

[The Write Place at the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

[Artists' Gallery](#)

[Indie Bookstores](#)

[Literary Arts Patrons](#)

[Scrapbook of Seven Years](#)

[Archives](#)

[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

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by Lynne Perrella: <http://www.LKPerrella.com>

About this image: *"The Wife' has made an expanded journey since I created her a couple of years ago. This past year, I created an entire exhibit (20 works) based on additional portraits from Chaucer's masterpiece. When I did the first grouping of five portraits, I knew I wanted to continue working and decided that if I applied for a show, that would be a strong motivation. As I went deeper into the individual stories, I was inspired by more and more of the characters. In a strange coincidence, just as I was getting all the work ready to hang, a friend of mine told me about a lecture series that was just about to begin at a local learning center. A Chaucer scholar gave a 12-week series on the Tales; often regaling us with Middle English, etc. It was the perfect conclusion to my journey. Actually, it re-awakened my suspicion that I would eventually do even MORE of the portraits."* —LP

Watch the captivating video below of Perrella's entire Chaucer series.

Video Credits:

Fine Art Series Inspired by *The Canterbury Tales*

Artwork by Lynne Perrella (www.LKPerrella.com)

Photography & Production by B. Docktor (www.BDocktor.com)

Music: "Greensleeves" by Angels of Venice, from the album *Music for Harp, Flute and Cello*, 1994



Lynne Perrella Canterbury Tales

from [B. Docktor](#)

02:52



Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

Featured Stories:

In Flight by Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

Alberta by Michael Tidemann

There She Goes by Karen M. McKinley

Last Visit by Nels Hanson

Roots by L. A. Henriquez

*See section of archived links below the current stories for past selections involving fantasy and fairy tale/archetypal themes

In Flight

by Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

18 July, 20--

Dear S.

~~I am hurt~~

No, I mean, it is me who has hurt you. You say I trespassed into a part of you that is sacred. This makes me a trespasser. Which would make me a law-breaker. But that can't be me. I'm a lawyer. I don't break the law. I don't do what I have done.

But it seems I did...I fell into that gray area between what is legal and what is wrong. It's one of those places that is impossible to legislate.

How did this happen? I've combed the ground a dozen times looking for the clues. Can you guess where I am? I'm here at the airport in Cape Town. Sitting by the CNA where we first met. I can see my own reflection in the glass window. I'm short and I would be balding, except I shave my head clean. My narrow shoulders are becoming more obvious now that my beer boep is expanding over my belt. A typical 39-year-old man. In the 24 days since you stopped talking to me, I've had to step back and take a good look at myself. I don't like what I see. But joining a gym won't fix it.

I know you're still angry. I know that is your right. The end of the last email you sent me, the final goodbye-forever-and-forever:

“When I recover from how much you have deceived me in too many ways, both big and small, I will wish you well. There was something so real between us. I hope one day you will live up to my original opinion of you. I’m sure there’s a diamond in there somewhere. Even though I’m not seeing it right about now, I had a good feeling about it once upon a time. It’s up to you to find it and polish it.”

...

I didn’t plan for any of this. I didn’t anticipate things would go so far. When I saw you hunched down in the CNA, flipping through magazines, I didn’t really think before I spoke. I was just amazed by the way you skimmed through the pages. I didn’t know someone could read so quickly. I thought you were pretending. “Are you actually absorbing anything?” Not really a stellar pick up line. And it wasn’t meant to be!

“This is the information age. One has no choice but to absorb things quickly.” You were sarcastic. I suppose you thought I was trying my luck.

Why did I speak to you in the first place? Was it just because you were sitting a few rows back from me on the flight...our eyes met once, when I stood up to help the gogo into her chair... But for some reason, I noticed you. I didn’t think you would notice me. Aside from the fact that you are ~~too beautiful~~ very attractive, you seemed so deep in your own mind...I don’t know. After we disembarked and collected our bags, it was just pure luck to run into you a few minutes later at the CNA.

If I could delete a moment in time, that would be it, wouldn’t it? Then we might have avoided the whole thing. If I could just rewind to that second and still my tongue, just before...

But I’d already spoken. You’d replied. And I didn’t know what to say... “What do you do with all that information you take in?” You stood up. You were a little taller than me, even though you were wearing flat shoes. “I store it for future use. Ahh, you were on the plane, weren’t you? Nice of you to help the elderly lady.”

“I try to be a gentleman.”

You didn’t exactly smile. One corner of your mouth lifted. “That is a pleasant departure from the norm. At least you try.”

"Pleasant departure from the norm.' I see you like words. You must be some type of...writer?"

Now you smiled and I was dazzled by a lot of teeth and gum, by a smile that seemed like the promise of a rain cloud in the drought-stricken Karoo where you grew up. "I'm a journalist. You?"

"Lawyer. But not a boring one. Here's my business card." I stuck it out so you had no choice but to take it. "Do you have one?"

Your eyes flickered up and down, taking my measure. You didn't want to give it to me, I could tell. Why did you in the end? Politeness?

I spent the day in boring meetings, the corner of your mouth playing over in my mind, your smile full of life-giving rain drops. That evening, I called you from the hotel ~~on the off chance you might be~~ in the hopes that you would be free for dinner.

We dined on that beautiful summer evening! I used to hate Cape Town—so segregated, so stilted. But you leant me your eyes, and your words. The wave-tossed vistas. Imposing Table Mountain sculpted so flat as if a family of giants planned to dine on it. The sky so capricious with its moods. The joy of two oceans meeting—the Atlantic and the Indian. The joy of two strangers meeting, talking into the night, raising our voices above the winds whipping wildly outside like dancing demons. The city lights extinguished at dawn, and still, we were talking, now back at your flat, sipping Rooibus tea. Before the sun came up, it was cool and damp but we'd spun a web of intimacy, fresh and ~~raw~~ new. Yet so warm and secure it felt like a cocoon. ~~Dialogue is the greatest aphrodisiac.~~

Now you accuse me of talking too much. Your words are different now, lethal, like the small, round stones shot from slingshots to kill small, fluttering birds with tiny, fluttering hearts. "Why did you talk to me so much, about me, if all you wanted to do was to f#\$k me? F#\$k me, and then f#\$k me over?"

I hate what's happened. It is terrible that actions like this can define your character. ~~On the face of things,~~ I am the bad guy. But that night, that night, I felt I hadn't talked to anyone in forever. I felt like I was flying high above the giant's dinner table, a bigger, better me, as if I had a right to sit at that table and demand champagne. The world became new again

because of the way your eyes glazed it with better and brighter colours. Colours I had all but forgotten existed.

Ya, I know, I know I “talked too much,” yet I failed to mention that “one essential fact.” And now you don’t want to talk to me anymore. But you said in your final goodbye-forever-and-forever email to me that I should stop saying, “I never meant to,” “I didn’t mean to,” “It was never my intention.” You said: “Take responsibility for your actions. It’s called accountability. You clearly intended to lie your way into my heart and my head, into my bed and my life. You are a Disgrace.”

My hand is already cramping. I never write by hand anymore but my laptop is packed up. Actually using a pen! But I thought you might like that. I am writing by hand because then I can’t delete anything. I can’t cut or paste or rearrange or edit out. That is my crime, isn’t it, that is what you have accused me of doing for...how long was it...nine? No, ten weeks.

I suppose that was your fancy way of saying I’m a liar. I am a liar, né? I understand that holding back the truth is as bad as lying. I understand.

But do you believe me when I tell you that there is Truth and truth, and I never lied to you about my feelings. What I feel for you is truer than the bluest sky. (I am not a poet. I am a lawyer. This is the best I can do.)

I AM GUILTY. I AM SORRY.

