[Alternate Route]
Issue 18 Summer 2025

⁅Alternate Route⁆

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Thank you for reading.

Table of Contents

Amirah Al Wassif....9
A Second Before the World Ends....10
Yesterday, I Met My Jinn Double....12
No Bigger Than a Chickpea....14
A response to a question....18

Shekhar Aryal Dahal....21
Allegory of the Apart....22
Mythical Lore for the Commons....23
Summer Bleeds....24

Louis Marvin....26
Cruisin' Oahu '25....27

Sydney Claire Thomson....30
True Morels....31

Reed Venrick....38
The Better Angels of Our Nature....39
Cezanne, the Hardest Working....41

Nick Young....46
STROP....47

Dudley Stone....56
Cocoa Puffs....57
Prompt #21....61

R. Gerry Fabian....65
Factoring Infatuation Levels....66
Peach Blossoms....67
The County Affair....68

Meagan H. Smith....71
You Get What You Get....72

Tammy Higgins....74
100_0002....75
100_0029....76

100_0094.....77

Amirah Al Wassif

I am an award-winning poet with several publications to my name. My poetry collection, For Those Who Don't Know Chocolate, was published in February 2019 by Poetic Justice Books & Arts. This was followed by my illustrated children's book, The Cocoa Boy and Other Stories, in February 2020. Bedazzled Ink Publishing Company released my most recent poetry collection, How to Bury a Curious Girl, in 2022. I am also delighted to share that my forthcoming collection, The Rules of Blind Obedience, will be published in December 2024.

My work has appeared in numerous print and online publications, including South Florida Poetry, Birmingham Arts Journal, Hawaii Review, The Meniscus, Chiron Review, The Hunger, Writers Resist, Right Now, Reckoning, New Welsh Review, and Event Magazine, among others.

A Second Before the World Ends

A second before the world ends,
I caught a cat in the act—
carefully building a nest
for a pregnant dove,
bit by bit...

Right then, a politician sneezed
on his way out of peace talks
that had birthed eight wars
and five famines.

My dead father asked:
"What are you doing?
Come on, you'll be here with me soon enough..."

I turned his word "there" over in my head.
Will I return to my mother's womb?
Go to some nameless place?
Become a fish with wings
and one lone eye
in the middle of its head?

I'm not trying to sound surreal—
That's just where my thoughts live
since I graduated from public high school.

Maybe it's the government schooling.
Maybe the dirty water.
Maybe racism.
Maybe the fear of belonging to any "minority."

Before I go,
I plan to release a poetry album.
Free entry for all.
And at every reading,
I'll kiss the hands of infants,
of the mad,
of women whose men still ridicule
the shape of their breasts
or the bags beneath their eyes.

My father's calling again—
this time, with mango gelato.
He wants me quickly.
I'm not sure what the hurry is.

A second before it's all over,
my neighbors wrapped their heads in papyrus,
claiming it's the only cure
for the "migraine of civilizations."

Then the monkey—"Mousa"—
leapt into my chest and said:
"I write poetry too."

I saw the sky fall
and shrink down
to the size of a fingertip.

My father called out again:
"I'm coming!"

I say it too,
as I write this final poem—
hallucinating.

Yesterday, I Met My Jinn Double

Yesterday, I met my jinn double.
Her fingers were shaped like forks.
She smiled at me three times—
with an upside-down mouth.

The roughness of her skin reminded me
of the last time I touched a leaf with my bare hand.
A long time ago,
back when trees could still be touched,
back when trees belonged to the earth.
Back when grape clusters were earrings—
and ropes to escape.

I knelt before her and whispered:
"How many times have they killed you?"
And I heard the echo:
"How many times have they killed me?"

I'm not her.
I don't want to be her.
I'm free.
I flutter from flower to flower,
tasting mulberries,
playing with clay.

She points to the moon,
trying to pull it down with a rope.
I got scared.
I wet myself.

I'm not a child—
but fear makes everyone do that.
The baby next door does it.

So did my grandfather—
and he was a bank manager.

No one is bigger than fear.

She comes closer.
Her feet were shaped like hooks.
I step back.
Then again.
And again—
until I disappear.

Or wake up
from the dream

No Bigger Than a Chickpea

Do you remember?

When I knelt before you, crying?

When you smiled at me and explained

Why a piece of my body had to be cut off?

Do you remember?

You said,

"You won't feel a thing.

It's no bigger than a chickpea."

My mother was boiling mint leaves.

I swear I felt the pot weeping.

Every leaf of mint seemed to ache,

As if preparing for a funeral.

You wore a loose, colorful *galabiya.*

You were laughing,

Genuinely happy, waiting for the line of girls—

So you could circumcise them.

It was the first time I heard the word.

I thought it was something

Like trimming your nails.

And I thought

You were like the school nurse.

We were laughing so hard,

Chasing one another,

Waiting for our turn.

The mother of each girl

Whispered to her:

"Once they cut that piece from you,

You'll be a good girl."

