of time for the many courses offered, some of which ran nearly a year.

If I'd heard correctly. I really wasn't tuned in. My aptitude test scores had recommended me for this school three years ago. When first duty assignments came out, however, they put me in the infantry. Recruiters and ex-Marines back home had promised the Corps would educate me. The infantry's lessons involved combat and weapons. Three years of infantry life had also revealed that radio operators, the only electronics field I was familiar with, were easy targets in combat. This PR spiel was aimed at the wrong target. I wanted to get my orders and go.

Finally, the Sergeant Major lined us up alphabetically to meet "The CO." This had to be the end. I felt relief. But he brought us to attention, marched us single file into an office, halted us, and ordered, "Left face." Here we were, marching inside a building again. Deep breath. I tried to relax.

Before us sat a colonel—I don't remember if full-bird or silver oak leaf. He stood up behind a big desk, gazed at us solemnly, then smiled as the Sergeant Major had done. "At ease, men. Any questions? Anything you'd like clarified about what you've seen?"

He looked for a second at each of us. This whole thing was actually quite exceptional. Colonels seldom met lowly Marines like me. I was naive enough to be impressed.

He nodded, approving our lack of input. "Fine. I am very glad you're here. Our school has only seven empty billets left, and you are the perfect men to fill them. You were hand-picked. We don't take just anyone. Now, there is one small complication that is holding up your leave, but we can iron out that wrinkle quickly. Are you with me so far?"

Another complication? Were we going to waste more time?

The Colonel said, "The specialty MOS you will receive from our school will guarantee you quick advancement, higher rank and pay, etc. Quite frankly, this is a life-changing opportunity. The thing is, though, the Corps wants to benefit for a while from the expertise we will help you develop. That's fair, isn't it? We only ask that you extend your enlistment two years. All we need is your signature to make this work."

Two years extension? He wanted two more years of my life? Now I was paying attention. I should have suspected something like this.

He picked up some papers, came around his desk, and gave them to the Sergeant Major, who came down our line handing each of us a sheet.

The Colonel said, "Read that, men. When you sign it, you can then be on your way home or wherever it is you're going on leave."

My form was entitled Immediate Reenlistment Contract. At the bottom left was an underlined blank area for signature and today's date above my typed-in name and serial number. Same thing on the right side for the witnessing officer.

My heart sank. Extending for two more years? Unbelievable. I was due for discharge next July. I'd been dreaming of it. I'd regretted my swearing in immediately back in Cincinnati, but I'd kept my word. Now the Corps was pulling this. It seemed like a betrayal. A trick.

Pressuring us like this to extend was a misuse of power, and my position at the end of the line allowed the Colonel to increase that pressure by slowly proceeding down the line from man to man toward me. I was instinctively angry at this set-up, watching each Marine cave in. The Colonel handed each one a pen, held up a clipboard for backing while the Marine signed the sheet, then shook hands. "Congratulations."

Each Marine said, "Thank you, sir," the Sergeant Major took the signed sheet, and the pair moved down the line to the next man. All the other guys extended for two years.

When they reached me at the end, I was tongue-tied. The Colonel lifted the clipboard toward me, but my arms remained rigidly hugging my sides. They felt paralyzed. What to say? I stared into his eyes. I noticed the Sergeant Major's face turn toward me.

The Colonel held up his other hand. "Well, Marine, here's a pen."

As if the words were forced from my lungs, I said, "I can't, sir."

"Can't?"

"Yes sir."

"You refuse to extend?"

"Yes sir."

"What the hell is your problem?"

"I have plans, sir."

"To do what?"

"Go to college, sir."

"Go to college? You hear that?" The Colonel looked at the Sergeant Major, then back at me. Awkward silence, then, "Do you know how many troops who leave the Corps and say they're going to college actually go? Huh? Do you know?"

"No sir."

"Less than one percent. That's all. And I doubt you're one of them."

He turned away, marched behind his desk, and slapped the clipboard down on it. The Sergeant Major took my sheet and laid it separately from the others in front of the Colonel.

