

# Chestnut Review

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 3 WINTER 2020



FOR STUBBORN ARTISTS

# Chestnut Review

Volume 1 Number 3 Winter 2020

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Cover: Erin Schalk, "Mineral Excavation"  
Acrylic on canvas, 12"x9", 2016

## Introduction

Winter is upon us. We hope you can take a moment as 2020 begins to explore this issue's authors. Consider: **Aashika Suresh** instructs us beyond the literal and obvious in "A Career in Teaching." **Katrina Monroe** reflects on our namesake in "The Chestnut Tree." **Mary Buchinger** explores the resonances of a crash in "Route 83." **Yasmin Mariam Kloth** deftly captures the joys and challenges of childhood and parenting in "Daughter: Five Poems." **Jennifer Brown** depicts a culture of tobacco addiction in "Boys Will Be Boys & Girls Girls, They Said." **Siamak Vossoughi** captures nuances of dedication in "Thank You For Your Service." **Cynthia McVay** examines the space between affluence and pretense in "Perfect." **Katherine Szpekman** takes us inside attraction in "First Kiss on Riverside Drive." **Kevin Burris** observes salesmanship in "At the Optical Shop." Our cover art, "Mineral Excavation" is by **Erin Schalk**, and we are pleased to feature the photograph "Tide pool, Broom Point, Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland" by **Richard LeBlond** and the painting "Spirit Wave" by **Britnie Walston**.

We hope you'll spend time with all of these pieces, and appreciate them as much as we did. Until spring, then. Keep creating, and being stubborn about it all.

James Rawlings

## A Career in Teaching

The day I become an educationist, I will not teach the Pythagoras theorem or the right way to punctuate (though you ought to know when a semicolon is used and not a full stop).

I will teach kids things I wish I didn't have to teach myself. For instance, yesterday, I learnt how to keep my breakfast down in the middle of town after sudden clammy palms and an erratic heartbeat.

I will teach them how counting the cracks on the side of the pavement or skipping to maneuver the edges on the road can keep you from imagining your loved ones dying. At least for a little while.

I will teach them to look for a red van delivering posts across town, peer out their vehicle window and imagine grabbing a lost letter finding its way home to them for every phone call their lover rejects.

There could be days you will lie curled up in bed, exhausted, I will tell them, for so long that you may miss class or the train, or an important meeting, but sleeping in for just a bit more may mean saving your life.

You will make mistakes, I will tell them, such grave ones that you'll go searching every drawer you can find for a magical eraser that could wipe them right off. Or you'll go researching a time machine.

(Maybe you will build that time machine.) Either way, you can revisit the past over and over again, but what's done will be done, and you will have to live with the consequences, I will remind them.

You will sink to the ground, but you sure as hell don't have to stay there, I will say. Or hang your head low, thank heavens for the sternocleidomastoid and splenius muscles that help it defy gravity!

Find a beverage or a food, maybe a favourite poem or an object that fits in the palm of your hand that can serve as your talisman, I will tell them kindly, for days you cannot bear to live on.

It's a long journey, this life, and the mitochondria will keep its powerhouse going even if a person momentarily forgets how it does so. But on days when you are certain the world is conspiring for your downfall,

I will tell them, hold your breath for twenty counts and then go out seeking fireflies. For you see, science can teach you how sunlight angles through a prism, but you will need to learn how to catch its glint for yourself.

## The Chestnut Tree

There was a survivor tree  
in the yard of my childhood home  
whose branches draped low and  
whose top soared past my bedroom window,  
oblivious to the pernicious parasite that felled its brethren.

In spring the abundant leaves  
flaunted an effusiveness of flowers  
forty feet of messy but majestic blooms,  
the only reason for the tree's continued existence in Mom's  
opinion.  
The blooming period was followed by the sprouting period  
where the hard won grass on that shady section of the lawn  
was invaded by seedlings, sprung from roots,  
vanquished week after week  
by a lawnmower on a commando mission.  
In the fall, chestnuts in gleaming browns  
matching my dog's soulful eyes,  
were pried from their spiky shells  
scooped by the bucket full,  
and used as gems to decorate my dresser,  
as markers to play games,  
even as students to play school.

On cold nights these precious gifts could be roasted,  
destroying their beauty but yielding their nurturing, nutty soft-  
ness.

Four decades later, from 3000 miles away, I was drawn back  
to that house of 100 plus years,  
standing strong, resplendent in its new paint job.  
But it was standing alone, the chestnut tree was gone,  
the house's stature, the eager joy in my heart, both diminished.  
Did I expect that time would treat my survivor gently?  
Beauty is not a defense against deterioration,  
nor memories a bulwark against the reality of loss.  
I peered over the hedge,  
imagining I could find seedlings under the snow.

## Route 83

That day in February  
skiing cross-country  
Suicide Bowl all morning early  
afternoon in the glorious geography of risk  
sun shattered with pines thick  
by the trail and I barely twenty followed  
my teacher and all the others learning  
to lay down tracks snow-gold  
light turned winter red I bled  
through cramps and blood  
first of the day's surprises  
back to the dorm I thought  
half an hour drive shower and change—

then I turned left at the blinking  
yellow and the skis flew past my head  
windows diamonded Fiesta back seat  
snug-up against my gearshift but I  
got out. And the old man said  
You'd better call  
pointing  
to the gas station on the corner

so I did and he was gone cops  
shook their heads  
We're taking you  
to the hospital

But I'm fine I said  
I just need to shower and they said  
You don't even know what hurts  
car totaled and I felt such shame  
cramps and blood Later

they find pieces of my car in the cracked grill  
of the old man's pickup truck parked  
in front of Toivo's Bar but I was  
the college student out-of-towner  
and he the town drunk  
Sally's father  
they said Then a hearty laughing  
orthopedic surgeon told me my neck  
would be a problem the rest of my life  
but my boyfriend of a month nursed me  
carried plates of pork chops and eggs up  
to me in his squeaky-spring bed  
and how to make love in a brace  
was my earliest and first the next year we  
married thirty-some years ago and I still  
don't wonder what if



Richard LeBlond

“Tide pool, Broom Point, Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland”  
September 18, 2014

YASMIN MARIAM KLOTH

## Daughter: Five Poems

### Here

My daughter is the German-Polish border  
that moved across Danzig. She's  
the old stone castles of Irish fields.  
My daughter is the city of Palmyra  
before its columns were destroyed. She's  
the white sands of the Sphinx. She's a mountain  
in Beirut made of Cedar groves.  
My daughter won't know Arabic in the way  
I heard the language split French phrases  
in my parents' house. She won't know the German  
her father's forebears whispered  
when the night would rock their ship  
from sea to here.  
My daughter's hair is soil in sun,  
her skin an almond shell. Her eyes  
are olive branches, her lashes shade.  
My daughter laughs the way  
the sky sounds just before it rains. She

cries in riverbeds where the rocks  
have gone soft.

