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“Memory Palace”

There’s a lot of stuff going on, and much of it is not good and often it’s hard to find a place for one’s brain to be that allows a bit of respite, so forgive me if I reminisce for a little while. Although this is something that I know doesn’t help everyone, it is something that works for me. Feel free to place your burdens down, too, if you want.

I occasionally spend time wandering around in the past. My past, anyway. A while back I learned that this pastime, if you will, is called creating a memory palace. A memory palace is a tool called the *method of loci*, an ancient mnemonic strategy considered useful for keeping specific details – people’s names, numbers and other things we tend to forget. By visualizing the size, shape, color and location of things, one can recall other items that were, well, just out of reach.

Of course, I may be oversimplifying this, but I do use the concept as I understand it, although not to remember words to a speech I have to make, or where I put my car keys. For me it is rather a way of seeing quite clearly bits from my childhood, the places, people and events, and expanding outwards from them to find more parts of my life-puzzle.

I haven’t been back to my hometown in quite a long time. Part of the reason is that there is little that remains there of my childhood. The house I grew up in is a different color, a different shape (more recent owners have made changes) and the proportions are different. There were many large trees on our little ¾ acre. They are gone. Perhaps a storm made them fall, or they were sold for their value as lumber. I don’t know. It is just as plausible that big shade trees don’t have street appeal anymore. That would be a shame, I think. A big maple tree is an excellent source of calm and summer relaxation.

The old two-rail fences scattered along the street must be a thing of the past, too. They were wearing out when I was young. A kind of yard demarcation status-symbol, they kept nothing in the yard, and no one out. As kids we sat on them, performed high-wire acts of

balancing along them, jumped over or crawled through them, chased by dogs, younger or older brothers. Who still owns such a thing? Today we want privacy, intimacy, a place to release the hounds or protect our plots of tomatoes. A yard is not for sharing anymore, unfortunately. The sounds of laughing children annoy us, for some inexplicable reason.

My best friend growing up had a basketball backboard and hoop bolted to the side of his house over the garage. His mother heard us outside, bouncing the ball, many hours through the summer days. The thump of it on the driveway and off the wooden backboard counterpointed everything – Sinatra on the radio, the groan of the Electrolux, the afternoon TV soaps. A small price to pay for knowing where your children (and the neighbors' kids) were.

There's another point to not physically revisiting the past haunts, though. I retain what I consider a clear picture in my mind of my home. No, wait, it's more than that. Pictures and sounds and music and scents and tastes. All of it together in a *mélange* of recollection, in the memory palace. Unspoiled by change, by storms or changes in taste. I can still start at a point, say the strange, tilted front porch of my childhood home, with the squeaky glider-couch and see through the screen to the dappled front yard. Yes, I know it is bigger in the past than now – because I have grown, aged, and my perception of distance (and time) have altered. A day is no longer a day, so to speak. I can see across to the public library across the street, the parking lot half-full and the empty phone booth near the street.

I can hear the thump-thump of my friend dribbling around the corner of my house. He sees me and pulls a quarter from his trousers pocket and so we begin the journey downtown to the luncheonette which is also a candy store. To get there, we must run the gauntlet of two houses in which reside older boys who don't get along with us. Call them bullies. We did.

This day – the one in my palace - however, is free of conflict. The path to the candy store is a series of dog-legs – left, then right, then left again. It leads past a baseball sandlot, and just beyond the edge of furthest left field an empty shallow pond that is filled during the

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

cross, I will bear your

“The Divergence of Dignity and Gravity”

by Nanda Klein

I was introduced to alcohol in childhood. Although my father let me sip the beer foam from his glass, I didn't like the taste of it. It was too bitter for a child who enjoyed drinking condensed milk from the can.

In fact, it was my mom's wine juice that I enjoyed the most: the red beverage diluted in water with a generous portion of sugar was so scrumptious I used to chug it down, often inciting me to nap afterward.

Despite the early exposure to alcohol, the realization that I didn't appreciate its aftereffects prevented me from developing an interest in drinking. Hence, at nightclubs I drank water. Besides, I was never fond of people getting intoxicated. I found it degrading.

