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Out on Love's Limb

Liz Betz

Olaf glances at the house window he knows to be above her kitchen sink. She's there but she draws back. She's watching him again. It makes him think twice about which branch he meant to cut but he redirects the chainsaw confidently. He's done this for decades. You cut individual limbs from the tree with the overall shape in mind.

This customer's wife is in his thoughts far more than she should be. Why? Because of how she watches him.

She watches him while he talks with her husband and she watches both of them while they stand and have their cigarettes. Her husband offhandedly mentions that she's the strong one. She's kicked the habit. She demurs. Probably, she has shown her strength in other ways that haven't been noticed. If she were with him, he'd notice. Her husband, who Olaf has known for a long time, is no prize. She's far too good for him.

The movements of her day bring her outside to the deck as he trims the trees on that side of the house, she appears in the garden with her kitchen compost, and she's made frequent visits to the window. Buzzzzzz, his chainsaw says no, she's been married for a long time and this is her normal routine. Or is it? You can't tell.

Olaf has never been involved with a woman. He doesn't know how to take the first step, or so he believes. But sometimes women handle all of that. Not likely she will. No sense thinking of a tryst, but even her fingers touching his cheek would be something to remember. It would give his life meaning.

Where did that foolish idea come from?

From her. It's how she watches him; it's a hunger, a longing in her eyes that he recognizes.

It's the second day he's been here to do this job, and he'll be back tomorrow. That gives him another day to...live in the daydream he's having. Where they exchange a long soulful look and come together for a kiss. How is that to happen? He's behaving like a teenager, when he's definitely not.

You can know the seasons of trees but not of love.

It must be noisy inside the house, he thinks, as he works on the pine tree at the corner of the house. Buzzzzz. Do the work. He's fit for a man of his age. He walks and chainsaws around the base of the tree until he sees something hanging from a branch. It looks like a bookmark. He switches off the chainsaw and reaches for it. The paper is curled up from the bottom and some of the ink has run but left behind are words; a poem. Is this for him? No, it's weathered. Still. When you find a message in a bottle, it is the universe's design. You have been chosen.

He fishes his cigarettes out of his pocket, notes there's only three left but no worry, he can buy some later. He lights a smoke while he carries the poem to his vehicle, knowing he's being watched. The poem is the opening he asked for. She's initiated something, he's to respond. He trembles as something inside him expands wide on a beautiful world. Even though he's just a tree trimmer, he's always believed he should be landscape artist. He could. With her. Here's your match, set the world afire.

When your one day arrives, maybe later than it should, you know.

Tomorrow, when she offers coffee, as is the routine, he'll speak of this, maybe bring her some of his own poetry. But for now, to gain insights about her words; he needs to take the poem home. He puts everything from his hand onto the driver's seat.

It's still too early to go home, he has time to finish trimming the '*tree of the poem*'. He moves reverently back to work.

Soon the job is finished. He's packing up when he hears the sound of a vehicle door being shut; he catches a glimpse of her as he rounds the corner. She's been in his truck. Why? His heart sinks. He knows. She is embarrassed. She's afraid of the opportunity the poem gave them. She has taken it away from him. There was barely a click when she closed the door but her action slams hard.

You are born alone; you die alone and, in his case, you live alone.

The toes of his boots drag on the ground; his heavy hands open the door. But everything is exactly where he left it. The scraggly weathered bookmark poem is

still under his package of cigarettes. Maybe, she added a few personal words to the poem. He turns it this way and that and nothing looks new.

This doesn't make sense, he thinks, as he starts the engine.

Maybe she left something for him? But there's nothing he can see. What if she slipped a note into his cigarette package? He opens it and there is nothing unusual there. He takes out the last cigarette to light it and begins his journey home. No insights come to him until he's ready to butt his cigarette.

Oh. There were two cigarettes left in the package but she's taken one. All the watching she's done is to see when he left his cigarettes unattended. The reason she left everything as she found it in the truck, is to hide her actions. She's a secret smoker.

And he's a fool. The bookmark poem is no message from the universe, she didn't care that he found it.

Buzzzzz. Something saws off his branch of hope and it falls without a sound.

You have to be watchful not to cut away too much of a tree.