The Colonel said, "You believe this? For a pipe dream, he's ignoring this opportunity."

The Sergeant shook his head.

"Nobody's turned down my offer of a billet before. He's breaking my streak."

The Colonel glanced at a large wall chart behind him. It was a transparent plastic square with columns of black-printed names of the school's programs followed by the total number of billets for each. Farther right were smaller numbers handwritten in red, adding up to seven, the open billets. What strikes me now is how that graphic reduced us humans into digits. We were pawns being used to promote this man's ambitions. His record? I was also being insulted and knew it, but I oddly felt guilt. Fleeting, I even considered signing.

The Colonel faced us again. "You are all scheduled for lunch at the school's mess hall. After that, you're free to go on leave. All except you..." He picked up my unsigned paper, dropped it back on the desk, said my last name, and stared at me. "These men will go home today, but we have to cut new orders and new leave papers for you. How long that will take, I do not know. Dismissed."

A feeling of something like despair hit me. My mind seemed to go blank the same way it had when I'd signed and agreed to serve four years. When I'd tried to imagine four whole years of taking orders, of being confined to the Marines, nothing but darkness had appeared in my mind. The Colonel was implying that this kind of torture wasn't over, and I knew it wasn't.

An underling from a nearby office led us through the building to the mess hall's chow line. I followed the others forlornly, imagining another hassle, another delay that would take.... I didn't know how long. It could go on for days.

We each filled up a metal tray with food, took tray and eating utensils to a table our guide led us to, and sat with him. The room was so noisy with voices I felt disoriented. We ate quickly, without enjoyment, until one of us yelled, "If you're ready, let's go."

Immersed in self-pity, I followed the others. The Corporal who'd guided us here was going to take us to an office for leave papers and orders. The other six would be free, then, but what about me? My anxiety rose with the uncertainty.

Our little group one after another put our eating utensils in a large plastic container for cleaning. But when the man ahead of me reached the garbage can, an MP grabbed a corner of the guy's tray and said, "Eat that bread. We don't waste food here."

There was one slice of white bread on his tray with a bite out of a corner. Now I noticed two MPs here and two at the other exit's garbage cans. The presence of MPs was odd. I'd seen this arrangement only in boot camp, which was on this base, just across the grinder from here.

"It fell on the floor," the guy ahead of me said. "It's dirty."

The MP said, "Eat it. That's an order."

"I outrank you." The guy with the bread was E-3 like me.

The MP, who had a PFC stripe, said, "Okay, wise ass, give me your ID."

The other MP came over beside them. "Give him your ID. You're on report."

Another of our guys said, "Now hold on. He'll eat it."

"No I won't," said the guy with the tray.

The second MP said, "You stay out of this or you'll be on report too."

The Corporal who'd led us here explained to the MPs that we had just extended to get into the school, that he'd not told us the rule about eating everything we took from the food line.

The first MP said, "All right, but I'll tell him just once more. Eat it or you will come with us to the Sergeant of the Guard."

The face of our E-3 reddened, but he brushed off the bread with his fingers and ate it. Of course, like me, he didn't want to stay here any longer than he had to. None of us said anything until we were out of the mess hall. Then the E-3 who'd had the problem said, "How chicken shit can you get?" All of us agreed with that.

We didn't talk about it anymore because the prospect of proceeding home took their attention. The other six bunched up behind the Corporal, almost pushing him to move faster to the school's office. Receiving their papers, they hurried to the Processing building for their seabags. That's where I parted with them, shook their hands, and wished them luck.

Which they'd need. How ironic. They'd just pledged two more years to be stationed here in this chicken-shit environment. I felt somewhat elated too, understanding that this base was a showcase, presenting visitors with the Corps marching, exercising, transforming civilians into Marines. So, the discipline here was strict and would remain so. Not extending my enlistment was my good luck. Thank God for that favor.

