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Editor's Note

Grab a popsicle and chill out for a spell with our 113th issue.

Includes a Bob Dylan concert, an unusual teacup, beach fun, stone fruit, meat-sack meditation, and a ouija board. So, you know, all the necessary ingredients for a rockin' summer party.

Stay cool.

— Laura Garrison

Hassan Believed

Youssef Alaoui

Hassan believed that if he lifted his teacup and set it down ten times in a row at the same hour every day, it would lift and drop on its own by mere force of nature habituating itself to a consistent environment. One day, after two years of lifting and setting down his teacup, Hassan ventured out of Tamri. He went to Smimou to watch over his dear father who was fighting pneumonia with nothing but thé vert, fresh ginger, and honey. He left his neighbor Mehdi in charge of looking through his kitchen window to peer at the table.

Mehdi said of course he would help out, gladly. He had a fine view of Hassan's window by sitting on his own garden wall. He smoked cigarettes and drank dark, sweet coffee from a small clear glass with faded gold patterns on it. He watched carefully each day, fifteen minutes at a time, for a week straight. After that he would shuffle down to the market to tend to his coffee stand until well past dark. During that week he did see Hassan's teacup lift and drop on its own on three of those seven days. He declared it a miracle. He told the people at his stand. They all agreed it was more likely the work of the ifrit.

He placed a call to Hassan from the tobacco store in town. Mehdi lit a cigarette and listened. Hassan's voice crackled over the wire and exclaimed with joy that, no he had not bargained with Lalla Qandisha. No, his house was safely far enough from the river and especially the ocean that boils and crashes under the cliffs outside of town. Mehdi shook his head, amused, and hung up once

the salutations were exchanged. Long live your dear father. May you persist in good health under the protection of God. Take good care of yourself. He turned to the people waiting behind him and said that it was in no way a deal with the devil. This cup really did move on its own.

A few gasped. Three people went home immediately to begin their own patient experiments. Perhaps it had to do with sunlight and the hour. Maybe it had to be the correct angle of sunlight. They stood outside Hassan's kitchen window and took measurements. How high was that window? On which corner of the table had he left the cup? A cup and a saucer, or no saucer? It was not clear which were the exact conditions. People from the coffee stand would arrive early to witness the event. Mehdi began offering coffee to them. Saad, a banana vendor showed up. They bought bananas and sipped strong coffee. They wouldn't see it every day, but when they did, they all guffawed in joy and clinked their tiny glasses. They left money, small change from their pockets.

Hassan's father was not recovering so quickly. Mehdi said, no worries my dear, everything is fine and under control. Take your time... He began selling coffee on the garden wall from dawn until 10:30 am, when he would have to leave to tend the stand. Some of the group would walk along with him. Sometimes they'd catch a ride on a cargo truck or saddle up with the scooter brigade. They would laugh and report on the miraculous cup haunted by evil spirits that rose and fell every day on its own in the morning.

But it was Hassan's cup. He wanted his cup back. He wanted his life back. He began looking for answers to help cure his father with earnest. The pharmacist of Smimou recommended an antibiotic. His father wouldn't take it. Herbs were what he wanted.

Herbs. So he asked around and found an herbalist who recommended a tea made of thyme, mint, fenugreek, saffron, and ginger. The tea was to be taken with fresh garlic. The garlic was to be chewed raw. The tea was to steep for forty minutes. He left the bonne in charge of the tea. She made the tea and fed his father plain bread with triangular cheese wrapped in foil and chunks of raw garlic on it. Hassan made his own tea and thought of his teacup, his kitchen table, his kitchen, and his whole house. He longed for his own dull life and routine. He looked forward to being home again. He ate some bread with the triangular cheese and raw garlic. It was good. With this and fresh fruit, thought Hassan, certainly father would get well soon. He was already feeling better. He held his father's hand and bid him goodbye.

