

# Rathalla Review

Rosemont College | Spring 2018



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## Flash Fiction

**Esther C.H. Walker** grew up near the rolling foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Her fiction has appeared in the *Virginia Literary Review* and *Sleetmagazine.com*. She lives and works in Hanover, New Hampshire with her husband.

## Poetry

**Douglas Cole** has published four collections of poetry and a novella. His work has appeared in anthologies and in *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Galway Review*, *Chiron*, *The Pinyon Review*, *Confrontation*, *Two Thirds North*, *Red Rock Review*, and *Slipstream*. He has been nominated twice for a Pushcart and Best of the Net, and has received the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry and the Best of Poetry Award from Clapboard House. His website is [douglastcole.com](http://douglastcole.com).

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**Thomas Piekarski** is a former editor of the California State Poetry Quarterly. His poetry and interviews have appeared in literary journals internationally, including *Nimrod*, *Florida English Journal*, *Cream City Review*, *Mandala Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, and *Boston Poetry Magazine*. He has published a travel book, *Best Choices In Northern California*, and a book of poems, *Time Lines*.



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# Cartoon Moment

Douglas Cole

The insane washer in the window  
trying to scrub his reflection away  
sees death leering back at him  
from the other side of transparency.  
The spider swings on a single thread  
looking for a place to put the moon.  
The insane washer pulls the ladder  
falling back with wild arms waving  
pillow-crashing into the green lawn  
as the streets and faces in doorways  
follow his body hole into the ground.  
And we rise from the opening eyes  
that he loaned us with surplus care  
to reenter the swirling chaotic air.

# A Job of Spores

Gregg Williard

Through the winter nights he sat alone in a lab, squinting into a microscope and drawing plant spores the size of a pin head. It was a part-time job for the university botany department while he went to art school. In preparation, he'd studied the nineteenth century Ernst Haeckel renderings of bacterium and jellyfish, somehow expecting that his own drawings would possess the same precision and symmetry, evoking Victorian machine dreams as much as living organisms. His spores resisted such assured elegance. Magnified, they were featureless blurs, and a growing imperative to reveal secret structures in what he saw only goaded him to exaggeration, elaboration, and out and out fantasy. Rather than steampunk ornament, his drawings had the squish and ooze of H.P. Lovecraft decay, sprouting volcanic pustules, tangled tentacles, and gaping fibrous pods like drooling lips. Abashed, he came to put himself in the disreputable company of the astronomer Percival Lowell, whose purportedly objective telescopic observations (and drawings) of Martian canals had destroyed his scientific reputation. Lowell wanted to see a Martian civilization so bad that there it was, for any fool to see. What did his little spores have to offer? He had hoped for something beautiful, something they had never seen before that he alone had discovered.

So far no one in the botany department had complained about the accuracy of his drawings, even after three months of steady work, more than a dozen drawings, and six generous paychecks. As scientists, or as graduate students in botany, they must have quickly realized that his tectonic whorls and erupting, articulated stalks could not possibly be real. But there was only silence, and the bi-monthly check. Perhaps they hadn't looked at his work yet. That had to be it. And when they did, they would be furious and demand their money back. But it was already gone.

During his nights in the lab he'd decided to quit school and move away and had spent the money on plane fare and a deposit on an apartment. He had no connections there, and no job yet. It was a risky and impetuous move, and he was already regretting it. He'd lose his student deferment and be vulnerable to the draft. The university would be looking for him, and then the government, and they would bother his

parents to tell them where he'd gone. So, he hadn't been planning on telling his parents where he was going.

The drawings became larger and more minute, covering smaller and smaller areas, detailing more features that were not there. He passed in and out of spells, in a graphic trance. His eyes tired fast. He took frequent breaks. At first, he roamed the empty building, mostly dark and blank. Then he walked around the lab, peering into cloudy specimen jars of floating blobs. Then he stayed put on the metal stool, turning the seat slowly with a squeak. The lab was sour and dusty with formaldehyde, vinegar, mildewed paper, and mimeograph ink. There were Bunsen burners and sinks. There was the knock and hiss of the radiator. There was a gurgling fish tank, empty save a plastic pirate skeleton and a treasure chest that popped opened to spew bubbles and then the chest closed. And the clack of his rapidograph pen, when he shook it, for ink flow. Beyond that was the snow-blanketed silence, enclosing the lab like a muff.

