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In the final leg of an especially grueling sword fight, all of your senses disappear except hearing. Your ears, in fact, are enhanced. They absorb everything: color, emotion, pain. That's all there is. The world is made of sound.

There's the brain shuddering clash of two blades, the lapping of the ocean's massive tongues against the hull of your ship, the throaty cheers of your crew, the ragged breathing of your opponent: this newfound threat.

I knew nothing of him, when he arrived - crewless and sharply dressed - except the beer on his breath, the greed in his eyes and the sword at his belt.

That is all it takes.

You know the battle is over - for better or worse - when the rest of the senses come back. In a wave, they return, all at once, overtaking you: all of a sudden I was seeing stars, smelling sweat and tasting pennies.

The blue and white patchwork sky floated above me, spinning in nauseating circles. Or was that me, spinning? Was it both?

I vaguely sensed pain in all four of my limbs - some worse than others - but it was impossible to tell which was a leg and which was an arm anymore. Was I even sure there were only four? It ached like seven. If the earth would just stop bloody folding over on itself for a moment, maybe I could-

"Well, well, well..." A detached head joined the rotating sky in my line of vision. It swam in circles above me like it was trapped in a cloudy, blueish whirlpool that would soon swallow it.

If only.

I attempted to orient myself. My back was against something hard and cold and wet - the deck! I was lying, I realized, defeated. This posh, disgustingly clean shaven man had bested me - me! - in front of my entire crew. This, you might not realize, is rock bottom for any self respecting sailor.

But again: my limb confusion. If I attempted to rise, I might end up trying to walk with my hands.

So there I stayed - trying not to vomit while the whirlpool face taunted me.

"Captain!" He beamed, revealing a strand of pearly teeth, "You put up a good fight!"

"Not good enough, so it seems."

A strong laugh, "No, no, not quite. But don't get yourself down, old boy, I doubt a sailor within a thousand miles could best me."

"That is a bold claim."

"Yes," a thoughtful voice, "but not an undeserving one."

"Where do you come from?"

"Ahh. Where do any of us come from?"

If I had had the strength to stand and shove him overboard, I would have.

"But if you mean my place of birth," He continued, "then I am from the Northeastern Highlands. Off the coast of -"

"Yes, I'm familiar with the Highlands," I spat, shifting clunkily to see him better, "Do you think this is my first day at sea?"

"I didn't know if-"

"The barnacles at the bottom of this boat could point in the direction of the Highlands. We've looted those rich buffoons three times in the past fortnight!"

"I was just trying to-"

"You were trying to make me look a fool!" My breath came in uncontrollable heaves from my nose. His tranquil silence made my insides boil, "To be made a fool on my own ship! To be mocked in this way, left down here lying like a shark on the sand! It's impertinent! It's a disgrace! Do you know nothing of our ways, Mr. Highlands?"

"I know some," He said, still calm, "I know that lying there, like that, is killing you. Your pride is fragile, captain, but it is not wounded easily. You guard it like an enormous loot of the finest silver. But as difficult as it may be to gain a Rogue's loyalty, it is equally challenging to take away. Have I been schooled properly, Captain?"

I frowned with pride, eyeing him up and down, "Ay'. We are virtuous men. Not like those where you come from."

He simply laughed, hard and clear, "Maybe not. I am not so vain as to claim that. But I will say this on behalf of my people: we are masterful takers. Where there is something to obtain, we will obtain it. If something can be ours, it will."

My heart thudded faster in my chest, "You speak of my ship, I assume? My crew? Will my glory, my sacrifices, my life's work be your latest steal?"

"Oh, I am not stealing, old boy," He smiled, stretching his arms out wide, "This crew behind me, they could have killed me easily by now, but they haven't! Do you know why? Do you know why that is?"

My lips stretched into a thin line.

He grinned wider, "Because respect is earned! I have earned it! There are those who conquer and those who have been conquered. You have made your place clear, today, and so have I. Come now, Captain, you have claimed this is not your first day at sea but I do begin to wonder..."

I tried to stand. I tried with all my might to stand but I couldn't.

"But it is not. I know this," He said, looking at me with pity for the first time, "You're a legend, are you not? The Great Captain, they call you. Known throughout the land - so miraculous you are, that you've surpassed the need of a surname! Impressive, very impressive. This is the end of an era, I'll give you that. But rules are rules. Even the greatest of conquerors can be conquered. Did you believe yourself invincible?"

I managed to sit up, and as I leaned on my trembling forearms, I saw the faces of my crew for the first time. Cracked and pained, but steady. Resolute. My enemy was right. My time in the sun was over.

"No man," I mustered, "is invincible. And if I must go, I shall go with the same honor that my comrades here have shown me over the last countless moons. I shall salute them as they have saluted me. This is their ship and forever will be. Do not kid yourself otherwise, Mr. Highlands."

He sheathed his sword, offering me a hand, "Never."

I took it and wobbled on my feet. My resolve, I'm sure, was the only thing keeping me upright.

A few of my former comrades made their way across the deck, away from us, reaching the dreaded

portside railing. With a few grunts and heaving breaths, the narrow wooden death sentence extended from the side.

"Rule number two," Said my conqueror, extending an inviting hand to kindly motion me towards the ledge, "The Plank."

Hold your head high, I thought, don't let them see your fear.

One step. Two. My rickety legs fumbled.

A muscular hand gripped the inside of my elbow, stopping my fall. My first mate furrowed his brows, looking at me with some strange mixture of tragedy, brotherhood and duty burning in his dark eyes.

I gave the best, most reassuring head nod I could muster. My friend guided me to my doom with a safe, loving arm wrapped around my shoulders.

I turned one last time.

"Farwell," I choked out, "May your sails fly high-"

"-and tides remain low." The crew echoed - a dozen rumbling voices becoming one.

I blinked back the burning behind my eyes and faced the sea.

The sea. The vast, marvelous basin of blue.

Oh, beautiful ocean, what has brought us here? Must we end it like this?

My entire life I have sailed your surface. Scouting stars, hoisting anchors, devouring threats. I know every wave, every ripple by name. I have memorized and murdered and made you mine.

But what lies beneath?

Think of the creatures and fallen ships that could be hidden in all that darkness! Think of the dazzling riches and gilled monsters to be discovered! The thought is almost too much; waves clapping seductively beneath the hull.

I will always be a slave to your temptations.

But will I conquer you, dear sea? Or will you conquer me?

That is the mystery. That is the game. That is the life and death of this poor old sailor.

In a way I felt relieved, taking that final step. The eternal fight was over. Had I lost? It seemed as though I had, and yet I felt no remorse. Is it truly a loss if you feel better once it is over? No shame. No regret.

Only peace. Only peace.

Without so much as a splash, the sea swallowed the pirate.



*Rose Knachel is a high school junior whose work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and will appear in forthcoming issues of Buttered Toast Magazine and Kalopsia Literary Journal.*



# 2ND PLACE

The First Night of the Rest of Our Lives  
Maddie Myrick

Moving day. The day I've been thinking about constantly for pretty much as long as I can remember. In the corner of my eye, I can see Elle smiling out the window, and I start smiling too. It's rare to see her not smiling. She's a glass-half-full type of woman; almost as optimistic as they can get. A few years ago, someone stole her purse after she left it at a restaurant. I was ready to hunt the thief down, but Elle wouldn't let me because "she can just get new things" and because "they probably needed it more". Although sometimes it seems she's too positive, her optimism balances me out - I am the yin to her yang.

Our car ride is comfortably quiet. The radio is so quiet it's difficult to hear over the hum of the air outside. Neither of us moves to turn up the volume; our excited, yet nervous, thoughts are enough to occupy the silence. I look over to Elle once more, and she catches my eye. Her eyes reflect the late-autumn gray outside, but they glimmer like a child's do on Christmas morning. She grins, flashing her perfectly un-straight smile that I am lucky enough to see so often. I break the silence.

"Only a few more blocks," I assure, "and then we'll finally be home."

In a long few minutes, we're arriving at the new apartment. We drive down Main Street, admiring the apartments above as we drive behind the little shops to park. I pull into a parking spot, and the truck isn't even fully stopped when Elle is unlocking the door and jumping out. Without getting any of our things from the back of the truck, we walk to the door, up the stairs, and finally, we're standing at our door. I can feel Elle's mittened hand grip my arm a little tighter as she takes a deep breath. Elle gives me the honor of opening it for the first time. The doorknob jiggles when I attempt to open it and I'm afraid it's going to fall out of the door. Once I manage to get it to turn and open, we step inside together. We're both quiet. The room we're standing in has hardwood floors and a high ceiling. Parts of the floor in front of the window have been bleached by the sun, and they're paler than the rest of the floor. They look worn. There's a small kitchen near the door and a bedroom in the corner. The paint on the wall, in some spots, is as dry and crackly as a dried-up mud puddle. On the far side of the room, there is a huge south-facing window that overlooks Main Street below.

"This is amazing!" Elle squeals, turning around in circles to admire the entire room. I notice immediately that the floor squeaks loudly with every few steps she takes.

Is it? I wonder, eyeing the huge crack that runs along the ceiling and what appears to be a drip stain underneath a window. My stomach is a rock. My throat is as dry as the ceiling and walls seem to be. Was this a mistake? This doesn't look like it did online.

"I know," I reply, smiling to appease her. I'm not sure if she believes me, though, because she just turns around and continues looking at everything.