When Hassan returned to his house, there were photographers waiting in the yard and a crowd of ten people sitting on Mehdi's garden wall. Mehdi was not there. He was at the coffee stand. These people were experimenters and felt the urgent need to discover more about Hassan's experience with the teacup, from all perspectives of the kitchen window. A reporter hastily asked him questions as he walked up the path and put his key in the door. No. Yes. No. Certainly not. No, I do not believe in Satan. Yes ask anyone. I am just like anyone else in this neighborhood! No, I do not have a family of my own. Sorry. Okay. Okay. That's really enough thank you. Goodbye. Then he sat down at the table and looked out the window. Twenty eyes peered in at him. Their eyes narrowed as his hand moved toward the teacup to fill it. He decided to leave it there and took out a tall glass he used for juice. They hopped off the wall. A few came knocking. He welcomed them in. They took measurements of the kitchen and asked him

about the ifrit. No. No ifrit! Just routine. Routine. Hassan your breath smells strongly of garlic, they said. Are you possessed by the devil? What!/? He kicked them all out. Everybody out! Out!

Mehdi came by a few days later to apologize for whatever he could muster. He had no idea how it all gathered force like that, but it was quite a sensation, an excellent story to tell and share and people would come from all over. Maybe Hassan could make a business out of it? No, he craved his old privacy. Would he continue to lift his teacup? No. Probably not. Well, maybe not. But, forces of routine are difficult to break. One cannot immediately sever oneself from the familiar without a transitional period, at least. That was what a few people were waiting for. Saad the banana vendor, who had been there many days observing the phenomenon from the street, was among them. He figured he could think through the matter in a single sitting. He knew people. He knew human nature. He knew mother nature. He perched on the wall with the coffee group.

What he saw there, he would not have believed had he not seen it with his own two eyes. Hassan sat there reading the morning paper and lo and behold, on the other side of his paper, unbeknownst to Hassan, his teacup lifted and landed three times in a row. Saad now saw it clearly. Others had checked Hassan's house for wires. There were none. So he was forced to discount Hassan acting as if he was ignorant while orchestrating the entire event. He noticed something else as well. Near about five minutes before the teacup would rise and drop, his upstairs neighbor would let the cat out through the window. The cat, whose name was Mnou, would sun herself and watch the birds flit on the trees, watch the watchers sipping coffee and muttering on the wall, and eventually she

would jump down to a branch and then a ledge, to access the alley below.

This was actually the magical event of the morning. Depending on how much sun she had absorbed, depending on her anxiousness to explore the shady alley and hunt rodents or whatever else cats do on their morning rounds, this first jump was the key to the amazing phenomenon that had transfixed Mehdi's friends for the past few months. As Saad observed all that was occurring around him, the others were barreling their eyes through Hassan's kitchen window, waiting for the phenomenon. But, above, due to the passage of Mnou's four legs and tail thereby casting a shadow ever so subtle and interrupting the sunshine landing on the table, on certain days, the effect made the cup look like it had left its saucer and then land again. It was uncanny. Saad went back a few times after to confirm his new theory and it worked out. Yes Mnou was the mastermind. He kept his reactions subtle. He did not tell a soul. He left a batch of bananas at Hassan's door every time he came to watch.

Hassan came by Saad's stand later to thank him. No, no worries. It is my pleasure, Hassan. I believe what you believe. You need your privacy back. Routine is a blessing. Yes. Routine is God's will. It is our way to honor ourselves and our ancestors. If I may make one recommendation to you, my dear, please never place your cup on the same corner as you normally do. Leave it anywhere but there, or if you do want to leave it there, do not do so every day. Your life will become less complicated. Of course. You may have a banana or two from my stand any time you like, my friend. They became closer in friendship after this. From then on, Hassan moved his cup around the table.

