



The Portal

A Collection of Short Stories and Poems
by members of the Writer's Group



From DiVitto Kelly, writer/editor of the Portal:

For the last three years, I headed up the monthly writer's group, working alongside some very talented writers. Together, we divvied up healthy critiques, presented helpful reading material, and served up encouragement to aspiring writers. The finished product was the Portal, a collection of short stories and poems.

I have savored this experience, but mostly, it's been a pleasure to associate with the steady and studious three: Ed White (a.k.a. CP Bialois), Jaime White, and Rick Weber -- you rarely missed a meeting. Together, you, my friends, all contributed so much to make the monthly one-of-a-kind Portal a success.

When I took over the Portal from talented writer/artist Etheridge Lovett in late 2012, writing fiction was new to me. I had some writing experience as a former editor/reporter for a local newspaper, but writing fiction was a different animal. I was always intrigued to sit in one of their afternoon meetings, but my work schedule always seemed to

conflict with it. I did manage to occasionally sneak in a few minutes here and there when I was off desk. It proved to be just enough to wet my creative writing whistle.

Looking back at my first stab at fiction, I quickly realized that creating a story versus covering a story were two separately unique processes. When I covered a story for the newspaper, I let the story come to me, jotting down pertinent observations and getting quotes along the way. To create a short story, I had to build something from scratch, creating characters, dialogue, setting, and more. The onus fell completely on my shoulders.

With the help and encouragement of my colleagues, I managed to eke out my very first short story. I geared the quirky tale towards tweens. Having spent lots of time working in youth services (and having two children of my own), I found myself drawn to the juvenile fiction genre.

What I soon realized with a Grinch-esque grin was that I could incorporate experiences in my life (both past and present) and apply it to my stories. My first tale titled *Go Fish* (formally *The Goldfish*), has a whole bunch of truth in it. The 12-year-old protagonist is a Reds fan. I was born in Cincinnati and will forever be a Reds fan. Case closed. Second, my wife is a

teacher at a Catholic school. School carnivals and volunteering are a way of life; there is no escaping it! Last but not least, the antics of my two children are a wealth of material with a dose of my own childhood thrown in for good measure.

I hope you enjoy my first-ever short story as much as I did crafting it. Actually, it was a complete anxiety-filled struggle. (and yes, I pestered my co-writers for their help). In the end, it was a proud accomplishment from a newbie that I still savor today. From that one short story of 3,462 words, it inevitably led to my first novel, *Seal Cove*, a horror story published last year. From an acorn grows an oak! Or should I say from a short story grows a novel?

This is for everyone who inspired me to keep plugging ahead. Thank you again my fellow writers. Oh, and I can't forget Emil 'One Dark Night' Moreno, who inspired me to write the novel in the first place. I wish you all the best in 2016.

Last but not least, I want to thank you, the reader. Simple as it may sound, without you, the Portal would have fallen flat on its face. Keep reading; and we'll keep writing.

DiVitto Kelly



The Switch

By Jamie White

“You know what we should do?”

Abby must’ve heard those words come out of her twin’s mouth a million times in their 19 years and they never stopped being terrifying. Claudia was always restless and looking for something new to do, excitement and adventure. More often than not, those words had gotten them into some kind of fix, but that never stopped her from asking what it was and eventually going along with it. What was that old saying? Insanity was performing the same action over and over while expecting a different result. If that was true, then Abby was certifiable. Ok, she had to admit that her twin had never gotten her into any real trouble; only a few really scary and awkward situations. This was mostly because she was far too timid, a point of contention between the two. Claudia was always telling Abby to lighten up and have some fun.

Truth be told, Abby was jealous of her sister. Claudia wasn’t

plagued by insecurities and was always first to sign up for some new challenge. Her life seemed like so much fun. She tried to imagine what it was like for her twin to live with no fears, no insecurities holding her back. She suddenly realized her twin was waiting for a response, bringing her back to reality. “What?”

“Well, you know I have that trip coming up right?”

Was she kidding? It was all that Claudia had been talking about. In a few short weeks, Claudia would be embarking on a safari where she’d be camping and hiking, not to mention all the amazing creatures her group would be seeing. Abby had considered going as well after Claudia raved about the last trip. She had to admit that the pictures and stories her twin had brought home were tempting. Still, she hesitated and before she knew it, all the slots were filled. She’d been kicking herself over it for days. “Yeah?”

“Well, I was just thinking that it’s a shame you missed out on a seat so... how’d you like to take my place?”

“Are you serious?” *What am I thinking? Of course she’s serious!* Her twin had instigated more switches than Abby could count over the years and each one had been a success. They knew each other well enough to fool even their own families

when they wanted to. They rarely did it to their parents, though, and had never revealed any of their switches so no one even considered the idea they would try it.

“Sure, why not? Look, I’ve already gone on one of these and I know you’re dying to check this out. You take my place. No one will ever guess. They haven’t had a meeting for the trip yet and most of the people going don’t know me. Plus, you know how well I can fool them here.”

“Well....” She was tempted. Boy, was she tempted. She would love to be able to see all those creatures in the wild and study them. She’d always had a fascination with animals and even considered being a vet at one point before settling on education.

“Come on... you know you want to.” Claudia’s voice took on a teasing tone, her one eyebrow arched in a silent challenge.

“Alright, I’m in.” Claudia always managed to get her way on things, it was a gift. Her parents always teased her that she should become a lawyer or politician. There were few things she couldn’t talk someone into.

Several weeks later Abby was getting ready to board a plane. She’d said goodbye to her family outside her parent’s home before the shuttle arrived to drive the group to the airport only a short

time ago and she already missed them. She never traveled so far before with people she barely knew. She was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea as a sudden rush of butterflies invaded her stomach. *Well, there's no backing out now...*

A few days into her trip, Abby was having the time of her life. The isolation was unexpectedly freeing to her. She didn't have to worry about constant phone calls and people coming by to ask for help with one problem or another. She could just relax and enjoy the sights that surrounded her. Claudia had been right; she did need this trip. Abby hadn't realized how stressed she'd been until she arrived here. When she got back she was going to have to thank Claudia for talking her into going.

Back home, Claudia was having a different experience. She had left her cell phone at home and moved into Abby's room for the duration of the trip and she didn't know how her twin handled things as well as she did. Since she was known as the more sensible of the two (and because Abby had an extreme allergy to the word "no"), friends always turned to her when they were having a problem. Claudia was already feeling the burn out. This was why she didn't often volunteer for stuff or offer advice to people; they would just keep coming back for more. She'd have to have a talk with Abby

when she got back about being too much of a doormat. It wasn't good for her. For now, Claudia was about to go out and have some fun with the few friends of Abby's who didn't constantly need help with one crisis or another. They were going out to a movie and then to get something to eat. It sounded boring, but should be an interesting change of pace for Claudia. She usually spent her nights at campus parties or any club that would allow people under 21. She'd just finished putting on one of her sister's favorite shirts when the doorbell rang. "Coming!" She grabbed her sister's purse and hurried for the door. It wouldn't be good to be late since Abby was punctual to a fault. She opened the door, putting on the same bright smile her sister always used to greet people. "Hi, Kristy!"

"Hi!" Kristy gestured to the hallway. "All ready to go?"

"Of course! Where's everyone else?" She peeked into the hallway, looking for the two girls who were joining them.

"They're waiting downstairs in the car. We couldn't find a parking space."

"Oh, ok. Tell them I'm on my way down, just have to lock up."

"No problem." Kristy turned around and hurried downstairs as Claudia quickly scanned the apartment and locked the door.

Her sister would kill her if she forgot to turn the water off or lock the door or something. She'd already done each a couple times and nearly caused a little flood in her own home.

"Hi, everyone!" Claudia climbed into the back seat with a girl named Dana, who'd worked in the school bookstore with her sister. In the driver's seat was Leslie, a girl Abby had met in a literature class the year before. "How are you guys?"

