

The Blue Route

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Istishhadiyah

By: Stephanie Ciner

“Stay beside me, Asan,” the whisper came softly from behind her veil.

He took her hand, the gentle pressure urging her forward.

“Walk faster, Sadiya. I won’t leave you.”

Her husband’s stride lengthened and she hastened to keep up. Sweat beaded above her eyebrows but she had no desire to brush it away. Her *abaya*-clad body brushed hundreds of human forms in the marketplace. Underneath the fabric, her skin tingled with each contact.

I possess one focus, one mission.

Despite her intentions, the everyday activities of the market engulfed her senses. She inhaled the sweet scent of fruit-ripened air as it mingled with the aroma of fresh-baked bread and fragrant spices. On every side swirled the vendors’ bright fabrics, their gold and silver bangles sparkled to attract shoppers passing by. Women chattered back and forth in Arabic or Farsi, enveloping each listener in a whirlwind of conversation. When Sadiya’s sandaled feet brushed the ground she felt a part of the earth itself, interwoven tightly with all that surrounded her. Every sensation was deep and concentrated, sparking with intensity.

How had she forgotten the incredible beauty of her city? Or what it felt like to be a part of a place so full of brilliance, a world pulsating with language and movement?

Two boys, chasing each other through the dusty street, bumped up against her legs. A slight smile crossed her face at their antics. That surprised her. She hadn’t looked upon a child in a year without the familiar stab of grief.

Today, though, she felt strangely peaceful. Alive.

She knew Asan was nervous. Tension radiated from his body like heat from the sun-blistered stones. He desired this honor for himself, but not in the same way she did.

She too shared his fury at the foreign occupation, loathed the razor-wire fences and 12-foot concrete walls dividing up neighborhoods where they’d played as children. She felt his humiliation each time he was patted down and searched by an American soldier, forced to display his ID card at every checkpoint. Asan would easily give his life if it meant fewer soldiers in his country. Die for martyrdom, *istishhad*. But for now she is the better choice, a female martyr. *Istishhadiyah*. And just as they anticipated, the checkpoint guards searched her husband but allowed Sadiya to pass through as though she was nothing more than a shadow at his side.

Her hand-made vest weighed upon her shoulders and torso, but she’d practiced wearing it the last several days. The steel balls clustered beneath her breasts, and beside them rested a C-4 plastic explosive. The detonator was only inches from her hand.

None of those items felt foreign to her body anymore, no more heavy than what she carried since Jamail’s death. She’d been in the kitchen that last afternoon, baking his favorite date cookies so that they’d still be warm when he arrived home from school. Any minute, she expected his slim eight-year-old body to bound through the door, greeting her with a cheerful *salaam omi* and a kiss on the right hand. She began to worry when Jamail was late and wished that her husband or one of her brothers was there so that she could leave the house accompanied by a man. Instead, her older brother came

through the door with Jamail's body. The boy had been shot twice, in the mouth and in the chest. Stray bullets from a skirmish between troops and insurgents, her brother said.

Sadiya carried a worn photograph of Jamail in her *abaya*. She pulled it out and glanced down at his little-boy face. A serious smile, but his eyes were laughing. How absurd, she felt like laughing as well. She hadn't done such a thing in months. But the sky gleamed bright and beautiful, the sun smiled its warmth into her eyes. She would see him again, and soon.

Yes, her son died for nothing. But she would honor him, take herself to him.

Her husband thought only of revenge, but she imagined reunion.

Meanwhile, the war continued.

Violence is the only language they speak.

But now she has learned their language. She will repeat it back to them in elegant fluency, with her own body—her self—as the message.

Just a moment longer, my child. Don't be afraid. Today I will be with you in paradise.

Not With The Compass, Not With The Map

after Karen Volkman

By: Beth Curtiss

Often from baking-scented winds I'll remember
the taste of chocolate chewy caramels wrapped in squares
of your scissor-cut wax paper, edges twisted some chilly gray morning when only
you and your cocoa-colored cat were up.
He'd watch you hide them in paper-lined blue-green-red tin boxes to chill overnight.
We'd open our door to you in unexpected Marches and Junes and Octobers
and after coat-taking, couch-sitting, Corgi-greeting, we'd explode with cold chocolate,
tooth-sticking, tongue-flipping, eyes-fluttered-closed.

You and years gone, the new moon
will peek from between the stars into the kitchen:
hours of baker's chocolate, sugar, butter,
stirred with our burnt wood spoons, with your bent candy thermometer
until the moonlight in the Rocky Mountains learns the taste from the wind.