A film student at the university came to shoot Hassan's teacup for a month for a school project. No one was vending at the garden wall. He had to bring his own coffee and bananas. He took some film and one photo at the same hour every day and documented the teacup's migration around the kitchen table and the sun's migration in the heavens, day over day. It became a stylized stop-motion animation. He played it at the film festival of Marrakech. The crowd loved it. It was so simple and beautiful. The colors were luscious. Live action, then a still frame. There were clouds and no clouds, bright light and dim light, and sometimes there were birds in the air reflected in the window. His window and frame became a photographic surface. It functioned as a palimpsest of still life in two directions; the inner world and the outer world, framed by the dusky white sill. It was an artistic salute to nature, to routine, to cozy life, to the home.

Over time, the watchers sitting on the wall dissipated. It was confirmed that Hassan's teacup would not be the same as it was, or if it was to be, then one might have to wait a month or two for the conditions to be absolutely aligned and perfect. That was exactly what Hassan desired, to have his morning tea in private again, with his window returned to its original nature and function, bringing only sunshine to his mornings. He was reunited with his routine. He promised himself to not exploit that again by creating a new experiment. Hassan's father fully regained his health. And never in their wildest dreams would anyone (but Saad) have ever guessed the magical powers of Mnou, the upstairs cat.

YOUSSEF ALAOUI is a Moroccan Colombian American. His family and heritage are an endless source of inspiration for his varied, dark, spiritual and carnal writings. He has an MFA in Poetics from New College of California. His work has appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Big Bridge*, *580 Split*, *Dusie Press*, *RIVET Journal*, *Paris Lit Up*, *The Opiate*, *Bioptic Review*, *Dryland*, and nominated for a Pushcart at *Full of Crow*. His short story collection *Fiercer Monsters* was published by Nomadic Press of Oakland, CA. His poetry collection *Critics of Mystery Marvel* was published by 2Leaf Press of NYC. Based in SLO CA. www.youssefalaoui.info twt@iuoala insta@iuoala777

Salisbury Frolics

Frank William Finney

Lipstick smudges
on a funhouse mirror.

Starfish twitching
on the shore at low tide.

FRANK WILLIAM FINNEY is a New England poet whose work has appeared widely in small press journals and anthologies including *Hedge Apple*, *Poor Yorick: The Poet's Mask*, *Tofu Ink Arts Press* and *Workers Write!* He is a former lecturer in literature at Thammasat University in Thailand where he taught for twenty-five years. His collection *The Folding of the Wings* is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

Peaches

Caitlin Morris

When she realized she'd forgotten the peaches, she was idling at the four-way stop a block away from home, and the peaches were still on the side of a country road forty-five minutes outside the city. She closed her hands tighter over the steering wheel, envisioning the abandoned cardboard boxes. Inside them, the sweet peaches, pock-marked by sparrows, wriggling with ants.

When the day began, she'd imagined it unfolding like something out of a glossy food magazine's summer spread: grilled peaches, balsamic vinegar, basil leaves, and juicy mozzarella slices—all under the gold sheen of late August. But the forest fires had turned the sky an unreal beige, and the sun glowed a grapefruit red. And now, she was almost home with nothing except a new layer of ash settling on her car and a deluge of text notifications. Her guests were on their way.

A car had tailgated the whole way home. As soon as she noticed the dusty red coupe six inches from her rear bumper, she signaled and maneuvered to the farthest right lane. The car followed, remaining close. She promised herself that she'd keep a reasonable pace; she was practiced at deflecting nuisances. She narrowed her focus to the grill that needed lighting, appetizer plates and cocktail napkins to arrange, bottles of Viognier and Chenin Blanc to chill. In the rearview mirror, a cloudy ash-laden windshield obscured the face and form of the person tailing her, silhouetted by the red sky.

The car behind her honked. She didn't accelerate or let her foot off the pedal. Instead, she let the car follow her, ignoring the intermittent honks.

"They're trying to get a rise out of you," her mother often used to say. She said it when the neighborhood kids smeared dirt onto her new bike, packed its wicker basket with sod, and ripped rainbow handlebar streamers. And yet again, when the same kids scratched on her bedroom window nightly for weeks, terrifying her into hysterics.

