The background of the cover is a painting. It depicts a person's legs from the knees down, wearing black stockings with a white lace pattern and small white pom-poms at the top. The person is wearing a red skirt with a ruffled hem. In the background, there is a yellow hot air balloon floating in a sky that transitions from yellow at the top to a dark red at the bottom, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall style is expressive and somewhat abstract.

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“Syzygy”

As you who have been reading my monthly vanity for a while may already have surmised, I am fascinated with language. I appreciate the vastness of the English vocabulary, and the nuance and selection offered to us, when we choose to read or talk or write. And I certainly don't consider it pompous or elitist to use the available resource. In truth, I find it wasteful to leave words on the table in lieu of using pictures and glyphs in our daily communications with each other. Bad enough that we select nipped and tucked thought-lets to begin with, often someone else's, I fear that for many reasons our year-long physical separation one from another has further edited our communication habits, reducing our patience for what is often disparagingly called long-windedness.

And that appellation certainly belongs to me. I've been on Zoom calls – friends getting together regularly or book-studies or with my daughters, and I frequently have to rein myself in. No one, I have deduced, wants to hear anybody unload all of the baggage they carry. We just don't have the stamina, or like anyone quite that much. Oh, we may love them and deeply, but that's asking a lot. My wife knows that, and uses the ploy of falling asleep when I go off on tangent after tangent answering the question “what do you have on tap tomorrow?” My daughters, on the other hand, are kind and treat me as they would, say, a wet dog they found begging at the door. *Who's a good boy?*

And so here's your last warning to turn the page before I regale you with something I found recently. It has to do with the word with which I've entitled this ramble. The term “syzygy.” Here's how it's defined from a cut-and-pasted online dictionary entry: 1. (Astronomy) either of the two positions (conjunction or opposition) of a celestial body when sun, earth, and the body lie in a straight line: the moon is at syzygy when full. 2. (Poetry) (in classical prosody) a metrical unit of two feet.

This fascinates me. Syzygy. From the Greek for yoke, union, conjunction. A word that has such diverse meaning is a bit of a unicorn, and great fun. Let's unpack this. A common syzygy is the spring and neap tides caused by the sun, earth and moon being in syzygy (noticeable to us when the moon is full or new). The astronomy definition is laying out for us that the planets and the sun have their own elegance – they are behaving as they must, not with randomness. That they can align as they follow their personal ellipses about the so-called center – the sun – reveals that rules are being followed. The harmony of the spheres, as it has been called, is that planets and stars have positioned themselves

where they must be. They are right-distanced from one another, moving at the appropriate speed, spinning or not as they must. Evidence of their shifting over eons atop eons, plays this out.

What has this to do with poetry? Let's see. A poetic Syzygy is the alignment of two poetic feet, achieving an alliterative feeling to a phrase. You have to trust me on this. Go and dredge up your old Norton Anthology of Poetry and see for yourself. Whoever coined this term for poetic alignment was thinking about elegance, about the sensibility of this kind of stringing together of words, how well it worked for communicating beauty.

There is a third fragment of a definition that I left out. *Any rare pairing, usually of opposites*. A tempting tidbit: something to think about. And I think it is right that this should be included in our little semi-academic investigation. I'm no mathematician nor a poetic scholar, but for syzygy to work, I suspect, there must be as much push as pull. The celestial bodies align according to rules of mass and velocity, distance and time. Perhaps they even jiggle into place, like the tumblers of a lock do under the command of a very old key. And words? Endless combination, endless tension gained and released, to make the point.

And herein lies my own point. The truth as I see it, we risk losing the capacity to say what can be said, elegantly or otherwise. We don't take deep enough breaths, perhaps. Everything seems to be a *bark*, a dog saying something in one short and mighty woof, and the rest of us only passing that message on down the lane and around the corner.

Make the big statements, say I. Ramble on. Go on a diatribe. I'm with you, along for the ride, seatbelt fastened. Play with structure, be somewhat difficult to follow. Occasionally veer off into the deep weeds.

And while you're at it – think about this, just for fun: Syzygy is the shortest word in the English language that, when written in lower-case cursive, has five letters that drop below the line. Five of six, to be precise. Check it out -

syzygy

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

out into the cool of the evening strolls

“He Will Be Home for the Holiday”

by Edward Jackson

After every holiday that would be considered major to a ten-year old child, Mason Robertson lost control of his behavior. Mason resided at the *Scenic View Mobile Home Park* in a faded mustard yellow and rusted white two-bedroom trailer with his mother Tammi. His father resided just north of Buford at the medium security Phillips State Prison for Men where he was serving time for cooking and distributing meth. Mason’s grandmother Ginny moved in after her son’s sentencing to keep an eye on Mason and his mother.