In actuality, I'm nervous. If this apartment is not everything we've hoped for, we'll be stuck here. We've been waiting for this for so long - everything needs to be perfect. My feet are planted where I am. I don't want to see the rest of the place - I'm afraid I will find more and more flaws. Elle walks to the window, looks outside, and then walks into the bedroom. I hesitantly pick up my feet and follow her, the floor groaning under my weight with every step. Am I going to fall through? Will it crack underneath me? The window I walk up to is caked in smudges, while the sill is crawling with dust and some dead flies. I cringe and move away from it. The air feels stagnant and dry on my skin and I want to take a shower after just standing in it. It smells as if this air has not moved or circulated in years, absorbing every scent and particle and not letting it go. I am suddenly aware of my own heartbeat, my own breathing, and the floor screaming beneath me. When I follow Elle into the bedroom, I can at least breathe a little sigh of relief when I see that the bedroom doesn't seem to have any horrible flaws. A few stains on the carpet and a bit of an odor seem to be the only problems.

"A little musty, hey?" Elle laughed. She takes a big deep breath, sniffing the air loudly with her nose pointed upwards. "Fresh paint, stale air, and burnt dust."

I can't help but laugh at this. She nailed every single scent.

"It kind of smells like old tacos, too," I grimace, at which Elle giggles and walks past me to go back into the other room.

After looking around a little bit more, I ease up a little bit. I'm still not impressed, but Elle, as always, is balancing my emotions about the flaws of the apartment. Her loving it so much makes me like it just a little bit more. I just want everything to be perfect for her. For us. We decide to start unloading our things from the truck. It takes the two of us four hours and around fifteen trips from the truck to the apartment to finally unload all of our things. Out of the apartment, down the stairs, to the truck, back to the building, up the stairs, in the apartment, and over again. It's absolutely

exhausting. By now, it's dark outside and we have to turn on the lights, creating a yellowish glow throughout the entire room. It makes the cracks and stains not-so noticeable. For once, though, Elle isn't smiling. She isn't unhappy, but I can tell she's worn-out. Her shoulders slump over after we set down a box. Her eyes droop and her hairline is glistening. A few times in between trips to the truck, she just sits on the floor to catch her breath. I probably don't look much better than her. She is a tired, worn-down stuffed animal; maybe that has been put through a dryer or left out in the rain one-too-many times. I take a few strides towards her and wrap my arms around her. She is my stuffed animal. As I hold her, I feel bad for not being as enthusiastic as her about moving into this place together. We have daydreamed about moving in together since we were freshmen in high school. Now, after more than five years together, the day has finally come, and I haven't been very supportive. I make sure to hold her for a little bit longer, breathe in her coconut shampoo and floral perfume, and appreciate the fact that this is my future wife. She buries her head into my chest, and even through my shirt and sweater, I can feel her lips curl up.

For dinner, we order Chinese takeout and eat on the floor together. Previously, this was one of our favorite activities. Whenever either of us had a rough day, or we just needed some comfort, the remedy was always Chinese food and eating on the floor. We've been doing it since even before we started dating, and it has remained a staple in our relationship. We lay out a blanket and eat on paper plates, with mostly half-full moving boxes around us. Actually, they're scattered all over. The room smells now of sweet and sour chicken, fortune cookies, and the fresh linen candle Elle lit as soon as she found it in one of the boxes. It is much, much better than the foreign smell we found when we first walked in. She and I are at least familiar with this smell. It is a reminder of when we were just kids, and of all of the hard times we've gotten through together. It's comforting. While we eat, we just put on some music and enjoy each other's company.

Elle lays on her back and puts her hands on her stomach, closes her eyes, and takes a deep breath. She groans. I look to her paper plate, see that it is almost clean, and smile to myself. No wonder she was so exhausted earlier; she had been starving. Not even two minutes later, one of our favorite songs comes on: "Banana Pancakes" by Jack Johnson. I look over and grin at her, expecting to lock eyes and sing the second line together, but she's laying on her side now, facing me, fast asleep. I set my food aside and quietly lay down next to her. Her brown hair lays draped over her shoulder perfectly. In the yellow glow of the lights around us, her skin is a pale olive, which accentuates the

beauty marks around her face. She looks ethereal, I think.

Laying here, next to the love of my life, this apartment doesn't seem so bad. I don't hear the floor squeak anymore. When all I could focus on was hating the flaws of this place, the creaks and groans were all I paid attention to. Now that I can start to appreciate the good, I don't even notice it. The walls appear softer. The whole room smells of good food and clean sheets. Our favorite song is playing. I glance over to the south-facing window that seemed so horrible to me earlier, and I imagine the beautiful sun pouring in through it on a summer day, feeding gracious houseplants and warming the room with its motherly rays. Here we are, laying in the middle of the floor, surrounded by both of our belongings, alone in a place we can actually call ours for the first time ever. I realize now, that it doesn't matter where I am. All that matters is that I am here, in this moment, with Elle. It is in this moment, with her sleeping next to me in the middle of the floor, and what's left of our Chinese takeout in front of us, that I realize I am home, and that this is just the first night of the rest of our lives together.



## Author Biography

*Maddie Myrick is a 16-year-old high school sophomore. She has always been very eager to learn and is always looking for new things to learn. She also loves animals of all kinds and has wanted to be a veterinarian (especially one at a zoo) for over half of her life. In her free time, she can be found volunteering at the Oshkosh Area Humane Society, spending time with her family (including her two cats and pet snake), baking, and listening to music of all types.*



# 3RD PLACE

## The End and the Beginning

### Sydney Farrell

Ever Tellers had never been to the lower parts of the city of Fortuna that were under the sea. He had always had food on his table and a roof over his head, and never felt the need to go there. The young lad was thirteen, quite tall, and had jet black hair, with eyes just as dark. To his knowledge, he had always lived in Fortuna. It was the magnificent city that was built on top of the sea, except for the lower levels that went all the way down to the sea's floor. The entire metropolis was like a huge jar rising up through and out of the water, with domes and palaces on the very top where the government officers lived and ruled.

Ever lived with his mother, Annalyn, very near the sea's surface, but still above it. He had always wondered about his father and other family members, but had never had the courage to ask. One night, on his thirteenth birthday, he finally did. Annalyn went very still. She knew Ever must not know until the time was right, and the time had not yet come.

"Well, I probably should have told you this long ago, but you are adopted," she said carefully. Ever was not as shocked as she expected. He had always felt as if it were true.

He went to bed that night with many questions. Who had his father been, and what kind of family was he from? As Ever looked out his window at the four moons of his world, he always thought of the four great cities of his world. Each city's color was the same as one of the moons; Viarum's was grey, Lester's was orange, Judaica's was white, and, last of all, Fortuna's color was bronze. He loved looking at the moons and the stars that were so beautiful, but also powerful.

Ever was awoken suddenly by a hand over his mouth. It was Annalyn. She was dressed and holding a bag. When she spoke, she sounded strong, but he could see her hands were shaking. "Quick, Ever, get up! You need to get dressed!" She spoke quickly and left. As he dressed, Ever knew something had happened. He just could not figure out what. When he emerged from his room, Annalyn put a satchel on him and led him to the end of the hall. She pushed on the wall and instantly a hidden door was revealed. Annalyn opened it and led him inside. Ever had a million questions but could not find the words. Annalyn turned to him and hugged him like she had never done in all the

time she had known him. They will be here soon, she thought, and released him. "I love you very much. Don't ever forget that, Ever." Ever was confused. Was he leaving? Then a sound like none he had ever heard was outside the house. Then Annalyn was gone and Ever was left alone.

Ever could not see at first. But then he saw a little stream of light coming up from the floor. He got down on his hands and knees and he could see that it was their living room below. What he saw next would never leave him. Ever saw Annalyn sitting on their couch, knitting. Suddenly, their front door opened. Four black outlines of people walked in. The feeling that Ever felt when they entered the room was one of such fear that he almost cried. Annalyn slowly got up and put her knitting down. "What do you want?" She stood tall against these people who were like shadows, dark and sinister.

"Oh, you know what we came here for. I will only ask once. Where is the girl?" The person that spoke was the shortest of the group, and her voice was as cold and dark as the night.

"I would rather die than tell you!" Annalyn sounded brave, but inside was terrified.

"Brave words for someone who's outnumbered," sneered the dark shadow. That is exactly what Ever began to suspect. Those people were shadows, or like them.

The four shadows began to close around Annalyn. She pulled out a knife that was hidden in her dress, ready to defend herself! The shadows' attack was quick, for they were light on their feet. The battle between them raged! Ever knew he should do something, but could not think of what it could be.

Finally, to Evers's dismay, the shadows overpowered Annalyn! "Let me go! You have nothing against me!" She struggled to free herself but with no avail.

"You have what we want. I will not ask again. Where can we find the girl?" In that moment, Annalyn knew she had to choose—tell them what they wanted to know and live, or protect the girl and die. She thought of Ever up in the attic seeing and hearing this. He still needed her, but she knew that if she talked, all the children would be in even greater danger.

"I gave you my answer!" she yelled.

"I thought you were smarter 9378. I was wrong." The shadow revealed a huge needle, then thrust it into her! Annalyn screamed. The scream was like nothing Ever had never heard. It was pain, sorrow and anger, all in one breath. "Take her to the house." The shadows lifted her up and left the through the front door.

Ever was stunned. He did not know what to do. A single tear slid upon his cheek. He pushed it away.

Finally, Ever looked in the bag that she had given him. Inside, he found a letter. It was from Annalyn.

‘Ever, if you are reading this, then the Umbra Society has taken me. I know you must have many questions. But first, you need to get away from our house. This bag has everything you need.

I love you very much. But you must go to the lower levels of Fortuna and seek out your sister, Raven Crowing. You are both in great danger. Look for her at Crowing Inn, on the eighth level down.