My daughter speaks.

When my daughter speaks  
her voice is a wildflower planted

far from here.

## At the Fountain

It's your favorite place  
in the little town square,  
this mossy fountain  
surrounded by green  
bushes and wooden benches.

It's our routine the two of us,  
when your father is traveling  
and the weather warms,  
to buy an ice cream  
on the corner with sprinkles  
and little candy eyeballs.  
You eat the eyes first,  
then worry you've destroyed  
the face already melted  
in the sun.

We sit by the fountain with our  
single scoops in hand

you ask me why you feel  
rain on your face.

I tell you it's the fountain  
spitting water when  
a breeze blows by.

I didn't hear you at first  
when you asked me  
if there was a bird in the water.

Your words brushed past me  
a spider web on a walk  
through the woods.

Your words brushed past me  
until you asked again.

I knew without looking.

I knew in the way the tiny hairs  
on our skin will tell us things  
about a person, a place, a dream.

I peered over your shoulder.

The bird on its belly,  
its wings spread

as if it were human  
with arms stretched  
to embrace a friend.

You stared at the scene  
questions in your eyes.

I took the cotton of your sleeve  
and pulled you away.

I thought how close we are  
to all of this, to the way we

can lose things  
like the life of a bird  
while we're eating ice cream  
in the sun.

## A Letter to My Daughter on Her First Day of Kindergarten

You stood behind a yellow line  
painted in the pavement.  
This, we told you,  
was the safest place to wait.  
You watched the yellow bus  
pull up against  
a yellow summer sun.  
You crossed the line without us,  
crossed the street without us,  
backpack hanging on your body,  
how is it possible your body  
looks both small and big.  
Your hand left the end of the skin  
of my hand.  
Today I learned:  
There are places where we can't follow you.

We can tell you to be everything:  
strong, kind, brave, thoughtful, tough--  
when needed.

We can tell you our love follows  
like a magician's cape, tell you  
how it trails the halls behind your feet.

We can tell you our stories of this time  
when we were young and  
summer stretched like thread  
into short nights and humid mornings.  
We can tell you we didn't know  
it would all pass so quickly  
and how we send the children  
we once were  
to cross the line with you.

The day ended and changed  
the morning light. I stood in the shade  
of the stop sign and the pines.  
You stepped off the bus a small face  
on the other side of the street.  
Head right. Head left. Then running.  
Your hand found the end  
of the skin of my hand.  
I didn't have to tell you anything.

You told me everything  
that was new.

# Normal

Sometimes I wonder if  
my hugs should  
feel this hard, this tight, wonder  
if it's normal  
to grab on like time  
is running out,  
or running fast, wonder  
if it's normal I  
keep my hands on  
these small shoulders for  
one more moment.  
One more moment  
buys me time,  
buys me a second,  
buys me a lightning strike,  
a snowfall.

I hug you so hard I hear  
you thinking,  
*what's wrong with you, why  
do you squeeze me so hard,  
stop it Mama that hurts, your  
love hurts.*  
I'll trip over my tongue  
to explain  
patience and goodness and kindness  
I'll trip over the words and what  
they mean.

These days I feel  
I cannot be  
your teacher when  
I fall short on all these things,  
when I need to practice more  
kindness and patience  
in this wide open,  
angry,  
hot poker  
world.

I cannot teach what  
you already are.  
I look into your fresh face and wide eyes.  
I stop talking so I may see you, so  
I may hear how you are all the words  
I have been trying to say.

# Daughter

For EJ

I am not equipped to pull this house apart.  
The only tools what I found in the garage—the saw and  
the leaf blower, the pickaxe,  
and the tree limb cutter.

## Thank You for Your Service

It was on the Geary bus, getting on at 25th Avenue was a soldier in full uniform, not a thing you see every day in San Francisco, but you could still love San Francisco for the way that each day it gave you something you didn't see every day.

The soldier moved down the aisle and the man sitting in front of me came to attention. He looked like old San Francisco. These guys who are proud of San Francisco's progressive history, but to a degree. I had a soft spot for them because of Denny and Lon, two guys I would see at the Royal Ground. They were old-time San Francisco Sunset District guys and they would tell me stories from their boyhood and youth. Denny had been in Vietnam and I always remembered how he told me that if America ever had a draft again, he would send his son to Ireland. He had such a wonderful fire when he said he would send his son to Ireland, and then a great sorrow when he said his son would probably fight him on it. I missed the hell out of those guys.

The man sat up straight when the soldier passed him. "Thank you for your service," he said.

I am not equipped to pack up all the things that do not belong to me. They were left for me to sort in piles (Throw, Give, Keep) years after she died—Chinese fans and masks, painted blue ceramic cups, a teapot. Gifts my father carried from his travels in his suitcase for her.

I do not remember most of these things. Even after I've touched them for the first time in many years, things that were the color and character in the stories I'm sure she told at parties, and her friends would laugh loudly through their drinks and their happy tears.

I am not equipped to handle the heat of this pain, each thing I touch a hot poker and my hands raw.

Not all of this belongs to me, but I am daughter. I am duty and honor and the keeper of things. I will break this house down with my hands so it may breathe again.