Ginny stayed on the plaid, tan tattered couch most nights. Mason and Ginny spent the afternoons watching talk shows whose daily themes were reveals of paternity. She smoked Newport cigarettes in the trailer and the couch became infested with the smell of menthol and tiny little burn hole patterns that Mason would trace and connect with his chewed-up fingernail like a dot-to-dot instead of doing his reading homework. His teacher only ever assigned reading homework for Mason who was still a non-reader.

His third-grade teacher, Mrs. Sanderson, felt cursed to have drawn the short straw that August. She’d heard rumors about the foul mouth redheaded boy. Early in the year, she reached out to the school psychologist to have him meet with

Mason weekly. Mrs. Sanderson wore wool pencil skirts and white shirts buttoned to the top. Her colleagues would whisper to each other she had overextended her stay in the teaching profession. She was quick to hit the call button when Mason acted out, and by the second month of school, the principal was called down to assist her over a dozen times.

One person had Mason’s back, the special education paraprofessional Nikki Tompkins. Nikki attended the same school as a child, worked in the cafeteria while pursuing her associates degree, then got the job with the special education department. Miss Nikki had a way with the tough boys that was a gift. The boys every other adult cast in the role as future inmate. And that role was not totally undeserved as so many of the boys that came through the Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD) classroom ended up incarcerated.

Miss Nikki was a calm, patient woman. She was trained in Restrain Without Harm (RWH) techniques in the EBD classroom. When she used the restrain technique, she made the boys feel hugged.

Mason was aware his daddy was in a men’s prison but didn’t understand what a prison was. He thought it more like a camp. And as the months passed, Mason would make unrealistic predictions when

his father would be home.

By spring, Mason was still a non-reader. During reading centers, while sitting at the kidney shaped table, he would not silently read to himself for practice while the other kids took their timed fluency test. Instead he would use a pencil or bent paper clip to draw designs on the plastic flap that circumnavigated the table. That spring day, he etched thirteen stars in the pattern of an X, like the flags flown where he lived.

“My daddy gonna be out by Easter.” Mason said.

“I understand Mason. He will be out by Easter,” Mrs. Sanderson said. “Just like last month when you said he was to be out by St. Patty’s Day. Now let’s get back to the story and I’ll restart my timer. Remember, no questions.”

The story in the reading series contained a sequence where a young girl dreams of a pink river but emerges from it bald after taking a swim. It made no sense but contained words easily decodable for a third grader who read on a first-grade level.

“Why she dream about not having hair?” Mason asked. “And why that river pink in the picture Miss Sanderson?”

“Mason, it’s Mrs. not Miss. It really doesn’t matter to reading why she dreams she’s bald. I just need you to read the words so I can

count your mistakes.”

He hated when she counted his mistakes. Each tally mark on her clipboard was amplified in his eyesight. The noise of the pencil slowly scraping that tally mark on the page sounded like the metal spatula his mother used to scrape burned flesh specks off the frying pan. Mrs. Sanderson was metal on metal to him. What he hated the most during this tally mark of shame exercise was the diagonal tally, indicating he'd reached a group of five mistakes. All the kids could count by fives and see he had the most mistakes.

Mason had a meltdown and tore up Mrs. Sanderson's bulletin board titled *hopping into spring*. It had white cotton ball bunny rabbits and colorful collage construction paper eggs. Mrs. Sanderson called down the hall for Miss Nikki who came in and picked Mason up like a linebacker. Miss Nikki used her hybrid Restrain Without Harm/hugging technique until he calmed down.

“I just wanted to know why that girl dreams she's bald?” he asked. “You know my daddy bald.”

“There isn't anything wrong asking. I think it's strange she dreams that she's bald. Maybe it means she will win the lottery,” Miss Nikki said.

“Why you say that?”

“Not sure. Lots of times people say dreams mean the opposite of what they are. Perhaps losing her hair means she'll win some money.”

“I just wish Miss Sanderson would stop counting my mistakes. I

fucking hate those tally marks.”

“Language Mason. Maybe you and I just work together so she won't have mistakes to count. What do you think about that?”

Mason stopped the body jerks that sometimes resembled a seizure. Miss Nikki stopped the restrain. He was ready to go back to class. He looked at Miss Nikki's soft dark eyes, her jet-black weave sprinkled with teal tracks, and wished she could be his teacher.

Miss Nikki always made eye contact with Mason. Her eyes had just a speck or two of hazel. She was his safe space, his trusted person in that school building. Miss Nikki was in her seventh year serving as the special education paraprofessional and her title meant she was the lowest on the economic and political level in the building, yet when any child acted up a fool, she was the first they called.

#

Tammi Robertson pulled out her dollar store calendar and circled the Saturday before what she considered the most major holiday of that month. It could be Yom Kippur or Flag Day, it didn't really matter. Her mother-in-law questioned this and felt it should only be Christian holidays, since they were Christians. Even though she was raised Baptist, Mason's mother practiced no religion. The closest she got to church during this time in her life was shopping at the church sponsored thrift store called *The Good Shepherd*.