A.T.’

Evers’s mind was racing a million miles a minute while he rode the tram down to sea level. Once there, he would have to walk all the way down to the eighth level below the sea’s surface. Thus, Evers’s greatest journey began.

As he walked down the declining shadowy street, he could see through the glass. The sea was murky and uninviting. The houses were crooked and dark. Few people were on the streets at first. But as Ever got lower, and things got darker, more were there doing what people did at night. Many of them were the very poor working class who toiled in factories all day, and then just tried to survive the nocturnal hours. Huddled around fires, they sang, fought, and talked about the upper class.

Ever heard things he had never known before about the government, that the man in charge was not the rightful ruler, and the like. He wondered if the people above the sea either did not care, or were too afraid to speak what they thought and express the truth. Ever saw for the first time that his city was very unhappy, that people were dying and suffering. By the time he got to the eighth level, it was morning. But very little sunlight got down that far, so the streetlamps still shown dimly. People began to come out and go to work or buy and sell in the market. It was very eerie. Nobody seemed to look, or even realized he was there.

As Ever walk through the market, he noticed things being bought and sold that he had never seen before. Then he saw it—a member of the Umbra leaning against a wall. Ever ducked into an alley and began to run! He had no idea where he was running to or even where he was. Suddenly, he crashed into the back of a very tall man. Ever stumbled backwards and fell. The man spun around and lunged at him, grabbing his bag! Ever tried to tug it away from the man, but he was strong and pushed Ever into a pile of boxes. And all went black for Ever Tellers.

When Ever awoke, he was in a dark room. He saw from the window that it was night again. As

he tried to sit up, all the memories flooded back; what had happened to Annalyn, his journey, and how his bag had gotten stolen.

"Don't try to sit up. You are still hurt." Ever was startled by the voice that was not rough. He looked, and saw that the speaker was a young girl, not even as old as him. She had black hair like Ever, but her eyes were as white as snow.

"Where am I?" asked Ever sitting up.

"You are in what once was the Crowing's Inn," the girl answered.

Suddenly, a man entered. He was short and thin, and had very red hair. "Well, Ever, it is good to see you up and awake!"

"How do you know my name?" Ever asked, now very worried about who these people were that he assumed had kidnapped him.

"I knew Annalyn. My name is Rieko Crowing, and this is Raven."

"Then you're the ones whom I have been seeking?" Ever had so many questions. But Rieko held up his hand.

"I know you probably have many questions but first you and Raven are in great danger..."

"But why? Is Raven really my sister?" Ever interrupted, and looked at the girl who had not stopped her intimidating stare. There was a pause from Rieko. He knew they needed to know, but not all of it.

"Yes, it is true. You and Raven here are siblings."

"How do I know you are telling the truth?"

Rieko held out and opened his hand. "Because of this." There lay a small charm, the other half of the one that Annalyn had always worn around her neck. Ever did not know what to believe. He was confused and upset that Annalyn had never told him. Then he thought of the Umbra taking Annalyn away from him, and knew that what he was up against was real. He realized that these people here were on his side.

Raven sat calmly. She had just as much emotion and confusion about everything as Ever, but she trusted Reiko with her life.

Ever stared back at her. He knew nothing of this girl, but somehow felt as if he had known all his life that he had a sister. Raven suddenly got up and rushed to him and hugged him! Ever began crying, as did Raven. They hugged for a long time, then finally began to talk. Ever told them about

what had happened to Annalyn, and how he had seen a shadow in the street.

Raven told Ever about her life and how she had lived there since she was very little. "But why separate us?" Raven asked Reiko.

He paused. "It was for your safety. Your parents were murdered by the Umbra, and we wanted to keep you safe. So we separated you and raised you separately as our own. The Umbra has a lot of power, but you two were born against them, and they want you dead. I do not believe Annalyn is gone. They most likely will keep her alive until they have both of you. We must leave the city at immediately." And so, they did.

As the boat pulled away from Fortuna, Ever and Raven were standing side by side looking up at the great city. They both knew that they had hard times ahead of them, but they had each other now and their journey was just beginning.



*Sydney Farrell is 14 years old and is homeschooled in Oshkosh. She has not written many stories, but has created quite a few fictional worlds and characters. Sydney loves to make jewelry, paint, and do things outside with her five siblings.*



**The Path Chosen  
Keridak Silk**

Ten year old Emma sat in a grassy field picking wildflowers. *How did I die?* She knew she was dead because this wasn't the world she had been born into. There it was dirty, sour smelling, filled with hunger and pain. Here those were gone. The only good times had been when she was sent on errands. She loved the carriages and carts. Carrying important people and goods around the city. Sometimes the drivers would let her pet the horses.

She ran her palms down her now smooth legs. No scars from beatings marred them. No bruises or soreness. Wiggling her bare toes the grass tickled. She made a strange sound. Clamped her hand over her mouth. Her body tense as she looked around. Nothing happened.

Nodding and taking a deep breath she remembered hearing the same noise from babies who found joy in the world. They hadn't learned. The older girls who lived next door would wait on the steps as the lamplighter went past. The young man would tip his hat and grin. The sisters then made a similar sound to Emma. They called it giggling.

Emma smiled. It had felt good, so she tried it again. A happy gurgle that began in her throat and vibrated. She was going to like being dead. She had been only four when Mama J took her in. Not her real mother, that one had died. Emma didn't remember mother at all. Mama J expected a day's work, every day. It didn't matter if you were little. Slackers were whipped or sent to bed without supper. Emma had learned quickly to always look busy, to keep her head down and not to ever smile. If you wanted to survive you followed Mama J's rules.

If the weather was nice Mama J would take a cup of tea to the back yard fence and chat. Lolli, her neighbor, always gushed, "I don't know how you do it. Taking those miserable girls in. You're a saint, that's what I say." Mama J sighed every time, sipped her tea, and nodded. Then the two of them would gossip. Two fat biddies with nothing to do.

Lolli's daughters cooked and cleaned. But there was a scullery maid about Emma's age for the hard work. Lolli claimed she was preparing her girls for marriage. It sounded like free labor for some man to Emma. *I'd never want to be married;* She'd often think. Mama J was preparing her for life as a servant. At least then there would be some pay, if she survived the lessons.

If Emma paused to wipe her eyes, she'd get a kick. "You good for nothing. Don't I feed you and clothe you? I don't know what possesses me to keep you. Your own parents didn't want you. Probably glad

they died before they could see what you turned into." Swallowing Emma scrubbed harder. Kept her head down and held the tears. The skin on her knees had started to split and bleed.

She smiled as she lifted her long skirt to see they were healed in this magical world of death. *How did I die?* A hazy memory of a cobblestone street. She scrunched her face to remember. There had been a carriage racing along in too much of a hurry to care what or who was in the way. She could hear the clip clopping of the horse team. She should have jumped out of the way but there had been a little boy.

*Is he here?* Emma looked around. She was alone. *Perhaps he didn't die like me.*

The field was empty except for all the flowers. Emma picked a few more for a nosegay. No rules. The happy sound came again. Emma looked at her dress, white and crisp. She ran her hands over the unfamiliar softness. "I'm clean." Her words were softly spoken. Then louder "I feel good!"

Getting up she looked around the field. It seemed to go on forever. Except in one direction there were woods and an opening for a path. She walked to it humming. She had never hummed in life, not even in her dreams. She held her fist full of tiny yellow flowers up to her nose and inhaled the sweet smell. She had already pinched herself and it had hurt. Everything worked. This just wasn't life as she had known it.

The path went into the woods. Emma stared at the huge trees and walked slowly. Branches hung overhead filtering the light and forming a tunnel. She jumped. A tiny creature hopped into the ferns, trying to get away from her. "It's ok. I won't hurt you," she called. It was small, furry, and gray with a puffy tail. *I wonder what you are.* Birds she knew, not their names but they were familiar. Black crows and pigeons often watched her work. There were a lot of other birds in the branches singing and moving about. Happily, she noticed their colors and listened to the music. *I like it here!*

The smooth dirt under her bare feet felt cool. *It's odd that there aren't other people. I know they die all the time.* At Mama J's kids died. Each time a big man came and tossed the body into a wheelbarrow, then pushed it off down the street. He smelled funny and had a red runny nose that he wiped on his sleeve. A day or two later another kid would be brought to Mama J's. Emma was always glad when they arrived cause it was hard work doing it all on her own. Washing floors, dusting, and cleaning out the ash. She always gave the chamber pots to the newcomer. She also started the fire in the morning. Shivering she would stack the small logs and place a piece of coal into the stove that heated the kitchen. She loved those few moments of warmth before the other's woke up. Her hands held to the flickering flame.

Emma had to make sure the kitchen was cleaned first. Lolli would come and sit there with Mama J when the weather was cold, rainy, or too hot. They didn't want her underfoot.

Breakfast was only for Mama J and her husband Mr. J. Dinner was served mid-day. If she was lucky, she could lick her fingers and taste the food before scraping the leftovers into the dog's dish. Too good for her. There was stale bread and moldy cheese for the orphans. They gobbled it greedily. Emma put her hands on her belly and continued to walk. No hunger, her grin grew.

There was an opening ahead. A dirt circle where the path divided into three. One way had red brick steps going down. The opposite had steps made of white stone. Green vines of white flowers decorated the sides. That one went up. It was the one in the middle that confused her. It was straight ahead. A gravel path.

Everyone knew what it meant to go up or down when you were dead, but where did this straight path in front of her go? There seemed to be a slight glow ahead. *I'm dead, what can happen.* She started forward, skipping along.

