The Awakenings Review

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The cover photo "Mono Lake:" features tufa towers, calcium-carbonate spires and knobs formed by the meeting of freshwater springs and alkaline lake water. Photographer **Sherry Shahan** wandered the globe with a 35mm camera or an iPhone, often watching the world and its people from behind; whether in the hub of London, a backstreet in Havana, or a squat hotel room in Paris. Sherry is a survivor of childhood trauma. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and taught a creative writing course for UCLA Extension for 10 years.

The Awakenings Review is published by

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Poetry, essay, and short story by:

Submission Guidelines

Editorial Policy

The Awakenings Review publishes original poetry, short stories, dramatic scenes, essays, creative non-fiction, photographs, excerpts from larger works, and cover art—all created by persons who have had experience with recovery from mental illness. We aim to publish an ultimately upbeat and hopeful journal, one of renewal and optimism.

A writer for *The Awakenings Review* (AR) need not have a mental illness—we are open to submissions from family members and friends of people with mental illnesses. We do prefer that a creator have a mental illness of some type, and be willing to write about it, but that does not have to be the focus of the writings.

In most cases, at least three members of the AR editorial board review each submission that makes it beyond the initial yea or nay. We strive to give this preliminary review of a submission in as short a time as possible.

Contributors selected for publication are not paid for their work. However, they will receive a complimentary copy of the journal in which their work is published when it becomes available, and additional copies are available at a discount.

Needless to say, do not send the AR the original or sole copy of a submission. The AR does not accept responsibility for lost or damaged submissions.

Submitting Your Work

We request that all submitters send their work through email to AR@AwakeningsProject.org. We will not review hardcopy submission or return them. Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis. Email submissions should be in a .doc or .docx format attached to an email sent to AR@AwakeningsProject.org and the word "submission" should appear in the subject line.

Cover Letter

Authors should include a cover letter describing their relationship with mental illness: either self, family member, or friend of someone who struggles with mental illness. While this information is voluntary, and its absence will not preclude your work from being considered, if your work is accepted for publication, you will be asked to submit a short biography where we would like you to supply this information.

Prose Requirements

The maximum length for fiction, creative nonfiction, interviews, dramatic scenes, book chapters, or essays for a given issue is 5,000 words. We do not review short pieces or flash fiction less than 500 words in length.

Pages should be numbered, and the writer's name, address, phone, and email address should appear at the top of the first page.

Poetry Requirements

The AR is looking for a representative body of work from a poet. This may be 3-5 poems that would fill several pages of the journal (followed by the poet's biography). We do not review single poems sent to us.

Authors should be aware that an individual line of poetry that exceeds 60 characters in length cannot be printed as a single line when published.

If you are submitting more than one poem by email, they should all be grouped together into one Word file, not sent as individual files. Please do not send PDF files.

Again, the poet's name, address, phone, and email address should appear at the top of the first page of a submission.

Biography

Upon acceptance, we request that a writer or poet submit a biography of no more than 150 words to us. We ask that they at least mention their relationship with mental illness.

Artwork and Photography

The Awakenings Review reviews photographs, ink drawings, etchings, charcoal drawings, paintings, and graphics. We place color photographs prominently on the cover of the journal and black-and-white work in clusters of inside pages attributed to an individual photographer or artist.

Color pieces for the cover should be landscape in orientation and at least 300 dpi, but not exceed 5 megabytes in size. An individual black-and-white piece to be considered for inside the journal should be portrait in orientation and at least 300 dpi. Please limit your submission to 8 pieces per email. Send it to AR@AwakeningsProject.org in .jpeg format (we do not accept .pdf or other file formats). Include "submission" in the subject line. An artist or photographer should follow other requirements in these guidelines vis à vis their connection to mental illness and include a cover letter.

Rights

Writers, poets, and artists retain the copyright to their material. By submitting work, they agree to assign to The AR one-time rights for publication.

Material must be offered for first publication. In most cases, we do not accept previously published work. Simultaneous submissions are allowed. However, if a submission is accepted by another publisher as well as by The AR, the author should notify The AR of their preferred publisher.

Privacy

By agreeing to allow their work to be published in The AR, writers whose work is accepted agree to allow The AR to publish a brief biography of them in the print copy of The AR, and to permit The AR to publish their names and titles of their works on The Awakenings Project web site. With the author's permission, the work itself may also be published on The Awakenings Project web site. The Awakenings Project will take measures to protect writers' names from access by Internet "web crawlers" to ensure, to the best of its ability, the writer's privacy. Access to information published on The Awakenings Project site cannot, however, be guaranteed to be inaccessible to all web crawlers.

Foreword – The Bloomingdale Papers

It would be easy to develop a long list of artists, poets and painters who have lived with or died with mental illness. If one includes alcoholism under this rubric, and one should, the list might include the likes of Vincent Van Gogh and William Faulkner. May I be forgiven if I narrow my considerations to only poets and use as an index case a single poet in the person of Hayden Carruth.

Carruth is assessed by many (not all) critics as being among the very best of recent poets. He was born in 1921 and died in 2008, and is thus a contemporary with many of the writers to be found in this issue of *The Awakenings Review*. Carruth left a large oeuvre of poetry and several essays. He was the recipient of prestigious awards including The National Book Award for Poetry.

Relevant to the purposes of this preface and to the mission of *The Awakenings Review* (hereinafter *AR*) is the fact that Carruth, early in his life suffered illnesses, including alcoholism, which caused him to be hospitalized for fifteen months in the Bloomingdale Asylum, the Psychiatric Wing of The New York Hospital, the "looney bin" he called it.

Relevant to this history, is that Carruth continued to write during his hospitalization and that the poems he wrote were subsequently published as "The Bloomingdale Papers". He was discharged not fully recovered but continued to be productive through his lifetime, and attained some modicum of health and peace.

The writing during his stay at Bloomingdale was prescribed: one of his doctors ordered it as part of his therapeutic regimen. The Bloomingdale Papers is a poignant collection, detailed and wrenching, and may illustrate many of the issues by which *AR* is inspired and with which it struggles.

The notion that writing has therapeutic value is not new, as illustrated by Carruth's story. Whether it has efficacy or not is controversial, although we at *AR* firmly believe it does have efficacious therapeutic value and that after medication and psychotherapy, artistic work is the most powerful therapeutic agent. R. J. Singer has written extensively (Review of General Psychology, 5, 91-99) of the power of narrative creation to contribute positively to one's identity including the power to rise to the occasion of wellness. Carruth's recovery, although only partial, provides evidence that the life of an ill person can become meaningful and productive. This reviewer believes writing became his identity and contributed to his well-being.

This perspective raises a question with which *AR* struggles: to what extent should AR's mission focus on the well-being of the poet? It has been written that "a poem is not a poem until the poet is healed". Or should the focus of *AR* be on the readership without regard for the poet's health? If writing poetry has therapeutic value, as Carruth's doctor evidently believed, the mechanism(s) are unknown, a point much in the skeptic's favor. Mere catharsis may contribute to the poet's health, but it is believed by many to have the potential to "lock in" illness. On the other hand, many poets and readers alike, believe that the hard work of artistry may have a mysterious intrinsic power for well-being. The editors and reviewers at *AR* believe that, and true to the idea of "awakening" look for the magic which lies in the manifest or hidden artistry of each submission. The balance is often difficult, and we often fail to achieve it.

