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ginosko

A Greek word meaning  
to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;  
knowledge that has an inception, a progress, an attainment.  
The recognition of truth from experience.

γινώσκω

There is mere existence. And there's experience. Pitched further—more resonant—than either of these, a poem, whether we're reading one or writing one, more actively grapples with, refines, and embodies experience, the experience of choosing—rather than to pass through the world—to instead take into ourselves the world with all of its sometime brutalities, and sometime joys. This taking in of the world is a kind of loving. A sustenance. Never mind that it will not save us. Every poem is, somewhere, both a form and an act of love.

—Carl Phillips

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## **C O N T R I B U T O R S**

## **Jane Jane**

### **Mark Knego**

Jane Y. is thirty-eight and lives in a home for women with mental disabilities near the river. There are 15 girls. It is convenient, Jane has her own room and a bathroom. There is a TV and a computer, but Jane cannot watch TV because she gets confused. She uses the computer for email but that is the extent of her computer abilities. She takes the train, shops, walks, sits, smokes, listens to music, mainly John Legend or Mariah, gets up, then walks somewhere else to repeat the process. She does this daily.

Jane came from N. where she was born into a family of four. She has the two parents and a sister. Her mother was and is cruel. She rejected her daughter early when signs of her disability swam to the surface. The family was humiliated, so they created a distance from her, and the family sent Jane away when she was seven. Some family members refuse to acknowledge that she is actually a sentient, living being, even to this day, mind you. Her mother refuses to communicate with her, no texts, no calls, no cards, no nothing. She hints at the nearby nuclear power plant to explain her daughter's condition. Jane's father is a distant self-coagulated independent businessman of some sort who rarely surfaces.

Jane F. grew up outside N. in a high-rise apartment building near a park. She has a mother and no siblings and never knew her father. He was and is an unknown memory. Her school was mid-sized and the kids all knew each other. The school is well known for outdoor sports and there is a lot of open space for the kids to run around in through the nearby forest. But Jane never ran around after school, or went anywhere at all, for that matter, or did the other things that kids do when they are young and in the prime of their lives.

Jane went home every day after school to take care of her bed-ridden mother. Her mother had fallen to the sword of a mysterious ailment, and there was no recourse for outside help because there was no insurance, so for all of Jane's school years she tended to her gravely ill mother. Feeding, sponge baths, massage, and the like. She could watch her schoolmates running around outside through the living room window, and she would allow herself this melancholy pleasure from time to time when she needed a break from tending to her mother in the bedroom.

After a length of time, one day, one year, Jane Y. and Jane F. merged. They simply became Jane. Although small in their worlds and even smaller in the larger world, their merger became celestial. It was as if two stars fused together in an enormous explosion of energy and became one.

From the high sky the archangel Gabriel saw this cosmic merger, and, having compassion for Jane and her mother, spread his wings, descended through the atmosphere, came to their apartment, and said he would help Jane take care of her mother. Gabriel informed them that they were good people, and he would help them.

light my path direct my steps shelter me under your protective wings  
Gabriel decided they should move out of N. to the seaside which would be better for Jane's mother. He said he would build a house where they could all live together in happiness. Jane and her mother were quite surprised at this turn of events, but quickly agreed and were content with Gabriel's presence.

Gabriel found open space on a bluff overlooking the sea some kilometers outside N. and brought in bricklayers, carpenters and the like to build the house. They constructed the house yet created extra-large doorways to accommodate Gabriel's large wings.

With the care of Jane and Gabriel Mother slowly got better. She regained her spirit and was soon able to sit up in bed and play cards with them. Laughter would ring out through the house and the neighbors came by to join in on the merriment. They had a party and drank chilled barley tea with mint leaf.

The family lived well, and everyone got along. The archangel Gabriel was quiet yet attentive and didn't ask for much. Jane grew vegetables and sold them at a roadside stall. Mother tended house. They were content and felt of themselves as a family.

The seasons passed cyclically like the gentle weather, then one day they had a rare visitor. They were all surprised and came out of the house.

The visitor was a postman and he walked up the path to the house. He took a letter out of his leather mailbag and said he had a delivery for Jane Y. He gave the letter to Jane then left back down the path as gently a rain began.

The all went to the kitchen and Jane sat at the table, opened the letter, and read it. It was from Jane Y.'s father. He said that Jane Y.'s mother was sick with cancer from

radiation poisoning and asked if Jane Y. could come see her.

Jane's mother was very confused and said she thought that she was Jane's mother, but Jane convinced her that she actually had two mothers, and that this case was not unusual. So they all decided to visit Jane's sick mother. Jane sensed that her mother who lived with her was jealous, so she spoke to her, and she calmed down, and felt it was right for her to accompany Jane and Gabriel to visit Jane's mother.

They found Jane's mother in a dimly lit room in a hospital. She could look out the large window at the thick green forest. She was weak, but happy to see her daughter. She cried. Then she asked who the other two were and Jane explained. She was confused because she thought she was Jane's mother, yet calmed down, and was very taken with Gabriel and his large wings. She said she was sorry for ignoring Jane when she was young and said that this had brought her untold grief and torment. But Jane said there was no reason to apologize and that she loved her and wished her to be content and comfortable. Then a nurse came and said Jane's mother was tired, and needed to rest, and could they leave and come back tomorrow.

When they came back the next morning Jane's mother was unconscious. She passed away an hour later peacefully in her bed.

They cried. Jane cried because of her mother's suffering, not because she had rejected her when Jane was young. Jane understood that this rejection was an understandable decision.

After some time they had arrangements to attend to. Gabriel suggested they build a mausoleum on the bluff overlooking the sea and should inter Jane's mother there. Jane and Mother thought this was a good idea but Mother said they needed to get permission from Jane's father. In subsequent days as they prepared for the move they tried to locate him but could not.

Gabriel called the bricklayers and artisans back to build the mausoleum and it was beautiful. Upon completion they decided to invite people from the nearby village, including the postman, for a celebration for the internment. Jane and her mother cooked copious amounts of vegetable pies, cheese dishes and teas which the group enjoyed tremendously. Jane felt some of the children ate so ravenously because they were hungry children. As the celebration extended into the evening one of them called for everyone's attention because



he had noticed something. He said he was an astronomer and noticed a new star in the sky over the sea. The group became hushed as they peered up into the dark. They found the star, and Gabriel assured them it was Jane's mother's soul in the sky. As Gabriel was an archangel the group accepted this as a truth. In the following seasons, people in the area would always look up into the sky and find Jane's mother's star. It would comfort them of their troubles of the Earthly life, as the star was of a mother whose daughter forgave her.

## mother

the other day i caught a glimpse in my phone screen and i saw my mother and was immediately upset; i don't want people to know that i came from her and that her blood and genes run through me, i don't want to sound like her or look like her, to everyone once else she's beautiful and desired and i'm lucky - i spent my whole life trying to be the opposite of whatever she was - trying to be me and not her daughter - and for the first part of my life i just had to be daddy's girl and that was enough to separate me from her, to drive a wedge between us this clear distinction, the obvious favor of my father and the team we became against her - during the second part of my life i had to really try to not be her, it wasn't enough to like dad more because she molded me to fit into her casing, the rebellion was an active attempt and it was worth it because in this third part of my life, i am nothing like her and i don't even have to try, it comes easy to me, as easy as i assumed motherhood should come to her but i forget about the things that are not within my control, i forget about science and dna and biologics and the fact that despite everything she did not do, she also carried me to term, nourished our bodies, grew me inside of her and pushed me out, my features are failing me, my freckles are increasing - soon theyll be sprinkled all over my face like hers, my hair reddens as i get older and im praying that the gray strands win the race before i mirror her even more - looking at old pictures of her and staring my future in the face, quite literally, she is the archetype the original design flawed and all and i refuse to be a broken carbon copy of the woman that broke me first

## Glitch

wrong incorrect broken out of order the line has zig zagged and chaos has ensued in my head, i panicked; i forgot pretty princess etiquette training walk straight and slow head up chin forward do not drop the book do not swear or the take the lord's name in vain, i yelled God and fuck the first time she showed me what it meant to be sated; you can't break rules you don't follow, i can't sin if i don't believe in holy wrongs or paradise; i fell out of the perfect system, raged against the confines of familial traditions; ripped the wings out of my back and stuffed syrupy apple pie down my throat;

they tried to switch my hardware and swap my battery but the symptom persisted, my software was not compatible; realization hit that i could not be mended, i became invisible as they ignored the defect entirely and pretended like it didn't exist, i couldn't disappoint and disgust them because i was no longer apart of their reality; effectively removing me, they had won in keeping their image from distorting, i walked away with my pain and my peace

## **Please Run To Me**

i saw a video today. the guy in the video started off by saying: "this is what mommy issues looks like in women" so of course i stopped scrolling and thought, let me watch this and see if it's accurate.

he said, mothers are supposed to teach their daughters who they should be, and fathers are supposed to teach their daughters how they are supposed to be treated. my dad taught me that men should worship and love you, and show it, often, but only when they are able, because men are not reliable, at no fault of their own so you can't blame them, best you can do is make yourself extremely independent, so you don't need them, but you can enjoy them. my mother reinforced this idea.

he said that if a mother has no self confidence, then she can't teach her daughter self confidence. my mom taught me to be self confident, in my physical self, mental self and emotional self because whatever i said and whatever i wanted was always right, even when it wasn't. she taught me never to get too comfortable in one place and to never stay anywhere too long, she taught me that only superficial connections were necessary and to never get too close to anyone, not even the people that come out of your own body.

i can't remember what the rest of the video was about, but as i was listening to "i'll come running" by brian eno, i thought to myself would they though, would they come running to tie my shoes, the answer being no. neither one of them has a parental bone in their body so did i make up my childhood? did my dad ever actually run vicks all over me when i was sick and rub my back until i fell asleep on the couch? did my mom actually make sure that i was the best looking child at any function we went to? because if so, where did those parents run off to, because it wasn't towards me.