There were trees at first and the gravelly pebbles were small. It shifted to familiar cobble stones. She couldn't make out anything in front of her. Emma whirled and tried to go back. Holding her breath as her chest tightened. It was the smell.

Emma slammed into an invisible wall. "NO," she screamed. Her fists pounded on the barrier keeping her from going back. "No" She turned and pressed her back against it, pushing and shaking. "I'm dead," she shouted. "I can't go back." The smell of the city on a hot day was getting stronger. The clamoring sounds of people and horses grew louder.

She bent in half clutching her stomach. Then saw familiar old faded black shoes poking out from under the skirts of a now gray, dirty frock. There was a hole, she bent and poked her finger in, touching her foot. No stockings. Her arms wrapped around her chest and rocked.

*I won't move.* Emma gritted her teeth determined to not go forward into the city street. Yet somehow, she was getting closer to it, and it was looking clearer. Wet tears slipped, then flowed. "I'm dead," she tried to hum but the sound strangled in her throat. Her stomach growled and the bloody skin on her knees began to sting. She stood back up to straighten them, stilling the pain. *Please, I'll be good. I work hard. I...*her trembling grew.

Through the tears, there was a blur of red. A tiny boy running. He laughed as he raced right towards the street. Emma moved before she thought. Flying out to snatch the laughing tot inches before the carriage hit. The clapping of the horse and the creak of the wheels loud in her ears. Her stomach lurched as she felt it breeze past her cheek. She held the child tight. The carriage had almost squashed them both.

"Edwin! My Edwin!" There was a flurry of blue velvet skirts and for a moment the air was filled with a

flower fragrance. A dark haired woman pulled the child to her and pressed her face into his neck. He laughed and giggled at the game.

Emma took a deep breath, enjoying the lovely smell and pretending she was back in the field. *Was I really dead?* Her breath was coming in fast puffs as she tried not to think. Better not to think, just go. Her head bent down, she hunched her shoulders and started to move away. More people had rushed over. Better to go before she was noticed.

Then a hand touched her shoulder. Frozen, Emma waited. *Just let me go. I'll be good.*

The woman in blue velvet lowered herself and looked into Emma's eyes. "Thank you. You saved my baby's life." Emma gave a nod and tried to shuffle off, but the hand still held her gently. Edwin was passed to a tall dark man and tossed into the air. While the woman continued. "What's your name?"

"Emma. Emma Mop." She stuttered out.

"Mop? That's a different name."

Her voice sounded musical and pleasant. Emma dared to answer. "The orphanage gave it to me."

The woman looked carefully at Emma. She took the small, rough hands into her own soft ones. "Well, Emma Mop." Emma felt her chin raised gently and looked into an amazingly beautiful face. The woman's eyes opened wide, bright blue as her dress.

"If you hadn't run into the street. If you hadn't whisked him up." She shuddered. Holding Emma's hand, tightly. "You risked yourself to save his life. You are a hero."

The tight knots in Emma's shoulders unclenched. She felt a warmth flow down her as she kept her head up, eyes focused on the lovely lady smiling down at her. She squeezed the hand that held hers. "Hero?"

The man holding Edwin moved closer. He had a warm smile that dimpled his cheeks. "Yes, Miss Mop, a hero. And you shall be treated as one." He bowed to her. "I'm Daniel, this is my wife, Camille... you've met Edwin. Please, come to our home for tea."

She felt safe with Edwin's family. Camille still held tightly to her hand. They both looked at her. She nodded quickly then followed them, a small grin on her face. She wanted to skip and hum out loud. *A hero, I'm a hero.*

There were pasties, hot and juicy. A big glass of milk and she was allowed to eat all the biscuits she

wanted. Sweet, buttery melting in her mouth. Mama J had never shared the biscuits with her kids. They were given watery tea and stale bread. Emma had only tasted butter when she had washed the family's plates.

"Emma." Camille said. "We'd like you to come and live with us."

Eagerly Emma nodded. "I work hard. I'm a good cleaner, I am. You won't need to beat me."

A look of pain went over the lovely face. "Emma, we would never beat you. We also don't want you to clean. Would you like to be Edwin's big sister?"

Emma sharply breathed in and held it. *Am I still dead?* The path had led her to be in the right place to save the little boy now covered in sugar and crumbs. The memory of doing this before and failing was fading. *I grabbed him. This time I was fast enough. I'm a hero.* She smiled as a warm glow formed in her chest. Emma nodded.

"Good, let's get you cleaned up." Camille rose and reached out her hand. Edwin raced them to the stairs.

"I'll take care of the details. Don't worry." Daniel called after them.

Emma stood at the foot of the stairs. They went up in a slight curve of white marble. Her cheeks hurt with the unfamiliar smile. She looked ahead and firmly took her steps to a new life.



## Author Biography

*Writing in multiple genres is the highlight of Keridak Silk's life: a kaleidoscope of magic, myth and reality. She has paranormal short stories published in two anthologies. Keridak is the author of The Advanced Psychic Series Volume 1 Amazing Past Life Tarot. The second is due in April: Shielding and Warding Psychic Protection. In her upcoming cozy mystery series Keridak weaves the unusual in as often as possible. Living the past twelve years in Germantown, Wisconsin; Keridak, her cat Stormy, Bob and husband now escape the winter to Florida. Keridak is a practicing intuitive counselor, certified hypnotist, and trainer.*



**Final Arguments  
Gail Sosinsky**

Lindy wasn't sure why she was in line. There was no way she was getting in, no way she was good enough. She could climb over the guard rail and tumble into Hell, and no one would notice or care.

The line shuffled forward another step. About ten people ahead, the floor broadened out and officials of some kind sat behind pearl inlaid desks, long feather pens dancing above the scrolls.

A gentle man in orange stood and bowed. A door opened, and the sound of chanting and the smell of incense floated out. Serenely, he walked through.

Serenity. Hah! Lindy couldn't imagine that for herself. So many things had felt right at the time – the threesome with the high school quarterback and the coach, the exhilaration of the meth, the thrill of petty theft from the lockers at the country club where she'd worked. Other things had been harder –the abortion, the time she'd jabbed the butcher knife into Bobby's gut because the son of a bitch just wouldn't stop hitting her. . .

She looked up at the sound of boisterous prayers. A man with a long beard and hat with little curls in front of his ears joined in the song and walked through. The line moved forward.

A woman in a hijab entered a sunlit garden.

A loud male voice cried, "I know Jesus Christ," and pearl-colored doors winged open to his triumphal entry.

Jesus Christ. Granny had gone on about Him, and Lindy had loved the pictures where He held lambs and smiled at children. But Jesus didn't love little girls who pulled their panties down for little boys, although Granny must have thought he was fine with old women who could be rolled for a quarter bottle of bourbon.

She should just jump. How bad could Hell be? She'd survived beatings and rapes, begged money and whored for it, burned down a house to get out of a lease and broken her pelvis crashing a car for the insurance. People like her were beyond help.

An old Amish woman walked through a door to green fields and the sound of lowing cows.

Selling Granny's teeth had been a mistake, though – a quick laugh and a twenty for completing the dare, but Medicaid wouldn't buy a second set, and Granny stopped eating. Just gave up and died. Lindy wished she could change that. Granny had been a hypocrite about a lot of things, but she'd stood by Lindy and her sister, Sally, when no one else would take them in. Granny had held on to Lindy long after Sally let go. Not that Lindy could blame Sally for breaking off contact. Lindy had testified against Sally in return for a lighter sentence – one year instead of three. Sally hadn't even known about the pot growing in the ravine. Sally had been home helping Granny after her hip replacement while Lindy played farmer.

Hell was where she belonged. No doubt about it. Endless suffering and no love. Lindy had been there. It would be a homecoming. She just wished she hadn't been so much hell for the few people who had cared.

Lindy leaned over the barrier, surprised to see her tear splash against the pearly rail.

"Next."

Lindy looked up and realized the official meant her. Oh, well. It wasn't like this was the first judge she had stood before. At least it would be over soon.

As Lindy approached, the official motioned for her to sit. Lindy shook her head to clear it. Sometimes the official had wings, sometimes a beard, for a moment he – she? – looked like an Egyptian with a set of scales and a feather. In the end, Lindy decided the official was an old woman in dire need of some instruction from a YouTube makeup video.

Lindy sat.

"Name?"

"Melinda Jane Beaumont Jones."

"Date of birth?"

"June 17, 1971."

"Cause of death?"

"I guess Bobby smacked me harder than usual."

The old woman's quill paused, and she peered at Lindy over wire-rimmed spectacles that Lindy hadn't noticed before. Shit! She just should have jumped over the railing. Lindy swallowed. "After Bobby hit me, I took some pain meds," Lindy said, looking into the mist swirling around her feet. "I took a lot."

The quill scratched in the scroll.

"Please claim the faith that has brought you thus far."

"What?"

"What do you believe?" the official asked. "What is Heaven, and why should you get in?" The quill quivered with her expectation.

Lindy caught herself before she laughed. Heaven? A full fridge, a full tank of gas and twenty bucks left over. Not having to fight for the last cigarette. No yelling. A smile from anyone, even the toothless old homeless woman on Holman Street who spent her day blessing people and eating what she pulled from the McDonald's dumpster. Lindy had stolen the woman's scarf once. Pushed her over and grabbed it right off her head.

Jesus Christ, why hadn't she just jumped the rail? She deserved Hell. Why should they let her into Heaven? They shouldn't!

"Melinda, I need an answer."

