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Rogério and Me

Lance Mason

— A memoir of transition —

#

"We have all lived through the fields, shared that common humiliation. How could we progress as a people while the farm workers were denied self-respect, while this shame, this injustice was permitted to continue? The United Farm Workers has never been dangerous if you believe in the Bill of Rights." – Cesar Chavez

#

One of the handful of jobs I had in the summer of '63 was picking lemons on the Waters Ranch outside Moorpark, California—ugly work, up the trees on twelve-foot ladders in the flies and the heat, canvas sleeves to the shoulder to ward off the stiletto-like thorns. Balanced against a branch with one hand, rusty clippers in the other, we snipped off lemons one by one, just above the green "button" so they looked special in the shops.

I'd load up fifty pounds in a burlap bag slung around my neck, climb down the ladder, pour the pebbly, yellow fruit into a box, and then hike back up and do it again. It paid the better of a buck-twenty-five an hour or twenty-five cents a box. Work-and-wage—a rugged but decent stopgap for those of us living at home and buying T-shirts and shoe polish, but not so hot for a guy with a wife—or two—and half-a-dozen kids. Trying to beat the hourly wage, those guys didn't clip, but just "pulled fruit" to fill the boxes as fast as they could. Unless you come from farming, the arithmetic can fool you.

One afternoon in late August, about two hundred in the shade, a dude came striding up after the lunch break as I was strapping on the collection bag.

"My row," he said.

I just looked at him, not sure how to reply. It was a good stand of trees, lots of hanging fruit, and he wanted it. He was working by the box, trying to beat the wage, probably with a family to feed, or maybe was a smack-head. "I been working this row all morning," I said, hoping to hold my ground.

He bent down and wrapped his fist around a thick, broken tree branch lying by his foot, and I saw he had *Chino*, the Youth Authority prison out in the desert, tattooed on his arm. "This is *my row*, ése." He wasn't messing around.

I no longer saw picking lemons a fit for my wealth achievement goals, and walked off the job. What are you going to do, fight for your life over \$1.25 an hour?

#

It had been a hot summer in Oxnard, and my best friend Jerry and I got around in my green '33 Plymouth sedan, a flathead six with suicide doors. With autumn rolling in, humid in the mornings with dew on the grass, the town smelled of the lima bean harvest and the sugarbeet mill out on Wooley Road, east of Five Points.

For the next job, Jerry and I got hired on at Fieldland Frozen Foods off East 5th Street. He got on the cleaning crew and I went to the warehouse stacking line, both for the night shift, 8 PM to 5 AM. Not challenging brainwork, but we'd knock off before dawn, hit home for breakfast, then tear away about sunrise to bodysurf down in Zuma or up at California Street in Ventura. We'd grab dinner at home and get back to work about dark.

The "stacking line" meant eight hours loading boxes of frozen lima beans off a chest-high conveyor belt onto shipping pallets on the floor. The belt came out of the packing room, the boxes filled with forty pounds of beans. If the beans ran out, the belt stopped, and we'd pull off and stack the boxes we could reach, waiting for more beans from the main freezer room, maybe two minutes, maybe twenty—nobody came to tell us. When they got more beans, the belt ran again. Like the lemons, it paid a buck-twenty-five an hour.

I worked the belt next to Rogerio, a real smiley guy with no English, as friendly as he could make himself, and it was the first time I felt bad for *no hablo español*. He even had to write down his name so I could learn it—*roh-g-HAIR-ee-oh*. He worked steady, steady, never getting ahead of himself, never behind. The boxes came down that belt, and old Rogerio stacked them on those pallets, lifting and loading like he'd bet his paycheck on the result—a working fool. If he didn't enjoy it, he didn't let on, like he and the job had an agreement: he wouldn't bitch about the work, and it wouldn't get any harder than he could handle. With a crew like that, Fieldland never had to worry about the job getting done.

Between belt runs, we'd stand in our Levis, tennies, and T-shirt, sweating like mules, a stream of arctic air blowing from the packing room down the belt, okay at first because we were hot, but then icy in the wind. Because it was summer, ninety degrees outside, I brought no jacket, but wouldn't wear one anyway for fear I'd stink it up. So I stood around or paced around, cold as a bastard, until something happened and we started stacking boxes again.

We were paid an extra seventy cents a day not to take coffee breaks while the belt was running. The lunch break was half an hour, but we had to hump boxes until the workers inside packing the beans quit loading them on the belt and gave the word to go eat. We had to be back, though, when the belt started

up again, or there would be broken boxes and hundreds of pounds of raw lima beans defrosting all over the floor.

This was not colorful, enthralling work—boring, in fact, like the tomato fields and the orchards and the corn boxing-stations. Yet the workers who came up from Mexico never seemed to lose focus or get tired. They did—it was only human—but they came from a culture that knew hard work and how to do it. Not that they enjoyed it any more than I did, but maybe despised it less.

Rogelio kept Spanish newspapers and books in his jeans' back pocket, reading them when the belt stopped. He made the work pleasant enough for both of us until the night a forklift driver came over with his thumb aimed back at the main freezer. "Coupla bins knocked over in there," he said, tossing me a parka and a shovel. "Foreman wants you to clean 'em up."

The forklift driver—the farm owner's son, for all I knew—was lying. He knocked the bins off their pallets himself, onto the freezer floor, and was telling me I had to go in there, in a smelly parka someone had probably puked on last season, and shovel up three tons of frozen beans in zero degrees with no gloves or boots. I did it, and then quit. Well, I didn't quit, but just didn't come back, or even bother to get my pay.