So it may breathe from beneath all the things I have never seen before but now,

how can I live without.

The soldier smiled and I hoped the man would go back to looking out the window, because then I could trust his words at least and I could imagine he might be a guy like Denny, someone who actually knew what war was and had respect for a soldier but would still send his son to Ireland if he got drafted, but the guy didn't do that at all, and instead he looked around to see who'd heard him, as if to challenge them, as if to say, I know this is San Francisco, but it's America before it is San Francisco, and the thing to do when you see a soldier in uniform is to thank them for their service. And I had just a flash of a moment when his eyes met mine that I thought his words might be directed at me, an Iranian man, and for just a moment it unlocked the part of me that worried every day that America is going to attack Iran, and I'm going to hear people thanking soldiers for their service of attacking my country, and then how the hell am I supposed to live in America, let alone write American stories that sing? But somehow the memory of Denny and Lon saved me, because I knew those guys, and the guy reminded me so much of them in the way he was trying to say that San Francisco was still the San Francisco of his boyhood and youth, and he had a desperation in his eyes that made me think he would've said it and looked around the way he did whether I was there or not.

Still, I went traveling through all my different ages when he said it like that, to my own boyhood and youth, when I would have felt it was directed at me, when I would have understood it as the voice of authority, an authority that I did not necessarily want to fight against, as much as I wanted to fight against the notion of war as service, because I liked service. I did not have the

first thing against service, but I looked around me and thought, we're not possibly that scared, are we, to think that war is the only service? Because what do you do if you like service but hate war? Well, you can write stories that you hope can be of some service. I wrote a short story collection called *Better Than War*. I wished I could give a copy of it now to Denny and Lon, but I had been out of touch with them for a while. I wished I could give a copy of it to the man who'd thanked the soldier for his service. Here, I'd say, this is just to balance things out. That would be nice. I'd probably be too scared to do it if I had a copy with me. You got a problem with the American soldier? he'd say to me. No, but I got a problem with war, I'd say. Maybe then he would say, Me too, and then we could look at each other and angrily agree with each other. I like to think that I could get to the point of angrily agreeing with anybody. That's what I was trying to do with the stories in the book. I was trying to say that a bunch of American soldiers and a bunch of Iranian soldiers shouldn't kill each other, because there are magnificent lives that Iranians are living and there are magnificent lives that Americans are living as well. Every story can be an anti-war story, in my opinion, if the lives of the people in those stories are shown to be wonderful. I had no doubt just then that the life of the soldier on the bus was wonderful, and that the life of the man who had thanked him for his service was wonderful. He had all of San Francisco, for one thing, new and old, and he was in the struggle of trying to make a straight line between his present and his past, which was a beautiful struggle to be in. I didn't have an idea for the next story I was going to write, but I looked around the bus and thought, it has to

be something that is talking to all of the people on this bus. It has to be something that is talking to all of them, written in plain language, with no tricks and only very humble flourishes.

That was a good start for now. Keep them all in mind when you sit down to write, and something will grow out of that, I told myself. Keep yourself in mind too, and laugh about the funniness of an Iranian man writing stories that Americans will recognize as their own, as coming from a place inside them that they didn't know was there. Laugh because it is funny. Even if it is only funny today and might be any number of things tomorrow. A writer has to put a great deal of faith into today anyway.

I got so lost in my own thoughts that I almost didn't notice that among the passengers getting on at 10th Avenue was a Buddhist monk. I used to pass by their temple when I lived over there on Funston. He walked toward the back and then a young white kid, whom I hadn't noticed till now, turned to him and said, "Thank you for *your* service."

The kid didn't look at the soldier, or at the man who'd thanked him for his service. He went back to looking out the window, like he was carrying war and peace inside him before he'd said it, and he would be carrying them after.

That's how you thank someone for their service, I thought.

The monk smiled, like he'd known for a long time that life was already happening before he stepped into any particular moment of it. He sat down next to the soldier, who moved over to make space for him in the back row.

The man who'd thanked the soldier for his service looked like he wanted to say something, but the kid made it clear that he was done, that he'd said his piece, and anyway all it was was balance. You couldn't say the monk hadn't been of service, and you couldn't say he didn't deserve to be thanked. Anyway the soldier had gotten a kick out of the whole thing, and the man couldn't say anything without showing that what he was actually reaching for was his own boyhood somehow, and I wished him luck that'd be able to find it some other way, and I loved the hell out of San Francisco for wearing its heart on its goddam sleeve, for wearing its heart on all its goddam sleeves, and I told myself that if you can't make stories out of this city, it's on you.



Britnie Walston, "Spirit Wave"  
Acrylic on canvas, 10" x 20", 2019

## Perfect

You meet Barbara in Central Park when Charlotte is a round puppy. Barbara is part of the morning Labrador group, the group you saw by the reservoir one day when you decide that's what you want: a Labrador. Your puppy is one year younger than everyone else's by the time you join but you are now part of the group. The group is an eclectic mix whose only common feature is you all own Labradors, although perhaps that choice may imply some commonality. For example, you did not get your dogs at the shelter or save them in the streets of Accra when you were Peace Corps volunteers. This is a group who as individuals sought out breeders and found dogs with pedigree. You never mention that you found Charlotte in the backyard of a trailer in the Hudson Valley and she was next-to-runt of a 13-puppy litter. She does have papers, and you prefer her long legs and slender body to the squat English Labradors anyway.

You are welcomed into the group which includes the sommelier of Le Cirque restaurant, who owns two thick black Labs of different ages. He always has a good story to tell, or gossip, like the time he saw Martha Stewart and Donald Trump dine together. He also confirms, as you suspect, that all the slender young gorgeous women at the bar are Russian prostitutes.