D is for Divorce

By: Nicole Dillie

Dinah fingered her Rosary. She allowed herself the little hypocrisy only while Mark was at work, the strange occasions where his shifts didn't line up with hers. Poor Mark, the irony always tempted the cynic in him, but he had bit his lips as he choked down the jokes through years of accidentally catching her at it. These days, Dinah had acquired a habit of simply sitting around and holding it. The daughter of a divorce, living with her college boyfriend at twenty-six, she was hardly the good Catholic girl her Gram had hoped for.

The relationship had plodded on for six years now. Even in that giddy final year of college there was something dull and ponderous in that entity of Mark and Dinah. Both business majors, neither had indulged in the boozy contact-collecting methods of their peers. Dinah had been a Kappa Rho at school, their secretary for three years. She attended the minimum two hours of party per week and wore her letters every Wednesday. On Monday nights, she would be in the meeting-room waiting with her laptop at the ready. In the Arial narrow font that she favored, Dinah placidly recorded sleazy gossip and power struggles without comment for almost her entire time in the sorority. Twice, she added her own comments to the minutes. One was an invitation to a pizza party in her room and the other was a reminder about the rudeness of being late to meetings.

Once Mark and Dinah graduated, Dinah went back to work for Gem, the beauty-supply store, she'd walked to work at since she was sixteen. She and Mark got an apartment five minutes and two right turns from her father's house, three minutes and a right from the house where her useless drunk of a mother rented a room, and set up house.

Four years slid by. Dinah was Fragrance Department Manager. She'd been modestly successful. Mark worked in marketing at Ralph's Sporting Goods. He hoped to buy himself into a partnership within the next five years. Ralph was a friendly old man with no children and a sad wish for small feet to race around his hardwood-floored Georgian house. After his initial shock when she was introduced, Ralph had invited the pair over every Thursday after closing. He'd warm up frozen hors' d'ouvres and insist that Dinah stop bringing him the tupperwares of frozen soup and pasta that appeared in his freezer at the end of the night. Mark and Dinah's joint bank account was incubating a small nest egg and Ralph seemed to always have an eye on her left hand. Dinah's father had been commenting on how flattering white looked on her for years. At first she'd thought it was a race thing, and then she realized it was a marriage thing instead. She didn't know which bugged her worse.

Mark had recently begun taking her out to dinner. Nowhere fancy, Mark's legs and elbows seemed to grow in those sorts of places, but respectable enough places still. He brought a bottle of wine home the week before. She'd never seen Mark drink anything other than beer and she'd gotten used to having only that in the house. He'd even failed to wear a baseball hat home from work on Tuesday. It was the first time in perhaps two years that she had clearly seen the crown of his head. It was slightly bald, shiny where the kinked fuzz faded into nothing.

That Sunday morning, Dinah drove the fifteen minutes past Gem for her weekly visit to Gram, the Gram as Mark called her, at eight am. In the lighted kitchen window, Dinah could see the two coffee-mugs and paper bag of rolls that were there every Sunday morning, had been since she was six and her father had dropped her off at eight in the morning to have breakfast in the cow-decorated kitchen before walking with Gramma and Granddad to Mass.

She let herself in.

“Good morning, granddaughter. Sit down and eat quick, we don’t want to be late for Mass.”

“Morning, Gram.” Dinah filled the two mugs with coffee and her fingers found the Sweet ’n’ Low next to Gram’s coffee cup. She did not need to look. Nothing in this house had moved for five years, not since Granddad’s heart attack. Gram always matched her kitchen now. Her black shape with a white smudge of a face melted into the cow-print if Dinah squinted her eyes.

“Have you gotten any of my perfume in yet?” Her hand shook as she handed Dinah a roll.

“No, Gram, they don’t make it anymore. The company went out of business.” Her voice softened, “Remember?”

Gram shook her head and stabbed the roll she’d been trying to butter. The knife wasn’t sharp, but Gram had grown frail and it would leave a bruise on her hand. Dinah snatched both knife and roll and forced her own, buttered roll into her grandmother’s hands.

“You do that for your baby not your Gramma,” Gram said sullenly.

Dinah raised an eyebrow and looked hard at her. She was looking at herself in a carnival mirror, if there was such a thing as one that added wrinkles: sandy hair in a ballet bun, startling green eyes, primly thin lips, a gold crucifix, a black sweater, sheath dress and pantyhose. They both looked like widows.