But I have already said that, haven’t I? You still won’t talk to me though. I am beginning to wonder if you will ever talk to me again. “But why should I?” I can hear you in my head still. “There is nothing left to talk about.”

But I still have things to tell you. Nothing hot and meaty. Just the cold leftovers from our final conversation. And there’s no place for them to go. We have said our goodbyes. Overtime is over. There was a penalty kickoff. We both lost.

But one thing is that we never played games, me and you. We always spoke with our hearts, our tongues stumbling along behind. “Except for that,” I hear you say. Yes, except for that. But can you understand that though it may be over, it is not finished...at least for me?

The day we met was the first day ever—in nine years—that I forgot to put on my wedding ring. When my wife drove me to the airport that morning,

she didn't notice of course. I didn't notice until I was in the hotel and was on the phone with you to see if we could have dinner.

Please believe me! I know you think I am the lowest type of a Jacob Zuma-style, Zulu male chauvinist bastard, the hackneyed stereotype of a two-timing African man... I know you hate stereotypes and those who give them life... I hang my head in shame. I should never have done what I did, and my mind keeps rewinding back to that first day. I keep trying to find a break in the action, the place where I should have pressed stop.

But I didn't. I let things continue, deepen, fan out, until every inch of me was yours. Every business trip to Cape Town was extended into a weekend. You were my getaway, my sanctuary, my harbor from the wave-tossed sea of life. And yes, you became suspicious when I never invited you home to Jo'burg. I suppose you know why now. I'm not sure my wife would have even noticed if you came and spent the weekend. But I'm not blaming her. We are both at fault.

"How could you drag me down with you into this sordid mess?"

Ya, I shouldn't have involved you in my messy marriage. I was traveling without a map, believe me. I was traveling deep into territory I had never ventured into, places in me, places in you, places I had no right to aspire to. I was living out a dream with you but I was cruel, selfish, wrong. I let you think it could be a reality.

I edited out whole parts of me-in-the-present by talking about my student days, the struggle, the transition. Those heady times when the country was being born, long before I even thought of tying the knot.

I'm not trying to appeal. It's too late for that. It's all in shreds, that something lovely lacing us together. I'm the one who smashed it. You have sent me back to my marriage because you know I don't have the guts to give up the last nine years. I'm supposed to work things out with my wife. I suppose we will see.

I can't ask you to wait and see with me.

The problem with us South Africans is that we have an amnesty culture. You say you're sorry, you're forgiven and it's back to business as usual. And I really mean business. These days a country is like a corporation and so we have to find a way to keep making money. Welcome to Our South

Africa! But I know, part of saying sorry is accepting the consequences. Some things can never be fixed. Not all truth leads to reconciliation in this country of our hearts.

You say I'm a thief. I am guilty of breaking and entering. I broke into your life and stole the worst thing I could have. I stole something you say you didn't know you still had. Your belief that things like this could really happen, that two strangers could meet, and fall in love, and live happily ever after... You are a princess and deserve a fairy tale. But I came along and acted like the kind of toad who could never turn into a prince. Now, the world's become like one of those newspaper stories you write in black and white—gritty, gray, grim...

"You were never going to tell me, were you? It's only because someone told your wife about us and she confronted you. That's when you decide to tell me the truth. Your conscience came too little and too late. Like a common thief, you only felt guilty when you were caught in the act."

You like words, né? You use them well. Yes, I never told you. No, I never thought it through that far. We were just...just. In media res. No yesterday, no tomorrow... Now I'm sort of crying again...

My flight back to Jo'burg is boarding now, the announcement is echoing around this cavernous terminal. I should head to the post office.

I hope that by some kind of magic, you will one day know that it's possible to make the biggest mistake in the truest possible way. ~~It's possible that something, even when it's so wrong, can be so right.~~ I have been unfair. I lied to two people I care about. When I step back and look at myself, I don't like what I see. I can't fix what has happened. I can only do things better in the future.

If it were just you and me, and we were far out at sea, at the place where the two oceans meet, with no history, no present, no circumstances to constrain us...we would have been fine. We could have been amazing.

But here, back on solid land, you won't ever trust me again, will you? You say you have forgiven me. But you can't forget. You won't even talk to me anymore. You're flying as far away from me as you can get.

I betrayed you. That makes me a traitor of your heart. I trespassed into you. That makes me a trespasser into secret, sacred parts of you I never had the right to breach.

I am a lawyer. I didn't break the law. I broke other things, too delicate to survive. You are hurt. I have hurt you.

I am so much more than sorry. I should head to the post office. Except I won't.

I will never send this letter.

Yours always,

R.

~~*P.S. However much you're hurting, please know that I am hurting so much more.*~~

Bio- Melissa Tandiwe Myambo is a Research Associate at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Most recently, she is the recipient of a Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Research Award. Links to Melissa Tandiwe Myambo's other writings can be found on her website:

www.homosumhumani.com

Alberta

by Michael Tidemann

"And furthermore," said the Belgian, "I wouldn't help you pull this wagon even if you were a horse like me instead of an ass."

"Oh, and what was the name of the ass?" asked John.

Henry hooked his thumbs in his vest and gazed straight ahead. "Wilson."

The whole car burst into laughter, including Mable, who held her new baby on her lap. Asleep until their laughter, Alberta started with a cough and

began to cry, and Mable lifted her to her shoulder giving her a sharp, light pat to coax her into silence. “Oh honey, shush, shush. Don’t make a fuss now...” And she sang,

*Hush little baby, don’t say a word
Momma’s gonna buy you a mockingbird
And if that mockingbird won’t sing
Momma’s gonna buy you a diamond ring...*

And just like that, the baby quietly cooed to the lyrics.

“Oh my goodness, what a good baby,” said Lydia, John’s wife, an elegant brunette. It took only a glance to see she and John were of the same station as Henry and Mable—comfortable middle class, successful merchants or landed gentry who were able to afford such things as a coach car from Hazleton to Bismarck where they were all attending Governor Hanna’s daughter’s wedding—engraved invitation no less. And Mable wouldn’t have dreamt of leaving Alberta with their servant girl just because the daft thing thought the baby had the croup and a bit of a fever. Such an idiot, that servant girl. Just barely out of girlhood herself—seventeen, for mercy’s sake. She wondered what Henry had in his head when he hired her.

As her mind scavenged for explanations, her eyes narrowed, searing a path toward Henry sitting there now, thumbs in his vest, standing out like a plump tom turkey. Errant images arose—Henry—the servant girl—Henry and the servant girl. No, how ridiculous. She was a foreigner, Irish brogue as thick as prairie sod—so thick a plow couldn’t bust through it. Each time she thought of the girl, there were more and more reasons to merit her disapproval, like a garden infested with weeds she couldn’t tear out fast enough before more sprouted up to take their place.

“And what’s her name again?” asked Lydia, dark, beautiful, elegant.

Mable instantly composed herself. She knew what was expected of a woman of her position; her dark thoughts could be snapped shut at a moment’s notice in a box only she had the key to. It was a practiced art. With a demure glance toward her greatest tangible accomplishment, she turned aside the child’s wispy, golden locks, so much like her own. “Alberta.”

“Alberta,” repeated Lydia. “As in Canada.”

“As in Canada,” confirmed Mable with a prim sort of pride.

The clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack of the train on the track lulled her half-asleep—sleep perturbed by images of *her*.

“Erin!” she’d called to her just that morning.

“Yes, Mrs. Olson,” said the girl, scurrying to her presence, cheeks blanched white so her freckles and fire-red hair blazed as her green eyes lifted like sea turtles swept up in the tide.

“Is this your *novel*?” she asked, disdain in the last word.

“Yes’m.” Erin’s eyes fell upon the book, then lifted like heavy stones.

“May I ask where you got it?”

“Me grandmum, Mrs. Olson. She give it to me as I boarded at Belfast.”