The group also includes the entertaining and charming wife of a European diplomat with a Field Labrador like your own Charlotte. She, too, is a font of inside information of the global political kind. She tells the group, laughing, about how her handsome son gets blow jobs from the girls in his private school on the Upper East Side; you cringe because your fourteen-year-old daughter doesn't talk as much to you as she used to; you are glad she is at a different school. One morning, after W is president, Diplomat's wife tells the group how, when they raided Saddam Hussein's palace seeking weapons of mass destruction, they found a closet full of Botox and blackberry jam. It is unclear whether the Botox is to treat Hussein's vanity (photos reveal a deep worry crease in his forehead), blepharospasm, (eye seizures—the original reason Botox was invented), or, in fact, is to be considered bacterial warfare, given its paralyzing features. No one can or cares to explain the stash of blackberry jam.

In the group tangentially is a flabby-faced, argumentative younger woman lawyer who always wears leggings and is having a hard time conceiving. She tells you how to lose weight and you wonder why she feels she has the right to do so, why she is telling you her dieting tricks that don't seem to work. She is remarkably hard on her handsome, gentle husband who sometimes comes to the park with their Lab in her stead.

And then there's overdressed Barbara, vivacious and upbeat with her squat and big-headed English yellow Labrador. You both appreciate more than the rest of them the cherry blossoms in spring and the maple leaves in the fall and you *talk garden* because you both have country houses. She is an expert maybe over-the-top gardener, if the

rest of her life is any indication. You have children roughly the same age who track.

It isn't clear whether Barbara and hers pretend to be the perfect family for everyone else or whether they really think they are, or they really are. Perfect in a number of ways. For one, there are four of them, one of each. A mother, a father, a daughter, a son. Barbara, Mike, Chloe, Christopher. Typical in the non-typical way, since these kinds of *typical* families rarely exist anymore; not perfect, yet something to shoot for. But perfect in that *we just got back from Paris* kind of way. More than normal. But they aren't normal, of course. The slight limp in Mike's gait tells a lot of the story, but not all of it. It is just a clue, a clue to approach slowly.

One by one, over the years, the Labrador group disbands. Diplomat dog is attacked in another setting and is never the same. Diplomat's wife was the glue, so the group is at risk. Le Cirque closes, and Sommelier moves to the country and opens a wine store. Flabby is not very interesting on her own, in fact she was never interesting, just angry, and so you and Barbara continue to seek each other out, find each other in the park every morning, and find ways to avoid Flabby.

By now, you know a lot about each other, given the therapy-like nature of the dog park dynamic, although your dogs don't interact much once they are adults. Charlotte is interested only in raiding baby strollers of bagels and cookies. *Sorry, sorry*, you say as you run to pull her away by the collar. You feign surprise, say *that never happens* but carry a five-dollar bill in your front pocket to whip out to compensate the irate parent of the shrieking child. Barbara's dog carries a tennis ball in his iron jaw.

Even though the unspoken rule dictates you don't see dog friends outside the park, you do, because you enjoy each other's company, and you are perhaps aspiring or lonely, so you let Barbara absorb you.

You hear a lot about Barbara's extraordinary family before you meet them. Her children are exceptional. Her husband is attentive, so good to Barbara. She tells you that on her birthday, and on Mother's Day, he makes her breakfast in bed. Brings her flowers. Takes her to a romantic dinner and a show. They are still in love. You believe her.

They hold a tree-trimming party every year. And a red-carpet Oscars party. You like to get dressed up once in a while but wonder why anyone would want to trim someone else's tree when you can't get anyone to trim yours. You find out that no one really trims the tree. You eat petite delectables from a silver tray and drink a lot and meet other rich thin people from New York, even though you are not rich nor thin.

The Serbian housekeeper, or a swift young man in a dark suit, opens the door, and takes your wrap and hangs it in the foyer closet. There is no *throw it on the bed* thing in their home. Someone, maybe Mike, steps forward with a flute and a bottle of champagne, immediately, offers you a glass. It is real champagne, too, not sparkling wine from Germany or prosecco. And there's lots of it.

Barbara bursts into the room with a smile, brimming, jubilant. That is, if she isn't still getting ready. You arrive early, *on the dot*, in part to be supportive, in part because you can't help yourself. Barbara is always late, even for her own parties. And you wonder, *how can someone be late for her own party?* Mike winks and nods, conveying this is part of her charm, that his bouncy wife, clad in, gripped

by, some designer dress worth thousands of dollars, is still dolling herself up. You wonder whether there is tension behind closed doors.

And although not as svelte as many of her guests, like, say, the woman who was a principal in the New York City Ballet, Barbara looks fabulous. Just slightly red-headed with flawless, pore-less skin, which may have been touched up by the plastic surgeon who is Mike's best friend. Her halo of energy captivates you. Whatever is on your mind or concerns you, like the fact that she is late for her own party, vanishes, because her energy takes over the room, over you. She bubbles, champagne-like, about the tree or who will win best actor.

You don't really care that much about either, but you are seduced by her love of it all. You're not sure you like all the pomp and circumstance, all the gold, when she shows you the antique side table she has sanded and re-gilded herself. You'd back up your Volvo if you saw it in a pile on the street and whisk it away, but it is not your style. It doesn't really interest you, but it interests her, and she is proud of her work, so you *ooooo* and *ahh*, you run your finger along the edge, because you know you should, because it will make her happy. Even happier.

The tree is big and full. They picked it themselves and brought it home from the Catskills. The ornaments are her grandmother's, of course. With delicacy, Barbara hooks an antique reindeer onto the end of a bough as she tells you so.

Barbara made all the little canapes that afternoon, complicated ones with tiny sprigs of dill and pastry and cream and home-smoked salmon. Not just generous wheels of imported aged cheese with artfully tossed candied walnuts

and dried cranberries, but there's some of that, too. And flowers, fresh aromatic, over-the-top bouquets and maybe even an entire sideboard of moss and flowering dogwood and lily of the valley.

Can that be true? She smokes her own salmon?

Everything is so perfect except that Mike walks with a limp and has the voice of a mobster.