“Speaking of babies,” Gram continued in the sharp voice Dinah had inherited, “I’d like to live to see a great grand-baby. When are you and Mark ever going to a courthouse? I’ve long since given up on a church, with that Baptist family of his.”

“Speaking of courthouses, how’s Dana’s case going?”

“She’s not going to get as much as she should, but she’ll get enough from that drunk to move back home. I still don’t know why your sister married that man.”

“And how’s Daisy? Is she dating again?”

“You know your cousin, she always was fragile. She’s living alone in that big house. Hasn’t even been on a date and it’s been two years. No luck with men, though at least that pretty face found her one with money. Poor girl, she’ll never want for material things. Missy, you aren’t pulling me off my question,” she warbled before Dinah cut in.

“How’s Daria? Don? Debbie? How about Uncle Dylan? Uncle Donald? Your cousin Dave? How did Daddy feel, raising me and Dana with his mama as our mother?”

“Baby... why are you bringing all that hurt out? Let it rest.”

“Gramma, we’re cursed! The whole family and only you and Granddad stayed married. Three generations and just you and Granddad made it. It’s not even like everyone got it right the second time!”

Gram clutched Dinah's fist in her warm, dry hand. "That means it's high time for a happily-ever-after, Dinah. This family is sure owed one. You and Mark love each other; everything else you can work through as it comes."

"Gram, I want to have a baby. I do. I want to have a baby and I want to name it anything that doesn't start with a D. D is for divorce."

Gram's face lit then paled. "You can't live your life afraid. I got used to that boy, and I got used to you living with him, but, Dinah, think: a baby. You have a man that loves you. He's a good man. It's time to tie the knot. Grab your bit of wedded bliss. I wouldn't trade mine for anything."

Dinah fell silent. She hadn't known her Granddad well. And he and her Gramma had always been fighting. He'd been a devout man, considered the priesthood but married the girl next door. All that divorce was a personal tragedy for him, like it was for Dinah. It hurt him. He stopped going to Mass. He was sharp with the kids and the grandkids. He died two days after Daisy's divorce, the first of Dinah's generation. His heart wasn't in it anymore, she'd murmured to herself at the funeral lunch. She hadn't meant to say it in front of the whole family. Gram never quite forgave Dinah that comment. Daisy and the others never quite forgot it.

They munched their rolls and drank their coffee silently. When they were done, they got into Dinah's car and drove to Mass. It had been three years since Gram had been able to make the walk there and back. After the service, Dinah dropped Gram back off at her house and drove home to have lunch with Mark. He was just getting out of bed as she changed into a State sweatshirt and a pair of jeans.

He was foggy-eyed and disheveled as he stumbled over to her side of the bed. Wrapping his arms around her, he said, "I was thinking maybe tonight we could go out to dinner, have a different ending to our Sunday."

The back of Dinah's neck prickled. Mark never wanted to go out. It was always a concession. Over the years, Dinah had wondered whether there was such a thing as borderline agoraphobia. She felt certain that Mark had it. "Are you sure? You hate going out."

"Something different."

The only thing Mark hated more than crowds was a break in his routine. He had always reminded Dinah a little bit of a dog, a good thing since she was a dog person. He liked his routines and when she broke them he gave her a mournful look that reminded her of her old collie, Darla's, stare if she found her food bowl empty. It was one of only two smudges on her glowing happiness that they couldn't have a dog in their apartment. The other smudge was appearing now. Mark was not as happy as she was. She turned to him and tried to bury her face in his shirt. "If you're sure."

Mark was already shambling away, jamming his favorite blue baseball cap on his head. She laughed and followed him out to the kitchen where he would lay out two plates, two cups, two forks, a sliced tomato on Dinah's favorite red plate, and a bottle of ketchup while Dinah made four slices of toast and scrambled five eggs.

Mark's eyes shone and his forehead looked damp as they sat down and made their sandwiches.

"Are you feeling all right? Maybe you should go back to bed." Dinah reached out and ran her fingers up and down the inside of his elbow.

Mark shivered. "I'd rather be up and moving." He slid his hat back on his head and raked at his scalp through his clipped, thick hair. "I think I'll go take a shower."

As Dinah washed their dishes, she listened. Beneath the patter of the shower she could hear Mark's pacing footsteps and a low stream of mutters.

He emerged from the bathroom streaming wet, his dark body lithe and glistening as an otter. Dinah smiled and stepped toward him, pressed so close that his bare chest made her sweatshirt cling, warm and damp, to her breasts. She squeezed tight and drew up her feet as he lumbered to the bedroom with Dinah's arms still clinging to his neck.