Nonetheless, “Ladies First” at Manara Bar was one of my favorite parties. Besides the club's offer of complimentary beer to ladies—the only ones allowed at the upper level—such events had amazing music making it difficult to leave the dance floor even after hours in high heels.

On the first floor, the men anxiously waited in the lobby by the wooden L-shaped staircase that was so high it seemed like a stairway to heaven. Most likely, in some of the men's minds, the upper level was filled with angels. What they didn't expect, however, was to witness the ingress of a fallen one.

Tired, my friend and I decided to

head downstairs to rest. As soon as I reached the staircase, the bright light announced that the place was packed with a multitude of voices trying to talk over the music.

Nevertheless, all at once, the soreness of my feet and the noise became trivial: Between all the ladies going down the stairs, I saw a gentleman leaning against the rail at the bottom of the staircase. His black hair matched his clothes, and besides being good-looking, he was also elegant. Our eyes met.

As in the very popular movie at the time *Titanic*, I envisioned myself as Rose walking down the steps to meet Jack. In what seemed to be slow motion, I moved my wavy long black hair back with my right hand, revealing my neck while teasingly disengaging my gaze.

Holding the rail with a tight grip to prevent me from falling, I gracefully began my descent with the confidence of a supermodel in a shampoo commercial. Staring at my feet, I moved down two steps. I then looked slightly up toward him. A smile popped up once I noticed his eyes remained locked on me. Then, all of the sudden, my grip was gone. The heel of my shoe got caught on the edge of the step. In a matter of seconds, my confidence went downhill fast, along with my dignity.

A synchronized sound wave echoed from the crowd as my body tumbled down the staircase. Peeking through my semi-closed eyes, I noticed all

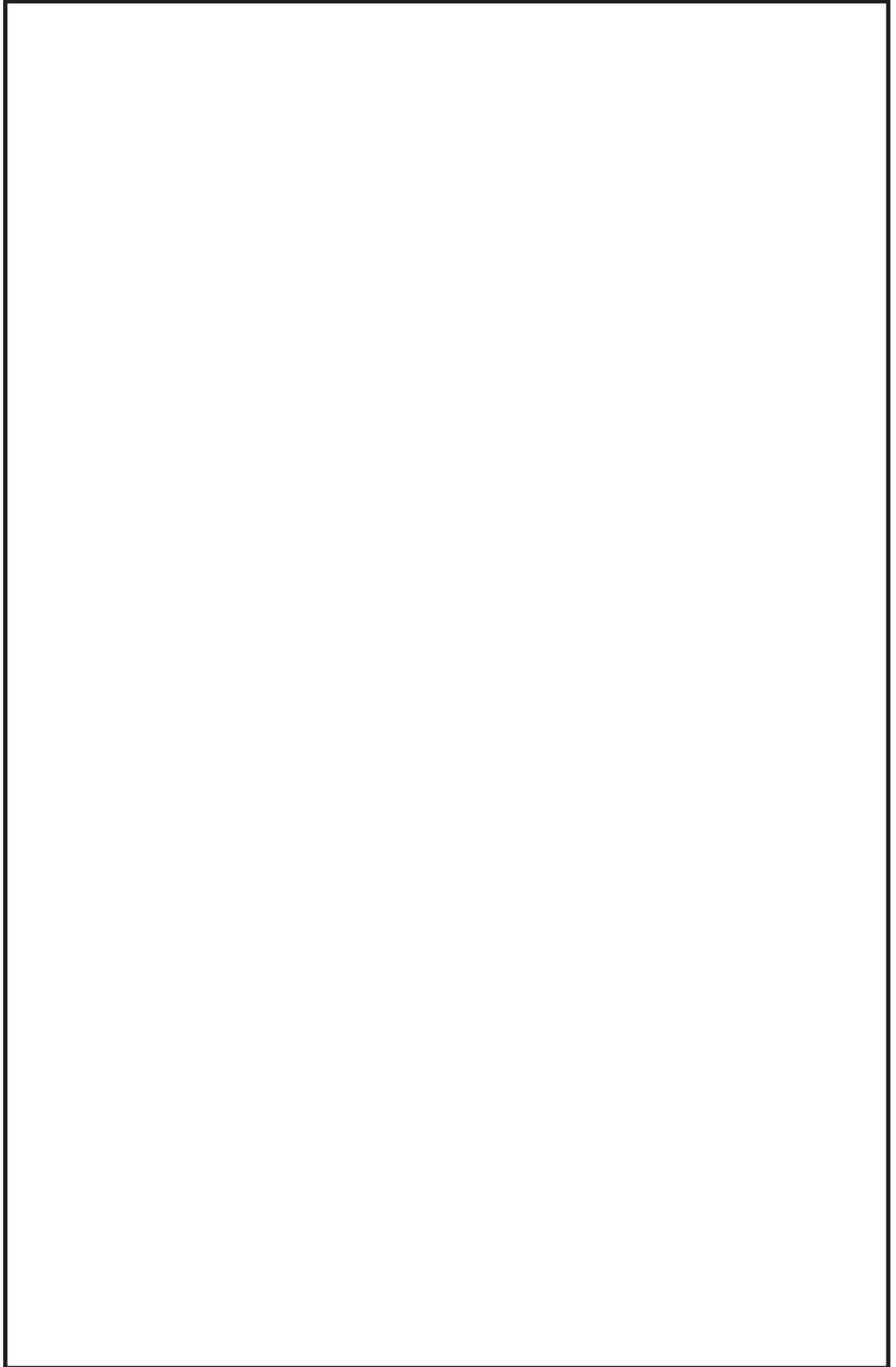
eyes were on me. With each spin and bump down the following step, the question rose in my mind: *How am I going to stand up and walk away from this? There's no turning back now.*