Liz Betz is a retired rancher who loves to write fiction. Her pastime seems to help her days go by, her brain to stay active and sometimes keeps her out of trouble. An overactive imagination is a wonderful thing to harness, but left alone...Her publication credits are many and varied as she explores the fictional world of mostly somewhat older but not necessarily mature characters.

From Steeplechase to Balustrades

Matt Conte

Bones weary, he slimed on his walk to his bike. Finally, after a long, hard shift, fresh 4 a.m. air hit his face.

Fingers calloused, she sat in her floral scrubs waiting for the bus. It ran more and more infrequently at this hour, but she relished the soft moments on her usual bench—uncomfortable in the traditional sense, comfortable at this point in her daily routine, and dirty in both the traditional and non senses.

After the first mile, the world behind him began to collapse in upon itself, the street crumbling and falling into molten underground caverns. The homes, some asleep, some raucous with summer parties, began to explode, pipe bombs and homemade dynamite sending rainbow bursts into the sky he could only see peripherally.

She stepped onto the bus and nodded to the driver, who clicked the LED destination sign to read "HOME." They took off and she watched as the bus rose above the pavement and into the air, soon flying high above the buildings. She leaned against the window, looking at what little traffic there was below like child's toys.

His unplugged headphones slowly pumped a carnival theme, drowning out the dark blue silence ahead of him and the roaring neon behind him.

Once stable above the clouds on this near cloudless morning, the driver reached out and knobbed the radio, spinning it louder and louder until Roy Bittan's keys and Mark Knopfler's guitar filled the empty bus.

No longer clanking together after more than half a day on his feet, his knees pedaled him forward with renewed strength.

Passing over the street she grew up on, she peeked out the window down at the wooded field down the street where she would play in the mud and the stream water as a child.

He ascended a cross-town bridge, which shook and slammed apart beneath him, the chunk of concrete at its peak missing. He braced himself and launched across the hole, landing safely on the other side and descending the bridge, now just a mile from home.

The bus began slowly sliding back into the atmosphere until its tires bounced onto the street. She stepped off the bus with a knowing nod to the driver – like an in-the-know talk show guest to the house band – and onto the curb in front of their apartment building.

He hops off, his bike floats itself to the alley and secures a lock. The last pieces of Earth fall into the dark blue of space.

With the world gone now, just crater and their building standing behind them, she doesn't even unlace her shoelaces before she kisses him.

Matt Conte is a writer and a pizzamaker in Philadelphia, PA. You can find him on Instagram at @matthewcharlesconte.

How Cheese is Made

Madison Blask

Please don't tell me how cheese is made. The parts of the sky that I can see from my picnic table cross-legged perch are pink and I can't stop crying and spitting and now my nose is clogged with snot, so as I try to explain to you that I would really prefer it if you didn't tell me how cheese is made I have to breathe out of my mouth, which I hate because it means soon my tongue will be dry.

I don't want you to tell me how cheese is made because I already know how cheese is made.

If I squint while standing next to my car on the crest of a hill that overlooks a pasture it is easy for me to believe I am seeing full cubes of cheese plunking out of cows. Grass goes in and sharp cheddar comes out. Even easier than this is to believe that cheese cubes and sticks and slices and chunks come piping hot off of a conveyor belt in a barn. One of those really old barns that seems like it was painted in the 1800s and is the same shade of red as every other barn.

Barn Red is what it says on the one paint can that every barn-owner passed back and forth to take turns using over a hundred years ago. The brushes were bigger back then, so painting the barns didn't ever take too long. Maybe it was one kid's job. Maybe each town had a Barn Boy who would stroll through the pastures without haste because he knew something that you knew as well: only he could paint your barn. You needed him for his shade of red and he needed you for a fresh glass of milk and a cool towel for him to place on the back of his neck as he painted.

But now they are all peeling, the barns. In what reads as a really intentional way. Like the barn itself is making a show of how effortless it is to be a barn, how nonchalant it is to be both a cow house and a hay house all at once, while also being where cheese is made.

If I am wrong, please don't tell me.

I am crying on the picnic table about cheese because I just received an email containing eleven sentences, two exclamation points, and a job offer. I am crying because if I had not gotten this email and enclosed job offer before the end of the month I was going to have to accept the only other job offer I

received out of the fourteen jobs I applied to: cheese maker's assistant. There would have been cows and a conveyor belt and it would smell like old milk and every day as I pulled on my galoshes and tied my hair up under a plastic net I would think, "I am how cheese is made."

