

dwelling
literary



DWELLING 1:

Home for the Holidays

DECEMBER 2020

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Remembering What's *Important*

By **Chris Butler**

Chris L. Butler is an African American and Dutch poet and essayist from Philadelphia, PA and Houston, TX. His work has been featured in Rejection Letters, Head Fake Hoops, Wine Cellar Press, FlyPaper Lit, Lucky Jefferson, Dreams Walking Lit, and others.

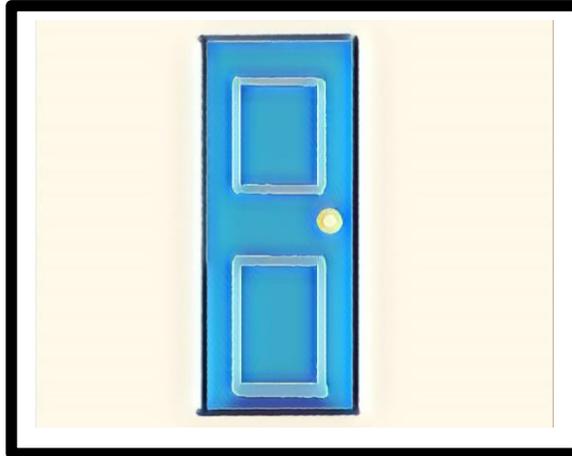
Growing up, I thought I was an architect. I don't mean literally, but rather in the metaphorical sense. I had a vision for how things are *supposed* to go, as well as how I wanted them to go. While think we all can connect Maybe you "predicted" income, or that dream As life goes on, sometimes hope for, and other we're still working on it.

In past years, working on my vision year, manifesting more permits. But this year, much differently. One of travel, and obviously that

foreseeable future. Additionally, I've been self employed most of this year, which I like to say is a fancy way of saying "I am unemployed unless I have a contract." This year has truly been chaotic, a domino effect of disasters. I've had relatives, friends, and fraternity brothers contract the virus. So unlike previous years, I'm seeking a sense of normalcy more than excitement.

I miss being in the room with my favorite people, I want to see my family, my friends. I miss human connection. I miss strolling and stepping with my frat brothers. I miss in-person poetry readings. I am grateful for all of the virtual opportunities I've gotten as a writer this year, but now I'm at a point where I legitimately want to spend time with these people whom I've become digitally acquainted. I also miss being in public spaces with complete strangers at a sports bar or a concert. I'm almost mesmerized by the fact that we would comfortably go places with thousands of people we didn't know, just because we had the same interests. I can't believe I never went to an international music festival, and now, that feels like something that may never happen.

I swear when this is all over I will cherish every precious moment. I think that's the biggest lesson we've all learned this year being apart from one another. We cannot take human connection for granted. I don't know when the pandemic will be over, but as I sit home with my wife and our dog this holiday season, we are grateful to be together. She's from Canada, and I'm American, so closed borders aren't exactly in our favor. We've spent months at a time apart during our relationship before getting married. I couldn't imagine doing that this year during a pandemic. I truly feel for those international couples going through that. While I miss my mom, her partner, my in-laws, my cousins, and friends, I know that the most important thing is that we are all alive and healthy.



some may not relate, I with the sentiment. you might have a certain car you always wanted. we get the things we times? Well let's just say,

around this time I am board for the upcoming desires than my schedule 2020, I'm looking at things my favorite things to do is is off of the table for the

HOME IS WHERE THE *Heart Is*

By **Nachi Keta**

A dropout of various colleges, **Nachi Keta** is a Kidney Transplant Recipient and a neurodiverse writer from New Delhi. His name is a combination of two terms: Nachi, which means 'death', and Keta, which means 'a creative force'. His work focuses on mental health, oppression and the absurd in social and personal. His words have found a home in various magazines like Perhappened, The Daily Drunk, The Bombay Review, The Howling Press and Sock Drawer, an updated list of which can be found here: nachi-keta.com.

I am walking in an unknown city with my heart in my hands. It is smaller than the cup made by my palms, so no one knows about it, even though blood drips around, and its rhythmic bur is audible. My palms feel its muscles contracting and expanding. And the pulsating blood vessel that connects it with my body- like an umbilical cord.

I walk. Cats and dogs sleep by trashcans in dark lanes. Cars and cabs whizz by slowly, in the slush of snow. A small city. Not one of those insomniac metropolitans that always buzz. I love walking thus- alone in unknown towns. After a few hours, they are not so.

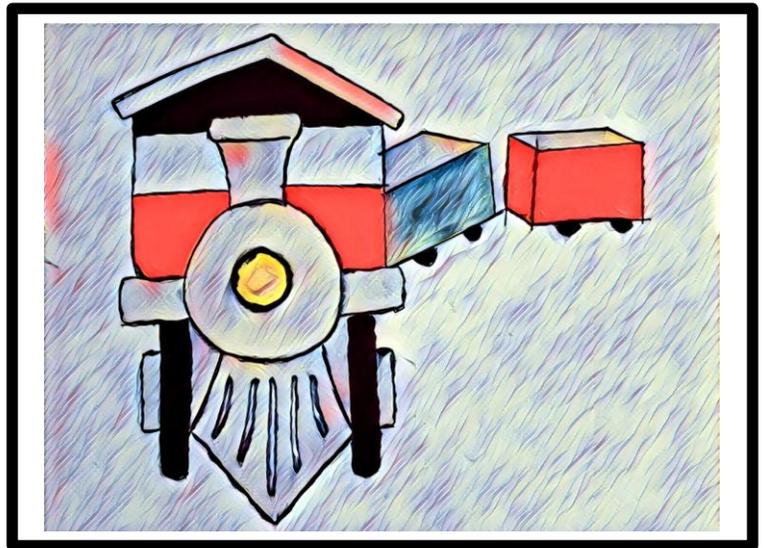
I pass over a bridge. It is beautiful. Lights twinkle in and out- blue and red. And people murmur- in pairs and groups. Christmas. Most are in their homes, celebrating with their family- sitting around a table, sharing jokes and anecdotes. But a few are out on the streets- like me. A woman with a dog. An old man with an old woman. Two men in berets. They look peaceful. They have found a home in each other's company.

Before the city, I was on a train, alone, looking out at the passing world. Not sad, but not happy either. Thinking about the place where my parents live- where I could never feel one with myself, where I was always uneasy. Not with the place, but with my being there. So I had left it. On a whim.

Suddenly, I found myself talking with other travelers. All oldsters, going to an old age home where they had found a home. I was the only young one in the cabin. So it looked like a good plan to them- talk to me about home.

"Home is not far," they said. "You just have to keep looking for one."

I said, "I am okay without one."



They were not shocked. They had seen the world. They started laughing, in chorus, and intoned- "Even a train can be a home. Walk across it, like an abandoned kid looking for a new father in sleeping men's faces, a new brother in a boy playing games on video-phone, a new mother in a woman feeding ice-cream to her kid. You just have to look. And keep walking back and forth from one end of the train to another. You'll find a home, one day."

I pass by a house. From inside, I hear a carol.

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.*

People gathered around, singing together, a turkey on the table, taffies and gifts for everyone. Home- we are all looking for one, I think. We all want to be in places where they don't know us, or know way too much about us. We don't really want to be known, essentially. So we keep lying to ourselves that we are looking for a home, when we are just after the convenience of habits. We are looking for a place where we can drag ourselves through the monotone of habitual faces and constant peculiarities.

I continue thinking thus, walking for a long time. Suddenly a child appears before me. Most probably ten. "Uncle, can you loan me your coat? I am cold." Her teeth shiver. She does not even have a cap. And as if taking a cue, a wisp of snow wafts by. *Or is it my imagination?*

It seems to be a genteel neighborhood. So I am surprised to find someone who might need a coat. "One of my friends snatched it as a joke. I let him because he was cold," she explains, reading my mind. *What about me?* almost comes out of me. But I bend down, put my heart on the ground, remove my jacket and give it to her. She smiles and puts it on at once.

Now she looks like a detective on a mission. "Come with me. I will return it when I am near the stove where my family is huddled."

I don't really want my coat. Let her have it. But the prospect of a warm hearth intrigues me. I have been on the road for rather long. So I pick up my heart and start walking behind her.

"Why are you carrying your heart with you?" she asks, stopping and turning back after a few steps.

I say nothing. I wait for her to realize that I don't want to talk. She can even keep the coat. I am walking with her only because... *why am I walking with her?*

"Oh, I get it. You are homeless like me," she says. And smiles.

"No," I say. *Why? And you are homeless?*

“Why then?” she asks.

“Because home is where the heart is. And by doing so I always carry my home with me,” comes out of me.

And then something breaks. And I start narrating her the entire story. From the beginning. “I took my heart out after I came down the train. This evening when...”

Thanksgiving *Leftovers* By **Samantha Terrell**

Samantha Terrell is an internationally-published American poet whose work has been published in a variety of chapbooks and journals. Samantha's collection "Vision, and Other Things We Hide From" is forthcoming from Potter's Grove Press. Raised in the American Midwest, Samantha and her family now reside in Upstate New York where they enjoy kayaking on still waters. Find her online at: <https://poetrybysamantha.weebly.com> or on Twitter @honestypoetry.

Every Thanksgiving at Mom's request,

Dad drove us around the old homesteads of his past.
Approximately two of the four of us kids would, usually
begrudgingly, come along.

A windmill here,
An old foundation there,
And every one marked by the same dormant Iowa grasses.

"This is the old French Place,"
He'd say, as he pointed to a partial farmhouse structure.
Or, "Here's the Upper Place." Yes, there was a "Lower Place," too.

Each had-been house
Had its own name, a story.
We'd tease and say, "Where's the old 'new' place?"

Don't it beat all?
I'm becoming more sentimental
Now that he's gone. I'm even using phrases like, "Don't it beat all?"

When all that's left is advice borrowed from his advice,
And stories about remnants of his old stories,
I'm, finally, grateful Mom made him repeat them every year.



Mom's *Cranberry* Cake

By **Anthony Salandy**

Anthony Salandy is a mixed-race poet & writer whose work tends to focus on social inequality throughout late-modern society. Anthony travels frequently and has spent most of his life in Kuwait jostling between the UK & America. Anthony's work has been published 75 times internationally. Anthony has 1 published *chapbook* titled 'The Great Northern Journey'. Anthony is also the Co-Editor in Chief of *Fahmidan Journal*.