## **kindness (n.): a stone of hope**

**April Yu**

kindness transplants itself into enough mouths to become a foreign word.  
my friends say it is lipstick wiped off teeth,  
a sheath of homework answers at  
midnight.

my parents say it is sterile tools and cracked  
palms, saving the world one heartbeat at a time. I  
graft this kindness onto my body, feel its foundation  
collapse between my bones.

I think of one thousand heartbeats I will never save.  
crushed beneath a policeman's boot, compensating for  
a crime never committed, their voices seeking purchase  
in air they no longer have. stuttering against lo mein and  
dumplings in plastic tins, ten years of city grime sloping  
their backs,  
GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY serializing the scene.  
my parents say you can't help anyone if you're dead.  
kindness bypassed by survival.

kindness, a word that evades me every day with  
its impossible candy-colored glow. Dr. King says  
it is something within reach as long as you are  
willing to do more than survive. I have a dream,  
he says, in the heart of a country that bleeds his  
people crimson.

a dream that we can remove crowns of  
privilege to help those with circlets of barbed  
thorns, that neither color nor my livelihood ever  
move my hand more than compassion. that  
compassion becomes my livelihood. says, hew  
out of the mountain of despair  
a stone of hope.

after, I tear the neon kindness from my skin, flush it out with something softer.

kindness is more than a flash-paper moment, a surgeon's knife or graphite numbers. it is an everyday battle, hands extended and steps taken, burdens transmitted and transmuted until the weight is halved by the shoulders of two. I sharpen my bones like blades, a calcium unity that can never be crushed.

### **Dove in Waves**

I have seen it before, this  
drowning, wing tips  
above water, beak  
gasping, the brain  
springing from I want, to  
I've been caught and,  
in my mind's eye,  
when white disappears  
to waves, the herring  
will silver flash  
hypnotic: Better to be  
in here, breath caught  
in bubbles, than caged  
waiting for a wedding.

**' brō-kən** n. A state of being paralyzed and or p a r s e d. Whispered when a says she doesn't want and/or like children. Any system that steals time from our hands and pours it into those already overflowing. A horse who rides as directed. Implies a fault line. Shift in functionality. A moment when a breath is taking place. Stress is on the first syllable as it carries no shame and therefore does not need to hide.

Note: This is a change in form from the verb 'to break.' When completing its action, the 'e' shifts, the 'n' joins, and the 'a' loses its tail but gains a voice.

Antonyms include: Foundations build on mutual understanding, The Child Who Reads in Class, My spirit, Your spirit, Preferred pronouns, Women who know what they want, The Rebel, The earring whose back fell off that is now used to open phone sims, Animals left on sidewalks and in shelters



## **Rose Quartz**

I was promised love through stone in  
Pensacola. Taught to grind pink salt,  
season your dinners, light white  
candles, call out to Eros, electrify  
your

eyes to mine again. Save shards to  
shrine you with, rocks hot glued between  
photos tacked to closet wall. Hold cold  
stones in my hand, impress a memory on  
each

one: your finger in my shoulder dimples;  
your arms lowering grandmother into her  
wheelchair; the one hair you muscle  
memory miss on your left cheek; water

rushing down your back and thighs.  
We were like that too—always in a  
rush to push ourselves down the drain.  
If this fails, can I resell pink grains as

Himalayan sea salt? Dinner microwave  
saved, ears bedroom straining to hear  
you come home before midnight, chest  
hoping for your arms to wrap around

me, an imagined need you'll have  
after one chew.

**Cupid Watches Diana and Endymion**  
**After Diana and Endymion, Francesco Solimena**

I did not know            that the sheep you herded today would be your last.

I did not know

    Diana would keep you immortalized unabashed.

Oh! Forsooth!

    If I had known, would I have changed a thing? There would  
have been delight    in watching Diana fall, call to her  
handmaidens—I release you!    For I too have tasted the salted  
skin of temptation and rue        only that I have ever kept the  
taste from your lips too. There would have been delight        in  
watching the lightening, repressed for so long, erupt    from her  
skin like Mount Vesuvius, long-held reserve thrust obscure! Her  
animal bloodlust calling forth a new hunt!

Goodbye Endymion

    May the moonlight covet your flushed cheeks forever.

Goodbye Endymion

    May you dream of how you are loved beyond measure.

## **To American Women:**

They want us  
in circles  
working  
Huddle House  
side hustles,  
breast  
feeding by nineteen,  
once-upon  
a-time future doctors,  
entrepreneurs,  
senators breasts too  
tender, eyes too  
bloodshot from nights  
newborn  
cries scared the  
Sandman away,  
brain on autopilot,  
driven purely by  
maternal instinct  
sharpened over  
generations. A  
prayer for money  
and health  
plastered to our  
lips, while we,  
industry cattle, trod  
forward making  
their profits  
forced  
to birth their  
workers.

## **Snake-Warning Sonnet**

***After Kim Addonizio's "Half-Hearted Sonnet"***

I saw belt hit asphalt, watched him slip  
down the street. Like Blues you cried, cleansed.

Tooth to lip I am renewed. Not what you intend,  
inspiration for thumbled belt straps snipped

into warning hand sewed, Snakes: *No Friends*  
*Here*. Yard spiked in combs slicked: slid: tricked: rended:

pushed: pulled through hair, a fight lipped  
through broken teeth, never sure how I offended.

There will be no nets that come recommended,  
only rats laced with antifreeze, script

flipped, "Tell me, why do you do this?" defense  
amended for me, my porch snake graveyard splendid.

A thank you to the woman who allows me to gloat:  
Scaled belly hulls, here will only bloat.

**The Muse Speaks**  
**After Christina Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio"**

Please paint me as Dante's "Persephone"  
having reached the Underworld, with brushes  
haunting me like pomegranate seed ruses,  
I am not sure I will bring your sunny

Spring anymore. I have been dragged across  
a thousand artist's windows and fond them  
all the same, whether hand on flower stem  
or hands reaching out for who? Until emboss

peels, I suffer half smile waning. Pluck me  
from this false skin! Let me show you the true  
face of a woman set to despair, who rues  
those who ask her to be patient, come see

my typhoon, wind to howl through ears screeching:  
"I won't stand waiting for you anymore!"

## return to waves

in a cage of painted steel, i thrust—i  
flit from millet stick to beak on wing cleaning  
hair slicked back and up pompadour style i  
kick parakeets white-blue angel lovely  
*in a cage of painted steel, i thrust—i*  
land shoulder-twig-hand cyclical bob my  
head to cageless gulls calling for stingray  
waves, i wait for sun to icarus my wings  
but its forgotten kiln heat, eyes closed to  
my cage of painted steel,  
i thrust— i  
ignored by all but the night and its pull  
that threatens to rebirth me reef fish wave  
drowning. distant moon pushes seafoam  
collecting to make modern Aphrodite, may she  
kill the sun. may all the cages be thrust  
into waves distant moon push seafoam collecting  
in a cage of painted steel.

# **Because the Way Night Falls on These Bare Trees**

**Douglas Cole**

When the train arrived in Milan he awoke to daylight flooding the cabin. Paris had been deluged with rain for the five days he was there. Now he looked up and saw blue sky and slow-moving high white clouds. The others rose from their seats and collected their bags, and Tom took his pack from the metal rack, held it, and filed with all the other people down the corridor and out to the platform. He stepped down from the train and felt sunlight on his head and arms. He slipped his pack onto his shoulders and walked down the platform toward the entrance. He wore boots which he had bought in London, jeans from America, and a black canvas coat which he had bought in a used clothing shop in Paris. His pack was small, though he carried everything necessary for survival. He reached up and felt his face. He had not shaved for two days. He moved his shoulders to release the stiffness from sleeping upright. No one seemed to notice him as a foreigner. Part of the game, he realized, was to wear no uniform, to assume a clothing of no nation.

The lobby of the Milan train station was vast and ornate. A stone stairway led down from the train platforms with spacious landings opening out on either side halfway down. On the ground floor were several stalls where vendors sold magazines and fruit, and along the front of the building were archways leading out to the street. The ceiling was domed with fine iron grillwork and skylights of pale green glass. People crowded along the stairs and on the ground floor, but only a few men in shabby clothes sat along the stone benches lining the edges of the two landings.

Tom walked through the stalls in the lobby. Vendors were selling drinks and fruit out of simple wooden carts. He passed through their gauntlet and through the tall arches and stood with his face tilted to the sun and his eyes closed. Across the street a crane was sweeping over an open lot. The red, iron girders of a new building lay in stacks along the street. Construction workers moved through long trenches which had been dug for a new foundation. Only their heads were above the ground. And like some secret city under veil, the buildings along the street had been covered with scaffolding and large grey tarps to protect them from the dust of the construction.

He walked down Via Vitruvio and along the front of the station. Other streets spread out away from the station like spokes on a wheel, and he chose a street at random and followed it. He wove into a crowd flowing along the sidewalk. He felt tall among them, looking across a wide stream of faces and shoulders, all of them infused with the grey dust that seemed to drift down from the fluttering canvasses over the storefronts. People standing on the islands and waiting for the green tram looked up with the faces of those stepping to their executions, and sparks flew from the heels of the metal shoes that rode on the end of poles that extended from the tram and connected to the wires strung above.