"Don't let them get a rise out of you," her mother had cooed, brushing the tears away gently with her fingertips.

The highway curved past her old elementary school, and for a second, the familiar cafeteria smell of butter, bleach, and body odor penetrated the car's sealed doors and windows. The sticky scent mixed with the sporadic honking briefly overwhelmed her. She could hardly see through the smoke blanketing the road. Somehow the noise, too, obscured her vision.

She considered pulling over, but the hundreds of hours of *Dateline* she watched on Friday nights discouraged her. So instead, she thought of home, the hum of the HEPA air filter, the chime of the stemless glassware positioned in rows, the doorbell, the burst of voices. *Don't let them get a rise out of you.*

The lines of evergreen trees faded into rows of townhouses, and she exited at the familiar offramp, almost laughing at how she pulled the other car with her, as though it had become her shadow.

At the four-way stop, a block away from home, she realized that she'd forgotten the peaches. But then the red car's engine revved, and the sweet fruit rotting in the summer heat didn't matter. She needed to decide what to do.

As she thought, memories arose unloosed by the glimpses of her elementary school flickering between the trees. Instead of making a plan, she recalled the industrial-sized cans of peaches served in the cafeteria. She remembered slicing the rim of the 106-oz can and peeling off the lid with her thumbnail. She almost felt her hands submerged in the orange syrup, squeezing, the fruit resisting and giving way. She couldn't even hear the honking. Instead, she tasted the aluminum-tinged sweetness.

Pulling over, she turned off the car's engine and looked in the rearview mirror one last time. Catching sight of her reflection, something formidable and charged returned her glance.

She unlocked her car door and stepped onto the street, readying herself to meet whatever it was that followed her home.

CAITLIN MORRIS teaches writing and literature at Bellevue College. While earning her MFA in creative writing from Western Washington University, she served as a fiction editor for *The Bellingham Review* and later for *Belletrist Magazine*. Recently, her work has appeared in *Ghost Parachute*. In addition, she co-hosts *Special Lady Day*—a podcast about rad women in history—with the poet Jessica Lohafer. You can find her at @ccmorrisohmy.

Necromancing Orson Welles

Penny Pennell

It is unconfirmed that Orson Welles consulted a Ouija board when making *Citizen Kane*. The planchette allegedly spelled out “rosebud” and he became positively insufferable henceforward.

We fashioned our own Ouija board on the back of a framed print of Mendeleev’s 1869 periodic table. When we accidentally summoned Welles’ spirit, we regretted it immediately. He picked us up and rearranged how we were sitting like we were prepping for a first read through. Changed the lighting to cast better shadows. Told us to project when we were speaking to him. *From the diaphragm*, he bellowed, and then told us to shut up so he could think.

The more he glowered and pondered, the louder we could hear Bernard Hermann’s score fill the room. *Chronicle Scherzo* morphed to “Psycho’s” *Prelude*. Orson scowled when we told him which score we preferred, and now he refuses to return to the spirit realm.

PENNY PENNELL received an M.A. in English from the University of Illinois at Springfield. Her fiction is forthcoming or has appeared in *Portland Metrozine*, *3Elements Review*, *Nightingale and Sparrow*, *Barnstorm*, and other places. She is an avid gardener and Chicago Cubs fan. @pennyrpennell

Body Bag

Olivia Hajioff

We exist, you and I,
in body bags.

Stretchy, but a perfect fit.

And when we lie quietly, what do we feel?

Not an arm or a leg

But a buzz, an ache, an itch.

Try it.

And the rest?

Blank space.

Pricks of light in a dark city.

But choose a point in the numbness

and suddenly it will come alive:

The tip of your nose,

The heel of your hand.

Once unfelt, they now belong.

And you will be brought back to earth

in the knowing.