Every winter I waited in anticipation
For the scent of rising cinnamon
To convert our little home
Into a fantastically warmed land-

Where cranberries would simmer
In the auburn pot where sugar bubbled
And berries twirled as they burst
So gently to the stove-top fire

That summoned my mother to action,

But when the cranberries appeared soft
Only then would she prepare
The sumptuous cake for which we desired
All through the hoary nights-

That gave way to only more frigid dawns,

And as the baking commenced
Did my mother sit and marvel
At the creation only she could make,
As if a miracle of margarine-

My mother was the buttery buttress
That cushioned the shocks
That shook our resilience
Only to suppress her own-

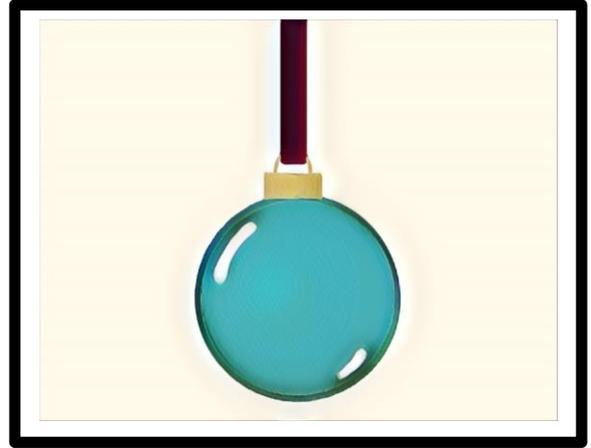
Much like the growing cake
That now rested as it cooled
Just above that worn oven
That served as a reminder-

For maternal sacrifice in domesticity.



this time, we will hold
the hands of
joy and never let go
By **Giselle Chiew**

Giselle Chiew is an aspiring writer who likes to experiment with words. When she is not writing, she enjoys reading books and listening to music. She is on twitter @whyisgjs



this year,

in the pursuit of happiness
i have gazed upon the sunset of dissolution
stumbled my way through loss,
been slammed dunked into concrete
devastation, dejection, disappointment
and the dissipating sound
of bedroom slippers

in the pursuit of happiness
a haven is discovered
prancing, hand in hand.
on rainbows. joy is found
from late-night television shows
and shared laughter
laughter that reaches the eyes
laughter that will echo forever

in the pursuit of happiness
i have found solace
in embraces,
that christmas bee hoon
coupled with my grandmothers
signature chilli sauce
the sound of rain pattering on the windshield

under the artificial branches
hanging with the fluorescent
ornaments, i am shattered
and put back together again.
made new and
moulded by love

under the tree
sits a wrapped
present, torn open with
hands fueled by anticipation.
mine
because when
contentment is heralded
the treasure is unearthed.

p.s.
when you peer inside
i hope you find,
all it is you have been
looking for
i hope you find
your solace

Would Anyone Care For a Slice of *Pie?* By Robin Bissett

Robin Bissett is a Teaching Artist and Writer from Central Texas. She enjoys absorbing and sharing stories and strengthening her surrounding literary communities. She tweets @rtbissett.

Right before joining our already seated swarm of relatives at the dinner table for the first holiday gathering that my husband and I had agreed to host at our place, I bungled the pumpkin pie.

In our small closed off kitchen, pearls of sweat looped along my hairline, and I dabbed them with the bottom of my green-checkered and vegetable-painted apron, careful not to smear my light layer of foundation. The relief earned from this process was fleeting, as the aggressive sweat tended to resurface mere seconds later. I could imagine this type of stifling and sultry environment would suit snakes and other cool-bellied creatures, but it was wholly unpleasant for me, a permanently warm-blooded woman who was, at that time, undergoing the blessings of menopause.



Though the temperature was less than ideal, the kitchen air smelled sweet, golden, and autumnal, and for that, I was thankful.

My feet throbbed, swollen in my claret kitten heels from standing all day, and it was becoming more and more difficult to continue cooking as I grew sidetracked by my stomach's continual growling. I allowed myself small tastes of the food that I had prepared for others. But, the spoonfuls here and there were not near enough to satiate my bear-sized hunger. I had not eaten a real meal all day, too scared that if my gaze drifted away from the dishes I was making and faltered for even a moment, I'd lose control, and either swallow the whole kitchen, or even worse, instead fall prey and be consumed by my own creations.

The outside of our fridge was covered in gifted and thrifted flyers, magnets, and postcards of close and distant places sent from family friends. One of my favorites was mailed to us from Denver and displayed only the word Cowboy written in hot pink font across a denim background. In addition to reminding me of one of my favorite Western movies of all time, *High Noon*, I felt that the unusual, charming quality of the postcard reflected my internal calamity. No matter how many times I fell down, I'd sooner or later climb back up into the saddle.

Inside of the fridge, the timid white wire shelves bowed under the weight of all that I had prepared. Yes, I once knew their contents by heart and would encounter the ingredients as both friend and foe in my sleep, but as my day dedicated to the kitchen

passed, they began to appear more and more mysterious to me, swaddled in fogged up Tupperware and layers of reusable food storage wraps.

Watching me shuffle around while nibbling on the edges of my fingers, a nervous tic I had sworn I had long ago conquered, my kind but naive husband, Steven, attempted to reassure me that everything was fine. It was not.

Though his intentions were kind, I interpreted his hovering presence as my greatest fear. A confirmation of the worry that he thought I couldn't pull it all off. He had been pestering me all day while I had been cooking, asking how and what he could do to help, and I had begged him, please just give me one minute to myself. So, he'd step into the dining room, note inquiries and complaints from our army of a family, and soon return.

Stretched too thin in all different directions, I was afraid if anything else went wrong, I would snap. Already, I had put the generously sized turkey in too late, forgotten Steven's dad preferred his green beans roasted without almonds, and I should have finished baking the pumpkin pie, arguably the most important dish, hours ago.

But, at last, it was showtime. I only needed to get the pie and the other food to the dining room table and survive the next few hours of nosy family conversation.

After a deep breath, I opened the oven door, reached in a gloved arm, and pulled out the pie, birthed in blood and sweat from the sacred recipe that had been handed down among the women in Steven's family for generations. I smiled, likely for the first time that day, then lost both my grip and my newly discovered happiness as I watched the pie flop facedown onto the floor.

Steven's eyes widened in response, and I said, Goddamn it, more loudly than I should have, considering my devoted Baptist in-laws perched just outside the kitchen door. Poor Steven reached to pick up the pan empty-handed, forgetting it was hot from the oven, and yelped like a puppy. The pie was smeared and misshapen across the floor, a discarded, melted face. I grabbed an ice cube from our cracked freezer tray and brushed it across his darkening, scalded palm. I did love him. I would do anything for him, including agree to host a full course dinner for all of our relatives.

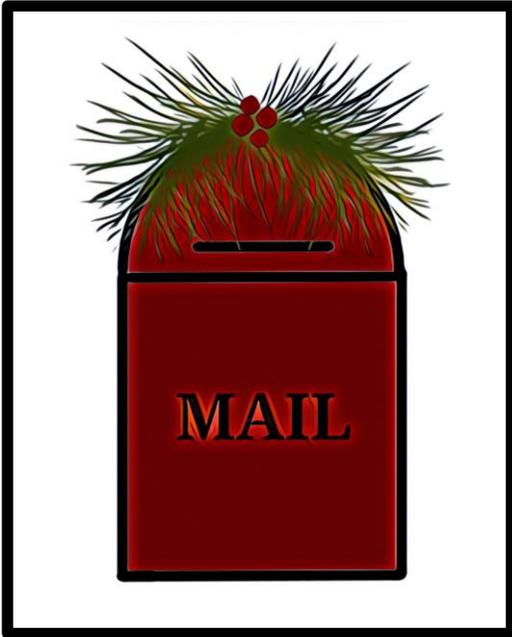
What are we gonna do? I asked him. I could glimpse my haggard state in the reflection of his contemplative brown eyes. He frowned for a moment, the way he often does when it is far too late to be awake, but he is determined to solve the *New York Times Daily Mini* crossword puzzle before falling into bed. He often reminded me that even small solutions sometimes require innovative thought.

Then, his eyes lit up, and he pulled a forgotten can of whipped cream out from the belly of the fridge. Side-by-side, we began to decorate, slicking tufts of the ethereal whipped cream over the pie's cavities, muffling frantic giggles, warm in the rushing heat of the moment and in each other's company.

Waking From the Longest *Sleep*

By **H.E. Casson**

H. E. Casson is a poet and voice actor whose favourite holiday memories all involve hot chocolate. Their words have recently been published by Cast of Wonders, Serotonin, and Taco Bell Quarterly. Visit them at hecasson.com and as @hecasson on Twitter.



Being depressed, you get to know your mail carrier's habits. Ours stomps up the stairs, bumps the snow off their boots, and throws open the mailbox with vigour. I've memorized the audio play. Today it's different. Heels tap like a dancer in a black and white movie. Is that skipping?

It's enough to prise me off the couch where I've set up camp, playing puzzle games on my phone. I'm soothed by the inevitability of success. Drag. Match. Win. Standing frees the odors I've been keeping close, tucked in armpits, feet, and hair grease. Opening the front door lets in fresh air, and I realize the whole house smells like me. Winter's immaculacy is an affront, but I rouse a little. In the box is not a letter with stamps and postmark, but parchment paper with a wax seal. I drop down in our front hall — sorry, *my* front hall — crack the seal and read.

Dear Auggie,

You have been selected to assist Santa Claus. This will be considered your first interview for potential permanent inclusion on Santa's North American team! To accept, please be on your roof at 4:45, as the sun sets.

Yours,

S. Claus

This is nonsense. It's undercover marketing or a strange prank. Despite that, I shower for the first time in weeks. I replace the smell of me with that of the peppermint body wash you left behind. I put on layers: my coat, your coat, my mitts, your mitts, my socks, your socks. Your new life needed none of this.

Getting up on the roof is easy. I climb from the shed outside our bedroom window to the trellis. I'm up just as your watch reads 4:44. I lie down in the snow and close my eyes. Maybe tomorrow, I'll donate your coat and mitts and throw out the body wash. I listen to the cars, the wind, the families walking home to dinner, and, coming closer, the jingle of bells. I listen to a voice I know instantly.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"You're not Santa."

My sister is dressed in a red snowsuit.

“Nope. Now come on. I have a car full of random crap to drop off at the houses of strangers. You in?”

“Sure,” I can't stop a smile, “I'm in.”

Æblekage

By **Kristina Saccone**

Kristina Saccone studied creative writing in college but then got lost down a postgraduate professional rabbit hole. Two decades later, she rediscovered short prose and creative nonfiction, which she crafts in the hours between logging off from work and wrangling her young son. She lives in the Washington, DC, area.

We lost Granny's recipe for æblekage.

Layer together warm, toasted stewed, sugared apples, and then jam on top. Granny made it in a glass scooped out by the spoonful, with a fraiche.

Granny's home-cooked meals were looked forward to when visiting her in suburb of Harrow. Whereas England for its terrible food, my Granny is her delicious, Danish cooking. One of was her bubbling, mouth-watering oven æblekage for dessert: a hand-crafted cake. My siblings and cousins share the same kind of stories about her home cooked meals. And yet, before she died, none of us thought to ask her to write down her recipe.



breadcrumbs and dollop raspberry bowl, which we dollop of creme

something we all the London can be infamous remembered for my favorite meals roast, with no-bake apple

I envy my husband's archive of his Nannie's recipes. She hand-wrote or typed her staples on cards that are now browned with age, which one of her children thought to carefully scan and save to the cloud. Her signature nut torte was on the table at every one of his birthdays, and now we can recreate it thanks to someone's foresight. Many of the recipes in this trove feature canned soup and vegetables, post-war staples that were at the humble roots of a generation of home-cooked food.

For my grandmother, her simple æblekage was made with packaged food, too: canned breadcrumbs and jarred raspberry jelly ordered from Denmark and shipped to her home in suburban London. The apples came from their backyard. Each summer, the grandkids aided in the harvest of pounds and pounds of apples from a handful of well tended trees. They were grass green, usually unblemished but some with worm holes. There were Granny Smiths as well as "cooking apples," too tart to bite into, yet perfect for stewing and storing away. Our Granny took it as her duty to peel, cut, and boil down the fruit, then turning it into freshly made æblekage.