He walked into the corridor of mottled light beneath the canvas, past shops with iron grills over the windows, past small food markets and restaurants.

He stopped at one of the restaurants and went in. It was a narrow place with booths on one side and refrigerated glass deli cases on the other side. It was empty except for the two men behind the counter and a woman who wore an emerald scarf over her head and a dark, wool

coat. She stood looking into the deli case and pointing a bony finger at a yellow chicken carcass. Tom sat in a booth near the back and waited. He had not eaten since the night before when he had had a cold pork roll in the Paris train station. He was ravenous. The two men standing behind the case both wore white aprons and moved in quick pantomime of service and spoke in overlapping sentences while the woman crooned in her indecision over which chicken to take. One of them looked over at Tom and said something in quick Italian. Tom nodded, and the man came around from behind the counter and gave him a menu. He spoke again, and Tom said, "Stella Artoi." The waiter brought him the beer, and Tom said, "Il Lasagne, por favore" in bad Italian. The man took the menu without responding and walked away.

Tom drank his beer and because he had not eaten he felt the alcohol quickly. He finished it and when the man brought his food he ordered another. He ate slowly, drinking the beer instead. He had two more. He was feeling mildly drunk but decided not to have another. He was at a point, he knew, where it would be easy to lose his precision and he did not want to lose it. He forced himself to imagine nothing and gave great attention to the act of eating. When he finished he picked up his pack and walked to the counter. He had exchanged twenty Pounds for Lire when he was in Paris, and this was his first time using the Italian money. This currency of another country had the feel of grimy apartments and pawnshops and food. He thought again about having another beer, but heard instead, I've got to get out of here. The two waiters stared at him as he paid his bill and left.

He walked further down the street looking at the people and the buildings. The alcohol gave an odd hue to the light, and the sun had dropped, throwing longer shadows across the ground. He thought to take a picture but decided against it. He turned up Via Tiepolo, a side street which was very narrow with tall, ragged buildings on either side. He could smell the cooking food, saw the apartments above.

He came upon a group of children kicking a ball back and forth in the street and moved along their perimeter and past them. The street curved several times then opened onto a large courtyard with a market. Stalls with colorful canvas tents stood in two rows, and he walked down the center through the crowd of people. Vendors were shouting, holding up fruits and displaying meats which were either hung from poles or laid out in wooden carts. There were Italian oranges, cantaloupes, peaches, and whole, plucked chickens hanging in bundles. He saw boxes of strawberries and apples, and stalls with shirts, sunglasses, jeans and leather jackets. He stopped at one of the stalls and picked up two oranges. "Cuanto cuesta?" he asked. His Italian was a bad kind of Spanish with a feigned accent. The vendor was a young man with a short beard and long brown hair tied back into a tail. He leaned forward and said: "Como?"

"Cuanto Cuesta?" Tom said, forcing his accent more and holding up the two oranges. The man smiled and waved his hand. "Gratsi," Tom said.

He walked back into the crowd and stopped once more to buy a box of strawberries. Without speaking, he gave the short, balding man a Lire note and took the change. Then he walked to the end of the stalls. A chain fence separated the market from the rest of the courtyard. He sat down on the curb of the street and leaned back against the fence, propping himself against his pack. He ate the oranges. They were small and sweet. He ate the strawberries which were unripe and tart. He looked at his watch: it was four o'clock. A cool wind picked up and he pulled up his collar.



He finished the strawberries and stood up. His train would not be leaving until seven, so he was in no hurry. I will meet Bill in Munich tomorrow, he thought, closer to the one grandfather, then we will go on to Venice or Nice. They had a three and a half week break from the university and had bought passes good for a month on all European trains. Tom walked up the street and came to Viale Abruzzi, then followed the street to Via Petrella and started walking in the direction of the train station. He was beginning to feel tired after not sleeping on the train and hoped to find a park or place to sit and rest.

He walked down another narrow street that was lined with grey buildings with green shutters. No children were playing in the street, here. It was quiet, and a low wind swept the dust into eddies along the gutters. Ahead of him he saw a black truck parked before the grey corrugated metal door of a warehouse. Two men were carrying whole sides of beef into the warehouse. The beef was fresh and red, with white strips of fat. The killer awoke before dawn. They carried the meat with the man in front resting the stump of the neck on his shoulder, the man in back holding his end up with a curved meat hook. Tom passed them, taking shallow breaths. The smell was sharp and sour, and the men's aprons were covered with blood.

Tom kept walking and felt that the train station was not far. All streets seemed to converge at the train station, he thought, and I can find my way home. Thoughts of the far circles of unknowable streets and buildings pressed in again and with them the vague fear of being lost. Through a window he heard a woman moaning, the sound of illness, and he glanced over to catch sight of her, eyes blackened, one arm raised. He caught the brief smell of the sick room, hot feverish sweat on a body burning slowly inside of itself.

He came out of the street to a small park. A set of tram tracks ran along the far side of the park, and a cement path wound down the center of it through a line of cypress trees. Between the trees were black iron streetlamps and wooden benches. A few men were sitting on various benches or sleeping on the ground. The trees were tall and old, but it was not a park like an oasis. Tom set his pack down on an open bench and took out his book. He lay down, resting his head on the pack and staring up through the trees for a while. He took a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. The sky was nearly dark, and a few heavy clouds moved slowly in the wind above. He opened his book and began reading in the faint yellow light of the streetlamp.

Burkewitz, Eisenberg and Stein were in competition. They were having the intellectual Olympics and because of some obscure embarrassment and physical weakness, Burkewitz fought for no other reason really than spite. He was the object of laughter, but now he was a force because of his mind. He rose in the class and his mind flourished. Tom lost himself in the book, and almost all sense of his surroundings dropped. He felt no cold or fatigue in his legs.

Then a sound like tearing paper made him start, and he looked around quickly. Two policemen were coming down the path. They wore grey military hats and dark blue uniforms with red straps over the shoulders. Batons hung at their sides. Each walked with his hands clasped behind his back. They looked at Tom, and he moved his eyes back toward the book, but his vision was concentrated on them. There was no reason for them to bother him, but in Paris a woman had told him with severe paranoia that the Italian police can arrest people and hold them for twenty four hours on nothing more than suspicion, and though he knew

there was no reason to be concerned about them, his mind adopted her fear as he felt them looking at him for a long time while they walked slowly past.

He remained outwardly calm. He had nothing to be afraid of, he thought. He had no reason. Many times he had had a reason, but this time he was safe. He began feeling better and looked across the path at a man lying on another bench. Then the policemen turned around and began walking back toward Tom, looking directly at him. He looked back down at his book again and remained motionless, though his heart began beating faster. Wait, wait, he thought. As they approached he slipped his hand under the strap of his pack. He could hardly out-run them carrying his pack, he thought. But they stopped in front of the man who was sleeping on the other bench. One of the policemen pushed the man with the end of his baton. The man awoke and sat up, bewildered. He had thick, black hair and a beard, and he wore a dirty, red sweater. They made him stand up and padded his pockets with their hands and pushed him with their batons as they searched him. A police car pulled up next to the tram tracks and they began pulling him towards it. He looked around at the other people in the park who sat silently, and he spoke quickly, pointing at them. The more he protested the harder the policemen pushed him. Then one of them began hitting him in the head with his baton. He screamed horribly, holding his hands over his face, and they pushed him toward the car. His eye was bleeding as they put him in the back seat and closed the door. Then they slid into the front of the car, turned on the siren and the lights and drove away.

Tom looked back down at his book and began to read. Some of the men in the park had gathered into a small group and were talking quietly. The teacher made a joke about Burkewitz, but it did not make sense. Humor did not translate, he thought. He read for an hour until he started to get cold. The park was engulfed in darkness, except for the feeble, yellow lamp light, and he found it difficult to read. He stood up, lifting up his pack, and started walking to the train station.

I've been up all night. But I've been sleep deprived all my life. The officers were watching loud television and laughing hysterically. Contrary to my wishes, they 'check' on me every hour and shine a bright torch in my eyes. It's coming up to 10:30am but I know the officers won't knock on my door and shout me to the Exercise yard. I am banned, again. But I will be called for my adjudication around 11am.

It's good timing because my body cannot take another beating. So staying in my cell is a lifeline. I already received my routinely spits from other prisoners this morning collecting my hot water. They flaunt their Canada Goose jackets, Nike trainers and unnecessary items that they get from selling drugs. I wear the same rags every day.

And it's not just 'clothes' I reject, it's money and human conventions and any last crumb of civilisation. I try to stay away from anyone who claims to be civilised or anyone who desires 'possessions.' I reject you if you blame others for their actions. Consequently, I reject most prisoners here. No one thinks they are guilty. They all blame their crimes on their 'partners,' 'mates,' 'juries' 'judges,' 'the local nonce,' 'the local priest,' 'the local priest who's also a nonce.' It's fool's paradise.

I take full responsibility for all my actions.

So how did I wind up in HMP Brixton? Because I pee, defecate and masturbate on the streets. This is indecent exposure and you're banged up for two years. This is my 11<sup>th</sup> imprisonment for the same 'crime.'

When I'm out on the streets of London, I receive disgusted looks from citizens. Mothers clutch their children's hands and shout things like 'perv, I'm reporting you!' and 'you should be ashamed of yourself' and 'go back to prison!' Young women with yoga mats and tight leggings turn their noses up. Some men with briefcases and fancy watches spit at me, some offer me money. The ravenous youth laugh and try to pretend that they are my friend, by saying things like 'you alright Diogenes, rough day yeh?' or 'no better time to wank, innit Diogenes?' and 'do you want some dizz, mate?'