"We're good," Leslie answered. "So what are we going to see?"

How Abby, who loved order so much, managed to be friends with them she had no idea. The one time she'd gone to the movies with them, they spent about twenty minutes debating what they were going to see that night and barely ended up having time to get to their seats before the show started. "How about that comedy that just opened?" Claudia remembered that Abby had been the one to suggest a movie first. After a bunch of debate, they'd finally gone with her choice. The same held true that night. By the time they'd gotten to the theatre and Claudia bought her sister's favorite snack (a diet soda and some raisinettes) they barely had time to sit down before the credits started to play. The smell of the popcorn her friends had bought was driving her crazy. Movie theater butter was her favorite, Abby couldn't stand the

stuff. Claudia licked her lips and tried to block the smell from her mind, popping one of the candies in her mouth.

Late that night, George Phillips was awoken by the sound of the phone ringing. He blindly reached for the receiver, blinking his eyes to clear the haze he was looking through. "Hello?" Mr. Phillips listened to the person on the phone a minute, the color draining from his face. "Yes, we'll be right there."

"What's going on?" His wife, Susan, sat up as a yawn escaped her lips.

"It's Abby. There's been an accident."

Twenty minutes later, George held his sobbing wife as the doctor broke the news. The car Abby had been riding in hit a tree after her friend Leslie had swerved to avoid a deer that ran into the road on their way home from the movies. Abby had been sitting in front and was thrown from the vehicle. The two sat in silence for what seemed like forever, holding onto each other as though holding on to a life preserver. Finally, Mrs. Phillips broke the silence.

"Claudia won't be back for another couple of days. What are we going to say to her?" She couldn't imagine the pain her daughter was going to feel coming home to such horrible news. The two had always been

so close. Just before Claudia left for the trip, Abby had been saying how excited she was to hear all about her sister's adventure. They couldn't call to give her a warning before she got back. Even if they could,

would they? How could they break such news over the phone? No, there was no way they could do that. They'd just have to make sure that they were there to greet her and give her the news in person.

Reach Out

Sheila Klein

Reach out as far as these long arms can extend
 Muscles ache with new effort, neck sore,
 Eyes puffy from lack of sleep, adrenaline pumping unregulated
 Bursting with bubbles of spring intoxication
 Effervescent, sparkling, clear, yet weary
 Move through space in all directions: up, down,
 around; don't forget the diagonal
 Face obstacles straight on
 Not turning away or pushing away, follow the way
 Truth with all its curves and sharp edges
 Approach gingerly with care and pace yourself
 Find some welcoming arms to rest in
 Then reenter the fray with renewed resolve
 Take up the challenges without resistance
 Trust the inner voice whispering what's needed
 Heard through the buzz and shouts of the naysayers
 All is possible, limitations are illusions
 Once those arms reach out they transform into wings



Go Fish

By DiVitto Kelly

The annual Saint Joseph Church carnival was winding down. It had been three and nine-tenths days of exhausting amusement, but on Sunday evening, eleven-year-old Thomas Leary was running out of time. In between boarding a slew of nausea-inducing rides and devouring funnel cake the size of Frisbees, it was time to win something other than another stuffed animal.

Thomas wanted to win a goldfish, but not just any goldfish. There was one in particular that had eluded both Thomas and all the other rambunctious children for nearly four days. Centered amongst all the traditional looking goldfish was a peculiar-looking one. It was not only the largest, but also the only one that was silver. It had tinges of green and red on its belly and black streaks on its paper-thin fins.

All of the glass fish bowls appeared to be the same size; ten rows of ten, and all neatly lined up. They were stationed on a sheet of plywood, propped up a foot off the ground with the use of beat up plastic milk crates. Yet

for some reason, no one had won the peculiar looking fish. Maybe the mouth of the fish bowl in question was narrower than all the others. Maybe all those children were just plain unlucky – or maybe they were lucky.

The carnie man working the goldfish booth stood just a notch over five-foot-seven. He was slender, grubby, and had two missing front teeth. He sported a red Mack Truck baseball cap complete with bulldog logo. The rest of his visibly dirty blond hair sprouted out in all directions like oily hay. His blue jeans and olive-green colored t-shirt had an assortment of stains, mostly grease from maintaining the hodgepodge collection of carnival rides.

Young Thomas approached the man, knowing it was now or never. “You want that fish pretty badly, don’t ya kid,” smirked the carnie man, proudly flashing that open-gapped smile a la Leon Spinks. “You ain’t the only one wanting to win it; I’ve made a killin’ these last couple of days – see?” The man held up a wad of dollar bills stacked high as a New York deli sandwich. He pointed his unkempt face at the boy, with breath so bad it made Thomas’s eyes water.

The young boy stared at the fish; the visor of his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap tilted down to conceal his face. He wasn’t keen on making eye contact with the creepy man.

“You gonna give it one more try, son?” the man inquired, knowing the boy had been there a bunch of times before already. “I’m closing up shop in ten minutes so you better make it quick.”

Thomas studied the fish intently. He paused, and then reached into his back pocket for his navy blue wallet sporting images of sharks, a gift he bought for himself from Marineland two years ago. He pulled it apart. The tearing sound of Velcro made the carnie man cringe.

“God I hate that noise!”

“Sorry sir,” said Thomas, thinking it was rather odd that a man working on noisy machinery and subjected to blistering loud classic rock music all day and night would mind the slight tearing sound of Velcro.

“How much you got, son?” the man asked impatiently, watching the boy dig around for cash. “Come on kid, I got a line of people here.”

Thomas turned around but didn’t see anybody. He pushed the bill of his cap upward, “It looks like I’m it, sir.”

“I guess so,” he answered quickly with a smirk. The man was itching to consume some adult beverages.

“And if you want my last dollar, you shouldn’t be so pushy,” Thomas added. The man gave Thomas a glaring look, not appreciating his smart-aleck remark. He’d had his fill of bratty kids the last few days. At least

he didn't have to worry about cleaning up barf unlike his brethren who worked the rides.

"Okay, okay kid, sorry. It's just that we're ready to close and I could really use a cold beer."

"And a shower," Thomas thought to himself. The boy pulled out a crisp, folded up dollar bill tightly hidden in a small crevice of his prized wallet.

"Alright, tell you what -- you get three throws for a buck, but since you're my last customer, I'll give you six." The man thought he was being extremely generous, considering how much annoyance he had endured these last four days. He loathed kids, but loved their money.

At least the weather hadn't been so bad, he thought, but tonight was looking like a different story. The man's occupation, with its long hours, cramped living conditions, and constant traveling, was demanding, but the salary was better than decent for a man with a tenth-grade education. Best of all, payday was conveniently done 'under the table.'

"I'll only need three this time," replied the determined boy, blocking out the ten dollars he'd already spent the past three days. "I'm gonna win it this time."

A rumble of thunder reverberated over the carnival grounds; a light drizzle of rain began falling. "Better hurry up, kid. It's do or die," the carnie man remarked, eyeing the menacing charcoal gray skies. A

blistering display of lightning etched out over the backdrop like lines on a map. Then it started to pour. At least the goldfish booth was covered.

Yet Thomas blocked it all out: the rain, thunder, lightning, and assortment of greasy foods gurgling in him stomach. Instead, he focused on the disco-ball looking fish remaining stationary in its bowl. The boy licked his lips and stretched out his arm, trying to get as close as possible to the target. He clutched the yellow ping-pong ball in his right hand and tossed it underhand. It clanked off the back part of the bowl, rising high before falling off to the side and onto the ground.

"One down, two to go," the man said, impatiently. Another bolt of lightning pierced the sky; thunder followed. Thomas aimed again, this time overhand style. He took in a deep breath, squinting his eyes like he was facing the last batter in the World Series. The second throw clinked off the front of the bowl, coming up way short. Thomas slumped his narrow shoulders. "Rats."