A clerk at the processing unit's headquarters predicted my wait for orders could be as short two days, but probably longer. It was indefinite. He assigned me a rack, a metal locker, and a foot locker in an unused barracks wing, told me to keep the room clean, then left.

Alone, I sat on my rack, feeling as if I were in Purgatory where suffering cleansed a soul of moral errors, according to Catholic mythology, before admission into a better place. But I didn't know what my sins were nor who was going to judge when my purging was sufficient. That night I took a shower hot enough to hurt. I worried about the indefinite length of my sentence, aware the school's Colonel might influence what happened to me.

Sent daily to a holding company for "special" recruits, my job there produced such worry I wondered if the Colonel himself had assigned me to it. The company used me for what sounds harmless, marching their recruits to mess call, sick bay, or other destinations. These recruits, though, were special euphemistically. The Corps put inept trainees into a holding company for evaluation until readmission into regular boot camp units or, like the ones I showed around, discharge, judged "Unfit for military duty."

I was caught in another bind. Because they couldn't dress, march, nor follow orders according to Marine Corps standards, marching as many as 15 of them to a mess hall was an adventure. Officers and noncoms might confront me about the group's appearance or my own. Trying to avoid trouble, I adjusted the recruits' clothing, then counted cadence when we moved to coordinate their steps. I safety-pinned a white armband neatly on the most with-it guys to be our road guards. These two recruits were supposed to, at my command, run ahead to block upcoming side streets so our group could cross intersections safely. I had to, however, place these guards in place in the proper at-ease posture, then retrieve them after we'd passed. Anticipating problems gave me a little control, but I knew we looked pathetic.

My uniforms, creased badly from being packed in a seabag, would not pass inspection either. After the first day's jaunt with the recruits, I borrowed an iron and squared away wearable utilities and a dress uniform. Polished a pair of boots and dress shoes. MCRD wanted spit and polish so I

gave them my best possible imitation of it. I also marched smartly and saluted officers while avoiding prolonged eye contact with those of higher rank.

Tension prevailed in this work assignment, but of the many times I marched the recruits, only two officers, both second lieutenants, told me to get "my" troops together. I answered them, "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Everyone else seemed to recognize untrainable recruits and ignored us. Walking the MCRD streets or sidewalks seemed risky enough to avoid it as much as possible.

The ninth day of checking for orders at Processing, the clerk had them. "Cherry Point, North Carolina," the print said. I'd become a "Launch and Recovery Technician," my new MOS, 7011. I knew nothing about that nor the USMC air wing in general, but I was elated.

"Thank you," I said. When the clerk didn't answer, I said, "I'm free to go now?"

My escape was all planned: a change into civilian clothes, a phone call to make airline reservations, a phone call home, a bus ride into San Diego, a train trip to LA, a bus to LAX, a flight to Chicago, a connecting flight to Cincinnati, a Greyhound bus ride 25 miles to Lebanon, then the familiar quarter-mile stroll down Southwest Street to home.

When I was finally high above the good earth, the engines humming away, I closed my eyes, and the prolonged stay at MCRD eventually seemed short and uneventful. My concentration focused instead on the future. Thirty days of freedom lay ahead, then something almost new, life on an air base. Another adventure. Did that Colonel spitefully delay my orders and leave papers? If so, thanks. The extra wait in San Diego made getting home even more enjoyable.

Bill Vernon served in the United States Marine Corps, studied English literature, then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folk dances. His poems, stories and nonfiction have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and Five Star Mysteries published his novel Old Town. Recently published include:

"The No-Colored Sign," in Marathon Literary Review

at <http://marathonlitreview.com/2018/06/07/the-no-colored-sign-bill-vernon>

"Mickey Mouse Ears," at As You Were: The Military Review

at <http://militaryexperience.org/mickey-mouse-ears>

"On The Way To Disneyland," in Parhelion Literary Magazine, 7/16/18

at <https://parbelionliterary.com/bill-vernon/>

"French Shutters," in Entropy, 8/10/18,

at <https://entropymag.org/french-shutters/>.