But why do I provoke the public like this?

I believe that nothing done in private should not be done in public. And I have freedom from shame. Prisoners, desperate to be free from incarceration, do not see that the truest freedom is to develop perfect mastery over oneself. Happiness cannot rely on your status, or how people perceive you. Only you can truly judge yourself.

Now let me recount to you how I've rustled myself up another nicking.

Yesterday morning, I pretended to be a lion on the Exercise yard, imitating its movements, roaring at other men, and scratching the earth. I then searched for a spot amidst the only grassy patch to mark my territory. The other prisoners made a right kerfuffle - shouting at me to put my 'cock away' and the officers approached me in a fluster. One young, good-looking female said "Diogenes, let's go inside, exercise is over for you." I roared and told

them Custodial Manager, to Governor, to Governing Governor. That's freedom, freedom to choose, but you're stuck, never moving forward, Diogenes. I'm sorry to say this, but I'm trying to wake you up a bit."

"Alright Gov - you believe you are free. I have no doubt that you have excelled and progressed throughout your career, and now you reign over this prison mightier than a sovereign. And I'm a humble commoner. But to me, you are enslaved. Your position is precarious, your authority threatened. You are enslaved by insatiable ambition and desires. I am free."

She stares at me with her body and face fixed as still as a marble sculpture.

She stutters some incomprehensible words. Then she composes herself.

After about two minutes silence, she says,

"I suppose we have different views on freedom. You are free of shame – that makes you powerful. But I see no freedom in being locked away in a cell."

"I see no freedom in abiding by the laws of society."

"But your freedom has been stolen from you because you chose to disobey the law, Diogenes."

"No, governor, I was free to choose to disobey the law. And I am free of any desires to be anywhere else. Even if I am incarcerated, I'm still free."

She pauses.

"Well...enjoy the Seg, Diogenes."

Then she leaves.

The young, blonde, attractive officer, SO Madden, collected "Exercise is not over yet so I'll be staying here for the next fifteen minutes." She turned on her body worn camera and said "for recording purposes, Diogenes has refused a direct order, so we are going to start Use Of Force to bring him into to the Segregation Unit. This is to protect the other staff and prisoners." Against my will, I was grabbed by my arms by the two officers on either side and put in a headlock by another. It was not aggressive but the stocky man who stunk of smoke pushed down on my neck bruises.

It's 11am and I am in the Segregation unit. I hear Matt, (matricide Matt,) shouting "try not to get ya cock out in front of the Gov, eh Diogenes?" I prefer Matt to the other prisoners because he does not blame anyone else for killing his mother and declares that he 'wanted to do it.' This makes him less imprisoned than most prisoners. I enter the adjudication room. "Ah, Diogenes, your back so soon. Have a seat." says the Governor.

"It is alleged that at 10:42am on 03/02/23, you committed the following offences –  
PT 51 (27) – disobeys any lawful order

PT 56 (7) = Intentionally endangers the health, mental health or personal safety of others.

The following report was written by SO Madden

Diogenes revealed his genitals to the prisoners and staff on exercise. This is a public offence. He then started to urinate on the grass in front of prisoners and staff on exercise. This is another public offence which is dangerous and unsanitary. Diogenes refused the direct order to stop urinating and leave the Exercise yard. As a result, we were obliged to enact Use Of Force to bring him to the Segregation Unit to protect other staff and prisoners.' The staff involved in the restraint were Ms Bresley, Ms Richards and me, SO Madden.

Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

I plead guilty for my actions.

The governor stops the recorder and finishes the adjudication.

As she is packing up to leave, she asks why I never seem upset or remorseful for my actions. I tell her that all my actions are align with my philosophy. And this lifestyle has brought me freedom all my life. The governor scoffs.

"Oh Diogenes, you are not free, look at yourself."

"Okay Gov, explain to me why I am not free."

I can feel my eyebrows lifting and her eyebrows narrowing.

"You've gone from the streets back to prison, back to new streets, and to a new prison, multiple times, Diogenes."

'But you are free?'

"Yes"

"How?"

'Well...I'm not imprisoned, am I?'

"Is that what freedom means to you?"

She doesn't think. She's in a hurry.

"Well...Yes - at the end of day, at 6:30pm, I will hand in my keys, radio, camera, baton and cuffs, leave these gates, go home to my wife, see my children, eat my own cooked food, sleep in a warm double bed. I've been able to progress for 30 years in this prison, an officer to Senior Officer tots me. She looks like she's about to cry. I think the Governor shouted at her for turning on her body worn camera while my cock was out. It must be illegal. She would benefit from my mental attitude. The champion of the dogs.

"Diogenes, you're in SEG-003, and it's lock in." She stammers.

I walk into my cell with my grub.

If a mouse can be satisfied with a few crumbs, why can't I be happy with little means?

I see the Governor walk away to the outside gates. She's thinking she could never be satisfied with my meagre portion. She can understand and appreciate the logic of my freedom, and in some ways, she respects it. But she knows, deep down, she needs more. She does desire holidays, cars, sex, clothes, television.

She will go home to her wife, slide onto the sofa and vow that she will not talk about work. But she can't help herself. "I don't go around wanking on the streets. His 'freedom' to do what he pleases causes distress to others, and that may make him free, but what about good will? What about those children who see your cock out on the streets? What about their freedom? What about the public's freedom to walk on the streets without being subject to sexual harassment?" She'll wish she'd said this to me, not her wife. She'll wish she'd hammered home the point that I care about my immediate needs, desires and survival more than the public's.

I'm in my cell now. I've got everything I need – my toilet, my sink, my bed. I'm not just content because I've come off the streets and this is a roof over my head. I'm content because I'm living my life how I want to live it.

I am free.

## **CADAVER STUDY**

**Anne Whitehouse**

**a cento, for Tiffany Fisk**

I'd learned that the fascia hold  
the muscles and organs in place,  
but it wasn't what I expected,  
not a net, but more like fuzz  
or cotton candy,  
tougher in some areas  
and finer in others.

Reflecting back the cadaver's skin  
revealed superficial fascia  
cradling globes of fat,  
each encased in its own membrane,  
some pea-sized or like a grain of corn,  
and the deep fascia below  
covering the muscles.

The patterns in her body  
showed me how she used her body.  
The rotation of her rib basket,  
the rotation of her leg,  
from habits that formed over time.

How distinct the muscles are  
when you dissect into them,  
the wide ribbon of latissimus dorsi,  
subscapularis inside the armpit.  
When I moved her arm,  
the fiber layers of pectoralis major  
did their little twist.

It took eight of us three hours  
to dissect her posterior.  
I was surprised by the thickness  
of the thoracolumbar fascia.  
Its pearly-white aponeurosis  
was as dense as a muscle connected  
to her sitting bones. No wonder  
so many people have low back pain.

The fascia is thin at the trapezius,  
where the muscle fibers  
lie in three directions  
to move head, neck, and arm.  
I saw how the lats and traps come down  
and the rhomboids attach.  
All was exactly like the textbooks  
and different at the same time.

When we eviscerated her,  
it was strangely not strange.  
I used clippers to snip the ribs  
and pulled them back to reveal  
the heart and the lungs,  
the diaphragm attaching  
to the pericardium.  
Except for the first rib,  
they snapped easily.

The heart was full of red strings  
that felt like spaghetti.  
The alveoli of the lungs felt grainy,  
like mashed-up Rice Krispies.  
We made a tracheotomy  
and inserted a straw.  
When we blew through it,  
the lungs inflated.

Then there were the stomach,  
the spleen, the liver.  
I was unprepared  
for the size of the liver.  
She had only one kidney  
and one ovary the size  
of my fingernail.  
The other had a cyst.



I opened the gall bladder,  
and bile came out.  
I opened the stomach,  
and its contents came out.  
There was so much poop  
in the large intestine,  
yet the smell of the cadaver  
was not a fleshy smell,  
but a product of the juices  
that remain in the body  
as it goes from being alive  
to being dead.

In her past she'd suffered a trauma.  
She'd had knee, hip, and shoulder  
surgeries on her right side.  
Internal sutures ringed her abdomen.

I wanted to see how her hip  
articulated from the inside.  
I started on the iliac crest  
of her bad hip. The tissue  
was fatty and grisly, the sutures  
tough to get through at first,  
but they came apart easily,  
and I fanned out the muscles  
stabilizing the hip—  
gluteus maximus, medius,  
and minimus, the external  
rotators, psoas, iliacus—  
that keep the femur tight  
in the socket.

When I pulled them aside,  
there was a metal hip,  
like a golf ball cut in half.  
It moved around easily  
on the fake femur neck,  
but the iliofemoral ligament  
securing the head of the femur  
to the socket was missing.

The healthy hip  
was harder to cut into.  
As the head of the femur came free,  
it made a sucking sound.  
We cut off the pelvic floor  
and the sitting bones.  
The hamstrings' attachments  
were thick and tight.  
They went right into the bone.  
She had screws in her sacrum  
from her trauma.  
The synovial fluid in her joints  
was sticky like molasses,  
but the spinal discs were dry,  
and the sacroiliac joint  
was bigger than I expected.

We saw the "cauda equina,"  
or "horse's tail," where  
the spinal cord branches out  
to enervate the sacrum.  
The sciatic nerve  
was the width of my finger  
and went from the base  
of the spine down the back  
of the leg, into the foot.