Jerry quit, too. "They got jobs over at a fiberglass factory," he said, "making garbage bins and planter boxes for the county."

#

That summer, America's modern battles for civil rights—Medgar Evers, Reverend King's "I Have a Dream" speech, the Birmingham bombing—took early shape in my brain, and I started to change, along with my language, mental and verbal. Though unsteady over it all, I would win a Knights of Columbus speech contest on voting rights the following school year.

Yet, until that chapter of my life, my "book" had been one of contentment, not to say sloth, and I'd seen no reason for people to change, or to change society. It seemed to me that, when everything is going smoothly in the world you know, somebody decides they're not happy. The work is there, the pay is steady, the weather is good, but they have to find some reason to be agitated. Were folks just being whisked up, being told they needed better cars or better clothes or better schools, until they decided they were being hard done by? It wasn't enough to live in America? *And so on*, I'd say to myself.

My young logic, my reasoning and point of view, were thin and feeble, and even I began to see through them. Dylan was singing that change was coming in the wind, and if it was coming for the Mexicans and *Chicanos*, it was coming for everyone in Oxnard. Before this, workers moved with the crops—beans and tomatoes around us, lemons and sugar beets, too, lettuce and melons down El

Centro way, grapes in the San Joaquin, fruit trees up north, corn other places. After the season, the Mexican nationals went back across the border to their families, where they lived well on American money, and because—there's no easy way to say this—there wasn't a permanent place for them in the US. This was called the *bracero* program.

Then the politics changed. With new legislation, Mexican-born laborers could get papers, get out of the migrant camps, and stay in America. They'd be able to have their families, too, their churches, their own houses, gardens, and stores, bringing in pride about living here, a sense they belonged. And they stuck, proving Bob Dylan was right.

That was the politics, but most people, unless they grow up with it, don't know farm economics, the center of Oxnard's world at the time. What was going to happen to the farming business when the workers left the migrant camps to live in town? What was going to happen to local housing demand? How about the small Southwestern farms that were dependent on Mexican labor to flourish, and the towns' businesses and neighborhoods and schools when all these changes came? This was the backdrop for the town's anxiety over these changes. Maybe they would be good for everyone, but maybe not. The point was that no one knew, and some white folks were scared and angry about the unknown.

Yet this was the dawn of the true Sixties, and racial tensions were rising across the country. Here in the Southwest, Oxnard included, the "have-have not" friction was between generations of Anglos seen to control the land and a Mexican culture that worked it for desperate wages. In truth, farming wasn't an easy life for anyone, and the landowners didn't sit around with their feet on the desk.

Still, things were changing, like Dylan said. After World War II, California started filling up with folks from all over, not just Mexico. Black Americans were moving out from Dixie and some Midwestern cities. Filipinos were getting papers to live in America. White Navy families were leaving the service for West Coast jobs.

Cultural norms, ways of thinking, were moving, too, shifting gears. The Freedom Riders would mount an assault on authority, and rock 'n' roll music and Lenny Bruce added to the attack. Down the road, those in power and the police were going to have their hands full with a lot more than fights between kids born on different sides of the tracks. Yet it was a time when Young America thought they were ready to claim their country.

#

Away from farming politics, the era's surfers and hipsters were carving out a new world, and Oxnard's youth took the only option that appealed to teenage boys. We pushed the limits, hanging our bare asses out of car windows on weekend mornings for the fat lady who sold avocados across from the Ventura Marina. In the Plymouth, we'd cruise down the beach road, our sun-kissed honeydews perched on the window frame, and she'd rock back in her camp chair under the eucalyptus trees, slap her thigh, and laugh until her hat fell off. We'd laugh with her.

Boys and young men started letting their hair grow. The barber down near Snooker's pool hall would trim the sides and leave the rest alone, so it hung in your eyes and over your collar, surfer style, driving the adults nuts. We'd rub in lemon juice to blonde it out, and a mother might look the other way if it wasn't too messy and you kept it clean.

Cars were changing, too. Jan & Dean and The Beach Boys were making surfing cool, but you couldn't just hang around your hometown beach. No, you had to be on the move, going where the swell was up and the waves breaking. That took wheels, and wheels meant anything that could carry you and your buddy and your boards on Saturday morning to distant lands. Sand and saltwater didn't jive with Sta-prest trousers and clean machines, so worn-out clothes and low-cut tennies came in along with ratty pickups and old station wagons, rides you could sleep in on the weekends, far from home. So was born the West Coast hippie scene, and the Plymouth cut it because it was vintage and funky.

#

Like lemons and lima beans, the fiberglass work was no IQ test. We were fill-ins, temporary labor until school started back, but we didn't mind. Neither of us saw our future in spraying lung-destroying plastic into garbage can molds. But the permanent guys, the *Latinos*? This was their life—skeleton shift on at six-thirty, the rest on at eight, half an hour for lunch, sandwiches or burritos. They were proud of what they did. I don't mean turning out trash cans, but how hard they worked at doing it. You had to respect them for that.

Later, I wondered what became of Rogerio. Picking lemons, stacking boxes, or working row crops, his kind didn't quit, and we needed them for the planting and the picking and the packing-house labor. Not many are willing to work that hard, or know how to, and this was the reason people were afraid of the coming changes in farmworker civil rights. To many, it looked dark on the horizon.