That May, the major holiday she circled was Mother's Day. The Saturday before the holiday she

took Mason to the prison for a visit.

“Daddy, can I just come live here with you?” Mason asked. Mason sat on his mother's lap while he spoke into an antiquated phone and looked pleadingly at his father through scratched, fogged plexiglass.

“Maybe buddy. We will look into that,” Bobby Robertson said.

Tammi gave Bobby the look. She hated when he wouldn't be straight with their son even though she refused to do it herself. She didn't have the energy to tell Mason prison wasn't like normal camp. She feared escalating Mason's behavior if she explained to him what the situation really was. She didn't realize the negative implications of allowing this idea of it being a camp to cement in Mason's head.

“Mason, right now your daddy got lots of work to do on weekends,” she said.

“That's right buddy,” Bobby said. “Your daddy working hard on weekends.”

During the car ride home Mason rapid fired questions to Tammi.

“Is daddy a mechanic? Is he a garbage man?”

“Baby, why you ask me that?”

“He wear the same kinda suit they do,” Mason said. “A onesie. His just orange.”

“I see,” Tammi said. “Yes, he do.”

“Do what?”

“He do one of those jobs.”

“Which one?”

“Whatever one you think.”

#

The summer proved to be difficult for Mason. Following the Mother's Day visit, he learned that he was being kept back by Mrs. Sanderson who indicated his lack of reading was the mitigating reason.

After the June Flag Day visit to the prison, Mason went about slashing tires and his grandmother covered for him with the police. Fourth of July, Mason got his hands on a lighter and started a small brush fire that burned up an abandoned car.

Mason spent most his time on the couch that summer with his grandmother watching her stories and talk shows while a red box fan blew heat on them. It was the same box fan his father used in his cooking area out back of the trailer on the cracked car pad. Bobby had wrapped that car pad with blue tarp to keep eyes out, but the neighbors in *Scenic View* could still smell the meth cooking.

One mid-summer day, Ginny noticed a round spot on his arm. Mason was a pale child prone to sunburns since his mother found sunscreen unnecessary. That round spot on his arm was darkly colored, a bit scabby to the touch, and somewhat crusted and flakey. Tammi put triple antibiotic cream on it and covered it with a bandage, but it grew to the size of a quarter.

"You gotta use something stronger on that Tammi," Ginny said. "It's the mark, his daddy had them."

"Like what?" Tammi asked. "This medicine is the best."

"For a mark like that you need something better than medicine. Mason, go get grandma that red can out back on the car pad. And a clean rag."

Mason came back in with the gas can and a torn-up t-shirt that was laundered. It was the same gas can that his father used in his meth cooking. Ginny soaked the fabric in the gasoline.

"You a brave boy like your daddy, aren't you?" Ginny asked.

"I am," Mason said.

"Don't you flinch. I gotta rub this deep in that mark. Only way to get a mark like this off a boy like you is to use fire making juice."

Mason noticed his grandmother was rubbing the gasoline on his mark in a counterclockwise movement. She did this for seven straight days, always counterclockwise, and the dark mark on his skin went away. Although it took the dark mark away, the gasoline created a circle on his skin that was whiter than his already pale white skin. In the right light, his skin looked translucent. His mother swore she could see through that mark to his bone.

Another round dark mark appeared on the back of his head. His grandmother insisted on shaving his head and keeping it shaved even after the dark mark subsided.

Mason quite liked his shaved head, it was just like his daddy's and his dad complimented him on it. The spot on the back of his head was twice the size of a quarter. His mother swore that she could see the skull bone through it, if the light were just right.

#

Tammi's calendar had no August holiday, so she took Mason on the Saturday before the new moon to see his father. She let Mason's red hair grow in to cover the spot so no one could see it when the school year started.

Mason started his second year in the third grade and sat next to a girl named Misti Harris. He was again placed in Mrs. Sanderson's class. She never thought he'd be placed back with her when deciding to retain him. The administration told her it was a random computerized program that made class lists, but she doubted that.

She continued to overuse the call button, but the principal long tired of going to her room so, the school secretary would get on the intercom and make an all call. "Miss Nikki, please report to room 298."

The all call felt undignified to Nikki. It wasn't because they called her to help with Mason. It was that they called her Miss Nikki. No other adult was referred to by their first name.

When his daddy was not released after Labor Day, Mason went on a tear in class destroying a bulletin board decorated with fake leaves and titled *falling into a new school year*. He broke the clipboard with the reading tally mark mistake page and stabbed several students with sharpened pencils.

Nikki noted that it was the first day back from a three-day holiday weekend and Mason visited his father. She wondered about his father often. Like Nikki, he attend-

ed the school as a child. Unlike Nikki, he was enrolled in the EBD class, albeit back then it was in the basement next to the custodial cleaning supplies. Bobby Robertson often was found in that closet smelling the chemicals.