We took apart her mandible  
and temporomandibular joint  
connecting her jaw to her skull.  
We removed the temporalis muscle  
under the zygomatic arch  
and the soft palate. We took out  
the tongue and voice box,  
observing the vocal folds,  
the esophagus and windpipe,  
the neck muscles.  
It was hard to turn her head  
to the right. Then we saw why:  
a bone spur on the cervical spine,  
the size of a dime.

Four of us took turns  
with a hacksaw  
to get into her skull,  
The dura mater came off  
with the outer covering.  
Exposed, the consistency  
of the brain was less firm  
than jello, more like mush.  
The pituitary gland was the size  
of my pinky nail, but round.

Teasing out other layers,  
I found the optic nerve,  
and I saw the black pupil.  
The color of her eyes  
was indescribable.

I knew her body from the inside  
as she could never know it.  
I made guesses about her life,  
but I could never know *her*.  
After my efforts, I was exhausted,  
as if I had taken a long journey.

## The Wader

It is not a pool day, ugly overcast, which Colton feels assures him, he will be alone. He is reading Borges when she walks in and takes a chaise on the other side of the pool. She looks a rough 60-maybe years old, built like a bowling ball, her skin hangs on the wide frame. One-piece floral suit, no straps it just hugs the mass. Gray hair tied back with a clip - wide, gritted face. She puts down her stuff and gets right in the water and starts gliding around the perimeter. The pool is shaped like two ovals, one on top of the other. There are filter drains at the corners and extremities. He's not paying particular attention, but in between poems he realizes his pool companion is stopping at each drain and sticking her hand in as though to clean them out. Colton thinks, how community-minded, and goes back to Borges. He is peering just over the book, through prescription sunglasses, and realizes that she is on her third or fourth procession. She wades from one to the next, same procedure each stop, whisks her hand through the drain. Perhaps she is in search of something. She doesn't seem rushed, she seems meditative, like this is a religious ritual, maybe the stations of the Cross. She has now done this at least twelve times, and Colton thinks of the twelve steps, especially number four *Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves, and your drains*. He's also convinced that whatever the motive, this is demented, and then quickly admonishes himself for being judgmental, ignorant of her rationale, and his own. She comes to the steps in front of Colton's lounging and is getting out. He isn't scared, but the apprehension has the air stuck in his lungs. Is she going to talk to him, explain her obsession, and then it comes to him. He's sitting to the side of a shower. She sprinkles the chlorine off and trudges back to her side of the pool, sits down, opens a book, and starts reading. It looks like it will start raining any moment. Colton puts on his shirt, collects himself, and must pass her on the way out. As he picks up the volume of poems, Jorge Luis looks at him from the cover, and reminds him that, *Life itself is a quotation, and this afternoon a question*. She looks up from her book and smiles, her smile is her only feminine feature. Have a nice day, she says. It occurs to Colton that some greater power, which he never gives any credit to, has sent the wader and Borges to make his day. There is a roar of thunder in the distance, and the first drop of rain hits his forehead.

## Party Line

Those huge brown poles stuck every half block, connected everything with tattered wires, vee-ing down the row house alleys to Lincoln logs on the horizon, well, Mannasota Ave., anyway – and then across the Atlantic. They say the President will be able to talk to the Kremlin. And now we're squatting under our desks, facing away from the windows, heads between our knees in Mrs. Sinton' 3<sup>rd</sup> grade – she called it an air raid drill. I've killed enough Germans and Japs with Vic Morrow-like machine- gun cool, in the fox holes under those poles, that they shouldn't be a threat – but this enemy, was somehow more dangerous and different. Checking out the upskirt on that cold hardwood floor, I whispered to Linda Perry with her buck teeth, and albino blonde hair that this was nothing to worry about, now that we could talk to the Russians on the phone and all. Then, as an afterthought, I informed her that I would be majoring in Political Science in college, thinking it sounded like pretty big shit.

## **Lake of Drops**

Azaria is reading this magazine article, on the end-table in the doctor's waiting room that compares universal consciousness, to drops of water that come together, to create a lake. Once in the examination room the doc explains that, all 6.7 billion assholes should drink, eight cups a day, to maintain true health. Azaria assumes the most efficient way to accomplish this, would be one every two hours that she's awake. Set the cell phone alarm, make it spring or bottled, not tap. Or wait, better yet ladle it from that lake of drops. Let those cups come together, and forge a new Azaria, with a social conscience, maybe even a desire to vote. As the therapy grows, and becomes the rage, everyone will come to realize that we're more than dehydrated egos, devouring and pushing things inside these ugly bags of skin, that we all drink from the same waters, need to see Dr. Harding, and would benefit greatly from reading the same magazines.

# Things I actually don't mind about the suburbs

Christina Michalski

How open the sky is. How beautiful it is to take in the sunrise, the stormy clouds, pink cotton candy sunrises and sunsets, and a full breath of stars.

The smell each household emits that reminds you there's a family there. Doing laundry. Cooking Indian food or some garlic infused dish. Perhaps they just put on the warm fireplace after a long exhausting day.

The ability to hear your own footsteps as you walk.

The ability to glimpse into windows and see the artwork and creativity of young children. The rainbows, sunshine, and flowers remind you of your own paintings you do in the park. It's curious how your mind didn't evolve past that stage.

And the cars passing by sound more like waves from the ocean rather than the incessant wave of frustration and road rage.

Going to playgrounds meant for kids as an adult. And swinging so high you get that pit in your stomach like you're on a roller coaster but you're just on the small swing and that's it and it's amazing.

The conversations you can have with your parents once the age of nagging and expectations begins to mellow and you realize and they realize you're all adults and are grown.

The ability to walk along the same path you've always walked, the same path etched by your parents and your sisters and your neighbors - making it the most comfortable homey "just for you" feeling. You're lucky in that way. There's so many people who aren't able to return home that easily.

The slow painful and excruciating process to find beauty, solace, and inspiration in what you always thought you hated and try to run away from.

She was six feet tall and 114 pounds when we met. A former Dallas model, she'd followed a man – a European tennis star – here only to have him break up with her. Brown bobbed hair haloed her head; Kim liked to dance by herself, mostly to the Talking Heads.

She didn't want us to live together but she stayed at my apartment a lot. After nights not spent together at my place, the next morning I'd get in my car to drive down to the Fort Sanders slum, stopping to pick up my pal, Angie, on the way. Angie was terrified of Kim, who seemed intimidating to many. Maybe a combo of height and her punk attitude.

At some point that first time, I threw my keys to Angie, telling her to drive – though she'd only just learned – and I climbed into the back seat to try to sleep off my hangover. I had her stop by Kim's place but before she could get out of the car, I'd exited the back, telling her "Keep the car and the keys. I'll catch up with you later." She looked horrified.

Kim hadn't given me a key to her place yet, though I was always welcome. When she wasn't there, I simply broke into her apartment, crawled onto the sofa and fell asleep while waiting for her to come home. She was fine with that cause she told me her German Shepard would kill me if I was an unwelcome intruder – and I believed her. Fortunately, that dog and I got along just fine. I never checked to see if she'd be fine with me breaking into every apartment in that old rundown Victorian building. I got my kicks off challenges but otherwise wasn't a criminal, never even entered any of the apartments, let alone did anything. I just liked to see if I could do it and I was damn good, it turned out.

Kim ate a baked potato on Tuesdays and a garden salad on Fridays. When she stood naked in front of her floor length mirror, she'd sigh, I'm so fat. Look at those thighs. She cried on the way to the shelter when her dog was evicted by the slumlord.

It didn't take long to understand why she was messed up. I mean, how can you be that beautiful, the envy of the fashion shoot or the occasional runway, and castigate yourself with bodily self-hatred? I found out and she only mentioned this twice the entire time we were together. She had a twin sister and for reasons I never really understood, her mother favored the sister and as bizarre as this seemed, she spent Kim's adolescence constantly criticizing her, constantly telling her she was fat and ugly. This, even after a contract with the Ford agency! I asked her why and she never replied. I spent months wanting to cuss out that woman for doing that to her child. But when she was criticizing her thighs at six feet, 110 pounds, for being fat, I tried to tell her that everyone had a bit of skin and meat on their thighs below their groin, that it wasn't fat, it was human.



Once, she replied honestly. “Oh, I know compared to most other women, I’m looked at as skinny, but every time I look in that mirror I see Jabba the Hutt.”

She had it rough. Her slumlord was an asshole and she cried on the way to the shelter when he evicted her dog. She was always getting sick, had no strength, nothing to ward off even the most basic cold. And she wouldn’t take any money to go to a doctor. A pride issue.

Kim waited tables at a restaurant on Cumberland Avenue, one I’d gone to for years even before we met. She always insisted on working, even when she was barely able to drag herself across the room. She lied to her manager about her condition. Blamed it on the weather.

In July she seemed to be getting especially bad but she wouldn’t take any damn money to see a doctor or let me drive her to the hospital. I called a doctor and asked what a quick checkup would cost and was told \$125. Determined to save her from herself – at least this time – I went to the restaurant and insisted on being seated in her section. She expressed surprise at seeing me there because when I went there to wait for her to get off work, I stayed in the bar and talked with Jayme, one of the bartenders and Kim’s best friend. This time, though, I took my time eating a good meal, asked for the check and after Kim brought it and I told her I’d see her later, I gave her a tip for \$150 and wrote “doctor” on the slip before beating it out the door. I knew she’d be ticked off, but I also hoped she’d finally go to the doctor. Both of which came true.