"I –." Shame filled Lindy. What a useless piece of shit she was. She'd spit in the face of every kindness she'd ever met. "I'm sorry. I –." Lindy shook her head and looked away.

"Melinda, what are you sorry for?" The official's voice seemed much softer.

"Everything," Lindy whispered. "I'm sorry for everything." A silence settled on the mist. Lindy hugged herself, head hanging forward. She was finished.

"Come with me," the official said, standing and motioning for Lindy to precede her. They passed behind the other desks, and the officials all turned to stare at her. Must not be many sent to Hell. She wondered why there wasn't a trap door like on kids' shows.

"Follow this path," the official said, pointing to a narrow wooden causeway. "The door will open when you reach it."

The mist rose heavily, swallowing the official.

What was the name of that movie about the walk to the gas chamber? Or was it an electric chair? Lindy couldn't remember. She stepped onto the wood, expecting it to be slick, but her feet didn't slip. She took one tentative step, two. She broke into a run. Anything to get past the anticipation of doom.

The door was a regular front door with a half-circle of windows, like the nice one she'd seen at Home Depot when they'd stopped to get a bedroom door to replace the one Bobby had smashed

his fist through. Except this door didn't have a handle. She knocked.

The door swung open.

She stepped into a kitchen. Odd, since the door was a front door. The dishes were done, and a bowl of fruit, complete with a pineapple, sat on the counter. A Crockpot full of barbeque sat on another counter next to a big fridge with the freezer on the bottom. A feeling of unease ran down Lindy's spine like a sneaky cat. She pulled open the refrigerator door.

A big bowl of cut-up watermelon sat surrounded by milk, eggs, cheese, potato salad – . Lindy slammed the door, truly scared for the first time. A sound behind her made her whirl around.

"Lindy," Granny said, drawing on a cigarette that smelled like lilacs. "Lindy, I am so sorry I didn't raise you better."

Lindy heard the words and somehow the fear and pain in Granny's heart that had driven her to the slaps and curses flashed through Lindy's mind, and she understood.

"No, Granny. I'm sorry –" Lindy sobbed. "You're teeth –"

"Hush, Lindy. I know."

"Where are we?" Lindy asked. "I know it's not Heaven. I saw the people going in there. But it doesn't seem like Hell."

Granny stubbed her cigarette out in a clean ashtray and pulled another from the pack, already lit. Granny handed her the pack, and Lindy took one, only to watch the pack immediately return to full. She took a drag and the scent of fresh oranges surrounded her.

"That is Heaven," Granny said at last. "The people there lived good enough to expect Heaven, and they will get what they believe Heaven should be. They get what they want. When I crossed the bridge, all I could think about was the way I failed and how sorry I was. I couldn't imagine Heaven, so I think I got the Heaven I need."

Lindy finished her cigarette, her thoughts deeper than the bottom of a well. She stubbed it out in the, again, empty ashtray. "So what do we do?"

"It's always a surprise," Granny said, unplugging the Crockpot and fitting it into its carry case. "Today there's a picnic just down the road. We're bringing fruit and barbecue, and Mr. Shepherd's planning to fry fish. Would you grab the watermelon from the fridge?" Granny zipped the cover. "Oh, no. I forgot to cut the pineapple. Could you grab that, too?" She headed to the door and held it open.

Lindy shifted the watermelon bowl and grabbed the pineapple. Beneath it, she saw a handful

of twenties and two gas cards.

She smiled briefly and headed out the door, not knowing what she would find, but trusting the surprise to come.



## Author Biography

*Mild-mannered office worker by day, dedicated writer on her own time, Gail Sosinsky grew up in a northern Wisconsin paper-mill town. She writes fiction, poetry and the occasional play, and her work tends toward science fiction and fantasy. She has been published in Star\*line, Eye to the Telescope, Mindflights, America West Airlines Magazine, and Sword and Sorceress XVI, among other venues.*



**Before the Fire  
Heidi Wylie**

Consciousness found her before her eyes were able to open, alarm bells ringing in her mind like a dream that had escaped with her into reality. Jen thought she smelled smoke, but kept her eyes closed and rolled over, beckoning sleep to return. She realized with a start, though, that those alarm bells were in fact screaming loudly, and she shot up in bed, swinging her legs to the side. Jen tried to get her eyes to adjust to the dark, but she had even flipped her bedside clock on its face in hopes of better sleep than she'd had in the last few weeks. "Dave," she whispered, reaching to the other side of the bed, but the sheets were cold. She hopped down from the tall frame, softly landing on the plush carpet. The shrill beeping did nothing to guide her, though the smell of smoke was much more pungent now that she was fully awake. She reached for her door and swung it open without thinking, immediately feeling the heat emanating from downstairs. The kids, she silently pleaded as her heart began to race.

Three weeks before the fire, Dave sat at his imposing mahogany desk in his expansive home office knowing he was thoroughly fucked. He stared at his laptop screen, sun streaming in through the skylight above him, trying his hardest to hold down the knot that had grown in his stomach. He stood up and started to pace. If he could just think hard enough, the cash would find a way to his pockets. It always had before. It had when he was eighteen and had just been kicked out of his dad's house for the last time. It had when he took a leap and bought his first car dealership. And it had when he'd opened the third and the fourth. Money ran toward him when he and Jen were planning their 500-guest wedding and when they had bought this behemoth of a house years ago. And now Jen had wanted an addition on the house for guests; an entire suite lining the whole back side of the house and overlooking the in-ground pool. But lately, Dave was keenly aware of the sensation growing inside his chest of water slowly filling up his hull and dragging him down, down into financial ruin and drowning him. He told himself it was opening that damn fifth dealership that was bleeding him dry, but he knew that wasn't the truth. The truth was uglier because it was just another of his own shortcomings instead of a failed risk. The truth was what made Dave feel small and stupid and

scared. He couldn't control his impulses. That was the truth.

Jen raced into Elijah's room and found everything perfectly still. So still that she worried that the smoke had already knocked her son unconscious. She shook him hard and said his name sharply. His eyes shot open, and her beautiful preteen son gazed up at her with the wonderment of a baby. Without a word, he gawked, not completely awake though his eyes were as big as the moon. "Elijah, the house is on fire," Jen said sternly. Elijah's clouded eyes snapped into focus and he whipped the covers off himself. He started scrambling for socks and shoes, and Jen couldn't help but be irritated at his fumbling about. Irritated is all she had been for years now. She'd curse herself for getting irked by the smallest thing, like baseball gear left in the middle of the living room, but a moment later lash out on the first breathing thing that crossed her path. She'd tell herself to let the next little thing go, but there it would be in front of her and the simmering rage would only intensify. Then the cycle would start anew, round and round until her head hit the pillow and everything was their fault and her fault and no one's fault and everyone's fault, and round and round until it was only her fault and she crumbled inside under the weight of her wretchedness as a member of this family. But she never could quite come up with the first thing that had irritated her in the day. If she could just figure out why she woke up so angry every morning, she could catch it in a cage and keep it from infecting her day. Instead she woke up each day wishing she was somewhere other than their beautiful home. The one that was more than anything she had ever dreamed of. Elijah finally had some old basketball shoes on that had been retired in his closet for at least a year. They were likely too small, but Jen pressed that insignificant concern down to focus on getting out. But she hated herself a little that she would have such a trivial criticism for her son in a moment when their world was literally going up in flames around them. She grabbed her son's hand and held it tightly as they darted into the hallway.

Two weeks before the fire, Dave sat in his office on the second floor at the new dealership, thinking. He was closing up for the night and he had been alone for a long while. Dim lights lit up the showroom floor and the large lot was illuminated by light, sending the cars beyond his office windows sparkling in the night. His huge office was surrounded by glass, overlooking his empire below. Wheels were turning inside his head relentlessly as to how he could pay down the exorbitant home equity line without Jen finding out how bad it had gotten. He had started throwing the statements away when they came in the mail because it made him feel sick to see the return

address. There weren't any friends to borrow from this time that would even make a dent in his burden. How much money could he take from the dealership without any of his partners noticing? It would take too long to funnel the amount he needed without suspicion. He was sweating through his green button down shirt and loosened his tie. He could lose the house, he thought in disbelief. He couldn't lose it; Jen loved that house and he loved her despite the distance 22 years of marriage can harden between two people. The spending had just been out of control, and on what? He couldn't even recall. When they had wanted something, the home equity was there with a big green light. He thought of Jen on the beach on their last vacation, her gorgeously tanned body in her slimming one-piece suit. She was stretched out in a lounge chair, sunglasses shading her eyes as she read a magazine, and he couldn't help but think that she hadn't aged a day. How lucky he was to have her. How expensive it was to have her. How he didn't always quite feel like he had her. Dave slowly made his way downstairs to the cars in the showroom and the fluorescent automatic lights came on with such force he had to squint. He walked over to the blue corvette closest to the back window and stood heavily before it. He took his hand and dragged it along its swirling blue paint, petting it gingerly. What if he could sell one of these outside the dealership? Or pay someone to make it look like they stole it? He could get some insurance money for that. He walked around the car, appraising its value. He would need to steal more of these than he even had in stock to make this go away, he thought dejectedly. He stood vacantly for a long time, feeling a gulf of empty dread emanating from within. The lights suddenly went out, and still Dave stood there in the near dark, thinking, thinking, thinking.