POETRY

“A poet is an unhappy being whose heart is torn by secret sufferings, but whose lips are so strangely formed that when the sighs and the cries escape them, they sound like beautiful music.”

- Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

HANSEL & GRETEL

WILLIAM DORESKI

Schlepping from bar to bar
in search of the perfect bourbon,
we mistake ourselves for Hansel
and Gretel scouting for witches
to roast in the ovens of our hearts—
a post-romantic conceit
we should never share in public.

You're always mumbling nothings
to your dead husband, your face
a moon on autopilot. You slur
these atonal endearments,
none of which apply to me.
I, on the other hand, drift off
with star-shaped expressions flashing
in lamplight too sallow to flatter.

The city shrugs like a tough guy
in his underwear. The streets crawl
to the harbor and abase themselves
before the elements. Long black ships
from China creak at the piers
where big cranes unload containers
with a grimace of efficiency
twenty-four hours a day.

I'd focus on the moment
the Big Bang occurred, but colors
dispute in the cosmos, blurring
my sense of time. Is this now,
or somewhere else? The kiss
you sometimes emboss on me
to keep me brimming can't weather
the next drink in the next bar.

You'll have to renew it
with slobber so offhand the dark
will mistake it for pubescence;
as if Hansel and Gretel grew up
faster than the fictions intend—
the stink of dead witch tracking them
to dark harbor water on which
you and I should learn to walk.

William Doeski has published three critical studies and several collections of poetry. His work has appeared in various journals. He has taught writing and literature at Emerson, Goddard, Boston University, and Keene State College. His new poetry collection is A Black River, A Dark Fall.

A BLIMP TOOK TO THE SKY

RICHARD WEAVER

A blimp took to the sky
one windblown afternoon. Tired of being
tethered, it slipped its moorings and ran away
with the northwest wind. Its silvery skin
drew the sun from behind the clouds
and further feathered hopes not to be squandered.
Left in its wake, an erasure of clouds.
In a fluttering of fancy, the Blimp pirouettes
above rangy mountains, unlikely to surrender
to land-based monuments, or later, the onion moon.

The author lives in Baltimore's Inner Harbor where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, acts as the Archivist-at-large for a Jesuit college, and is the unofficial poet-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub and Restaurant - a mere 276 strides away. He is the author of The Stars Undone (Duende Press). His poems have appeared in River Poet's Journal, Southern Review, Little Patuxent Review, Loch Raven Review, Adelaide, Slush Pile, and Elsewhere. Yes, there is a magazine named Elsewhere

MAYBE I'LL WRITE

ACE BOGGESS

A love poem for a memory, with music.

Maybe I'll write you into my life like a song:
lyrics catchy, vulgar, or obtuse;
chorus I'll replay when my heart is in it.

Maybe I'll sing you in bars with barricaded doors
late at night, on stage,
when empty chairs require a conjuring;

hum you on a Thursday in church,
its blank pews hungry for reverberations:
The Cathedral of Many Lonely Souls.

Maybe I'll strum new nearness of you
in simple chords on my guitar
while I grunt along as if channeling the ghost

of someone not dead, someone with a voice
built out of gravel & tobacco juice.
Maybe yes, I'll spin your record counterclockwise,

loose the sinister backmasking,
risking disenchantment, excommunication.
Oh, maybe maybe maybe

I'll write the words down, a letter in notes
to express my longing for an hour, an instant.
I'll send you across radio waves

that travel through space until the gods
of distant silence reply to my melody,
their you-songs as unexpected as my own.

Ace Boggess is author of four books of poetry, most recently I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So (Unsolicited Press, 2018), found at

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B072132X/ref=db_a_def_rwt_bibl_vppi_i1,
and *Ultra Deep Field (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2017)*. His poetry has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *River Styx*, *cream city review*, and *American Literary Review*, among others. He received a fellowship from the *West Virginia Commission on the Arts* and spent five years in a *West Virginia prison*. He lives in *Charleston, West Virginia*.

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