"You choked on that one kid," said the carnie man. "Stay focused, one more time; you can do it." Thomas looked up, thinking the carnie was starting to sound like his little league baseball coach.

"Thomas, where are you?" called out his mother, holding her seven-year-old daughter's hand and a melting ice cream cone in the other as her purse slid up

and down her arm in annoyance. She was thoroughly exhausted.

"Just one more chance mom; I'm gonna win that cool-looking fish.

"We've got to go now," she exclaimed, struggling with her always-effervescent daughter, Fiona. "In fact I have to go now!"

You said I could have a pet, right?" asked Thomas, more determined than ever. The mother of two was worn out, having spent four straight days volunteering at the carnival, a big fundraiser for the church and Catholic school, where Mrs. Leary was also the art teacher.

"Thomas, I've spent thirty hours with you and your sister here, not to mention at your grade's game booths. It's time to go!" Mrs. Leary was certain her husband planned his business trip this weekend on purpose.

"Just one more throw mom; I'll get it this time!" replied her son. "I swear!"

"No swearing," shot Mom.

"While we're young, kid!" said the irked carnie, sneering, already packing up his gear. When no kids were around, the carnie man was a genuine swear-o-matic. The man handed Thomas the last ball. The boy took off his baseball cap, handing it to his sister, who put it on, slightly tilted. He stretched out his arms, blew on his right hand and took aim.

"Alright fishy, this is it," said Thomas, glaring at the target. The fish remained still, staring at

the boy. It winked and offered up a subtle grin. The boy straightened up, taken aback. He paused for a moment. Did he really just see that fish smile? That would be weird, but also totally cool, he thought.

The fish pressed its nose against the round bowl, observing the boy closely. “That’s so cute mommy,” said Fiona, tugging on her coat sleeve. “The fishy is smiling at me!”

“Fish don’t smile, Fiona,” said her mom quickly, wanting to leave ASAP.

“Oh this one does ma’am; it’s quite special,” the carnie man said emphatically.

“Fish smiling? Please,” she huffed. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I said this one does,” he replied, as he brandished his bold, toothless gap.

“You need to win this fish, boy,” the carnie said, emphasizing the word, y-o-u. The man went over to the fish bowl and pressed both hands on it like a crystal ball. “He really wants you to win him.”

Thomas tossed the ball just as a bolt of lightning nearly struck the church. The ping-pong ball hovered ever so briefly before descending. It bounced straight up from the back edge of the glass bowl. The ball came down, hitting the front end, flying up a few inches before plopping straight into the targeted bowl. A winner!

“I got it mommy, I won the fish!” screamed Thomas as he broke into a happy shuffle.

“Hurray for Thomas,” screeched Fiona. “Now we have a pet!”

“You mean I have a pet,” answered Thomas, proudly.

“Yippee to all of you,” said the carnie, prying open his blue and white cooler and popping open an ice cold bottle of Budweiser. “Salud kiddo, as they say in Spanish. And here you go little girl, a fish for you too.” The carnie man handed the girl a small goldfish in a bag.

“What do you say Fiona,” said Mom.

“Thank you, mister.”

“Just my way of saying thanks for all your money,” joked the carnie man. “But seriously, it’s time to go folks so I can enjoy my cervesa in peace.”

The carnie man handed the bag with the big goldfish to Thomas. He even through in a free fish bowl. The boy held it up. The fish stared directly at him. The carnie man scurried around, already collecting empty fishbowls and placing them in a big box.

“This goldfish looks like it has . . . teeth,” said Thomas, surprised.

“What, kid?” he asked, hearing only part of what the boy was asking. He dropped one of the glass bowls, breaking it then accidentally knocked over his beer when he stepped back.

“Oh, for the freaking poop! That was my last cold beer.” He

picked it up and drank the rest, savoring every ounce before belching.

“We feel your pain,” said Mrs. Leary, eager to leave. “Thank you again for the extra goldfish.” Mom and daughter started walking away.

“No problemo,” said the carnie man, who suddenly reached out and latched on to the boy’s arm.

“Son, you better take good care of that fish, or else.” He glared at the boy straight in the eyes with a patented Cheshire cat grin before letting go.

Thomas stood like a statue, sensing a chill that migrated right up his spine. “Uh . . . okay.” He caught up to his family, glancing back only to see the carnie man still staring at him.

The rain was coming down harder as the family trekked through the empty parking lot. The winds were blowing harder and more lightning painted the blackened sky.

“Hurry up, kids,” yelled mommy. She fumbled for her keys and pressed the button for the sliding door to open on their minivan. Everyone piled in.

On the ride home, Thomas studied the fish. It kept looking at him no matter how he turned the water-filled bag.

Fiona was spinning her bag around and around. “Mommy, do fish get sea sick?” At a stop light, Mrs. Leary rested her head on the steering wheel and sighed. “I survived another year.”

 It was nearing 11:30pm; the kids had already changed into their pajamas and brushed their teeth.

“Bedtime guys,” said Mom, getting into bed herself down the hall and finding a copy of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone planted on her pillow. Thomas had been bugging her mom for weeks to read it.

The eleven-year-old placed the fishbowl on the desk next to his bunk bed. An occasional lightning strike spotlighted the fish, now angled upward at the young boy. Thomas, resting on his side, looked down at the fish, observing it. He took out the orange mini flashlight he stashed under his pillow when he wanted to read late at night and shone it on the fish. It suddenly popped its head out of the water. Thomas’s eyes widened. He had a weird feeling about his new pet.

It was near midnight; everyone was asleep. Thomas had left the flashlight on, still pointed at the fishbowl. The gentle beam began to fade. The fish fluttered its fins and moved to the center of the bowl. It blinked. The circular eyes turned completely black as tiny triangular teeth sprouted from the upper and lower jaws. The fish sped around and around as the water level in the bowl began to rise, spilling over the edge. The fish swam faster and faster. More water whooshed from the glass bowl like an overflowing blender. More

and more water started spilling out.

An hour later, the bedroom floor was covered in water, over a foot and filling up quickly. The bedroom door was shut tight, not a drop leaking out. The storm was going nowhere, rain coming down in sheets and lightning illuminating the night sky. More bellowing thunder rolled in.

It was nearing two in the morning; the water now covered the lower bunk bed completely. The bowl floated aimlessly like a lost ship. A gentle splash almost woke up Thomas, who turned to the other side of his bed facing the wall. A blue stuffed animal shark he’d won two days earlier fell into the water, barely causing a ripple. It rested on the surface momentarily before something pulled it under. An hour later, the water was halfway up the ladder leading to the second level bunk bed.

A crack of thunder made the boy lift his head, turning towards the window. Before sinking back into his down pillow, Thomas noticed the fishbowl almost at eye level, floating. “What the . . .?”

Thomas jumped to his knees on his bed, terrified. He searched for the flashlight now lodged somewhere under his blanket. He picked it up, shining the weak beam of light around his water-filled room. He heard movement coming from the front part of his bed facing the door. He picked up his pillow, brandishing it like a shield, and peered just over the

top. To his right, Thomas noticed the stuffed animal shark half-submerged in the water, shredded in half. He continued to inch closer to the front of the bed, still unable to see anything.

Another gentle splash. The boy paused, reaching back instead and tossed a stuffed animal seal into the water, wondering what would happen next. Silence. The water abruptly kicked up and the stuffed animal’s head appeared in front of him. He shined the flashlight at the seal when a grotesque head followed. The stuffed animal was lodged in its mouth.

Thomas tried to scream, but was nearly paralyzed with fright. He gulped, unable to take his eyes off the hideous mouth. Whatever it was, Thomas wasn’t about to let it shred another of his stuffed animals. He lunged for the seal, snatching it right from the thing’s mouth before whacking it with the pillow, sending it back into the water.