You are surprised the first time you meet him because he doesn't fit Barbara's description. He has not quite a comb over and a hard edge and no sense of humor and will know more than you no matter what you talk about. You will never see him smile. He reminds you that he sculpts and shows you some of his pieces on pedestals in the living room which you think aren't bad. He will insist he is an excellent tennis player; you don't doubt him, but it is hard to contain your surprise given the laborious way he walks. It is clear that he has worked hard to overcome his childhood polio and the Bronx, all that he must have endured, and he wants everyone to know it has been full-steam ahead as a self-made man. That he loves the opera and appreciates fine food, he knows his wines, has his own driver and a place on Shelter Island and a sailboat.

Barbara and Mike take you out for dinner to fancy, sophisticated restaurants and night clubs, late at night, later than you are used to, in that New York way, which is not really your way. Their driver drives you home. Mike won't let you pay, so you reciprocate in other ways, by treating Barbara when it's just the two of you, say.

Mike and Barbara show you extraordinary hospitality. You are their third wheel, when you are not seeing someone, double date when you are. They set you up with Mike's plastic surgeon friend. Although he is smart and

articulate, you have a hard time with his profession, what he stands for. He is not your type, and you are not his. You know you would be a project with your big nose and imperfect skin, and while some part of you is tantalized by the prospect of being perfect, too, it is against everything you believe in, what you scorn. You don't see each other again *in that way* and are polite when you see each other at future tree trimming or Oscaring and pretend to not know each other when either of you brings a date.

When you try to understand what Mike does, it never makes sense. He has a private investment business, a partner you never meet. He travels, he does deals. He owns or leases hundreds of thousands of acres in Papua New Guinea that he will clear cut to grow other things. You try to hold back outrage—you have been reading a lot about PNG because it is at the top of your bucket list—but he describes it in such a way that it seems he is saving the place. *What about the fragile ecosystems that host the intricate, unique birds of paradise and the peoples yet untouched by diet Coke?* Mike says he will set aside a certain amount as a reserve, which wouldn't happen otherwise. He will feed hungry people. He is saving PNG. He gives the biologists three months to do an ecosystem survey, which you know is a blink of time, nothing, to do meaningful research. He seems to care about the environment, but you don't see how what he says squares with what he does. You try not to ruffle feathers, but you may be operating in denial here, not wanting to know, knowing you can't change what he is doing. You contemplate boycotting them or ask Barbara about it. You will on other occasions try again to understand what he does, maybe when he arrives back from a trip, probe and plunder, but you never will feel comfort-

able about this. You wonder where you are supposed to draw the friends line.

You will never forget about the time the three of you go to a movie, a premiere. Mike secures tickets ahead of time, four great seats in the center, ten rows in from the screen. Four, so you can stow your winter coats in the extra seat. The theater lights dim. All the seats are occupied, so people arriving late keep asking *is that seat taken, the one with the coats?* And Mike says, in his gruff, mafia voice, "I bought that ticket." It just doesn't make sense to people, that he bought a seat, for \$15, the price of a movie in New York, for coats. They are exasperated looking for a seat for themselves. It is one of those grey situations that no one is right, no one is wrong, but everyone's pissed. You are embarrassed but enjoy the luxury of not having to sit on your coat, and not having to fight for it, but it's unseemly.

Then there's Chloe, a perfect specimen, thin and angled, a vegetarian, of course. She remembers your name, greets you like an old friend, even though you are her mother's age, her mother's friend, because she wants to work where you used to work. She wears tiny dresses that cost thousands of dollars per square inch. You are surprised her bedroom is a tornado when you explore the apartment pretending to look for the bathroom. Shopping bags and tissue paper, bright pink lacy thongs and rejected evening-wear are strewn across the floor, the unmade bed. She is just in from Paris or Rome or Boston.

You eventually find the bathroom, right where Barbara said it was, where it was last time, with a flickering candle obfuscating potential smells and softening the overhead light. The hand towel is plush-new.

Chloe, who speaks French and learned Italian because she now has a gorgeous, wealthy Italian boyfriend who thinks she is exquisite, is doing better now. All through middle school and most of high school, Barbara speaks of Chloe's academic prowess and exceptional SAT scores, record-beating track meets, ribbon-garnering horseback riding, the summer research jobs, and how she will go to Yale.

And then one day Barbara comes to the park looking tired and says that Chloe has been taken away during the night.

"Kidnapped?"

"We staged an intervention."

"What?"

"They came at four in the morning and handcuffed Chloe and took her away." There was screaming, a struggle.

This is the first you hear of Chloe's drug issue. That she had been running in the wrong crowds, which is easy to do in New York City, that she was out all night long clubbing and developing a *habit*. That it had gotten so bad and out of control and then came to a screeching halt all in thirty seconds for you is immaterial because it is not your story, but you are surprised you had not heard about any of this until this morning when it began and ended all at once.

"She is going to a farm in New Mexico."

Perfectly manicured, lace-thonged, rake-thin Chloe has a drug problem that will go away shoveling shit in New Mexico.

She will not go to Yale after all.

Her unexpected gap year will become her college essay, her learning, and she will go to Colorado College. She

will somehow nip all those drugs in the buds and do well enough. She straightens out. She will work for her father. She is good at math and spreadsheets. She consults you about consulting.

Barbara confides in you that there is tension between Mike and her. Mike spoils Chloe, buying her handbags and fur coats, and anything else she wants. Is that before or after rehab, you can't remember.

And then there's Christopher, who is your daughter's age technically, but who acts like a middle-aged man. At the Oscars or tree trimming party he wears a long smoking jacket and velvet slippers with emblems. His hair is like his mother's, big and wavy with just a touch of red, a hint of Kennedy. He can talk about politics and the election, in Latin probably, better than most adults. He holds his own. He will go to Harvard, or Oxford. And maybe it is Christopher who is pouring the champagne one of those evenings, for one of those gatherings. He, too, remembers your name and who you are.

It is decided that Christopher will go to boarding school, where he can play more tennis and sail. He is a star tennis player, like his father. Mike's driver ferries Christopher to his tennis lessons in midtown twice a week. He is ranked, as he is in sailing. But over the summer, Christopher develops pain, excruciating pain in his wrists and legs. He takes a bevy of tests. His body is screaming, screaming in pain, screaming to stop. He stops.