#

With summer ending, Jerry and I decided not to pursue the “languid turpitude” of Ensenada, Mexico, as we’d been thinking, nor play football, but to hang at the beach, bodysurf, and check out the babes. To do this, we had to ignore something that had been brewing all summer. Back before the Fourth of July weekend, the two of us had driven out to Fillmore to buy fireworks, mostly kids stuff like sparklers and Roman candles. They didn't sell cherry bombs and M-80s, the ones from Mexico that really exploded. Still, Oxnard fire regulations forbade what we did buy. Therefore, we two indefatigable smugglers hid it all under the car's back seat and drove it home anyway. That afternoon my father, in a mild panic, knocked on the bathroom door.

"You'd better come out here."

"I'm still in the shower. I'll be out in a few minutes."

"The police are here."

Too big at sixteen to climb out the window and run for the border, I dried off and dressed. My father was waiting in the living room, the front door open. Two uniformed cops, straight out of *Dragnet*, were waiting on the porch, and nosy neighbors were watching from their front lawns. Curious drivers were pulling to the curb. I, of course, was trying to figure out the best lie I could tell about the fireworks. For good or bad, that's not why the police had come.

The officer who talked was one J. D. Phillips. I still picture the black letters on his brass name-tag. “There was a gang fight today in *La Colonia*.” This was the *Latino* section of town east of the Union Pacific tracks. “A boy hit with a pipe is in the hospital and pretty critical.” Phillips also said my car, the green Plymouth, had been reported at the scene. In my first successful negotiation in life, I was able to convince Phillips this was a mistake, that it was neither me nor my car at the scene. I did this without revealing the Independence Day contraband.

Still, the gang fight had taken place, and the boy died, the first in a series of street battles that summer between young Anglos and *Latinos*, mostly males, but a few girls, too. There were no more deaths, but not for lack of trying. After decades of an uneasy peace, political changes with unknown consequences had tipped the balance from *détente* to aggression, and then to violence, a pattern to be reflected across the ethnic, social, and economic landscape for years to come.

#

I don't need to chronicle all of 1963 for you. It came out of an America we knew, imperfect, and soon to face harder times. Along the way, I found my course and Jerry found his, but not before youth's experience tenderized parts of me and toughened others, not before it showed me that there was a “man” in humanity,

one to be proud of, to set your compass by, and to sail with as long as the breeze blew and the lines held and the canvas kept its shape. The Dodgers blanked the Yankees in the '63 Series, and Sandy Koufax was baseball's living comet. It was a time of triumph and turmoil. The history books are full of it and, if Jerry were still around, we could live it again—Rogerio, too, if we could find him.

*Mason grew up in rural California working ag and blue-collar jobs; studied at UCSB, Loyola, UCLA; taught at UCLA, the National University, Brazil, Otago U, New Zealand; spent twenty years living and traveling overseas by foot, bicycle, motorcycle, tramp steamer, plane, train, and dugout canoe; was a cycle racer, stage actor, rugby player, and coach; has won numerous writing awards and honors. While this memoir is nonfiction, it also appears as a scene in Mason's unpublished novel *Beachtown Blues*.*

Support

D.R. Baker

This is where I find myself when the debt collectors won't stop calling. When the student loans need paying, the interest accumulated like snow atop a mountain. When I'd like to stop choosing between groceries and phone. Moreover, when I need some direction other than no direction, something to do with my hands and eyeballs for predetermined slices of the day. Passion does not lead me here, but I find yourself among some for whom this is the world, the sole domain in which their lives find meaning and function. This is an office, and I am not certain I belong here.

The room is open. The lights are fluorescent, but somehow not harsh. This is neither the corporate hell world from the movies, nor the technocratic nightmare of Silicon Valley. There is neither a redundant memo nor a ping pong table to be found. The people are neither overly friendly nor willfully obtuse. I am somewhere in between all of that, somewhere out in the real world of it.

I am a customer support agent. Support, not service. It's a newish term, introduced in hopes of moving away from the negative connotations of interminable hold times and overseas call centers.

A customer calls and I help them locate their invoice. Another asks me how to reset their password. I learn new words like *onboarding* and *workflow*. Phrases like *watch this space* and *let's check in about that* enter my lexicon, absorbed, as by a sponge, from the environment around me. I transfer another customer to their sales representative, but the words *sales* and *purchase* and *buy* are never used—instead, I say *success manager*. The customers are friendly enough, rarely irate, never screaming or cussing.

For the first few weeks I am actually excited to get to work. I am learning. I am meeting new people. I am in charge of your life, because this company is paying me a livable salary to sit in a chair and click things for forty hours a week. Soon, my savings will grow, my credit will improve, and I can even think about taking a vacation.

I attend meetings. Some are aimless, others confusing. Occasionally they provide a forum for airing grievances amongst my teammates and manager, over things I know don't matter, but which nevertheless boil my blood: the

expectation that my team, being positioned at the front of the office, should buzz in visitors; salespeoples' constant need for babysitting, their shrugging off any task faintly resembling work; the VP's fixation on metrics (average call length, percentage of emails resolved on first reply) and total ignorance of the human element of our responsibilities. Regardless of their content or catharsis, I have yet to attend a meeting that seems necessary.