Jen and Elijah ran down the stairs without considering what would await them at the bottom. Jen flung open the front door and pushed Elijah out so hard that he stumbled and fell onto one knee. His lanky, awkward limbs didn't seem to mind and he easily sprung up and ran toward the street. Jen didn't look back as she waded through the smoke toward the basement. The fire alarms were screaming so loud that she couldn't even hear herself cough. She tried to bend low as she made her way to the basement door. Just as she reached it, Dave and Tyler burst through, Tyler yelling "Mom!" upon seeing her. He was so tall and strong, a young man of 18 on the verge of his life truly beginning. Tears filled her eyes with smoke and relief at the sight of him. "Get outside!" she shouted. Tyler dashed for the front door. "Elijah?" Dave shouted, and Jen pointed toward the door. Without a second thought, Dave rushed outside. Jen looked around their open concept first floor for

anything she could think to salvage. She was struck by how ironic it was that she had just a week before done the same thing.

Just last Tuesday morning she had been sitting in an oversized chair in the living room, cup of coffee in hand, calculating all the things she would take with her to her new condo. Sure, it was only three bedrooms and probably only half the size of their first floor, but it was all hers. Well, sort of. She had used the home equity to buy it with cash without him noticing, but that wasn't unusual. She had bought it cheap from a golfing girlfriend named Trish who didn't ask many questions. Trish had said offhandedly that she needed to offload her "lady cave" to pay off something her husband didn't know about. So one secret becomes another, Jen thought. She had bought it but hadn't drawn up divorce papers. What did that say? Did she want to be with Dave? If she did, why would she be so eagerly mentally boxing up her most beloved possessions on this sunny morning? All she knew was that this life was stifling. She had everything and yet the yawning hole within her kept growing. She was grateful for the condo now. Now they would at least have somewhere to go to ride out the wreckage, however complicated it would be to explain to Dave.

One week before the fire, Dave walked through the new addition with the contractor. He was thrilled with the large windows and the natural light they let in, but it didn't erase the constant ticking of the calculator in his head. Jen had wanted the addition but seemed to take no interest in the progress as of late. She had simply not responded to his text when he had told her about this meeting, so he figured she didn't care about things like the electrical now that she could see the overall structure taking shape. He was more particular about things like where outlets went anyway. The contractor's voice boomed and blathered on as Dave took in the high ceilings and open space. He saw two young guys working on the electrical on the far wall and thought to himself that they couldn't be a day older than Tyler. He could even see acne on one of their faces. Where was their supervisor? He tried to wrangle his attention back to the contractor, but just then a loud burst of laughter came from the young men. Dave looked over again to see them leaning on the bare studs, doubled over with whatever had been amusing them. He saw a vision of Tyler and his buddies holding the exact same pose, wracked with hysteria. Dave wondered to himself why he had even agreed to this addition when Tyler would be headed to college in the fall. They would have an entire basement lair suddenly vacant. Dave's heart began to race. What if they could downsize? Sell this gargantuan headache for something smaller for just him, Jen, and Elijah? Jen would be pissed, he

knew. She loved pulling her BMW into the extravagant driveway, knowing her neighbors envied her. He'd have to talk to her about it, which gave him pause. He dreaded talking to her at all, let alone about something he knew would disappoint her. Besides, the bank would be knocking well before he could close on this. I mean, who could possibly sell their house in the middle of putting on an addition? His heart slowed and his stomach knotted. He hadn't even realized the contractor had walked away to speak with someone else. Assuming his walkthrough was over, Dave headed into the garage and climbed into the Land Rover. He grabbed the steering wheel and gingerly placed his forehead on the stitched leather. Then he let out a scream so loud and long it clawed at his voice, leaving him sapped and silent.

When Jen finally jogged onto the front lawn, her family was waiting by the curb. Dave, Elijah and Tyler stood staring at the house in flames. It was clear the fire was coming from the back of the house, their precious new addition.

"Did anyone call 911?" Jen asked in a rasping voice.

"I did," said Dave. His voice seemed vacant. They all stood in silence as they watched the smoke billow into the night. A long time seemed to pass before Dave said, "I'll call the insurance company tomorrow. Thank God we have a great policy." The way he said it with such surety gave Jen pause. She looked over at Dave, but his face was blank. "Should give us a pretty good payout."

"Where are we gonna go?" Elijah asked quietly. Jen could see tears forming in his eyes.

"Don't worry, I have a condo we can stay in until we figure out what to do," Jen said in a soothing voice. Dave slowly turned his head toward her. They locked eyes for the first time in probably weeks. "You do?" Dave asked mildly. "How'd you get that?"

Jen embraced Elijah, looking away from Dave as her heart beat heavily and said, "Trish was selling it and needed money fast, so I used the home equity."

She didn't see Dave's whole body tense and begin to shake with anger, resentment, understanding of what she had done and what he had done. Another long moment passed as Jen held Elijah, Tyler and Dave standing stoically before their sinking ship.

They heard sirens wailing as the firemen approached, but still stayed planted to the earth beneath them. As they watched the firemen proceed into the house, one approached Dave and shook his hand. "I take it you're the owner?" the fireman said in a firm voice. "Yes," Dave replied, trying to seem as composed as possible. "We'll get this put out as soon as we can. Do you have a place to

stay for the rest of the night?" Dave swallowed and glanced at Jen. "Yes." The fireman started to walk away but Dave touched his coat.

"It had to have been those damn kids doing the electrical," he said, an urgency in his voice. Jen couldn't help but look over at him with curiosity. "They couldn't have been any older than my son here and they were working on the electrical in our addition just last week."

The fireman paused, looking from him to Jen. "Don't worry, sir. We'll determine the cause of the fire and let you know what we find out." He walked toward the flaming house, leaving the family behind.

When the fireman was out of earshot, Jen took a few steps toward her husband and looked him squarely in the eye. He returned her gaze evenly, clenching his jaw and slowly releasing it. When had he become a stranger to her? When had she stopped noticing the tension in his shoulders, the weary look of someone haunted by stress?

Finally she said in a near whisper, "Kids doing the electrical, huh?"

Dave swallowed. "Yeah."

Jen searched his eyes knowingly. After a beat, he peered back at her with the same knowing look. Jen couldn't help but look away as guilt washed over her. They stood side by side, staring at their house, their life. Finally, Jen cleared her raspy throat and said, "Well, then I guess we should sue them."

Dave's chest was tight. With relief, excitement, fear, smoke; he wasn't sure. But they would survive this somehow. He was sure of that. And maybe even come out ahead. No one would ever need to know about his desperation. Jen felt desperate too, though. Desperate for the future, which was now completely unknown to her. She felt as though she stood before a room full of doors, all blank and identical, unwilling to reveal what future was beyond each one.

Finally she felt Tyler's hand on her shoulder, and she looked at him and put her hand over his. She rested her head on her son's arm, his frame too tall for her to reach his shoulder. The kids would be fine, no matter what was before them. Kids are resilient, she reminded herself. Like hardy little weeds.

"Let's go," she said. She approached a police car that had arrived without their notice and asked for a ride to the condo. Within a few minutes, another unmarked police car arrived with a few necessities in the trunk for each of them. Jen climbed in the front seat gingerly and left the back for Dave and

the boys. She gave the driver the address and he pulled away from the curb. Jen took one last look at her old life, closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them, it was gone.



## Author Biography

*Heidi Wylie is a voice and piano teacher in the Milwaukee area. She spent five years teaching in Milwaukee Public Schools before teaching privately with Wylie Voice Studio. She has always loved reading, but has only recently ventured into writing works of her own. Heidi is a mother of two beautiful children, and she is grateful to her endlessly supportive husband, Jon.*



## Nine Letters Ejigayehu Case

Pronounced “edge-ih-guy-u”; although, that’s not the case for attendance on the first day of school, substitute teachers, people on the announcements, and countless others. Letters are often added or forgotten when it rolls off the tongue of some. But still, my name remains special to me and the ones I got it from.

Ejigayehu is an Ethiopian name in Amharic, that translates to “I have seen a lot good or better.” I, like many others, don’t think I have seen a lot until I really think about it. I have seen people get hurt, both physically and psychologically. I have seen people bully and get bullied. I have seen people cry. I have seen people who have lost loved ones; people who have lost friends. I have seen people get their hearts broken. I have seen people feel alone or unwelcomed. I have seen animals in fear. I have seen the outside air not so clear. I have seen the grass and oceans that house trash. I have seen people get broken down by society’s standards. I have seen a lot, like many other, maybe not all good, but I believe that my name is beautiful and means just that...

All nine letters form to mean “I have seen a lot good/better,” each representing the beauties that I have seen, felt, and what makes me...me. E for the Earth I’ve seen and how beautiful it is. The oceans, the trees, the grass, everything. J for the people I see Join together and unite to fight for a cause which brings me joy. I for all the people I’ve seen In love. From film and TV to reality. From young people to the old couple together in a restaurant eating peacefully. G for all the stars and planets that live in our Galaxy. All so close, yet so far. All so similar, yet so different. A for my Ancestors before me who gave me the culture I am tied to. Forever grateful, forever proud. Y for the Youth who I believe hold so much power, love and change. Sad to see mine slowly leave but will always keep a piece of it with me. E for Everyone who has lived before me and will come after me. Fascinated by their way of life and the fact that they walked on the same ground as me. From people 100 year years from now to the Ancient Greeks. H for the Happiness I feel when I am with my family. Too big to ever feel lonely. Last but not least, U for the Untouched places I have yet to go, Unmet goals I have yet to reach, and so many more.

So next time someone says my name wrong, turns their head in confusion trying to read it, or just says “Ms. Case?” I’ll be reminded of all the things I think my name represents about me and take pride in the fact that it’s as unique and beautiful as humans themselves.