After my grandmother passed away, one of my cousins circulated a recipe for æblekage, pulled from the Internet. My mother, too, had a version from a Danish cookbook. But when

our hands combined the same, very simple ingredients, the result was different from what my grandmother herself made. In practice, it's the same food, but it just doesn't taste right.

As the story goes in our family, the error is in forgoing the Danish breadcrumbs and jelly. We buy it, instead, in our home country of America: a shabby replacement. There must be more to the difference between her æblekage and ours, though. A family recipe is not just a set of ingredients and cook times. We are missing my grandmother's kitchen secrets, the kind that get scratched in the margins or shared doing the dishes together.

She taught us many things, but not this.

Perhaps she thought of æblekage as rote and so not worth documenting. Or, maybe she did write it down, but she put it in a drawer where it got lost among the lifetime of paper that we found in drawers and boxes after she passed away. This treasure trove included bundles of Air Mail letters that she exchanged with my grandfather when they were just young lovers. Perhaps some things are worth saving, while others are best kept a memory.

That remembrance, though, is truly a salve when I mourn my grandmother and her æblekage. I can still feel the soft, tart apple melt in my mouth, mixed with the sugary crunch of breadcrumbs. The raspberry jelly was sparsely distributed on the top and so, when it hit the tongue, my taste buds exploded.

While my mouth is watering, it takes a few seconds to realign my brain and remember: this is nothing but a memory.

The thought of it makes me feel at home again.

Hippodrome

By Amy Barnes

Amy Barnes has words at a variety of sites including The New Southern Fugitives, FlashBack Fiction, Popshot Quarterly, Flash Fiction Magazine, X-Ray Lit, Anti-Hero Chic, Museum of Americana, Penny Fiction, Elephants Never, Re-side, The Molotov Cocktail, Lucent Dreaming, Lunatic Fiction, Rejection Lit, Perhappened, Cabinet of Heed, Spartan Lit, National Flash Flood Day and others. Her work has been long-listed at Reflex Press, Bath Flash Fiction, Retreat West and TSS Publishing. She volunteers at Fractured Lit, CRAFT, Taco Bell Quarterly, Retreat West, NFFD and Narratively. She is nominated for Best Microfictions 2021 and a Pushcart. Her flash collection will be published in May, 2021 by ELJ Editions, Ltd.



A trio of fake horses appear in the Difficult town square two weeks before Christmas. Real police horses sniff them and turn away. Children pat their noses expecting wet velvet but only feel plastic. No one knows where the horses came from but they can't be moved as their hooves are cemented into the ground, tall grass planted around their ankles.

They're deemed interlopers with no purpose and yet, the townspeople accept them and pose for pictures. Tourists arrive in droves, cameras and plastic carrots and apples in hand.

"Listen, Mama," Susan Cooper says tapping Horse #1.
Boing. Thud. Boing. Thud.

The empty belly echoes like a church bell, but without a wedding or funeral to announce.

"The Christmas festival tree has to go *here*," Susan's dad announces. He puts one hand on Horse #2's back, a temporary cowboy in his version of an Ugly Christmas sweater: a red and green argyle vest.

"I *like* the white one." A voice rises from the crowd.

"Be quiet, Dorothy," Susan's dad says.

"You can't take her down. Her name is Acorn."

And with that, Dorothy climbs onto newly-named Acorn. The gathered crowd gasps. It isn't often you see an elderly woman mount a fake or real horse.

"It must be easy to mount since it can't move," a tourist whispers.

"You can't take Rudolph either."

"Or Foxy."

"It's a sign. Like the three wise men."

The crowd speaks as one and by the time real church bells announce it's noon, clusters of people take turns riding the fake horses.

“Christmas is cancelled,” Susan’s dad announces.

No one listens to him. He relents and puts the festival Christmas tree in his dollar store parking lot and sells miniature horses wearing red and green argyle vests to tourists.

One day, the horses disappeared as quickly as they arrived. It’s a mass exodus of all fake horses, even the carousel horses and the penny one in front of Cooper’s Dollar Store.

To cover the gaping holes in the town square pavement, a trio of replacement statue horses are erected with a plaque to memorialize them. There are whispers Susan’s dad planned the entire thing to keep from going bankrupt. On snowy December nights, tourists still come to search for ghost-horse footprints and buy a dollar store t-shirt that says “Merry Christmas from the Difficult horses.”

Oh, Those *Holiday* Dinners

By **David Calogero Centorbi**

David Calogero Centorbi is a writer living in Detroit, MI. Recently published work in *The Daily Drunk*, *Dreams Walking*, *Versification*, *Brown Bag Online*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Crow Name*, and *Crepe & Pen*. He can be found here on Twitter: @DavidCaCentorbi.

My girlfriend of six months gave me a panicked look halfway through the first course—which she didn't know was the first course. This was Renee's first time at an Italian Thanksgiving dinner: there was spaghetti, ravioli, meatballs, my mother's marinara sauce, and spicy Italian sausage, everything homemade.



When we finished eating, we went upstairs to the kitchen.

“How'd you like it?” I asked her.

She looked at me a little confused, “I never had that type of food for Thanksgiving. I guess it's always good to try something new.”

Just as I was about to ask her what she meant, my Aunt Josephine walked in and asked Renee if she enjoyed the meal, “It was so delicious, and all that work you must've put into it.”

“Oh, that's for sure. All the work and preparation, and then it's over in one day. Well, dear, I hope you saved room for turkey and stuffing.”

When I saw Renee's expression, it all made sense to me. The panic and confusion disappeared and Renee blurted out, “We're having turkey and stuffing too?”

My aunt laughed, “Obviously, Salvatore never told you what to expect.”

Then, Aunt Josephine opened the oven and pulled out the green bean casserole. When Renee saw it, I could tell Thanksgiving was starting to look more familiar to her.

I heard Aunt Maria call us back downstairs for Thanksgiving's second course: turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, green bean casserole, and my mother's meat, cheese, and raisin stuffing.

Halfway through the meal I leaned over and said to Renee, “There will be dessert too, just a heads up.”

“This is a lot of food.”

A few of my younger cousins heard that and said, “That’s why our dad’s so fat.”

And, of course, they got the *look* from my Aunt Gina, and in unison apologized.

There was always an hour break before we had dessert. So, Renee and I went for a walk around the neighborhood. We ended up walking back into the house when my mother was calling everyone downstairs for Thanksgiving’s third course: homemade cannoli, cream puffs, Pinulada—little dough balls covered in sugar and honey—my mother’s cheesecake, and Aunt Diana’s pumpkin pie.

Renee just stood there and stared at it all, “How do you make all this homemade?”

“Well, I guess they just do it. Sort of just happens,” which I said a bit too loudly.

“Just happens, Salvatore,” my Aunt Josephine corrected me. “Nothing, *just happens*, about any of this, unless you call two weeks of preparation and then baking day and night, *just happens*.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but it’s worth it, so glad you do it, and it was Renee’s first time,” I said panicked, not intending to turn the attention to Renee.

“Yes, I know.”

Renee came to my rescue, “It was so delicious. All the time and effort, amazing. Maybe one day when Sal has to be involved he will understand.”

My Aunt Josephine smiled, “Oh, I like you. And probably not, these lazy-ass men think putting up and taking down tables and chairs is their only duty. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, if they only knew.”

After we were finished with dessert, we decided to leave. As I was driving Renee back home I asked, “So, what are you doing for Christmas dinner?”

“Dieting.”

We laughed.

“Well, now that you know what Thanksgiving dinner is like, you need to experience Christmas dinner.”

“Oh my god, how is it different?”

“Well, we drop the turkey. But, we have ham instead.”

“Oh, I guess my Christmas Dinner isn’t so different than yours, we have that too,” and she started to laugh.

“Anyway, think about it. And look, you have almost a whole month to diet beforehand.”

“We’ll see.” Then she giggled a bit to herself, “I think if I asked you to come to my house for Christmas dinner, you’d be starving by the time you left. I still can’t get over all that food.”

“Well, it’s only three times a year.”

“Three times a year! Why three?”

I was a little confused. “Well, ok, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter.”

“Easter!”

That was the final trauma of the day.

“You have all the same food?” she seemed confused and panicked again.

“Oh no.”

She relaxed a bit.

“No, it’s the same as Christmas dinner, but there is more dessert.”

“How can there be more dessert? What possibly can you...”

And I interrupted her a bit, “My mother makes her lamb cake. It’s a tradition.”

“Lamb cake! Wait, it’s not made of...”

I laughed, “No, no. It’s a white cake with white frosting. She uses a lamb mold. Then she puts green-dyed coconut shavings underneath it like it’s sitting in the grass. Then she puts all different colored jelly beans around it. All the kids get to take them off and eat them before they cut the cake and then...”

“Oh my god,” she said, startling me.

I tightened my hands on the steering wheel, “What?”

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, soft and long, then whispered into my ear, “I love you. And I will come to Christmas dinner. But I am so full, please, please, stop talking about food.”

Home is Where the Darkness Isn't

By **Jay Fraser**

Jay Fraser is a poet and writer from Lincolnshire in the UK. Taking the majority of his inspiration from French philosophy, old movies, and the landscapes of rural England, he tries to turn that into something worth reading. His poetry is upcoming in *The Tide Rises* and *Versification*. Find him on Twitter @JayFraser1, if you like that sort of thing.

Gloomy comfort wraps around the twinkled glow of
Trinkets and tiny figurines, scale-model street lamps and
Snow coated globes. Frost spiderwebs across the onyx
Windows, and turns spiderwebs to crystal architects' sketches,
Delineating safety in the winter's dusk.

Greyed out skies like downy feathers slur their way over the
Slate, steel, and slush of the December streets.

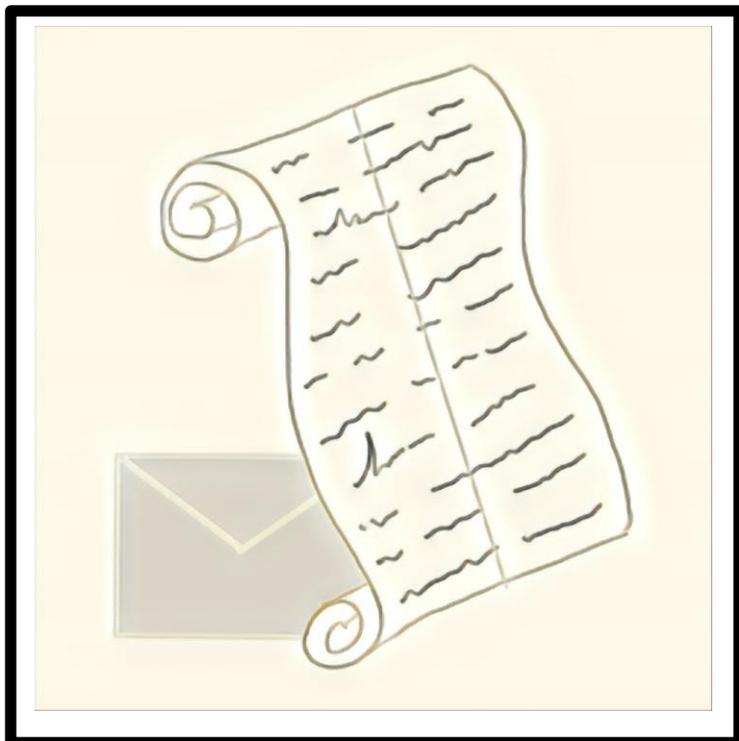
None of it makes it inside, where that warmth revolves around
The keeping-out of that chill, the sugared sweetness of
Hot ginger, the return of absent voices to eager ears, and
The knowledge of a nook where the dying season can't stay.