OLIVIA HAJIOFF, a Fulbright scholar, first published a story at age nine. It was televised as a children's ballet for the British television show, *Freetime*. Since then she has written for the British Fulbright magazine, HIV Now project and various musical magazines. Olivia's poetry has appeared on philosopher William B. Irvine's website, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *The Shambhala Times* and the *Front Porch Review*. She is the 2020 Grand Choice Winner of the Laura Riding Jackson Poetry competition. By profession, Olivia is a concert violinist, teacher, member of the Virginia Arts Commission Touring Artists and the Marcolivia Duo.

All Alright Now

Pete Able

The first few songs weren't my particular favorites and they were played in a hurry. Though the arena boasted high ceilings that went up thirty feet or more into darkness, I felt claustrophobic. Six thousand people were seated around me and I swore I could feel their breath on the back of my neck. My armpits sweat under my hoodie and I was sadder even than before I left the house.

Sitting directly behind me was what had to be a lost soul—the ghost of a woman who wailed in a high-pitched, shrieking voice. She masked the agony of her unfinished life with apparent jubilation, but I could tell. Fakers can always tell another faker.

“Oh yeyeyeyeahhhhh!” she cried.

I didn't turn around to face the ghost—I didn't have the nerve—but my mental picture of her was as a small, gray, drowned corpse with messy black hair, like the girl from *The Ring*. She screamed again and again, kicked the back of my chair and there was nothing to do but prepare myself for a long, painful concert experience.

The date was November 17, 2018 and Bob Dylan was performing at the Hard Rock Arena in Atlantic City. At 77 the iconic figure drew a mixed crowd of all different ages. My roommate and I, at 24 and 26, observed the senior citizen ticketholders and goings on almost like it were an episode on the History Channel.

The first song Dylan and his band played I got at all excited about was “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven,” but I couldn't really enjoy it. Maybe it was fitting the ghost screamed and howled with enhanced

volume as if she held a megaphone pointed at the back of my head. Maybe she really was “*tryin’ to get to heaven.*” Maybe she screamed and howled because she loathed being stuck down here with the rest of us.

My roommate, David, sat on my left because his right ear was his good ear. Born stone deaf in the left, he liked to joke it was a good thing the defect hadn’t been in his right because it’d feel too weird to hold the phone in his left hand. On this occasion I thought him lucky because he couldn’t hear the ghost as well as I could and appeared unfazed by her shrieks.

Periodically throughout the show David leaned over to ask me the names of the songs and what I thought of the performance. *Ooh I like this one*, he’d say. *What’s this one called again?* He deferred to me so often, and seemed so unfamiliar with Dylan’s music, I started to wonder why he’d even wanted to come along.

“Who do you think ‘and His Band’ are?” he asked.

“*What?*”

“The ticket says, ‘Bob Dylan *and His Band.*’ That must be pretty demeaning for those musicians, don’t you think? They don’t have names of their own.”

“I think it’s probably an honor just to share the stage with such an icon,” I said, speaking clearly into his right ear.

David frowned and was quiet, then: “But what about after Dylan is gone, what then? They don’t have a name to trade on.”

“I see what you mean,” I said patiently. “But I think this tour will still look good on their resumés.”

David seemed satisfied. Maybe he was thinking this concert would look good on *his* resumé. Maybe when he got home he’d add it to his LinkedIn profile, I thought.

Dylan played a lot of the songs I wanted to hear but not the way I wanted to hear them—not like the studio versions I knew so well. I guessed after playing the same songs for thirty, forty, or even fifty years he had to make changes to entertain himself, to give the songs new life. On a fundamental level I understood this but still would've killed to hear "Desolation Row" played just how it was on the 11-minute, 21-second, 1965 recording on *Highway 61 Revisited*.

During a sedate, second-leg of a less popular song, while most everyone in the crowd was quiet, the ghost behind me, seated in row 26 seat F, screamed an earth-shattering scream from nowhere, causing me to jump and bite my tongue. I glanced up into the darkness, thinking the sky would fall but nothing dropped. I turned to David but he made no response. He sat leaned forward, staring down at the stage so intently you'd think the performance were a basketball game he had money on.