On his last night he turned off the microscope light and watched through the second-floor window as the snowflakes passed through the yellow street lamps. It was a childhood game: try to follow a single flake through the flurry on its race to the ground. Picture it as a human life span. Try to imagine a mathematics that could measure how many flakes were passing through his visual field at any one moment. Then the calculations that could quantify the precise shape of this "visual field," and project that out into larger measures of space and time. Then algorithms to model a hologrammatic map of human life spans from the beginning of the species, plotted as descending white dots from birth, at the top of the graph, to death, at the bottom. After this, imagine working to find correlations with the snowfall, and establishing how big a field, and how long and dense a snowfall would represent all the lives ever lived, up to this exact moment. Then making this into a three-dimensional display that could be synchronized with an actual area of outdoor falling snow. Then showing the animation in a darkened room in a gallery, or projecting the model onto matching snowflakes falling in a real outdoor space. Unfortunately, he had no ability or

training in mathematics and had no idea if such a thing were possible. This was the early 1970's, and the technology for creating such a mathematically-plotted hologram room barely existed, if at all. And if it did, he would hardly know how to use it. It was what he wanted to see, and he wanted it so bad that, sometimes, it was right there, for any fool to see.

He peered through the amber yellow street lights to the black tree line across the quad. At the university there had just been riots against the war. Imagining himself a war correspondent artist, he had climbed to the top of one tree above the tear gas and had drawn the massed protestors confronting the National Guard. He had drawn his own face in the crowd, over and over. Now the quad was silent and empty and he wondered about his destiny, and his dad picking him up in ten minutes. There was a hint of the tear gas in the sour air of the lab. Maybe he would tell him on the drive home that he had decided to quit school and move away, even if it meant being drafted.

He blew on the spore drawing and decided it was ok. He signed his name and the date and put it in the folder for finished work. He was paid by the drawing so there was nothing more to document. Only later would he realize how rarely his drawings would make any money. He was no scientist, but he knew this was the historical moment in quantum physics popularizing the Many Worlds Theory: every event, every choice split off into an infinite number of different possibilities, all of them existing as an infinite number of universes.

This was the night of forking paths. That's how he would remember it. He made the decision to leave school and move far away and start over. Everything that followed this decision was, indeed, different than what his prior trajectory seemed to predict. He'd given up trying to decide if it had been a mistake, or not. If the forking path he'd chosen was better or worse than his previous course. And what paths had the drawings of the spores opened? Would they somehow inspire whole new studies of micro-organisms, anticipating advances in microphotography of monstrous mites and chiggers, feasting on dust mote skin wafers like

floating, shimmering pizzas on the breeze?

His father's car drove up to the front steps and waited for him to appear. The snow fell through the headlights. The wipers stroked the flakes. He couldn't see his father's face through the windshield, but knew he was watching the snow, and smiling.



# Curse Me, Bless Me

Jennifer Rieger

It was a grueling day of back-to-back college essay conferences. The AP students were particularly needy. It was one of those days when “Ms. Rieger” merged into one word—Misreeger—and then was repeated approximately one thousand times. College deadlines were fast approaching, and I was charged with healing the woes of the colloquial and the hearts of the insecure.

After checking my phone during my prep period, I noticed a Facebook message from George, a student who had graduated two years prior. “Give me a call when you have a minute,” and then his cell number. I didn’t think too much of it; George would contact me on occasion. He was incredibly philosophical, and liked to give me updates on new poetry and books he encountered. I knew he craved that academic connection, and missed a traditional class.