Free of *Christmas*

By **Mike Hickman**

Mike Hickman (@MikeHicWriter) is a writer from York, England. He has written for Off the Rock Productions (stage and audio), including a 2018 play about Groucho Marx. He has recently been published in EllipsisZine, the Blake-Jones Review, Bitchin' Kitsch, the Cabinet of Heed, the Potato Soup Journal, and the Trouvaille Review.



This was the Friday Malcolm got to put Christmas away for another year.

Or, to be more exact, to put school Christmas away. A whole month of carols and preparations for the Christmas play and wrapping presents for people he'd never meet in countries he'd never thought of. A whole month of Christmas spice smells and orange peel and fake snow and tinsel and glitter and fairy lights. And all of it preceded by months of anticipation, almost the whole way since the new school year had started in September. Everyone making out that

Christmas was somehow better than any other time of the year. Making him feel that, whatever they went home to, it couldn't be like his own experience.

Of course he'd want to be free of it as soon as the final bell rang and school was out. Surely anyone would understand that?

Getting off the bus at the end of his road, Malcolm heaved his bag back over his shoulder and began the icy trudge to his front door. He'd sling it down on the floor and leave it there to moulder over the holiday. Last year, curdled banana remains had spent two weeks soaking into the cards and presents he'd been given by the class. Somehow, it had felt appropriate.

He could still smell banana over the vanilla of the scented candle he'd been given by dopey Hannah. Never to be lit, of course. Maybe given away next year to someone else in school. Maybe a present for someone closer to home. It wasn't like he'd had the chance to think about presents yet.

Malcolm rattled through his pockets for the keys. There'd been the year when he'd dropped them in the playground on the way out and had to go all the way back. The caretaker who they all called Keys McGruder to his face and much worse behind his back

had sworn at having to come back out again to unlock the gates in the snow. He had his holiday plans, too, even if most of those involved coming in for builders and cleaners. But at least there'd be no kids about. One thing everyone knew about Keys McGruder was just how much he hated children. Malcolm could well understand.

If he was lucky, he wouldn't see or think about anyone in his class for the next two weeks.

The keys finally released themselves from a ball of used tissue and sweet wrappers. Malcolm didn't let them drop onto the path. He could do without that earache right at the start of the hols. The door, though, was stiff, and it was only as he pushed that he realised that the post had yet to be taken in. No cards, of course. Not for him, anyway.

The curtains were still drawn in the dark living room, but there was no surprise there, given the time they left in the morning. Given that he was back early today – earlier than perhaps he'd been back all year. End of term. A chance for him to exist in daylight without school. Short though the days might be.

For some of the children in Malcolm's class, this would be an escape into a couple of weeks of ranging the estates on the bikes they rode with such intimidating ease. With the bikes they got for Christmas, perhaps. Now, there was something else to inflame the jealousy. Malcolm had been lucky to get a second hand book some years. Luckier still if the pages weren't stuck together or it was one he wanted to read. For others in the class, this would be a chance to experience all that primary school had so resolutely failed to give them. A trip abroad with the family, say, if their parents were prepared to pay over-the-odds for not sneaking away during term time as so many did. These would be the children who would come back tanned to rust, full of the kind of stories Malcolm had never been able to truthfully tell. They'd clutch souvenirs and postcards that they'd then give away to increase their popularity still further.

All that and pressies and tinsel and turkey, too, Malcolm thought.

Whatever. Let them all go where they would because, at long last, he was free to get out of the ridiculous uniform and just be himself. Across Christmas and New Year, there would be no more pretending to know things he didn't know. Not only would he be spared the excruciatingly embarrassing PE lessons, there'd also be a pause in the failed science experiments and the cringe-inducingly slow answers in maths. Better even than that, there'd be no visits to the Head's office, trying to explain himself – not that she ever understood him, anyway. Particularly when she'd challenged him about not wanting to join in with the school Christmas Fayre because he had a "thing" about Christmas that, no, he wasn't going to explain. The year-long lie could be put to one side with his school tie.

Two weeks. End of term. A chance for him to stop the "obsessing about school" that they argued about so often at home.

Malcolm only noticed the envelope when he'd flung himself back on the creaking springs of the sofa and started to unbutton the straining shirt. Frowning, he leaned forward, recognising his name and the handwriting and the smudges in the ink.

The children's Christmas gifts were still in his bag. The comedy musical Christmas tie was draped over the unwatered pot plant where the Christmas tree might have been if he hadn't left it so late because he'd had his Christmas already. And everyone else's, it felt like.

Unfolding the letter, reading the tear-smearred words, the all too conscious Christmas curmudgeon and primary school teacher, Malcolm Cook, was left it no doubt that now, for him, this year, he really had put Christmas away.

A *Hotel* for the Holidays

By **Julie McClement**

Julie McClement

(@JulieMcClement) graduated from Centennial College's Children's Media program. She grew up in midwestern Ontario and works as a UX Researcher.

Every year, the Chelsea Hotel in downtown Toronto gets done up for Christmas, and every year, I visit.

First, I look at the gingerbread houses. Each department creates their own, and they're pretty creative: Hawaiian beach bungalows with peppermint windows, an RV with a marshmallow bear at the wheel. The public has a week to vote.

I take this task terribly seriously, as though it's a presidential election where I'm casting the decisive ballot. Last year it took me over ten minutes before I settled on a replica of Gimbels from the movie *Elf*, wanting to ensure this choice emerged from a rigorous evaluation of artistry and craftsmanship, unhindered by sentimental associations.



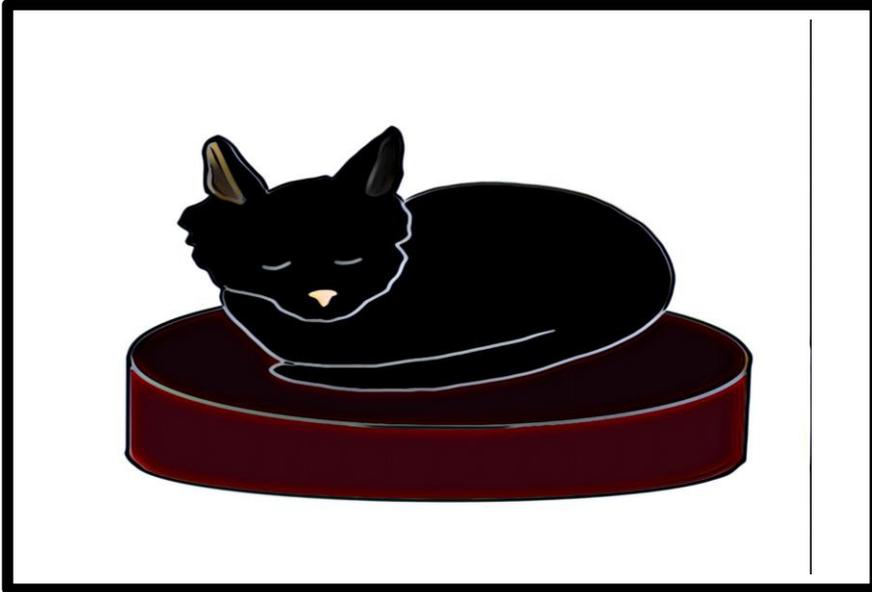
The Chelsea also has a Santa set with the big man himself, as well as free hot chocolate for everyone. I take a cup myself, though I'm not a guest at this hotel, and haven't been for a long time.

As a child I stayed there often. I have a thousand tiny memories. Stripping down to my swimsuit by the pool. Gazing down from the balcony. Climbing into bed next to my sister and making sure she didn't get more space than she was entitled to, the precise midpoint as fiercely negotiated as borders in the Middle East.

Now, coming back as an adult, alone with snow melting in my hair, I cup my hot chocolate in my hands, and sway to the holiday tunes piped throughout the lobby. A hotel is a place most people just pass through, but at this moment, I am home.

Burning Desire: A Hanukkah Story

By David Wasserman



David Wasserman (he/him) is the author of *Tiny Footcrunch* (Unsolicited Press, 2018) and *Dealing: Tarot Poems and Pictures* (Unsolicited Press, 2019) - the latter in collaboration with Project Runway's Helen Castillo (art) and in support of NYC non-profit Literacy, Inc. His work has appeared in *8 Poems Journal*, *Plum Recruit Mag* and *Wine Cellar Press*, among others. David is editor-in-chief of *Second Chance Lit*, teaches elementary school and lives in Connecticut, USA. Find him online at davidwassermanbooks.com or [@davidwasserman1](https://twitter.com/davidwasserman1).

I stared into the shamash candle. The flame danced and teased a happy hora and I considered snuffing it out. "You might represent miracles and perseverance," I hissed, "but your name means

servant and, don't forget, we let you burn out. You get replaced each sunset." I'd been feeling burnt out too, and heading home for Hanukkah wasn't the panacea I thought it would be. Was I a candle burning for nothing, for no one, just sucking up oxygen and waiting for the inevitable two-finger lick pinch of time? I needed direction. A sign.

I sighed.

At that moment two things happened simultaneously:

1. The flames of the menorah bent backward under my sudden onslaught of breath.
2. My parents' Maine Coon, Alonzo, jumped up onto the kitchen counter.

Alonzo's tail flared up, the fire finding his long and fluffy hair the perfect tinder. "Shit, shit, shit!" I cursed as I scrambled around the counter to help. I was too slow. Alonzo had already made a mad dash out the cat door. I ran outside and saw a yowling yolo blaze of glory flaming across a vast white ocean of snow into the third night of Hanukkah. It was beautiful. I lit out in the direction of the burning.

Christmas Memories

By **Robin McNamara**

Set adrift on memories of you,
Childhood Christmas.
Excitement of last minute shopping
In town with shops filled with
Festive cheer and toys.
A special day like no other,
The wrapping of gifts,
The Christmas movie on TV.

Set adrift on memories of you,
Childhood Christmas Eve.
You snuggled me into bed
With promises of Santa's presents.
Whiff of the Christmas cake in the oven
From the kitchen.
The lights of the tree shone brightly
In the living room.

Set adrift on memories of you,
Childhood Christmas day.
The morning excitement
Of what did Santa bring?
The adults finally rise wearily
To begin preparations of Christmas dinner.
Dad carving the turkey,
Mum setting the table for the family.

Set adrift on memories of you,
Childhood Christmas.
The visits of neighboring friends
With their presents from Santa,
Who played a while with me,
Until the time came to gather together
The family for dinner.
A time of contemplation for those departed.

Robin McNamara is an Irish poet with over 65 poems published worldwide, including poems published in America and in the UK with Starving Writers, Saccharine Poetry, Pink Plastic House, Full House Literary Magazine, Dream Journal, Spillwords & Ephemeral Elegies. A regular contributor to Poetry Ireland and Black Bough Poetry poetry prompts. UCD Library have a selection of his pandemic poems in their archives as a record of poems written during this period.



Set adrift on memories of you,
Childhood Christmas past.
Now long gone as I now an adult,
Remember fondly those special days
With my own family.
I carry on the family traditions,
Passed from my parents to me
And remember fondly what we celebrated.