## Author Biography

*Ejigayehu Case is a 17-year-old Junior at Arrowhead High School. She plays lacrosse and her favorite subject is history. She likes to draw, make clothes, sing and is learning how to play the guitar right now.*



## A Modern Moria Susan Imbs

Children are blissfully ignorant of the world around them. I grew up sleeping under a quilt that was exquisitely appliqued and hand quilted by a friend of my grandmother. It was covered in pastel pink and lavender tulips and all I remembered about it for years was my Mom fussing at me to never sit on the quilt. Little did I know at the time it had been commissioned by my grandfather for his beloved granddaughter because he wanted her to be surrounded in beauty while she dreamt. Half a century later the quilt remains pristine and beautiful, a tactile reminder of love from a heart long stilled, those beautiful bits of fabric carefully cut and stitched into pale purple posies with moss green leaves which lulled me to dreams as I grew.

In that same house I learned of the Greek goddesses called the Fates, or the Moirai. Clotho twirled the spindle that created the threads of life from nothing. Lachesis measured the length of each life and guided it into the tapestry of humanity. Atropos brought forth her shears and cut the thread when that life was at an end. Somehow, the thought of three women gathered around doing the work of needle and thread always brought to mind an image of my mother, grandmother and great aunt sitting around the dining room table, needles flashing as they laid down tiny precise crossed stitches of pink and rose and green, turning a flat piece of white fabric into a garden of roses, the top for a quilt to go into my hope chest. These women believed every young woman should have a hope chest filled with linens to start her life as an adult and were willing to put their needles where their beliefs were. When completed, the queen-sized top was sent to that same friendly quilter to be finished with perfect, tiny lines of cotton thread woven between layers of fabric and batting. It was another "don't sit on that quilt!" quilt given to me on my thirteenth birthday tucked inside two pillow cases. I adored it. I still do. Hundreds of hours of love to cuddle under when I miss them. There are times I can almost hear the three of them chattering away, clouds of the cigarette smoke that eventually killed them wreathing their heads, telling stories and stitching in love with every dip of the needle and snip of the scissors. Life and death in a perpetual dance, the balance shifting moment to

moment, never sure when the last snip will come.

Now, decades away from my quilting bat mitzvah, I find myself creating works of art in totally different ways with cut out shapes of fabric layered one atop the other that over time illuminate milestones in my life. I suspect it may be a bold act of hubris to insist that turning a rainbow of colors and patterns of perfectly good cottons into precisely crafted strips and pieces, wild shapes and harmonious images will result in something better than existed before I took scissors and rotary cutter to slice and clip my way through the stash of fabrics. And yet, who is to say that cutting and shaping and stitching these fabrics is not an echo of the Moirai?

From the days of my childhood under those roses the shadow of disease stalked my every step. I insisted on pretending to be ignorant of it and pursued an education and a career. Threads of lives were twisted and turned and I found myself married, raising two adopted children. I made and lost friends, traveled the world, had my share of triumphs and disasters. Always I struggled to stay one step ahead of that shadow. Eventually I lost. I stood still one breath too long and my world turned on its head. No more teaching or traveling. Now I was an observer of a world in which I had been such an active participant. All of the expressions of love and light I had poured into my education career had to find another outlet, and quilting whispered to me from the depths of memory, kindled by sewing programs on public television and flamed into fire by local guilds and amazing classes. Snip. Snip. Snip. My old life was cut away and a quilter was born.

In one of my earliest quilting classes I recreated a photograph of my childhood home in the depths of winter. Meticulously chosen and cut pieces of fabrics melded with free motion machine embroidery to create a reasonable representation of the house in which I had lived and slept under those quilts growing up. My scissors were busy on that one, seeking the perfect bit of fabric to show early morning sunlight reflecting on ice kissed windows, or to call up the shades and tints of blue and gray and cream in snow caressed by dawn and shadowed by mighty oaks and tulip trees. In this house I learned about love and service, about the Moirai, about the spinning and measuring and cutting of lives. About the need to be a person who weaves light into the lives around me any way I can. About beauty that comes in a million forms and springs from a single Source of all Life. About

the joy of starting with a pile of raw materials and finishing with a concrete realization of an image from my mind, enabling me to share with others the flashes of Light which pulsed in my inner eye.

In the first flush of passion freshly born, fabrics flew from my growing stash to meet a dozen quilt guild challenges. In one, the creation of a deck of cards in fabric, I pulled the Queen of Hearts. Doreen Speckman, a quilt teacher who lived life out loud, bright and bold and exuberant, had died from a heart attack while traveling with students in Ireland only days earlier. "The Queen of Quilters' Hearts" was born. Assertive yellows and reds and blues, a body shaped after the Venus of Willendorf and filled with water, earth and sky, I surrounded her with her famous block made of two triangle shapes called "Peaky" and "Spike" and a frame of dancing angels, calling up her vibrant dance through life with every cut and stitch. It was my first memorial quilt; it would not be my last.

The state flowers from all the places my Dad lived in his 84 years of wandering were turned into blocks and joined others signed by friends and loved ones to create a frame around a wall hanging which was filled with photographs from his life. I made it for his 80th birthday and as a guard against encroaching symptoms of Alzheimer's. I read that having tactile memory prompts helped a person stay grounded, helped them hold on to their history, held off the decay of time. It hung in his office until the day he died, and he looked at it, touched it, laughed and smiled and cried with it in turn, or so I was told.

Mom and I selected it for a quilt for her bedroom, filled with hummingbirds and cacti and desert flowers. It was a way of completing the circle begun back when she made a quilt for me. I ran out of time on that quilt when she ran out of time. Pieces of those fabrics have wandered their way into many of the quilts I have crafted these ten years past, as if to weave her into them and thereby keep her in my life. Time. There is never enough time with those we love when Atropos closes her shears. Snip. Snip. Snip.

I gathered fabrics in every shade and tint of browns and pinks and greens and splashed them together to create the peaks of the Santa Catalina mountains turned to flame by the setting sun. "When the mountains are pink, it's time to drink!" my parents would cheerfully call out before fixing a

cocktail and settling on the porch to watch the cosmic light show in the desert they loved so much. They are still there, together, in the sands of that serene wilderness, forever watching the mountains blaze to life each evening, toasting each other as they dance through the life that comes.

Fabric is paint and canvas all rolled in to one. The same yardage can show up as a cactus or a tree, a building or a feather. Life is a lot like that – more about the way we understand what we see than what is actually there. Is a rainstorm a blessing or a curse? In the middle of a drought, it is life itself. After a hurricane, it is another disaster in the making. We grieve when death steals away the ones we love, begging Atropos to stay her shears for one more hour, another day. And yet - if a man is in excruciating pain from incurable metastatic bone cancer, is it really wrong to want to see Atropos cut the thread of his life, bring surcease of agony and lead him to a better place? At times like those, a handmade quilt may bring temporary respite or a reminder that even when he is alone he is loved. It will not fix that which can only be fixed one way.

And then there are events which stop the flow of time, turn the world upside down, break open the tiny boxes in which we huddle against the vastness of the world.

Snip, snip, snip as tears poured down my cheeks. Little had I known when I purchased the novelty yardage showing the skylines of New York City and Washington, D.C. to celebrate the turn of the millennium that less than two years later I would be sitting in my studio, weeping. The long, pointed bills of my golden stork scissors flashed through a haze of tears as I trimmed the buildings away from their star-spangled nighttime backgrounds and repositioned them against green grass and sunny skies and concrete before adding billowing smoke from the Pentagon and the crater that had been the World Trade Towers. Those I had clipped from the skyline with shaking hands and tears that left me aching inside, the screams and silences of the dying and the dead ringing in my head. I wrapped the image in angels, scattering them around the scene like the ash that fell for days. No one died alone in those brutal hours – the hosts of heaven held the hand of every soul who passed from this life to the next. Snip, snip, snip. Atropos was busy and another angel spread its wings, gathered another life, carried it away in a strong, protective embrace. My quilt found its way to Houston, Texas that year to hang at the International Quilt Festival in memory of the devastation that had hit that

bright September morning. Two snips and the Towers were gone. It had not taken much longer to lose them in real life.

Quilters responded, collecting quilts from all over the country and around the world, sending them to New York and Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia to be sure that every family who lost someone that fateful morning received a touch of love to wrap around their bodies when their hearts were overwhelmed. It is the way of quilters. We make tiny quilts to comfort babies born too soon, bed sized ones to give a moment of colorful joy to those suffering from abuse or loss, lap sized ones to lonely forgotten people who have little else to bring them warmth. Quilters donate to charities who care for the broken and forgotten, those in desperate need, and children who have seen far too much far too soon of the darker side of life. Tiny drops of light scattered by my tiny pieces of cut and sewn and cut and sewn fabrics sparkle in the night alongside thousands and thousands of others. It is not much. Every bit of radiance helps.

And so I continue to snip away pieces from whole yards of cloth and stitch them back together. Where the Moirai spin and measure the length and course of our lives, light and dark, the spindle flashing new thread from nothing, Lachesis measuring it with care until Atropos snips off the days of each person born, I snip and clip to stitch together something new from the broken threads of existence. No one lives without tragedy. No life lived is without joy. It is finding the balance, celebrating them both and moving forward towards which I strive with my tiny mosaics and collages of fabric, original designs and ancient patterns passed through the generations. Memorials. Disasters. Births and weddings and graduations. The simple joy of capturing the image of a flower or a bird and giving it long life instead of the fleeting moment it knew in truth. Snip. Snip. Snip. Let the light shine.

Without her shears, Atropos could not bring life to a close, and close it always must. Life unending would be a horror; she saves us from that.