Months later she surprised me when she told me she wanted to go back to the tennis star. They HAD been together for two years, but apart for one now. Me? I did nothing; it was her choice.

She was 103 pounds when it ended; I don’t know how much she weighed when Jayme told me she’d died.

I am old. But I wear a slippery, silken skin without a single crease. I carry a great many twigs, logs and sodden leaves. I bear boats and swords and house swordfish, home to spoons, plates and glasses. Gold, and silver of priceless trinkets. I witness listless stories of storms and floods. Human dramas played out upon my body. Great tragedies, even comedies sometimes upon my breast, cherished ephemera, jeweled bridal cavalcade of lost arks. Destruction of land, giving way to new ones across the other side. New farms yellowing, new laughter ringing, new loves budding, on the far stretch of the alluvial soil.

Then one day, the drama takes a turn as I bend around the lofty gums. All is going smoothly on the precious, fine land. There is a thud. A branch falls off. Splosh, Splish, Splash. I cave in, a moment, pirates are on the run. A sepulchre is lowered. It touches the bottom of my gut. That the pirates mutter, not enough, not enough is taken from the new land. A new bride's home has been ransacked. Her bridal jewelry in the casket; bales have been torched, and people burnt alive. Yet, that is not enough, the weighty sepulchre, more gold and more silver on the horizon. My body is murky and heavy in places. Dark and grisly sorrow is painted. In my burrow, I see what I see, I hear thee. I record all your grievances and I bury them downunder. I record, not recoil, but the vengeance is mine.

A cyclone slaps hard, a catcher in the rye, takes the pirates on the lurch, in frenzy of a ruckus. They flee as far as they see. But the eye chases them until it is dawn. It takes them astride. The pirates are funneled and then embedded, not far from the sepulchre. This is the story, I take back to the maiden, bereaved in white garment. It has happened. Now you can move on. Make new jewelry, even more fashionable ones. The maiden hears me out. But she says nothing. And I wonder, why this news has not sunk at all. The sun has risen. Vultures have flown away. The time is now ripe to chase the dream of life.

The divine numbers, 1,2,3 and 4 are pure and willful. They do what they do. They slide, and never look back. Use it. This window of opportunity may not return. Pirates are gone and will not be coming along in a long, long time now. I cannot wait for I am the tide of both glad tidings and bad. I proceed unhindered. I mope for loss. When the bridge is crossed, over the moss, I see an albatross. Swooping low, it speaks to me, oh no no! The maiden is cursed. No rhyme, no reason. They said she brings bad luck. A community of fools has decided that they must condemn her to distrust. No happy ending, this tale ends here. My nuanced waves cannot be euphoric. No winds to stir it, no big ships foghorn. On my placid waters, the maiden's body surface. I push on at once. The chase begins — an endless motion of chasing a dream, a metaphor of a wavering journey yet to be realized.

# The Edge of Water

Chinmay Rastogi

The rigours of morning chores have passed, a lull has settled in. I can't say if it's late morning or mid-afternoon. The sense of siesta settles in bourgeois households between meals and times of departures of different residents. For three-year-old me, with my brother gone to school, Dad having left for work, and Mom taking a relaxing shower, it's time for free frolic.

Sunlight pours into the area that serves as our living room, hallway, and kitchen space. My tricycle, its seat bearing an eagle head image, moves on the cheap mosaic floor tiles with a soft whir. There is no loud screech from the wheels' contact with the ground. The air remains undisturbed, relaxed, as after a hot shower on a cold, gloomy winter morning. The ceiling fan ruffles the plastic of the table cover, its shiny surface reflecting the sunlight. The dancing rays and the lack of sound make it seem as if I am underwater.

I circle the dinner table on my tricycle. Round and round. Like the second hand on the clock hanging on a wall and the blades of the fan. They're no match for my speed. The soft whir is just like the sound my pushback car makes when I put it on the floor and pull back as far as it can go before releasing for maximum thrust. It sounds distant, coming from above water, like the songs on my mother's radio behind the closed door.

It's now a game of going as quick as possible without coming in contact with anything. The rush excites me. The sleeves of my t-shirt hug my arms almost as tightly as my toes grasp the pedals. I feel a soft lick of the air and feel like a rushing eagle. I hear the added sound of the tricycle's chain doing its best to keep up with my adrenaline. I don't realize I've chalked a whirlpool—the kitchen table at its centre sucks me in. I knock off the ketchup bottle still on the table from this morning's breakfast.

I'm yanked out from under water and hear everything. The fall breaks the bottle's glass and the calm in the house. The chorus from the radio's song resounds around me. My breathing is shallow, paced. The smell of sweeteners and tomatoes diffuses everywhere, although it is the scent of soap and lotion that grabs my attention. My eyes follow the viscous ketchup as it spreads slowly, and then take in the silhouette a couple of steps ahead. In it, I can make out that my mother has her hair wrapped in a towel, and her hands hang to her sides, limp but strong. Her silhouette heaves. My three-year-old mind cannot reason that she is rather angry at the mess than at me. It only braces itself for the earful I am about to receive, deservedly.

\*

It is late afternoon but the sky is dark. Pale, more like. Dirty with its thick clouds of yellow. I'm sure there are a few dead moths and flies and some wilted leaves floating in the pool. I can't see it from where I sit with the teenage boys in swimming trunks, taking shelter from the rain under a covered platform, waiting to practise for the upcoming tournament.

They're all older than me by at least five years. I can't join in their conversation for they're using words which I asked my grandma about when I first heard them two summers ago and she leaned in with a stern look and a thick, flashing hand and warned me don't ever say that again, or else! I focus instead on the sound of rain, the soft lapping of the pool's water. I can even hear ducks a little way away, quacking and flapping their wings in their cage.

The pool is behind the elevated wall to our right, its chipped pink paint darker and newer with the lines of rainwater snaking over it. I uncross and cross my legs—the concrete of the platform digs into my ankles and butt. The filtration system under the pool, protected behind a small iron-mesh door, remains quiet. No electricity. The maintenance workers must have compensated by flooding the pool with chlorine. The water must be green today. I didn't bring my goggles. My eyes will burn.

The teenage boys have trunks of different sizes and colours. There's one in painful yellow with blue lines that looks repulsive but my eyes keep coming back to it. Their toenails too are of a variety of shapes and colours. One of them is like an incomplete triangle with rough edges. The boy next to me has nails so trim and neat they almost shine. One of the boys has hair on his toes. Yuck.

Now they're trying yoga poses to kill the time. No one can do the plough position properly. They can't touch the ground behind their head with their toes. They take turns, throwing their legs back, which come crashing down despite their best efforts. Some try to push their lower backs with their hands. One stays in the Happy Baby position instead and the others mock him as a baby. Two of them lose balance and tumble sideways, one of whom farts. Everyone laughs. I do too. One of the boys looks at me.

"Hey, you try next, fatty. Surely a cute baby!"

A few giggles linger from the collective laughter. I'm the shortest here by some distance yet not the thinnest, by some way. They probably expect me to make a fool of myself. I show them how it's done, who's the real grown-up.

"Just wait, he's going to fart any second!"

Arms straight on the ground and stretched in front, legs all the way back, feet resting on the ground behind, I stay in position, undisturbed. All that can be heard is the soft drip of rain on the pool water, close yet distant.

\*

The lamps cast a dim light, making the bathroom look rather elegant than dusky. I made my way here in hopes of finding an animal made out of intricate towel arrangements. The hotels we've stayed in on this trip so far have had a tendency to leave surprises like that waiting for guests when they check-in. I'm in my mid-teens and my brother's "legally" an adult, but we're both slightly disappointed not to find a towel swan, elephant, or bore on the bed or table, or a monkey hanging down the curtain rod.

I marvel at how large the bathroom is. It's three times the size of your college room, I say to my brother. He walks in with the small digital camera in his hand, browsing through pictures he's clicked over the day. He looks up momentarily and shrugs. I mimic his dispassionate expression and lift my shoulders up and down in a shrug each time he presses the button to view the next picture. I look into the mirror and copy the soft beep the camera utters. His reflection looks up at me. It smiles and lifts the camera. I grab a tissue from the box by the sink and hold it in front of my face as a makeshift veil. In the picture, only the light from the lamps is brighter than its white surface. It is colourless yet stands out more than my red jumper, the granite slab, the wooden cabinets, the ceramic tiles, and the jute blind that covers a glass wall.

The day is almost up, the sky thick with clouds threatening a thunderous downpour. My brother feels dull, drowsy. I'm warm, fuzzy. We walk out into the balcony where he drops on a lounge chair, spreads his legs, crosses his arms, and shuts his eyes in satisfaction, ignoring my finger prodding his leg to make him get up. I want to explore the pier which the hotel overlooks. There were some interesting craft stores and a café that had made me turn my head three times with its inviting coffee aroma. My parents won't allow me to go off on my own, so I take the room key and leave without informing them

Despite bearing a faint whiff of sea salt, the wind is calm. A few tourists move about. The lampposts flanking the path to the pier have just lit up. I slowly walk up to the edge. There's activity around me but nothing loud enough to swallow the littoral sounds of soft lapping of the waves and the flaps and splash of fowls and gulls. The night approaches fast, dragging a wave of darkness that engulfs the sea and stands in front of me—more prominent than the bright lights of the lampposts and the shops. The ocean just sighed.