1

There is food. Snacks: chips, granola, cereal, bananas, apples, candy, chocolate. The office provides a catered lunch once a week, often from an expensive restaurant I'd never visit on my own. I almost always grab seconds. Due to the food and the sedentary nature of the job, I gain weight. There are fitness initiatives, discounts on club memberships, but I never open those emails.

A coffee machine sits in the kitchen, operating at an endless hum between the hours of 8:30 and 2:00. I don't want to estimate how many gallons are brewed each day. Some days, I drink coffee until my fingertips buzz, at which point I drink glass after glass of water in an attempt to calm down. I eventually switch to decaf.

Tepidly, I test how long I can get away with sitting in the bathroom. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Close to fifteen. No one says anything.

The company has something called a culture team, whose sole purpose seems to be to manufacture fun. They plan in-office events, like guest speakers and little contests. One of the design people just won an Amazon gift card for their Halloween costume. There's always food, cupcakes and donuts and the like, at these events, and non-alcoholic drinks.

Twice a year, in the summer and around the winter holidays, there are parties. Some people in the office treat these parties like prom, leaving work early to get their hair done and to change their clothes. The people who commute in from New Jersey and Long Island come to work with already-enhanced hair, and gym bags with their party clothes inside. These events don't remotely resemble any party I've been to before, but they are fun enough, or at least try to be. The absence of spontaneity—everything has a schedule and rules—keeps genuine fun at least an arm's distance away.

A few times a week, the younger people in the office hit the bar downstairs. I

understand, as I sip an okay beer I paid a dollar too much for, that the way I see these people is likely the way they see me.

Despite this, it's here in the bar, when everyone has a beer or two in them, that I feel something might actually happen. Not that I expect debauchery or chaos. These are still my coworkers. There is still a calculated distance. But outside the confines of the office, outside the stoic series of activities that masquerade as fun, this is where the people beside whom I sit and click things for forty hours a week finally start to resemble human beings.

I hope they now see the human in me too.

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The Produce Business

Garth Porter

It sounds stupid now but, on my last day in the produce department, I thought I could hook my boss up with one of our regular customers.

Ken was a widower. He had a son my age and they lived together in an apartment. I worked for him when I was an awkward twenty-one year old. I struggled with conversation, and Ken wasn't great at it either.

The first thing we ever talked about was football. It was six in the morning and I was putting bananas on the display. Ken walked up and started moving bunches, two at a time, from the box on my cart to the black rubber riser. We did this in silence while Bruce Hornsby's *The Way It Is* played over the store speakers. I'd worked there about two weeks.

Ken looked up from the bananas. "You follow football?"

I shrugged and tilted my head like I needed to think about it. "No, not really."

Ken turned to the display then looked out over it. "I'm a Dolphins fan."

He adjusted an over-ripe bunch near the bottom then started toward a display of garlic. He had a bad knee so every step with his left foot looked like it hurt.

Once, I overheard him venting to another manager about horse racing.

Ken and Rich, the grocery manager, stood in the back room. The fluorescent lights in the rafters flickered and cast strobe shadows on the dingy gray walls.

Ken hurled a trash bag into the compactor door.

"A filly won the Belmont!"

He looked at Rich and his beady, dark eyes pulsed with annoyed confusion.

Rich shrugged and threw a cardboard box into the baling machine.

"A filly won the Belmont!" Ken repeated. He took a box of rotting cauliflower and threw it into the compactor.

Rich shook his head and pulled the gate down on the baler.

Ken looked at his cart, found it empty, and cursed in frustration. He pressed the button on the compactor and stomped past without acknowledging me.

Rich turned the baler on and walked away.

* * *

We had a regular customer, Mrs. Oravetz, who came in every Thursday afternoon, just after three o'clock. She bought one cantaloupe every week and asked to have it cut in half and wrapped in cellophane.

"I just like to know what I'm buying," she told me. The other produce clerks thought she was annoying but I didn't care. I let her come into the back room and watch as I sliced the melon and wrapped it.

It took less than a minute, but then she would stay and talk for about ten. She was polite, though, and always apologized and went on her way when I told her I had to get back to work. I learned her whole backstory.

Before retiring, she'd been an art teacher at the local community college. She loved Dancing with the Stars and Family Feud. She had one child, a son, who lived out west and never called. She had long, gray hair that she would never cut short. "Because then," she said, "I'll have completely turned into my mother." She'd been married but her husband passed after a failed lung transplant. The most interesting thing, though, was that twice a year, she went into the city with her girlfriends and spent a weekend at the casino.

"At first, we just went to see the shows," she said. "But they wanted to try playing cards and—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "You play poker?"

She blushed. "It just came natural to me!"

* * *

When I put in my two-weeks notice, I told Ken I was dropping out of college and moving to the city. School wasn't going well and I had a friend down there looking for a room mate.

"I don't think my son is learning anything over there," Ken said. "I think all he does is drink."

His son and I went to the same piss-ant state school in rural Western-PA.

"Yeah," I said. "That's what most people do."

Ken stood in front of the bagged salad display.

"I remember I used to study for tests. And cram." He made a note in his ledger. "My son, he doesn't do that."

He turned backed to the bagged salads.

I went to the back room where Bill, my night shift partner, was already putting his apron on.

"Did you tell him?"

"Yeah," I said. "He barely cared."

Bill straightened his apron. "Did he change the subject to Brian?"

I laughed.

"My son," Bill said, mocking Ken's voice. He threw a crate of bananas on a cart. "My son's gonna drive me to an early grave!"