Do you remember?

Do you remember how all the girls begged you

When you pulled out the blade?

We thought it was a joke.

We thought it was a game.

But we never knew

We were part of it.

Author's Note

Although I was not subjected to female genital mutilation myself, I grew up surrounded by it. It happened to most of my relatives, my neighbors, and many of the girls I knew.

It was seen as a tradition, a rite of passage, something to "prepare" a girl for a life deemed acceptable.

But behind the smiles and the rituals, there was pain— deep, unspoken, and enduring.

This prose poem is not about a single story. It is a collective memory, drawn from the voices and silences of girls who were taught to laugh before they screamed.

It speaks of a blade disguised as care, a wound mistaken for virtue, and a ritual that continues, still, under the names of purity and tradition.

This piece is for them— for the girls who never knew what was being taken until it was too late.

And for the ones who still think it's just a game.

A response to a question

:the host on the television asks

?How many souls has the monster of life devoured

.My sister responds

.She begins counting on her fingers

“.One,” she says. “My father”

.Then she reaches five hundred in a single breath

:I hear her listing

,the whales

,the trees

,the ants

,the seahorses

,the coral reefs

,the novels

,the music

,the laughter of children

,the meteors

,the swordfish

,the poets

,the sculptors

,the screenplays

,the stages

,the costumes of actors

...the cockatoos

,I stand on the railway tracks

--waving at a thousand versions of myself

terrifying replicas

,draped in shrouds

.grinning with marble teeth

:I wonder

,How can a woman, in a land of extremism

dance in the streets

without drawing a bullet

?Or the blade of a knife

.My mother—the cloud—calls out to me

",It's late, my darling"

.She says in Eve's voice

,I kneel

--to pray

,or to release the caged bird of my soul

and let it fly

...far

.far away

Shekhar Aryal Dahal

is a poet and writer based in Kathmandu. His work explores philosophy, mythology, and human nature, often blending the real with the mystical. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Nepali literary magazines, and he writes in both English and Nepali.

Allegory of the Apart

A torn pair of leather shoes
debris in the hall–
Remnants of the long-lost youth
Broken grass beneath the benches in the park
high heels, low smile
black shoes, red bruise

Enigmatic shyness in the eyes
Veils the irresistible craving–
the fountain of lust
Two unknowns must know
who is the foe and who will
slowly step onto the toes of the other
to stand face-to-face with an absolute alien
All in the abode where everything is immaterial
All abide by all things material

Strangers and strange in the most familiar way
Lovers are strangers in the most intimate way

Mythical Lore for the Commons

Foliage beneath an old oak tree
Sways with the rhythm of the breeze
Then the arrival of the winter blizzard
Stills the green and prospect of trees
A few moons later, wizards and mystics from ancient lore
Heave handfuls of leaves in their hands
And resurrect shrunken trunks from the dead

Shall that be declared as a victory
or is it just another repetition of history?

Nature is schizophrenic!

To whom the nature abases
Bigotry is the trait of commons!
Preach them falsity with honesty
And they with no hesitation will summon
Ghosts from the Morgue Garden of Eden
Do not tell them they have failed
To undo the unjust borne by creatures
Of nocturnal wild jungle of the modern age

A serpent and a falcon lock deadpan stare at one another
A mouse in a hole digs deeper to flee from the casting shadow
The radiant heat of the sun turns foliage into burning pyre
A mass of deer attempts to sprint and steer to outrun a lion

Nature is schizophrenic!

Summer Bleeds

Tell me about summer breeze
Does its tenderness heal
the barren meadow and fallen leaves?
Does it whisper the melodies?
An ode to the one who turned cold
and dispersed like the winter frost
Or does it resurrect the dirt
like the old man's memories?
Both are hazy, crazy– engulfed in mysteries

Summer Breeze
Conveys the voices of abandoned choices
Recites the tale of rusted fate–
The Deadman's poetry
His forsaken love howls
through the rustle of unturned pages
The sudden gust of wind
Leads to a whirl of emotions
Evokes a deformed figure
A subtle smile and a drop of tear

Summer Breeze
Mourns for the fallen
Summer Bleeds

Louis Marvin

-lives with the Chinese girls in Honolulu, teaches and coaches at private and public schools, sees turtles and seals with his wife and artist friend Lonewolf.

Published in university archives, newspapers, online, in print, and in anthologies.