Once I finally reached the bottom of the stairs, I didn't stand up. Thankfully, all my bones were fine, but my ego splintered into a million fragments. Motionless, I laid there, pretending I passed out. Meanwhile, I mentally enhanced my master plan.

With the help of his friend, the gentleman in black carefully pulled me up. Tragically, given that I was severely intoxicated, I buried my face in his shoulder, allowing myself to lean on him. Noticing his sympathy, I began to mumble to appear even more convincing.

A security guard picked me up and carried me to the restroom. There, I sat on the floor with my head against the wall and my legs extended on the floor. That's when I realized that being intoxicated wasn't that degrading. Well, as long as I was just pretending.

Impressed by my profound contemplation and the discovery of my theatrical abilities, I picked myself up and, along with the little dignity I had left, walked out only to collapse once more as soon as I caught sight of a familiar face staring at me. He was all in black. ❖



“The Aftermath”

Out in the Pacific, the surf shrugs
its way onto the shores of atolls,
cool blue shoulders under foamy white locks,
and lies down to rest on the sand.

Coconut crabs whose ancestors waved
ragged claws at new suns
briefly burning in the skies
clatter across the beach, oblivious
to the cesium fires inside.

two by David A. Pickett

“Half Life”

What is the half-life of the human heart?
As we climb the steepening slope of years
the freshness of our youth decays
as particles of hope, and faith, and love
become despair, and doubt, and hate,
and fade away.
The passion that we had for life
grows thin and rare
as we asymptotically approach
the axis of our final dissolution.
Who will help us when we are halfway there?

"The New Continent"

By William Erickson

When they make
the new continent
I will be the first
to want to go there
but will not want to
go there first.
You will grab my wrist
and feel what my brain
does without my knowing
and will mistake it for love.
We all do.
Our fingers are ten
of the scariest things
on earth. When we
discover they're missing
we'll pretend surprise,
looking around like
we didn't hide them
to stop from worrying,
secretly relieved
we can no longer touch.
The secret is a new continent.
Our palms are in on it.
We all are.

"Transmute"

Asacia Hernandez

My veins are the root,
they remind me of the truth.
Every flake, hair, and tooth,
will fade with my youth.