George’s life wasn’t easy. His parents were both drug addicts and held long criminal records. He lived in an orphanage, twice, and had been left alone for days as a toddler. That’s when his grandparents took him in and raised him as their own. If you asked him, he’d say that he witnessed, first-hand, the benevolence of mankind and the ugliness of mankind at a very young age. He spent his middle school years in a delinquent facility. Lacking motivation and confidence, he occasionally had to kick the asses of bullies who loved to remind him that he was overweight. But high school changed a lot for him. Even though he struggled in some classes, he embraced the education he had been missing. He stepped out of his comfort zone, wrestled, actively trained in Jiu-Jitsu, embraced epics about honor, strength, and courage, and decided that if I said poetry was awesome, he’d give it a try. His favorite poem was Dylan Thomas’ “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.” He loved it so much in fact, that he made the stretch to connect it to every single thing we read. Upon his graduation, he asked me to look after his friend, Branden, who was two years younger than him—a boy in my own son’s class. I promised I would, and sure enough, Branden’s name appeared the following year on my 11th grade roster.

Branden was not an easy child. He was among the most lovable students I had ever taught, but he was

also among the laziest. George knew I had my work cut out for me and even said, “Hit him with that ‘mom look’ you’ve got going on. That kills everyone, and you’re really fucking good at it.”

I was indeed really fucking good at it.

“I mean, Branden, it’s not that I’m mad that you don’t have your homework. I’m just... disappointed. Am I boring?” I laid it on thick. “Is there something else I can do to hold your attention? I don’t know. Just wondering if this is somehow my fault.” Spell cast. Branden hung his head, fidgeted with his hands, and finally looked at me.

“God. I’m such a dick”

I’d sigh, walk away, and he’d have a full draft of his paper in my inbox that night, letting me know I was a good teacher, and I should never blame myself. Sorcery perfected.

From the very first day of school, Branden kept asking, “When are we going to read that poem George keeps talking about?” Obviously, anything George loved was okay in Branden’s book. Although the poem is on the 12th grade curriculum, I printed it out for Branden, told him to read it, and walked away certain that poor Dylan Thomas was destined for the crumbled horror of the bottom of Branden’s book bag. Much to my surprise, he came back the next day with notes scribbled all over it. He was excited, and wanted to discuss the poem. So we did. He was amazed by it all: the villanelle’s repetition; the parallel structure indicative of all men; the way the form of the poem itself signified a perpetual rebirth. He promised to make me proud in 12th grade English when he read it again.

Kicking and screaming the whole way, Branden moved on to 12th grade. He found himself in my best friend Rachel Darnell’s class. With English as the only 4-year required course, she was to be the gatekeeper of Branden’s diploma. We both knew that Rachel would love him, but she also had a unique mom-look of her own, and was not going to take any of his shit. She pulled him through the college essay, through the literature, and finally through the Senior Graduation Project. His stellar moment was impressing her with his knowledge of “Do Not Go Gentle,” and then he finally raged against the dying of

the light all the way across the stage at graduation.

I replied to George's message. No answer. While I don't normally give my number to students, I had a feeling I should. Hitting send, I shook the message from my mind, and finished out the day. By 2:21, I had four missed phone calls and one message. "Riegs, this is George. Branden was hit by a van. It's bad. I don't think he's going to make it."

Branden spent the majority of his time bodybuilding. He would meet George at the gym and lift, contemplate life, and talk shit. He told his mother that he was training for the fight of his life. His doctors would agree. When the van hit him, it was like hitting a tank, except that tank's motherboard couldn't withstand the blow. That drunk driver literally knocked Branden from his sneakers, and he flew.

"Riegs, do you think you could get here? I'm at Penn University Hospital." I thought of George, my young philosopher—the boy who wrote about heroes, strength, and honor. The boy who spent his entire education searching for a mom to care for him when he needed one.

"George, I'm not great in these situations. I don't know if I can hold it together."

My voice cracked, and he whispered into the phone, "Shhh. It's okay. I understand."