Thomas jumped back to the other end of his bed, trying to make out where the thing was. He aimed the flashlight in every direction. There, at the other end of his bedroom, Thomas spotted a longish, spiky dorsal fin protruding from the water. The right pectoral fin, colored in tattered streaks of black, lifted from the water. It plopped a red object on top of its head, unveiling a small grease-stained hat, the words Mack Truck standing out in bold black letters. The bulbous head poked out of

the water; the evil fish grinning at the boy. The front two teeth were missing.

“You shoulda picked another fish boy!” the voice lashed out, laughing like a mad man. “It’s dinnertime baby!” Thomas recoiled in horror.

“I hate kids, boy, especially ones that use Velcro! Haaaa.” The fish zeroed in towards the bunk bed like a torpedo. Thomas leaned against the wall pulling up a corner of the twin mattress for protection. The hideous fish looked like one part grouper, one part carnie. The fish was over five feet long, hued in silver with green and red markings, and blotched with grease stains. It barreled out of the water, smacking right into the mattress, gnashing its dirty gray teeth. Thomas pushed back as the snapping jaws lunged closer.

“Mom!” Thomas screamed out weakly, his eyes frantically searching his room for protection.

“You’re toast, kid, and I like mine topped with humans!” Thomas noticed his baseball bat floating in the water. He pushed back the fish and reached for the thirty-inch Louisville slugger, grasping it in his wet hands.

“Alright, Mr. Carnie fish, come and get me!” roared Thomas, one of the best hitters on his little league team. The fish pounced again, only to be met with the bat.

“Oh, for the freaking poop!” screamed the carnie fish. “You

little punk! Now you’re dead meat!”

Thomas noticed the water spilling over his mattress. Preparing for another attack, he glanced at the window and had an idea. If he could get rid of the water, the fish would be helpless, and would earn a much-deserved pounding. Thomas shifted to the window next to his bed. He pulled up the blind, and started smashing away with the barrel end of the bat, the top windows first. Then, as the water receded, the lower ones. The water poured out like a crumbling dam.

The fish attacked again, this time having to jump up a bit to reach the boy. Thomas was ready, christening the ugly fish’s head with a powerful whack.

“You son of a rat, I’ll kill you!” yelled the carnie fish, now boiling mad. The ugly fish shook its aching head. Thomas broke more windows. The water gushed out profusely.

“What’s going on in there Thomas?” asked his mom, awakened by the sound of breaking glass, “I can’t open the door!”

“Everything’s under control mom,” said Thomas, raising his tween-age voice. He climbed down the ladder to pummel the carnie fish into submission. The water began to recede quickly, now only a couple of feet deep in his room.

“You snot-nosed rat,” the hideous fish hollered, snapping

its repulsive jaws at Thomas, determined to gobble up the boy. “The carnie fish always triumphs! The eleven-year-old rolled his eyes and pummeled the fish repeatedly.

The rest of the water started retracting back into the glass fishbowl, swallowing it up. Soon, only the damp carpeting remained. The fish thrashed about helplessly.

Thomas raised the bat again but noticed the fish was shrinking, smaller and smaller. “What the heck?”

“This ain’t over kid,” screeched the carnie fish, flailing away with its fins on the blue carpeted floor.

The carnie’s voice rose higher and higher as if he’d inhaled helium. The crazed fish kept shrinking, now no bigger than a Snicker’s bar. Thomas scooped it up like a hot grounder with his Rawlings glove and dumped it back into the glass bowl. The angry fish emitted a string of curse words underwater as a slew of bubbles perched the surface.

“Are you alright? Thomas?” his mom cried out, pounding on the door. She finally stormed inside, able to push it open. She noticed her son standing in the middle of his room, holding the fish bowl in one hand and the baseball bat resting on the opposite shoulder.

Thomas exhaled. “I’m okay; everything’s fine.”

“What’s going on?” Mom asked, soon realizing she was standing barefoot on the soaked carpeting. “Ugh, what happened here?”

“It’s a kind of a weird story,” said Thomas. He walked out of his room and headed for the bathroom, whistling.

“Are you feeling okay?” asked Mom, calling down the hallway. “What are you doing with your fish?”

“I just need to use the bathroom real quick,” her son replied, grinning to himself. Thirty seconds later . . . flush. Thomas returned to his bedroom with the empty fish bowl.

“Where’s your fish?” Mom asked.

Thomas turned around. “Oh, he had to go too.”

Awake

David Plumb

Window to your left
 Tiny click of overhead fan
 Quiet spreads across the neighborhood
 You think back when the days emptied
 When she simply appeared
 Not a soiree, a fantasy, a blank wish
 You knew something caught right off
 Your mind drifts to her breathing
 Your arm rests on her shoulder
 A female great horned owl hoots
 From the nearby park
 Silence and you remember the first dance
 At the Pink Hotel, step following step
 Beyond the mystery of folly, messes, not funny
 Days, good and bad memories that fade
 And disappear at 3:07 A:M when
 A tiny light no one but you can see appears and someone says
 This is it and for a second you don’t know
 It’s you talking to yourself
 It says yes she is the prize the whole damn thing
 Beyond wars, endless slaughters, souls gone awry
 Crooked politicians, dropping APRs, failed dreams
 Impossible circumstances and just plain wisdom
 And you lie there listening to the awe
 Holding the two of you so still



Howling at the Moon

By Meagan Cahuasqui

Cold wind slashed through her skin. Tiny pellets of semi-formed ice left cuts in her vulnerable face, but she couldn't stop even for a moment, no matter how sharp the pain of catching her breath was. *Better these small wounds and aches now than defeated in mere minutes.*

The people of Adalyn's village always said she moved like a swift winter's storm in the night, now it was time to see if that was true. Thankfully, the bright, white moonlight lit her path, otherwise she wouldn't have seen the fallen and decaying tree trunk in front of her.

Adalyn jumped the hurdle like a ballerina doing an jeté across a stage, her lithe legs extending to their fullest, one behind and one in front, until her cloak caught on a stray, jagged branch and choked her back.

One deft movement set her free as she twisted out of the trap and left the cloak behind, now exposing her entire body to the freezing forest. She could already feel tiny prickles of

droplets that weren't quite ice yet layering over the surface of her collar bone and shoulders.

Can't worry about that now. Her breath came out in controlled huffs and she could see each exhalation as a cloud of evaporating mist right before her mouth. It never lingered long, which meant it wasn't as cold as some nights. *Still cold, though.*

The wolf pack's howl reverberated through her very bones and the sound almost seemed to travel ahead of her, as if they were simultaneously leading and pushing her to a specific destination. Adalyn smiled, a feral thing that reached her eyes.

So, they think this same old trick will fool me like when I was a pup? She glanced around her, never losing sight of the path under her feet, seeing from side to side as she kept pace with the night's wind, narrowing her eyes until they picked up forms and movements on either side of her. One corner of her lips quirked up. *I don't think so.*

Her nostrils flared as they took in the scent of her brothers, telling her where each member stood in the familiar formation. It was a classic flanking maneuver, with three wolves on each side, forcing her to continue in a straight line, until she ran herself over a cliff or into a dead end. *And what happens when I don't follow logic?*

The goal, after all, was for Adalyn to make it to the safety zone without getting caught by the pack, and the safety zone lay ahead, so forward she must go.

She felt the two halves of the pack move in on either side, creating a narrower path so that she could not run left or right through any open gaps they might have left before. The pressure was on, and she felt her brothers' confidence grow, but these were her woods, too.

She grounded her feet in the hard, frozen dirt to come to a brief halt, and then twisted herself around to head back in the direction she came from, never losing much momentum since this was something she'd practiced time and time again.