A special instance of this conundrum is the occasional writing about horrific and traumatizing events such as war or rape or child abuse. The description of such events is likely to have great cathartic value to the writer but to be distressing to some readers. Such writing may even have the potential to precipitate an exacerbation of illness. Similarly, graphic depiction of killing or of sexuality may offend elements of *AR*'s readership while being of therapeutic value to the writer. Our index poet was not shy about these matters. Carruth wrote about war (against our involvement in Viet Nam) and wrote graphically about the blessing of joyful human sexuality. Hence another call for balance. *The Awakenings Review* is not a publication for a general readership, nor does it accept writing from a general population of artists. But the editor and the reviewers at *AR* believe that such writing is to be individualized and, with some modicum of discretion, standards are to be applied differently in each individual case.

There are some lessons to be learned from the instance of Hayden Carruth. First, meaning and peace can be found even for those in the throes of mental illness. Artistic writing and striving is thought by many to have therapeutic value. The well-being sought is not quick to come, perseverance is required. Second, writers and editors and reviewers all must exercise balance in the service of more than one constituency.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *The Awakenings Review*. We hope you enjoy thinking with us for a moment about the balancing acts required of its editor and reviewers. We find great fulfillment in our work and hope to contribute to your well-being and to the well-being of our contributors.

Lloyd Jacobs, MD
Assistant Editor

Preface

In the early 2000s I was part of a research group, the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at the University of Chicago, where our primary focus was studying the stigma of mental illness. With my colleague, Dr. Patrick Corrigan, I co-authored a book on the topic, *Don't Call Me Nuts: Coping with the Stigma of Mental Illness* (Recovery Press 2001). Pat Corrigan was, and still is, an authority on the subject; I was glad, honored really, to be able to add the voice of a person with a serious mental illness to the project. Today, as a distinguished professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Pat Corrigan espouses a novel approach to stigma, an approach which he calls Honest, Open, and Proud (HOP). It entails education and training to empower a person to disclosure.

Pat Corrigan uses the metaphor of a double-edged sword to describe stigma. On one edge a person experiencing it is fraught with the pain of the symptoms of these disorders such as depression, paranoia, anxiety, or flashbacks. On the other side, as damaging to the individual, there is shame, discrimination, and loss of opportunity.

It is fair to ask what the role of artistic expression is in mitigating of the pain of stigma and mental illness. Does a journal such as *The Awakenings Review* help? I think it does. We start by having over thirty artists, writers, and poets, plus a list of reviewers and production collaborators disclose their own mental illnesses or the mental illnesses of friends and family. We ask each contributor to do this in a cover letter that accompanies their submission, and then in a biography at the end of their work. Again and again, I see them assert that writing is a therapeutic exercise; to many people it is affirming and life-changing. As we say in our listing on the Internet platform *NewPages*, The AR is about catharsis and exploration. We witness catharsis in the creation of poetry and prose; we witness catharsis in the publication and sharing of these writings with the reading public.

The title of this publication reveals our mission. We are a means to awakening artists, poets, writers, and readers to a greater understanding of mental illness. It is a widely known fact that many great and celebrated writers and poets have been touched. The list is so often cited that it does not need to be included here. What is important though, is that writers and poets who contribute to The AR are following a path that has been trodden over the centuries. This awakening is indeed affirming; this is a source of self-respect and self-esteem; this is contrary to stigma. That there is a publication such as The AR that discloses the relationship between mental illness and great literature says that a writer or poet experiences confidence and self-respect by means of their literary heritage.

What else does The AR do to address the anguish of stigma and mental illness? We increase awareness and understanding of mental illness by providing readers with accurate depictions of mental health issues along with their impact on individuals and society. Through literary works, either by reading them or creating them, people gain insight into the nature of mental illness and into their own struggles. Moreover, by creating fictional characters who defy traditional stereotypes and expectations, the authors of this literature teach us valuable truths. The stories and poetry we publish in The AR normalize mental health challenges by portraying them as common and relatable. It also helps to foster empathy and understanding. By presenting complex and multi-dimensional characters who struggle with these challenges, literature encourages readers to see beyond a simple diagnosis and connect with humanity.

Either it is my age, or perhaps the mellowing of my personality, but I sense the stigma of mental illness has been eased in recent years. It seemed brutal, pervasive, prevalent, hurtful, infuriating, and depressing in the 1980s and 1990s when I first was stricken with a schizoaffective disorder. But today, people who I meet in life, to whom I feel close enough that I disclose my illness, are more likely to be understanding and tolerant. This may be due to my having greater skill in managing and communicating my condition—people see me as "normal." Moreover, due in part to the success of organizations that advocate for the mentally ill, and institutions such as IIT, and perhaps more favorable treatment in the media, I think stigma is less widespread in the United States than three decades ago.

To point. Three times a week I participate in a walking group that hikes a 2.4-mile loop at a nature preserve near me. Over months and years, the four or five of us who regularly meet for this activity have bonded. At one time or another, I have shared with the group the turmoil (and adventures) I have had in living with mania and psychosis. But more significant to me is the experience of Jenn, who lives with treatment-resistant major depressive disorder. Those who are "normal" do not cold-shoulder Jenn, just the opposite, they are concerned and supportive. When Jenn talks about suicidal ideation, rather than being estranged, they care for her and encourage her not to miss group outings. Recently, Jenn obtained free samples of a new medication that, after years of depression, was finally giving her relief. Sadly, the free samples she counted on ran out, and she was not able to afford to buy it. Without being asked, a member of the group called the pharmaceutical company that manufactures the drug, acted as Jenn's advocate, and secured from the company a supply of free samples for Jenn.

In keeping with the HOP model, allow me to disclose one seminal event in my psychiatric history. In 1979 I was a second-year graduate student studying for an MBA at Vanderbilt University. A year earlier I had graduated from Kenyon College with a Bachelor's degree in psychology, so I had little experience with a business curriculum. Aside from business school being a bad fit, all the courses—marketing, finance, accounting—were foreign to me so I scrambled to get up to speed. Just shy of miserable, I was under considerable and prolonged stress. By the mid-semester my thinking and behavior were driven by anxiety and referential delusions from a rising psychosis. One night, as I sat on my bed, a lightning storm flashed outside my window. At the same time, I was aware of beams of light streaming into my darkened room from a light bulb through the louvered door to my closet. It was the light of God, and it was telling me that the flashes of light were nuclear bombs being dropped on Nashville. I had to do something! I had to tell someone about this calamity. So, I jumped in my car and drove off into the night with no direction, until I suddenly knew I should tell the horrible news to the Chancellor of Vanderbilt, Alexander Heard. But I didn't know where he lived or where to go. I arrived at a four-way intersection with stop signs, and a car passed in front of me. I knew with certainty, the kind of certainty that only a psychotic person can comprehend, that I should follow that car and it would lead me to the Chancellor's house, then I could inform him of this catastrophe. So, for many blocks, I followed the car until it pulled up in front of a large building with a white portico. I rushed inside and told a receptionist that I must see Alexander Heard. She led me to a room with bright fluorescent lights and a cot, and only then did I realize I had unwittingly brought myself to the Emergency Room at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. I was admitted to the psychiatric unit and in ten days discharged on antipsychotic medication. I took a medical leave from Vanderbilt a week later. This event changed my life profoundly.