Nikki remembered him as a quiet, stoic boy with a mean streak who often hurt others. Nikki and Bobby didn't run in the same circles back then. Georgia schools were only integrated in theory, even in 1996, the school maintained a segregated situation inside the walls. But not by race, it was segregated by ability, which in turn, meant it was economically segregated.

Nikki asked the psychologist about techniques beyond RWH. He was exasperated not just with Mason, but Nikki's inquiries. The psychologist brought in an inflatable punching clown in hopes that maybe Mason could get some aggression out.

That clown lasted only one week before Mason took Misti's rainbow handled scissors and stabbed it to deflation. Mason was barred from using scissors.

By September, Misti reached her boiling point because he teased her endlessly about her custodian father. Mason would eat bags of Hot Takis and then vomit them on the floor just to make Mr. Harris come to the room to clean it up. He would then rally the other kids in a chorus of "garbage man."

"I heard Mrs. Sanderson say your daddy was in jail," Misti said

"Shut up. My daddy work at a men's camp," Mason said. "He can leave whenever he want. Anyway, I

may just go live with him, and you will still be fat."

Over the Labor Day visit, Bobby Robertson sported a new prison tattoo on his neck. It had thick bold lines creeping up his neck to the left of his jaw. Bobby had that same pale skin as Mason that would burn in the yard during recreation. If he couldn't get his hands on a razor, his receded red follicles would peek their way through his skull forming an orange ring around the middle of his head. Tammi noticed that Bobby had one of those round marks on the new ink, making it appear like a polka-dot on that black tattoo.

After that Labor Day visit, against Tammi's wishes, Ginny shaved Mason's head to see about the mark. It was back and she commanded Mason to get the gas can so she could remove it. Mason loved his shaved head. It made him feel like his daddy. But when she was done, Ginny thought she could see his skull through it, sometimes it appeared to pulsate. She wondered if her boy Bobby had put something more in that red can beyond gasoline.

Monday, in a preemptive strike, Mason began teasing Misti, knowing that she may make fun of his head. And he was right to fear that because in a counterstrike she did make fun of his head, but one could never know if she would have done this first.

"You know what Mason, you a bald-headed freak," Misti said.

"That weird bleached out mark on your arm, you got one twice as big on the back of your big ass head. Sometimes it moves like you got an

alien in you."

"Fuck off you fat fuck. Maybe you should spread some gasoline on your skin to lighten it a little," Mason said.

Just then Mason was yanked by his collar out of his seat.

"Come with me," Miss Nikki said.

"What I do?" Mason asked. He yelled the entire way down the hall to the EBD room. He thrashed and threw punches at Nikki.

Miss Nikki wrapped her legs around him and crossed his arms around his stomach, like a strait jacket. It was classic RWH moves.

"You stop teasing that girl. Or else," Nikki said.

"Or else what bitch?" he asked.

"Or else I won't have your back. I understand when you act out when Mrs. Sanderson makes fun of your reading. But that girl don't ever start nothing with anyone. You leave her and her daddy alone. Her daddy is my friend and if you mess with my friend, I'm about ready to mess with you."

"I didn't know he your friend, Miss Nikki. Sorry."

"Don't sorry me. You say your sorry to Misti. You hear?"

"Yea."

Nikki released her legs from around him and he hugged her. She looked down at the round mark and swore it was moving.

The two of them made their way to the art room so Miss Nikki could get some fancy duct tape to fix Mr. Punching Clown. She hated to admit it, but maybe that school psychologist was onto something and Mason needed to get aggression out. Mason picked the

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American Flag decorated roll.

“For pride Miss Nikki.

American Pride,” Mason said.

Miss Nikki took Mason to see Nurse Rawls so she could look at the spots. Nurse Rawls gloved up and examined the lightened skin.

“Mason, does anyone put medicine on these spots?” She asked. “Do they itch and scab up?”

“Yes ma’am. My momma put some cream on it and it still itched, so my grandmother put gas juice on it.”

“Gas juice?”

“From the red can that my daddy used for cooking.”

“I see,” Nurse Rawls said. She turned to Miss Nikki and spoke as if Mason wasn’t in the room. “Does he live at the Scenic Trailers?”

“He does.”

“It’s probably ringworm, a fungal infection. Those folks over there have some weird thinking and put gasoline on skin rashes. Try Medicated Selsun Blue shampoo and leave it on the ringworm.”

“Isn’t there medicine?” Nikki asked. “You want him to use dandruff shampoo on it? Look at it closely, can’t you see some of the bone through it?”

Nurse Rawls examined it and said, “Maybe, but it’s skin wearing off due to the gasoline. He needs a doctor, but it’s not like his mother is going to take him. What hillbilly let’s her mother-in-law rub gas on a kid’s fungal infection?”

“It’s none of our business what they do,” Nikki said.

“Well, his father made it all our business when he got caught cooking. Who knows what chemicals

they have actually rubbed into this boy’s skin?”