Dinah lay just as Mark had left her in the bed. He vanished into the bathroom again. She spread her arms and legs, luxuriating in the last moment of freedom before the cold forced her retreat under the covers.

Mark dropped something in the bathroom with a ping, swore, and then grumbled and groaned. Apparently, he was having a hard time finding whatever he dropped. Dinah cocked her head and laughed a little as she listened. She could picture him scrabbling around on their mint-colored floor wearing nothing but boxers and a baseball cap.

He emerged from the bathroom missing the baseball cap. Something was clenched in a white-knuckled fist. The giggle that had been clambering up her throat fell stupidly to her stomach. Dinah rolled onto her belly and stared at him, her eyes glittering with ratty panic.

"I was going to wait for the restaurant but this moment seems righter somehow."

"Mark," she began. Through the haze and lurch of her stomach she caught herself wondering: is "righter" a word?

His words accelerated, rolling into each other, "Besides, I hate doing personal stuff in public, and you don't like big gushy gestures, and if I waited til dessert, I would be spending a lot of money for a meal I didn't taste, wouldn't I? And-"

"Mark," her voice was creaky and high.

He lowered his, "And I knew that you might need some... talking into it, even though it really is an obvious thing." He opened the fist. "Dinah, I've spent the last four years wanting you to marry me." A small flash erupted from his palm.

For a moment, Dinah's eyes coveted the ring, held it, embraced it, and slid from Mark's doggy waiting stare.

"Mark," she swallowed and held her breath for a moment before continuing, "I care about you too much. We can't get married. I couldn't live, knowing it's only a happy little wait until you leave."

He sighed. "Honey, I know you have your curse theory, but I think I've proved that I'm not going anywhere."

"It's not my curse and it's not a theory, Mark. My family just can't stay married, there's something wrong with us somehow. We just can't get it right."

"So, go to Vegas, marry a stranger and get a quickie divorce. If that's what it takes for you to marry me, I can deal with it. You can do it while we're engaged and no one would ever have to know."

"I may be scared shitless of it, but I respect marriage, Mark, and I don't think you can cheat fate like that, besides it's not like the second marriages end any happier."

“Fate! Dinah you aren’t your parents or your sister. You don’t have to be lonely, but Dinah, I want to get married and I can’t wait forever. You say yes and I’m not going anywhere.”

Dinah curled up on the bed and Mark sat down next to her. She curled herself so that she was wrapped around him. He was looking at her with his wounded eyes and the small glitter still danced in his palm.

“Dinah, I love you. I do. But, every day we live together like this is a hurt to my mom and I’m sure the Gram doesn’t like it, even if she’s quiet about it. Dinah, I know you’re scared, but this is about more than you or us. It’s hard enough for my mom that I didn’t want one of the girls I grew up with, that I went away to college and didn’t come back to make her the proudest mom on my whole block. You’re so different from her, that’s hard enough. You’re the Catholic to her Baptist, the math whiz to her reading.”

“I’m the white to her black, you’re getting at.”

“That too. It sure doesn’t help, Dinah, don’t kid yourself: we made life just a little rougher for both our families, being together. Your Grandad never imagined his family marrying into Italians, much less a black Baptist boy.”

Both sat silently for a moment. Dinah’s hand, lately resting on Mark’s thigh, withdrew. She tugged fretfully at her own hair.

“It’s hard enough being us as it is, Dinah. We don’t need to make it harder. I want to be able to have Ralph over to dinner. I want to invite people to OUR place without having to justify ourselves. Christ, Dinah, I want to have kids.”

“I do too,” she murmured, hiding her face against his warm leg.

“We have to be married to do those things. That little difference will change our world, Di, you have to trust me on this, and it won’t change us. I’ll be as wild about you as ever, only instead of talking about my hot girlfriend, I’ll be bragging about my sexy wife.”

She pressed her face harder against the firm thigh. A trickle down his leg let him know he was piercing through her defenses, whatever resolve she’d shored up against what she’d known he wanted. Deliberately he traced his fingers down her back, his coffee-colored fingers raising goose-bumps on her light skin. He bent as far as he could to get his lips near her ear. “Would you like to be my sexy wife?”

Dinah nodded manically, clutching at the leg her tears were wetting. Mark laughed, grabbed her shaking hand, and slowly pressed the ring onto her finger. He laughed and stroked her until she was still. As he fell silent, she raised her head to look at her altered hand.

“We still aren’t giving any child of mine a D-name,” she murmured.