In truth, the terms "mental illness" and "psychiatric disorder" are still pregnant with negative connotations. On the cover of every issue of *The Awakenings Review* is a tagline that says that this is a journal by artists, writers, and poets who live with them. In this declaration we are honest, we are open, and we are proud. By way of Pat Corrigan's model, we are truthfully an endeavor that dulls the double-edged sword.

Robert Lundin
Editor

Advisory Board

The Awakenings Review is pleased to announce the formation of an Advisory Board that will regularly advise The AR on matters of editorial practice, visibility, distribution, and content. We gratefully welcome the Board which is comprised of the following notable individuals:

Patrick Corrigan, PsyD, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Illinois Institute of Technology; Director of the Center for Health Equity, Education and Research; international authority on stigma, prolific author and editor. **David Lynn, Ph.D.**, Dept of English, Kenyon College; Editor Emeritus *The Kenyon Review.* **Lloyd Jacobs. MD**, Professor of Surgery Univ. of Michigan (retired); MD, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine; Former President of the Medical College of Ohio; Assistant Editor, *The Awakenings Review*. **Mary Lou Lowry, JD, MS**, Retired attorney; Masters of Science in counseling; Exceptional leader in mental health advocacy; Benefactor, the Awakenings Project. **Dost Öngür, Ph.D., MD**, Chief, Psychotic Disorders Division, McLean Hospital; William P. and Henry B. Test Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; Editor in Chief *JAMA Psychiatry.* **John Budin, MD**, Exceptional leader in mental health advocacy; Board of Directors, The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance; Associate Professor of Psychiatry (retired), Columbia University Hospital of Physicians and Surgeons. **The Right Rev. George Smith**, Rector, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Glen Ellyn, Illinois; MDiv, Seabury-Western Theological Seminary; MBA, Northwestern University; BA in Economics, Wesleyan University. **Steven Hayes, Ph.D.**, Foundation Professor of Psychology Emeritus, University of Nevada, Reno; President, Institute for Better Health; best-selling and prolific author and researcher; developer of Relational Frame Theory, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Process-Based Therapy. **Kay Redfield Jamison, Ph.D**., The Dalio Professor in Mood Disorders, Professor of Psychiatry, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine; Honorary Professor of English at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland; prolific author and authority on bipolar illness.

Editor's Note

True to the nature of mental illness, often the content in *The Awakenings Review* can be melancholy, alarming, or disturbing. Our editorial staff has weighed the practice of attaching trigger warnings to select stories or poems in these pages and decided against it. We feel instead that you, the reader, should understand from the start that in reading a journal of this genre and honesty you may at times come across material that is sad or unsettling. If you are sensitive and easily alarmed, we suggest you read with caution. Otherwise, we encourage you to read with a fair mind and an empathetic heart.

However, I would like to announce that, with the Spring 2024 issue, *The Awakenings Review* is committed to publishing material with a different emphasis. Our aim is to make you, the reader, feel heartened and uplifted by the material that you read in our journal, so we will do our utmost to present poetry and prose that has an encouraging message. This will not be an easy task, but we are committed to a new direction.

RKL

Liana Tang

OUTBURST

After the poem by Emily Dickinson, 1862

After great pain, the formal feelings suspend—
The Nerves sits alone, doused with cowering fantasies—
The stiff Heart questions their perceived purpose
When no one hears the beats on the surface?

Perhaps another brief candle lighted way to dusty death,
Or plagued by social suicide in another shaky breath.
Perhaps a roof was battered by viciously strung slurs,
Or a gilt title stripped and lost to a long-time spur.
Perhaps—

No flickering flame near
To thaw and hasten the suspended cheer.
But done without accommodating slow,
It explodes—then the letting go—

REFLECTION

Bellows the din inside our head
But broadcasting none
For we're afraid to steal the comfort blanket we had offered
And tossed it to the side, leaving the cold to bite us.
But the faceless taunts grow,
Taking your breath away
And kneecap your body
And watches you in your sleep.

But you stare back,
And no one's there.
Oh, but your shadow rises,
The blood stopping inside your veins
Bile twisting and churning,
Burning your stomach.
Sweat dripped down your nape,
But you see it, there's someone
That awful someone
Playing your body tricks
And seeping their awful thoughts into your bone!
You grasp it with your hands, and clamp it tight.
"I've got you now!"

But the form shimmers under the moonlight,
And no one's there.

But even with your body plans of sabotage
And the chaos of the outside world
There is a steady pulse
Tying you back to your roots.
For why else would Lord give you a beating heart?

CLOSED DOORS

You wait in a room with open doors
Under harsh, glowing synthetic lights,
You speak, "I heard you are a doctor
Who could cure anyone with your sight."

"Ah yes," the doctor replied with his back turned, six feet away,
"But I'm afraid I can't look at you.
But I promise my reasons are sound and clear,
And have been thought through."

"Please doctor, there is a swelling worm
wiggling inside my brain!
Unless slain, I will be nothing but dirty stains."

"Even if I slain the worm,
The process is long and disorderly,
And isn't it your fault for digesting the worm
That has led you to calling me?"

"Sir, I'm sorry for the trouble
But I do not know where the worm comes from—"

"But that's not the problem.
I'm worried about what the suppressed, bloody instincts inside you become.
You could scream, you could kill, you could lie,
But with no one to vouch or deny,
I'm afraid it is time we say goodbye."

Your mouth clamped shut, as the guards dragged you away,
They're never interested in your blows or shows,
Or the pain of the worm wiggling inside your brain
Because the door is now closed.

Liana Tang *is a Hong Kong 17-year-old writer who has been published or forthcoming in more than fifty-five publications, including interning at the* South China Morning Post*. Her first chapbook,* Crossing the Chasm, *is forthcoming from Trouble Department in 2023 and her co-authored Young Adult novel is forthcoming from Earnshaw Books in September 2023. She has been admitted to the University of Toronto in Canada. She briefly struggled with depression, suicidality, and binge eating disorder when she was a child, but aims to provide hope in her writing works.*

Elizabeth Brulé Farrell

MARIGOLDS

I plant the marigolds for power.

The faithful believe the scent calls back
the dead. All summer I carry buckets

of water, pray over the flowers, hope
for more buds. At October's end

a burst of pungent petals. I scatter them
across the table and put out plates,

wait for the hungry ghosts to come.

CHANGING

We were surprised that she said the word
Halloween, dragging a yellow banana peel
costume out of the closet. Learning to speak,
she already knew it meant changing from one
thing to another. I was a flower once, wearing
a floppy headdress of petals framing my face.
Another time a clairvoyant walking with spirits.
Then a paper bag became my mask with eyes
barely big enough to see. I liked being hidden,
leaving myself for a while. Now I discard
descriptions, allowing a grandchild to choose
what and who I will become at twilight.

HESITATION

Before I saw her face it was her hair
that I noticed, straightened of curls,
hanging below her shoulders.

She seemed paralyzed in produce,
staring too long at the romaine and
unable to move to another aisle.

Dismayed that seeing me
might trigger discomfort within her,
I hesitated to ask how she was doing.

HOLDING IT TOGETHER

All winter in the bitter cold
wooden pins gripped the empty rope,
highlighting their lack of service.

There would be a thaw, a need
to hang out wet clothes again.

Some of them made it through
the days of dwindling light.
Some of them split in two when

trying to pry them loose
from the frayed and unraveling line.