\*

The oxpecker doesn't peck at the ox but weighs it down. The quadruped stands bemused, unsure of how to reach it and make it forego its perch. The bird might soon begin pecking the ox's skin or the insides of its ears. For now, the ox resigns itself to continue standing quietly on the lush grass at the edge of the lake, gazing at the water. The bird makes a little hop to turn and take stock of the mid-afternoon scene. The two share this current moment of hush.

The ox blinks often. It bats its eyelashes and whips its tail at the flies front and back as it looks to the side. Its lashes are long, longer than they should be. How long are an ox's lashes? Camera shutters snap around me in the safari jeep without blinking flashes. Each beep is like a birdcall.

A gust of hot, dry wind ripples through the air, traces lines on the water, combs the plumage of the oxpecker. The ox dangles up its tail. The wind sends the hair at its tail end aflutter to make a faux weathercock. The hills far away are bluer than the water. They sway

in the hot air current, waving at me from afar. It is more a greeting than a goodbye, being acknowledged and not stranded. The summer languor washes over me, gulps me down.

\*

We kill our engines and park the motorcycles by the lake, our stay for the night resting in its centre. It is dusk and the sky is bright amber, a stark contrast to the faded white of the floating hotel. The quiet surrounding all the riders accentuates the birds' greetings and signoffs. We plop down into the boat and drift slowly. The exhaustion of the day's ride passing farms and a waterfall accumulates in my body as I sit with a sigh, my legs dead as logs.

Everyone absorbs the scene in their own way, and whether they're sitting silently, taking snaps and selfies, or indulging in banter, there is a dignified reticence in our collective demeanour which seeps out and dissolves into our surroundings. The bird calls die down. The boat's motor shuts off. The rudder goes quiet. All that's left for a moment is the slosh of water against the bow and the breaths of twelve people twenty and above—perhaps our young helmsman being an exception. We sway gently with the waves. The boat. The wind. I hear the breaths. I almost hear the lips widen.

## UNTETHERED

Eleven months, twenty-four days

1.

His first wife had other places to see, more satisfying places to be.  
He suspects she no longer remembers his pet name for her –  
no reason why she should.

Their time measured in months.

She'd have to dust off the decades, dig out faded  
Polaroids – that is, if she kept any. No doubt no.

Their nights out nights at the laundromat  
scented with sweat and Clorox.

Johnny Rivers' Summer Rain on the radio.

Still, no schmaltz, no Hallmark,  
with her, in her, through her, he sought no other self,

like a postulant cloistered within the walls of his abbey.

But then left to drift untethered, gad-  
flying year into year into decades.

2.

They met as second starters, bruised but  
seasoned well by all the hours of the day,

especially late nights on beaches with the rhythm of  
sibilant waves along the Gulf shore. A quarter of a  
century later,

the widower wakes to another day, another set of tasks  
mundane as yesterday.

An untethered finale.

## **BALMLESS**

### **Four months, four days**

The widower sinks much deeper, darker,  
beneath the hypochondria of his grief.

He torches himself by lighting her favorite  
candle. Fresh Cut Roses. Burn. Burning all  
night,

unconsciously votive. The widower navigates  
these corridors of memory and absence  
poorly.

She's at home here. No. She isn't. No more.  
The widower is no clairvoyant who can peer  
beyond

what is. The widower twists their ring on his finger,  
while relearning how to cook for one again.

## **TEN MONTHS, TWENTY-FOUR DAYS**

The poet spoke truthfully. Suicide  
perches like a colorful finch

upon his finger. Songs melodious  
as narcotics to melancholy.

The widower is depressed. Why not.  
Not to be, he might as well be a sociopath.

A daughter calls, startles the cardinal  
roosting quietly on his deck.



## **A YEAR AND A DAY**

The weather and COVID kept  
the widower away yesterday.  
Too muddy for a Sunday.  
His health survives on a plateau.

The widower wants to plant her  
favorite – lily of the valley – to be  
worn like a wedding crown around  
her head stone. Sweet, no doubt,

nostalgic as a sundae, but actually,  
ground crews weed whack every  
grass blade, dandelion sprout down  
to the roots. No stopping them.

Instead, the widower rubs the sod  
above her like he stroked her back,  
gently, in early morning hours,  
comforted by her sleeping breath.

## **NOT DONE**

Five months, one day

Like you, the widower thought he be done with  
Donne, decades ago, after navigating a survey  
course, but here he is, his footing lost. Tear shedding.  
Sorry, Jack. No valediction quells this widower's  
mourning.

No sonnet holy enough to birth him peace, any peace.  
His metaphors stolen from a child's Golden Book.  
What telescope can see beyond this horizon?  
None. Hubble does see yesterday today, where it  
is still the first day. Let there be light.  
The widower wonders if a new day awaits him or will  
he drag himself sunset to sunset walker bound.

## He Died

He died on a Friday.

The July heat was already pouring in through the weathered old screen as he perished quietly in his slumber. He'd always insisted upon the open window, even on the very coldest of nights. His wife would wrap herself in layers and layers of electric blankets in those days when they still shared the same room, time and circumstances causing them to slowly drift apart in their sleep.

Thirty-nine years as husband and wife. Decades of laughter and illness, heartbreak, and euphoria gone in the span of a single heartbeat. She would never know what did him in, only that he slept. She found him there in the first blush of morning, leaving the room before turning back and placing her hand gently on the bedroom door. The new day opened up all around her, petals on a withered flower, as she realized they would never see their fortieth year together.

He died on a Tuesday in the sweltering heat of the jungle, the bullets whizzing over his head as he crawled ass-deep through the rice paddies, muck, and shit. He was just short of his nineteenth year, one of Uncle Sam's Misguided Children traveling the world where the faint of heart would never dare to go. The explosions went off in a constant barrage, pieces of his brethren raining down all around him as he kept on going, his weapon slung over his back. He was proud and young, he was invincible. He was the favorite of the gods and therefore destined for greatness as the shrapnel from an errant grenade took him down. He was his country's greatest treasure and the source of its deepest shame. Dirty masses unleashing their spittle and scorn upon him from lofty towers, his purple heart forged in blood and brotherhood and unrequited valor.

He died on a Monday at the very moment he saw her across the smoke-filled cocktail lounge, her long, dark hair piled high atop her head, and asked her to dance. Other men lingered like moths to a flame as he sauntered over, picked up an erstwhile beau, chair and all, and physically moved him out of his way. Her eyes were emerald green, with just a hint of blue, fathomless and pure. He felt his past shed away like a physical pain as he looked into those eyes, the spring of his life suddenly turning into summer.

He died all over again on a Thursday as they wheeled out a tiny, premature baby past him in an incubator. He placed his flask of bourbon back into his pocket as he said a silent prayer of thanks that all had gone well. He hadn't planned on a girl. It seemed impossible that this should be so, with his masculine, larger-than-life presence, but there she was. Her scrunched up face crying down the hall convinced him that they had birthed some sort of an alien lizard, yet he loved her all the same. Fiercely and loyally, as was his nature.

On Saturday, he died as he walked her down the aisle, determined that he would walk as a man one last time, alone without oxygen or assistance of any kind. He had worked up

to that goal for many months, calling upon his reserves of strength with his battered old Marine Corps handbook as a guide. On Sunday, he celebrated seeing the next generation off to their honeymoon in style, his only child launched safely into the world.

On Wednesday he died anew as his love withered and wasted away in a sterile hospital room, her memories seeping into nothingness as the brain tumor did its gruesome work. His spirit lingered on impatiently, rumbling heaven and earth in torment as he waited for her suffering to finally come to an end. She'd only been without him for eight years, had so much life yet to live, but there she was all the same. She finally joined him, placing her hand in his as they danced into eternity. Young lovers once again, twirling around and around in heavenly abandon.

He died on a Friday.

## Original Sin

Kristina Milnius had perfect hair.

She sat directly in front of Bobby in Sister Mary Bernard's third-grade class at St. Casimir's Primary School in Oak Lawn, Chicago. Her silky blonde hair flowed down her back, reaching past her waist like a princess in a fairy tale. It was the cause of endless fascination for young Bobby Kroupa, bored as he always was, by the nun's endless droning.

On and on Sister Bernard lectured, her colorless voice lulling him into a doze as he focused on Kristina's polished tresses. They were arranged into two amazingly long braids. He couldn't decide if one was just slightly longer than the other or if boredom was causing his mind to drift. Bobby wanted to touch them more than anything else in the world, feel the heft and weight of them.

It wasn't that he particularly liked Kristina Milnius. All girls were strange creatures and better left alone. They didn't like mud pies or stick ball, kick the can or catching frogs down by the creek. They smelled sweet and giggled a lot. No, Bobby's interest was purely academic.

He longed to know how her hair looked out of the braids. How long it took her mother to arrange them each morning or what it felt like to have that much hair. Bobby's father shaved him every month or so, "high and tight" he'd always say, so Bobby really had no idea what it was like. If he reached out and picked up a braid would Kristina even notice?

Sister Bernard rapped her ruler hard on Bobby's desk causing him to jump. She'd corrected him more than once about daydreaming, his mother gave him a good whack about it just last week. He shot to attention, folding his hands on the desk and nearly knocking over his ink pot. Bobby had gotten in trouble many times for spilling ink and was relieved to see it wobble, then settle back into the upright position. Ink was not cheap and waste was a sin.

Bobby rubbed his knuckles in fear, terrified of the nun's swift, punishing ruler.

Satisfied that she'd reclaimed his attention, Sister Bernard passed him by without missing a single word in her lesson. Bobby felt his heart hammering in his chest as the recess bell mercifully rang.