He seems of a different era, and you can see why boarding school might be good for him, in that past-generation kind of way. Everyone's ecstatic but not surprised when he is accepted to one of the top schools. When they move him in, Barbara outfits his room like a Ralph Lauren show-

case. The other students don't understand the velvet window treatments and oriental rugs. It seems pretentious, although it isn't clear whether it is pretention or the real thing. His thing. Them.

He is acing all his classes, so you hear, loving it, until one day, Barbara tells you in the park, that he is expelled from school for cheating. Inadvertent or deliberate, he has lifted whole paragraphs of Latin translations from the internet, and it is likely not the first time he has done so, but part of a concerning pattern.

Over the next few months, park conversations revolve around where a student goes after he's been caught cheating. What school takes him halfway through the year? God forbid, he goes to public school in New York City where he will probably be beaten up.

But there he is, back home not just for the Oscars or the tree trimming party but living again. And you are not sure how to interact with him but give him a polite kiss as you always have. He refills your glass. You think you might understand why he has cheated.

Somehow, they find another boarding school that will take Christopher. The school takes fuck-ups, kids who struck out in one way or another, so it's good that he will finish the school year, and high school, but not good because everyone—meaning colleges and anyone who matters—knows that's where fuck-ups go.

A couple months later, Barbara and Mike get a phone call from the school. Something is going wrong, even for fuck-up school. Christopher takes too many showers for the average bear. He wears his clothes for an hour or just touches them, and lets them fall to the floor, sullied. Barbara's plush towels are washed threadbare. He has no more

clean clothes. He is naked, won't leave his room. When he comes home, he uses rolls and rolls of paper towels. He doesn't touch door knobs with his hands. A pile of slightly crumpled paper towels accumulates beside the bathroom door. He takes five showers a day, for an hour. Uses the towel once.

Barbara is at a loss. She is losing it. He is driving them all insane.

This goes on for months, until they rent an apartment for Christopher to live separately but nearby. He is now eighteen and hasn't finished high school. But he's finished 1,543 rolls of paper towels. Because he is emancipated, they cannot force him to take the medication. But because he is incapacitated they pay for his apartment. He only leaves his apartment to get more paper towels. He runs out of money and begins to steal paper towels. He gets caught stealing. He's cracked.

And then, in the middle of all this, there is more.

What you don't know, and Mike doesn't, and Barbara and they don't, is that there is something growing in Mike's head. At first it is just a blurry eye and then a splitting headache, and then within a week they, and you, find out that Mike has a tumor and he has less than a year to live. You find out because Barbara, who continues to come to the park even after her dog dies from eating a philodendron leaf, doesn't come to the park anymore.

You are with Barbara for that year, his last year, which is fraught with optimism and pain and canapes and tree trimming like all those before. Everyone raises their glass as if nothing is happening. The housekeeper grabs you when Barbara is out of the room to tell you how crazy everyone is, and how she wants to quit. But she is still there

months later, even though or because her own husband is dying.

The landlords of the house they rent on Shelter Island don't renew their lease, which comes as a surprise to you for different reasons than for them. You thought they *owned* their house on Shelter Island. But it turns out they have rented that house for twenty years and Barbara decorated and gardened and planted a dozen trees that final year, and then the landlord pulled the house from under them.

Mike sues the landlords just before he dies. And then he dies. Not suddenly, because everyone is on notice, everyone is expecting it, but even so, when the moment comes it feels like a surprise. You feel badly for Barbara, of course, but cannot help but think and thank that maybe Papua New Guinea is spared.

The memorial service remembers Mike's love of opera and elegance, his love of Barbara. Somewhere in that man was a tenderness, a thoughtfulness. Tree-trimming and Oscar party guests are in the pews in muted fare. Barbara's mother doesn't come to the funeral because Barbara's sister told Barbara not to burden their elderly mother with the news. You meet Barbara's sister who never liked Mike, didn't think Barbara should have married Mike. Barbara had many, many suitors that were more suitable and she should have settled for one of them. Barbara has told you that her sister is angry and bitter because she married late and never had children.

A couple days after Mike is interred, Barbara calls you at 7:00 AM from her car. You pick up, ready to console Barbara in her grief.

"I had to move everything out of the summer house. Yesterday, the movers filled a truck and my car. I'm selling the sofa and the sailboat." Barbara spent the night in her BMW X5 in Long Island on the side of the road. She laughs uncontrollably.

*Ha, ha!* She is always bubbly.

"Barbara, you should have called me!" You had no idea. Everything falls apart all of a sudden with Barbara. It's always over when she calls. You suggest slowing down. She accelerates.

Barbara finds out that Mike left no money, no funds, no health insurance. Taxes are due. There are enormous, unmanaged medical bills, and Christopher. Weeks earlier, Mike renewed the lease on their New York City apartment, which you also thought they owned. The rent is \$13,000 a month, and you wonder why on earth they would renew *under the circumstances*, or any circumstances. You would never rent anything for that much money. But certainly not under the circumstances. But then you realize that is precisely why they re-upped the lease: It was their lease on Mike's life.

Overnight, his business goes *poof!* Gone because it was just him and his partner, a shell, and the partner's moving on, the invisible partner. Barbara is laughing and crying and wondering how she will pay rent. Her sister who has *all the money in the world* never liked Mike. Her sister won't lend her anything. She's such a bitch.

Barbara cannot even mourn with her own mother because she didn't tell her mother that Mike was dying, Mike is dead.

Why isn't Barbara angry at Mike for leaving her this mess? Did she know all along that the whole thing was a

sham? She is smart and was in business before. She should have known. (You should have known. Did you?) They could have reigned it all in. And now she has the apartment and Christopher's rent to pay, debts, and not a dime, and she's emptying the twenty-year summer rental. It's all so exhausting and Barbara's laughing.

You remember all the money that was spent, the lavishness. The coat seat. You were part of it all. Barbara still has her full-time housekeeper. She perpetuates her lifestyle even as the sordid underbelly reveals.