By
Heart
By **Meagan Johanson**

Meagan Johanson is a writer from Oregon, where she lives with her family. She has been published in *Lunate Fiction*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Versification*, and elsewhere. She loves music, books, new obsessions, and anything with butter on it. You can find her on Twitter: @MeaganJohanson.



“I almost forgot,” Grandma says, as she zips my yellow raincoat up. I always wear my raincoat now when Grandma makes her Christmas rolls. “Just in case,” she says, but her eyelids crinkle up with grin, because we both know what comes next.

And we laugh when the mixer shoots flour to the air. We laugh when Mama comes in and scolds us both, then throws up a pinch of flour and can’t help but laugh some too.

Grandma tells me what to add to the bowl: salt, fat, sugar, eggs. I measure and mess, spread Crisco in tins; my hands are small and good for this. But Grandma shapes the dough into rolls, with quick hands of bone and freckle, pinching one, two, three balls off for the clover leaves.

The dough grows fat in the small, warm kitchen—that’s how we know it’s time to bake. When the rolls come out, I lick my lips and Mama slicks a stick of butter over each golden top. “Perfect every time,” she says. “Even with no recipe.”

We tuck the hot rolls into the big bread bowl, all but the one with four leaves; this one is mine. Grandma leans over and opens it up for me like a secret, the leaves spreading to the soft, sweet, steaming inside. I tear off a piece and gobble it up and Grandma starts to laugh again. It turns into one of her sandpaper coughs, the ones that sound like they hurt.

Mama hands the bowl to me, but her eyes stay on Grandma. “Take this to the table, Munchkin.” But I don’t. I stand in the kitchen in my raincoat and watch as Mom slips her arm around Grandma’s waist. I’m four years old, but I remember.

*

“How many cups of sugar?” Mom quizzes.

“Trick question,” I reply, scooping sugar from the jar. “Only 1/2 cup.”

“Correct. And the water? If it’s too hot the yeast....”

“...won’t bloom. Mom, I got this. It’s all up here.” I tap the side of my head, and shoo her away with a towel.

“I forget, teenagers know everything. I won’t be around forever, you know.”

At the end of the counter, she cracks open eggs for eggnog, feigning indifference, thinking I don’t notice her glances my way. Dad and Grandpa watch the football game in the living room, their voices swelling in the background. Mom hums, like she always does when she cooks.

A pang of memory unzips in me. It’s just us now, making Christmas dinner, two pairs of hands instead of three. Indulgence slips out, as if I could stop it.

“Hey Mom, how much shortening do I mix in again?”

She puts down her whisk, wipes her hands on her apron, and with a punctuated nonchalance, makes her way to my side. For a long, relishing moment she inspects the silver bowl. “One stick,” she replies. “Your Grandma used lard. Have I told you this? Shortening is not quite the same. I’ll grab it. You stay here and start the knead.”

I click the mixer on to low and a small puff of flour spills into the air. From the living room, a jubilation erupts, clapping and celebratory hoots. Touchdown.

*

My husband bites hard through the flat, heavy roll. “Itsh... tayshty,” he says, his mouth full of burden.

“The yeast must have expired,” I mumble. “Or the water too warm. Or maybe I used too much flour.”

“Honey, they’re fine. Plus, a little hard work never hurt anybody.” He forces down another bite with a generous swig of wine.

“You are a sweet and terrible liar,” I say, tossing my roll at him. His lifts his hands, two white flags, but the bread gets by, bouncing hard off his chest to land in his mashed potato gravy.

He picks up the half-submerged roll and takes a dripping bite. “I schtill think itsh delischush,” he says. “Try it with the gravy.”

In the high chair, my son drums the bread on his tray—shaking the plastic, spilling his milk—while I replay memories in my head, wondering what I forgot.

*

“Are you paying attention, Munchkin?” My granddaughter nods up at me, her green eyes wide and watching. “We need two cups of water, just warm enough,” I say filling the measuring cup at the sink. “Then the sugar and yeast and we wait till it blooms.”

“Blooms, like flowers?” She peers into the bowl from her tiptoed, step-stool perch.

“A kind of growing, yes. Then we’ll add the egg, the salt, the fat—but first, the best part of all.”

From the side door, a burst of air fills the room, as my son walks in, arms full of red-wrapped gifts. “Mom, she won’t remember any of this,” he says, closing the door with his foot. “She’s only four years old.”

But I turn on the mixer anyway and the flour spits white clouds into the air—over our arms, down the fronts of our shirts—and we both burst open with laughter.

I think she’ll need a coat next year, and a four-leaf clover tonight, just for her.

Some things a heart can’t forget.

White *Wine* in the Sun

By **Issy Golding**

Issy Golding is a student in Sydney (a place where Christmas is rarely considered cozy), an aspiring non fiction journalist and avid writer of poetry. Generally writing about Australian social politics and global history, she can generally be found on the lifelong search for the worlds best caramel slice. Twitter: @goldingissy Other works: <https://issygolding.journoportfolio.com/>

Days get longer
Sun gets closer
Countdown to Christmas as the temperature gets higher
We don't have the snow & hot chocolate
Santa in a suit never made much sense to me
Holidays - December
The beginning of Summer,
Schools off, shoes off.
Beaches & laughter & homemade icecream - always rocky road.
Lamingtons, always slightly burnt.
Christmas: cricket & cousins
Music in the background, the gentle reminder that the rest of the world still exists
Where you'll get a face dyed red with the cold all rugged up in your coats
My face will burn the same colour from the scorching sun.
White wine, salty air, a blissful existence.
Days spent jumping over boiling sand
Whitewash of waves the closest I'll come to a white Christmas.
The best carol you'll ever hear us the dull hum of the ocean harmonising with
the playful tease of family.



Pas de *Deux*

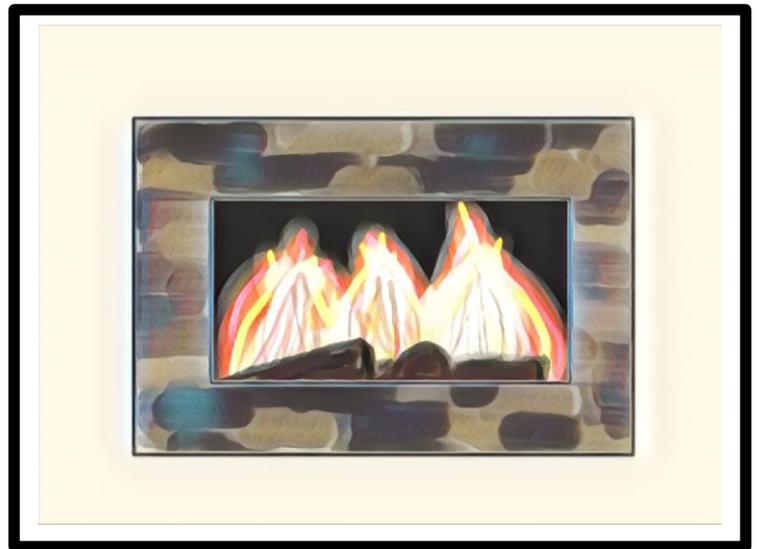
By **Mileva Anastasiadou**

Mileva Anastasiadou is a neurologist, from Athens, Greece. A Pushcart, Best of the Net and Best Small Fictions nominated writer, her work can be found in many journals, such as Litro, Jellyfish Review, Flash Flood, Moon Park Review, Okay Donkey, Maudlin House, Open Pen and others.

Andante maestoso

Festivities have already begun in the Sugar Plum Cottage, although Nate isn't here. Clara dives deeper into the armchair, everyone is here already, her parents, his parents, while Noelle, her godmother, an aspiring matchmaker who introduced them long ago, a wonderful hostess too, is taking care of the fireplace, *is it warm enough?* she asks, and everyone nods, all except Clara, Clara is busy looking out the window, she's not listening, she doesn't

notice the fire, the Christmas lights, the tree, she's staring out of the window, like waiting for something, or someone, and she feels all eyes on her, when Noelle asks her: *how has it been, dear?* She shrugs, takes a sip of wine, *it's been fine*, she says, and she knows, she knows they all expect more of her, she's been away and now she's here for Christmas, she's never been that far from home before, and home isn't quite a home without Nate.



Tarantella

But they know not, they can't know, about the promise those two had made, before Clara left for studies, they'd meet on Christmas Eve, they said, they'd meet again like they met the first time, the Sugar Plum cottage would do its magic, and if that magic works, it'll be like they were never apart, the time in between will be a dream, only magic does not work all the time, Nate thinks, he may lose the battle this time, he thinks, driving and driving, to be there on time, while crooning Jingle Bells, only he doesn't believe those bells sound happy, for he sings, he sings louder, but he sings in a minor key, which makes a happy song sound sad.

Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy

Clara hasn't moved, she stays still, hidden in the armchair by the window, not even the smell of freshly baked cookies wafting from the kitchen does not lift her spirits, she wishes she was as lucky as Cinderella, she'd then have a fairy godmother, she'd do her magic and Nate would appear and he'd say that nothing changed, but she only has Noelle, she has no magic wand, she'll probably give her a scarf, she'll say, *it'll keep you warm, dear*, and Clara

will be polite and thank her godmother, for that's what real life is all about, it's about scarves and cozy gatherings and loss and pain. *It'll keep you warm, my dear*, godmother says, when she approaches, handing a red scarf to Clara, with lots of redder hearts painted on it, Noelle is handing the scarf but first she moves it, as if it were a magic wand and then she stays still, she stays silent, she's looking up as if waiting, waiting for the magic to work, she moves it again and Clara laughs, *Noelle's being funny again*, she tells mom, but she stops laughing when she hears the sound of the car's engine, she jumps out of the armchair, missing Noelle taking a bow, waiting for the applause, but Clara glows, glows, glows, when she sees Nate at the doorstep, she glows brighter than Christmas lights, she dances into his arms, a ballerina in disguise, like drops of water splashing in a fountain at first, like waves crashing onto the shore a second later, and Nate holds her and won't let go.