Without my scissors, I could not bring life back together to heal through my bits and pieces, my

stitching disparate slices of fabric into entirely new existence with beauty that is totally new.

I will take my scissors over hers any day.



## Author Biography

*The Reverend Doctor Susan Imbs started her writing career in fifth grade when she composed a limerick about a squirrel. Since then she has been recognized as one of the top 25 Young Writers in Michigan and seen her work published in the Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine, the Eads Bridge Review, and on a filed patent. She writes poetry, essays, sermons, wedding and funeral services, short stories and is, of course, working on a novel. Also in the queue are a non-fiction work on Dissociated Identity Disorder and a training manual on bringing healing into people's lives through energy work.*



Because of My Dad  
Reilly Mader

It was the start of the summer and gosh was I excited. School was out for three months and I was ready. During the second week of summer, one of our favorite families came into town: Peter, Cam, and McKenzie. They lived in North Carolina and we have been close with them for over 15 years.

Peter plays a lot of golf in North Carolina with his buddies from work and was intrigued to ask my dad to play a round with him while they were in town. "That would be a blast, let's do it," my dad said. But what I didn't know is that my brother, Brady, and I would be joining them. They asked us to be their caddies for the round. When they asked us, our hearts sank like the Titanic and our bodies lit up. It was like we had a whole bag of Halloween candy. For the rest of the night, our bodies shook with excitement and our eyes were as bold as ever.

As the sun ran away, we knew we were getting closer and closer. It was 8:45 and Brady and I skipped upstairs to our beds with smiles as big as the grinch. "Wow," my brother whispered. "Tomorrow is going to be a day."

As soon as our hearts slowed down, our bedroom door creaked open and Peter quietly asked, "You boys still up?"

We shot up like a children's toy. "Yes we are," I said. Peter asked us if we had our outfits ready, and we shook our heads. Sure we were excited to caddy tomorrow, but we didn't know we had to dress a certain way. We sprung out of our beds and skipped to our closets.

After 25 minutes of searching, Peter helped us find matching shirts and pants with a vintage brown belt that looked like it had sat in water the whole day. "Thanks for the help Peter," Brady exclaimed. We laid back in bed and our world became dark.

The night was over in a blink and the sun escalated as the morning was upon us. Our alarm clock sang at 8am and we were up in a flash. We brushed our teeth, put on our outfits, and sang along to our favorite country songs. "Sunrise, sunburn, sunset repeat," we both sang.

We met Peter and our Dad outside by the car. Not a cloud in the sky as the wind whistled

around the house. "The course is calling our names!" My dad screamed. We all hopped in the car, and our day was off. We got to the course around 9 o'clock. We checked in, got our carts, and pulled up to the hole number 1. Pristine tee boxes, shiny golf carts, and cool drinks.

I would caddy for my dad and my brother was with Peter. We took a minute to appreciate where we were and the game we were about to play and enjoy. I explained the first hole to my dad, "You are going to want to hit a 3-wood and draw it in on the right side of the fairway."

"Alright captain," my dad said with a smile. He teed the ball up, took two practice swings, and crack! The sounds of the ball off the club rising in the air like a hot air balloon.

The front nine flew by and me and Brady were wishing for the time to just slow down. We reached hole 9 and Peter had a putt to tie my dad. My dad was six over par. Peter and Brady both squatted on their knees to attempt to read the breakage of the green. Peter lined up the putt and took his stroke. The ball snuck into the hole away from 12-feet out. "Crap!" The noise of our opponents hands touching each other indicated our first nine holes as caddies were finished.

The back nine of Hamilton Mill country Club looked incredible. With white bunkers, fairways like carpet, and refreshments along the way, we were all in for a treat. Because there were no rangers on the back nine, Brady and I got the opportunity to drive the carts; it was a dream come true. With the back nine going similar to the front, the 18th hole was our last opportunity to win the match. My dad had a eight-foot putt for birdie after knocking it on for 165 yards out with his 8-iron. This was my chance to prove that I could help myself. "It breaks left to right, aim half a pin to the right and it should drop," I said to my dad. With complete silence surrounding us, you could hear our hearts beating. Bump bump, bump bump, bump bump.

My dad took his club back and stopped. We all stared at him like he was made of fire. He said to me, "My left arm really hurts, would you help me out and hit this putt for me?" I stood there like the whole world stopped turning and was frozen.

"Reilly?" my dad said. I snapped out of it and said, "Yeah, definitely." I was honored but butterflies filled me up like a glass of lemonade in the summer. I bent down, read the putt one more time, and set into position. I made a steady stroke and the ball was on its way. Turning left, the green carried it to the hole and we had won the match. Our excitement drove around the course. It was ever lasting. We shook hands, and the best day of our lives was just about finished.

We drove home and jumped in our pool. Relaxation was upon us, but I couldn't get our day out

of my head. When I made that putt, my whole body felt like a never ending party. It was the first time I was introduced to the sport and I couldn't have asked anybody else to share the experience with. Golf was my new hobby, my new passion, and my new life. I admired everything the game had to offer. The environment, the course, and the ups and downs. I knew golf was an amazing sport because it never became easier. It always presented a new challenge that you could never prepare for. Similar to life. It became a time where I could forget about everything and just purely have fun. And, it was because of my dad.



## Author Biography

*Reilly Mader is a senior at Arrowhead Union High School and is 18 years old. He is a published author and enjoys writing poems. He was runner-up in The Sijo's Cultural Society poem contest in the year 2020. Reilly loves spending time with his family. Golf has become a big passion of his and he currently works at Kettle Moraine Golf Club in Douman, Wisconsin. He has a very kind heart and likes to spend his free time watching sports.*



## Black Dog and the Perpetual Fray Paul Walter

A barren tree stands alone  
in an eternal landscape  
of patchy grass and spattered leaves.  
A tethered red leash clutches a black dog.

In the eternal landscape,  
the oil-stained dog,  
pawing at patchy grass and spattered leaves,  
strains against the tightening grip.

This oil-stained figure  
wheezes in locomotive puffs and  
strains against the tightening grip  
like fingers stretching a woven trap.

The black dog wheezes in locomotive puffs  
while the red leash frays  
like the fibers of a woven finger trap.  
One glossy eye dies in the struggle.

The red leash frays  
and shredded threads unravel.  
One glossy eye goes dead from the struggle,  
but the other eye still glistens.

Shredded threads unravel  
above patchy grass and spattered leaves,  
and one eye glistens  
in fevered contrast to the barren tree.



## Author Biography

*For the past 10 years, Paul Walter, a teacher in Slinger, WI, has facilitated a young authors' camp. During that time, his campers have won numerous awards and have been featured on 88.9 Radio Milwaukee, OnMilwaukee.com, and WUWM's Lake Effect. After helping many students get their pieces published, Paul's eager to continue pursuing his own writing paths. Following earning a Graduate Certificate in Creative Writing through UW Oshkosh, Paul's work has won the Lakefly Poetry contest and has been featured in numerous Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets publications, including Sheltering with Poems: Community & Connection During COVID.*



Oh, Give Me a Home  
Gail Sosinsky

Him on another cattle drive,  
three weeks gone, or thereabouts.  
Who can tell?  
the days burning  
one into another  
like the sun melting  
over distant mesas.

I chore indoors,  
chore in the barn  
chore in the garden –  
stop at day's end  
with the last bucket  
from the well  
to pour a drop for the daisy  
on my last child's grave,  
the boy who made it here  
to homestead  
but didn't last  
the first dry summer –  
I pat my empty womb,  
grateful it's not breeding  
more sorrow.

Tonight at the grave,  
the moon bright sky  
grows blinding white.  
A star dances down  
and opens like a door.

A lady steps out,  
skin like silk,  
rested and plump,

smelling like cool spring rain,  
not a tooth missing in her kindly smile.

Her eyes turn sad  
at the look of me.  
She offers one soft hand,  
points with the other inside the shining door –

Been so long since I heard it,  
I don't know it for laughter  
at first –  
the murmur of friendly gossip,  
the clink of tea cups,  
the coos of healthy babes.

My heart thuds down  
like a leg -tied calf,  
and a brand of sheer yearning  
sears my mind.

The lady cocks her head  
like a little bird,  
her finger beckons,  
her smile turns mischievous .

I drop my bucket  
and lay my hand in hers.

From the star's small window,  
I watch my gibbering husk  
flop beside the bucket.

A friendly voice asks  
if I take my tea with sugar.  
The star rises to the heavens  
with my heart,  
and I say yes.



## Author Biography

*Mild-mannered office worker by day, dedicated writer on her own time, Gail Sosinsky grew up in a northern Wisconsin paper-mill town. She writes fiction, poetry and the occasional play, and her work tends toward science fiction and fantasy. She has been published in Star\*line, Eye to the Telescope, Mindfilights, America West Airlines Magazine, and Sword and Sorceress XVI, among other venues.*



Peace is a dove that flies on wings of glass.  
The winds shifts and  
Peace crashes and breaks.  
Becomes merely glittering shards  
that threaten to slice flesh.  
Bloody-fingered men try to assemble hope.  
Their children urge them on,  
Will the chore be done  
Before they must try?  
Blood makes glass slippery.  
Shards fly through the air.  
Some wedge under fingers,  
The pain will possess that life.  
Some shards enter mouths  
They will speak through a veil of blood.  
But some will enter hearts.  
And then we will remember  
That blood is the glue that holds all together.



## Author Biography

*Joyce Frohn has been published more than two hundred times. She has been paid for about half of those. She is married with an adult daughter. She also shares a house with two cats, a gecko, a guinea pig and too many dirty dishes.*