The following week when you check in on Barbara, she is starting a jewelry line, maybe a lifestyle business. That's why she needs to keep her apartment. Everyone wants to be her, have her look, her life, she says. You buy a necklace from her to help, the cheapest thing you can find on her dining room table for \$300, even though she tells you she marks things up by twenty times and you usually only buy things on sale or in the open-air markets of developing countries where there are no middlemen. You pretend to believe her when she says she designs this stuff herself, even though you have seen things just like it all over Asia. She travels to the Philippines a couple times a year to bring things back. She has trunk shows.

A year later, Barbara's mother dies. She leaves Barbara nothing, because she thinks Mike is still alive. That's when Barbara realizes that's why her sister told her not to tell her mother that Mike was dying, that Mike is dead. Barbara's mother wouldn't leave anything to Barbara as long as Mike was in the picture. Barbara's sister gets everything.

You come to the city for an event and suggest getting pedicures together but when you go to meet Barbara at her favorite place, she, of course, is running late, and it

turns out to be one of those places that charge \$50 for a pedicure, not \$23, like the one you infrequently go to. You can't believe Barbara is still doing this, under the circumstances, actually it kind of outrages you, since Barbara has been hinting she could use a loan. You leave before she arrives, which is a half-hour after you were supposed to meet. You understand why her sister won't lend her money.

You want to help Barbara but now you know you can't. You try to remember the last time Barbara asked you about you.

Barbara tells you that Chloe gets a job offer at the place you used to work but turns it down for a firm that is second tier, and you wonder how that can be.

Barbara is very busy, and you know in part it is to avoid being still, sidestep the pain, the swirl of horror around her. She keeps up her champagne life because it is what she is selling. You check on her, keep up for a while, but over time, with less frequency. You *like* things she posts on Facebook. You visit her, drop in or meet for coffee when you can, until it seems less and less convenient and the lies are so overwhelming that you don't think you have much to talk about anymore. And you have tired of only listening. She doesn't even know who you are.

You have a hard time accepting that Christopher lives off a government disability program in Utah, the cheapest place Barbara could find for him to live on his own. He has a therapist who meets with him monthly. When Barbara drops by to visit him on her way to California for a trunk show where she will sell \$100,000 worth of extravagance, he will not open the door. She laughs when she tells you

and says it doesn't bother her. You wonder how it can not bother her, how she laughs.

You know that mental illnesses can be genetic. You wonder what the effect of living the gilded life, in a champagne bubble, in the cracks of truth, can do to a person. You find out that brain trauma can lead to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder—many football players develop it—but it strikes you as bizarre and ironic that the trauma to Mike's brain is manifest in Christopher.

The third anniversary of Mike's death shows up on Facebook to remind you of how things can go so wrong when everything seems so perfect, so normal. When everyone's smiling. You hover on the page and wonder what to write. You write nothing. You write this story.

KATHERINE SZPEKMAN

## First Kiss on Riverside Drive

You leaned in.  
Our eyes closed.  
While rain, a mist so light  
we may have imagined it,  
caught us in a fine net,  
on iridescent pavement.

Tears of the gods spilled  
from April's warmest breath.  
Your lips, moist,  
lustrous with liquor and  
nacre, at the same time  
both sweet and briny.

Our mouths, anticipatory,  
opened like oysters in their beds,  
and your tongue swished in  
like sea water,  
in and out,  
searching for a pearl.

## Boys Will Be Boys & Girls Girls, They Said

Down south, like the banner of a borderless nation, the circle bleached in the backpocket of jeans gives away manhood's pledges. You can buy smokes at sixteen if you can't steal them from parents or bum them. I find my coworker's stashed forgotten on the topedge of the ladies'-room mirror for between-break breaks. Her name is Gayle. She's my mom's age or older, stunted, working stock at the drugstore when the pharmacist puts me on the register, younger & neater.

Around me, the women smoke & the men suck & spit, chipmunk-cheeked & buzzing. From women I learn the many forms of finesse, fine-motor fingers flipping the neat box open, the tinsel-sound of cellophane, the ritual tap of box on palm, flip & flip, the faint swish of one cigarette slid out to scissored fingers, slick-tipped with pale polish. A filthy habit, my mother says, but I can't agree, not when the trick of the lighter's toothed wheel makes flame & a glowing coal, a wand for punctuation & gesture as coils of smoke carry words & my grandmother's breath into the world. As, later, the smoke will carry her away, something finally other than a body.

But that is years off. For now, women breathe fire & men & boys who want to be men however unimaginable that is at 14 or 16—those not-yet-men pack tobacco inside their lower lips against teeth & gums, carry cokecans of warm brown spit from class to class. They sit in Typing salivating for the teacher's always-cleavage-baring dresses, her dark tan & bottle-blonde & the cleft of her breasts keep them shuffling up to ask for a hall-pass, leaning over her desk. The rest cock their chairs on two legs back, spit hot juice in their cans or stolen cafeteria-cups, sliding them into the desktrays below the typewriters.

Fathers chew & spit while mowing grass, cheeks distended—as long as they keep it out of the house the mothers look the other way, shooting jets of smoke out mouthedges to clear their eyes. A girl, I do not learn to spit, can barely clear my mouth of a bitter taste unless alone, where I don't have to hide in napkin-manners, girl that I'm trying to be. I'm coached & coaxed to avoid the legacy of swagger, the father-to-daughter burden of long-legs as likely to hobble me with coltish clumsiness as to charm my springing-up weed of a body to grace. I learn instead to pucker my lips around the stem of smoke as if to demonstrate, breath by breath, how I might kiss, what my mouth can soon promise a man.

KEVIN BURRIS

## At the Optical Shop

The man in the monogrammed lab coat  
starched and white with his head shaved,  
looking all medical and a little like  
a shady purveyor of ice cream,  
is advising an older man and his wife  
of the benefits, the manufacturer's claims  
for each potential selection  
on a looming mirrored wall of frames.

*These*, he is saying, *offer a classic look*.  
Think Philip Larkin, think Jean-Paul Sartre.  
Think British don in his Oxford rooms  
puffing a Dunhill and lecturing  
on the essential ornithology of the Amazon.