Coda

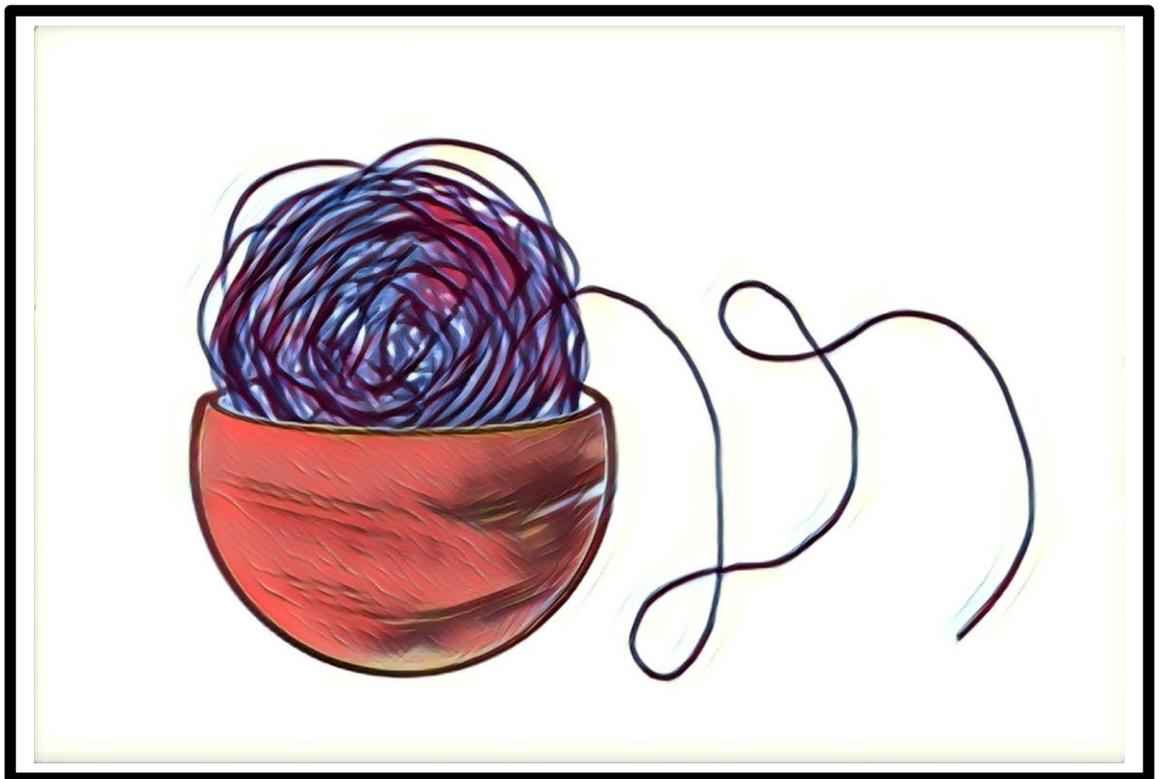
Now Christmas lights shine brighter, cookies smell stronger, like joy, like love, and sorrow vanishes when they are together, Clara and Nate, they're lighter than air, like they're communicating vessels, they are connected, whenever he's around, nothing hurts much, her pain lessens, for he transforms pain into joy, which flows back to her, then the emotion settles, when they're both equally happy. If only they didn't live in the real world, the world in which everything ends, if only they lived in a never-ending fairy tale, but all they have is now, and Christmas, they're walking now, they walk hand in hand, like they're about to dance, dance, dance, a pas de deux, a step for two, like they'll jump into the Land of Sweets and stay there forever.

Blanket

By Chase Ferree

Chase Ferree (he/him) is a teacher in Seattle, Washington. Originally from North Carolina, he's also lived in Missouri and Massachusetts. His poems have appeared in *The Harvard Advocate*, *Peripheries Journal*, and *Stone of Madness Press*. Find him on Twitter @freechasetoday.

Your hands, all vein and muscle, strategize
to avoid the hassle of yarny-knots
down at your feet or strewn across
your lap until a whole afghan—
a child's imagined map replete
with continents, with seas and underwater
trenches—covers your knees. The boy,
awestruck, hunches to scrutinize
a cavernous inch, falls deep within,
is falling ever since.



Come *Rejoicing*

By **Michael Luketich**

Michael Luketich was once one of the youngest full members of a professional Eastern European folk dance troupe and is now a lawyer. He doesn't understand how he got from there to here either. He's on Twitter: @mikeluketich

Čas radosti, veselosti

We used to spend every Christmas at my grandmother's home in this little coal mining town in Western Pennsylvania. My grandmother, who had trouble hearing, kept her television's volume turned up so loudly that you could hear her Christmas music blaring as loudly as if she were hosting a festive fraternity party. I was blessed to know – from an early age – what it meant to be “home for the holidays.”



Větu nastal nyní

We would arrive in the afternoon each Christmas Eve, so we could change and prepare for service at the English-Croatian church my mother was raised and married in, presided over by the most serious soul God ever squeezed into a 5'2" body. The town's mines had been worked by Croatian men who had left their homes for the promise of America, only to see no more of it than its dark, coal underbelly.

Pán Bůh věčný, nekonečný

There were canaries in the mines, but no God. Not there. Not until their lungs blackened and their once strong bodies rapidly failed them in ways no alcohol could hide, when this small pastor would come to the hospital and, so they said, help them find God in their final moments.

Narodil se z Panny

And my grandfather, my namesake, was the pastor's greatest story: the man who left his human form behind so calmly, so assuredly, that he often said, “If anyone ever went to Heaven, it was Mike.”

V městečku Betlémě

I never knew my grandfather and yet he was everywhere in the home: the couch where he laid when he grew too weak to walk upstairs but was too alive to die was where we sat and waited to accept hard candies and soft, denture-less kisses; the bathroom he'd built himself that still had his sign, "Men Only," though he'd barely lived long enough to enforce his rule; and the place where he had stood when my grandmother had had enough of his drunken boorishness and thrown a "good" vase at him, missing but making an impression anyway.

V jesličkách ve chlěvě

And so it was that our family felt welcomed by the church, though we lacked the ability to understand the Croatian interjected here and there into the English services (for those from the old country who could not attend the Croatian service later), for we were the family of the one sure angel in Heaven: the drunken, mean-spirited sinner who was saved and whose salvation the other families relied upon as evidence of their own, impending salvation.

Leží malé pacholátko na seně, na seně

Oh, how that little church came alive on Christmas Eve: how the sounds of a song sung by an increasingly small number of Croatians and an increasingly large number of their American-born descendants in a church built with love from the best materials they could afford would transport you from that coal-mining town for a few moments into a little town in a faraway land and, for a moment, you could begin to make out life before the mines laid strong men into cold graves.

Leží malé pacholátko na seně, na seně

Yule Rule

By **Kevin Gooden**

Kevin Gooden retired in 2020 to pursue his creative writing dream. He's taken writing courses through Gotham Writers (New York) and Humber College (Toronto). He's had poetry, humour, and horror short stories published this year—this is his first literary publication. When he's not writing shorts and thinking about novels, he's often crafting micro-fictions on Twitter.



It was our first Christmas without Dad, and we planned to do it right. They say the first year without a loved one is the worst. All those notable days lurking; all those notable absences hurting. Days like birthday, Mother's Day—or Father's Day, depending on the *who*—anniversary, Thanksgiving, the Super Bowl, in Dad's case, and worst of all, Christmas.

Dad was a ruler. Not the King Henry the Eighth type. The foot-long wooden type you used in elementary school to draw straight lines, measure the odd thing, maybe still had one tucked away somewhere, always lost when needed. All those little meticulously spaced lines dividing up

the inches, those were Dad's rules. He had rules for everything, even Christmas.

But I admired his Christmas canon—he called it the Yule Rule—because it was simple: family first.

So, we and our dread were gathering with Mom at the farm. I arrived in Minnesota two days ago from LA, happy I'd remembered to dig out my old winter coat at the last second. The producer was crabby I was going, but I didn't care, cause the producer was *always* crabby. Sandra and I just broke up, and I'd imagined my brothers would be all over that. But Josh and Lisa were splitsville, too. Maybe unexpected death makes you ponder life, where it is or isn't going.

It was great to see Josh's always mussy dark hair and those blue eyes that still drove ladies crazy, good to talk, like old times. It felt like Dad and his faded Packers T-shirt, salt and pepper hair, and traditional winter-only beard were just around the corner, in the kitchen,

fussing over the turkey, basting, measuring temperature way too many times, questing poultry perfection.

Jason was arriving tonight, on schedule. Typically, no one had info on Janice's arrival. Out of us four kids, she was the one most opposite Dad, a red-haired terror most likely to be the wrecker. But Mom said she was coming from 'Down south, somewhere.', would be here tomorrow night for dinner.

"How are you doing, Mom?"

"Oh, you know. I'm fine," she said, wiping the counter.

She looked fine, which I didn't understand. She'd let her hair go gray, but there was *something* new about her, a lightness. Then I heard it.

Is she... humming?

"Where's the snowman?" I asked. Dad had a gaudy three-foot high Styrofoam snowman, looked like Frosty, that he always put on the counter.

"That was always in the way," Mom said, putting a hot pie in Frosty's spot to cool. "It's on the hallway table."

I looked and there he was. Didn't even notice. Maybe he was in the right spot, now.

"Do you need any help?"

"No, I'm fine. Why don't you go help your brother?"

In the living room, surrounded by Mom's beautiful display of poinsettias, evergreen garlands, candles, Christmas canes, bows, bells, ropes, ribbons, and the plethora of glittering age-old decorations that we knew and loved, Josh was doing one of Dad's tasks: decorating the tree. But the tree's location was wrong.

"Dad always put it over there."

"Mom told me to put it here," he said, smiling. "Makes sense. Now you'll be able to view it from outside, too. Not sure why Dad squished it in by the piano. We sacrifice one chair this way, but so what? It's always just us. Plenty of places to sit."

I considered it. Made sense.

But what about Dad?

"Have you noticed Mom?"

"Yes! Doesn't she look great, Jenn?"

"Sure Josh. But don't you think... I don't know. Shouldn't she be sad still?"

"We're all sad. But no, I'm glad she's okay. You should be too. Here, hang this."

Mom still saved all the ornaments we crafted in school. Josh passed Janice's hideous creation, that looked like Marlow's ghost, complete with chains, holding a candy cane. We both laughed.

#

Jason got in late. It was the first time I met baby Kirsten. She was beautiful.

"I'm so happy you picked a 'K' name. Dad would love you carrying on the tradition."

Annette, Jason's wife, beamed.

We stayed up late, played Dad's favourite: Rummoli. Mom surprised everyone by repeatedly winning the Poker Pot. Jason cursed, said a high three-of-a-kind should beat a low card full house, and we laughed so hard I thought I'd pee. Jason never changed.

The next night, Christmas Eve, was when we usually had our big dinner, so the cook had the day off on Christmas. Jason took over turkey duties. The table was set, and Janice still hadn't arrived.

"Maybe we should start," I said, not wanting the food to get cold.

"No," Mom said, surprising me again.

Before anyone could speak, we saw headlights, heard a car's snow-squeaky halt.

"Janice is here."

There were two door slams, voices. Laughter.

Who's she with? Someone... not family, is at our family dinner?

Janice and her guest entered in a swirl of snowflakes, a whirlwind of hugs and introductions.

Jendayi was a refugee from Sudan. With her afro and dark skin, she looked about as different from Janice's pale skin and long red hair as you could imagine.

The only empty chair was Dad's. Mom said, "Welcome Jendayi, please sit." Pointed at his chair.

We settled. We were ready. Except... Dad always said grace. Silence.

Janice said, "Would anyone mind... if Jendayi spoke?"

Mom said, "Go ahead." Smiled.

Jendayi said, "In my homeland, my name means 'Grateful'. Today I *am* grateful for a country I am safe in. A new good friend. And for a family who honours tradition, and even when missing a loved one, still welcomes a stranger. Thank you for everything, God. Amen."

And I finally understood. Dad's tradition wasn't about minutia, this thing here or that thing there. It was about family. About love. And we were honouring him. In a new way.

He was *magic.* By **Megan Cannella**

Megan Cannella (@megancannella) is a Midwestern transplant currently living in Nevada. For over a decade, Megan has bounced between working at a call center, grad school, and teaching. She has work in @PorcupineLit, @dailydrunkmag, @VerseZine, @TBQuarterly, and @perhappened.