There was no fixing what was broken,
counting how many left were still of use.
There would be more than enough

Elizabeth Brulé Farrell

STEALING MY SOUL

I smiled blowing out the candles
as you took my picture.

A smokey residue of wishes
floating in the kitchen.

It was once thought your soul
was stolen by a camera.

I hope you can see mine.

Elizabeth Brulé Farrell's *poems can be found in the chapbook,* Into the Wild Garden *(www. allynpaperworks.com),* The Healing Muse, Earth's Daughters, Except for Love: New England Poets Inspired by Donald Hall, The Paterson Literary Review, Poetry East, Stronger Than Fear, Evening Street Review, The Comstock Review, Pilgrimage, *among others. She has been the recipient of the Louise Bogan Memorial Award for Poetry. She wrestles with seasonal affective disorder when the clocks fall back and there is less light each day. She is grateful to be a part of* The Awakenings Review *which benefits many of us who struggle.*

NILE

I love working with children. Their innocence and wonder about the world, coinciding with their dead-pan literal, matter-of-fact approach to everything around them, never ceases to make me laugh. But that's also why it pains me when anyone hurts a child and robs them of their right to innocence. Nile is one of the many youngsters who make me want to make the world a safer place, and in doing so, continues to change me.

It was a hot, sunny June morning when the van pulled up in my driveway, and I chafed as the sun beat down on the asphalt, making it steamy hot even before noon. Nile's mother got out of the van and announced, "She don' wanna' get out the car. She 'fraid of you." I smiled and nodded at Mrs. Jones, who held her drooling ten-month old partly on her hip and partly resting on her six-month, pregnant belly. Mr. Jones, a large man who appeared to be stuffed behind the steering wheel, gave me a broad smile, and tipped his baseball cap, saying hello.

I rested the palms of my hands on my legs and bent down to look into the van. The little girl looked out from the back seat, and when I moved closer, she hooked her hand tighter around the door handle and peeked out for a look at me. I stood smiling at her, a good four feet from the van, while meeting her intent, but cautious gaze.

"Hello, Nile. I'm Dr. K. It's very nice to meet you," I said.

She hesitated for a moment, stone-faced, sizing me up. "Hi, Dr. K.," she said. Slowly, she began the laborious task of unfolding herself out of the van. A thin girl, she unwrapped her arms from around her long legs. She thrust her legs, one at a time, in front of her, the rest of her body following, moving slowly, cautiously, like a praying mantis. She came toward me - head down at first - then with tiny steps, she slowly and gently raised her arm to meet my extended hand. As we shook hands, she was looking at me, and a small smile eased its way at the corners of her mouth, then fully emerged onto her ebony face, displaying perfectly white teeth, both top and bottom rows arranged in straight lines.

As we moved from the driveway to my office, I realized that she reached my shoulder height, and she carried herself with an air of delicacy and grace even though she was all of seven. Her mother had called to make the appointment and reported that Nile's older stepbrother, now out of the home, had sexually abused her. She suspected that there had been physical and psychological abuse as well. Nile's only outcry for help occurred *after* yet another abusive encounter, when her twelve-year-old stepbrother had threatened to kill her and burn down the house, with all family members in it. Nile stated that she told her parents. "I told the truth because him might hurt the baby. The baby doesn't know how to run yet."

The simplicity of her reasoning in the face of terror was staggering, and over the course of two sessions she revealed to me unspeakable horrors. A sadness that this quiet, beautiful child had endured such horrific abuse seeped into my soul, encasing it like a shroud. She quietly revealed the last of her stepbrother's abusive behaviors, the last event that triggered the call by neighbors to child protective authorities and which brought her into treatment with me.

"I don' know why him wen crazy…but him did. Seem like him been crazy all the time. I could tell…him eyes was gettin' that mad look. Him eyes always get really big. Then him starts screamin'. I run away and hide in the closet, but him found me. Lucky the babies was wit mama," she said shaking her head. "Him tried to touch me that way agin' but not so much…but he's mad, real mad. So's him tried to burn me up. Wit a lighter, but I push him back. But hims got madder. So, him pick me up and throw me out the window and hold me bys my feet," she said. "Him said he want me to fall so he could hear me go squoosh," she added.

She aimlessly arranged the clothes on the baby doll while she talked as if telling a story about someone else, and only occasionally would her face get angry or animated. I could hear the internal chatter of my anger rising, thinking about this defenseless child, alone, and dealing with a preteen who was obviously in the throes of a psychotic break.

Suddenly, I got a quick flashback to a memory from thirty years ago, long before I was a therapist. I was teaching kindergarten and loving every single second with these doe-eyed, so easy-to-please babies. Being the lunch line leader, learning to write your name, or being the one to feed the goldfish for the week, are the primary accomplishments that bring honor and pride to a little five-year-old.

One of them, James, came into the class one day to announce, "Miss K, I know how to read!" he said. The other children around him squealed with ohhhhhhhhs and ahhhhhhhhhhs at this announcement.

"James, would you like to show us how you can read?" I said.

"Yay! Very much," he said. And so, the child proceeded to read, slowly and haltingly, the first page of *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. The children crowded around him as if touching him would help them to suck out the magical ability of reading. Their faces were filled with astonishment that he could decipher what those magical shapes and forms meant. Then the mood moved to wonder, their excitement spread like wildfire. "He *knows* how to *readddddd*!!!!" they squealed. In the language of children, I knew they meant, "He knows the secret!!! He knows the secret!!!" My heart filled with unspeakable joy of what this learning created for them. It was a pathway that would open the door to limitless horizons.

I flew back to Nile in the present day, and with me was the wonderful, innocent moment of witnessing the birth of reading, a memory from so long ago. *That* was what I wanted for Nile to have experienced...the innocent magic of discovery. Not the terror that lurked around every corner, nor the sewer types of experiences that had kidnapped her youth.

"I like that him gone now. It quiet and nice," she said. She nodded then, rubbing the palms of her hands on her upper legs, acknowledging that getting to that quiet was no small feat. "Now the babies don't wake up with the screamin'," she added. She smiled slowly with her large brown eyes, languishing in the sea of tranquility.

"I can't wait for wen the new baby comes," Nile continued. "I want it to be a girl so we can have more girls than boys. Then nobody will get hurts again."

"It's not nice when people hurt each other," I said.

"Yep. Especially wen they is supposed to love you. Like wen it's a brother or somethin'," said Nile.

Nile went on to discuss many of the ways that her stepbrother had terrorized the household, and I often wondered who had terrorized *him* to make him think of such evil things to do at such a young age. In her little life on this earth, Nile could *not* remember a time when her stepbrother was not torturing her.

Whether we played Candyland or we talked about the abuse, or she drew pictures of her family, Nile would first sit down with her hands on her lap, become very quiet and then very slowly begin to look around the room. It wasn't a suspicious, frightened, or hypervigilant examination. I came to understand that Nile's temperament was to observe all the things in her environment first, even people, in an effort to assign meaning to things before she began to interact. Each time she came to a session, she had a different set of questions: What were those papers in the picture frames on the wall? (Diplomas). Where did you get that clock from? (It was a gift from my mother and father). How

come you're a grown-up and you have so many good toys in your room? (So that children can play with them while they talk to me).

But she would also ask hard questions and make many thoughtful observations. She would look down at my granite floor and ask me how they got the tiny lines in the "cement." One day while we were playing Candyland – her favorite game - she bolted upright and got this surprised, astonished look on her face and said, "Ssssshhhh Dr. K.!"