With time all will dilute.
They kick and scream to dispute,
"This is our world to pollute!"
Then we kiss the shoes of those in suit.

The brave confute for the mute,
and jump without a parachute.
As we all follow the same route,
knowing time will never retribute.

“The Raft”

by Robert P. Bishop

Christine refilled their coffee cups and sat down across the kitchen table from David. “Are you going to visit Warren today?”

“Yes. He isn’t going to last much longer. Do you want to come with me?”

“No. I don’t want to see what he’s become.”

“It’s hard for me too, but he’s been my friend for fifty-three years.”

Christine started collecting the breakfast dishes. “What if some do-gooder on the staff gets their nose out of joint and interferes?”

“Not going to happen. They’ve accepted his decision and are good with it.”

“I don’t know if I could ever do what Warren is doing. I’m not brave enough.”

David smiled. “You might be, if you were in his position.”

“I hope I never find out.” She grimaced. “I wouldn’t want to embarrass myself.” She refilled the coffee cups again.

“Death does funny things to people,” David said. He spun his coffee cup on the table as he searched for words. “I had a brother I never told you about. His name was Billy. He died.”

Christine’s mouth dropped open. “My god, David, why didn’t you ever tell me? We’ve been married thirty-three years! I’m your wife. You’re supposed to tell me

these things.”

David shrugged. “Yeah, well.” He sipped some coffee. “Billy died in his sleep when he was twelve and I was seven. I had no idea what death was, didn’t have a clue about its significance. But it scared me. It was so different. I had never seen a dead person before. I asked my father if it hurt to be dead. He said he didn’t know. I asked if I was going to die and he said I didn’t have to worry about that now. I asked him if he was going to die. He said yes, someday. Then I asked if he was afraid to die and he said no.” David stopped talking and sipped some coffee.

“All these years we’ve been married and you’ve never said anything about this. Why?”

“It’s not something I want to talk about, or even think about. Six years after Billy died my dad had a heart attack. He sobbed and begged God not to die. Over and over he said he was afraid to die. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.” David smiled ruefully, looked at Christine and shrugged. “Seventy-four years later it’s still hard to comprehend he lied to me.”

“Maybe he was trying to protect you, or realized you were too young to understand death.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“How awful. Those must have been difficult times for you. Is that why you’ve never said anything?”

“I don’t know. Probably.

Neither one is a pleasant memory.”

“I’m glad you told me.” She placed her hand on his. “Did your father die from the heart attack?”

“No, he lived twelve more years.”

“Do you think he lived those years being afraid to die?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t everybody have some fear of dying? My dad and I never had much of a relationship. It got worse after his heart attack so I can’t really say how he felt.” David finished his coffee and stood up. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

“I’m sure, David. Unless you want me to go.”

“No, it’s all right.”

David parked, got out of his car and stood for some moments looking at The Cedars nursing home, a beige-colored building surrounded by Douglas fir trees. The nursing home depressed him. He knew the people living in The Cedars were not making plans for a trip to Angkor Wat, a cruise on the Volga River, or a journey to any other destination. The people living in The Cedars were enduring, waiting, and that added to the grief he felt over Warren.

David had helped Warren move into The Cedars after he was released from the hospital following the stroke. A year of rigorous physical therapy got Warren ambu-

latory and able to feed and care for himself. And he could walk the short distance to a nearby coffee shop with David three days a week and spend an hour or two talking about his forty-five year career as a tugboat captain on Puget Sound.

The walks to the coffee shop diminished then stopped when Warren's health began a rapid and precipitous decline. "I'm just a decrepit old man," he complained to David several months later from his bed. "I'm tired, I hurt, and I can't do things for myself. I don't want to live anymore."

David didn't say anything. Warren sometimes made these kinds of comments when he was not feeling well or was in a dark mood.

"I know how to do it. I researched it," Warren said. "This is Washington State. What I'm going to do is legal and nobody can stop me."

David had learned to be patient. Warren would disclose his plans in his own way.