And I would really prefer not to be how cheese is made. Because then I would know. And I do not want to know how cheese is made.

The job offer I received and accepted is not important. I wasn't sitting and then standing and then lying on top of the picnic table under the sunset with tears and snot rolling down my face because I was ecstatic about my new employment opportunity. My face was sticky wet because now I do not have to be how cheese is made.

I was going to work as a cheese maker's assistant because it seemed to me that if I was unable to get a job in the field I wanted, the next best choice was to force myself to learn a new skill in a field with a barn in it. Plus, I like eating cheese. But now I don't have to be a cheese maker's assistant and the sky is pink and if I concentrate on that then maybe my nose will de-clog itself without too much effort on my part.

I would rather die than learn how cheese is made. I would rather be made into cheese than learn how cheese is made. I would rather be made into cheese and then be sold for a half of what I'm worth than learn how cheese is made. Please, don't tell me. I don't want to know.

Madison Blask is an essayist currently living in Burlington, Vermont. She can be found @IamMadi_SON on Twitter

Summer, Death, and the City

Anita Kestin

I am working on a trial basis for the medical examiner and we are called to the house of a man who has died a few days before. The neighbors noticed a smell. This is my first death scene and I have something to prove as no woman has ever done this before. My supervisor, who reminds me of Lou Grant from the Mary Tyler Moore show, has three daughters and he does not think women belong anywhere near death and decay. He is gruff, protective, portly, and blunt and he has years of experience in the field. To me, he will always be Dr. Grant and I cannot imagine ever calling him by his first name.

It is mid-day and the temperature outside has reached 95 degrees. Dr. Grant drives us to the apartment building and we climb the stairs together, Dr. Grant stopping once to rest and me slowing my pace when I realize stairs may be difficult for him. The apartment door is slightly ajar and the gloved assistants are already doing their work looking for pill bottles and methodically looking for clues in the apartment. One assistant hands us some gloves and leads us to the body in the bedroom and pulls off the covers. The naked body is swollen, mottled and turning yellow and black. The smell is overwhelming and Dr. Grant studies my face, watching, watching, watching me for some sign that I realize that I am not cut out for this.

He asks me to make observations about the scene. I can barely focus on the room, the leftover food, the pills on the counter, and the signs of prior illness. My mind is racing and ricocheting over the room, searching for something to say that might be relevant. My motto has always been from Edna St Vincent Millay: "Dig, dig; and if I come to ledges, blast." This job seems fascinating to me and I am in this fight. I am struggling to focus while trying not to vomit or have the distress I am feeling show on my face. My pen scrapes against the paper as I try to control my hand from shaking.

The assistants pepper Dr. Grant with rapid fire observations and they all discuss their conclusion that this is a clear-cut case of death from heart disease in an elderly man. Dr. Grant nods and the assistants ask if they can remove the body now. They are already late for lunch and they are eager to get back to the air conditioned office. Dr. Grant studies my face as I make notes.

"Not yet," he says.

Ten minutes later, he nods at his team mates and they start to wrap up the body and gather their samples. The sheet they place on the body is already damp and discolored in places and they cover the sheet with an opaque plastic tarp. We go out in the hall and he puts an arm across my shoulders. "Here's a tip," he says. "Try to breath normally the whole time. If you hold your breath, the smell will overwhelm you."

We both stand in the corridor for a while watching the helpers maneuver the stretcher carrying the body covered in the sheet and the thick plastic down the stairs. Dr. Grant pulls the apartment door shut and the lock clicks. As we head down after them, Dr. Grant looks back at me and says: "You're hired." I feel my body relax for the first time since we entered this building. Some of the doors to the apartments are open and people are watching as the stretcher carrying the body coils around the tight staircase leading down from the fourth floor. I smell food cooking, onions and tomatoes. The wall is covered in thick bright jagged lines where, I imagine, a child has run a bunch of crayons down the wall leading from the third floor to the second floor. A stair is loose and covered with silver duct tape a little further down. Outside, cars and motorcycles are maneuvering around the van where the body is being loaded and I smell diesel fumes and bread from the bakery next door and sweat from the people walking on the street.