We both sat very quiet, and she leaned forward and whispered to me, "Does you hear that beautiful song? Listen, that bird is singing! Ohhhhhhhhh…I's could listen to it all day!" She ran to the window to catch sight of the creature who was trilling. A smile emerged, and her face glowed peacefully with its ebony sheen. Caught off-guard, I just sat and listened to the beautiful songbird, getting more enjoyment from watching this child who seemed to me to be an old soul. She could take enjoyment from the simplest things in life, and yet she had been through so many unspeakable traumas.

I had liked her name the instant her mother spoke it during our first telephone call. I thought of the river Nile in Egypt, the long, meandering snake of a river that carried ships with exotic spices, colorful fabrics, dazzling jewels, and astounding riches that stymied comparison. The Nile was rich with the narrative of monarchs and alive with the history of a country as old as civilization itself… the elixir of life.

"I called cause she gots to come to see you cause of the abuse. But she can't be stayin' long. We be movin' to South Carolina soon…like in a few weeks," said her mother.

"Do you want to wait until you move to begin her in therapy?" I asked.

"No…can't do that 'cause the judge says we gots to start her right away. I knows she'll takes to you cause she takes to everybody, but she 'ben through a lot. Nile a special child. But you see that. You sound real nice, so I think she might be okay," she said.

Nile and I had four sessions before her mother announced that when she brought her again it would be for the last time. I asked the mother for her forwarding information such as the new address, and where I could contact her to give Nile's new therapist a history of what she had accomplished thus far in therapy. I also hoped that this statement would ensure that Nile would continue in therapy, but the mother told me that she would first be staying with a relative in Mississippi. Then they would move to South Carolina to live with family before the new baby came. Nile's parents, uneducated and poor, always spoke of Nile with pride and appeared as the kind of parents who had her best interest as their primary objective, but I could feel the worry and apprehension within me grow. My engulfing hope was that they would protect her in the future.

Our last session occurred on a bright, sunny day. The cicadas were going full blast, signaling that the heat of August was high, but summer would soon be coming to an end. I decided that Nile and I would go down to the beach, a short walk from my office, so we could walk along the cool, dark-gray water's edge. Her parents, along with the babies, stayed in the air-conditioned waiting room.

The sand was still wet with the tide receding, and the grainy coolness felt good on our feet. The sun was starting its journey toward noonday, and the top of the water looked like someone had showered it with granulated sugar. As we walked, Nile slipped her hand into mine and both of us looked at each other and smiled. Tall for her age, she was just about shoulder height to my 5'3" frame. As she walked, her back was ramrod straight, and her strides convinced me that in a previous life she was a Zulu who could cross the Sahara in a day's worth of running. We talked a little about this being our last session, and her sadness at not being able to see me anymore because she would be so far away. I agreed with her that it was indeed sad, but that she was going on to a new life, in a new place with wonderful adventures, free from the harm she had experienced before.

Nile looked at me and smiled. "You know," she said, "today I am the luckiest person in the whole world!"

"You are?" I laughed. "Why?"

"Because…the sun is shining. We are near this pretty water, and you are my friend, and you are holding my hand," she said.

I was momentarily speechless at the profound but absolute simplicity of her words. With all that this child had endured, it appeared that there was not one angry bone in her body. She always seemed to be in harmony with her environment and only became upset when talking about trying to protect her younger siblings. And in the short time that I knew her, she seemed to think only the best things about everything.

"Yes, Nile, I feel that I am lucky that you are my friend, too," I said.

"So, promise that you will *never* forget this day!" she said.

"I promise!"

I keep my promise and think of that day often, especially when my work with children and what they have been through seems particularly onerous. When the numbers of hurt and wounded children continue to grow rather than diminish, when the ways they are hurt become more sadistic and inhumane than the human mind can imagine, and when it seems like I will never be able to stem the tide of pain and sorrow that these youngsters endure, I think of Nile. I try not to fret and worry about how her life has turned out. I try to be as optimistic as she always was in my office. I do often pray that life has been kinder to her and that the Gods are watching out for her. I pray that her Zulu stature

can give her the strength to outrun all of the bad things in life that might try to hunt her. And I pray that she can be the same life force as her namesake and go through life with strength and majesty.

But most of all, I keep my promise to remember our last day together, and the memory of the shimmering water, the salty smell of the Long Island Sound, the cool wet soothing sand under our bare feet, and Nile's ebony hand entwined with mine. The memory continues to teach me that it is possible to hold onto innocence in the face of evil and that the heart can survive even the most overwhelming burden. And finally, the memory reminds me to have courage and to reflect on this small child with a mighty name who - with simple words - continues to teach me to stay in the moment and relish the beauty and magnificence of what lies before me.

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George Drew

TWO FOR RENA

1. Sonnet for the Summer Rain
Our daughter in rehab, my wife laying her head
down in another house, our daughter's children
upstairs laying their heads down over my wife's head,
and in this house, my wife's and my house,
me laying my head down and up and down,
the insomniac hours dragging by like feet
in wet sand, dragging until I rise in our dark house
in the middle of the night, pulled by the tide
of rain, the intermittent rain, rain intermittent
as my wife's and my life has been after our daughter
ran aground in rehab like a ship off course
and after her two children came into the house
that now is my wife's life, here I am, alone
and grateful intermittently for the intermittent rain.

2. The Mountain is Out
Daughter, I know that lately the sky has seemed so dark
even the brightest stars are blacked out,
a sky you wanted to believe was completely blue
with the whitest of cumulus clouds ever,
clouds so billowy you could make out all sorts
of exotic shapes, your playful mind
moving them around like pieces on a cosmic chessboard.
I know too, there are many days when all you want to do
is curl into a ball, clasp your knees and let
the storm clouds gather. But look there, Daughter,
beyond the narrow window of right now:
The clouds obscuring all your tomorrows are lifting,
and the mountain, the mountain is out.
The summit awaits, but the ascent—the ascent is everything.

George Drew

ARGUING WITH MY DAUGHTER

Round 1

Later, peace would be restored, our treaty
ratified with an embrace. In the moment, though,
our anger going over the top, she closed down,
eyes set and unblinking, face stony and red, shoulders
stiffened, my terms of surrender rebuffed.
Pushing out my chair from the table, I marched
past her, out of the room. Five, ten minutes later,
regrouped, ready for reengagement, for compromise,
I returned, ready to pull my chair in close to hers,
ready to talk not scream. Her chair was empty.

Round 2

I've never believed in superstitious drivel,
but today, after the bile boiling up
from the volcanic core of my daughter's gut,
after the armor-piercing glare of her gray eyes,
after the dirty-bomb words of her rage,
that the mouse I trapped, on this one Friday
the thirteenth, was the thirteenth victim
to date of my rodent body count this winter
was and is a stunning coming together.

CRI DE COEUR

An email from my daughter

She got her tonsils out this morning.
At age 37.

She's been drooling all over the place.
It feels like her tongue has been ripped out.

Yes, her job knows.
Yes, she's getting paid sick leave.

She'll be "home" tomorrow.

She went from a 0 to 100
with the pain and swelling, in 3 hours.

Yes, she hurts a lot.

She knows the kids are fine.
She's not.

Antibiotics suck and to swallow
a horse pill 3 times a day is

NOT NOT NOT
exactly her idea of a fun time.