Mason fixated his eyes on the randomly placed green tiles on the floor and spun the American flag duct tape roll around his finger.

Back in the classroom, Mason kept his head down on his desk. He removed a staple from his reading workbook and was poking holes into the ringworm spot on his arm. He broke a ball point blue pen and was rubbing the ink into the punctures. He was tattooing himself.

Miss Nikki came back at the end of the day and saw it. Home made tattoos were not uncommon around those parts, but the symbol took her aback.

“Do you know what that symbol is?” she asked.

“It’s my daddy’s symbol.”

“Yes, do you know what it stands for?”

“Pride. American pride,” Mason said. “I like it. I like how the lines go up, and then to the right, then down, and to the left.”

Miss Nikki took Mason back down to Nurse Rawls to have her clean it up and sterilize what surely was going to be an infected tattoo.

“Dear God. This boy tattooed a swastika on his ringworm,” Nurse Rawls said.

“Let it go,” Nikki said. “He doesn’t understand what it means. He thinks it’s American pride.”

“Where’d you see this symbol young man?” Nurse Rawls asked him.

“On my daddy’s neck ma’am.”

“Nikki, how can you work with this boy as a Black woman?”

“It’s not him. It’s his father,”

Nikki said. “And it’s more complicated than I can explain. I went to school with Bobby Robertson. I know more about it than I want to.”

“Nothing complicated about this tattoo Nikki, you have the patience of a saint.”

Mason again fixated his gaze on the random green tiles while Nurse Rawls applied an alcohol solution on his tattoo that smelled no better than gasoline to him. She was no different than his grandmother. He started to believe they all wanted to wear away his skin to the bone. All Mason Robertson wanted now was to live with his father.

#

On Saturday, October 28th, Mason, and his mother went to visit his daddy.

“What you gonna be this year for Halloween buddy?” Bobby asked.

“Scream face,” Mason said. “I got a Scream face mask from *The Good Shepard*. It’s still in the box, never used. But the blood juice in it is all dried up. When I push the air pump, the fake blood is all red powder.”

“Sounds good buddy. Scary stuff,” Bobby said.

“You gonna be out of here to take me trick-or-treating daddy?” Mason asked.

“Maybe. We’ll see. I might just could.”

“If not, can I come live here?”

“Well, only bad boys live here,” Bobby said, “So you’d have to do something really bad to come live with daddy. You think that gonna

happen Mason?"

Mason smiled.

#

Monday October 30th, Mrs. Sanderson sat at the kidney shaped table and held another reading fluency assessment.

"Mason you have the largest tally count and it's your second time in the third grade. What are we going to do with you?" she asked. She said this loud enough for the entire class to hear.

Mason looked down at the tiles on the floor and fixated his gaze on the maroon ones randomly placed around the room. It was in that shaming moment he made his decision how he would go live with his father.

Miss Nikki walked into the room while the tally mark shaming session was beginning and simply interlaced her hand with Mason's, walked him to the EBD room, and inflated Mr. Punching Clown and let him beat the hell out of it.

#

Before the parade of costumes around the school, Mrs. Sanderson had art activities for the class. Every year the same, construction paper pumpkins and coloring sheets. While handing out the materials she gave Mason his in an envelope.

"Here Mason, yours are pre-cut. We can't trust you with scissors you know," Mrs. Sanderson said.

Nikki was dressed head to toe in glitter and a pink tutu. No one quite knew what the costume was, but it elicited smiles. Mrs. Sanderson refused to take part in anything so childish as to wear a costume on Halloween. That day,

she wore a brown houndstooth tweed pencil skirt that ended right at the knee with dark shaded pantyhose.

"My daddy said he might could be out today, to take me trick-or-treating. You think he here Ms. Nikki?" Mason asked.

"Mason, your daddy won't be out anytime soon, you need to know that," Nikki said. "It may just be a long time he lives there."

"If he ain't coming out then I go live with him, bad boys get to live there, so I'll be a bad boy."

"Mason, I think you are a good boy. It's Halloween, let's have a great day," she said. Nikki smiled at Mason who ran his arms over hers picking up some glitter along the static way.

Miss Nikki, unaware of Mason's visit the previous weekend, paid little mind to that sentence Mason spoke, but it would haunt her for years to come.

Miss Nikki went back to the EBD classroom assured that Mason seemed in good spirits and calm enough to not need hand holding during the parade. He looked so happy in his costume. And she had another student who was troubling her mind that day.

"Misti, give me them scissors," Mason said.

"No way Mason, they are mine. What you want with Rainbow anyway? Misti asked. "You ain't even allowed scissors and if Mrs. Sanderson sees you with them, she'll take them."

"I promise I won't tease you for a week. And I'll hide them in my costume."

"Two weeks. And you leave my daddy alone too."

"Deal."

Mason didn't just choose those scissors because he could manipulate Misti. He chose them because kid's scissors were too small for Misti's hands and she had grown up scissors. The ones with points at the tips. Perfect for stabbing. He remembered stabbing Mr. Punching Clown with them.