Mark laughed. Dinah did not smile.

Forget About Anything

By: Shannon Fandler

That year when I was eighteen, I guess, was the most fucked up my mental health has ever been. There were several reasons, the most damning of which was loneliness. There was also Aristos, who probably never knew how much he killed me. I was a first-year college student, and he worked at a little family-run cafe a couple blocks away from my campus. Supposedly he prepared food and baked pastries, but I'd always see him with his sleeves rolled up, leaning on the counter and talking to customers who, their mouths full of sandwich or coffee, were helpless not to listen to his diatribe. It was nearly constant, his ranting about life in general and particularly about how wasted his talents were in the kitchen of his uncle's little restaurant, he with his good mind and college degree, but nobody disliked hearing it. The first day he gave me an earful, I chuckled and was a little flattered and walked away not thinking much about him. But it got to where I could see, with my eyes shut, the scarring on the left half of his face—my tongue had traced it into the insides of my cheeks so many times.

"You're such a baby," his aunt would yell to him, rushing in and out of the kitchen with some new burn on her hand or dirty trays stuffed under her arm. He was. He had a wide infant gape that he could contort in any way he wanted. When he was upset, his lips were so soft and grimaced that his whole mouth seemed in danger of sliding sideways off his face. But he could also snarl his upper lip tenderly, popping a couple of wet teeth. He was a young forty, then. His aunt loved him and his uncle loved him. They would pay for anything, for him. They didn't want him to work in their restaurant. When the aunt was not slicing pitas or flash-cooking meat on the giant, deadly skillet in the back, she would slap his rear end with her dish towel or hang on his arm and tell him how wasted he was, standing around wiping the counter all day. His uncle would sometimes hang around shyly smoking and saying things to make Aristos talk. Once, he said, "You going to have children anytime soon? You're not so young."

Aristos's hands flew up in the air. They were covered lightly in black hair. "Crazy," he said. "What do I need children for? Crazy. In a world filled with pedophiles and predators and nymphomaniacs and whores and Santa Claus and cartoons having sex, why on earth would I need *children*? Why would I bring *children* into it?" I laughed, and he flashed a gentle look at me. "You're a child, what are you, fifteen, sixteen? Why are you laughing? What do you know?" His voice was caressing. I had a second tea that day, just to linger, and while he made it and watched me drink it, he told me everything he knew about bad parenting. "Mothers dressing their little girls like whores. Do you know how you can tell a good mother? Her daughter looks like shit. Socks up to here—" He gestured vaguely at his knees. "Sweatpants, a sweatshirt, all covered up."

"That's the kind of mother I had," I said, and he looked at me very softly.

"Good," he said. "How old are you? Eighteen? Nineteen?"

He was forty, and his wife was thirty-five. She was going to school to be a doctor, and he never talked about her. Sometimes he would preface statements with, "This person that I know..." These statements were loving and vague. If we were talking about

a restaurant: “This person I know tried it the other day, and they liked it.” I guessed he didn’t want anyone to know he was married, so he could flirt with the young professional women who came in on their lunch hours. I only knew, because someone or another had told me, that the aunt and uncle were putting the wife through medical school. She wasn’t Greek like Aristos, but a plain-looking light-skinned woman, like me. I don’t know why they did this, for his wife, except that Aristos had a round, pleasant face and liked people and could make pizza. And he was their nephew and so they loved him and gave their money freely to him. Aristos had told me once, half-joking, that the uncle had gotten him a prostitute for his eighteenth birthday, a big, blonde, soft-bodied girl who was about thirty and beautiful. All the men in the family had gone to the whorehouse. This was in Greece, where love was different, he had said, and I told him I was not offended. “But do you really like that kind of girl?” I asked.

“Girls in *string bikinis*,” he proclaimed, pronouncing “bikinis” with a kind of mocking precision. “Those are my favorite kind of girls, but I’ll take the kind in wool skirts and argyle sweaters too,” he added, because that was what I was wearing as I sat curled up in a booth eating chevre and honey and listening to him talk. I wanted, then, to take his face between my hands, to touch his thin black hair and the brown scalp beneath it. But he was always dancing and beaming a couple of steps away, dangling like a clown on strings.

When I went home for winter break that December, I thought I would be overjoyed to leave school. My roommate was nothing like me and, in fact, was not returning for the spring semester. Winter had seemed to make our room perpetually dark—we were in the back of a half-empty housing overflow center, full of a lot of drafty hallways and frightening bathrooms. Often, I found condoms stuck to the ceilings and vomit in the corners of the elevators.