Dr. Grant and I get into his car and he describes some of the most unusual things he has seen at death scenes as we head back to the office. He is animated, talking with his hands, carried away with the joy of reliving the fascinating things he has seen to an appreciative audience. And that I am. I am elated and also eager to dive into such interesting work. I am woman: just hear me roar!

A few weeks later, I am called to a death scene in a ranch house at the northern edge of the city. I look around the small bedroom with its chenille bedspread draped over the dead body and I study the facial expressions of the bereaved. It is only then, as it begins to dawn on me that I may be standing in the middle of a murder scene, that I realize how ill prepared I am to do this job.

Anita Kestin, MD, MPH, has worked in academics, nursing homes, hospices, and locked wards of a psychiatric facility. She's a daughter (of immigrants fleeing the Holocaust), wife, mother, grandmother, progressive activist. She has been writing for years but has just started submitting her work.

Bicycle couriers

DS Maolalai

night-time, pulling the van

through Dublin in lockdown

to the University

Veterinary Hospital – our dog

sick with grapes

and made strange

by the fuss. our city

all empty; dead

as old apple trees

on Georges St, couriers

lean on their bikes,

nervous as pigeons

and flocking.

The bureaucrat.

DS Maolalai

what paperwork this.

what reams

and what checking

of notes.

crossing our references

and crossing

out references – totalling

the spreadsheets

for profit and loss.

to find this way of saying

your eyes are like rocks

beneath the waves

on which I might find

myself foundered. what paperwork,

what pencilled tutorials;

my life is the filing
of red forms
and blue.
the checking of boxes
in the sterile
july shine
of offices.

and this! – just
to get your eyes right,
just the way they are.
and your hands – and your beautiful
hands.

DS Maolalai is a poet from Ireland. He has been nominated seven times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016) and "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019)

"Al walks to the post office every day" & "The boss's son"
Casey Killingsworth

Al walks to the post office every day

Al gets a letter and asks
me to look at it but he never
says he can't read. I read aloud
and Al nods along.

Al collects hollyhock seeds from
the countless plants that line
his dirt road and saves them
by color in plastic bags
until he replants them next year.

They all grow. Al fell in with the law
once after his son fondled a fourteen
year old and Al got thumbed for it.
Everybody said so. He sent the
county a twelve dollar money order
every month until he was even.

His son is no good and Al's wife,
before she died of alcohol
poisoning, would call Al up at
the mill all the time until she
got him fired. His son lived
with him for a while with a wife
twice his age.

I think Al liked her a lot
and maybe she liked
him back some too but that's as
far as it went. When the county

put a street sign up that said
“Hollyhock Lane” you might
as well have made Al
the governor.

Some people just live.
Some people just live.

The boss's son

My first year at the creamery,
right out of high school,
my milk truck threw a tire.
And we never found it.
The mechanic and I
searched for a mile in the snow,
both sides of the road,
but we never saw
a trace of it.

Michael told me later
when he came back from college—
and by then the tire had become
a big joke among us drivers—
he told me that his dad would
have fired anybody else for losing
that tire.

But since it was me

During summers Michael came home
and worked with the rest of us.

It was kind of embarrassing, him
in college and his dad the boss
and me, friend, in this work for life.

We got by.

Sometimes we rode together
to make deliveries and we'd
talk about what he was going to do
with his life. And I have to say
he's done it.

I just wish he wouldn't have said
that about losing the tire

Casey Killingsworth has work in The American Journal of Poetry, 3rd Wednesday (forthcoming), Two Thirds North, and other journals. His book of poems, A Handbook for Water, was published by Cranberry Press in 1995. As well he has a book on the poetry of Langston Hughes, The Black and Blue Collar Blues (VDM, 2008). Casey has a Master's degree from Reed College.

Emotional Labor

Kate Telling



Katy Telling is a writer, mixed media artist, and former Party Girl (in the Parker Posey sense of the phrase) currently editing her first chapbook. See new work @PoeticRituals on Instagram or twitter, as well as, in upcoming editions of Botticelli Magazine, Riggwelter Press, Detritus Online and more. This is her second contribution to Whatever Keeps the Lights On.