The parade started and Mrs. Sanderson expressed exasperation over it. She walked ahead of her class asking one of the other third grade teachers to watch the kids. The loudspeaker was playing *Monster Mash* and she found a spot on the wall next to Nurse Rawls to complain about the noise.

Miss Nikki was bringing up the rear of the third-grade classrooms, trying to keep an eye on Mason. Among a sea of Scream faces, Mason was unrecognizable in the costume parade. One would have thought that the dried fake blood in the mask would be a giveaway, but so many of the Scream masks were dried out that year.

Mason hovered close to the wall. He saw ahead that Mrs. Sanderson and Nurse Rawls were leaning against it where randomly placed cinderblocks were painted auburn. He pulled the scissors out of his white, waffle long sleeve undershirt he wore under the costume. At first he thought he'd keep them closed when he stabbed, but on second thought he quite liked the idea of opening them just wide enough to make tally marks on their legs.

He stabbed Nurse Rawls first. She seemed the kind that needed to be wounded first, if not she may have prevented any further stabbing. He plunged the pointed tips inside her right shin and dragged them downwards, tearing her fleshy leg skin along the way. Blood didn't squirt out as he imagined, instead it oozed slowly, without any excitement. He turned the handles just enough to force the wind out of her lungs.

Mrs. Sanderson was in shock and couldn't do more than scream. Mason plunged his scissors into her left shin. She doubled over and fell to the ground. This made making skin tally marks more laborious for Mason as he did not have the weight of gravity on his side. He pulled them out after moving them down her shin, and plunged them back in. No one but Miss Nikki knew he was attempting to make a five-tally mark on her skin, but he was stopped before he could get to the diagonal one across the four to indicate five.

The wound on Mrs. Sanderson's skin was deeper and the blood pooled around her torn pantyhose. Soon the pantyhose was all but gone, exposing legs desperately in need of a shave. Miss Nikki ran to pull Mason off her, and held him to her chest, forgetting all RWH techniques. Looking down she saw two bones. The first was in the wound on Mrs. Sanderson's leg. But it was the second one that was far more concerning. She pulled Mason's *Scream* mask off and could see the translucent spot on the back of his head, pulsating vigor-

ously exposing skull bone.

#

Ambulances were not needed but the two women required stitches on the tally marks on their legs. Immediately after the incident, Mason was held in the EBD room with Miss Nikki while they awaited a social worker, the school resource officer, and his mother. Miss Nikki felt foolish in her pink tutu that once seemed so whimsical. She held him close but wouldn't touch his head, it was still pulsating where the mark was.

"Mason. Honey. Why?" she asked.

"I'm gonna go live with my daddy," he said. "Bad boys live there and I'm gonna go live with my daddy."

Tammi Robertson and her mother-in-law made their way to the school and they watched as Mason was escorted to the resource officer's car to take him to the Gwinnett Youth Detention Center. They kept shaking their heads and smoked Newport Menthols on the steps of the school. Miss Nikki walked out and stood next to them and for the first time since she was in her twenties, smoked a cigarette. #

Nikki took silent grief from the staff at Eagle Eye Elementary the remainder of the year. Mrs. Sanderson and Nurse Rawls reminded her almost daily with just their looks. Although both recovered with no long-lasting effects on their legs, the jagged horizontal scars were visible daily just below the hemline of Mrs. Sanderson's pencil skirts. Whenever Nikki

looked at them all she thought was tally marks.

She didn't go see Mason for a long time although she thought of him daily. However, she did visit someone who was incarcerated. On the first Saturday of each month, Miss Nikki would drive north on Interstate 80 and take exit 120 and follow the signs to Phillips State Prison for Men to see the man she once went to elementary school with.

During those visits she would converse with him about what happened. She tried to understand the root cause of this. She wanted to know what was in that gas can. Bobby Robertson never told her. Nikki would stare at the round mark on his swastika tattoo that Tammi thought looked like a polka-dot. Each time when Bobby Robertson would get angry over Nikki asking about the gas can, she noticed that the spot would pulsate. ❖

“We Smiled at the Strangeness”

by Bill Gillard

It is the annual science fair, and I am a judge. I've taught high school Physics for twenty years now. I get called to do science fairs pretty often. Comes with the territory. This particular fair is in a town a few over from mine. Five high schools are here, and for two hours I need to feign interest in pH graphs, conductivity, fruit flies, and dissections done by students I don't know.

I am 45 years old.

I learn from a mousy boy's poster that a periodic comet is a remnant of the creation of the solar system 4.6 billion years ago. It is massive enough to be buffeted by everything gravitationally as it makes its chaotic orbit, its outsides bombarded by the solar wind. Not bad. Thanks, I say, and move along. The boy eyes my white judge's ribbon nervously.