But at home, my parents were at work all day and I never bothered to clean up after myself. Christmas was a bright spot lasting a couple of days, and then the house was full of shadows again. My old friends were excited but detached. We spent a couple of long evenings drinking and telling all our new stories. It seemed like an endless amount of grasping hands and trying to make each other understand. The people we had met! The things we had done and seen and learned! But each time we fell apart after the crest of a frustrating night, we felt as if we’d been unsuccessful in communicating our adventures, joys, and sorrows. Aristos, the warmth in his eyes and how it was always hot in the café as I sat at my table in the back with my book and my pita and hummus sandwich. How Aristos would sometimes sit on some adjacent table and talk to me for a few minutes. “I shouldn’t be here,” he would say. “I am an investment banker. Top of my graduating class, and top of my field for a little while.” Then he would laugh and thrust a dishcloth down into a glass until it squeaked. “This is why you should study hard,” he said once. “So you can polish the glasses that come out of the dishwasher so that some woman with a husband that cheats on her with his secretary can come in here and get lipstick prints on the rim of it while she tells her lady friends about finding the secretary’s underwear in the husband’s briefcase or the secretary’s lipstick on the husband’s briefs. The state of the glassware, you see, is very important, obviously, in this case.”

“Aristos, you’re insane,” I would say. But I couldn’t tell this to my old friends. What was urgent to me was confusing to them, and I spent the entire winter pining.

When I saw him again at the start of the new semester, I was eating a gyro at an awkward corner table. I had been anxious since I'd walked in. There was a busier crowd in the restaurant, because my classes had changed and I was taking my lunches later. His aunt had barely said hello.

And when he walked in, arguing vehemently with a younger man, I felt like a little girl, far removed from his adulthood and masculinity. Aristos was square-shouldered in a wool pea coat, and had an ugly expression to his mouth. I blushed furiously. I couldn't eat my sandwich. And when he had finished his argument to his satisfaction, and when he had greeted half the restaurant effusively, and when he had seen me and showered me with his own brand of over-the-top welcoming and flattery, he suddenly noticed the blush and pulled up sharply and asked,

“What's wrong? Had too much or not enough Christmas?”

“Nothing, a fever,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. “Well, if you're contagious, get the hell out.” And he grinned and slid his hand a little on the table while I stared at his knuckles and clean nails. I had been wondering lately what they would feel like on my scalp or on the soft mound of my stomach.

“This is my cousin Nick,” he remembered to add, gesturing carelessly. And I whispered hello to the thin, dark-skinned man who had come into the restaurant with Aristos. He became a fixture there, quickly. Often, they would pull out a chess board and Nick's slim fingers would set up all the pieces quietly while Aristos joked and bullshitted with friends. It might be an hour, sometimes, before Aristos would actually sit down to play. But then he wouldn't speak a word, in his concentration. His brow would darken and his fingers would fist. I would stare at his gold wedding ring resting among the dark hairs, and at the way he seemed volatile, almost furious. I wouldn't have touched him on the shoulder to get his attention if the restaurant had been on fire—I would have thought he might strike me and send me reeling across the floor. It was in contexts like this that I felt Aristos was different with me than he was with others, that he played with me the role of the fun uncle or jovial older brother and that with other men he was graver, modulated, softer-spoken but more imposing. One afternoon I saw him and his cousin fixing a car, Aristos lying on the ground without a coat, his arms and chest straining against the fabric of his shirt as he wrestled in the underbelly of the vehicle. And again I felt locked out of his world, as if I were not worthy even to say hello. At these times I wanted almost to be a man, so that I could be his friend. I imagined hugging him after the car engine had turned over successfully, I imagined touching his back and saying, “Shit, man, we did it, let's get a drink.” I wanted to sit in a bar with him and hear his stories and inhale his beery sweat and breath, a strange but ultimate kind of intimacy.

When the spring term threatened to end, with finals only a week away, I felt as though I couldn't leave. I begged my parents to allow me to enroll in the first abbreviated summer semester. It was just two classes, British Literature and Art History, for five short weeks. So after finals, I returned home only to move back to school a couple of weeks later, with my summer clothes in two suitcases. And when I returned, Aristos was on an extended vacation to Mexico. His aunt, bending over the cash register drawer to count out my change for an iced tea, told me she didn't know when he would be back.