I said goodbye and started packing up my things. A wave of nausea hit me as I walked down the back stairwell. I paused at the bottom, holding onto the cinderblock wall. I stared at the screen of my phone—at the messages I had missed from him that day. I touched his name and typed. "George. I'll be there within the hour. Tell me where you are." I sent the text, and headed to my Jeep.

The traffic along the Schuylkill Expressway was thick. I later discovered that there was an accident causing the gridlock, and I couldn't make my way around it. I dialed. "George, I can't get there." He told me he understood, that he wasn't sure if Branden could hear anyone anyway. "Do me a favor, George. Google 'Do Not Go Gentle' and read it to him. At the end, exchange the word 'father' for 'brother.' George? Do you understand?" I heard a faint "yeah," and some muted whispers in the background, and then he started to read.

"Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."  
He continued, with an excellent cadence and

momentum that would make any teacher proud. When he came to the line, "And you, my brother, there on that sad height," there was a pause, then a gasp, and then he started repeating over and over, "He's moving his hands! Riegs! He's moving his hands!"

Whenever tragedy strikes our school community, Rachel and I make a plan. It's what we do. We headed to Penn a few days after Branden's accident to stare at the pummeled, broken shell of the boy we constantly pushed, constantly questioned, constantly guilted. We looked at the worn face of his young mother, Tammy, my age, who had already lost a child to cancer. We had collected enough money from the faculty and staff to get Branden an iPad. I didn't know why. I think the purchase meant that we could will him to open his eyes, watch the screen, listen to the music.

Holding the box, Tammy tilted her head to the side and nodded as her eyes welled and her voice shook. "Yes. He will like this very much. He will use it all the time."

I knew this mother didn't need any more tears, but a quick sob escaped my throat. Rachel, as stoic as ever, grabbed my arm and we allowed Tammy to talk to the doctors. We eavesdropped for a few moments as they updated her on Branden's condition. It didn't sound good. Medical terminology floated among the beeping of machines, the pumping of the ventilator, and the shuffling of hallway activity. Words repeated, "pressure," "fluid," and "surgery." Rachel and I nodded as if we knew what the hell they were talking about. After a few minutes, his dad, Allen, walked in. Tammy sighed, fell into him, like she had been carrying a bag full of weights all day, and managed to convey the doctors' update. Looking over her shoulder, she said to us, "Allen's a 'whisperer,' you know. I don't know how he does it."

Allen leaned on the bed and began massaging Branden's arms and legs, whispering in his ear. "Shhh. How's that, my man? Lots of people here, Branden. Your high school English teachers are here. They say you owe them some work. They're waiting for you to wake up and smile."

Rachel and I stood, glued to one another—our nails pressed into each other's hands. We could only handle our own uncomfortable family intrusion a few minutes more. We hugged this couple—this pillar of strength and sadness—walked a few paces down the hall, and broke down in front of the elevator.

We were silent on the ride back.

"How many more times do you think we'll have to do this, Rach? I mean, the hospitals and the funerals? Twenty more times? Thirty?"

"I don't know. I can't get Tammy's face out of my head. She's everywhere."

I unfastened my seat belt, grabbed Rachel's hand, and kissed it. "That's because we're her." I stepped out of her minivan and entered my house through the garage door. It would be quiet. Ryan was out of town, and Evan was at college. I had noticed he posted a video on Branden's Facebook page. He gathered three friends and recorded "May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You." He knew the hymn would comfort that mother—knew it would lighten his own mother's heart. My child. Safe, in his dorm room.

I called George as soon as I entered the house. We discussed all the big questions of "why." Why did this happen to Branden? Why would a family, already destined to mourn a daughter for the rest of their lives, have to endure yet another tragedy? Why are there really horrible people, real assholes, who get to roam the earth unscathed? If we must endure pain, why isn't it equally distributed? Some answers were beautiful and comforting; others were ugly and appalling. I asked George what Dylan Thomas' lines, "Curse me, bless me, with these fierce tears, I pray," meant to him.