* * *

I saw Ken, once, hiding behind a pallet of russet potatoes when Mrs. Oravetz was in the store. I followed his gaze over to where she was standing at the leaf lettuce, then looked back at him. He saw me and scurried off to the back room when he realized he'd been caught.

When I went over to see why Mrs. Oravetz was here so early, she told me her son was in town and might be stopping for dinner but hadn't confirmed the plans yet.

"Do you have any more romaine lettuce in the back?" she asked. "This all looks fine but," she paused and took a breath. "He was always a picky eater, and I want it to be perfect if he comes over."

That if killed me. I still think about it sometimes.

I went to the back to check.

Ken stood at the stainless steel bench that he used as a desk. He flipped through a spreadsheet, looked up and shrugged.

"Even in my old age," he said, "I haven't lost my sense of direction."

* * *

So on my last day, I decided I would try to introduce them. I didn't have much of a plan. Ken worked five in the morning till three in the afternoon every day. Mrs. Oravetz showed up every Thursday right after Ken clocked out. I figured if I could keep him around talking, maybe Mrs. Oravetz would walk by and the opportunity would present itself.

At three o'clock, I wheeled out a cart with melon halves, already cut and wrapped, and positioned myself by the cut fruit display, right at the front of the department where everyone had to walk by when they came in the store.

I moved melons, one at a time, from the cart to the display. After a few minutes, Ken came down the aisle.

He smiled wide and shook my hand. "It's been a pleasure."

"Thanks," I said. "I really appreciate the opportunity."

"Well good luck," he said, releasing my hand. "Don't forget about us."

He turned and started for the time clock.

I asked the first question I thought of. "How do you think, uh, Brian's going to do at school this semester?"

Ken stopped. "Eh, I just hope he focuses more."

I glanced over toward the entrance but didn't see Mrs. Oravetz.

"Maybe if he takes a class that he's interested in, or something, that'll help," I said.

Ken shook his head and started to complain about how his son would never apply himself at school.

I looked up at the clock above the leaf lettuce. This bought me about five minutes. I looked over at the entrance. Still no Mrs. Oravetz.

Ken looked at his watch and shifted his weight from his good leg to his bad leg.

“Well hey, good luck with everything,” he said again. “I got a thing tonight I really gotta get to.”

I tried to think of something else. I considered asking him about gambling but I didn’t even know where to start.

“Thanks again,” I said. He took off for the time clock. I checked the clock again—fifteen minutes after three.

Mrs. Oravetz was a no-show.

Garth Porter is a truck driver from Western Pennsylvania

WHAT'S NICE IS THAT YOU CAN'T MURDER A HORSE

Jordan Clark

The condominium isn't thrilled his horse isn't a dog. His wife copes. It's a cyst that isn't a spider bite that's of her utmost concern. He tells her, A thing at a time.

Umbrella-handed talks seem meeker nowadays. Even though complaints still arise, they've a tendency to be passive or corkboarded. When his stable was unwheeled that night, then refurbished with cinder blocks—that was troublesome. He'd sagged in front of it a while, loafers flecked with dew—why maze?—thinking: traffic won't pander joggers.

The stable is subsequently beached beneath the awning of he and his wife's duel parking space. Thankfully, they consider exercise healthful, because the curbs are alarmingly sparse in regards to red and run both ends of the street.

It was springs ago, miscarriage still afoot, looming, that he proposed they parent an animal:
any breed, whatever she fancied.

All the lassoing and cheery requests to be lassoed pushed them into hurrying. Loudspeakers thickened the unobstructed air and made even the mildest deliberation next to pointless. The horse who took the cake was understandably segmented away from the favored livestock, the slew of nonsense-dredged canopies too. Her spots stockpiled majorly toward her hind. She was a lean steed—mostly legs, coat the color of crust, a grandly capitalized sale tag drooping from the botched hole punched through her ear; a bargain. The rancher was joyous.

Having chosen to hang onto her original name, it was ages until his wife was capable of saying it aloud—such finality.

Dakot's well-nourished now and loves lapping water and the block. He's fully aware of her clopping, her ever-chipping hooves his crowbar couldn't pry. An attempt to crochet her booties had soon proved fruitless seeing as he pricked his thumb just about immediately, swore, smacked the sofa and declared, That's it. His wife, bless her heart, is so quick with baking soda; the cushion returned to its main state.

When headlong into warmth, the horse spends plenty afternoons in a heap on the lawn in the courtyard shaded by the girthy tree with its Chinese handcuff latticed trunk. Seldom tied up, besides the occasional headlock from the rope swing, she'll often sniff doughnuts. These circles aren't nearly spacious enough to permit diamonds, yet children shrivel in, each manning a position.

Leaning against their doorway one night, ring-bearing a mint bit and bridle, he asked, "Could I just see?" Fringed shawl hovering, her feet nonexistent, she told plainly that she already wears the wig.

As a boy he'd straddle his father's sawhorse, gingerly avoiding footprinting the abounding wood-shavings. A bathmat was flung over for the sake of belief.

He has been after that saddle erection since.

The front door ajar, Dakota's consented to wander while the couple adheres to shucking a side that'll surely dominate what the entree would rightfully assume. Husks and wispy strings are in a mound next to an overzealous ramekin cradling a convincing intermixing of regular and imitation lemons.

A few boys from the surrounding condos grouped around the pudgiest one, the leader, praising his newest bat his mother had just bought him. One suggested it may actually be a billy club. "See? Retractable."