“On account of the women and the mojitos and everything being cheap,” she said, rolling her eyes. His wife was, apparently, in an internship and not accompanying him. And for the rest of the five weeks, I felt like my chest wall had collapsed, crushing my throat and causing me to breathe shallowly. I muddled through the two classes as best I could, and spent my extra time walking idly around the mostly-empty campus, vowing never again to experience summer in a college town. It was like losing a god.

And the next year, family and friends convinced me to transfer back home. I slept in my own room and went to classes and worked part time at a video store. I graduated punctually and had a few different jobs and a boyfriend who, during one of many conversations about where we’d been and whom we’d known before we met each other, laughed about Aristos and said,

“He was probably in the Greek mob. That’s where he got his money.” And I had another boyfriend after that one who had actually been to the restaurant, and vaguely knew the aunt and uncle, such were the narrow boundaries of my world. Everyone I knew, knew each other. And we all thought the same things and had been to the same places, which was why I no longer knew Aristos. Because he had been everywhere and knew people I couldn’t imagine. Though now, I guess, he’s lost the rest of his hair and is bitterer, maybe more complaining.

But what I still hold on to, years later, was a day in February, a freezing day, when he had followed me out of the restaurant and a little ways up the street. Our breath was visible in the air. There weren’t many people around because it was so cold, and he grabbed my throat and kissed me roughly against the wall of the consignment shop next to a window display of mannequins in shabby coats. My hair caught in the bricks and jerked out of my scalp. When he strode on wordlessly up the street, there was a little kick to his step, but when he turned the corner, I saw that his profile was businesslike. He wasn’t even smiling.

After that, he started wearing glasses. One day, he brought a six hundred dollar bottle of vodka into the restaurant, explaining to everyone who was there about the little Russian town it had come from, and the purity of the taste. “Like snow off a mountain,” he said.

“Get the hell out of my restaurant,” the uncle said. “You don’t bring a six hundred dollar bottle of vodka here, where there are working people. A fucking waste of money!”

“You know what’s wasted?” cried Aristos, slamming the bottle down on my table and flinging himself into the booth across from me. “I am. Fucking wasted.” He wasn’t rally mad. And, in the moments before his uncle came over to forgive him, he put his head close to mine and told me how he would take me, some day, to the little Russian village where, holed up in a hotel he knew of there, we would eat the very best liquor-filled chocolates in the world, so good they would make you forget about anything.

we drift

By: Melissa Goodrich

we drift

because
the new moon towed
the little boat out too far to kick
our way home. The sea unlaced its shoes.
And we began to waft away, barefoot and

briny,
the little licking of white
in the seagull, white in the cloud. And the

windmill
of the sea kept rowing, the wind
cashmere with a rip in it. The sledge of blue
on blue, the ruined moon in the mirror. And a

hand
blooming in water, towing behind it
a small ribbon of fish. Maybe we'll end up in

Tahiti,
the backs of our necks poultry raw,
the linen waves seeming to
clot where the boat tips.

Prussian
blue our bodies, Persian and rucked at the center,
the sun coming up in a pucker,
the way we lay length-wise together like piano keys.

Stuff in the Corners of My Mouth

By: William Hurst

i don't want to live
through my children,
squatting down again
beside their hearts
(elbowing organs
out of the way)
so i could give
a good stretchpullandturn
like i was
two

i don't want to die
together with someone,
like we were tourists
on a cruise-liner,
lying back in the splotched
sun-swept sky,
with two sips
of raisin wine, wrinkled,
to tide us over
till the rest stop

no, i want to die
alone, and under my
beating heartarmsandlegs
like i was fighting
the last battle at Thermopylae,
blood and bone mashed
together with a spear,
your hand, folded into
mine; and i'd open,
letting go

“let me do it on my own”

Times You Were

By: Halle Kostansek

The time you were standing there all along
behind your little son on the stairs
as he introduced himself to me, and I blushed
and you beamed at his poised and confident air;

The time your cat had kittens
and your accent loved “the litt-le *grey* one”,
whom you cradled in white hands and promised
to me when she was old enough to wean;

The time the children bedecked you
in paper and sent you out in their parade;
The time your hair was short and you wore
a flapper’s dress and beads Halloween Day;

The time you smiled and sang an extra bar
from far back in the church’s silent nave,
where you’d written me a mother’s love letter
and forty lines on living acts of grace;

The time they laid hands on you, all the women,
and with love embraced you, but the cancer
stayed; the time the needle hurt you; all
the times it was impractical to pray;

The first time we saw you without
your hair—your daughter’s wedding,
a windswept day,
with all the little children there;

The time your son was grown
and handsome, and retreated to the silence
of the darkest room, where the dim world
milled around him, and he bowed his head
and sighed and wept alone;

The time you lay and read your psalms
beneath the big oak tree, the light
on your pale blue skirt just like
the sun on a glimmering postcard-perfect sea;

The time you were swathed in waves of white
linen, your pale hands consumed to bone,
your mouth a silent arc
on the face of a captive ghost;

The time you rose panting, your sighs a flicker
in your labor-weary throat,
and your cheek lay on his temple—
the last time you held your firstborn close.