"Well," George began, "he's trying to grasp death—this ending we all have to face, eventually."

I agreed, but prodded a little more. "George, why are endings, why are tragedies, a blessing and a curse?"

He had heard the question before, as a student in my English class, sitting in the desk perfectly adjacent to my own desk. There was silence on the other end. I'm used to this with him. He processes, and thinks about his words carefully before speaking.

"It's a curse because it really sucks. Times like this fucking suck. And it's not fair."

I stopped him before he went any further.

"Why is it a blessing, George?"

Again silence.

"I don't know," he finely said.

"Yes you do," I quickly retorted. The volume of my voice increased, and I slowed my words down. "Why- a- blessing?"

His voice cracked. "Because I'm sitting here on the phone with my English teacher, contemplating time, and appreciating what I have."

Branden has improved, but the after-effects of his brain injury are pretty extensive—something he will always contend with. His mom and dad care for him, love him, advocate for him. The last I saw him was at a bowling fundraiser. George and I met there wearing Captain America shirts—a community symbol for Branden's strength. As soon as we walked up to his wheel chair, he smiled and reached his arms up to hug us.

"You're my brother," he managed to slowly say to George. "That's right, brother. Always." Branden looked to me, and struggled with his words. "And you and Ms. Darnell are my moms."

Just like Rachel did in that hospital room, George grabbed my arm. As I looked at this child's now drawn face, now crooked smile, now dented skull, I nodded emphatically. "You're right, Branden. Always."

That night, George and I drank shitty bowling alley beer and bowled our hearts out. We talked about Nietzsche and Beowulf, and sent pictures to his own 2010 classmates. It was like nothing had changed, and everything had changed. Every once in a while, we'd look over at Branden, greeting his guests. We'd catch each other's eyes, but there were no words left.

<sup>1</sup> *The "mom look" is among a few of my superpowers. My students can feel it searing into the backs of their little heads from the far seats of a crowded auditorium whenever they're acting like fools. They can also sense it when they tell me of "printer problems" when an essay is due, when the assistant principal calls them out of my class, and when they run to the bathroom with the speed of Jackie Joyner-Kersey whenever I ask for a volunteer to read aloud. The "mom look" has the power to propel with lightning speed the most apathetic student right from my senior project podium, through the mainline roads of Montgomery County, and onto the graduation stage at Villanova University. I should charge a fee.*



# Descent

Esther C.H. Walker

She saw the kid go down. The pond was a short cut to school. It was icy now. She had thought it was icy enough. The coffee pot screamed at her. The neighbor's dog was yelping. Bits of buttered scone covered her fingers. She shoved her bare feet into boots. She left the back door open.

The kid wasn't calling out. She didn't hear splashing. She looked for the rope that weighed down the tarp covering the woodpile. A squirrel ran by her. The dog followed. She started screaming. She didn't know what she was saying. She hoped it was: "Please help!"

She plunged arthritic arms into the water. She grabbed for a flash of purple. Her eyelashes began to freeze. The skin folds gathering around her elbows as she leaned forward into the water began to turn blue. Her breath was elusive: she couldn't see it, couldn't smell it. Her nightgown cleaved to her stomach like the membrane of an onion. The frozen snow felt like razor blades against her knees.

*What am I doing here again?* she thought.

# Submerged

Thomas Piekarski

Once daylight plunges sleet becomes snow  
While cold dark clouds sail toward the Sierras.  
Jehovah's mouth gaping wide like a black hole  
Swallows Apollo. With moonlight Aphrodite

Rises. Her wings span the globe, they glow  
Rhythmic prisms like a borealis way high  
Above the atmosphere. She defies gravity,  
Fluttering, gleaming in the celestial expanse.

For fun I poke the sun in its monotonous eye,  
Proving it isn't so all-powerful. My eyes are  
Also the sun's, and in due time I'll surely cry  
Myself to eternal sleep rocking in a baby crib.

An ocean of consciousness existed eons prior to  
The Sierras being born. They were then seafloor,  
Since uplifted and sculpted by forces mirroring  
Merging black holes that submerge every atom.