Later, David became fidgety and upset. He wanted to know why they weren't using the big monitors that were set up on either side of the stage. A fair point. No doubt for other shows they were used to show close-ups of the performers, but they weren't using them then.

Annoyance crept into his voice. "There're right there, you got 'em, so why not turn them on?"

He issued several complaints, and, really, he was right—we had no way to know for sure what we were looking at. The small figure down on stage dressed in the baggy suit *sounded* like Dylan, he was

doing Dylan's songs, but we couldn't see his lips moving, or even his face in any detail.

What if it's all a pantomime? I thought. Could be the audio is prerecorded and the real Dylan is on the other side of the country in sunny Palm Springs, sipping iced tea poolside, playing dominoes with Joan Baez. Stranger things have happened. Take Tupac's hologram performing at Coachella.

The turning point in the show for me came when the cute, twenty-something girl sitting on my right began singing along to Dylan's new version of "It Ain't Me Babe". Her voice had the totally opposite effect on me than the ghost's. It didn't grate but rather felt like the emotional support of a parent and I peered over at her from the corner of my eye to see if she in anyway resembled my mother. She was leaned way over into the crook of her boyfriend's neck, softly crooning into his ear.

The couple seemed an interesting microcosm of the crowd. Young Dylan fans like myself, they wore jeans and dark flannels that more or less matched. The boyfriend wore glasses with thick black frames low down on his nose as if reading, and the girl's hair was all but hidden under a formless gray knit hat, which suggested to me she might be unwell, a terminal case. Anyway, no sickness affected her voice. She sang with the gravity and intonation of the studio version while Dylan did his own thing down on stage.

I quickly realized this girl was performing the Dylan song more like Dylan than *Dylan*, and I opted to listen to her rather than old Bob himself. I slouched down in my chair and began to enjoy myself for the first time, or at least, relaxed to some degree. The girl represented some beautiful continuity. That she could sing Dylan's

song this way made me feel more secure, more optimistic about the future.

“When I Paint My Masterpiece,” “Make You Feel My Love,” and “Simple Twist of Fate” were all performed. Dylan played the piano and the harmonica but not the guitar, which made me wonder if at 77 Bob had arthritis in his elbows or shoulders. Whatever the case, it didn’t bother me. I watched him down there singing into the microphone—with what was more or less the same somewhat-nasal, gravelly voice that first sang “Blowin’ in the Wind” in 1963—and that was enough.

Despite his advanced age, arthritis or not, Dylan kept up an energetic pace. Without breaks between songs, he moved rapidly around the stage, flirting with the microphone, interacting with the band, generally putting on a show. Personally, I wanted a more mellow vibe. I wanted to sit quietly and observe in the dark like I would at a movie or play, not whoop and holler like the ponytailed man three rows up playing air drums, or scream my head off like the ghost in 26F.

The highlight of the performance came when Dylan slowed way down and played a meandering version of “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right.” He rattled off the first couple verses then blew a nice, sly harmonica solo in the middle. People whistled and cheered. Green and blue lights twinkled down on stage. The sound of the harmonica reverberated through the air. This was what I’d waited in line for, I thought. This one song made the whole night. It made up for the drive, the cost of the ticket, gas and parking fees, the anxiety and discomfort caused by the crowd. It even made up for

the past couple months of depression. I'd suffer through it all again if that meant I could arrive at the exact place I was now.

Near the end David leaned over and said, "I wish he'd play 'All Along the Watchtower'."

I don't know why, but the comment irritated me. I guessed it was the only Dylan song David actually knew.

"Not a chance," I said. "He'll never play that."

"He might," David countered hopefully.

"Not likely. He's gotta be sick of it by now. In fact, if he plays 'All Along the Watchtower,' I'll do the dishes every night for a month."

As the Dylan expert of the two of us, I was so sure of myself. But soon I'd regret saying that.