After my dad died, my uncle became Santa. It was a natural fit. He was always game for eating a few more cookies after a too big Christmas Eve dinner, and my little brother and I didn't know his handwriting, so he could be Santa on the gift tags stuck to tissue paper -- so as not to risk ruining a perfectly good gift bag -- and on the boxes whose wrapping paper just happened to match the paper on the presents from Mom.

With an easy laugh, he gave three-year-old me free reign at the Christmas tree lot. Under the influence of my expert supervision, we came home with a tree that scraped the ceiling and took over most of the living room. But it made me happy. To him, that was reason enough to unleash pine scented chaos on my mother as she tried to figure out how to Christmas as a widow.



Later, when my little brother made reindeer snacks in kindergarten -- glitter and Cheerios: a gastrointestinal delight for any species to be sure -- my uncle stomped through the front yard where my brother had proudly scattered the creation so that it looked like Santa had come and his reindeer had feasted on one handful of a heart healthy breakfast and two handfuls of the world's most aggressive crafting material.

Recently...or not so recently

...the magic has gotten...hazy or confused or lost...or as the adults like to say, *complicated*.

My uncle is tired from years of stomping and spreading glitter around to make everything seem a little less worse.

My mom's tree folds up easily now and gets zipped up into a special Christmas tree bag to be kept in the attic until next Thanksgiving...or the unused spare bedroom, however far she can stand to carry it.

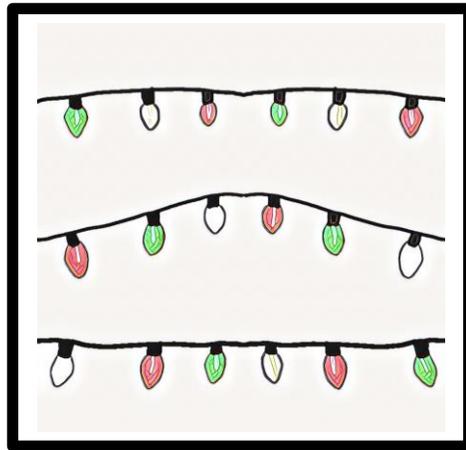
And I don't always make it home for Christmas anymore.

We do still pass those un-ruined gift bags back and forth though.

Welcome, Winter

By **Kelly Esparza**

Kelly Esparza is a graduate from the University of Arizona with a B.A. in English and a B.A. in Creative Writing. She is the author of *The World as Seen Through My Eyes* (Kindle Direct Publishing, 2019) and the co-author of *Out of This World!* (Make Way for Books, 2020). Her work has also appeared in *433 Magazine*. Kelly strives to uplift others with her writing. Twitter: @Kelly_Esparza7



I take a bite of Nostalgia during the holidays / I hear giggles from my childhood, ringing in my ears like jingle bells / Michael Bublé's Christmas album plays on repeat / Frank Sinatra and Gloria Estefan's songs make a cameo, too / the smell of warm chocolate chip cookies permeate the house / peppermint hot chocolate leaves a fresh, minty aftertaste / embers crackle in the fireplace / a string of multi-colored, twinkly lights greet the neighbors / our tree plays dress up, decorated in ornaments we've collected over the years / *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* call for movie marathons / snow drifts delicately on the porch / we make snowmen with carrot noses and brown buttons for eyes / a thin snowflake falls and melts onto my tongue while I make snow angels / overcast skies and rainy days make a visit, too / *brrr* / an invitation for fuzzy socks / and cashmere sweaters and knit scarves and leather, knee-high boots / laughter echoes for days / smiles and hugs count, too / ugly Christmas sweater contests and white elephant gifts and Secret Santa presents / it's the gift giving that thrills me / Love makes a surprise visit, and I welcome her with open arms / I'm taking this time to hold my family closer / Joy makes a home in our hearts.

My *Discovery* By Christine M. Estel

Christine M. Estel lives and writes in the Philadelphia area. She tweets from [@EstellingAStory](https://twitter.com/EstellingAStory).

As I sit here, on the floor in front of the lush fir, copious needles having already fallen and decorated our rug, I'm holding my biggest one yet. I've savored all the others, taking my time to unwrap — sliding my fingers under the edges and flaps to lift the Scotch tape, making sure not to tear or rip.

My widened eyes behold the red, black, and green plaid paper, a classic Christmas-time print, covering a large box that fits perfectly in the crook and open space between my crossed legs. I scan the outline from corner to corner, and side to side, wondering what awaits me underneath.



Eventually I see the tag, and for the first time in my ten Christmases, I see the glaring reality next to “From”: I trace the *S* with my eyes, as if I were using my finger, starting at the base and making my way up the slant, curving right along the loop at the top and back down until it crosses back over itself on the bottom, swinging back towards the *a* next to it. The brief pause in between gives me time for a hasty look over the entire word, my eyes scanning the connecting bumps, curves, and lines of the *a*, *n*, *t*, and *a*, the last one having a familiar hook at the end. I feel, at once, shocked and proud at my discovery. I whip my head towards her with a devilish grin.

“Mom, why does Santa have the same cursive as you?”

Who's *Marty* Fame?

By Cheryl Ferguson Bernini

Cheryl Ferguson Bernini, originally from Connecticut, lives in Italy, where she and her husband, Giacomo, share (use that term lightly) their home with four felines. When she isn't at her desk designing and building words, she is probably out exploring new worlds. You can read her stories, both fiction and nonfiction, online and in print. Follow her on Twitter @FergusonBernini and Facebook @CFergusonBernini.

As a sapling on a rooted in its Italian overflowed with both entire brood gathered it generations. At the start members divvied up Come December, festive finery, the hosts the yuletide feast.



genealogical tree deeply heritage, holidays family and food. When the represented three of each year, the core the celebratory days. dressed and draped in readied their household for

This Christmas Eve, mid-1970s, the families gathered at the home of my uncle Ed. With culinary preparations still being made, Mom joined my aunts and my grandmother in the overheated kitchen. I, along with my older brother and sister, united with our rarely seen cousins. And the men? They kept an eye on the kids while having an aperitivo, the standard pre-dinner drink, and sharing some laughs.

Into the parlor wafted the succulent aromas of the delicacies made from an array of seafood that would soon be served. No one ate much during the day leading up to the festivities; you needed to leave room to stuff yourself during this infamous banquet. And let's not forget dessert, where a touch of sweetness in the form of cookies and cakes, home-baked or store-bought, awaited alongside the espresso and limoncello. A selection of these treats sat out as a presentation, although they were off-limits until we finished eating dinner.

One inconspicuous cookie jar sat in the back corner of the arrangement. Hidden in the shadows, who would have thought to explore the container when trays openly lined the console. My dad, Fred, that's who. In the immediate family, Fred was the only member without an ounce of Italian blood. He may not have been born Italian, but he learned well and adapted through his love of eating like one!

Dad's stomach began grumbling, and, to tide him over, he thought a cookie or two wouldn't hurt his appetite. He spied the lone ceramic cookie jar, a pristine example of Capodimonte, and flipped open its lid. The perfume of almond and pine nuts overcame his senses. The pignoli cookie had long been Fred's favorite Christmas confection. He threw rationale to the wind and dove in.

Between sipping his cocktail and joking with his brothers-in-law, Fred made his way, repeatedly, stealthily, to the holder of all that was good. Snatching cookie after cookie from the jar's belly, he eventually left only crumbs in the porcelain abyss. All the while, no one noticed.

Amid the holiday chaos, my Uncle Ed wanted to curb the hunger he felt, and he, too, visited the cookie jar. Although upon dipping his hand in, he discovered the vessel void of its sweet delights.

On a small sheet of paper that he slipped into the ceramic crock, he wrote the words, 'morte fame'. In proper Italian, it is written, 'morte di fame', and its literal meaning is 'dying of hunger'. Italian-Americans have mistranslated the phrase and use it to mean, 'you're a pig' (in essence, you are a glutton who will die as a result of overeating). In Italy, it translates to something darker and more insulting, a person has the means but refuses to use them to help themselves and will, because of greed or ignorance, die of hunger.

Fred returned one last time when he found, instead of his beloved cookies, a note. Without his glasses, he had to hold the snippet far enough out to see it. Catching the colorful twinkling lights from the overly decorated and perfectly coiffed Christmas tree, he first read the words to himself.

His guilt now presented itself for all to see, along with his confusion. Squinting and bewildered, he read those words aloud, but not mor-teh and not faa-meh.

"Morty."

"Fame."

Shrugging his shoulders, he scanned the room for an explanation. "Who's Morty Fame?"

The room once bustling with excitement silenced for a moment before erupting in laughter. Fred, with a belly full of cookies, had the greatest sense of humor and wasn't the least bit embarrassed. Why should he be when he had already had his fill of those cherished crescents. In Fred's own words, "you can call me anything, but don't call me late for dinner." That evening he was neither late for dinner or dessert!

With each Christmas Eve that follows, with every pignoli cookie I bake and eat, I do a shout out to Morty Fame because without him, it wouldn't be Christmas.

When I *hear* Amy Grant's "Rockin Around the Christmas Tree"

By **Lindsey Heatherly**

Lindsey Heatherly is a writer born and raised in Upstate South Carolina. She has words in *Emerge Literary Journal*, *X-R-A-Y*, *Emrys Journal*, *Red Fez*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal* and more. She spends her time at home raising a strong, confident daughter. She can be found on her website at <https://r3dwillow.wixsite.com/rydanmardsey> or on Twitter: @rydanmardsey.

I am transported to a navy-blue sofa, in the living room of the house I grew up in, where all five of us would wait patiently for Dad to pass around more ornaments for decorating the tree: angels and bells, ornaments made from paper plates and pipe cleaners, a laminated tree with my sister's face pasted as a star at the top, several "Baby's First Christmas" ornaments, and trumpets with red bows. I think of the Nativity scene, and how my sister would cradle Jesus and call him *baby* before gently resting him back in the manger, the gentle glow from the tiny village that would decorate the top of our felt snow covered piano, and the Batman figurine my brother would add to survey and protect the villagers.

I think of the shelf with the corn husk angel and the candles mom would put in our bedroom windows – how they would shine, and we would run across the street and marvel at them in pajamas, under winter coats.

I think of hot chocolate with five marshmallows a piece and how mom and dad would split them up equally.

I think of Ms. Juanita, how she would string hundreds of lights on her tree and hang angels, made of starched lace, next to crystal icicles.

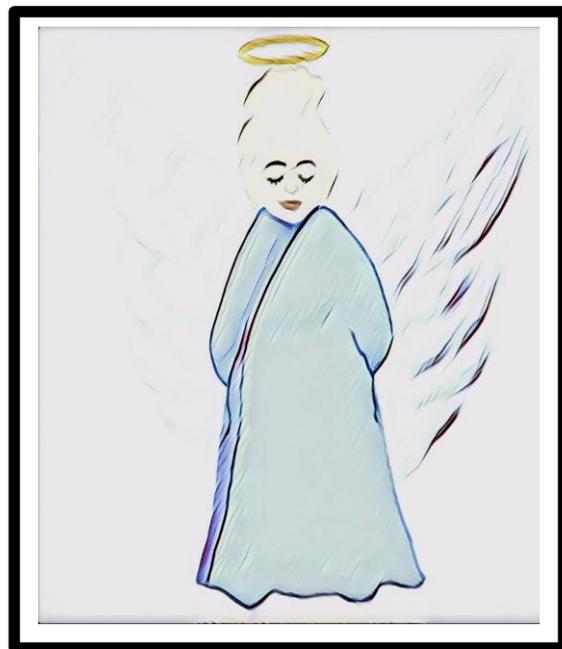
How she taught me to cross stitch, and how I still have the pattern I sewed –

a lamb with fruit falling from the basket on its back.