"I'm going to stop eating. I'll drink water and the coffee you bring every day from Starbucks. I like that coffee, but I'm not going to eat anything. Should take about eighteen to twenty-one days."

After that declaration, Warren never ate another bite of food, although he drank water and enjoyed the coffee David brought when he visited every day.

David went down the hall to Warren's room, stood outside the open door and looked in. Warren

lay on his back with his eyes half shut, his mouth open, breathing shallowly and irregularly. He had been in this state for the last four days and David wondered how long he could hang on. A sudden apprehension flooded David and he was unable to enter the room. Instead, he went in search of the duty nurse.

"Warren," he said by way of explanation when he found her.

"It's been nineteen days. He's on the edge of going," the nurse said quietly. "I think it will be today."

David nodded. "I'll sit with him for a while."

"He would like that." She held up a cautionary finger. "He can hear what you say, but there isn't any way of knowing if he understands."

David pulled a chair close to the bed, sat down and looked at Warren's face; his lips and his hands had turned a purple color. Warren's hands rested on top of the blanket covering him. David took Warren's right hand. It felt fragile and cold.

"Warren, it's David." Warren didn't respond and David had no way of knowing if Warren heard him.

Warren gasped, stopped breathing, then started breathing a few seconds later. Then Warren stopped breathing again. Several seconds later Warren began breathing. From the research David had done on end-of-life, he recognized this as Cheyne-Stokes breathing and knew it indicated death was close by.

David didn't know what to say. What could he say that conveyed any meaning at this time? He thought holding Warren's hand might tell him he was not alone. Was holding Warren's hand enough as death approached? Did it comfort Warren, help him to let go if he knew he was not alone?

David had no way of knowing these answers so he sat quietly by Warren's bed with his warm strong fingers wrapped around his friend's fragile and cold hand.

He loved his friend and would miss him, but it was Warren's decision and David never tried to convince him otherwise. Frequently, David wondered if he could gin up the courage to do what Warren was doing if he lived in a body convulsed with pain, collapsing week by week and making most of life's basic tasks nearly impossible without the embarrassment of asking for help.

So he waited patiently as his friend's life ticked away.

After several minutes, David said, "Paul Hebbins and I wanted to float down the Yellowstone River from Laurel, Montana to New Orleans." He ran his thumb over the bony knuckles of Warren's right hand, hoping for an indication Warren heard him, then continued when Warren didn't respond. "I don't think I ever told you this. We were thirteen years old and ready for adventure. We were going to make a raft out of cottonwood trees. We even chopped down two cottonwoods for our raft, but then we realized what we wanted to do

was impossible so we gave up and never made that raft. I bet those two logs are still on the riverbank after all these years, waiting for a couple of boys to use them for a raft and have the adventure Paul and I never had.”

Warren remained motionless, his breath shallow and erratic.

“I’m eighty-one years old and still think about that. It would have been an adventure, it sure would have.”

David stopped talking and sat by the bed, holding Warren’s hand in both of his. It was some time before he realized Warren had stopped breathing. David waited several more minutes then put Warren’s hand on the bed, straightened his fingers so they lay flat on the blanket and went in search of the nurse. “It’s over,” he said when he found her.

When he got home, David poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Christine. “Warren is gone. I think it was peaceful. I hope it was.”

Christine sipped her wine. “Are you all right?”

David took a long swallow. “I am.” He took another drink of wine. “How do you feel about taking a river trip on a raft?”

Christine smiled at him over her wine glass. “Why don’t you tell me about it?” ❖

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.

Dreamed I was sitting in the cafeteria in school. High school lunch was not my favorite place to be, and I preferred to hide in a classroom – empty if possible. Quiet during a full day of noise is a particularly nice thing. Even outside was better than the cafeteria – although outside meant cars going by, students yelling to one another, whistles blowing out on the playing fields or bells sounding for the beginnings or endings of school timing constructs. I didn’t like going to the cafeteria because when I was young enough to be there, bringing your lunch to school was something lesser than buying a school lunch. Funny how that has changed over the years (many of them.) To bring your pitiful sandwich, or worse, leftovers in a worn out Tupperware container was to get stares from others sitting at the long linoleum covered tables. Why did you bring that stinky thing in here? The looks asked. Have you no shame you will not sink to? Cold meatloaf and mashed potatoes? Were those once green beans? What did your mom do to them? Make them into an onion-stenched casserole? My God!