It took Adalyn's brothers longer to catch on, and in that brief moment of their inattention, she dodged left, right behind that half of the pack, and charged straight on up a sturdy pine tree, using the rough, cracked patches of bark as her hand and footholds until she reached the branches, where she then began to spring from one ledge to the next on the tips of her toes, barely touching ground on each jump.

She climbed until the pine needles became thick enough for some cover, and then she leaped from that tree to the next, and the next one, and moving forward again in the same direction she was always meant

to, swinging and jumping from tree branch to tree branch, like it was all some playground jungle gym that bridged the gap between here and there.

The brisk, sharp scent of the bark and needles also threw her brothers off the trail, so when Adalyn could hear their padding paws against crunching leaves and pine cones and stones no more, she descended, mere yards away from the safety zone. It was in her line of vision, but she hadn't accounted for the little one.

Like her, he moved as a ghost in the dark, and she hadn't expected his equally adept intellect.

She was forced to come to a halt, and the sudden stop sent her sprawling back. A dull ache shot up her elbows as they hit the cold, packed earth. Adalyn winced and sucked in a loud breath, trying not to let the few stray tears escape.

A young, light grey wolf, not quite a pup anymore, but with some of its soft, fur still remaining, stepped in her path, blocking the way to the safety zone. He made no noise, but bared his still growing fangs in an arrogant snarl.

She had to admit, it was well played, but was he faster than her? *Time to find out.*

Picking herself back up, she brushed off twigs that had embedded themselves in her skin, ignoring the sting of the open cuts and fresh bruises that adorned her legs and arms. With bent knees and a straight back, she waited, knowing he'd charge first. They always did, even one as smart as him. They couldn't help it.

The energy emanating from the standoff was like an electrical charge in the air. A millennium seemed to pass between them as she held her breath, until finally he ran forward, teeth bared. Adalyn chuckled and met the challenge, charging forward full speed.

A few feet lay between them when he acted as she'd predicted, jumping forward to close that last gap, jaw open, ready for the clamp that would put her out of the competition, but she grew up playing this game.

In the last moment, just before he descended on her, she threw her body back, legs forward, and slid underneath him, and without looking back, threw her body forward once more and sprang into the last stretch, legs working full force. Now she could hear them all at her heels again, but the game was over.

Adalyn rammed into the pillar at the safety zone and slammed her fist down on the red X, now worn and faded from decades of

others like her laying their claim to a place in the pack.

Sweat that had been frozen to her skin during the game now flowed freely down her brow and nose to her chin, and she breathed deep and hard, finally feeling every cut, bump, bruise and fracture from the night's escapades.

Behind her, she heard the loud and purposeful step of her brothers as they drew up into human form once more. A heavy hand clapped down on her shoulder, the eldest, giving his sign of respect for her accomplishment.

"I almost had you," said a sullen voice next to her. The little one crossed his arms and pouted.

She reached out a hand, tousled his hair and laughed. "You did. Next time, brother."

Together, they made their way back home to the village, where the ceremony would take place under the full moon, cementing her well-earned place in the pack.



Give it a Hiss

By CP Bialois/Ed White

“Reports continue to come in about a twenty foot king cobra snake on the loose. Authorities say to stay indoors, and do not approach or attempt to apprehend the snake if you see it. I repeat, Reports continue to come—”

Janet switched off her car radio and stared straight ahead at the twin yellow eyes staring at her from the middle of her white garage door.

They are not eyes. They are not eyes. They are not eyes... She forced herself to breath as she repeated her new mantra until the eyes shifted back into yellow circles caused by her headlights.

If only the damn thing had windows... How could I let my imagination get the best of me like this? She shook her head and chewed on her lip. Ever since her brother threw that damn rubber snake at her when they were twelve... A cold shudder ran up her spine at the memory. *And now there’s a*

cobra on the loose. Oh, lucky me...

Swallowing, she tried to wrestle her growing anxiety until she could think straight. This was no time to panic, especially since the reports were from across town. There was no way a snake could cover that much distance in a couple of hours. She was sure of it. Besides, part of her was sure the media was embellishing the snake’s size and danger like they did most things. *Then why don’t you get out of the car?*

Good question. She looked out her window, but all she could see were the evening shadows. Nothing looked too out of the ordinary, but she didn’t trust appearances enough to step into the shadows. It didn’t matter if the street light and the houselights along her street were burning brightly, no way could anything on God’s green Earth make her do that. Nuh uh.

So what do I do? Blowing out a breath, she gripped the steering wheel and pulled herself higher so she could see closer to her door. She’d seen enough movies and documentaries to know not to step blindly out or over something without seeing as much as possible. That knowledge didn’t help when she couldn’t see straight down the side of her door to the ground.

“Damn it!” She let go of the wheel and fell back into her seat

with a grunt. Out of reflex, she reached for the handle to wind down her window, but paused as her fingers touched the clear plastic knob. *The radio said it was twenty feet long! It could get into the car!*

A whimper-like squeal escaped from her as she pulled her hand back and pressed her eyes closed. *I so didn’t need to think of that.*

Her chest tightened as her breathing came in shallow gulps and her heart raced. She recognized the anxiety attack right away, but there wasn’t much she could do except to force her breathing to slow and deal with it.

“It’s not any different than the hundreds you have during the day. You know what to do.” With as much as she had going through her mind, saying this actually caused her to laugh. While it was barely more than a couple of hiccups, it helped her relax enough so that her heart started to slow and the tightness in her chest loosened.

Shaking her head, she forced her eyes open and stared at the twin yellow circles on her garage door again. It never failed. Every time she had an anxiety attack, she always found a way to deal with it. No one believed her at work when she told them, just like she knew they wouldn’t believe her when she said she thought the cobra was under her

car waiting for her. Hell, she didn't really believe it. But logic wasn't something that worked with someone in the midst of panicking.

Is that what I'm doing?

She groaned at having her own thoughts berating her. "No, I'm trying to survive."

Really? Could've fooled me.

She winced at that and wondered if others argued with themselves like this.

After a few more breaths, she glanced at the car radio's clock: eight thirty. She should've been inside eating a microwaved dinner half an hour ago. The idea that she allowed herself to be stuck in her car burning gas she couldn't afford to burn was embarrassing. Even worse, she knew some of her neighbors had seen her pull into her driveway. They were probably laughing it up at her stupid overreaction to things. She knew she would if she was in their place.

Taking another deep breath, she let it out slowly and reached for the door handle. She intended to keep the lights on, but she'd turn off the engine. Her husband could jump her dead battery in the morning. Right now, she just wanted to get inside as quickly as possible and she needed the light. It was an irrational fear, she knew, but it helped to calm her. Once she was inside behind

closed and locked doors she'd be able to relax.

Yes, inside. Inside is good.

Closing her eyes, she mumbled a quick prayer, then turned off the ignition, opened the door, and jump out, running for the front door as quickly as she could. Let the neighbors be damned if they laughed at her. If they cared so much, they should've come out to check and make sure she was safe. It's what she'd done when Mister Reynolds had his heart attack in the front yard a couple of months ago. Why couldn't they show her the same compassion?

Janet shook her head to chase away the thoughts as she reached the front door and slid the key into the deadbolt, then the doorknob. Both turned without any resistance and she pushed the door open. Once inside, she slammed the door closed and flipped the light switch next to the door. Instantly, the room burst into white light from the chandelier in the center of the room.

She smiled while letting out a shaky breath and taking in another deep one. She had never felt as foolish as she did now that she was safe and sound in her house. Each part of her memory from the last half hour came with a laugh, but none more than thinking the snake could possibly have covered the handful of miles

from where it escaped to her house. The college was at least ten minutes away by car, and someone would have seen it along the road or sidewalks. No, it was in a yard or tree somewhere hiding. It'd be found and caught by the morning, she was sure of it.