I half-expected someone as legendary, as time-tested and proven, as *old* as Bob Dylan would skip the encore, that he'd just walk off stage straight into a limo to be whisked away to some quiet, luxurious apartment but he didn't leave right away. The lights shot back on and Dylan and His Band performed two more songs.

Like the rest of the show, some of the words were hard to hear and the rhythm different, but there was no mistaking the notes of "All Along the Watchtower" and "Blowin' in the Wind."

The crowd made a riot of appreciative noises, but none rivaled the noise of the ghost behind me, who alternately cackled like a wild monkey and broke out in shrill, haunted laughter. Just as I'd been sure Dylan would not perform "Watchtower," I was sure of this ghost's hideous appearance. I felt if you saw her you'd be so repulsed you'd vomit, or feel so queasy you'd double over, but I was wrong again.

As the applause died down, I thought of my job, my ex-girlfriend, my expired gym membership, and of washing dishes, and it all seemed so easy and trivial, nothing at all to worry about. Surely none of it warranted the drowning feeling of even the day before.

The arena lights came on and it was all over. People stood up, rubbed their eyes and stretched as if just waking up. David and I made our way to the aisle and I caught a glimpse of the ghost who'd kicked my chair and taxed my nerves all night. She took the form of a living woman—a normal, attractive young woman talking with a girl who must've been a sibling, if not a twin.

She had smooth skin and a pointy nose. Straight white teeth peeked out from under full, moving lips as she whispered something to her sister. Average height and slender, she wore a fuzzy red sweater and a few strands of her hair were died orange and held back with a metallic star-shaped hairpin.

To her sister, the ghost spoke up and said, "That was really something! I needed this."

The younger girl, a mirror image only a few inches shorter and with different hair, replied, "I told you you'd have fun. Things aren't as bad as you make them out to be sometimes."

The ghost's mouth was pouty, which seemed an old habit, but her eyes were bright like high beams on a car.

"I guess you're right. I've been focusing on the wrong kinds of things."

"I'm glad you came," said the sister, as she put her arm around the taller one's waist.

"Sorry I've been so hard to be around lately," said the ghost.

Because of the blood-curdling sounds she'd made it was difficult to see the woman as completely alive, but of course she didn't look anything like a ghost, drowned or otherwise. Her body looked firm to me, soft but ultimately firm. If I reached out, my hand would not pass through her.

In truth I didn't know what to think, but as I went before her down the stairs I shot a smile in her direction. She smiled back and my whole body went cool and crisp. I became a piece of ripe fruit and it'd been a long time since I felt so fresh and so clean.

Walking down to the arena floor, thinking of Dylan's Nobel Prize and the ghost-woman's transition, I felt on the edge of a revelation.

In the wide corridors of the gaudy hotel/casino we were swept along by streams of elated, chattering people. I allowed myself to go with the flow of the crowd, feeling like a leaf cruising down a small stream on the side of the street after a rain.

Waiting at the elevators, where I was deposited, David chattered too but I couldn't make out what he said. I watched his mouth move but heard only the whir of a dozen overlapping voices then, for a while—silence. *Was I leaving this plane of existence?*

Soon David's mouth closed and the elevator doors opened with the ding of a welcome chime.

Pressed up against the back wall, sucking in my gut, I stared up at the mirrored ceiling and had that breakthrough. I couldn't go back into the past, and really, I couldn't go lower in the present, so there was nowhere to go but up. With the tune of "Don't Think Twice" echoing in my head, I decided that's what I would do—I'd

go up. I'd ride this new wave as high as it'd take me, which I hoped would be at least as far as Parking Deck 4.

PETE ABLE's stories have appeared in *Literally Stories*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Spillwords Press*, *Johnny America*, *Idle Ink*, *The Fiction Pool*, *Thorn Literary Magazine*, among others. He lives in southern New Jersey.

On the cover:

“Graffiti”

JAN SIMONS is an enthusiastic hobby photographer from Eersel in the Netherlands. Simons’s work is available on Pixabay.