Who doesn’t want that for lunch right now? What madman wouldn’t cut off a body part to have their mom’s meatloaf and mashed potatoes, with a side of green bean casserole. I taste a plastic forkful in my dream and wish.

GL - cyberspace

“The World Is On Fire”

by Nancy Machlis Rechtman

I feel what you feel
With just one touch
A spark
The jolt of my heart
I know what you know
And it burns.

Sometimes I enter a room
Filled with people
And a colossal wave
Engulfs me.
The heartache
And uncertainty
And fear
Ricochet off the walls
And rocket through my synapses
Until I can barely move.

And I can read the jumble of your mind
Along with everyone else's
While the cacophony brings me to my knees
As the strength seeps out of my body.

The whole world is on fire
Nothing makes any sense
And no one can think straight anymore
Or be assured they are safe when they should be
And we all feel as if we've gone mad.

So at the moment
The only thing I can do
Is flee
Until I find water.
Icy cold drops sizzle on my fevered skin
And I crawl into the solitude
That is my salvation
As well as my curse
Because I know there will come a time
When I will have to return
And there is no escape
From the enormity
Of the pain.

Table For One

by Nancy Machlis Rechtman

Her footsteps echo across the high-gloss oak floor
Clicking like a lonely train making its way down the tracks
In the middle of nowhere
At midnight
And she wonders
If anyone notices.

Her hands hang by her sides
Useless
Wistfully seeking a connection
That will make her whole
But the emptiness
Is pervasive
Washing over her
With every step
Filled with unrelenting waves
Of longing.

She sinks into her seat
Hiding her face as she scans the menu
Hoping to conceal the sadness that clings to her
Like a neon sign
Screaming her pain to the world.
She has no appetite
For food - or life - anymore
Yet she's giving it all one more try
Because somewhere in her heart
A little girl cries
Wondering what happened to happily ever after
Never imagining that she'd end up living in a world
Where a table for one would be the only place
That she could find a seat.

So when the waiter approaches
With a tentative smile
Certain this order will barely be enough garner him a decent tip
Instead of ordering the house salad with no dressing
And a glass of sparkling water
She orders the Penne alla Vodka
With a glass of Sauvignon Blanc
And the waiter's smile broadens
So she asks him to add a slice of white chocolate raspberry cheesecake
For dessert
And when he gives a quick bow and hurries to place her order
She sits for a moment and then reaches into her purse
Pulling out a large bill
And places it on the table under the handmade rustic pepper mill
Then stands
And haltingly walks away from the table
Each click of her step an act of sheer force of will
As she makes her way out the door.

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coldest days of winter so that it freezes and becomes a skating rink. A bit further and a large piece of granite with a bronze plate affixed to it has the names of my town's losses during World Wars One and Two. I would imagine that it is a larger plaque now, so many years later. Behind it is a flagpole, and I can hear the tuneful clang of the brass devices that hold the grommets of the flag overhead.

Look both ways and cross the street. Then cross the train tracks – left to the west, right to the east. That is how I see the world, a left turn takes me out of town into the rural parts, a right turn eventually leads to the city. Straight ahead is the little store with the screen door that slams behind, and a glass case with penny candy. Cinnamon jawbreakers, Jujubes in pasteboard boxes. Wax-wrapped bubble-gum – five pink pieces to a stick with a large color funny, too. A nickel does it. Perfect – some for now, some for later. My friend stands me to some gum, for which I will repay him next time. (I get a dime allowance for emptying the trash at home. It's worth it to my parents – every can in every room must be carried out individually or in pairs – this is pre-Hefty days. If I forget to put the lid on the big can outdoors, breezes lift and carry litter around the yard.)