# On Driving

Alice Lowe

1.

Sixteen—sweet sixteen—a milestone, momentous in itself, but for me it meant I could get my driver’s license. It would be the instrument of my longed-for flight—or at least the first fledgling steps—from the nest. I would have wings, I would soar with the eagles. I was a year younger than my classmates (I’d skipped an early grade), so driving would legitimize and elevate me in the eyes of my peers.

I envisioned myself in a pose appropriated from a collage of movie images: cool and sophisticated behind the wheel of my dream car—a yellow Sunbeam Alpine (Grace Kelly drove a blue one in *To Catch a Thief*)—with big dark glasses à la Audrey Hepburn and curls of smoke wafting from the cigarette in the corner of my Revlon-emboldened ruby-red lips.

2.

I’d completed both in-class and behind-the-wheel driver’s ed at school, then aced the written test to get my learner’s permit six months before, as soon as I was eligible. Days after turning sixteen, having won my father’s seal of approval on my demonstrated driving acuity, I applied for my license. Dad took off work to accompany me to the DMV and proffered last-minute coaching on the way. “Don’t be in a hurry—think before you act,” he said. He knew my weak spots. “Don’t hold the wheel in a death grip. Remember your rear-view mirrors.”

I reassured him—“Don’t worry, dad, I’ll be fine”—and I was until the examiner slid into the passenger seat and I took the wheel.

“Ready? Let’s go,” he said. At that instant I came unglued. I was so nervous I backed into the bumper of a station wagon in the parking lot. The examiner didn’t flinch, didn’t disqualify me on the spot.

“It’s ok,” he said, “take a deep breath, calm down.” He subtracted some points and we continued the test, but I was too rattled to think, much less drive. My mistakes were minor after that, but they added up, and I flunked the test.

I tried again a few weeks later. My dad gave me a tranquilizer before we left home—half a Miltown.

“Just to settle her down a bit,” he said in response to my mother’s raised eyebrows. This time I performed with calm precision and impressed the examiner (not the same one) with my attentiveness and skillful parallel parking.

3.

I drove every chance I could, my father in the front seat beside me. One quiet Sunday afternoon he said I could take the car out by myself to run an errand within the confines of our small town. As I approached the main intersection—the only one at the time, now that I think of it—the light changed to yellow. I had entered the crossing, but instead of dashing through, I braked and backed up a bit to clear the crosswalk. I patted myself on the back for my good sense. *Wait’ll I tell Dad*, I thought; *he’ll be pleased*. When the light turned green I stepped gently on the gas and—still in reverse—backed into the car behind me. It was a light tap, and there was no damage to either car.

I dissolved into snotty, gulping sobs. “I just got my license,” I wailed to the other driver. “It’s the first time I’ve driven alone.”

She laughed at my tears, my hysteria. “No harm done,” she said.

I never told my father.

4.

A driver’s license as a set of wings was a flawed metaphor, I soon realized. My passport to freedom wouldn’t be official until I had wheels of my own. I was a senior in high school and worked part-time in an office about five miles from school. My father ferried me daily between home, school, and work. There was no possibility that my parents could or would buy me a car, so I saved almost all of my dollar-an-hour earnings, and after a few months—to Dad’s relief and with his blessings—I bought a ’49 Ford for \$100. That’s about \$800 in today’s dollars, which wouldn’t buy much of a car, but I lucked out. It was a sturdy two-door, in decent condition for its twelve years and considerable mileage. Its buttercream paint job and tan upholstery would pass muster with my friends too.

My car—did I name it? I can’t recall—

performed its required tasks commendably by day, but at night and on weekends it turned into a magic carpet. It swooped me out of the house and into the social whirl. I could hang out with my friends at the drive-in, go to parties, cruise the beaches and back roads with the radio turned up full blast.

5.