Dakota relaxed, guarding second; stoic.

Another boy readies, swiveling his cleats before being pitched the ball—to which sent a vicious ringing ricocheting throughout the community, hurtling toward Dakota, pelting her upside her temple. A goose-egg developed.

The boys were a toppled sack of marbles and headless.

The couple were deaf.

Dakota sulked into the living room, nudging the screen door with her snout. At first, he figured she was winded from the stairs, they can be steep—depending. After brushing past the ottoman's shoulders, shone by the lamp, his wife noticed the appalling bump.

"Shouldn't you dash it—dot it?" She questions as he slowly circles the goose-egg with a purple felt tip marker to monitor its growth. She then drops a fistfull of painkillers into a mortar and pestle as per his suggestion.

As they knelt together on the wool rug, budding the rough, capsized arch enveloping the fireplace, his wife iced the horse, wishing dearly to retard the swelling. Embers orbed, his elbows were latched as he heated his palms. The ice-pack would melt, stamping Dakota's fur with fleeting spots. His wife's in charge of bliss. She should've known better, he thought. Eventually, she resorted to using a gallon baggie rather than the sandwich.

On particularly grueling days, which he figured tonight was, he'll treat the horse to nougat a la mode—a fast favorite; dodgy eyes, finger pressed lightly to his pursed lips, back hunched. Captivity doesn't yield dessert. Plus, crude wheat becomes dismal and crimped cabbage, no matter how thinly shredded, and barely digests.

"If he appeared any older," he gruffed, "or sprouted denser peach fuzz, I'd squeeze him 'til he's mixed berried."

Unless accounting for his bouts of domestic abuse, he's not a violent man.

A framed picture—thick balsa, slightly askew—adorns the wall left of the mantel. Picture day's annual and it'd landed a week shy of their investment. All three huddled; background asymmetrical; creases neater in front than back; his pleats as flat as his wife could iron without branding; Dakota verging on fattening and her mane decidedly more picturesque in pigtails, though, in the beginning, were ponied.

The wife and horse had jammed themselves between the vanity and tub. A soggy then steam-stiffened, half-rolled catalog on the ground scuttered from the fan and their swift-shifting feet—eliciting the adjoining bedroom door. The molding behind it was in dire need of caulking and a wipe.

Only when nosing the portrait will the matted indentations leftover from her newly forgone muzzle begin to surface.

Jordan Clark lives and works in California within the ceramics industry. He has been previously published at X-Ray Lit Mag.

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Mr. Jones' Burial

Cianna Garrison

Harold Jones was a salesman. That was what I had been told. I had been briefed a little on the background of this man from my boss, who was a family friend of Jones' wife. I went into this particular service knowing far more than I usually did. His bread and butter were convincing unsuspecting souls to buy things that they did not need. He had graduated high school back in '72—but only by the skin of his teeth—and spent six months at university before dropping out. Jones then proceeded on a path of exponential failure—which included managing mom-and-pop restaurants, repairing shingles on rooftops, and working as a laborer at a meat-packing plant—until he stumbled upon his talent for swindling people into emptying their pocketbooks.

Success in his field didn't much please his family, but that never seemed to phase him. Though he had achieved some level of success, his expectations were shockingly low. Thus, in the eyes of others, he could pay to keep the utilities on and his family fed but remained an indolent schmuck.

Mr. Jones skated through life with a nonchalant arrogance that thwarted his relationships with others, including his disgruntled wife and two ambivalent sons. It was these three individuals I saw maundering about the boat in some make-shift performance of grief until it seemed they could no longer bear the charade.

Consequently, over my eight-month stint on the unhappy vessel we called Pearl, I had seen some displays of grief that were authentic and had begun to easily pick apart those who were falsely boasting a tear from the corner of their eye. The number of these individuals was appallingly high.

To tell how I began assisting with burials at sea as my main source of income is in of itself inconsequential. You see, like Harold Jones, I was stumbling through life at a meager pace, unable to hold down employment because of an "authority complex," described to me in painful detail by my therapist. Unlike Jones, I had a rather useful skill set and opportunities were not always scarce, but I had recently exhausted these and in desperation, took the first job I could find. My wife and I were separated. She took our two children, who were slowly forgetting about their father, sometimes at light speed it seemed. So, I was on Pearl, acting as what I can only describe as concierge, wait staff, and assistant to the funeral director, all the while wishing my own existence was much more than it was.

And there she was. Mrs. Elaine Jones was walking about the boat, playing the part of the distraught widow. I had come aboard in the early hours of the morning to set up for the service with the others. Because our team took care of catering for guests, including a bar, there was much to do. The guests, including Mrs. Jones and her sons, arrived at noon sharp. Before we set out to sea, I had the pleasure of providing the freshly widowed woman with martinis and hors d'oeuvres.

The captain asked that the staff only engaged in small talk, essentially nothing more than paid flies on the decks. A professional, reserved attitude as that of a Maître D was a prerequisite. Observe, serve and withdraw.

To my dismay, Mrs. Jones seemed to have other ideas of what an appropriate conversation was with waitstaff. I had just served her an appetizer and instead of being allowed to excuse myself to serve other guests, I was held in an uncomfortable gaze.

"Would you tell me what's in this?" She had caught not only my eyes but had reached for my elbow before I could retreat.

"I believe it's kalamata olive, feta, and prosciutto, ma'am."