No. She's not calling.
It hurts to talk. It hurts to breathe.
I know, I want to say. I know.

TO MY DAUGHTER AFTER HER FIRST RELAPSE

Daughter, as the oceans warm,
sightings of sharks off the coasts of the Americas have risen
dramatically, and so too have the incidents of sharks
attacking people out for a glorious day of swimming,
surfboarding, snorkeling or scuba diving.

What you should remember,
after passing out on that floor and lying there as still
as a dead fish washed up on one of those beaches,
is that there are numerous kinds of shark, many,
like the Leopard Shark, not dangerous to humans at all,
and others, like the Great White or the Tiger Shark,
a threat to anyone frolicking in the ocean.

That being so, Daughter, what matters,
after this your first relapse, is that in the turbulent
waters of yourself you keep what still is a Leopard Shark
from becoming a Great White or a Tiger Shark.
Please, Daughter, come back safely to the beach,
let the bright sun warm and renew you.
Do not let number one become number two.

DAUGHTER, MY WISH FOR YOU

Daughter, my wish for you is this:

You know how sometimes digital devices
can go haywire for no clear reason,
like recently the silver answering machine
attached to my landline phone, how it
echoed like a cave of reverberant shrieks
when someone left a message? Or, how
on my desktop the Purge for deleted emails
left the number 15 visible and undeletable
even though the 15 emails had been?

That's half the story. The other half
is that in both cases, after fiddling for hours
and getting nowhere, I was astounded
when next I looked both were back
to normal, somehow auto-corrected, each
by its own device. And that, Daughter,
I fervently wish for you, that one day soon
the turbulence of your world will have
auto-corrected, leaving your clear greeting.

George Drew *is author of nine poetry collections, including* Pastoral Habits: New and Selected Poems *and* The View from Jackass Hill*, winner of the 2010 X.J. Kennedy Poetry Prize, both from Texas Review Press,* Fancy's Orphan*, Tiger Bark Press, and most recently* Drumming Armageddon*, Madville Publishing, 2020. Drew also has published two chapbooks,* So Many Bones: Poems of Russia*, and a new chapbook titled* Hog: A Delta Memoir*, Bass Clef Press, and a book of essays titled* Just Like Oz*, Madville Press. He has won awards such as the* South Carolina Review *Poetry Prize, the Paumanok Poetry Award, the Adirondack Literary Award, the* St. Petersburg Review *Poetry Contest, the Knightville Poetry Contest, in 2020 the William Faulkner Literary Competition, and most recently the 2023 Passager Poetry Prize. Mental illness in Drew's family, on both sides, was caused by disease, trauma through injury or alcoholism.*

Valentina Grgin

ONE MORE STORY

"Can you tell me just one more story *Tata*?"
"It's late, Vali. *Laku noć Mišu. Volim te.*"

My mother used to come home to our Astoria apartment with bagfuls of groceries, cursing my father for not helping her carry them up the stairs. We lived on the top floor of our building, which lacked the luxury of an elevator, and she was pregnant with my brother at the time. She made it back from her trips up and down the stairs, wondering where her husband and daughter could have gone. As she dropped the last of the smiley-face shopping bags on the kitchen floor, her eyes wandered over to the table. Peeking under the table cloth on one side were my *Dora the Explorer* socks. On the other, almost the entirety of my dad's 6'3" body stuck out from under the table, still in his work clothes and boots. Instinct told her to panic as she thought she had walked into a murder scene, but in reality I always begged my dad to tell me his stories the second he got home from work. He hung out with me until he couldn't keep his eyes open anymore. That day I decided we would have a tea party with my plastic *Tinker Bell* cups, but my dad wanted to lie down, so we sprawled out on the cold kitchen floor, and he told me his stories about magical talking animals he met in the woods of Croatia when he was young. When my mother lifted the table cloth, my father was fast asleep, snoring and drooling onto his arm, and I was wide awake, tracing the grout borders of the tiles with my finger, waiting for him to wake up, so he could tell me more.

My father could have written a book series longer than *The Chronicles of Narnia* with all the tales he told me everyday. He told me stories about a wild boar he befriended in the woods behind my grandma's house. Then he added a fox, and a rabbit, and a horse, and a dog. They all had silly names, like *Mačak Mišamel* and *Magarac Vranac*, the cat and the donkey. They took my dad on adventures where they saved children from monsters, burned down witches' cottages, and knocked down the castles and fortresses of evil kings. My dad had new stories for me every day, and when my siblings were born, he retold the stories without missing a single detail. I loved my dad's stories more than any cartoon or toy. I sat and stared at him intently while he waved his arms

around and talked for hours on end about *Divlji Prasac Gunđo*, his wild boar best friend. My parents rarely read us picture books before tucking us into bed. Instead, our imaginations were built upon the stories my dad told us.

My father was still young back then, handsome with dark hair and dark eyes, and a smile that my mother always gushed over. He always had a tall and thin figure, and the muscles on his arms and back were defined from heavy lifting at work. His accent was stronger back then too. I still giggle when he tries to order a water bottle at a restaurant and the waitress pauses and says, "A bowl of water?" My parents agreed that their children should speak their home language, so I watched *Dora the Explorer* synchronized in Croatian and listened to *klapa* music in my car seat while my mom sang along. I went to pre-school not knowing a word of English, and when I finally started to learn, I had an accent just like my father's.

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"Can you take me to meet *Divlji Prasac Gunđo, Tata*? I want to go on adventures too."
"I don't know, *Mišu*. *Gunđo* is old now!"
"But *Mama* won't take me to see him when we go to *Baba* Darinka's house. *Molim te*, *Tata*."
"Nemogu, Vali. I'm sorry."

My family spends every summer in Croatia. All of us, except my father. Since he got off the boat to America in his twenties, he has gone back only a handful of times, usually for funerals, or disputes over which land goes to which brother. As a child, I could not understand why he never came with us. Croatia was paradise where all my happiest memories were made, memories my dad was absent from. We left him for two months each year. I cried at the airport every time and asked him why he couldn't go. The response was the same every year. "I'm sorry, *Mišu*, I can't. You know I have to work. I have a business to run."

My dad is the youngest of four brothers. They lived on a farm in a town called Slivnica in rural Croatia, where my grandma raised chickens and sheep. She let stray cats roam the house and eat their food when they barely had enough for themselves. My dad named his cat *Tošo*. When my father was young, Croatia was not Croatia, rather it was part of Yugoslavia, a republic in control of multiple Slavic countries. It was a communist government. My dad had rosaries ripped away from him at school, and they went to church in secret. If anyone ever acknowledged their Croatian nationality in public, they

were shot. No Croatian flags, no crosses or religious symbols, no identity outside of serving Yugoslavia. When the *Domovinski Rat,* the Croatian War for Independence, sparked in the 90s, my mom had already been living on Long Island, going to a small-town high school an ocean away from the war. My father and his brothers were soldiers for four years. He was seventeen when the war began, nearing the end of his last year of high school. He turned eighteen a month later, and joined his brothers in the army. They witnessed and had to do horrific things. My father and his brothers served as part of the *Hrvatska Vojska*. Poorly-equipped but strong-willed, they won the homeland war, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. I never learned about this in history classes, though. I learned about it from my dad when I got older.

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"The monsters were grabbing children out of their beds in the middle of the night, taking them to the witch's cottage in the woods, *Zločesta Vještica Baba Roga*, so she could cook them in her oven and eat them for dinner. *Gunđo, Vranac* and I ran off to save the children. *Gunđo* knocked the cottage door down with his big head and attacked the witch while *Vranac* chased her evil cat, *Mačak Mišamel*, guarding the cage where she kept the children. *Mišamel* ran off scared, and I helped them escape. The kids rode on *Gunđo* and *Vranac*'s backs all the way back to town while I ran alongside them, keeping an eye out for monsters hidden in the trees."

My father never talked about the war when I was young, not even with my mother. As I got older, he started telling me about watching Yugoslav forces burn innocent people alive. He told me about the children taken from their homes in the middle of the night, or ripped away from their mothers' arms. How the house he grew up in was bombed and raided. How his mother watched her sister held at gunpoint, with no power to stop it. How he watched his friends get shot right in front of him, and had to leave them behind as they bled out into the dirt.

I listen to him with the same awe I had as a child. I don't know whether I should pity him or admire him. My father killed people. He had to. That's how wars work. I can't help but wonder how many wives, children, and parents grieved over deaths caused by my father's finger on the trigger. I can see how that pain has crept up on him over the years, in small moments where his face changes, and I know some suppressed memory made its way back into his consciousness.

I remember the one summer my dad joined us in Croatia for two weeks. He had only been back a few times since the war ended. It took a lot of con-

vincing from my mother, who had been bringing us kids to *Baba* Darinka's house every summer since I was eight months old, and watched her worsening condition as she aged. *Mama* said it would be good for him to spend time with his mother again and see his brothers. His father had passed away years before I was born, and *Baba* Darinka was living alone in the same eroding house he grew up in. One day, he took me on a hike in the woods that he talked about in his stories. When we came across a wild boar, I froze and turned to my dad for protection. He started doing his little happy dance. "Look, Vali! It's *Gunđo*! That's my friend *Gunđo*!" He grinned so wide that I could see the rot in his back teeth from cigarette smoking. I was around eleven years old then, and knew this was not a magic talking animal, but it was the first time I saw my dad smile since he had been in Croatia, so I played along with the fantasy one last time. It was the last time I got to experience the innocence and magic of my dad's stories. Now, he shows me pictures of him in uniform, letters he received during the war, mementos he's kept overflowing in a duct-taped shoe box.

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"October 1991. This was one of the hardest days of my life. The helmet was so damn heavy. All the difficulties in life today seem to be heaven compared to those days."

When the war was over, my dad got on a boat to America and never turned back. He left what was left of his family and friends, and everything he had in Slivnica. All he had was a backpack and his shoebox of tragedies he wished to forget but never could. I wonder why he still keeps that shoe box tucked away in the top shelf of his closet if it holds so much darkness. When he arrived, he went to technical school, met my mom in a Croatian bar in Astoria, and in a hurry to start a new life they got married and had me. They were happy, at first. But they were both so young, my father too young to process the trauma he had endured, and my mother too naive to look beyond his charm and love, and realize the baggage that came with marrying an ex-soldier.

My mom told me about the first time she had ever seen my dad talk about the war. Someone had hung up a Yugoslavian flag in the office where he worked. He came home from work that day, and it was like a switch flipped in his brain. He was so angry, whispering to himself about how he could kill the man who did this. He paced back and forth throughout the apartment, having imaginary arguments in his head. Later that night, she thought he had forgotten all about it, and they went out to Scorpio's, the bar in Queens where all the Croatians met up on the weekends. My dad, never really a big drinker, had one

mixed drink, and suddenly he started up again, slurring obscenities under his breath about the man with the Yugoslavian flag. My mom got him out of the bar, and they started walking back to the apartment. All the anger he had pent up throughout the day exploded, and he was ready to walk over to this man's apartment and beat the life out of him. As my mom tried to calm him down, he took out all his anger and adrenaline on a large metal garbage bin in an alleyway, lifting it up from the ground and throwing it into the street. It was the first time she had ever seen him get violent. In his craze, he had forgotten my mom was with him, and his long strides carried him out of her sight as she rushed behind with her heels under her arm. My mom walked the rest of the way alone, terrified of what she would come home to, praying he would be there when she arrived. She found him knocked out in bed, and the next morning he could not believe he did what he did. He kept apologizing to my mom for what she saw, ashamed he let his anger get the best of him. They had an unspoken agreement to never bring it up again.

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My father worked long hours to give my mom the best life he could. He moved us out of the Astoria apartment and into a house on Long Island. He started his own heating and cooling business, proud that he no longer had to live under communist control that kept him and his family living in poverty. While he was living comfortably in America, his mother lived out the rest of her life in the house back in Slivnica, that to this day is covered in craters from bombs and bullets. The oldest brother, Darko, moved to a city about two hours north of Slivnica. *Stric* Ive built a house for his family down the road from *Baba* Darinka, walking over every once in a while to bring her Coca Cola and cookies. *Stric* Božo came back to *Baba* when his wife died. He cooked and cleaned for her, farmed the land, and tended to the chickens. Pere, my father, was the only one who got away. I know my uncles resent him for leaving. They belittle him for running away from the past, yet they always ask us what life is like in New York, talking about getting their Visas so they can come visit.

Unlike some other veterans living with PTSD, my father never yelled or got violent towards us. He never laid a finger on my mother or me, or Nikola, or Juliana, besides the times he would accidentally punch my mom in the face in his sleep, fighting off whatever demons inhabited his night terrors. When he and my mom argued, he made sure my siblings and I never heard it. I was stunned when they sat us down to tell us they were getting a divorce. Nikola came to me later with the realization, "That's why *Tata* has been sleeping in my room. He keeps saying he wants to protect me from the monsters, but I'm not afraid of the dark."

My parents tried for years to make it work, but my dad knew how much stress he put on my mom with his paranoia, the nightmares, the constant distrust of everyone around him. And my mom knew he was a good man, just damaged beyond repair. He constantly accused my mother of cheating on him, or stealing money from him. He knew deep down she would do no such thing, but he was sick. He still is. They told us they still loved each other, but they had to do it from a distance now. My mom decided to sell the house, even though he said not to. She didn't want him to have to pick us up every weekend from the house that was his first big accomplishment.

I cried in my dad's arms for hours that day, already missing him and we hadn't even moved out yet. I already missed running towards the creaking of the garage door signaling *Tata* was home, meaning it was time for us to sit on the couch, watch *Ancient Aliens*, and tear apart an entire box of Oreo cookies. I couldn't bear the thought of him living alone. It was the same feeling I felt every summer when we left him to go to Croatia. I knew he was sick, although he refused to get any help from doctors. I worried about him in an empty apartment where the only companion he had was his mind. I tell him to get a cat to keep him company, because I still worry.

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"I remember once we were shooting at the Serbs, and I turned the shotgun around to my chest. I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. I tried again, and no bullet came out. I turned the gun back around and shot at a soldier hidden behind a tree, and it fired. He dropped dead instantly. I was weak then. God saved me."

The years he spent running away from his past caught up to him. Now, he speaks in crazed rants and whispers to himself whenever it is too quiet. I remember one Christmas, when I was in middle school, I got him a stress relief candle from Bath and Body Works. "Hvala *Mišu*, I like this. You know I need stress relief," he said, and lit the candle. An hour later, his rambling ended with Serbian soldiers tying his best friend up on a pole and burning him alive in front of Slivnica's church. I remember the time I begged him to go to Croatia for Christmas to see my cousins, and he refused to drive down certain roads and past certain houses. He singled out trees in a forest of hundreds and would say, "I hid behind this tree when the Serbs were shooting at us." He took me to random ruins of bricks and dust and said, "This was a tower built to aim from a higher ground in the war." At night, we slept in his old childhood room and he watched me play a *Barbie Island Princess* game on my Nintendo DS, and he

laughed at the coconuts that fell from the trees. I treasure moments like these, where I catch a glimpse of the goofy man I know and love. I hated seeing him so on edge when we were out on the unpaved roads of Slivnica, where he was paranoid someone was going to kill us, or take me away from him forever. I hated going to the cemetery with him, where he stared at the tombs of his friends and family he lost in the war. I wished we could play *Island Princess* forever.

When my grandma died a couple of years ago, he went back to Croatia by himself. I was terrified. I hated the thought of him sleeping alone in that house without the distraction of my Barbie games. The brothers couldn't afford to give my grandma a proper tombstone, so all that marks her grave is a piece of wood with her name, *Darinka Grgin*, etched into it. I cried myself to sleep every night that he was away, not at the thought of my dead grandma, but at the thought of my dad having another grave to lay flowers upon. When we go to Croatia in the summertime and visit the mess of uneven plots and broken glass that is Slivnica's only cemetery, we buy flowers for every person my dad loved. We visit his old house where my uncle still lives, and my mom makes us take pictures so my dad knows we visited. I hate it. I know her intentions come from a good place, but I also know it pains my dad to see the old wooden panels of the kitchen and the gravel driveway that leads up to the rusted gate.

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I never ask him any specifics about his past–I know not to–even though lately he ends up on the topic anyway. Sometimes I take the shoe box out of the closet, dust it off, and look at the photos and letters he keeps inside it. Most of the photographs are from the war. The uniform is baggy on his thin frame. In each one, his face is frozen in a dead stare, always with a gun bigger than his teenage body strapped around his shoulders. Why did they take pictures like this? And why does he keep them? In the mix are only a few pictures of himself as a little boy, feeding the chickens and hugging his father in front of the olive trees in the yard. Before, and after. I imagine a part of him died in that war, and this shoebox holds whatever is left of his life in Croatia. I run my fingers along the torn pieces of fabric from his uniform. I read the crumpled letters from his cousins, friends, and women whose names I don't recognize. They pray for him and his brothers, for their lives. They pray for *Baba* Darinka, who hid in the house throughout those years with her rosaries and cats, praying her sons would come home. Her Pere. My *Tata*.

If I think too much about him I start to cry. Does *Tata* think about the war, the things he saw, the things he did? I've only seen him cry once, at my high school graduation. He didn't cry when his brother called about *Baba* dy-

ing. He doesn't cry when he tells me about his past. Does he cry when he is alone? Does he cry himself to sleep the way I do sometimes, wishing I was seven years old again, snuggling with Nikola and Juliana while he told us about *Divlji Prasac Gunđo*? Does he wish he could go back to his childhood too, before he was forced to grow up too fast?

I do believe he is happy, despite the burdens he carries. He is happy when he hangs out with his friends from the Croatian church in Astoria, or when he's making my siblings and me omelets on Sunday mornings. He loves hiking and has been traveling a lot lately. He went to Costa Rica with a woman, Juliana, and I suspect is his new girlfriend. His cheeks get rosy when Juliana interrogates him about this woman named Helena he posted a picture with on Facebook. He quit smoking four years ago and loves bike riding now. He wants to run a marathon soon.

As hard as I try, I will never fully understand how my dad's mind, plagued by war, created a fantastic universe for his children out of all his suffering. He masked the horrors of his past with wild tales a child could only understand on a surface level. The stories always had a happy ending. He and Gunđo always won in the end, against evil *Baba Roga* and the monsters in the trees. I hope my dad is as proud of himself as I am. When I feel like the world is crashing down on me, I close my eyes and imagine myself as a kid again, having tea parties with *Tata*, giggling at the funny animals he talked about in his stories. I hope when the memories come flooding back, he thinks about petting his cat Tošo under *Baba's* olive trees. I hope he thinks about our tea parties under the kitchen table, too.

Valentina Grgin *is currently a second year undergraduate student at Manhattan College in the Bronx, New York. She is studying English towards a career in writing and education. Her father is a first generation immigrant who now lives with PTSD from the Croatian War for Independence of the 90s, which inspired her to write this essay. This is the first time her work has been published in a literary journal.*

Sandra Kolankiewicz

OLLIE, OLLIE OXEN FREE!

You can come out now. Everyone's gone, they're
all dead, can't hurt you now. Come, come from
wherever you are, the place you've hidden
all your life, and bring your other parts with
you, all together, like the family
you are that live in the soul divided
from itself. You have nothing to fear but
tears, made from your own bodily fluid,
that burn only at the start like when you
first break a sweat on a run, opening
of the pores what hurts as little toxins
give up, flush out like a bad dream that can
not return. You're home, you're home, the hyper
vigilantly tasked, the arbiters of
taste, the ones who keep trying to put out
fires, come drink, eat, talk, and work out. Whether
you're under a moss-covered rock or stuck
to the ceiling, rise up or down, do what
you need to get here for feasts we'll be having!
The manager will relax, the critic
will hold her tongue, the caretakers and folk
pleasers will go to the back yard and swing.
We'll sooth the terrified toddler, feed the
hungry baby, embrace the sulking teen,
calm the angry kindergartener, make
the one whose body is changing not shamed,
pick up the infant so he doesn't cry.
The table is set, your longings fulfilled,
what you're afraid of released from closets
to frolic free in the air just like you.

THE SAME NOWHERE

I see a sadness in you which does not
need to be happy, the same way petals
past their prime don't yearn to stay on the vine,
feel no shame at being nose down on the
grass and trodden. Fall's as indifferent
to winter as an impersonal god
is to our beseeching, except seasons
do not cry out to stay beyond their time,
unconscious and ruled by the tilt of the
earth in a universe held together
by dark energy we cannot see, don't
know we feel. What's the point except to be
human with upturned faces, marveling
at the firmament while the stars do not
wonder about us, could care less if we
love them, and like us will cease to exist,
theirs a longer turn to the same nowhere.

FOR THE HURT HE DOESN'T KNOW

I'm not sure if my first thought or the last
is the one I don't want to have, but when
I look at you, I see you're staring down
the same stairs as I, caught on a landing.
There's nothing wrong with sitting down, blocking
the steps, for how else do you think you'll make
friends? The only persons I ever met
were ones I came to know while climbing, who
accepted or offered an ankle when
we'd no rail. Considering the sky while
we pause is just as good as noticing
our shoelace needs tied, better yet, pointing
out a dropped mitten to the person next
to us, knowing one hand can be colder
than the other, one foot can drag, days can
take forever to become nights where we

can't hide even in the dark. Tears can come
in little spurts off and on, or force us
to bed in a flood, what we recall not
who we are or were, like blaming someone
for the hurt he doesn't know he caused us.

Sandra Kolankiewicz *is the author of* Even the Cracks *(forthcoming),* Lost in Transition, The Way You Will Go, *and* Turning Inside Out. *Much of her creative work reflects the multidimensional effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on the individual, their friends and family, and the community.*