I think of how I would sit next to Ms. Martha in the church pew and how she always had peppermint gum and wore rings on every finger.

How she would slide each one of them off her hands and let me try them on throughout the service.

I think of white Christmas lights, the oversized tree



next to the grand piano, and the candles we would
hold with cardboard rings, to catch dripping wax,
as we sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

I think of how the holiday was simple,
and my parents made magic from nothing but love,
and I am left to wonder if I will ever marvel again,
as I place the starched lace angel atop our tree.

At the *Cabin* By Sarah Little

Sarah Little is a sometimes-poet who scribbles when she remembers and gets tetchy when she goes too long without writing. Her work has appeared in *Pink Plastic Dollhouse*, *Perhappened Mag*, and *Mineral Lit*, among others. Her first poetry micro-chapbook, *Snapshots* was published with *Broken Sleep Books* in July 2019.



Spring snaps by in a confusion of Halloween and Christmas advertising.
We pack hampers with food and suitcases,
and for two weeks stopping to pack feels like
the only respite. It's our only time to stop and breathe.

You drive. I navigate, watching google maps.
We arrive, tiny cottage on the water. Wood-panelled and cozy,
the first thing I hear when I get out of the car
is the ocean.

We unpack. You venture to the back deck
portable barbecue in hand, and set up. At home
we never really get a chance to use it.
Occasionally, a car swishes down the street.

Outside, you grill; inside, I bake cherries into
shortbread and dip them in chocolate. You strike matches
and the air mixes tastes: smoke from the grill,
citronella and bug repellent spray,
a hint of sulfur off the matches.

We sit to eat facing the ocean. Cars are
few and far between in this suburb; we listen to the
waves, and I can already see you with a surfboard
tomorrow morning.

At the end of the fence there's a pohutakawa in full bloom: there's a carpet of little red needles on the grass. In a nearby tree, a tui serenades us.

We use the shortbread as scoops for ice-cream, chocolate-end first. The wind picks up and the candles dance, flames flickering wildly, and staying stubbornly lit.

Dusk darkens to night. Here, we get to see stars in the sky, for once. The tapestry is untouched and unspoiled by streetlights.

It's getting colder now. Despite 29 degrees for the day, the weather suggests 14 overnight. We go inside, first time today. Flick on a movie that neither of us have seen, throw a blanket on.

There's hot chocolate and popcorn in front of us; there's the quiet hum of the heat pump.

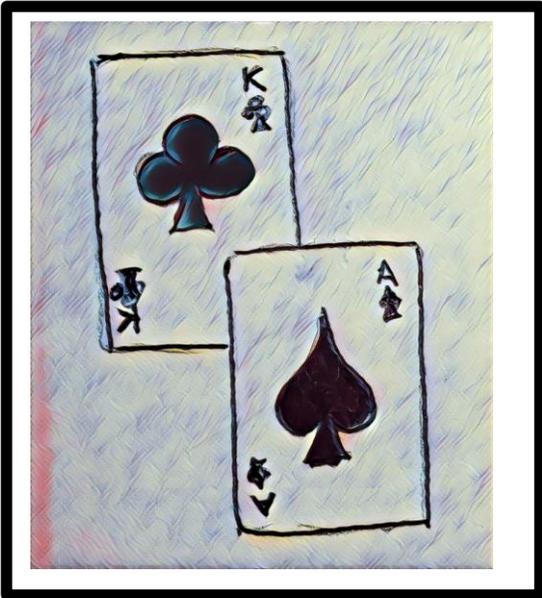
We are in for the night.

Poker

And Pastries

By **B F Jones**

B F Jones is French and lives in the UK. She has stories and poems in various magazines including The Cabinet of Heed, Ellipsis, Versification, The Daily Drunk, Spelk and Bending Genres. She can be found on Twitter: @fijo_frenchie



'Here by seven-ish' she'd texted.

I've put the pie in the oven and enjoy icy sips of beer as I lay the table. Jay cracks open the oysters and the kids sit by the window, tossing impatient legs.

Suddenly they're here, appearing through the back door with their children and too many bags and leftovers in a cool box and tired smiles.

'How was the drive?' The question remains unanswered, swallowed by hugs. The kids disappear, Jay opens more beers and the four of us sit down, the world suddenly a better place.

She says she likes my trainers and I say she can have them. I admire her nails and she promises to do mine.

We eat peanuts and olives and talk about our work, kids, husbands, friends and parents. We play Billy Joel's The Stranger as it's the only record that doesn't jump, and we sing along.

While we tuck the kids in, we make plans to sightsee, exercise, eat vegetables and drink herbal tea. We won't. We'll chatter over coffee and spend leisurely days by the fire after brisk walks on the beach. We'll make impossibly ugly Play Doh animals, bake biscuits and decorate the tree. We'll eat cheese and bread and pastries, drink beer and wine. We'll put the kids to bed before playing poker into the small hours.

We stand by the backdoor, leaden with pie, nicotine rushing through our heads, cold nibbling the tip of our fingers, looking up at the stars. We pride ourselves that we can locate the Big Dipper, and we think that bright one might be Venus.

"Anyone for a game of poker?" We're all tired and want to go to bed but we lay the matches, count the chips and start playing, as there are things that should never change.

Harvested Time

By **Jason de Koff**

Jason de Koff is an associate professor of agronomy and soil science at Tennessee State University. He lives in Nashville, TN with his wife, Jaclyn, and his two daughters, Tegan and Maizie. He has published in a number of scientific journals, and has over 30 poems published or forthcoming in literary journals, including WriteNow, this year.



A tranquil evening with roaring fire,
huddling close as temperatures descend,
I-spying the constellations that should exist.

Getting in the car with sink deep seats,
to feel the warmth envelop, hold close,
the lulling cadence of rolling tires.

Rushing through atmospheres at significant speeds,
imagining new worlds to behold below,
boredom and excitement engaging neurons in battle.

The early morning with fields of mist and dew,
where buck and fawn nibble tender shoots,
a hand cradles a smaller one that is larger each time.

Scrolling slowly, sinking deeply in the reverie,
of these once forgotten panels of light,
is the harvested time that yields the tapestry of life.

Winter, *Waking*

By **Kris Hiles**

Kris Hiles is an autistic queer poet living in a blue house with her plants and vinyl records. She likes snow, the smell of archives, and vintage computers. In her free time, she edits **GLITCHWORDS**, an online micropoetry zine. You can find her on Twitter at @KrisHiles.

Diffused, peppermint
isn't a candy, it's a biting day of frost
on the windows – the soft fall of snow.

In the air, the crystals float,
cold diamonds refracting the filtered sun,
and on the ground, a slick icing.

There's a silence in the yard
you can hear. Beyond, in the morning echo,
the crunch of the blanket beneath waking feet.

The trees are white,
peppered, dark needles piercing through,
and under, black circles in a silver sea.

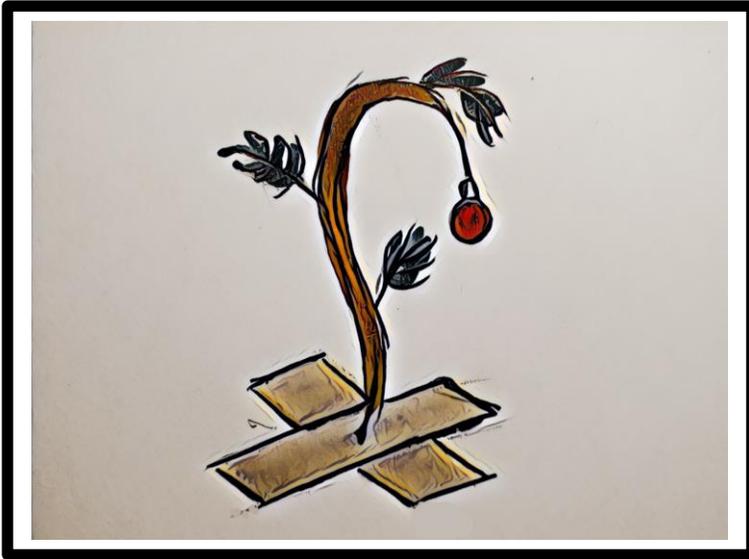
Inside, the fireplace roars, breathing –
you rub your hands together with the heat,
rising against the glass, pressing against the day.



An
Open Letter
From a Christmas Tree

By **Shawn Berman**

Shawn Berman runs The Daily Drunk. His favorite Adam Sandler movie is Billy Madison. Some of his recent work has appeared in Hobart, Rejection Letters, and No Contact. He tweets a lot @sbb_writer.



Today is March 25, 2021 and I have been suffering for approximately three months.

Usually I am festive and full of pizzazz, but I cannot in good faith tell you that everything is even remotely fine and dandy anymore.

In fact, things started to go downhill shortly after the holiday season ended. This is when the owners of said residence (The Bermans) stopped watering me daily, leaving me to fend for myself. I won't get into specifics, but I have been through

some pretty traumatic stuff and the dog's water bowl is not the same as the glorious Brita filter.

As the days continue to chug along, my branches ache, and my beautiful pine needles (what's left of them, at least) are wilting away to frizzled nothingness. I'm not trying to be dramatic, but it hurts to stand up straight for more than two minutes lately.

Listen, I know what I am. And I know that I am scientifically way past my prime. It's a fact that I enjoyed serving my purpose as a Christmas tree. Not only have I brought Christmas spirit to this house since Thanksgiving, but I have been the perfect resting spot for all those heavy homemade ornaments. Furthermore, I even allowed the cats to climb me, often knocking me over on my side, which truly hurt, FYI!

Even though my time as a Christmas tree was wonderful, I long for The Bermans to put an end to this nonsense already. It is my one and only wish for them to finally throw me onto the side of the road for the kind garbagemen, who will no doubt scoop me up with care and transport me to my well-deserved arctic oasis, where I will be given tons of spruce juice and massages.

So, Santa, or Santa's intern who monitors his letters: If you're reading this--PLEASE help. I am BEGGING you. I'm beginning to hear rumors that The Bermans might leave me up until Christmas 2021, as it's not that far away anymore. Freaking lunatics, I tell you. *Ugh*.

Sincerely,

A Christmas tree who has been left up for way too long!

12:15 a.m.

New Year's Day

By **Meredith Phipps**

Meredith Phipps (she/her) is a current undergraduate student at Barnard College where she studies English and works as a Writing Fellow. She bounces back and forth between Manhattan and northern Indiana. She has current or upcoming work in GLITCHWORDS and Northern Otter Press. (twitter: @merzi1999).

Someone in a gold dress
carrying beautiful shoes
beside the water,
opting for splinters over
stilettos stuck in the boardwalk.

Lovers, friends, or strangers
kissing fast eyes closed,
stepping each other backwards and
almost falling into the Atlantic.
They laugh so hard that
they almost fall in again.

A little kid in a 3 piece suit
blowing their paper horn
next to a man leaning over the railing
while his friends sing Auld Lang Syne
but change the words to "past his prime."

The salt in the air shimmers,
just thick enough to reflect fireworks.
We're all covered in ocean brine and bright colors,
listening to each other make noise
for the first time all year.