My mother never drove. A New Yorker until her mid-thirties, she didn't need to. When our family moved to California she gave it a try, but she was too nervous and gave up after a couple of informal lessons. She channeled her anxiety into the part of the Nervous Nellie back-seat driver with all its stereotypical behavior. She glued her eyes to the road as if she were steering, as if her efforts were needed for safe navigation. "Slow down, Harold," she'd say, and "Watch out for that truck," though my father's cautious driving was never cause for alarm.

My brother and I used to tease her when she grasped her armrest and slammed her foot onto the floorboard. "That's the way, Mom—good thing you have brakes on your side too," we'd say. She would inhale through her teeth, jaws clenched, a hissing, slurping sound. Once we gave her a lollipop and said, "Here, suck on this."

6.

It didn't take long to get over the initial thrill. After graduation I moved away from home and went to work full time. I bought a new car, a powder-blue Ford Falcon. My independence secure, driving soon became merely a means to an end—it got me from point A to point B. I had no desire to explore new vistas, didn't take delight in the freedom of the open road, the wind ruffling my hair.

I've never been relaxed behind the wheel, then or now. My mother's legacy? I drive at or under the speed limit and rarely change lanes. I don't trust other drivers. I've gone on road trips over the years—cross-country, up and down the coast—and always donemy share of the driving, in spite of my companions' mutterings: "You drive like an old lady. It'll take us all day to go fifty miles at this rate. Can't you speed up?"

7.

Mid-span on the Coronado Bay Bridge twenty-

some years ago I had a panic attack. I froze at the highest point, where the bridge swoops around in a crescent. The bay shimmered below, and the barrier suddenly appeared flimsy, the drop too close for comfort. The steering wheel wanted to wrest itself out of my hands and send me plummeting over the side or into oncoming traffic. I limped and lurched the rest of the way across with a death grip on the wheel. I gulped air from the open window until I reached solid ground.

When the same symptoms—sweating, hyperventilating, wooden limbs, scrambled brain—started to occur on overpasses and freeways, I could talk myself down and pull off at the next exit. Until it reached a point where I felt I was a danger to myself and others. A brain tumor, which I was certain would be detected as the cause, was ruled out. I was referred to therapy and told my condition was a type of agoraphobia. My own research unearthed the more precise "hodophobia," an intense and irrational fear of travel that takes on individualized characteristics such as mine. Neither the cause nor the cure was known. I feared I was losing my mind, literally driving myself crazy.

8.

I battled my demon for years. I tried various approaches, including mind over matter ("Just do it!") and tapping (the Emotional Freedom Technique). I never conquered my phobia, but I've adapted to it. I rarely drive on the freeway and never across bridges, but I can get anywhere in San Diego on surface streets. I live in a central neighborhood where most of what I want and need is accessible on foot. I'm an inveterate walker, and I've whittled my driving down to essential errands and appointments.

It was Joan Didion, or maybe Ruth Reichl—both fellow hodophobia sufferers—who said that the crazy people are the ones who drive on today's superhighways, that it's more rational to fear and avoid them.

9.

After I retired from work, I looked toward the day when I would be able to relinquish the steering wheel. I have a friend who stopped driving when she moved from San Diego to Seattle—she gets by with

public transportation, online shopping, and a little help from her friends.

Now, though, I learn there are health hazards for seniors who give up driving. Studies have shown a decline in physical and mental health, a greater incidence of depression among older people who don't drive. I wanted to stop driving for my well-being only to be told I should continue for the same reason. Still, after driving for more than fifty years I yearn to fold my wings and hang up the keys. A new interpretation of freedom.





# By & By

Cameron Morse

Deep in the shade of my third year  
since diagnosis, the swing set rafters  
cobweb above the blackened planks.  
Cicada casings cling to its underbelly,

their bodies missing. I can no longer  
hear them screaming. The cricket hums  
to itself its little lamentation. Autumn  
comes, and my bimonthly visit

with the oncologist tomorrow morning,  
a wheelbarrow to be pushed  
from the wood pile to the back patio,  
unloaded and pushed back again.





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