Mable turned the book over in her hand disdainfully. “And you’ve actually been *reading* it, I suppose?”

Erin cowered. “Yes’m.”

“Well I’ve been reading it too. It’s tawdry and common. Is that what you hope to be? Tawdry and common?”

“No’m.”

“Then dispose of it.” Mable handed her the book with a sneer. “You should be reading the great books—Shakespeare and Pope, Addison and Steele. Certainly not this common Irishman Joyce.”

“Yes’m,” said Erin, eyes so heavy she couldn’t lift them from the floor.

“And Erin? Erin! Look at me.”

“Yes’m?” she said, in tears.

“Get rid of that necklace too. It’s gaudy and garish.”

“But ma’am, that’s a gift from my grandmum too.” She touched it as though it were the center of her heart.

“Well at least have the common decency to hide it—or to not wear it in my presence.”

“Yes’m.”

“And Erin?”

“Yes’m?”

“Dispose of that book. I’ll not have such filth in a Christian home.”

“Yes’m.”

She never saw the book again—though she knew the girl would never have thrown it away as she’d ordered. That was all right though, she supposed. At least the girl was afraid of her. And that was all that mattered.

Clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack.

Henry she’d met at a church social at New Leipzig. Oh, he was such a handsome one, that Henry, riding up in a spotless black carriage and matching black geldings. He hung up the reins and stepped off the carriage like a prince, a person used to being admired. Even at twenty, his hair had started to whiten, like the snowy crest of a young king. Mable learned from the girls’ gossip that he already had his own meat market in Hazleton with four men working under him—German butchers, no less. And weren’t they the best? Henry would bring in a steer or hog and they would slit its throat, saving the blood, then they would slaughter the animal. He chose only the finest steers and from those he would select the choicest cuts and pack them in ice and sawdust and ship them to the governor and other gentlemen in state government in Bismarck. The best cuts from the hogs went there too, and the rest the Germans made into hot, spicy sausage that bit back when you sank your teeth into it. *That Henry, he makes the best sausage this side of Heidelberg*, everyone said. *That Henry, he’s the richest butcher this side of Dresden*, they said too, especially the girls.

Was it any wonder then that as Henry looked past the covey of corseted femininity and settled his sky-blue eyes on her that she fell in love? And he with her?

Clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack.

Alberta fussed and as she didn't wish to betray any feelings of intolerance in polite company, Mable took her leave of the others and went to their coach, shunning the snores of those in the berths she passed. Night slid past through the coach window now, twinkling stars growing from the endless prairie. She found solace in the quiet, peace in the solitude. Alberta, finally silent in her arms, regained the familiar appeal of a doll made out of porcelain, a thing to be admired. Mable lay down beside her and coiled her body possessively around the fair child in motherly sleep.

Clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack.

She wished she could have interviewed the servant girl first but Henry insisted it was hard to find anyone. *But a foreigner?* she had insisted. *We were foreigners two generations ago*, he reminded her. It was the only argument they'd ever had, and it was a bad one. When Henry rolled up the dusty drive at Potato Butte later that day, the Irish girl's hair flying in the wind like the horse's mane, laughter like water over boulders as they dodged prairie dog mounds, Mable fumed. So *this* was the person who was going to look after her only child? Cook and clean, chop and haul in wood and coal and haul out the ashes? She hadn't even stepped off the carriage when Sigfred, their hired man, hurried to extend his hand to help her down. Then, incredibly, Henry sent him to milk the cows so he could help her down himself.

The girl came down from the carriage and into Henry's arms as naturally as life itself, laughing, green eyes lighting him up like a lighthouse on an errant ship at sea. The first thing Mable did was make her bring in coal, not giving her time to change into her work clothes so her spotless white dress she had bought just to meet her new mistress was forever ruined with coal dust.

She knew the girl dallied with Sigfred. She just knew it the way she would offer to go help him with the milking and come back into the farmhouse, lust written in her lilting voice, sated lust in her eyes. Then, as she served their supper, Sigfred's eyes would rove her body like a map of places he'd already traveled.

Clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack.

And Henry. What suspicions were there too. They'd hosted a house party on New Year's Eve and all the neighbors were there—for four miles in every

direction at least—packing their home so some had to stand in the foyer and gab as the Victrola played in the parlor as the couples danced. Alberta was but two months old then, so Mable was still tired from carrying her. Thus, she didn't mind when Henry danced just the first two dances with her before she sat down to rest. But did he have to dance *every* dance with the servant girl after that? Well that's what he did, squiring her around the parlor, strutting like a proud peacock beside her as though *she* were his wife.

She swore could see it in the eyes of her guests as well. They would look at Henry and the servant girl then back at her then back at them. After a time they no longer looked at her at all, letting the scene of Henry and Erin draw their gaze like an audience before a stage. To her horror, they even went up to her and asked who she was and began calling her by her first name. Erin this and Erin that. *What do you think of this, Erin? Do you have a beau? No? Well you should meet our son. He's an attorney in Bismarck. Argued a case before the state supreme court, even. Do you think you'd like to meet him? Good. He'll be here next weekend. We'll introduce him.*

With no education, no family or connections, her only apparent asset her vulgar auburn-tressed, emerald-eyed appearance, Erin, in one evening, flew up flights of the social staircase it had taken Mable's family a number of generations and ruthless sacrifices to climb. Everyone in the house that New Year's Eve night loved her, worshipped her. And oh, how Mable hated her.

Clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack.

And *that's* why Mabel decided to take her baby on this wedding trip. Despite the servant girl's protestations that Alberta had a croup and a bit of a fever. After all, it was June and the weather was perfect—neither particularly cold nor hot by day with few, if any, mosquitoes. It was ideal weather to introduce an eight-month-old baby of society, to parade her amongst the right social circles, to see and be seen in the city—though Bismarck was hardly a city. But it was the capital and that was something, wasn't it?

Erin had cried when they left. She'd already grown attached to Alberta, rocking her in the chair beside the fireplace, telling her superstitious peasant folklore about fairies and children, putting protective charms and religious idols around the child...cooing to her like a silly loon, lifting the

blanket from her face, playing peek-a-boo so the baby laughed. Mable could never make her laugh and she was her mother. So why should she allow a mere servant girl to do that? Or determine whether her daughter would go on this trip? Following Erin's insistence that Alberta was unwell for travel and the girl's assertion about a dream that "put the heart crossways in me about it," she jerked the baby away from Erin's arms. Both Erin and Alberta cried, and Mable had all she could do not to laugh.

They had boarded at Hazelton at sunset on the longest day of the year, the sun burning the western buttes to glowing coals. As night descended, washing the landscape in shades of violet and mauve, Erin stood there in tears beside Sigfred, holding up her hand to Alberta who waved back, laughing, then cried as her mother boarded with her onto the train.

The porter carried their steamer trunk to their coach and they went to the dining car where they ordered oysters, quail with wild rice, and a magnum of Lafitte-Rothschild.

"Do you really think we should, Henry?" she asked, looking at the massive, expensive bottle.

"Of course. After all, don't I have something to celebrate—a big farm, a successful business, and the most beautiful wife and child between the Red River and the Rockies?"

Mable smiled as she watched through the window as Sigfred helped the servant girl into the carriage—she refused to even think of her by her first name. *Servant girl*. That's all she was and that was all she would ever be. In the three days they would be gone, she secretly hoped Sigfred would get the girl in trouble and she would be able to later say, *See what happens when I leave you two together alone for a weekend? Henry should have known better than to hire an Irish girl.*

Clackity clack, clackity clack, clackity clack.