Feeling better about herself, she pushed away from the door, and still chuckling, made her way past the stairs and living room. Nothing was out of place as far as she could tell, and that realization brought another concern of hers to mind.

Her husband should've been home by now, but she hadn't seen his car.

Maybe he parked in the garage? Yes, that's it. It's his turn today.

A weight lifted from her at the answer coming so fast. It meant he was home and probably taking a nap. That was why he hadn't come out to her car when she'd sat in their driveway stressing over what to do. It was as simple as that.

She flicked on the light switch in the kitchen and turned toward the fridge and the empty beer can on the counter next to the sink. "Harold, you know where the recycling goes." She uttered a good-natured tsk and picked up the can. The unexpected weight caught her off guard and she dropped it.

She watched it fall to the floor in slow motion. When it struck the tiles, some brownish-yellow liquid popped out like a squirt from a water gun, then it bounced. The can turned in mid-air, giving her a glimpse of the brand name before hitting the floor again and rolling and spewing its contents over the floor.

The entire event felt like a dream to Janet and she continued watching it for a few more seconds as it gushed beer all over the floor. She thought about grabbing a towel to clean it up when an icy cold hand grasped her heart.

Fear like she had never felt before swarmed over her, making what she'd experienced outside seem like a mild shock. With shaking hands, she grasped the side of the counter behind her. Each breath came in short, raspy bursts as her throat continued to tighten.

Something's wrong! Something's terribly wrong! She tried to swallow, but her neck muscles refused to work.

Something fell over in the garage.

The sound, followed by cursing pulled her back from the edge she found her nerves on. But it wasn't until Harold opened the door across from her leading to the backyard that she could move. In what felt like a single

motion, she launched herself into his arms and buried her face in his shoulder.

"Hey, honey, hey, what's wrong?" Harold tried to soothe her, but she refused to release her hold on him until her heart started to slow. Seeming to sense her need to hold him, he didn't try to dislodge her until she was ready. When she loosened her grip and stepped back, her gripped her arms to steady her. "Are you all right, babe? What's wrong?"

Janet tried to answer, but only incoherent blubbling came out before being chokes off by swallowed tears and mucus.

Harold guided her to the nearest kitchen chair. Easy, now. Come on, breathe. Nice and deep, now."

With her fear washed away at seeing him, she did as he instructed and after a couple of minutes she was able to grab a paper towel to wipe away her tears and blow her nose. When she felt able to talk, she opened her mouth but she only chuckled and shook her head. "I feel like such an idiot."

The worried look that had dominated Harold's face was gone, replaced by a smile of his own. "It must be something good to upset you this much."

She waved her hand holding the paper towel in the air. "It's... it's

just they were saying on the radio that a twenty-foot long King Cobra got loose at the college..."

Harold nodded, knowingly, his smile fading. "And you thought it had come here somehow."

She knew he hadn't meant it as a question, but she nodded anyway. "Yeah. Pretty stupid, huh?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. When I got home, none of the neighbors were out. Not even Ted across the street, and he loves to grill on a day like this."

Janet's brow furrowed as her mind tried to grasp at something she hadn't thought of that before. "That's strange. I only heard the news half an hour ago, maybe a little longer than that."

Harold shrugged. "Don't know. I didn't hear about it until you told me, and I worked at the college today."

Janet gasped, then covered her mouth with her right hand. "That's right. You had a drywall job there today."

Harold nodded. "Yep, and no one mentioned it while I was there, so I think that's a good sign we don't have to worry."

Once again, Janet felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Shaking her head, she dabbed at her eyes with the paper towel. "I'm such

an idiot. I left my lights on so I could run in here.”

It took a second, but when Harold started chuckling she couldn't help but join in. After everything she had put herself through, it felt great for her to laugh again. Even if meant her sides would hurt tomorrow.

After a couple of minutes, he patted her on the shoulder and stood. “Guess we'd better take care of that before the battery dies, huh?”

Still chuckling, she nodded. “Yeah, or the neighbors will really have something to talk about.”

He smiled at her, then headed toward the front door.

She pushed herself up when a thought occurred to her when she spied the beer can and puddle still on the floor. “Honey?”

“Yeah?”

“What were you doing, anyway? I thought you would've heard me come home.”

He poked his head around the corner of the arched doorway, smiling. “I was busy setting up your garden.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “You're kidding?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I'll show you after I get your lights.

Keys?” He held out his hand and she tossed him her car keys.

“Be careful.”

“I will.” With that, he disappeared back around the corner. When the front door opened and closed, she grabbed some paper towels from the kitchen table and turned toward the spilled beer.

“Man, I'm such an idiot.” As she bent down to clean up the mess, the door to the garage pushed open off to her side. The latch had been broken since they moved in, and Harold hadn't gotten around to fixing it yet. The creaking of the hinges caught her attention, but it was the loud roar-like hiss that made her spin around. Sitting there, propped up nearly as tall as Janet and with its hood fully pushed out was the largest snake she'd ever seen.

As if in reaction to her fear, her mind recalled a story she'd read as a kid in the 90s about a woman in Florida that heard a hissing coming from under her car after she pulled into her driveway and was halfway to her door. Thinking it was a leaking hose or something, she turned back to see a python had somehow tangled itself in the undercarriage of her car.

Despite the details of the story that came to her, Janet couldn't remember if the snake had been injured or not, but at the moment she didn't care. All she could do was stare into the circular

bronze-colored eyes of the king cobra and remember how she had thought her car's headlights on the garage door were snake eyes when she first came home.

If only it had windows... “I could've seen you in the back of Harold's work truck.”

The snake seemed to hiss in answer as it pulled its head back and lunged forward. Even as it bit into her shoulder, Janet could only see those eyes, and how unsnake-like they seemed.



Be It Resolved

By Rick Weber

“What's your New Year's resolution this year?”

“Not to make one.”

“That's what you said last year.”

“...and the year before that, and the year before that. The same as lot of other folks do. Why make promises you can't keep?”

“You should at least try.”

“Get fat, dumb, and happy during the Holidays, and atone for it all

after New Year’s Day. No thank you. My level of hypocrisy doesn’t go that far. I can only sink so low.”

“How far is that?”

“What?”

“How far have you sunk?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you want to change?”

“I am the way I am. I certainly don’t want to be like you setting all these great goals and not following up on any of them. Tell me how have you changed in the past year?”

“Well, I, I, I.....”

“And there you go. Nothing ventured. Nothing gained. What is your prognostication for this year? What are you going to follow through on? Are you going to really make an honest effort? My guess is no.”

“You didn’t give me a chance to finish.”

“Finish? Finish what? You never start.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh? Please enlighten me. Name one thing that you started, let alone completed.”

“I have a plan every year.”

“Planning doesn’t count. Did you ever initiate any of your plans?”

“Well, I tried, but things came up.”

“What things? Don’t you mean excuses, lame, very lame excuses?”

“I had other priorities looming, which had to be done.”

“Priorities? What kept you in the way of keeping your promises?”

“Work. I had goals to meet for the year.”

“Management by objectives you set yourself the year before, a very low bar.”

“The bosses were pleased.”

“They were tolerant. What are your long range goals?”

“At work or outside of my job?”

“Both.”

“Well, those are two very different issues. Each has its own focus...”

“The discipline is the same for both. What have you set upon yourself to get things done? What effort have you made to stick to these rules? The answer is none.”

“I disagree. I exert a high degree of self-control in carrying out all of my activities.”

“I see very little in self-control in anything you do, which is why you don’t start and never finish what you have ‘planned’. Schmoozing the bosses will only get you so far, and that road is coming to an end. Outside of work, you’re a lost cause.”

“Again, not true. As you have seen, I have a very dynamic life outside the office...”

“Only, if you count being a bump on a log as dynamic.”

“I don’t like to make waves...”

“The pull of the moon makes waves. You’re impervious to anything that might get you going in any direction.”