Just after the kid who flipped nickels one hundred thousand times, and recorded each one (Good Lord!), is a poster about the melting properties of various winter road treatments. I don't like winter driving at all. A barbaric age we live in. The poster is unattended. On the right wing of the trifold is a photo of a mangled car at the bottom of a snowy ditch. I reach out to touch it and remember a friend I loved deeply, dead just like that on an icy road. Years have passed and the wound is still fresh.

I close my eyes to try to pull her image from my memory.

When I open my eyes, I see the girl who has come back to her poster. She has a paper cup filled with water. Water is melted ice. She smiles.

Her eyes.

So familiar somehow. But she is no student of mine.

And the crooked smile.

Nice poster, I say. Tell me about it.

Her project is more memoir than anything scientific. She tells me about her family—two younger sisters, her mother—how they slid into the wrong lane on an icy road, how none of them survived.

She tells me that they had been searching for a house—the first they'd buy. Her mother wanted a log home on a river so she could canoe. The girl argued that it would be too far to travel to school and she would have no social life that far away from other people.

Secretly, she thought that her mom was too picky, that they should just buy something and it would feel like home. You should see some of the places we lived before then, she says, tilting her head to laugh as if she is pouring a small cup of happiness from a pitcher.

Her father didn't come back from Germany after the divorce, even after the accident. That's

where he's from, the girl told me. She lives with cousins on her mother's side now. He's from Germany, she told me again and finished the water.

Our children—I have none—our children—this child—are chunks of dirty ice that hurtle out of the Oort Cloud, propelled by who knows what at 40 km/sec. They all start off intact and massive and seek the warm sun that, like all desires, blinds and burns us.

Our past is the tail of a comet, chunks of our young selves careening off gloriously into color and light, trailing away from our diminishing bodies.

She tells me things about her family—secrets. I feel compelled to reciprocate. A few years back, I met a woman on a beach in Maine, I want to tell her. We both stopped and stared at each other. We shared our names and tried to figure out how we knew each other. We tried everything, interests, geography, common friends, nor were our names familiar to each other in any way. She grew up in New Hampshire, me in New York City. She went to college in Maine, I in North Carolina. And so on. There was no overlap. And yet were were certain. We smiled at the strangeness and eventually parted.

This mystical loneliness, broken parts of us melting off into the void, pieces of us shattering, our

bodies diminished second by second by the light and heat and mass that calls to us across the void of loneliness.

Her mother—dead for a year—wanted a log home on a river. Her daughter, alone now, studies road salt. I teach Physics. An hour ago, I knew a lot of things. I was a judge at this science fair, for example.

Now, right this second, I know less than nothing. ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

Missed my ride home, long way, not sure why I didn't drive myself in the first place. Each time someone else left the event, I asked if I could catch a ride, but no one going my way. Now just a handful left of people I even know. I am more polite than I ever am, and a mom of a friend says yes, get my stuff and she'll wait in the car for me.

For some reason, I think now is the time to get some travel-grub from the grocery store – crackers and cheese and some candy or a bag of pretzels. I go to the entrance to the store, which somehow now is one of those big-box deals, a warehouse with a line of people outside waiting to get in because of Covid restrictions on the number of people allowed in the place. I wait anyhow, and there is a ruckus near the front of the line for some reason but Back here we can't see what the problem was. Some store security comes past us (from farther behind us in line?) to handle the situation. The line moves pretty quickly, and it feels like I should be left behind by my ride, but for some reason this doesn't occur to me. I need that junk food.

At the front of the line it enters the sliding door into the store and splits into two columns, those with memberships and folks like me. My line is moving all the way across the front of the store and up past the last checkout lane, where no one is wearing a mask. It just now also occurs to me that I'm not wearing a mask, so I reach in my pocket where I only have a handkerchief, which I hold against my face like I'm going to sneeze or something.

At this point I finally realize that I've been keeping my ride waiting and I want to turn around, but there's no room to go back and there's no movement to go forward. I look behind me and there's a tiny window I can slide open if I want to try to climb out of it, but when I open it there is a voice over a loudspeaker saying that store security should report to the check-out lines. I know they're after me, so I just wait there, hoping that my explanation will suffice.

Jellyroll - cyberspace

two by K. A. Williams

“The Partying Neighbors”

I have the perfect apartment
with reasonable rent,
and a great location.
There’s just one problem -
my next door neighbors.
I’ve never met them but
I’d recognize their voices.
They throw noisy parties
every other weekend.
I can hear them talk and laugh
through the thin walls
when the loud music
is not assailing my ears.
But the worst thing of all
is that they’ve never invited
me to any of their parties.

“Last Night’s Dream”

I wish I could recall my dreams
with vivid clarity like the people
whose nighttime adventures are
recorded in The Dream Journal.
But when I wake, the last remnants
are usually running quickly away,
leaving behind only vague feelings.
All I can remember about last
night’s dream was that I knocked
down a building with a paper ball.
Could that have been my subconscious
mind’s view of the solidity of material
objects or merely the end of a strange dream?