She looked at the stars now, so bright they shone like white diamonds on velvet. Alberta quiet beside her, she got up and went to the seat in front of the window and sat to gaze at the huge, orange full moon breaking over the prairie so she could pick out every landmark on the horizon. Potato Butte, far to the southeast, nestling their farm in its slope, and Little Heart Butte, pointed like a finger on the otherwise flat prairie.

She rested her chin on her hand, wondering about the life she had earned. She had done well, hadn't she? After all, she had married a successful man—wealthy, in many people's eyes. They had the farm and the big, new house and the meat market in Hazelton. And Henry was the admiration of every girl who saw him. So she should be satisfied, shouldn't she? Wasn't wealth, having a handsome husband and child, being both envied and admired, the true measure of success? Wasn't this what every woman wanted to achieve? And Alberta was her certificate of proof of all this—Henry's posterity and therefore, her validation, and power over him. No servant girl would ever take what she'd legitimately attained. She wasn't just a wife to be displaced; she'd done what every married woman is told to do—made herself a mother.

Such were her thoughts as she went to Alberta and kissed her cool forehead, covering her up so she wouldn't catch chill; Mable preferred to sleep in cool night air and left the window slightly ajar. "Such a good baby, so quiet. My darling doll." She smiled at the child that reflected her beauty as well as her triumph in marriage and realized it was the proudest moment of her life. Pleased, she left to go to the club car and enjoy herself with the others.

Smoke and jokes and laughter met her, Henry and John fairly rollicking as Lydia cast a smile at her. Mable sat beside Henry and touched his shoulder as a firm reminder, reining him in.

"So how are your stocks doing, Henry?" John said, casting a knowing eye at him.

Henry smiled and sipped his brandy. "I think they might be going all right."

"Let's see now—Standard Oil, Bethlehem Steele, Ford Motor...what else do you have now?"

"Oh..." Henry pondered with false modesty. "I thought I'd pick up a few more automobile stocks, you know—Chevrolet, Packard, Studebaker..."

"But Henry—do you think they'll ever replace the horse?"

Henry leaned forward with knowing intensity. "Mark my word here today. In forty years the horse will have no more value than a pet dog. It will be merely a pleasure animal. Oh, he may have some utility on a ranch, cutting cattle and riding fence and that sort of thing. But draft horses will be no more."

“Oh, Henry,” John scoffed dismissingly. “And with what do you envision they will replace horses in this fantasy world?”

Henry sat back with his cigar and blew smoke rings as though each framed a picture of the future. “I see great, mammoth machines picking and harvesting wheat and corn. Someday I even envision one machine doing it all—picking and shelling so all it has to do is dump it into a wagon that will take it to market.”

“Oh, oh...” John laughed uproariously, holding his hand over Henry’s glass. “No more brandy for him. He’s had all he can handle.”

“Not only that. I see farm equipment manufacturers becoming huge concerns. McCormick-Deering and the others. So I’m going to invest everything in them. And I see huge barges coming up the Mississippi, laden with corn and wheat and sugar beets taken by the thousands of ton to places like London and Paris. And I see war on the horizon.” Henry’s eyes glimmered through cigar smoke like a seer. “Europe maybe.” He faced John and nodded soberly, despite the brandy. “So just yesterday I bought ten thousand shares in the Hormel company that’s just started to package beef and pork in tins. An army can’t march on an empty stomach, you know.”

“Oh, Henry, Henry.” John mused. “I hope you don’t lose it all in these misbegotten ventures.”

“Not at all,” said Henry meditatively. “Not at all.” He peered straight ahead at the future through a window visible only to him—and him alone.

Having discovered little amusement, she found herself weary and in search of a reason to be excused. “I’ll go check on Alberta,” said Mable.

“You go, dear,” said Henry, nestling a kiss against her cheek.

Their talk continued as the train rolled on, Bismarck now breaking upon the horizon, glowing gas and electric lights dotting the prairie. Beyond was the Missouri River then Mandan and then the great prairie began—wheat fields and ranches stretching all the way to the great, blue, ice-spiked Rockies.

Henry mused at the infinitude of it all. If he could see great cities breaking out upon the prairie, he could also see a downside. Easterners—foreigners, even, as Mable called them—right now were breaking prairie sod they had no business breaking up out west of the Missouri. Honyockers, they called them. Tenderfeet. Greenhorns. Men who could sit a horse no more than a man could walk on the moon—oh, that would happen someday too, but certainly not tomorrow. But breaking up prairie sod was a mistake he could never broach. While rains were certainly good now, they were merely cyclical. Someday those miles upon miles of gumbo out toward the Badlands would dry up and be picked up by the wind and carried all the way to New York and into the Atlantic. Ranching, that's what the western prairies were meant for. The best thing they could have done was leave the buffalo on them and let the Indians have it all.

A white image entered the car, Mable in her nightgown holding the baby, wonder and horror on her face.

“Mable, for God's sake. What are you doing here in your night dress? This is a public car, don't you know that?”

“Henry,” she whispered, all she could manage in the vast gulf between them, the child in her arms silent and cold.

*Come away, O, human child!
To the woods and waters wild
With a fairy hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than
you can understand...* —“The Stolen Child” by W. B. Yeats

Bio- Michael Tidemann's fiction has appeared in thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org, *Struggle*, *Black Hills Monthly Magazine*, and *Black Hills Monthly*; nonfiction has appeared in *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Overdrive*, *Snowmobile*, the *Des Moines Register*, *Western Business*, *Writer's Journal*, *Truckers' News*, and *Truckers USA*. His novel, *Doomsday*, which is about how terrorists destroy the Internet and destroy civilization, is available on Amazon Kindle as is his short story collection, *The Elk and other stories*, several of which appeared previously in thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org. *The Elk* will also soon be available in print on createspace. His author page is amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann.

There She Goes

by Karen M. McKinley

Mementos of all types are scattered about the floor: pictures of the grandkids, bits and baubles of old costume jewelry, a dried rose corsage from a high school prom fifty years ago. There's even a cracked plaster hand print of Shelley from when she was in kindergarten almost thirty years ago. I can't believe Mom kept that. I broke it in 1986 during the famous checkers championship incident. Shelley didn't speak to me for a whole day because of it. Poor little thing. She was heartbroken when it hit the floor and splintered into seven different pieces. Mom had to glue it together on the spot to appease her and calm her sobbing.

As I look at the menagerie of memories around me, I can hardly believe that Mom's gone—and it happened so fast. As someone suffering from lupus, Mom had learned to take the utmost care of her health, always checking with our family doctor over the slightest infection, just in case. And then three weeks ago she'd gotten that scrape on her knee while at her Thursday afternoon pottery class. It'd brought about the most minor of infections. *Something of no great importance*, Mom had assured when starting on the leftover antibiotics from the last time. *Don't you worry*, she said. Only two weeks later, Mom was in the hospital and they were telling us that there was something wrong with her heart and that she needed to have surgery. It only spiraled downward from there, with a shocking swiftness I am still trying to process.

I wipe the tears from my eyes for what feels like the millionth time in the last three days. I don't seem to be able to stop them. Shelley is sitting on the floor across from me and she has the same stunned expression on her face that I imagine I must have. We've spent the last two hours taking a trip down memory lane, sorting through Mom's things.

There's so much.

Dad's in the living room, staring at the television. *Perry Mason* is on. He's seen the episode before, a dozen times in fact. The sad reality of Alzheimer's though is that he doesn't realize it. He's not real bad off. I mean, he still knows who we are. But he's in that lost-the-coherency-of-the-moment phase where he can't function well anymore. He'll forget that he's put a roast in the oven and will leave it there until the kitchen starts to get a little smoky, or forgets to take Minnie out for a walk. Mom always did that. He can't drive on his own anymore.

Honestly, it's the thought that keeps creeping into my head as Shelley and I sit here looking at Mom's stuff. It's what has kept me awake late into the night long after my husband has fallen into a deep sleep beside me for the last three days.