Cruisin' Oahu '25

It's busy at **Koko Head Park**, like horses ready to run into Summer

Cuttin' grass on the baseball fields, tennis lessons, and hiking up wooden steps to get a swimsuit body

Tidepools past Sandy's

The crash and sea salt smell

Schools of baby fish in the pools, small black crabs crawling on black volcano rock wet and dry

A lady showed me and Mrs. Wang whale spouts in the distance once, from this very spot

Waimanalo Beach Park

Children made a secret circle in the dogwood trees

Colors spread before our eyes of deeper jade and turquoise- these magic waters

Here we took Job Corps folks to splash and play, some charter school kids too

State Park/Sacred Land/Wounded Knee

Sacred Hawaiian Land, where my knee hurt and the wood grew

Here begins the tale of the Chinese and Swedes, of little local lasses

Hawaiian chants and palms, grasses, a cool wind blows from the past to our glorious futures

China Man's (and Woman's) Hat

One of my favorite island offices

They filmed Jurassic park behind us, ran a long distance race with public and private schools, and my daughter rode a pony here (Kualoa Ranch)

Hakipu'u Hawaiian Charter School and Mililani Middle School did teacher/kumu outings here and we saw turtles from the deck of a glass bottomed boat

Turtle Bay

Grandpa and granddaughter saw the small fish below the hotel windows at jagged volcanic rock tidepools

We played and won a hotel room stay in the Hawaiian State Open

During the pandemic---it was an empty beach-so we snorkeled alone and actually saw a turtle in the bay

==========

My day is done, hard won and Summer is not even upon us

LM *5-25*

Sydney Claire Thomson

writes poetry and prose. Her short story 'The Snake Oil Salesman' was published in The Evening Universe. Her poems have been published in Boats Against the Current and Kennings Literary Journal. You can follow her work on Instagram (@sclairethomson).

True Morels

I am a mycologist by trade. I am a scientist by nature. I am a skeptic as a rule. I tend not to believe in fairy tales, in fanciful things. This was a point of contention between my sister and me; one of many. I am a pragmatist. My sister, not so much.

We fought just before her last year of Uni. She'd wanted to marry her then-boyfriend. I disapproved, not that she'd asked for my blessing. I'd thought – still think – she was too young. I did say some cruel things, I see that now. I said she was acting like a child. I said she needed to grow up.

We haven't talked since.

If it had been an 18-wheeler instead of a sedan – or if he'd been driving just a little faster when they collided – we might have never gotten another chance.

#

Our mum told us stories about fairies when we were little.

My sister's favorite was the one about the ring of mushrooms, a fairy circle, in the center of the Avebury Stones. This is-

n't impossible, of course, but it isn't likely. The Avebury Stones are out in the open, bared to the elements, largely treeless.

Morels like to grow in forests where a fire has been, burnt it all down to nothing. Morels grow from the remains of what used to be.

I'll give my mum one thing: morels like chalk, and the Avebury Stones are sitting on tons of it, calcareous land, the white hidden just beneath the top layer of grass and soil. Eons ago they used to scrape it away, I've learned, to reveal the chalk, bright like bone against the bleak landscape.

#

It's been a long time since I've thought about those stories Mum told my sister and me. They come back to me, now, as I realize my route on my way home takes me right past the stones.

I didn't think much about going back, not before this. I wasn't brave enough. It wasn't until her car wreck: that's what did it, that's what it took to get me to go home.

And I am going home, but I have a stop to make first.

The Avebury Stones have been here for thousands of years, through countless wars. Concentric circles, irregularly shaped stones. I've never been to the Avebury Stones before. I haven't even been to the more famous Stonehenge not too far away from this one. Here, all the dirt was upset to make these deep, deep gullies and hills around the circles. And, in the near-distance, Neolithic burial sites. One has a tree on top of it, a tangle of roots like intestines, and a thousand ribbons tied on its branches.

I feel like a fool, walking through these stones. I am soaked through upon entry, not a moment after passing their border. The rain comes out of nowhere, flattening the grass and hitting me sideways. I try to shelter myself by one of the stones, not that it does much. But in the shadow of the massive rock, pockmarked and worn by time, I see something wondrous: a morel cluster. A circle of common morels, in the Avebury Stones. Maybe I've cracked. Maybe the dread – the guilt – is too much for me to carry.

Not just because these common morels are out of place, but because when I go to touch one, it comes away from the ground, loose in my hand but for these strange roots, lengthy

and decidedly wrong. I pull and pull, and the roots keep coming up until I realize why they look so peculiar– they aren't roots, they are hair.

Blonde hair like my sister's.

I pull another and another morel off the ground until they're all tangled in a web of hair. Chunks of dirt and mud get stuck under my fingernails as I dig, trying to uproot whatever is beneath, terrified of what I'll find.

The rain gets in my eyes, and I think I must be crying, too. Dumbly, I try to wipe it away with my muddy hands, only to make it worse. When I finally clear it away, there are no morels. Nothing but some upturned grass I've strewn about, much of it sticking to my wet skin, the tendrils starting to itch. There was no hair, there were no mushrooms. It hadn't ended for her like this, with her in the ground, thank God.

As soon as I leave the rain ceases.

#

The common morel– *Morchella vulgaris.* It looks like a sponge. The taxonomy of *Morchella vulgaris* is as follows:

Kingdom– Fungi.

Division– Ascomycota.

Class– Pezizomycetes.

Order– Pezizales.

Family– Morchellaceae.