"Blue Window"

the glass turns
blue window tilts fire
liquid rushes
to be stopped by blue
glass pane
is melted by the fire

I see no reason to break it

two by Robert Beveridge

"Less Willing"

there is the hedge
there are the thorns

across the lot
a grassy expanse

a robin searches for food

there has been no sun

Contributors

Edward Jackson attended Western Michigan University (BA), Aquinas College (M.Ed.), University of Georgia (Ed.S.), and Emory University (Post Grad Certificate). Currently he is enrolled in the MFA program at Youngstown State. He lives in Greenville, PA with his husband, their cat and dog, and a bunch of squatter bats and squirrels who won't leave the walls of his attic office.

Bill Gillard is an award-winning teacher of creative writing and literature at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. His writing has appeared in dozens of journals, and he is the author of the poetry collection, *The Vade Mecum of the True Sublime*, and two chapbooks, *Ode to Sandra Hook* and *Desire, the River*. He is co-author of *Speculative Modernism*, a study of the origins of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. He is the Fiction Editor at the literary magazine, *Masque and Spectacle*. He earned an M.F.A. from Fairleigh Dickinson University, is a recovering youth hockey coach, and lives in Appleton, Wisconsin, with his wife and two daughters.

Last year and/or this year, **K. A. Williams** was published in *The Blotter*, *Corner Bar*, *Literary Yard*, *Calliope*, *Tigershark*, *Ariel Chart*, *Visual Verse*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *Nuthouse*, *Transfigured Lit*, *Altered Reality*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Yellow Mama*, *View From Atlantis*, *Trembling With Fear*, *The Rockford Review*, and *Mystery Tribune*. Apart from writing, she enjoys music, computer chess, and text adventure games.

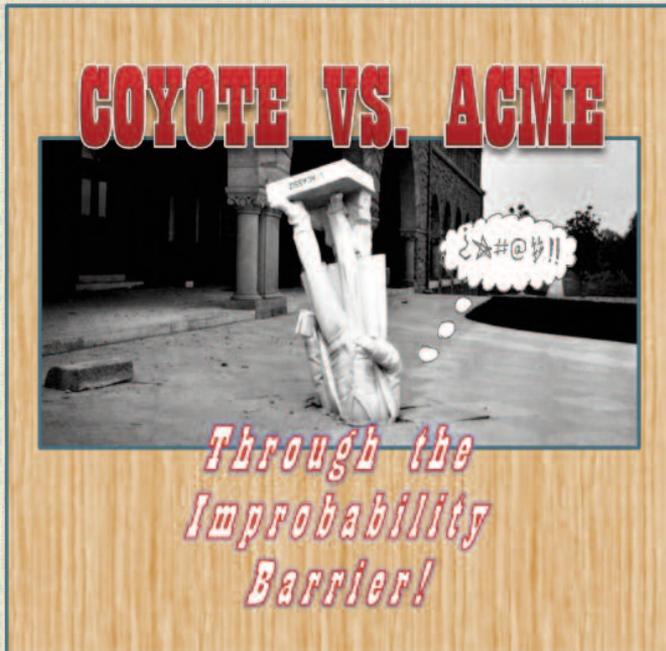
Proma Sen Gupta writes that she "is an artist specialized in acrylic painting who is based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Creating painting of new theme, nature world, folk painting, traditional & cultural painting, mythological painting, mandala art; her work allows her to be constantly experimenting and exploring missing colors with imagination and inviting the viewers to see acrylic painting in diverse ways.

Proma Sen Gupta actively participates in the artists' virtual community. She has no basic background education to learn the painting whereas she receives this quality by innate. She is also actively selling her painting to her viewers and eager to explore more scope in this field."

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *El Portal*, *Blood Moon Rising*, and *PTMN.TEAU*, among others.

COYOTE vs. ACME

("Gay
Cowboy Music!")



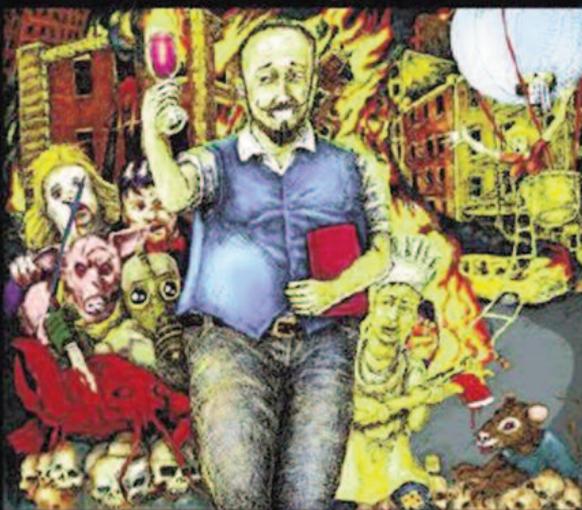
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