Who's going to take care of Dad now?

"Look Renee, it's us at the zoo." Shelley manages a smile and holds up a shot of the two of us when we were fourteen and six respectively, at the Lincoln Park Zoo, standing in front of the Reptile House. I have a stuffed animal snake in my hands and Shelley is giggling. Her hair is in pigtails that I did up that morning when she begged me to make her look like Cindy from *The Brady Bunch*.

"Remember how Dad went to that deli and got us all hot pastrami sandwiches and matzo balls for the picnic?" I ask.

"Yeah, and Mom fell asleep on the blanket after we ate while he read *Bridge to Tarabithia* to us."

Dad.

"Shelley." I hesitate to even begin this conversation but I know it must be had—and soon, before Shelley goes off gallivanting around the globe again. "What are you going to do afterward? I mean, when the funeral is over and everything."

Shelley's red rimmed eyes meet mine. I know she's clueless by the blank expression on her face. She hasn't even thought about the ramifications of Mom's passing yet. Or rather, she has, but hasn't given a thought as to her possible responsibility in the matter.

"I don't know. I was thinking of heading out to see Bianca, you know maybe crash at her place for a bit until I can find a new job."

Bianca is a friend of hers who lives in Dublin. I sigh heavily. How can she afford a plane ticket to Ireland when she's out of work? In Shelley's whirlwind life packed full of adventure this is not an unusual line of thinking. At thirty-five, she's spent more time traveling and working in different locales than the average flight attendant. Bartender, costumer, spa attendant—you name it, she's done it. Never a penny in the bank, my sister, but she's led quite the life.

I will be honest. There are times when I envy her. Her life is exciting. Not everybody can exist on a month to month basis without knowing how long a 'paying gig' is going to last. She does it with style. She has friends everywhere from Boston to Dubai and always manages to have fun. She's sung "God Save the Queen" in a pub on Bond Street at two a.m., made kimono wedding gowns in Kyoto, and barfed on royalty in Norway. She collects life experiences the way I collected stamps when I was a kid, with passion and zeal.

There are also times when her life really pisses me off. She is incredibly irresponsible. She says that she'd love to have kids someday but never stays with a boyfriend longer than it takes to get sick of living in one city. She overdrew her bank account earlier this year (I know because she emailed me from the internet café in Moscow asking for a few rubles to get by on until the next payday). One time she had to spend the night on a park bench somewhere in Copenhagen because her friend the stripper, locked her out of their apartment while she was "entertaining" that night. It didn't faze Shelley but I was scared to death when she told me. God. She could have been molested—or killed.

"You have money for a plane ticket?" I ask as I begin to put the photos back into the box. I am making a list for Dad that explains where everything is in the house, so that when he forgets all he has to do is look on the refrigerator and see. I draw a line from 'family photos' to the words 'hall closet' next.

She shrugs, her long red hair falling gently over her shoulders. We inherited the auburn locks from Mom. Only I have the freckles. "I have that return from American Airlines that was never used. I can change it for the fee."

"And Bianca is going to feed you?" I didn't mean it to come out with such attitude. Shelley raises her eyebrows in surprise.

"Feed me? I don't think it will be a problem. Geez, I don't eat that much. Besides, she hates cooking. If I promise to cook for her while I'm there it'll be a fair tradeoff. There are plenty of odd jobs in the city. I can pick one up easily. Don't worry," she assures me.

Before I realize it the words come tumbling out of my mouth in a rush, like Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls—one of a million places that I have never visited. "Shelley, have you even stopped to think about what's going to happen next for Dad? In case you haven't noticed, the Alzheimer's has

progressed a bit since the last time you were here. He can't take care of himself. Mom kept an eye on him. She was the one who did the grocery shopping, made the trips to the bank, reminded him to take his glaucoma pills. Who do you think is going to do that now?"

Ah, there it is. The look of recognition. As awareness seeps into her brain, the truth of what she assumes is laid bare between us.

"Renee, I—"

"You what? Figured that I would be the one to do it? Ever responsible Renee? Level-headed, married with 2.5 kids Renee?"

"It's just—" she sputters. "Renee, I wouldn't even begin to know how to take care of him. You're so good with the kids, not that he's a kid, but I can barely take care of myself let alone another person. I can't even take care of a house plant."

"You can say that again," I mutter under my breath. Shelley hears me nonetheless.

Now she's angry. "What is that supposed to mean?"

I know that I've opened up a can of worms, but I don't care. My grief over my mother is overwhelming and future plans on my end feel as if they are about to evaporate before my eyes.

It's not fair.

"It means that maybe it's time for you to start thinking about someone besides yourself for once. To take into consideration family obligation and think about shrugging off this moniker of *wild child* that you persist in wearing. You are thirty-five and out of work with nowhere stable to live. How about moving in with Dad so that you can help take care of him? I mean, you've been gone for so long. You've missed so much. And with the Alzheimer's—" It pains me to say it. "You know it won't be much longer before who we are slips through his fingertips. Gather up memories while you can, Shelley. He needs you."

The silence between us is heavy as Shelley digests what I am saying. It makes logical sense, but it goes against the grain for her. I am the one who's always walked the straight line, lived the traditional life. Been there for

everyone. I graduated college a semester early with my newly minted degree in journalism, got hired on at the *Tribune* full-time two months out, married at twenty-two, then kids, the dog, a backyard pool, the swing set, with barbecues envied and attended by all of the neighbors. Five years ago I was awarded the American Journalist's Award for my exposé on the poor quality of water in Chicago's public drinking fountains. Because of me, ten-year-olds are no longer consuming water tainted with hormones and anti-depressants.

Shelley missed the awards banquet. She was doing summer stock in England.

It's been me to go over to the house on weekends to help Mom and Dad with repairs that can't be handled by them, and me that shuttled the dog to the vet when they were both down with the flu last Memorial weekend. And it was me that sat with Dad at Mom's bedside when she was no longer coherent, whispering my goodbyes to her and telling her what a great mom she'd been, while Shelley sat on a ten hour flight back from Bulgaria—only to get here too late.

I hate myself for thinking that. I know she got here as soon as she possibly could. Yet in my head, it's representative of the typical way of it is between us.

I've worn the mantle of responsibility for so long it's left an indelible mark on my shoulders, while Shelley has managed to skirt not only adult accountability but the pain of always being present. I know that she loves Dad. It's not a question of love. It's just—she doesn't feel equipped to take on the role of caregiver and her personality, I fear, will demand that she not even try.

"You're laying this on me now? The day before Mom's funeral?" she exclaims. "Since when has my lifestyle been the subject of debate? Mom and Dad have never complained about it. Not once in the past fifteen years has a letter ever fallen into my hands from them saying anything about it being difficult without me or asking why I don't still live in Chicago. You know why I moved. What is this?"

Jeremy and I have raised our kids. Both of them are in college now. He and I are officially empty nesters, and the plan (hatched ten months ago after sending Patricia off to Michigan State) was to finally begin traveling

ourselves. Tomorrow, *tomorrow* we were supposed to put the money down for the rental in San Gimignano. We were going to stay in Tuscany for three whole months.

My voice is low as I answer. “I was about to embark on my own adventure and if you don’t stay, it won’t be possible. Since you were twenty and lit out of here for Europe, you’ve made a life out of living serendipity style. All I want is a taste of that. It’s my turn, Shelley.”

I tell her about the Italian villa, plans for tomato picking, and bike riding in the countryside. My anger subsides and is replaced by a self-led pity parade in which I am the Grand Marshal. Twenty years of traditional life have been good to me but I’ve realized as of late that money in the bank, a well-manicured lawn, and bacon and egg Sundays are not enough in the course of one’s existence.