We whistle on the way home for luck – it would go badly were we to run into our adversaries with our pockets full of sweet loot. I bite off another piece of Bazooka when we're at the corner of my yard – home free all.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

Contributors

Nanda Klein is a passionate and driven creative nonfiction writer. Nanda is a native of Brazil and currently lives in Miami, FL. *The Divergence of Dignity and Gravity* has been previously published at The Florida Writer, an online magazine for the members of the Florida Writers Association.

David A Pickett writes, "I am currently an active participant in the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop. My work has won prizes in PEN Prison Writing Contests and has been published or is forthcoming in *Creosote*, *Poetry*, *Slant* and elsewhere."

Asacia Hernandez is a senior at Stephen F. Austin State University studying Creative Writing. With a raving addiction to tea, at her roots, she is just a bald lady full of beans.

William Erickson is a poet and memoirist from Southwest Washington. His work appears or is forthcoming in *West Branch*, *Bear Review*, *GASHER*, and numerous others. He is the author of a chapbook, *Monotonies of the Wildlife* (FLP). William writes in the company of his wife and his two rescued pups.

Robert P. Bishop, an army veteran and former teacher, holds a Master's in Biology and lives in Tucson, Arizona. He is the author of three novels and four short-story collections (available on Amazon) and is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His short fiction has appeared in *Active Muse*, *Ariel Chart*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Clover and White*, *CommuterLit*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Fleas on the Dog*, *Ink Pantry*, *Literally Stories*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Lunate Fiction*, *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Spelk* and elsewhere.

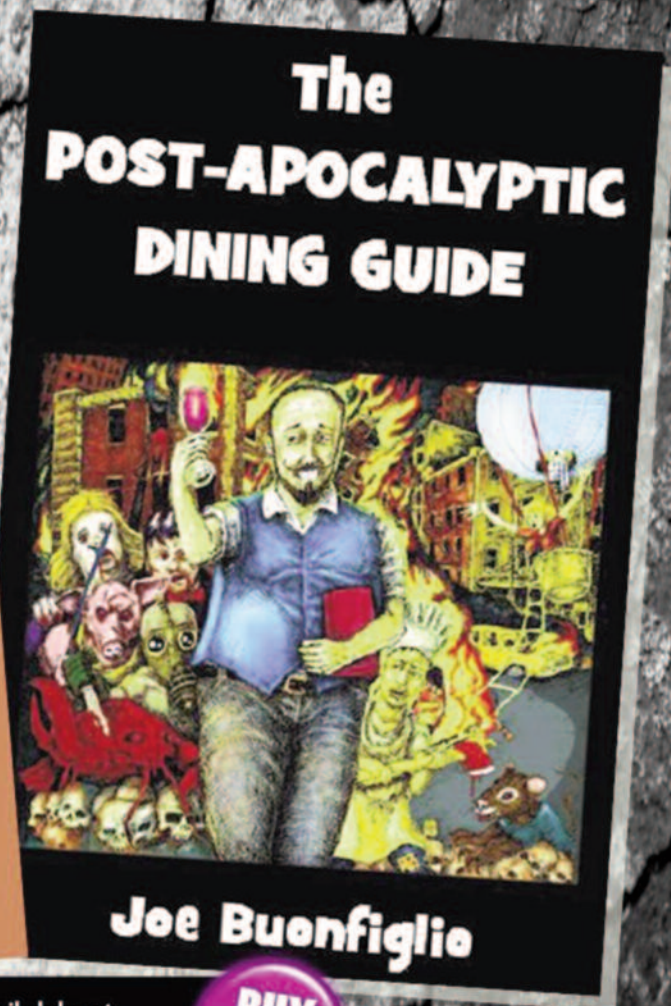
Nancy Machlis Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in *Literary Yard*, *Paper Dragon*, *Page & Spine*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *Quail Bell*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Goat's Milk*, and more. She wrote freelance Lifestyle stories for a local newspaper, and she was the copy editor for another local paper. She currently writes a blog called *Inanities* at <https://nancywriteon.wordpress.com>

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