“I don’t want to be led around by the nose. I want to find my way.”

“Find your way? Ask for directions!”

“Ask whom? You? Which way do I go, and where do I go?”

“What are your priorities? You said that they held you back in keeping your resolutions. Nothing I saw amounted to a ‘priority’ unless I missed something.”

“You weren’t looking at the whole picture. You don’t understand.”

“Understand what? ‘That a body in motion stays in motion,’ and ‘a body at rest stays at rest.’ You

haven't moved, and you're certainly not moving me."

"This is what I'm planning for the coming year..."

"We've covered that. A plan is not an action. What are you going to do? What's it going to take to get you started?"

"That's pretty bold talk coming from someone not resolving to do anything."

"Me? I'm not the one lying to myself year after year after year. How about coming clean and telling yourself the truth?"

"The truth?"

"You know, the truth. Face the facts. You don't want to change. You want to stay in your comfort zone. You don't want to accept that this is the calm before the storm. If you don't do something soon, it will be too late. You're an asteroid going through space on a collision course with another asteroid, a planet, or a piece of space junk."

"So, the ball is in my court?"

"It always has been."

"What are you going to do to help?"

"You mean what do I have to offer?"

"Is there something substantive being put on the table? I can't go it alone."

"You never have been. We have always been pushing and pulling each other, but we haven't gotten anywhere. We need to change. We need resolution."

"What do we need to resolve?"

"Inertia. We have to change in order to improve. We're in a rut together."

"I see you're finally facing reality yourself. I may have been in denial, but so were you, the all knowing one, by not making any resolutions, ever."

"I guess the change has begun..."

A beeping noise started growing louder and louder. I shook my head and rolled over toward it. It was the alarm clock. I reached over, turned it off, sat up on the edge of the bed, and smelled coffee being brewed in the kitchen nearby. I had conversations like this before with myself, but never with this sense of urgency. I knew that this was the time.



Cannibal Buffet

By DiVitto Kelly

"I'm famished," proclaimed Bob Unger, eager to chow down with his wife and two children as they patiently waited to be seated at the restaurant.

"We'll, you've come to the right place," replied the spunky brunette hostess, overhearing the hefty man wearing blue jeans and red checkered flannel shirt. "This way, sir."

The Home Body Buffet was a favorite dining joint for the Unger's, feasting at the popular restaurant at least once a month. The four sat down at their familiar table stationed near the main buffet spread for easy access.

"Okay kids, you know the drill, take your plates and silverware. And Toby, absolutely no cutting in line," said Mom to her weeble wobble framed eleven-year-old son. "Last time was embarrassing, jumping in front of that old woman, just for another thigh!"

"All right, all right, I promise -- sheesh," said the beleaguered boy, a mirror image of his old man.

“Alice, please don’t be so finicky this time,” said Mom, addressing her slender daughter. “Your father spends a pretty penny to come here.”

“Yes mommy dearest,” the surly teen replied, a Goth replica of her favorite TV show character, Gloomy Gladys.

Three of the four family salivated as they circled the large buffet table like sharks.

“Ooh, look!” said Bob, “Fresh CEO, musta got ‘em from the city today.”

Helen passed, preferring a sample of sports athletes – something lean and trim. She’d been dying to lose twenty pounds, even trying the Adkins diet, “But at some point, “you run out of Adkins’s.” She loved that line, often blurting out in laughter and snorting like a pig.

Mr. Unger glanced to his right at a sign and cringed. “Politicians? Man oh man this joint is scraping the bottom of the barrel. Son, stay away from that or you’ll be sitting on the can for a week. I wouldn’t eat ‘em if they were the last living people on earth.”

Alice never ate much, preferring fruit and vegetables. All her friends and their parents were doing it, but her mom always insisted.

“Dear, if you’re not too hungry, try the librarian – they’re low-calorie.”

“Librarian? Ha,” laughed Dad. “Why don’t you just gnaw on a tree limb instead?” Mr. Unger

was in fine comedic form. A full-time professional funnyman, Unger literally killed his audience.

“Maybe if you’d stop chomping down on those slow-moving Wal-Mart types, you wouldn’t be such a porker,” said Alice, always aimed and ready with a verbal barb.

“Hey, I’m in good shape, kinda,” replied Dad as looked down at his protruding gut.

“Well, I’m going to change my diet – no more people!” boasted Alice, an independent thinker who never shying away from an opinion. Both parents were hoping no one else overheard their daughter.

“Sorry folks; our daughter’s a bit under the weather,” said Mom, sporting a half-hearted smile.

“Son, I wanna test out a new joke -- actually it’s an old joke but with a new take.” Toby shrugged, fancying to load up his garbage can lid of a plate. He never laughed at his dad’s jokes.

“Okay Pops, spill your guts.”

“Hey, I like that; mind if I use it tomorrow night at the ‘Fryers’ Club?”

“Sure, why not,” Toby added, drolly.

“Okay, a horse walks into a bar.” His son was already rolling his eyes. “Hang in there, son, okay? Now, where was I? Oh, a horse saunters into a drinking establishment. The bartender says, ‘Hey, why the long face?’

“Come on, Dad,” grouched Toby.

“The horse replies, ‘Cause my wife was just turned into glue! Haaaaa!”

A single mother, properly dressed, gasped. “Sir, that was in absolutely poor taste!” She proceeded to select a healthy looking forearm for her son and stormed off.

Seeing the restaurant completely full, the always effervescent Mr. Unger called out, “You know why cannibals don’t eat clowns? ‘Cause they taste funny!” Haaaaa!” The whole place erupted in groans.

“Why does he have to do that lame joke all the time; it’s so embarrassing,” quipped Alice.

“You’ve only experienced it for a few years dear, try twenty-five for me,” shrugged Mom.

The Unger family filled their plates and returned to the table. Alice stuck with a large salad and some finger food. Toby dug into his plateful of organs. Mom dined on biceps and triceps while dad feasted on a community college professor, hoping it would make him smarter.

“You know it never used to be this way,” said Alice, well-mannered as she finished off her healthy meal. People used to eat regular foods; fruits, grains, chicken and beef.

“That was two hundred years ago dear,” said Mom. “You should know from history – how viruses wiped out the food

supply all over Earth. And the fish, they got smart and swam into deeper waters, unable to be caught. In desperation, people turned on each other, and in due time, we liked it.”

“I heard it was because humans were so filled up with preservatives and chemicals it was the only thing still fresh to eat,” joked Dad. “It was fat people who were eaten first – those couch potatoes never had a chance.”

“I think I read somewhere people use to eat barbecued ribs . . . from pigs!” added Mom.

“What’s a pig?” asked Toby.

“Dad,” Alice answered, coldly.

“So what are you saying, we start grazing on our front lawns?” asked Dad. “Maybe pour some thousand island dressing and sprinkle a few croutons on our fine Kentucky bluegrass? Ridiculous!”

“Try this?” said Alice. She took out a small plastic container from her cute panda shaped backpack and handed it to her dad.

Dad opened it, grimacing at the tan object. It had a crusty texture, still warm. “What is it?”

“Just give try it Dad. You’re not scared, are you?”

“I’m not scared of nothing, except your mother when she’s really upset at me. Okay, okay.” He took the object and bit into it. His eyes lit up in approval and

continued munching. “Wow! What is this?”

“Chicken,” said Alice. “For my school project, I was able recreate a few farm animals from recently discovered DNA.

Actually, my best friend’s dad is a research scientist and he helped us. We’ve got chickens, a pig, two goats, and a cow. They’re all secretly stored at the abandon barn behind my friend’s house.”

“I think I’m in love with chicken,” drooled Dad. “You got any more?”

“Yep, at home. We’re going to expand the project so we don’t have to eat people anymore.