"No gluten?" she eyed it like a buzzard, hungry and loathing.

"I'm sorry?"

"There is no gluten I hope."

With composure, I explained that if she'd asked for specific dietary requests prior, they would have been met. Although I saw her soften, I had seen no speck of remorse in her eyes or her manner. In fact, I was certain she was more concerned about whether or not the wind would dislodge her little black hat from atop her head. I nodded to her, smiled, and began to turn, but again, she caught me with a ferocity of temper akin to a lioness.

"You're a dear. May I ask what the staff gets paid for a trip like this?" Superiority was lurking beneath her taut smile. There was a curious blend, though. It was as though I was a tawdry excitement, a fresh plaything—as she was, after all, "back on the market" now that her husband had passed.

In this confusion, I had all but forgotten there were other guests. I glanced at her coolly and said, "I'd prefer not to say."

Mrs. Jones, displeased with my answer, responded with a smirk, "I was just making a guess with my sons as we came on board. I can't imagine this job is all *that* lucrative. Unless, of course, you own the boat."

I changed the subject. "And who are your sons?" Somehow, my efforts to step away from the conversation were failing. I found myself giving in while I watched two of the other staff members flit about with drinks in tow.

She pointed to the two younger men standing near the railing. "The taller one is Thatcher, my oldest. The shorter is Frank." Both men were in their twenties, slender, well-manicured, and altogether disinterested. I watched them while she asked me about my children and my marital status, at which point I excused myself with the pretext that her boys had neither drink nor hors d'oeuvre.

It was not that I minded the attention of Mrs. Elaine Jones; I found myself flattered. Perhaps, even, on another day I may have welcomed it if it were not for the knowledge that we were all working to provide her with outstanding funeral services for her late husband. This particular service was causing a very distinct kind of indigestion for which I did not care for.

"May I get something for either of you?" We'd just left port, and while most of the other guests had been served and were already on a second drink, they were empty-handed.

Thatcher Jones pushed his sunglasses from his face. "Yes, bourbon would be nice."

When I came back with their drinks a moment later, I could hear the two brothers remark on how slow the service was.

Frank gulped his down and said, "Shame my father gets such a nice send-off." Looking straight at me as he said this, he then ordered me to get him a second drink.

His older brother laughed in response, saying, "I was wondering when he would finally decide to give up. He knew he was a failure. All of us did."

I excused myself before the two of them could keep me going back and forth to the bar, leaving them for someone else to handle.

The service began at 1:00 p.m. and went off without an issue. The Jones family did their best to keep up appearances, but no one on board had been spared the real truth. They were unapologetically blunt about what they had felt for the man.

Despite this, together, we spread Mr. Harold Jones' ashes. I watched as they flew in ribbons, the sound of sandy grit gracefully departing with the sea air and resting easily on the water. I had an unusual lump in my throat. We let some flower petals fall on the surface where he'd been laid to rest.

After we'd concluded, the guests had gathered in clumps, while we served them bourbon, manhattans, and dry martinis.

"What do we do with ourselves now that Jones is gone, eh?" A stout man laughed, elbowing his coworkers.

All I heard was cold laughter, muffled as though I had gone partially deaf.

"I outsold him by a third last quarter!"

"Can't say I'll miss his mug at the meetings."

"I wonder what Elaine ever saw in him. Always wish I'd met her first."

"The bastard owed me money for a year."

I listened, wishing for a quiet moment to fall again. But the trip back to port was not quiet. Instead, it was a cacophony.

My co-worker Karen soon came up behind me. She was silent at first. Just watching. Then she turned to me and whispered, "They all hated him, didn't they?"

"What gave you that idea?" I winked.

She had only been with the crew for a short time, saw only a few trips, got lucky with those she'd dealt with. Eight months and I had seen more than I ever bargained for.

Her eyes widened. "Is it always like this? Doesn't anyone care?"

I thought about this for a moment. Knowing what I did about Harold Jones, I couldn't say much against the man, except that he was a two-bit salesman with an overblown self-esteem. He was a family man who had fallen short. An average Joe. Perhaps he never cared to try as hard as other men, but did that deserve this response?

I gave her a soft tap on the shoulder and denied nothing.

I left her there to think while I went about the boat, bringing fresh drinks and watching the crowd, in their raucous laughter, as they stood in some bizarre brotherhood, oblivious to their own inhumanity.

Cianna Garrison is a writer from Southern California. She received her bachelor's in English from Arizona State University and currently works writing online content. Previously, she was awarded ASU's Homecoming Writer Award in Poetry in 2017 and plans to continue her education in creative writing and literature studies. This is the first time her short fiction has appeared in a publication.

IRREPLACEABLE

John Grey

He's sick with some terminal disease
but still the office keeps calling.

His blood slows, brain falters,
and his cells devour their neighbors.

But a report must be completed,
an in-file needs outing,
dotted lines cry out for signatures,
a spreadsheet hasn't balanced in months.

In a cubicle far from the sickbed,
huddle his unknown well-wishers:
a half-done product assessment,
a rash of unseen memos,
an unapproved sales form,
columns of numbers that refuse to agree.

The cancer claims him,
his friends and family weep,
he's buried.

But he doesn't truly die
until they hire his replacement.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in Hawaii Pacific Review, Dalhousie Review and Qwerty with work upcoming in Blueline, Willard and Maple and Clade Song.