“So basically this has less to do with Dad than it does with your own personal agenda,” Shelley pronounces when I’m finished.

Now I really lose it. What happens next is a disintegration from sibling argument to all out critique of one another's lifestyle choices. Accusations are flung from one side of the court to the other. Outside, it is a beautiful sunny day. A neighbor is mowing the lawn and the smell of freshly cut grass burns my nose through the open window. Inside, a storm of pent up emotion that I didn’t even know I had, rages.

The scene ends the way all sister to sister fights do; two red-headed girls having a shouting match (minus the hair pulling of our youth), followed closely by slamming doors and a retreat into separate corners to sulk—or in this case, to let the tears flow. I go directly into Mom’s bathroom while Shelley stalks out of the bedroom, slams the front door to the house, and presumably heads for the garage to have a smoke.

Twenty minutes pass before I can collect myself enough to be rational towards another human being. I wipe my eyes, dab a little refresher lip balm on, and consider the woman facing me in the mirror. Forty-three, tall and lanky, with just a touch of gray at the temples, smile lines where there ought to be, and a tiny scar on my left collarbone from when I fell out of a tree at the age of sixteen. Shelley had dared me to climb up farther than usual and, well, who was I to back down from an eight-year-old?

Oh God, I think suddenly. Maybe I really am being selfish. Shelley is right. Mom and Dad have never fussed about her travels nor have they ever fretted about how she conducts her life. Except for the Moscow incident, she's never once asked for monetary bailout. And I know for a fact that her roaming from place to place makes her happy, more than being married with a swing set and a big dog ever would.

My anger subsides and the notion of compromise begins to take shape in my mind. Maybe if she can just stay long enough to give Jeremy and I our time in Italy, to really be able to experience for ourselves what it's like to travel throughout the summer. Or maybe even for a year. Again, I sigh. I don't want to miss out on time with Dad either.

I quietly wander out of the bedroom area, on down the hall toward the living room. When I hear Dad's and Shelley's voices, I stop for a second. Acting the spy, from around the corner I can see them sitting on the sofa together with the card table in front of them. Shelley is helping him finish a puzzle our mom started weeks ago that's just been sitting there, abandoned, because no one has had the heart to pull apart the portion that she finished.

Shelley is laughing a little and Dad is gazing up into her face as she tries desperately to match another piece. The picture it will form at the end is an entire plate of tiny candy canes, so the amount of red and white amoebas lying in front of them is staggering. Dad has an expression of unreserved trust on his face that she will be able to finish it that is almost childlike in nature. At the same time as it breaks my heart to see that kind of vulnerability in his eyes, what gets me is the way she relates to him. I'm sure she doesn't even realize that she's doing it, but she is cheering him up the day before what will surely be one of the worst days of his life.

That's when I inherently know that whatever happens from here on out, this is and always will be the very essence of my sister, her true self and her absolute strength as a human being. My sister who, despite her Mad Hatter habits, will always be part of the glue that holds this family together no matter where she roams. As she goes on snapping puzzle pieces into place and raising her arms in the air in the sign for 'Touchdown!' at each success, I think about our mom and cry some more. I cry for all of the birthdays and 4th of Julys and Thanksgivings for which she will be absent. I cry for the fact that she won't see Patricia graduate or make my father's favorite lasagna dish anymore, and that the sweater I was knitting to give her on her

birthday this year is no longer needed. There is a hole in my heart the size of Delaware. But somewhere deep in my heart I also give thanks for Shelley and her reappearance in my life, however extraordinary the circumstances. She is our autumn child, our respite from the realities of life, the piece of the puzzle that inextricably fits despite her incongruent ways.

Bio- Karen M. McKinley holds a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing from Columbia College and lives in Chicago, where she is currently working on her first YA novel. Previously, she has been published in *Hair Trigger* #37, *Goreyesque*, and *Remarkable Doorways*, and was a featured writer for the online steampunk mag *The Aether Chronicle*. She is a lover of fashion and costuming and cannot resist a good cup of dark roast—especially after midnight.

My Last Visit

by Nels Hanson

Dear Friend,

When I conveyed to you last month by post the good news that our beloved Edward for the time being remained safe and secure, save for some bearable pain from the old wound, and his mind sometimes straying painfully to sad events long past, I confess I withheld certain disturbing details, to spare you and myself unneeded upset and confusion.

As I wrote you, Edward looked generally tolerable—to be sure, his hair was whiter, his strong face pale as frost, and when he became animated the scar at his brow appeared to redden and become more prominent, but all in all he seemed at the time in no present danger.

It was what he said, and his changed manner—and certain ensuing occurrences—that I found particularly unsettling.

The visit began satisfactorily enough, Edward assuring me that he had never felt better in his life, insisting that I join him in a dram of Kentucky bourbon to celebrate my presence at his bedside, the reunion he had requested two days before by paid courier.

I asked if he were permitted strong spirits, as I wondered if his loyal and watchful niece might be listening at his closed bedroom door.

“It’s in my table,” he said. “Two glasses, for two old bosom friends.”

I retrieved the bottle and then, Edward, raising his glass with a steady hand, so the brown liquor shown golden in the autumn sun through the window, toasted “all our dear fellows of Company B, veterans of the Second Manassas and Fredericksburg, Cold Harbor and cruel Petersburg, to those that by the grace of God survived, and to those many who have fallen and are about to fall, but will remain forever alive in memory.”

At Edward’s suggestion, we agreed the indelible scenes of battle would remain with us always, to the hour of our deaths, that indeed those chaotic and violent engagements often returned to us in troubled sleep, Edward adding that at the end such thoughts had visited our misled but brave and tenacious adversaries, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

“On their deathbeds, in their final deliriums, both returned to the field of battle, calling urgently on General A. P. Hill to reinforce them.”

Then, on a more personal note, Edward related—and this is my cardinal point—that very lately, perhaps as the result of the still remaining pistol ball above his right eye, something had “changed inside his head.”

Once again I heard the sharp report that early evening at the bridge, the shot fired by Jeb Stuart himself, after our earlier encounter with Mosby, the Gray Ghost. I saw the red flash from his muzzle and then Edward falling without a cry, before together you and I lifted him and carried him to the rear.

“The surgeon saved your life, your eye, but a steadier, more sober hand might have removed the ball,” I said.

Strangely, Edward replied that the recent alterations in his awareness had been for the most part “good,” though he acknowledged that at their onset the “symptoms” had made him fear for his mental integrity.

For a moment, I had to look away from our comrade stretched out on the bed’s starched white sheet, as if already he lay upon his waiting shroud.

I noticed again that his lodgings were immaculate, well-kept by his niece, Maddy Osborne, who had greeted me at the front door of the modest dwelling and led me to the sick room. The bright morning October light

illuminated the neat chamber, perhaps preparing it for his departure, and I steeled myself against my future sorrow.

“Dear Henry?”

Edward motioned with a thin hand toward the night table, I thought to ask for another whiskey, but when I reached for the drawer he shook his head. Instead, he was pointing toward the lamp.

“Is it your eye?” I asked. “Do you feel a pressure and dimming from the round?”

“No,” Edward answered, in a stronger, more vigorous voice. “We’ll require the oil lamp, to light the dark.”

I stared closely at the face we both know so well, at the crimson bar that seemed suddenly redder and more pronounced above his white brow, the place where Jeb Stuart had marked him forever.

“Can you see, old friend?” I asked, staring into his gray eyes that shone with an inner light, hardly returning my look of concern.

“Perfectly,” he answered, “for the moment.”

He smiled, waiting patiently, until I set the match to the wick and the lamp burned dimly in the sunlit room.

“Thank you, Henry. That will be better.”