Genus– *Morchella.*

It is what is known as a *true morel.* As opposed to its poisonous look-alike, *Gyromitra esculenta*, the *false morel.* I find that interesting, the distinction between *true* and *false* in the taxa of mushrooms, as if even we scientists were fooled at one point, as if we could have got it wrong.

There are no morels at the Avebury Stones. None that I've seen.

#

Some morels develop mycorrhizal relationships with their host trees: a symbiotic relationship where both benefit from existing with one another.

Coexistence– a mutual habitation.

Or the idea that two things can be true at once.

Maybe I'll call my mum on the drive over. She's with my sister in the hospital. Maybe I'll tell her a story about mushroom circles in the Avebury Stones. I think my sister will like that.

Reed Venrick
currently resides in Marseille, France.

The Better Angels of Our Nature

Marcel Proust believed we are prisoners
Of our bodies, and yet, in retrospect,
We are not potted plants nor rooted ,
Roses, and despite what he thought

Of limitations of living inside the human
Body, we have the flexibility to extend
Freedom to our legs and an imaginative
Mind even creates wings, and unless

We experience out of body flight, which
Not even the dreamy Proust could *1
Achieve, then we can move, and I can
Fly tomorrow, if I wish, from Paris

To Marseille, and while Proust sees
Our lives fated by our limited, personal space,
Others see it shaped by Bergsonian
Time measuring our personal experience,

Either slow, moderate, or fast, but were I
To choose, I'd prefer to be a time traveler wandering
Along the Seine River in 1788, trying to keep
Up with Jefferson's famously-long stride

On his way to the ambassador's office, *2
Questioning about the imminent revolution,
Simmering and soon to boil over, but also
Discussing the architecture of Paris,

But I have no worries, once AI takes
Control of the auto's wheel and plane's stick

And invents the world's parameters again,
I trust AI will re-invent my life as a time-traveler

To go back and forth, to and fro for why
Shouldn't we think that AI could create all
That imagined under a cosmic building
Code, where everything in the human

Imagination is possible to manifest
And implement, expanding the invention
Of wings, and personal flight, where
We merge with birds so that we may

Soar above the filthy pits of those
Demons shitting on the world—
Trying to prevent us from reaching
The better angels of our Nature. *3

FOOTNOTES:

1. Proust had asthma, which no doubt colored his view of the human body.

2. Jefferson was the tallest of the founding fathers, a half inch taller than Washington.

3. Lincoln's phrase from the the Gettysburg Address, likely

Stems from a line in Shakespeare's "Othello."

Cezanne, the Hardest Working

(Le Cezanne, le plu travailleur)

Like Pissarro, Paul Cezanne *1
Was not the best draftsman, even
His best, old friend Emile Zola
Said bluntly there were students

In the "Les Ecole des Beaux-Arts,"
Who sketched and shaded and
Blended colors with more finesse than
Cezanne, and hadn't he twice been

Rejected by that same prestigious
Art school in Paris? Best that Cezanne
Was not born earlier in the super-talented
French 19th century, and true, Cezanne

Had not Delacroix's genius for curve,
Nor Ingres' master hand, nor could
Cezanne touch-paint-to-canvas with Jean-
Louis David's hawk-eye precision.*2

But few French artists worked harder—
Harder to shape his forms, harder to
Match his colors to the line and frame
And design between form and content.

But in the early 1860 years, Cezanne's
Boyhood friend, Zola, did not think Cezanne
Would succeed far into critical favor
When compared to those Zola favored—

Manet, Monet, Callibotte—Cezanne
Was the neglected one of the impressionists.
But Cezanne, like his fellow southerner
Zola, devoted his life to developing—be

It an apple or pear or the ridge line
Of "Mont Victorie"—developing his style,
His artistic style, and why so hard working?
His wife was not one he would be having

Chats with in the evening about artwork
In France— much less discuss the ever
Volitaile French politics, and so he left
Paris and went down to work on that

Rocky but gentle hill where he esconced
Himself in family property, in Aux-en-
Provence, the town of a hundred fountains.
Moreover, "work," let's admit it—you

The reader and I the writer—that the French
Are not known for their hard-working lifestyle,
But Cezanne did work hard on his style,
Pushing the line of his forms, matching

The colors of the spectrum he loved—
The beige and the green—to compensate
For inferiority fostered on him by "Les
Critiques Parisiens," who ignored his paintings

And if growling critics are not enough,
Then also, there are whispering artists.
Manet gave damning praise when glancing
At Cezanne's portraits of his uncle—

Calling Cezanne “not a real painter, *3
But a good mason,” furthermore, Cezanne
Was not socially and polished-handsome
Like Zola(wearing natty 19th century

Bourgeois suits, presenting an image
Much as we see in Leonardo di Caprio
In 2025), but Cezanne was lucky indeed
to find an activity that inspired him,

Because he was not suited to the bouesquie
Life style, which insisted on a vibrant,
Gregarious personality, and Cezanne
Had never been excited by handling

Bills and note like he observed in his father,
No it was best to shut out the madding world’s noise
And work alone “Dans son atelier A’ Aux
En Provence”work with that same intensity

That floods into passion—like Napoleon *4
Himself was said to work, and for some in France,
Those who clammer for shorter days, weeks,
And more union holidays, they do not work

For themselves, and they will always labor
For the conventional life, where many
Of us are enshared, if not entrapped, however
Those who work for his-her-selves

Transcend the five-of-the-clock hour and may
Create their own destiny, as they need
To commute no further than where
Their own willing hands take them.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Camille Pissarro, known as the father of the French impressionists.