*And these*, he points out, *are titanium*.  
Think spaceships, think robots, think  
Arnold Schwarzenegger, indestructible  
cyborg rising from the Sturm und Drang.  
Think Q walking Bond through his secret lab,  
pointing to an ordinary pair of glasses.

*Now these*, he says next with extra breath,  
*are designer*, presenting them as a queen

presents a medal. Think Halston, think Gucci,  
think Yves St. Laurent. Think about you  
resplendent on your immaculate yacht,  
the cliffs of Monaco to starboard,  
young love immediately to port.

The old folks seem uneasy.  
He is pulling at the patch on his injured eye.  
She is fidgeting with a loose thread  
hanging from the handle of an old fabric bag.  
What they want to know is:  
how much?  
Think Medicare. Think furnace repair.  
Think a single fast-food burger, split, for lunch.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Jennifer Brown** studied creative writing at the University of Maryland and University of Houston. She spent many years teaching college and high-school English, living on the campus of a boarding school, and teaching creative writing in summer programs. In 2018, she won the Linda Flowers Literary Award from the NC Humanities Council; the winning essay appears in *North Carolina Literary Review*, Summer 2019. Her poems appear in *IthacaLit*, *Muse/A*, *CCLR*, *Rumble Fish Quarterly*, and *Stonecrop*. She blogs on Medium.com and at [Howeverthink.com](http://Howeverthink.com), and exists on various social media as [oneofthejenns](https://www.instagram.com/oneofthejenns).

**Mary Buchinger** is the author of three collections of poetry: *e i n f ü h l u n g/in feeling* (2018), *Aerialist* (2015) and *Roomful of Sparrows* (2008). She is President of the New England Poetry Club and Professor of English and communication studies at MCPHS University in Boston. Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Diagram*, *Gargoyle*, *Nimrod*, *PANK*, *Salamander*, *Slice Magazine*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and elsewhere; her website is [www.MaryBuchinger.com](http://www.MaryBuchinger.com).

**Kevin Burris** lives in southern Illinois. His work has appeared in many literary journals, including *Poetry East*, *Atlanta Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *The Bitter Oleander*. His first poetry collection, "The Happiest Day of My Life," was published in 2016 by FutureCycle Press.

**Yasmin Mariam Kloth** writes creative nonfiction and poetry. Her work has aired on NPR and appeared on [npr.org](http://npr.org). She co-translated a book of poetry by the French-Canadian author Mona Latif Ghattas called 'Sails For Exile,' and her work has appeared in *Gravel* and the *West Texas Literary Review*. She has work forthcoming in *The Tiny Journal*, *Willawaw Journal*, and *JuxtaProse*. She attended the Kenyon Review Writer's Workshop in July 2019 with Natalie Shapero. Yasmin lives in Cincinnati, OH with her husband and their young daughter.

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**Cynthia McVay** lives on a defunct farm in the Hudson Valley, where she writes, forages and makes art. Cynthia's work has been/will be published in *DASH*, *The Ravens Perch*, *daCunha's Anthology 2*, *2019 Orison Anthology*, *Ragazine* and *Eclectica*. Her work was winner, the 2018 Orison Anthology Award in Nonfiction; performed in the UK, as Editors' Choice winner, daCunha's 2017 Flash Nonfiction Competition; short-listed, Anton Chekov Contest New Flash Fiction Review; finalist, 2nd Annual — Sunshot Book Awards; Honorable Mention, Writer's Relief Peter K. Hixson Memorial Award: Short Stories; Honorable Mention, Glimmer Train Press's Very Short Fiction contest; finalist, Palooka Chapbook Contest; finalist, New Millenium Writings Muse Contest; finalist, freeze frame fiction and non-fiction finalist, Bridging the Gap Awards at the Slice Writer's Conference 2017.

**Erin Schalk** is a visual artist, writer, and educator who lives in the greater Los Angeles area. She graduated with her MFA in Studio from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2017, and she has exhibited her art throughout the United States and in Japan. Today, Schalk teaches and is in charge of an arts education program which provides tactile art courses to blind and visually impaired students.

**Aashika Suresh** is a freelance writer from the Indian beach city of Chennai. She writes on days the world makes sense to her; and then again on days it doesn't. Aashika was placed among the top 30 poets in Wingword Poetry Competition 2017 and her work has appeared in Erbacce Press' chapbook, *Literary Yard*, *Wax Art and Poetry*, *Visual Verse*, and *Bones Journal*, among

others. On most days, she seeks out good poetry, sunshine, coffee and puppies.

**Katherine Szpekman** writes poetry and memoir from her home in Collinsville, Connecticut. Her work has appeared in *Red Eft Review*, *Sky Island Journal*, and *Muddy River Poetry Review*, and is forthcoming in *Hiram Poetry Review*. She was awarded Honorable Mention in the Connecticut River Review Poetry Contest 2019.

**Siamak Vossoughi** is a writer living in Seattle. He has work published in *Glimmer Train*, *Missouri Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *West Branch*, and *The Rumpus*. His short story collection, *Better Than War*, received a 2014 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction.

**Britnie Walston** is a versatile artist, capturing energy through light, vibrant color, depth, and texture. The use of exaggerated brushstrokes and abstract color give her paintings life and voice. Her landscapes and abstract work consist of a variety of unconventional techniques to capture the elements portrayed. One of the most used techniques in her abstract paintings, is the method of mixing each individual color using acrylic paint, floetrol, silicone, and water. Together, they create “cell like” forms. Britnie also achieves different designs and textures using household objects such as strainers, straws, and frosting spatulas. She aims to depict the emotions of liberation (“set free”) and freedom (“being free”). Her work as a whole, is inspired by nature and portrays the absence of human presence, bringing out the personality of nature itself, while providing the viewer the opportunity to escape and appreciate all the beauty that surrounds us. More of her work can be found at [www.BN-WArt.com](http://www.BN-WArt.com).

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for stubborn artists

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