He gazed out the window, just as the air turned dark, and I saw a large, solitary thunderhead obscure the sun above the mountain, casting shadow across the brilliant fall woods and cornfields and the room so warmly illuminated only seconds before.

“It frightened me,” Edward said, “at first. Now I find these events reassuring.”

His pallid face lit up again, but the healed wound shown nearly scarlet as fresh blood, so I recalled once more that chill dusk at the bridge. I saw again Stuart with the ostrich feather in his hat, his red-lined cape with yellow sash. On the black horse he raised the silver pistol and fired, brave

Stuart unaware that tomorrow he would meet his final fate at Yellow Tavern.

“Ah, what a delightful song! A Baltimore Oriole, if I’m not mistaken.”

You could have heard the proverbial pin drop in the closed bedroom that was silent as any empty church or the grave.

Then he asked for another jigger, “to celebrate,” he said.

“Your niece allows you the occasional toddy?” I asked. “For the pain?”

He has been drinking previous to my arrival, I thought, to summon his courage, to receive a fellow soldier come to visit a last time.

Or he is imbibing steadily, each day, soon after sunup, to fight off his discomfort and his fear at the darkening cloud advancing toward him.

“Yes,” he said, “but for better understanding, and my heart.”

I searched his unveined face, again his clear eyes, for the telltale signs of the tippler.

I discovered none and poured him another ounce, the same instant that I saw a quick flutter of orange and black.

A small bird, it was an oriole, had landed on his windowsill.

With a shiver, I remembered that a bird, like a stopped clock, is often the herald of one’s imminent demise.

Its dark eyes peered in, from just beyond the pane.

Then its slender beak opened and it began a long and complex aria of birdsong, limpid as pure spring water and as sweet. The strings of notes filling the room were worthy of the piece by Mozart that we so enjoyed, when the famous lady from the opera visited our camp at Antietam, that afternoon before the battle.

“There you are,” Edward beamed. “Right on time.”

As you know, nature sometimes attends the departure of a noble spirit. Still, I was a bit taken aback by the coincidence of the cloud, and now the oriole, and drained my glass.

“Have another, Henry, for old time’s sake,” Edward urged with good cheer. “When I have a drop, I imagine our old friend General Grant can taste it and slake his thirst in the other world.”

My eye strayed from Edward’s smiling countenance—how brave he seemed, always so much braver than I!—to the framed photograph above his headboard. Now I half expected the image of our trusted but sometimes sodden commander to wink an eye or grin in thanks.

I turned to Edward and noticed—from the excitement of our meeting, or the working of the strong whiskey?—the ancient injury grown redder, darker, a vivid crimson banner like a rebel battle flag across his forehead.

“The wound,” I said, “does it still pain you?”

“Oh no,” he said. “I sense its presence, like an old friend, like a lucky throw at nine pins. Remember Rip Van Winkle, joining Henry Hudson and his crew from the Half Moon? Each struck pin occasioned thunder.”

Just then, I swear on all we hold sacred, a large chalk half moon, like a face partly veiled, like the waiting face of death itself, cleared the mountain where the black cloud still obscured the sun.

There was a firm knock at the door, certain as the knock of the Grim Reaper, and Maddy entered with Edward’s early lunch, to help with his spoon and napkin.

It was then I quickly stood and bending to the bed, I told Edward that I must go, to leave him to his repast, and firmly we clasped hands.

“Goodbye, dear Henry. God forever bless you.”

“And you,” I said.

“No,” Edward said, “God bless you!”

I took his repeated fond words as a last farewell, to a brother-in-arms he would not meet again this side of heaven. I admit I was eager to leave him

now, and when I rode off for more than a mile I wept like a child, before I urged the horse into a gallop to escape the unexpected lightning and heavy rain.

Afterward, as you can well imagine, our visit lingered in my mind, but I could not bring myself to express to you my concern in my last missive.

The pain was too sharp, as if it were my own passing and not Edward's that I understood was fast approaching. It was as though my undefiled brow bore the accursed bullet.

Each hour, I expected a note from his mourning niece, informing me that the gallant solider, still bearing the lead ball and its scar from fifty years before, had left this Earth, to meet again his Maker—and perhaps his un-maker, Jeb Stuart, these many years a true "gray ghost," at long last as friends...

As the days passed, no letter came.

Slowly Edward's white face, the ruby, changing mark above his eye, the strange cloud, the singing oriole, the bloodless half moon, the steady rain that washed away my stricken tears, began to fade from immediate memory, such as once-bright, vivid things falling and then disappearing into deeper water—

Until this Sunday morning, when I was seized with a gripping agony deep inside my chest and heard myself cry out to Edward and to you, that I feared I had received a mortal wound from the enemy's volley, perhaps from the pistol of Mosby...

Alas, the doctor informs me I have but a day or even hours to live. Surely Edward knew that it was I, not he, who would soon "cross the river to rest in the shade of the trees," so he wished to bid me an especial heartfelt toast and goodbye, under the guise of his own near ending.

Perhaps the lovely oriole will return to sing again my threnody.

Yours forever, in abiding affection, honor and truth,

Henry

(These spoken words were written down by his daughter, Mrs. Emma Browning)

Bio- Nels Hanson grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, and 2014. Poems appeared in *Word Riot*, *Oklahoma Review*, *Pacific Review* and other magazines and received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, *Sharkpack Review's* 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.

Roots (inspired by the Writers' Craft Box "Roots" theme)

by L. A. Henriquez

Gifts are awkward. Awkward, not in the 'thoughtful' sense. More in the 'imposed acceptance' sense. An unsolicited or dissatisfying gift is just that: 'Imposed,' as the recipient does not want or is not expecting a gift.

I stood here, surrounded by ceiling high boxes. My existence encased in containers around me. Moving for the umpteenth time. I always seemed to be in motion. Stationary was a dream. At first, this was due to the need for escapism. From the multiple and mundane job roles, my place of birth, my lack of a love interest. But now? There isn't even a choice in the matter. *Be careful what you wish for*, they say. I guess so.

This empty living room had lost my sweet, constant aroma of sandalwood and amber incense. All I could smell was pine and paint. This room, where I had hosted many house parties, consoled and celebrated myself, and offered as a temporary abode to my fellow wanderlust-led friends, now resembled a sterile showroom in Ikea.

Outside reflected an idyllic water painting of a melancholy break-up between fall and winter. The sky was an impending outburst; gray, periwinkle blue and a muted mango orange danced across it. I thought I would be ecstatic today. The painful absence of my in-transit record player, the overwhelming amount of boxes and my nostalgia proved differently.

The only breath of life present in my ex-apartment was Jessamine, who sat pensive on a mahogany window sill. Jessamine usually, was the embodiment of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* in iridescent green. Forest. Teal.

Emerald. Lime. Sea green. Pistachio. Olive. Viridian... All on her good days. This month and those that followed were far removed from her days of glory. I still adored her in a sister to sister fashion; she was the one who taught me altruism without imposition.

In one of my excursions to Central America, I helped an old man. Mr. Liu Shen had been rudely ejected from a local taxi after the driver heard that he had lost his wallet. Assuming that the old man was giving a disingenuous excuse, the driver threatened him and forced him to leave the car. Mr. Liu Shen was new to the area and looked displaced, so I had reached out to him. Through his broken English, which superseded his minimal Espanol, he explained his fondness for agriculture and the need of his educational trip to Costa Rica for his "business back home." We then bonded over food, a mutual disdain for TSA, the commonalities in all cultures and more food. '*Shen*' meant 'spiritual.' '*Liu*' meant 'willow tree.' I explained that my unisex name was pronounced 'Yeh-meen' instead of the spelling 'Jemene.'

He told me that I had a warm spirit; he sensed conflict and vulnerability, but a good heart underneath it all. I felt stripped yet revamped, as someone else reminding me that I have a 'good heart,' was something I had needed to be reiterated at the time. Shortly before Costa Rica, I had endured a deep depression, finances were abysmal and my ability to commit to anything—whether promises, a profession or personal relationships—was at an all time low. What could I say? I used to carry my heart on my sleeve and a 'Me against the world' ideology, which had genuinely been the denominator to my life until then.

My roots were in the Caribbean, immersed between two countries deemed the 'Island of Spice' and 'Helen of the West.' Their bodies offered endless golden sand, past days of uprising, natural resources, exotic fruits and enticing, translucent waves. The melodious beauty of these islands had been embedded in me by way of creativity.

Music had always been my muse. Art, my outlet. I never ran from my roots; I represented them in my color schemes, from my many hair experiments to my art palette choices to my cushions, certain signature accessories and articles of clothing. I always gravitated back to the Caribbean, every year, whether money did or did not suffice. My roots were never the reason why 'in transit' was my status. My roots were the reason that I endured and remained resilient.

Something about his energy, reflected the sun. Though the only feature that had evidence of the heat were his eyes. A hazelnut hue that sprouted and widened in size with each of the words he enunciated—thanks to the tonal emphasis of Mandarin. He wore a white polo shirt, brown khaki pants and neat white plimsolls—only accompanied by a small briefcase, a sun hat and a backpack. Luckily, crime in Manuel Antonio was at a record low, but recognizable tourists could always be discerned and exploited by locals. I felt a sadness at the fact that he was elderly and travelling alone.

After deciding that he was human enough to be an ally, I split my last handful of money, walked him over to a taxi man, explained the route, found the address to the embassy on my cell phone—so that he could retrieve or report any missing details, then finally, gave him my number to call in case of any diversions. He taught me how to say 'thank you' in Mandarin—a repetition of the same word '*xiexie*' which sounded like 'shen-shen' with less emphasis on the 'sh' part of the word. I stopped repeating it to avoid offending him—as my Canadian accent gave no leeway for adopting the harsh tonal gauge of his Mandarin.

He stood up and hugged me in the way a proud father hugs a daughter, removed his backpack, rummaged inside it, and produced what was unknown to me at the time—a Chinese Elm. This small, curvaceous, voluminous tree resembled something out of a toy jungle. I had heard of them. But what good would I have with a miniature tree?

Mr. Liu Shen also handed me a book called *The Art of Bonsai*, thanked me again before whispering under his breath and leaving in the taxi. I promised him I would read it cover to cover. 'Orange Jessamine' was one of the first names I saw. Peach was always a favorite color of mine and though 'Jessamine' was a completely different type of bonsai to Chinese Elm, the name reminded me of mine and I found a common ground. My favorite things were the only undercurrent to instill a sense of 'home' during my travels. And my travels were the only form of 'peace' I encountered.

Since then, Jessamine and I have been side by side. Like a sound byte of Mother Nature travelling with me. Keeping me in tune when I felt detached from everything and everyone. I otherwise travelled alone. Every six months. Through move to move, relationship to somewhat relationship and job role to job role. Jessamine and I were inseparable.

The more I read about Chinese Elms, the more I found shared idiosyncrasies between Jessamine and I. We were both adaptable. They were, to my knowledge, one of the only bonsai trees that could adapt to living both inside and outdoors. We both recovered from neglect and damage well. We both loved an abundance of light.

I had actually lived in this apartment for twelve months. The longest period I had ever paid rent. The happiest abode I had adopted and like the season of fall, my rays had receded and bought me a bitter end. My family even called to check on Jessamine; part of me pondered whether I sounded like the 'Crazy Cat Lady' stereotype of lonely women with an excessive amount of felines within their living quarters. Another part of me couldn't care less.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

Almost as obtrusive as the sound, more men filed into my apartment, grabbing boxes, shoving containers, throwing my personal belongings back and forth like an inside joke at my expense. I could have just been cynical, but even so...

“Excuse me, it says 'Fragile' on that box?”

The goofy-looking brat looked at me with a quizzical expression and a facetious smirk.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Uh, so treat it accordingly or I'll hire someone who can. Thank you.” I snapped. Manners are free, only the jerks of the world find it impossible to adhere to them. A couple of the other movers turned around to see, in 'frat boy' fashion. I had encountered this one too many times to be intimidated by them. If necessary, I would do this whole move by my lonesome. Solitary, like it had been for a long time. They had one more strike. I oversaw every action they carried out until my apartment went from a busy intersection to the barren outback.

Thanks to Jessamine, I learned the meaning of pruning, watering, feeding. I even learned to tolerate the concept of time—which I despised since the age of 7. Since the age I was promised we would return back to Canada. Nine years after that, on the basis of that broken promise, I evaded my parents and overstayed on a vacation. That 10 year ban has been the bane of my

life—that keeps me travelling for months at a time. All to evade my birthplace. My birthplace, the glum, gray, Pound Sterling orientated, mind-numbing abyss that corrupted my character and drove my impulse to flee. To find culture, traditional cuisine, diversity, opportunity, consistent weather.

Here I stood. The one place I was comfortable in for 12 months, paid an average wage as I taught those from lower economic backgrounds to converse in my native tongue. Though it didn't satisfy my creative thirst, it quenched my need to help others. It gave me the ability to travel and make 'home' out of everywhere I blossomed in. It cured my wanderlust, until I could be back where I left my soul in childhood. As an adult, I had to learn that sometimes those that precede you, fail you at times. Whether they acknowledge this or not, I came to the realization that I had to fulfill that promise to my inner child.

The laminated floor felt cold under my bare feet. I sat on the one plush velvet bean bag I requested that they leave, querying the synchronization of how Jessamine and I were. Both laid bare. Mr. Liu Shen never did call. I hoped he was okay. Maybe he knew that I was. Or that I wasn't. Maybe he saw in me what he saw in his former Chinese Elm; the need to be nourished, the adaptability, the many branches and leaves, attempting to grow towards the sun. Maybe he departed leaving me with her to show me the misconception in 'solitary' being a chosen way of life and to impart some life knowledge.

Or maybe he just needed money and gave me an unwanted, semi-trained Bonsai tree—and I created Jessamine as a coping strategy. Either way, my belongings, my memories and my passport stamps are all I will have, in my untrained form.

Author Commentary: The term "roots" to me opens up a vine of thoughts. As somebody who loves history, travel and culture, it made me reflect on my background, my muses, the struggles I have gone through, my family members and my love for writing.

I then tried to consider how my roots tied into all of my experiences and wrote from the heart.

Bio- L. A. Henriquez is a charismatic writer who has been writing since childhood. After completing a second novel and with somewhat aggressive encouragement from her peers

(and parents), she decided to take her first love seriously and start submitting her writing for publication. L. A. Henriquez has written for *Sampleface* magazine, co-hosted on the Harlem, NY Radio show *Sugatreats*, worked in Freelance PR and is featured on a number of indie music albums as a poet/lyricist. Culture, cuisine and conversation are her main muses.

Sampling of archived links of past selections involving fantasy and fairy tale/archetypal themes:

"Reflections on The Little Mermaid: A Few Moments with the Queen" by Beate Sigriddaughter (an alternative view of "The Little Mermaid")

First story on page

[http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org/images/Spring_2011 - Fiction.p](http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org/images/Spring_2011_-_Fiction.p)

"Dancing Shoes" by Melodie Corrigall (a contemporary interpretation of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses")

Third story on page

[http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org/images/Fall_2012 - Fiction.pdf](http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org/images/Fall_2012_-_Fiction.pdf)

"Exclusive Interview: Mr. Mole's Musings" by Denise Bouchard (an alternative view of "Thumbelina")

Fifth story on page

http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org/images/Spring_2009-Fiction.pdf

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