The Biggest Tip
Marilyn Kallet

I was thirteen, faked seventeen
to snag the waitressing job
at Camp Cayuga,

Happy Land.
My dining-hall tables were packed
with adolescent boys,

and I was never quick enough
with the bug juice
or burgers.

"C'mon!" the boys yelled.
Their counselors
egged them on.

I cried after breakfast,
lunch, chipped-beef dinner.
But one counselor

was kind, and at the end
of summer, Arty Blumenthal
handed me a sealed envelope—

my name, and a twenty!
A golf pro, he was dating pony-tailed
June, a real seventeen-year-old.

These days when I over-tip,
I mention Arty, and servers
beam at me, as if

we share a secret
stash, as if
I understand them.

Marilyn Kallet, Knoxville Poet Laureate, has published 18 books, including How Our Bodies Learned, The Love That Moves Me, and Packing Light: New and Selected Poems. She has translated Paul Eluard's Last Love Poems and Péret's The Big Game. Professor Emerita at University of Tennessee, Dr. Kallet leads a writing residency for VCCA-Fran

Notes From The Field

Mary Bone

I was taking notes
as I planted my garden.
I saw toxic larvae-
the kind that would eat
your garden and devastate your fields.
I saw future pestilence as the larvae
grew wings and took over.
I felt like it was the end times.

Mary Bone has been writing poetry and short stories since the age of twelve. Some of her recent poems can be found at The Literary Librarian, Vita Brevis Literature, Literary Yard and upcoming at Z Publishing for The Emerging Poets 2019 Series.

Nasturtium
Ankh Spice

Her small canopy accepts rain
and makes jewels of it, selling them to our eyes
as diamonds. The tensile cells of water, magic beads
for the rolling, the bursting
tongue – how we eaged up the green-fresh
everything to be tasted
later

In our squat they grew through the walls, unruly collective
of tendrils finding any crack, light – tough
leaves all broad shoulders, hiding flowers
fierce-bright-headed, but so fragile
they bruised themselves gone in a single day
eaten up for their free
vitamins – little lives bit back. Mustard-bitter - the rain
came through the roof often
but not often enough for jewels

Hide those scars - these days
they'll palm over \$15 for
a few petals burning
in a salad – remember the green
umbrella lost somewhere
sheltering
unstrung beads, all perfect
bags of water
waiting to be sold

Ankh Spice is a poet from Aotearoa (New Zealand) who believes that narrative can change the world, especially the bits that hurt. Nothing has changed his mind yet. His work has appeared in a number of international publications, and two of his poems have recently been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Ankh can be found @SeaGoatScreams on Twitter, or @AnkhSpiceSeaGoatScreamsPoetry on Facebook. Most of his published work is listed at <https://linktr.ee/SeaGoatScreamsPoetry>.

The Art of the Striptease

Buffy

You come early
prepare the room.
Your head cocks when they drift in.

You unbutton your baby blue sweater
quickenning their mood.
You're here to show the movie's ad campaign,
so you pull off your earrings.
Toss one gold hoop to Boss.

He sucks on it; one you let roll down The Table.
The Others jump for it.
Boss and MoneyMan watch.
Rearrange themselves.
The Others dip to their iPhones, scanning.

Fingertips on your collarbone,
you lean back, offer a quick peek-a-boo of lacy white
and their phones fall silent.
Challenge takes its place at The Table.
You know they feel the heat.

You tease off your silky blouse, let it fly,
shimmy down your jeans.
A PowerPoint erupts on the screen.
You thumb the clicker, run the slides.
You hook your fingers into the top of your panties.
All eyes on you now.

You don't mind their relishing your breasts,
or even your ass,
your saucy side dishes.
You mind they might see your heart squeezed,

your ribs working overtime to keep yourself stitched together.
The meeting-weather turns icy.

The only other woman takes the last thing, your shoes,
places them with respect in the corner.
You stand thong-naked. Barefoot.

You're close, very close to approval.
The air is thin, almost blue
when the meeting is broken.

Hang on.
An actor-director-producer shows up.
Heat-seeking boss missiles right out the door.

Hard to the mirror in a ladies' room
on another floor,
hipbones against the sink
you dream-hate:
How to Get to The Table.
how to get to the table.

You deserve The Table.
You want to watch someone else, unlikely a man,
remove clothing, remove covering, remove volatile content.
Be deprived of status, be taken apart.
Stripped.

Buffy lives in Los Angeles. A two-time Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, her recent work has appeared in Split Lip Magazine, Rise Up Review, Bird's Thumb, and Dodging the Rain. She was awarded Cobalt Review's Prize for the baseball issue. She has marketed many Hollywood movies and documentaries.

Meeting Notes

Angela Rey

It's itching.

The hole in my head.

Let's recap our wins

And discuss roadblocks.

Lights buzz, fluorescing

The spiders that hide

In the hole in my head.

Everyone is staring.

Hello? The project -

I don't want them to get out.

What's your status?

I don't want them to get out.

On target.

Two spider legs

Tickle the edges

Of the hole in my head.

Any issues?

They're going to get out.

To report – any issues?

They're going to get out.

No, no, no... No issues.

I shudder a twitch.

Lean back, coax them down.

Damn the hole in my head.

It's itching.

Angela Rey was born in Central Florida to a Cuban exile and Appalachian asylum seeker. She is the personal assistant to three dogs, runs a catch and release program for stray humans, and believes in the transformative power of table top gaming. When properly caffeinated, she helps produce a podcast (2Scientists) and writes.