Prayer for Roethke
My Professor, who loved me

By: Mallory Leonard

I remember the books along the wall, keepers of our shared passion;
And the way his eyes would gaze on me, soft and delighted;
And the way his words swirled as wind as they carried me into the magic of our poetry,
And when he smiled at my dancing language, I was free.
His office was a haven for my scattered thoughts,
A forest, where I explored a realm of knowledge and affection.
He laughed in the light,
Strumming the branches in a melody that embraced me as he did,
And a home was built in the trees marked by pen and tongues.

Sad I was, too deep to be seen, when he held my hand;
He stilled the clear water from my eye,
Surrounding me in that water,
Cooling my cheek with his moss.

My teacher, I could not stay forever.
But you planted me in your roots, and up I grow like a vine.
Find solace in my winding green as it courses the hard bark.
Pray you, feel the ground still wet.

If only I could see your face with my fingers,
Oh lustrous willow, sycamore friend.
I hear your words and mine as they whip our souls.
We, our rights have no matter
In the love of nature.

Contributors

Stephanie Ciner is a junior at Eastern University studying creative writing and anthropology. She likes camping, traveling, reading, playing guitar, knitting, and cooking delicious vegan food.

Beth Curtiss is a senior music major and education/creative writing double minor at Bryn Mawr College. After she graduates she hopes to pursue a master's degree in music education and become a secondary school music teacher. Her primary instrument is voice and she usually writes poetry and fiction, but she also enjoys dabbling in piano and creative nonfiction. She primarily grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, and has been both a writer and a singer for as long as she can remember. Aside from writing and music, her interests include spending time with her family and pets, travel, reading, learning about world religions, technology education, and knitting.

Nicole Dillie is a senior English major at Ursinus College with minors in Creative Writing and Gender and Women's Studies. Originally from Levittown, PA, she has to admit she hasn't moved around all that much. Currently applying to grad school, she is realizing that, yes, she does love writing enough to fill out all those forms. She is very grateful to her family, to Brian, and to her sorority sisters for putting up with her writing itch.

Shannon Fandler is a junior English major at Cabrini College in Radnor, PA.

Melissa Goodrich is a junior creative writing student at Susquehanna University and Co-Editor of the national undergraduate literary journal SU Review. She has a love for photography, the Pantoum, and finds all 101 2-letter legal Scrabble words fascinating (AA is Hawaiian lava, JO is sweetheart).

William Hurst is an undergraduate at Lee University, Cleveland, TN. He is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies. His poetry emphasizes the place of the natural in unnatural circumstances, and is influenced primarily by the work of T.S. Eliot, E.E. Cummings, and Charles Bukowski. He plans to eventually finish an M.A. and a Ph.D in Medieval History and teach at the collegiate level.

Halle Wurst Kostansek is a Senior at Mercyhurst College in Erie, Pennsylvania with a dual major in Russian Studies and English. When not indulging her fascination with the "play" of language, she can be found pinned beneath a population of precocious felines from which her husband must carefully, gingerly unearth her.

Mallory Leonard grew up in Maryville, TN, surrounded by a rambunctious, loving family. Her love for literature blossomed at an early age, when she taught herself to read and began to pretend she was Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. During her high school years, Mallory found herself in the midst of some of the most delightfully eccentric beings she had ever encountered, which are belovedly known as English teachers. In their classes, Mallory was captivated by the beauty of language and the enthusiasm her teachers demonstrated in their work. To this day, Mallory believes it was her teachers' support mixed with her own literary inclinations that got her where she is today. Currently Mallory resides in Cleveland, TN, where she ardently devotes herself to gratifying her insatiable hunger for literature, studying under Lee University's quirky and brilliant English professors. Mallory serves on the Editorial Staff of the *Lee Review*, her university's literary journal. She is a member of four national honor societies, including Sigma Tau Delta and Alpha Chi. Also, she has been published in the *Enlightenment*, and she has presented at the Sigma Tau Delta conference at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga.