

CHAUTAUQUA

20.2



chance
encounters

CHAUTAUQUA

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA WILMINGTON,

DEPARTMENT OF CREATIVE WRITING

Philip Gerard
April 7, 1955–November 7, 2022

“Every conversation is a story, and every story is an adventure, and every adventure takes me out of my small life into a larger one, and I love that. I love that it catapults me out into the world, outdoors, in all seasons, to places I have only dreamed of going—or maybe never dreamed of going—places where they speak in different accents, different languages even. Where the air smells different, and the skyline is unfamiliar, and the landscape is a brand new map.”

—Philip Gerard, “On Fire for Research”

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Chautauqua is published each June by Chautauqua Institution, a not-for-profit corporation under section 501(c)(3) of the United States Revenue Code.

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Guardian, Samantha Wall, Ink on Dura-Lar, 84" x 40"

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March 2023, Gillian Pribicko

<https://unsplash.com/photos/M6-6v-vZhHc>, September 19, 2020, Roberto Delfanti

Stray Cups, Linda Vasconi

ISSN 1549-7917

Produced by The Publishing Laboratory
Department of Creative Writing
University of North Carolina Wilmington
601 South College Road
Wilmington, NC 28403-5938
www.uncw.edu/writers

THE CHAUTAUQUA WAY

For more than a hundred and thirty years, Chautauqua Institution has served as a stage and a classroom for leading figures of the times, including Ulysses S. Grant, Booker T. Washington, Alexander Graham Bell, Susan B. Anthony, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Chautauqua way is a habit of living in a state of continual enrichment: learning on vacation, finding intellectual stimulation in leisure, imbuing all activities with a passion for art. Learning and art should not be confined to separate spaces or designated hours, nor spirituality expressed only within sacred walls or books of prayers.

Chautauqua is a literary manifestation of the values and aesthetics of Chautauqua Institution. Each volume is a portable Chautauqua season between covers. The sections loosely reflect the categories of experience addressed during those nine summer weeks, playing one writer's vision off another's in the spirit of oblique, artful dialogue.

The Chautauqua way is also reflected in how we make this book. Each year, in partnership with the Chautauqua Literary Arts, graduate and undergraduate students in the Department of Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington work as members of the editorial team, guided by professional editors and an advisory board. They read and discuss submissions, fact check and edit, search for art, and participate in the artistic process of building a book, to be released at the start of the summer season.

In our editorial sessions, we read aloud excerpts or even entire works, listening for the music of great writing, searching for the piece that eloquently addresses the issue's theme through some facet of the life in art, spirit, or play, or a life lesson. Writers, ages twelve through eighteen, enjoy that same respectful attention through Young Voices.

So settle back on a couch or a comfortable patch of grass and spread this book open like a tent. Immerse yourself in the world of ideas, imagination, and language that lives between its covers. For as many minutes or hours as you like, you are part of the Chautauqua community.

Jill Gerard, Editor
Chautauqua Institution

ON THE COVER

Guardian, Samantha Wall
Ink on Dura-Lar, 84" x 40"

The art on this cover, *Guardian*, was provided by the artist, Samantha Wall. It appeared, alongside other drawings by Wall, in the 2022 Chautauqua Visual Arts exhibition “All that Glitters.” Her work in this exhibition is described as “slippery yet impeccably rendered,” and a reminder “of the complicated importance of human connection.”

Wall’s golden drawings in this exhibition are representative of figures shaped by more than one culture. The metallic quality in each piece is a nod to the Korean celebration of Dol, or a child’s first birthday, during which gold rings are given as gifts to the family in hopes of funding the child’s future endeavors. For Wall, who was born in Korea but has lived most of her life in the United States, the tradition “became a point of entry to explore family history and cultural identity.”

In thinking about the cover art for *Chance Encounters*, I kept coming back to the importance not only of instances of human connection that shape our lives, but also our encounters with culture, art, tradition and the divine. I was interested in how those experiences allowed for a deepening of connection and understanding between people as well as with oneself. Wall’s drawings in this exhibition are a shining example of how encounters with art, family, and culture can shape a person and their creative practice—the way they show up in the world.

To see more of Wall’s work go to samanthawall.com or find her on instagram as [@samanthawall](https://www.instagram.com/samanthawall).

Chautauqua thanks Chautauqua Institution and the
Department of Education for their support of the journal.



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Janice E. Rodríguez

“I hear it’s flat where you come from,” the apartment manager says, tapping my driver’s license.

“So flat,” I reply, “that you can watch your dog run away for two weeks straight.”

As flat, I keep to myself, as the lines on vital signs monitor when they don’t have anything to keep track of anymore.

Like most folks around here, she’s got buckets of friendly chatter. “They say the sky’s big out there.”

I was brought up polite, so I don’t tell her Montana’s the state that nabbed that slogan. And I don’t tell her how big the bowl of the sky can be—so big it curves down to swallow up the roads on which the man you wanted to grow old with will never drive again.

She swings open the door of the furnished studio. “What brings you east?”

The studio’s balcony overlooks a hill alight with fall leaves. “I didn’t start out going east. I almost made it to the Rockies, but Beulah didn’t like the steep grades.”

She asks, “Who’s Beulah?”

“My hatchback.”

There had been no point in staying after the funeral, so I filled the tank and put mile after mile behind me, driving west as far as the foothills, where Beulah groaned and whined and threatened to overheat. I changed course; it didn’t matter where I went, so long as it was away from where I was before.

Navigating on the east side of the Rockies was simple. I kept the jagged line of peaks on my right shoulder. I stopped somewhere in Colorado to buy a suitcase; I was tired by then of keeping my things in a plastic bag. But Colorado wasn’t far enough away, and I kept driving.

I’d glance in the rearview mirror to check the progress of the gray hairs—so few that I had a name for every one of them—that tangled with the dirty blonde ones. There were new and faint fans of lines at the corners of my eyes.

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Fraser's eyes were the lightest of blue, the color of a June sky at nine in the morning. One day as he stared at the bedroom ceiling, I realized that, side-on, his pupils were as clear as glass.

"I can see through your eyes!" I exclaimed.

He rolled over and drew me close. "That's what it's all about, seeing the world through each other's eyes, don't you know?"

It was so perfectly poetic that I figured it's what I must have meant all along.

The sound of ruffling papers calls me back to the present. The apartment manager flips through documents and says, "We're almost ready to sign, but you didn't fill in the emergency contact."

Fraser was my emergency contact, but I wasn't his. He never replaced Sierra's name after he moved out of their house, so she was the one the police called that day.

"Let's go to Seattle or somewhere out there," I had suggested the week before at Larson's Fin Dining.

He pushed couple of fries through the gravy on his plate.

"Nothing's keeping us here," I reasoned. "Everyplace needs bartenders."

"You think?" he asked.

"And hotels always need someone for evening shift."

We, the only night people in town, were made for each other—we loved pancake-thin pillows and the dark edges of overbaked cookies but dreaded perky morning people, mayonnaise, and the tuna hotdish that Larson's Fin Dining prided itself on. We were orphans, too. Fraser was orphaned by misfortune. I was not an orphan in the legal sense, but it was less complicated to say I was than to explain how much sunnier life was out from under my folks' corrosive and endless disappointment. Away from them, I became almost as easygoing as Fraser.

Sierra was nothing close to easygoing, and only the diminished romantic opportunities of a pocket-sized county seat in half-deserted farm country could explain why Fraser ever married her.

There were a couple of million reasons why they separated, but only two reasons they never divorced.

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The first he said out loud, “It’d cost me too much in alimony.”

He never spoke the second, but it was understood by all: It was his nature, one that seemed at odds with his imposing ruggedness. He coaxed ladybugs off the inside of his window screen and onto his fingertip to release them outdoors; he absorbed the deep hurt and brittle anger of drunken bar patrons with compassion, and he avoided confrontation at all costs.

I MET SIERRA before I met Fraser on my third night working the reception desk of the Wanderon Inn. Laughter and off-key singing of “Happy Birthday” poured out of the everything room—the day manager, Ernesto, had christened the room; it did stints as a trade show center, meeting venue, banquet hall, and just once, in 1999, a ballroom. The cash bar at the birthday party was enough to put the motel into the black for the month, and the music had already been turned up twice.

I was checking in our only guests, an older couple who had pulled off the interstate, when Sierra came to the reception desk, arms flailing.

She inserted herself between the man and woman, rested her hand on his arm, and said, “This is important.”

Turning to me, she demanded, “Call your events manager. Right now.”

Once or twice a month, when Ernesto managed to book something into the everything room, he asked Darlene to stop by and take care of the details. It was gig work she did for a few extra dollars, not for the glory of being an events manager.

Sierra spoke as if I were hard of hearing. “I requested pink napkins. The napkins on our table are salmon.”

I put on the bland, corporate smile recommended in the training video and gave the bland, corporate response, “Thank you for letting me know about that.”

I tapped the keyboard of my computer, found keys for a room as far from the birthday party as possible, and handed them to my guests.

“Room 134. Would you like help with your suitcase?”

“No, miss, but thank you kindly.”

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The cheekbones of Sierra's heart-shaped face were splotchy with anger. "My mother's dress is pink. So is the cake."

"I see."

"This is completely inappropriate," Sierra said. "She doesn't have to put up with this for her sixtieth birthday party. What are you going to do about this?"

"Our events manager isn't here right now," I said, sliding my glance to the clock, which read ten-thirty. Darlene had been gone for hours, had no doubt cooked supper for her grandkids and put them and herself to bed.

"Do you have any idea how much money we're spending here tonight?"

The offending napkins had been on the table, glorying in their ability to clash with pink, since the beginning of the party. It would have been easy to swap them if Sierra had spoken up then. One corner of her mouth hinted at an ugly smile.

I said, "I'll be glad to share your complaint with the day manager."

A man emerged from the everything room, his dark auburn hair damp with sweat. He tugged at Sierra's elbow and said, "Come back to the party."

"Fraser, the napkins..."

"Don't matter," he chided her gently. "Your mom doesn't care."

"She's not paying for this party. Dad and I are."

"Your dad doesn't care, either. Come back and have a beer."

"I don't want a beer, Fraser!"

"Your mom says she's going to cut the cake in five minutes."

"Without me?" Sierra shrieked. She turned a fierce eye on me. "You need to give me your name, and you can be sure that I'll be calling your manger about this travesty."

"Rose White," I replied.

He pulled her away, and I nodded my thanks to him.

He winked at me and said, "Nice name! I've got a plant name, too."

Sierra made one more trip to the reception desk, right before leaving, to let me know that she'd known Ernesto her whole life. For a few dark

moments, I imagined it would have been better if I had never left home. But there wasn't even a main street there, not a single traffic light, no motel or anywhere else to work if you didn't want to farm or commute eighty miles to a fast-food joint. In the quiet hours of the night, I rehearsed some excuses and calculated how long I could stretch my savings until I found another place. I dragged myself out of bed early the next day to report the napkin fiasco to Ernesto before Sierra did.

"She texted me last night," Ernesto said.

I twisted the damp tissue in my hand.

"She texted Ben Larson, too, about the placement of 'happy birthday' on the cake. Ignore her." He pushed back his office chair, turning philosophical. "Rose, life is all about when we peak, and Sierra peaked at the wrong time. Some people peak in high school and spend the rest of their lives trying to recapture the glory of the homecoming court or the basketball team. The failure-to-launch people never even get started. What's best is to always be a month away from peaking, always nudging those goalposts and striving for them."

I wasn't about to tell Ernesto that his advice sounded like a recipe for an ulcer. I asked, "Sierra peaked in high school?"

"Worse," he said. "Junior high. She's a clique queen and always needs to feel like she won. Ben's going to offer her a free cake; I'll refund twenty-five symbolic dollars. Then she can look for the next thing to have a cow about."

My grandfather had advice about the clique queen in my school. He told me to kick her in the shins, just once, but good and hard.

LARSON'S FIN DINING, where Fraser tended bar, was the only place in town that was open late, so that's where I spent my Tuesday nights off. The barstools were newly upholstered, and the beer selection was decent.

My first time there, Fraser greeted me with a draft IPA, on him, he said, to make up for Sierra's napkin meltdown.

I thanked him and said, "I looked up your plant name. Fraser means 'strawberry', right?"

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“Two points for you.”

I ordered cheesy potato skins. When he served them, he told me that a man at the end of the bar had paid for them. The man tugged briefly at the brim of his gimme cap, nodding.

Fraser said, “That’s Bob Wagner, Sierra’s dad.”

It seemed that lots of people in this town went out of their way to compensate for Sierra.

I settled in to watch the game with the other bar patrons. Their cheers changed to angry shouts and then to mutters. After a bad call and a worse fumble, some of the old-timers paid their tabs and left. At the final score, those who remained swallowed the last of their beer and their pride and trickled out of the bar. Fraser turned the television off and the music down.

“Why does everyone in town call this place ‘Larson’s Fin Dining?’” I asked. “Does the restaurant serve fish?”

Fraser’s warm chuckle rippled as he wiped the worn oak bar. “Nah. There used to be neon sign that read ‘Larson’s Fine Dining’, but the E busted.”

Three weeks in, the other Tuesday-nighters already treated me like a regular, and Fraser had my IPA cold and potato skins hot when I arrived. I was always the last to leave, and conversation improved considerably once everyone else cleared out. He and I talked about everything. We talked about nothing.

“One more for the road?” Fraser asked one frigid February night.

“Nope. I’ve got to get going, and you should get home to your wife.” I said it to remind myself that he was married.

Which he was, I learned, and he wasn’t. They had separated three years before. I did the math as he told his story; they’d spent more time apart than married.

For our first date, we strolled through the town park on a late March afternoon. The ice that remained in the middle of the lake was pocked and mottled. We tossed pebbles at the wind-driven ripples near the shore.

Fraser turned up the collar on my coat and snugged my hat down over my ears. “Don’t get cold.”

We started walking to warm up, avoiding slush puddles.

“Well, would you look at this?” he asked, stopping at trashcan. He plucked a stuffed elephant from the trash. “Now who’d leave this behind?”

“Gross, Fraser. Leave it alone.”

“Look, he’s got a big hole in his leg.”

He took it home, tenderhearted as he was, and stitched up the tear. He stood the elephant up. It leaned. He tilted his head and asked, “What’s your name, little guy?”

“You’re kidding. You’re naming it?” I asked.

“Says the woman who named her car.” He smiled and cleared a space for the elephant on the coffee table. “He looks like a Steve.”

I moved into Fraser and Steve’s apartment before the corn was knee high. It was a one bedroom with hand-me-down furniture, a view out the kitchen window as long as a summer day, perfectly flat and thin pillows on a new queen mattress, and Fraser’s two neat lists on the refrigerator—stuff to buy and things that needed doing.

One of those things was Sierra’s shutters. Three years separated, yet she had the nerve to ask him to repaint the shutters because they were too orange for her new crimson car.

“Fraser, why in heck are you fixing her house?”

“It’s too pretty a place to let it fall apart,” he answered. “She doesn’t know how to keep it nice like her grandparents did.”

“You’re going to paint the shutters?”

“Oh, yah. But I’ll need to buy new shutter dogs and hinges first,” he answered.

I said, “I think what would fix things would be if you told her where to get off.”

He cupped my face in his palms and kissed me. “That’s a hornets’ nest no one wants to poke. Besides,” he added, twisting a hank of my hair into a soft rope and brushing the tip of my nose with it, “I like her folks.”

“You and everyone else.”

“Come to the lumber yard with me?” he asked.

I passed, preferring an early start at work. I picked up coffee and

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cupcakes at the truck stop—decaf for Ernesto because he was finishing his shift, regular for me because I was starting mine.

He had an opinion on Sierra's request that Fraser be the one to paint her shutters: "Now that you moved in with him, she needs to assert her ownership."

"What? Like a dog peeing on a lamppost? Ernesto, that's immature."

"She *is* immature."

I offered him a cupcake. "And this whole town of too-too nice people never thought it part of their civic duty to help her grow up a little?"

Ernesto pinched the paper away from his cupcake. "It's not our business. You know, her parents tried a long time until they had her. My wife and me, we always said no to our kids, and they say no to our grandkids. But Bob and Bobbie Wagner were so happy to finally have a baby that they couldn't bring themselves to set boundaries."

"Somebody might want to do that for her one day," I said.

FRASER AND I always locked our doors. Sierra didn't, and it was one of the things that she and Fraser fought about when they were together. He'd lock the house; she'd unlock it; he'd lock it again; she'd tell him that her grandparents never locked the house back when they lived in it.

Most people around town didn't bother to lock their doors, either. Some of the old-timers were, in fact, not altogether sure where their house keys were. That's the world they grew up in, or at least that's how they remembered it—a smaller, friendlier world that existed before the interstate, one of trust and neighborliness. The crops went in; the crops were harvested. The four seasons rolled around and around.

"Not Southern California," Fraser said one day. He had just emerged from the shower after spending the afternoon taking the shutters off Sierra's house.

I gave him a puzzled look.

"When we go west," he said. "Let's not go to Southern California. I'd miss the change of seasons if we lived there."

I hugged him so hard that he mimed gasping for air.

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“Washington or Oregon, maybe?” I asked. “I’ve never seen the ocean. When should we go?”

“I ought to finish that porch first.”

I groaned.

The next day was the most miserable one of the summer, the kind when everyone said that it wasn’t the heat that got you, it was the humidity. Either one on its own was enough to lay you out that day. Fraser drove to Sierra’s to make some progress on the shutters before going to work.

I made him lemonade, the real thing, with lemons that I trekked to Walmart for. Soon enough, I learned why my grandmother preferred the powdered stuff that came in canisters. First off, you need a mountain of lemons to make more than a glassful. Second, if you drop them, they roll a lot farther than you’d think. And if you cut yourself, fishing the seeds out of the lemon juice sets your fingers on fire.

But I triumphed. I poured the lemonade over ice into an empty apple juice bottle and drove it to Sierra’s. I parked Beulah in the shade. Shutters in three different shades of green leaned against the house, quart-sized cans of paint next to them. Fraser was frowning at the shutter he’d rested on a sawhorse and a fourth can of paint to swatch.

“Lemonade!” I announced. The bottle was sweating almost as much as I was, not half as much as Fraser was.

In under ten seconds, he chugged most of what had taken me an hour to shop for and make.

“You’re the best,” he said, giving me a lemon-flavored kiss.

“I am, aren’t I?” I kissed him back. “Take a break. It’s hot.”

Sweat had glued his tee to his torso. He drank the rest of the lemonade.

I wagged my phone at him. “I found some places in Oregon and Washington. They’re beautiful. Want to see?”

He tried to make out the images on the screen before giving me an apologetic smile. “Maybe later?”

I perched on the porch rail and watched as he returned to the sawhorse and began to scrape the shutter.

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“Don’t sit there,” Fraser said. “Part of the rail is rotted out. I need to replace it.”

“For crying out loud, Fraser!” I exclaimed. “Are you going to build her a whole new porch?”

“Ah, Rose, don’t be like that,” he said. “I love this old house. This is like my parting gift to it. Then we’ll head out to see all those places you bookmarked on your phone.”

He stripped off his tee and hung it over the rail. The previous day’s sun had turned his skin pink under its tan. As he worked, the muscles of his back tensed and relaxed under his new tattoo—a rose in bloom.

“You still have a key to this house?” I asked.

“She doesn’t lock her door.”

“So how about if we go inside where it’s air conditioned and have sex right on the kitchen table?”

He wiped sweat from his forehead, and, for a moment, I thought he might be considering the idea.

“That thing’s not too sturdy,” he replied. “She bought it for its looks.”

“The couch, then.”

He took a slow breath. “Rose, don’t. It’s not me you want right now. What you want is to mess with Sierra.”

I felt small, like I’d been caught somewhere I didn’t belong, and I knew he was right.

“It’s air conditioned at our place,” he offered, his eyes kind and clear and so deep I could have drowned in them. “We’ve got a couch, too, don’t you know? So let me finish up, and I’ll be home soon.”

“Okay. See you there.”

He added, “I’m gonna get that divorce. I’ll let Sierra know tomorrow.”

HE KISSED ME and pulled the sheet up around my shoulder before getting an early start for Sierra’s the next morning. Ernesto rang the doorbell a few hours later.

“Why aren’t you at work?” I asked.

“Bob Wagner called,” he answered. “Put on your shoes. We’ve got to go.”

“Go where?”

It was 180 miles to the trauma center, and Ernesto stopped trying to distract me with small talk after the first ten. Flashing police lights dotted the place where the endless straight of the highway met the sky. The dots grew larger.

“Don’t look, okay?” Ernesto said. “He’s not there. They took him in a helicopter.”

Fraser’s pick-up was on its side; nearby, an SUV teetered upside down. A semi was parked on the median, its load of pipes scattered like pick-up sticks.

I could not help but stare.

“Rose, don’t look. Rosita! Why don’t you think of things to tell Fraser when you see him?”

I imagined us sitting on beach in Oregon, a cloud-streaked sky and majestic waves, pillars of rock standing guard offshore, gulls wheeling overhead. We’ll go there, I would say to him when I saw him. We’ll walk that beach together.

The trip to the hospital seemed to take hours. The walk down the shiny, brightly lit corridors seemed longer still. I held the image of the beach in my mind, ready to share it with Fraser. In our imaginations, we’d be together in a place of peace and beauty.

I stared at his vital signs monitor, uncomprehending. It was silent, no green lines on its black screen.

Fraser was somewhere under the bandages, tubes, and tape. His eyes were closed; what I could see of his face was slack.

“What is *she* doing here?” Sierra demanded.

Bob answered, “I asked Ernesto to bring her.”

“I don’t want her here.”

“Be polite, sweetheart,” Bobbie admonished, taking Sierra’s elbow and guiding her to the door. “It’s not about what we want. It’s about what Fraser would have wanted. Let’s get something to eat.”

Ernesto asked. “Do you want me to stay?”

I must have shaken my head no, because I found myself alone with Fraser.

The beds of his fingernails were a dusky blue, his hand pale and cool.

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I held it to my cheek. Someone had combed the part of his hair that wasn't swathed in gauze.

A tiny woman knocked at the door and introduced herself as the chaplain.

"How are you bearing up?" she asked.

"I should bring some clothes for him."

She rested her hand on my shoulder. "He doesn't need clothes anymore."

"Oh," I said, the reality forming in my mind. "I was too late."

"Do you want us to pray together?"

I shrugged and said, "He promised he'd be with me forever."

"And He is, even to the end of the world."

"I didn't mean God, Reverend."

After a time that was either too short or close to forever, Bob and Bobbie returned with Sierra, who stared at Fraser as if she didn't know him.

She whispered, "Cremation."

I said, "I'd like to buy the urn."

Ernesto drove me home. He and Ava made me stay at their place. She made tomato soup that I wasn't hungry for but ate anyway.

Sierra texted me after breakfast the next day:

You can have half the ashes.

What's the password for his phone?

Ava took me to the apartment for clothes. Without Fraser, the place was as neutral and antiseptic as the furniture display in a department store.

"Want me to pack some things for you?" Ava asked. "You sit on the couch and take it easy."

A pair of his socks was on the floor, his coffee cup in the sink. Steve, listing to one side, stared at me with sad little eyes.

Ava hummed and pattered for a few minutes before emerging from the bedroom with my overnight bag.

She said, "Sit there a little longer if you want, and I can wait in the car."

Janice E. Rodríguez

“No.”

“You’re ready to go?” she asked.

“You bet.”

I took Steve with me. He smelled like Fraser and kept me company when the world was asleep. He was in my hands when I awoke every night, disoriented, standing in one room or another of Ernesto’s house.

I ORDERED A HANDMADE RAKU urn with iridescent blue glaze above, the green of endless fields below, and had it sent, at Sierra’s request, to her house.

She sent more texts that week:

The urn arrived today.

I’ll arrange the funeral.

Ushers will seat you.

Don’t wear navy.

Not only did she arrange the funeral, she starred in it—picked music that Fraser hated; held court in the first pew next to his only living relative, Uncle Leo; carried on like she was the one that Fraser wanted to spend the rest of his life with; murmured to other mourners and pointed at me, in the back pew, where the usher had been told to seat me. I wore my defiance in the form of a head held high and a navy dress.

I balked at the thought of attending the funeral lunch in the motel’s everything room. I walked to Larson’s Fin Dining instead. Ben Larson unlocked the door and let me in.

He said, “I offered her this place for free, you know.”

He poured me a coffee and topped up his own cup. I stood at the bar, more than a little lost. He led me to a booth.

“You know why she didn’t want this place?” he asked. “Because I don’t have round tables in the dining room. Jeez. Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

“Did you tell her off?”

“Yeah, no, course not. That’d be rude,” he answered. “How are you getting on?”

CHAUTAQUA

"I'm sleepwalking for the first time in my life. Sometimes I take pictures off the wall or open drawers."

Ben stared into his cup. I stared into mine. We let the creaking and settling of the building do the rest of the talking. Two cups of coffee later, I walked to Ernesto's and found him and Ava back from the interment.

Their sympathetic looks and overflowing kindness had grown, suddenly, to distress more than soothe me.

"I'm ready to go back to the apartment," I told them.

To the apartment first, I thought, and then to Sierra's to get my half of the ashes so I could say my own goodbyes to Fraser.

Outside the apartment door, I dropped my overnight bag, blindsided by what she had done: the lock was changed; my possessions were in an oversized garbage bag that slumped in the hallway.

My knees gave way, and I slid to the floor. For the first time since the accident, I cried. I cried loud and long enough that the neighbors cracked their doors to stare.

Shirley, who lived across the hall, came to pat my head with her knotted, arthritic hand. She was wearing her funeral clothes but had changed into aqua slippers. She nodded at the plastic bag. "It was there when I got back. So uncalled for! I saw her talking to the manager yesterday."

I didn't need to ask who Shirley was talking about.

"You weren't at the luncheon. Have you had anything to eat?" she asked. "Come on over. I'll make you tea and a sandwich. You'll feel better with something in your stomach."

"Thanks," I said. "But there's something I've got to do."

The hinges squeaked when I yanked Beulah's hatch open. I shoved in my overnight bag and the plastic garbage bag. I did something I had never done before—gunned the engine—and instead of dispelling my anger, fueled it.

Sierra was home; her car was parked out front. Fraser's toolbox was on her porch, the sawhorse near the rail, the shutters and paint cans where he had left them.

She opened the door before I knocked. "Did you need something?" she asked with a saccharine smile.

Janice E. Rodríguez

“I’m here for my half of the ashes and the urn.”

She disappeared inside and returned with the urn. “Here you go. I’m so glad you came to your senses and stayed away from the luncheon. What would people have said?”

I swallowed the retort that was forming on my lips and walked away. I made it halfway to the car before growing suspicious of the urn’s lightness. I pried off the lid.

It was empty.

I spun around and glared at Sierra, who wiggled her fingers at me and said, “Have a nice life.”

I stormed back up the steps and hammered on the door until she shot the deadbolt. I moved to the window and slammed the glass with the flat of my hand. She pulled the shade down. I wailed in protest and rained down on her all the curses I knew. Wrung out, I sat on the top porch step, the urn still cradled in my left arm.

The need to be somewhere—anywhere—else took hold of me. My hands strayed over the urn, and I wondered where. But I intended to burn some bridges first.

Sierra’s car was unlocked. I pried open the cans of paint and poured Lincolnshire Loden onto her leather upholstery, Mediterranean Olive into the gear shift, Forest Primeval over her engine block, and Manifestly Matcha on her roof. I wiped my hands clean on her shearling steering wheel cover.

I buckled Steve into the passenger seat of my car and said, “Let’s see the ocean, little guy.”

The insurmountable Rockies stood between us and the Pacific, their profile as jagged as fresh pain. I turned south, skirting the foothills, searching for a place to call home.

The hypnotic straights of interstate sent my mind back to the accident. I abandoned the interstate to thread truer landscapes, those rich in relics of the people who had lived, loved, and died there. I held my own memorial for Fraser by a stone-choked stream, settling his urn in the shade of a silver-leaved tree. I opened an IPA, took a sip, and poured the rest out on the ground. I told Fraser that I missed him. I told myself it was time to let him go.

CHAUTAQUA

Still, I awoke every night to find myself standing, bewildered, inside a motel room.

A MONTH AND A HALF into going wherever the wind blew me, I came to a small city that lazed by the curve of a wide and glassy river.

“Should we stop here?” I asked Steve, and he nodded a yes as we rumbled over railroad tracks.

Half the businesses of the main street were shuttered, but the barbecue joint was crowded with lunchtime patrons. Their overheard laughter and conversation kept me company as I ate. When I emerged into the afternoon sunshine, I saw a woman seated under a sign—Mo’s Tattoos—sketching, a dripping glass of sweet tea next to her lawn chair.

“You’re far from home,” she said, peering over her reading glasses and pointing at my car.

“I’m on my way to a new one,” I said.

“Where’s that?” she asked, running purple fingernails over her tattooed left arm.

I looked through the window of her studio. “I don’t know.”

“Come on in,” she said.

The exposed brick walls were nearly covered in photos of tattoos. The floorboards squeaked as I crossed to a corner of memorials—portraits, crosses, lilies, and a saint or two. The other walls showcased patriotic tattoos, Celtic knots, flowers, cartoon characters, *lotería*.

“Can I get one today?” I asked, surprising myself.

“Not after a damned, greasy barbecue lunch at Jimmy’s,” she said. “That stuff slides down easy, but it comes up just as easy once you’re in the chair. But we can do a consult and maybe set you up for tomorrow.”

“That’d be great, Mo,” I said.

“I’m Rella. I bought the place when Mo died.”

She led me back to the memorial corner. “Do you want people to ask you about him or her?”

“Him. And no, not yet.”

“Then let’s choose a design that means something only to you. Maybe the place you met. Or we could do some script. Did he have a favorite quote?”

Janice E. Rodríguez

“Not really.” Then the words came without seeming to stop in my mind first: “I want a strawberry, with leaves and flowers.”

Rella showed me photos. She asked probing questions about my aesthetics and life. By the end of the afternoon, she knew me better than my mother ever would.

“Come back tomorrow at nine,” Rella said, “Wear comfy clothes.”

“Don’t you want to know the date he died?”

She hooked two fingers in the neck of her tee and slid it down, exposing an exquisite tattoo portrait of a freckled teenager. Framed in an oval, it rested like a locket over her heart. “See the pearls on her necklace?” she asked.

Six black pearls, seven white ones. I was standing close enough to feel the warmth of Rella’s skin.

“June seventh,” she said. “The day they come into this world matters a damn sight more than the day they leave it. When was his birthday?”

“February fifth,” I said.

“See you tomorrow,” Rella said. “Have breakfast before you come, but not a big, damned greasy one.”

The next morning, she transferred the stencil to my forearm and waited for two long minutes, to see if I’d change my mind, I supposed.

“Is it going to hurt?” I asked.

“Sure as you’re standing there. But I’ll talk you through.”

“Let’s do it,” I said.

Rella pulled her salt-and-pepper waves into a ponytail. I reclined in the chair and held my breath.

“How long have you been on the road?” Rella asked.

“Six weeks, two days. And seven weeks, four days that he’s been gone.”

“Seen a lot of this land of ours?”

The tattoo machine chattered. I grimaced before continuing. “You betcha. I figured I’d keep a list in my head of the places I stopped. I forgot the names pretty fast, though, so I made up new ones, like Western Movie Town and Nothing-to-See Town. The people in Green Enchilada Town were nice. But it looked too much like what I left behind—prairie and big sky. Did you know there’s a town with a cow statue?”

Rella laughed. "There's at least ten of those."

"I hated that place. That's where I was the day I forgot to count how long it was since he died. Pothole Town is where I learned to always put the chain on a motel door."

"Why's that?" Rella asked.

"I started sleepwalking after he died. In Pothole Town, I was opening the door when I woke up. Since then, I always put the chain on the door, so I don't wake up in some parking lot."

"Bless your heart. You know what? You're looking for him."

The truth of it rumbled through me long and deep, like summer thunder. I grunted as Rella began the zig-zagged edge of another leaf.

"You're doing fine, buttercup," she said. "This is nothing compared with what you've been through."

She finished outlining the leaf and a flower bud before I could speak again: "The next place was Three Church Town. Three churches, five bars, standoffish people, no reason to stay."

After that, I drove for two days past fields of sorghum and stubs of harvested corn to anyplace, and anyplace was Rella's and the purifying pain of her needles.

I was out of conversation. Rella, true to her word, led me through the rest, her voice guiding me over the pain. She told me about the strawberry shortcake she made when her kids were little, named the colors of the ink in her palette, talked like the artist she was about shading and placement.

"I'm starting on his birthday now," she said. "Two dewdrops on one side for February; five on the other for the fifth. Not that you'd ever forget."

I started to think that Rella's town might be home, and I told her so when she had finished her work. She took my hands in hers, and her slow and deliberate pronouncement transfixed me: "You are not yet home. But the wandering is almost complete."

"How do I know when I find my place?"

"You will receive signs."

IN VAIN, I sought those signs in abandoned farmhouses strangled by kudzu, in towns idle from humidity, on an Atlantic beach pounded by

storm-driven waves. I turned back inland and then north. I drove part of US 1 three times one day—about thirty miles from Great Waffle City, back again for Steve, who'd rolled under the motel bed, and then a new start north. I stopped at the first town I came to after sunset and pulled into a motel parking lot.

I realized upon waking that I had not walked in my sleep.

"Can you believe that, Steve?" I curved the corners of his mouth into a smile before hurrying to catch the motel's breakfast buffet.

"Sorry," the manager said. "We're starting late today. Would you like a cup of coffee a while?"

Coffee cup in hand, I strolled by the brick homes and small shops clustered on the main street of Town Cupped in a Valley. Geese honked as they sailed the small, intimate sky. I could see my breath; I'd need my gloves soon.

My growling stomach sent me back to the motel for breakfast.

"Thanks for waiting," the manager said as I walked by her desk. "Our evening desk person just quit, and things are a little upside down."

I put bread in the toaster and opened the minifridge. There were dozens of small containers of yogurt, every one strawberry.

If those aren't signs, Rella, I thought, I don't know what are.

THE APARTMENT MANAGER jingles the keys and hands them to me. I jingle them back.

I carry my bags inside, nestle Steve onto the couch, and slide open the balcony door, inhaling the scent of autumn leaves and earth broken for winter wheat.

"He'd have liked this place," I say to Steve.

A meandering stream winks beneath time-smoothed hills that abide in melancholy peace. I wait, held in their embrace, for spring to come again.



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ANN ASPELL is a book designer in Vermont. Her fiction has been published by *One Story*, and her poems have appeared in a variety of journals, including *Hunger Mountain*, *La Presa*, *Magma Poetry*, *Poetry International*, and *Spillway*, as well as the anthology *The Traveler's Vade Mecum* (2016).

TRICIA BOGLE is a NYC-based poet with deep roots in Missouri. She holds a B.A. in Creative Writing & Philosophy (Loyola Baltimore), an M.A. in Political Theory, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy (Fordham). For over a decade, she taught advanced courses in bioethics at Montclair State University, exploring various ways to understand what is human in a world increasingly mediated by technology.

POLLY BROWN'S collection, *Pebble Leaf Feather Knife*, was released in 2019 by Cherry Grove Collections. She has two chapbooks, *Blue Heron Stone* (Every Other Thursday Press) and *Each Thing Torn from Any of Us*, (Finishing Line). She has taught and read widely in eastern Massachusetts, where her favorite poetry teaching gig was at Stanley Kunitz's boyhood home in Worcester, sitting near the pear tree that appears in several important Kunitz poems. Brown has received awards from the Worcester County Poetry Society and the Massachusetts Artists' Foundation. Recent poems have appeared online in *Canary: A Literary Magazine of the Environmental Crisis*, and in *Appalachia*, the journal of the Appalachian Mountain Society.

JOANNE M. CLARKSON'S sixth poetry collection, *Hospice House*, was accepted by MoonPath Press and will appear in 2023. Her poems have been published in such journals as *Poetry Northwest*, *Nimrod*, *Poet Lore*, *Western Humanities Review* and *Beloit Poetry Journal*. She has received an Artist Trust Grant and an NEH grant to teach poetry in rural libraries. Clarkson has Masters Degrees in English and Library Science and has taught and worked for many years as a professional librarian. After caring for her mother through a long illness, she re-careered as a Registered Nurse working in Home Health and Hospice. See more at JoanneClarkson.com.

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ipient of the 2022 Banyan Poetry Prize, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She is the author of *Stunt Double* and serves as the current Poetry Editor for *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought*. Read more of her work at elizabethcgarcia.wordpress.com.

MARY GILLILAND is the author of *The Ruined Walled Castle Garden* and *The Devil's Fools*, with poems anthologized most recently in *Rumors Secrets & Lies: Poems on Pregnancy, Abortion & Choice*, and *Wild Gods: The Ecstatic in Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. She's received the Stanley Kunitz Fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center and a Cornell University Council on the Arts Faculty Grant. *Ember Days* is forthcoming in 2024.

JESSICA GUZMAN is the author of the poetry collection *Adelante* (Switchback Books, 2020), selected by Patricia Smith as winner of the 2019 Gatewood Prize. Her poems have appeared in *32 Poems*, *Shenandoah*, *jubilat*, and elsewhere. She teaches at Widener University and lives in Philadelphia.

ROGER HART'S stories and essays have been published in *Natural Bridge*, *The Tampa Review*, *Passages North*, *Runner's World*, and other magazines and journals. His story, "Mysteries of the Universe," won the McGlenn Fiction Prize and was published in *Philadelphia Stories*. He recently moved to Montana where he writes under the supervision of his wife and two big dogs.

JOHN HOPPENTHALER'S books of poetry are *Domestic Garden*, *Anticipate the Coming Reservoir*, *Lives of Water*, and the forthcoming *Night Wing Over Metropolitan Area*, all with Carnegie Mellon UP. With Kazim Ali, he has co-edited a volume of essays on the poetry of Jean Valentine, *This-World Company* (U of Michigan P). A professor of Creative Writing and Literature at East Carolina University, he also serves on the Advisory Board for Backbone Press, specializing in the publication and promotion of marginalized voices. His poetry, essays, and interviews have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *New York Magazine*, *Southern Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Literary Review*, *Blackbird*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and many other journals, anthologies, and textbooks.

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JIMMY KINDREE is a queer Minnesotan writer currently living and teaching in Norway. His work has appeared in *Electric Literature: The Commuter*, *Sycamore Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *J Journal*, and *PIF Magazine*. He also spins yarn and knits with it, makes pottery, cheese, and bread, and plays banjo.

SHARON LACOUR was born in New Orleans and most of her writing takes place there and around the Gulf Coast. She has also spent time teaching music in Germany. Her novel, *Light in the Woods*, unfolds within the rich Acadian culture of the Louisiana coast in the 1920s. Her stories can be found in the *Xavier*, *Arkansas*, *Blue Lake* and *Sheepshead Review* among others. Most of them are available on her website at sharonlacour.com. She lives with her husband, dog and cat and works as a piano teacher.

XIAOLY LI is a poet and photographer in Massachusetts. She is a 2022 recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowship Grant in Poetry. Her poetry has appeared in *Spillway*, *American Journal of Poetry*, *PANK*, *Atlanta Review*, *Chautauqua*, *Rhino*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *J Journal* and elsewhere; her work has been featured on *Verse Daily* and in several anthologies. She has been nominated for Best of the Net three times, Best New Poets, and a Pushcart Prize. Her photography has been shown and sold in galleries in Boston. Xiaoly received her Ph.D. in electrical engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute and her Masters in computer science and engineering from Tsinghua University in China.

MARJORIE MADDOX, English professor at Commonwealth University, has published 14 collections of poetry—most recently *Begin with a Question* (Paraclete) and the ekphrastic collections from Shanti Arts, *Heart Speaks*, *Is Spoken For* (with Karen Elias) and *In the Museum of My Daughter's Mind*,

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a collaboration with her artist daughter (hafer.work). In addition, she has published the story collection, *What She Was Saying* (Fomite), four children's/YA books, and an anthology on Pennsylvania. Please see marjoriemaddox.com.

QUINCY GRAY MCMICHAEL, when not at her writing desk, stewards her farm, Vernal Vibe Rise, on Moneton ancestral land. Her writing, both creative nonfiction and poetry, has appeared in *Salon*, *Assay*, *Appalachian Review*, *Yes! Magazine*, *Burningword*, and *The Dewdrop*, among others—and is forthcoming from *Full Bleed*. Quincy holds an MFA from the Naslund-Mann Graduate School of Writing at Spalding University. She is a recent Pushcart Prize nominee, serves as Contributing Editor at *Good River Review*, and is completing a hybrid memoir that explores obsession and overwork through a blend of poetry and prose.

SUSAN NUSBAUM, born in Rochester, NY, received her BA from Smith College and her law degree from the University of Buffalo Law School. She lives in Buffalo, NY, where she has worked as a musician, teacher, arts administrator, and most recently as a criminal prosecutor. Her three poetry collections, *What We Take With Us*, *Open Wide, the Eye*, and *Alive in this Place*, were published by Coffeetown Press. Her work has appeared in numerous publications including *The Connecticut Review*, *Poetry East*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Chautauqua*, *Harpur Palate*, and many others. She has presented her work in solo public readings in numerous communities in the Northeast and Florida.

PAUL PEDROZA was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. He received his MFA in Fiction from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His story collection, *The Dead Will Rise and Save Us*, is available from Veliz Books. He has completed his first novel, and he is currently working on a second and on a collection of essays. His work has appeared in *Rattle*, *MAKE: A Chicago Literary Magazine*, *Palabra*, *Confluencia*, *Inquiring Mind Buddhist Magazine*, and in the following anthologies: *Critical Storytelling in the Borderlands* (Brill Sense Publishers, 2022), *Our Lost Border* (Arte Público Press, 2013), and *New Border Voices* (TAMU Press, 2014).

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MICHAEL QUATTRONE (he/him) is the author of the award-winning chapbook, *Rhinoceroses* (New School, 2007) and the songs of *One River* (Wolfe Island Records, 2018). Recent poems appear in *The Night Heron Barks*, *DMQ Review*, and the *Best American Poetry Blog*. His work is included in *Incredible Sestina Anthology* and *Best American Erotic Poems*. He lives in Tarrytown, New York, where he reads for the *Westchester Review* and Slapering Hol Press.

DOUG RAMSPECK is the author of nine poetry collections, one collection of short stories, and a novella. One recent book, *Black Flowers*, was published by LSU Press. Six of his books have received awards: *Blur* (Tenth Gate Prize), *Distant Fires* (Grayson Books Poetry Prize), *The Owl That Carries Us Away* (G. S. Sharat Chandra Prize for Short Fiction), *Original Bodies* (Michael Waters Poetry Prize), *Mechanical Fireflies* (Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize), and *Black Tupelo Country* (John Ciardi Prize for Poetry). His individual poems have appeared in journals that include *The Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Slate*, and *The Georgia Review*. He is a three-time recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award.

JANICE E. RODRÍGUEZ grew up with her nose in a book and hasn't ever taken it out. Shortlisted for the Tillie Olsen Short Story Award and the Chester B. Himes Short Fiction Prize, she moves her paragraphs around the same way she does the perennials in her garden—as if they were furniture. When not writing or gardening, she's in the kitchen working her way through a stack of cookbooks. Find her online at janiceerodriguez.com.

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BARBARA WEST'S second book, a work-in-progress memoir, *What the "Others" Are Here For (And What If I'm One of Them?)* explores tension between Christian/Buddhist directives to "help others" and her 12-step program's directive to "focus on yourself and stop bothering everyone else." Her work has appeared in *Intima*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *American Journal of Nursing*, *Shambhala Times*, and others. Her performance videos have won awards in festivals around the world. A descendant of Pennsylvania Dutch activists, she has recently moved to Corvallis, Oregon where she's resumed working in hospice after a decade of wound/ostomy/continence nursing.

CHARLOTTE WYATT is a writer based in Las Vegas, Nevada. Her work is in or forthcoming from the *Potomac Review*, *Joyland*, *Electric Literature*, *Gulf Coast*, and others.

CHUN YU is an award-winning bilingual (English and Chinese) poet, graphic novelist, scientist, and translator. She is the author of the multi-awarding winning memoir in verse *Little Green: Growing Up During the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Simon & Schuster), and a historical graphic novel in progress (Macmillan), and more. Her poetry and stories are published by the *Boston Herald*, *Orion*, *Poetry Northwest*, *MIT Tech Talk*, *Xinhua Daily*, *Poem of the Day*, *Arion Press*, *Koa Press*, and more. Her work is taught in world history and culture classes. Chun is a Library Laureate 2023 of SFPL and an honoree of YBCA 100 award (2020) for creative changemakers. She has been awarded grants from San Francisco Arts Commission, Zellerbach, Poets & Writers, Sankofa Fund, and more. Her poetry and translations have been recently nominated for Pushcart Prize. Her Two Languages/One Community project connects Chinese American and African American communities with poetry writing and storytelling. Chun holds a B.S. and M.S. from Peking University and a Ph.D. from Rutgers University. She was a post-doctoral fellow in a Harvard-MIT joint program. Her websites are chunyu.org and twolanguagesonecommunity.com.

CHAUTAUQUA is open to submissions from any writer. The editors welcome original, previously unpublished works of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, particularly those pieces that embody the vision of Chautauqua Institution, as much a philosophy and an aesthetic as a physical place whose soul lies in the American passion for self-improvement—the drive to enrich oneself culturally, artistically, morally, and intellectually. Check the website for information on themes and reading periods: chq.org/season/literary-arts/readers/literary-journal.

General submission guidelines are also available on the web at chq.org/season/literary-arts/readers/literary-journal. Book reviews, interviews, and profiles are by invitation only; please query the editor before submitting. Other queries may be addressed to chautauquajournal@gmail.com.

In this issue:

“*All you can do*, he says,
 is move along, adapt. Take care, he adds,
and wobbles off to orbit whatever body seizes him.”

—George Drew, “Talbot’s Chance”

“When I am the recipient of slow, mindful work done with a generous heart, I have no doubt that this attention transforms the end product.”

—Quincy Gray McMichael, “Farming After Death”

“The Bronx is like this:
stray things show up at the door—
menus, Mormons, someone else’s morning paper.”

—Tricia Bogle, “Bronx, 1995”

“Heat blushed her skin, like a kiss. People say she would do anything for a kiss.”

—Jessica Guzman, “Match Girl”