2. Jean-Louis David, the neo-classical French painter of the revolution,

The painter of "The Death of Marat," and Napoleon's best known paintings.

3. His maternal uncle, Dominique Aubert, whom Cezanne painted 9 times;

The best known, done with a putty knife, hangs in Musee d'Orsay in Paris.

4. Literally "workshop" which together with his former home,

has been converted to a museum in Aix en Provence in the south of France.

Nick Young

is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in dozens of reviews, journals and anthologies. His first novel, "Deadline," was published in 2023. He can be found on Bluesky @youngnick.bsky.social. He lives outside Chicago.

STROP

It was a fitting name, Rolling Vistas, situated on the edge of a picturesque town near the sprawling Shawnee National Forest. Set on the crest of a hillside, surrounded by verdant timberland and a meandering brook, it bespoke serenity. And by reputation, it was the finest assisted living center in all of southern Illinois. It numbered among its one hundred-odd residents the parents and grandparents of some of the area's oldest and most well-to-do families. And of those who called it home, none was held in greater esteem than the Reverend T. Randall Buford.

At eighty-two, Rev. Buford had resided at Rolling Vistas for three years, thanks to the generosity of the congregation at the First Bible Church of the Redeemer. For more than forty years he had been the shepherd of the flock, baptizing newborns and converts in the blood of Jesus and ushering those who passed into the Kingdom of Glory. In between, he spent each Sabbath inveighing against the predations of Satan and, with his wife of many years, raising up foster children. By way of repayment, the members of the church, many of significant means, made regular contributions to see to his care at Rolling Vistas.

Once a man of imposing physical presence and a powerful baritone voice, Rev. Buford now spent his days wheelchair-bound in a netherworld of silent, partially blind immobility as a result of a series of strokes. The thunderous pronouncements of tribulation and hellfire had been quelled. All that remained of his former robustness were facial tics and the flickering of his rheumy eyes.

To be sure, the old preacher was accorded sensitive care provided by a staff that included several members of his former congregation. And he did not lack for attention from the outside. Though he had no living family, a regular stream of well-wishers to his sunny, spacious room added variety and the warmth of human contact to his days.

One of those who began coming introduced himself to the staff as Mike Taylor. As an eight-year-old orphan in 1956, he explained, the Rev. Buford had taken him in.

"The reverend and Mrs. Buford couldn't have been more generous, raised me up as a Bible-believing Christian with the right values, and it changed the course of my life," he'd said on that first visit. "My line of work has kept me abroad for many

years, so I had no idea the reverend had fallen on hard times. But by the grace of the Savior, when I returned a few weeks ago, I learned of his plight; and now, with the Lord's help, I hope to repay Rev. Buford's kindness."

So, Mike Taylor became a regular Sunday afternoon caller, with small gifts for the reverend's caregivers and fresh flowers for his room. And he always brought with him a leatherbound Bible from which he patiently read passages for Rev. Buford. Despite his physical infirmities, the old gentlemen retained enough lucidity to understand what was going on around him and react with his eyes. Mike Taylor's visits proved to be a balm, as the younger man spoke soothingly, laughed easily and never failed to end their time together with a quiet prayer.

In early September, the day of the autumnal equinox, a day with the sunlight aslant bringing warmth leavened by a gentle westerly breeze, Mike Taylor arrived for his afternoon visit with a request.

"The Lord has graced us with such a beautiful day," he said to Rev. Buford's nurse, Ann Davis, "that I was hoping it

would be alright if I took the reverend out to the pond." Normally, a staff member was required to accompany residents and guests outside the main building, but Mike Taylor had shown himself to be such a thoughtful, attentive visitor that there was no objection.

"Spend as much time together as you'd like," Nurse Davis replied with a smile.

Rev. Buford's eyes registered how pleased he was to see his visitor who told him cheerfully of his plan to spend the afternoon outdoors. The pond, which lay a short distance from the east wing of the main residence, was kidney-shaped, its water kept fresh by a central aerator that acted as a calming fountain. Like the rest of the grounds, it was meticulously landscaped with rocks and plantings. The whole was bordered on three sides by beautiful maples and oaks displaying the first blushes of fall color.

Mike Taylor slowly wheeled Rev. Buford down a winding walkway through the trees to a shaded spot where there was a park bench. As the old gentleman was turned to face the pond, a zephyr rose, ruffling his snow-white hair.