Aren’t you getting tired of chasing the postal worker for breakfast, or preying on my teachers? We can’t find a decent substitute anymore. And besides, it’s messy too.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” replied Dad.

“You really think we can all survive on this?” He eyed the chicken leg bone, cleanly stripped of all the meat.

“Oh yeah,” Alice replied emphatically. Toby was barely paying attention, munching down on liver.

“Well, good for you!” said Mom, proud of her honor roll daughter. “Always the smart one.” Alice smiled.

“Well, let’s blow this Popsicle stand and eat chicken!” boasted Dad. He paid the bill and the family of four headed outside.

“I think this a good time to put the top down, don’t you think?” asked Dad, proud of his hundred year old blood red convertible.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” said their daughter.

“Ah, it’s perfect out honey, and besides, I feel like we’ve all been reborn or something to that effect, boasted Dad. “As of tonight, we’re swearing off people!”

The family of four blissfully drove in and around the neighborhood, enjoying the crisp spring evening air before stopping at a red light. From behind, a gang of famished cannibal thugs jumped the Unger family, devouring them in seconds like a school-full of piranhas.

They left nothing but the bones.

Let's Cover The Mirrors

Suzzette Dawes

Rainy days used to scare me.

As a child, I would run inside

When thunder rolled and lightning flashed in the sky.

Grandma would cover the mirrors

So lightning couldn't come inside

And we would be safe and dry.

Oh, the tales I was told!

We'd entertain ourselves by reading

But I'd often wonder about the mirror world.

The mystique about thunder and lightning lessened

As I grew older, science debunked the legends and lore

And I grew bold and at times braved the elements,

Traveling. I had developed a thirst to explore

From flipping through the pages of our encyclopaedia -

the portal to other places where I dreamt to go.

I have visited quite a few places but still so much more to go

See. Smell. Feel. Hear. Taste.

But when it rains, I still think of Grandma.

I once drove to nearby Ponce Inlet on a rainy day

And the white haze made me think about back in time

Before the comforts of electricity.

Back in time before fancy gadgets,

Before radar navigation and GPS,

When ships relied on the lighthouse to safely come to bay.

Even when it rains, the ships could safely come to bay.

Rainy days are even scary today due to the way some
people drive, it's wild!

Yet we have all these fancy gadgets!

I'd rather be inside, dry, reading a book.

Listening to the roll of thunder and watching the flash of
lightning,

Maybe I should cover the mirrors

For Grandma.



The Anniversary

By Jamie White

The storm raged outside as volatile as the tempers flaring inside. Rain drops beat against the window pane as thunder shook the room. Abby grabbed the closest thing to her, a pillow, and hurled it at her boyfriend.

“You are one of the most frustrating people I have ever met in my life! Are you seriously this dense, or are you trying to piss me off?”

Kevin rolled his eyes and batted the pillow aside before it could hit him in the face, as she’d surely intended. “What’d I do?”

Abby sighed and threw her hands up in the air. “I can’t believe you have no idea. Not even the slightest clue?”

“If I had a clue, why wouldn’t I say so?” Kevin shook his head, taking a seat on the couch.

“You forgot, that’s what! Think about it, Kevin. What day is it?”

“Monday?” He raised an eyebrow as a blank expression came over his face.

Abby let out a frustrated grunt and shook her head. “I’m talking about the date! You really have no idea?”

His face scrunched up in confusion as he considered her question. “It’s September 3rd, so what?”

“Oh, my God.” Abby glared and stood up, heading toward the bedroom.

“Abby, wait a sec...” He got up and followed her. Partway to the room, realization washed over him and his eyes widened. *Shit.*

When he caught up with her, Abby was sitting on the bed with her head in her hands. She looked up as he entered the room, wiping her eyes. “What do you want?” Her voice came out harsh and cracked a bit as she struggled to contain the emotions flowing through her.

Before he could say anything in response, the lights went out, shrouding the room in blackness punctuated by an odd flash of lightning. Both remained silent for several minutes as he considered what he could say to make it up to her, but nothing came to mind. He was going to have to seriously make this up to her. He just had to figure out how. “I’ll be right back.”

He retreated to the dining room where they kept a stock pile of candles and lighters. The click of the lighter echoed through the

room as he lit the first candle. An eerie glow flickered through the room as the wick ignited. He watched the flame dance for a few minutes before setting it in a holder and lighting the other. Anything to get just a few more moments to try and figure out how to make things right.

His heart ached as he thought about the date and what it meant for her. He imagined she could still hear the words echoing through her mind most of the day, along with the memories it stirred in her. He sighed as he picked up the candles and returned to the room.

“Here you go,” he said as he reached a hand out to give her one of the candles.

“Thanks,” she mumbled as she looked down at the floor. She set the candle on the bedside table.

He cringed as he heard the pain in her voice. “Abby, I’m so sorry. I know it’s not an excuse, but it’s all I have right now. I got too caught up in things the past few days and the dates just flew by me. Is there anything I can do?”

Silence greeted his words and Kevin set his candle next to hers, then took a seat beside her. He put a hand on her shoulder. “Abby?”

She burst into tears and he put his arms around her, letting her have the moment of grief without trying to make it better. He

swallowed, knowing that'd been what she'd needed all day. He just hadn't been there.

Awaken

by Daniel W. Butler

“At midnight tonight, your existence will be torn from this reality and you will find peace.” These words are carved into my arm, a prophecy seared into my flesh. I don't know what it means. I don't really care.

I start looking around; I'm sitting on a toilet. To my right is a sink, to my left, a bathtub. My porcelain crypt is waiting patiently to fulfill its duty.

There is a clock on the sink. 11:57. Three more minutes.

I stare at my face in the mirror. Black circles under my eyes. Pale, hollow skin. Disheveled hair. My pupils seem to expand, then shrink. Expand, then shrink. Watching them makes me feel dizzy, a little nauseous.

I close my eyes, squinting them together to keep focused, to stay awake.

I turn on the faucet. Cupping my hands under the water, I slowly sip from it.

Does it matter? Not really. I'm going to die anyway.

11:59. One more minute. My midnight reaper is reeling me in.

My arm begins to burn. Then the words pulse, tearing from my flesh. They rise into the air and

span across the mirror. My arm falls limp, but I barely notice. Crimson words flying toward the mirror hold my attention.

Now they say, “Welcome home.”

It hurts. But I enjoy the pain. It's what brought me to this

bathroom so often. Leaving family, friends behind. I watch my last moment through the broken shard of the mirror. Lying on the floor.

Forgotten.

Dead Poets

Carole Hearn

Dead poets never die
They just fade away

They are like resting books
There on the shelves they lay

Then one day others come along
To see them all anew

And think how fortunate that they are
To get to read them and review

So when I lay upon the shelf
And thoughts of me have passed

One day I'll be picked up and read
But it won't be the last



Authors!

Edgar Allan Poe (Jan. 19)

Benjamin Franklin (Jan. 17)

Jack London (Jan. 12)

Carl Sandburg (Jan. 6)

The Writer’s Group meetings are held the first Tuesday of every month in the second floor conference room from 6:00 – 7:30pm.

***Upcoming dates for 2016:**

Feb 2, March 1, April 5, May 3, June 7, July 5, Aug 2, Sept 6, Oct 4, Nov 1, Dec 6.

The Poetry Club meetings are held the third Tuesday of every month in the second floor conference room from 6:00 – 7:30pm.

***Upcoming dates for 2016:**

Feb 16, March 15, April 19, May 17, June 21, July 19, Aug 16, Sept 20, Oct 18, Nov 15, Dec 20.

From picture books and novels to poetry, stop by and discuss your ideas. Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal to Daniel W. Butler at dabutler@broward.org.

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FEEDBACK CORNER

We want to hear from you! Let us know what you think of our stories. Feel free to email Daniel W. Butler, head of the writer’s group at dabutler@broward.org or call (954) 201-8281.

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