"The goodness of God's creation," Mike Taylor said as he removed his shoulder bag and placed it on the bench. He sat down and stretched, allowing the perfection of the day to wash over him. One of the other nurses waved to him as she helped an elderly resident to a bench on the opposite side of the pond. Clusters of clouds billowed above, ivory against the dazzling azure of the mid-afternoon sky.

After several minutes sitting in silence, Mike Taylor folded back the leather flap of his bag, removed his Bible and opened it carefully to where one of the book's red ribbon markers had been placed. He cleared his throat and read:

"Discipline your children, and they will give you peace of mind and will make your heart glad.'Otis You remember that passage, don't you reverend? Proverbs 29:17. And surely you recall Proverbs 29:15: *''The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame.'* And still in Proverbs: *'Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.'* Chapter 22, Verse 15." As he read, Mike Taylor's voice began to rise with his emotions. "And just one more I'm certain you know," he continued: '*Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you*

strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.' Proverbs again, reverend, Chapter 23, Verses 13-14. You recall them all? You should, because you repeated them over and over again to me when I was living with you. And I brought with me something else you should remember from those days." He reached inside his bag and withdrew a length of tanned leather, about three inches wide and eighteen inches long, with a metal clip sewn into one end. He laid the strip across Rev. Buford's lap. The preacher's eyes flicked downward, and a corner of his mouth twitched once. "Surely you haven't forgotten what this is—a barber's strop? Yes. It's quite similar to the one you kept in your basement, the one *you used on me*." He turned to look Rev. Buford full in the face, his voice dropping. "You see, reverend, I'm not Mike Taylor at all. He died five years ago. Cancer, I believe. Tiny little town out in Nebraska, as I recall. I've simply borrowed his name, that of a righteous, God-fearing man. It's not that difficult. Wear a smile and mouth all the pieties. That's the way, isn't it, reverend? But if I'm not Mike Taylor, then who am I?" He bored in on the old man's eyes, clouded, swimming. "I am Bill Collins—little Billy? Do you remember little Billy, reverend? And the strop?" The

preacher's face twitched again, and he blinked rapidly several times. "Yes, you remember," Bill Collins' lips tightened derisively. "And so do I. The basement, the awful choking rankness of it...the terrifying shadows...your voice, hoarse from calling down the wrath of God upon the recalcitrant child. But most of all, *reverend*, I will never forget every time you raised the strop high above your head and brought it down, every blow you landed across my back." He was fighting against an upwelling of anger that was burning through his chest. "The scars remain; they always will. And you, locked inside your mute prison, does it thrill you still how much sheer *pleasure* you took in stropping the back of a nine-year-old boy because he resisted you?" Rev You miserable, cruel bastard. You did your damnedest to break me, but here I am."erend Buford's face was becoming more animated. Bill Collins leaned closer, eyes narrowing. "

He stood and arched his back, stepping into the sun and letting it splash on his face, allowing the gentle breeze to flow around him. After a long moment, he turned once again to look at the preacher.

"So what should I do, Rev. Buford, to repay a man such as yourself, a man who had such a profound impact on me?" He

began walking slowly around the preacher. “Here's my plan: I will continue my visits, charming the staff as Mike Taylor, always putting them at ease. And one day when I come, it might be on a Sunday or another day. Perhaps in the morning or the afternoon or even at night—you will never be certain—I will bring with me a tiny vial and a syringe, and in the vial will be a deadly toxin, and I will inject you with it. The tiniest pin prick, that's all. You will hardly feel the needle. And for a few minutes, while we say our final prayer together and I leave, you won’t notice any change. But gradually the pain will begin, and it will intensify, and there will be nothing you can do to stop it. And more time will pass, only minutes, before your heart stops beating. But before it does, the agony will be excruciating; and, if you could, you would beg for release. You will experience Hell here and now before your rotten soul is sent there when you die.”

Bill Collins stopped directly behind the preacher and, smiling, leaned in close to his left ear, patting the old gentleman's shoulder reassuringly. “But it won't be today, reverend. It won't be today. Now, shall we pray?”

"Strop" first appeared in the Potato Soup Journal.

Dudley Stone

's fiction has most recently appeared online in Danse Macabre and Snapdragon. Additionally, he is a published poet (with a Pushcart Prize nomination), produced playwright, and a proud member of the Dramatists Guild and Kentucky State Poetry Society. Mr. Stone received his B.A. from the University of Kentucky and resides in Lexington, KY.

Cocoa Puffs

She left the child in a puddle of Cocoa Puffs. Someone would help. There must be someone who would help.

The child carefully grasped a solitary Cocoa Puff and placed it between his lips. His eyes were big and round as moons. He shrieked with sugary chocolate delight.

She left the child and the Cocoa Puffs and the older woman pushing a cart toward them, smiling indulgently at the child, who was now splashing in a sea of Cocoa Puffs. As she left the aisle she saw the older woman's smile start to droop.

She left the aisle and passed the sale display, a vast pyramid of plastic soft drink bottles. She passed checkout aisles and customer service and produce.

She left the cool of the store for the heat of the asphalt and the stale warmth of her SUV. She scraped the seatbelt across her chest and lap and clicked it secure. She ignored the clicks and beeps, the Christmas tree of lights, some accompanied by alarm bells, some not. She started the engine, and presently the lights and sounds went away.

She left the Cocoa Puffs and the frowning woman and the parking lot and the familiar streets. She crossed the river and left the city. She adjusted the rearview mirror so she couldn't see the empty child seat.

She heard a muffled noise. There were no Christmas lights. The speedometer needle hovered below the legal limit. Something was shouting at her but it wasn't her fuel gauge or her oil temperature. She drove past law enforcement vehicles. None showed any interest in her.

She left the Cocoa Puffs and the frowning woman and the familiar streets and the river and the police. Something was shouting at her. It was coming from inside the purse resting on the seat beside her. The noise stopped after a while, then started again.

She didn't remember retrieving her purse. Of course, she knew she must have, that's where she kept her keys, she couldn't unlock the door, couldn't start the car, wouldn't be here without her purse and inside it her keys, but she couldn't think, she could-n't think back, couldn't see the purse on the seat beside her and trace its movements, her movements, back to the city and the

parking lot and the cool of the store and the aisle and the Cocoa Puffs.

And the child, the boy rather, of course a boy, clearly, it had been a boy all along obviously, but she'd never thought of him as a boy but rather--

She left the city and the police and the neighborhood and the bedroom. She left the rolling farmland and climbed into the mountains, no, not mountains, hills. Foothills.

She left the interstate. She left asphalt and then gravel. A cloud of dust rose in her rearview mirror.

A Slurpee would be nice, she thought. Something cold and blue and refreshing. A Slurpee and a cigarette and a shower and a bed that was not hers, not theirs, but where she could rest, where she could think until the noise coming from her purse stopped.

She left the shouting purse and the child seat in the back. She left the engine running and the front door open. The car beeped insistently.

She left the car and the dirt road and the drainage ditch beside it. She left her sandals and her blouse and her watch and

her wedding ring. There was a scratch across her chest from the seatbelt.

She left the young man she'd married, tall and handsome and reliable. And the other young man, not her husband. She left the store and the aisle and the Cocoa Puffs on the floor and the child and the frowning woman with the cart. She left the flashing lights of pursuers who by now would be coming, must surely be coming.

A Slurpee would be nice, she thought.

Prompt #21

(after the opening line of Chapter 21 of P.D. James' *The Children of Men* (Large Print)

"It was at half past eight he heard the knock." Was it in fact a knock? Of course it was. This was no pocket horror story, like the ones Jack told him (and told him again when he couldn't keep straight stories told and untold, and which anyway wasn't original with him, but the source had disappeared into the rabbit hole of the past, like so much else). Anyway, I have since Googled it, and it is the story "Knock" by Fredric Brown), the one that goes:

> "The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door."

Which is problematic to begin with, as the second sentence totally contradicts the first, unless the knocker in sentence two belongs to any category other than man as specified in sentence one, which makes the story less about existential horror than about cutesy-pie clever wordplay. I don't think anyone was ever filled with existential dread from a word game, except for maybe Hangman or that fucking Wordle.

But maybe the knocker is an animal, a beast, or an alien that transcends traditional categories of gender. Or perhaps a woman. I hope it's a woman. That's what I would hope if I was the last man on Earth.

Not that I am, of course. I'm just saying if I were . . .

Anyway, the story isn't even about the last man on earth.

Half past eight, as I said, knock on the door, which primes the reader for a lot of questions: Who is it? One or many? What do they want? Are they after him? Do they have torches? Should he be terrified?

Or expectant? Did they bring an outsized check with his name on it? Are they accompanied by a television crew? Have they spelled his name correctly on the check? Is the big check just for show or will he have to lug the unwieldy thing to the bank? Will the ridiculous check make him a walking target for the highwaymen doubtlessly waiting by the ATM? Would it be rude to request a smaller check for ease of carry and concealment while he consults an attorney who can advise him on lawyerly ways to minimize the tax consequences?

No, that's silly, even if he was the last man on Earth (which I know he's not; we've already debunked that theory), again this presumes any highwaymen (and the attorney as well) are categorically defined as above, i.e., not men in the strictest sense, and perhaps not humanoid at all but perhaps passing interstellar pirates who just happened to notice his light was on.

Sitting alone in a room reading it's easy to think you're the last man on Earth and consequently to be startled by a knock on the door, even if it's not a highwayman, an attorney, or anyone with a large check.

Half past, knock, who is it? Is it a man or a woman? I hope it's a woman. I really really really hope it's a woman.

R. Gerry Fabian

is a published writer and poet from Doylestown, PA. He has published five books of poetry: Parallels, Coming Out Of The Atlantic, Electronic Forecasts, Wildflower Women, Pilfered Circadian Rhythm as well as his poetry baseball book, Ball On The Mound.

Factoring Infatuation Levels

It is a matter of aerodynamics.

The fluid flow demands propulsion.

Embrace the degrees of wingspan.

Control the air currents

to support the value of glide.

Landings should be gentle.

Peach Blossoms

When classes turned over in January,
you sat in front of me in English class.
That day, I was enraptured with your perfume
which many days later,
I realized was just an acquired natural scent.
We slowly became friends and then something more.

In early March, we would meet
in your family's' peach orchard -
our clandestine Tuesday and Thursday rendezvous.
The blossom's intensity was overwhelming.
While I had kissed other girls
your kiss was the first to show me
what 'depth of intensity' meant.

As graduation approached,
it was clear that Eros
had lost all interest in us.
Even now, when a peach scent is present,
I revisit that kiss.

The County Affair

You came as a game of chance
parading down Main Street or so I was told.
I found you, a series of swirling sounds,
at the line for admissions gate.
The combs in your black hair
glittered like carrousel lights.

Your smell caught my attention-
a buttery, salty anxious scent.
Your lips were cotton-candy-
soft, sweet and lingering.

You whirled me around
going up and down in a dizzying motion.
I watched as you climbed a slender pole
and walked the coiled wire
that stretches infatuation with admiration.
We walked to the back tents
where whiskey, beer and all things naughty
flirted, taunted and teased me.
The night grew quiet until it was time to go.

In the morning, I rose early and hurried
to the outskirts of this sad, rusted dream town
and all that was left was a broken hair comb.

Meagan H. Smith

was born in Cleveland, Mississippi. She lived the first half of her life in the south before ending up in New York by way of Arizona. In addition to writing, she spends her time creating tiny ceramic figurines and pondering existence. She is supported in these endeavors by her fiance, six dogs, and two cats. She has previously published poetry in Evolution, the literary magazine for Suffolk County Community College in Selden, New York.

You Get What You Get

I am

a star

collapsing

an eventual black hole

drawing you in

already, but

try to remember

my better half,

I am also the moon,

a face to look upon

in the dark,

waxing and waning,

inevitably and infinitely.

She, her,

Tammy Higgins

, is 57 years old, and her name of Tammy Higgins, born and raised in

Northern New York and lives in Southern NH. She has MS, Diabetes2, and fibro, loves the

outdoors, wildlife, writing, photography dining out, nature and gardening, gaming online,

slow cookers, and learning to play her Washburn electric guitar listen to heavy metal and

love cats and weed.

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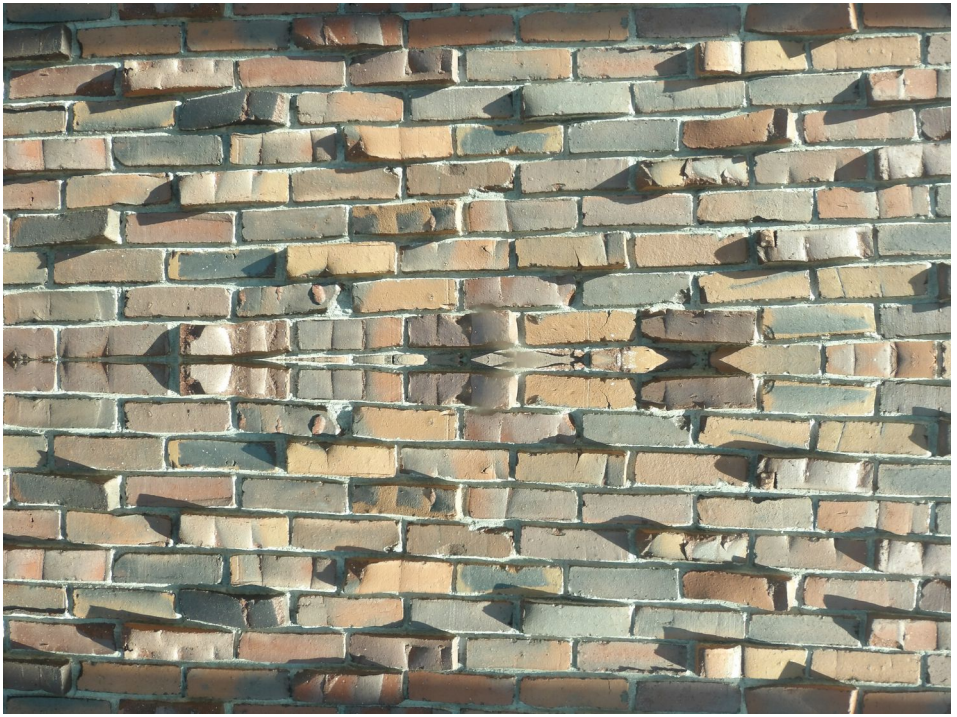

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