#

The previous night had been a rough one. Bobby's mother was so mad that she'd hollered at him in Lithuanian, reverting back to the language of the old country. Sister Bernard wouldn't hesitate to phone her again--Bobby better be on his guard. He sat up ramrod straight in his chair, hands clean and demurely folded as Kristina sat down. She was a vision in powder blue with two tiny matching bows in her golden-white hair.

All self-control abandoned him as a single shimmering braid flopped onto Bobby's desk. A quick glance around the classroom found Sister Bernard facing the blackboard, his classmates all obediently copying away. There would never be a more perfect time.

Bobby reached down to claim his prize. He knew he was committing a grave sin, but felt powerless to resist. Pillowly and soft, he squeezed it lightly between his fingers, making sure not to alert Kristina. Such was the length of the hair that she couldn't feel his intrusion

as he picked it up, fascinated by its silken texture. Before he knew what he was doing, Bobby pulled it slowly across the desk and plunged the tip of the braid into his open ink pot.

Mesmerized, Bobby watched the ink move its way up Kristina's braid, an enormous sucking fountain pen. Frantically he looked around, stunned that he seemed to be the only witness to this miraculous event. When the blackness had consumed over half of the hair, Bobby gently pulled it out, taking a quick moment to refill his ink. It seemed a real shame that the other braid should not be included in such an exciting experiment so Bobby decided to try his luck again. He pulled the other braid onto his desk and dipped it in.

The ink moved faster this time, beating its twin as it climbed higher and higher, past Kristina's shoulders before Sister Bernard finally turned around. Bobby kept his eyes on the braid, completely entranced as the nun screamed out in alarm. Bobby knew he would be in very, very big trouble, but he also knew in his nine-year old-mind, that it was completely worth it.

#

Bobby Kroupa had a hard time sitting for the next few days. Kristina Milnius' mother joined his own in berating him in a fiery mixture of Lithuanian and English, such was the enormity of his transgression. He stood in the corner all the next day followed by three weeks of cleaning erasers. His mother banned him from the radio, there was to be no "Lone Ranger" for two months. Even his father got in on Bobby's punishment, making him rake up all the leaves. He did allow Bobby to burn them, so it wasn't a complete wash.

The hardest part was apologizing to Kristina herself. He thought her new short hairstyle was quite becoming and told her so, earning a slap on the back of his head from the good sister for his trouble. His parents knew Kristina's mother and she was still on the warpath. Bobby's mother was not amused, although he did see a slight twinkle in his father's eye whenever the subject of Bobby's "Original Sin" was mentioned.

#

From his new seat across the classroom, Bobby looked for Kristina. Sister Bernard seated him behind Joey Zulanis, knowing that Bobby wouldn't touch his hair without getting a knuckle sandwich in return. He saw Kristina's short hair was pulled back with a pink headband, silky tendrils escaping in curls around her face and Bobby began to think that maybe girls weren't so bad after all. As he settled into daydreaming, he thought that his first impression was still correct.

Kristina Milnius had perfect hair.

## Corpse Flower

The Corpse Flower clutched its hidden treasure tightly, leaves interlocking in a steely grip. The flower would bloom in its own time. It would not be rushed or stopped in this biological imperative, any and all obstacles would be overcome. The evolution of hundreds of thousands of years brought it this far, there would be no turning back.

This particular flower had not bloomed in over forty-seven years. Forty-seven summers had seen it closed off to the world, forty-seven seasons of a quiet, dormant existence. Life in all its thoughtless cruelty and euphoric joy danced around the Corpse Flower in ten thousand permutations, never once making any kind of impression upon it.

When it did bloom, it would be quite a spectacle, pent-up energy accumulated over a lifetime bursting into macabre fruition. The Corpse Flower would open, gloriously blood-red and rancid, the smell of rotting flesh and death emanating from its core. Seeds from its exultant debut would be quickly absorbed into the atmosphere, tiny imprints destined to grow into their own splendor, carried away like whispered prayers on a current of wind to take root and begin anew.

Upon reaching the end of its cycle, the Corpse Flower would dig deeper, entrenching itself even further and biding its time for another season of blooming. It would go on like this indefinitely, weathering any attack with the sheer, dogged persistence that marked its place in an imperfect world.

If by chance it should die, the Corpse Flower's children would grow and flourish, carrying on its legacy with single-handed abandon until it became their own time to bloom, the cycle beginning all over again. Relentless and resolute, the Corpse Flower clung to life until there was absolutely no life left.

Only death would separate it from its gruesome task, but then death was its ultimate achievement. For only in sweet death would the Corpse Flower finally win the evolutionary battle, killing itself in the process in a blaze of futile, apocalyptic glory. The Corpse Flower would be triumphant.

#

To my Family and Friends:

This is a status update I never believed in my wildest dreams I would have to write. It has been quite a battle, but I have sadly come to the end of the road. The cancer that was in remission is back and this time there are no more options for me. As many of you know, I was first diagnosed five years ago and have fought the good fight. My hair is non-existent and I probably light up like a Christmas tree from all the radiation and chemo, but with great effort, I did get to remission twice. Those days were quite a party, let me tell you (what happens at the remission party stays at the remission party--you know who you are!) However, when I went in for my latest checkup, they found a new tumor. God only knows when or how in the hell this one grew, but it is a big one, the size of a softball. It seems I have used up my lifetime supply of chemotherapy (who knew there was such a thing?) so now there is nothing to do but let nature take its course. The doc says I have a month,

maybe more. I might make it to my 48th birthday, but who knows? Thanks to those who have stood by me through all of this shit, I couldn't have made it this far without you. Stop by and see me anytime, but make it quick! We can share a beer (or two or three or...) and talk about better days. Live every day like it is your last because, well you know. I hope one day cancer dies its own death--never give up fellow warriors! I may go down, but it will still be swinging all the way. Love to you all until we meet again in this life or the next, Your battle-scarred but eternally hopeful friend, Steve

# The Fragrant Path

Malina Douglas

The only sound in the room was the deliberate rip of a Sweet-n-Low packet, which she tore off between purple lacquered fingers. The contents she poured into his teacup and stirred.

“Can I see?” she asked.

Carlyle leaned forward and offered his arm. On the inside of his elbow was a graze, red and raw.

Smooth fingertips trailed either side of the wound

“It must be painful.”

“It is,” he managed, but the words came out as a rasp. Her care seemed to reach inside of him, to hold him in a place he had never been held.

“I have a special cream for that.”

“Yeah?” She had more than a special cream, he was sure. A fragrance clung to her pale rounded flesh, a flowery scent he could not define. Species of flowers were as unknown to him as the stars. Carlyle longed to find out what the scent was but decided to deny himself the pleasure. Since he had bound himself to the path of the Buddha, carnal desires were a sin to be forsaken. His readings told him so, though he had not himself experienced them.

As Mrs Walton disappeared behind a gauzy gold curtain, he surveyed his surroundings. Full rounded tulips, sumptuous armchairs, round pendulous lamps. As he moved his feet, a plush carpet caressed his soles. How curious that her house was so close to his, yet within lay another world.

Mrs Walton returned. He noticed how she moved the chair closer to him. The ooze of cream from a miniature tube. The soft circular motions of her fingertips on his skin.

“Thank you, Mrs Walton.”

His neighbour laughed, a sound rich as a slice of pound cake. “Call me Lydia.”

“Lydia...” he rolled the soft, full vowels on his tongue.

“Are you seeing someone?” her voice, low and husky, breathed into his ear.

“No, I, uh...” His childish vow crumpled inwardly and fluttered away.



She smiled, and he noticed her teeth. Whiter than the bones in his anatomy class. Her fingertips trailed upwards and he shivered. He could run from her yet his body remained transfixed. There was something he'd read in a Buddhist text. How did it go? When faced by a challenge, surrender to what is. Soften into it. Yes, that was the process he was going through. As his bony knees trembled and his mouth moistened with saliva, he was softening.

As Lydia leaned towards him, he noticed something. Observation, that was a virtue too. He observed the deep v of her flowered dress, the swell of her breasts like ripe, rounded fruit.

A quote from his textbook took on a sudden significance. Work with diligence and your efforts shall be fruitful.

Her face was right in front of his and he noticed the pores on her rosy toned skin. Before he could react or even think, her mouth touched his. Cushioned lips parted like the flesh of a peach. Carlyle's lips moved in response and he felt himself immerse in her.

When he drew back, his look of surprise provoked a smile.

Gripped by a sudden thirst, he reached for his tea. The pink end of the Sweet-n-Low packet was curled beside his cup. Surreal sweetness flooded his mouth. He set the cup down, leaned forward and his moist lips found hers.

She stroked the length of his spine. An experience he imagined as samadhi flooded his body. Like an artefact dug from the sand, a new understanding was revealed. Experience through wisdom. More than those dusty old books, this was sacred.

As the Sweet-n-Low sped through his bloodstream he surrendered to her kiss.

She took his bottom lip between her teeth and ever so softly, she bit.

**explanation for an overheard question on washington ave**

in the pain of the  
real world in late january  
rain into snow all grey slush all  
pools of oil like cancerous rainbows these  
    dogs with their frightened teeth  
    these passing days in numb hours  
        counted backwards

speak of hope  
in an empty room

invent names for anonymous villages  
in countries you were taught  
    didn't matter

let them burn if that's what it  
takes to keep you fat on  
internet porn and reality tv

there are never so many enemies in  
this world that  
someone can't invent a few more

## poem in deepening blue light

and no shadows because  
everything is shadow

do you see?

a tentative world of  
maybes and suicides

five below zero

the fact that i love you  
which i use as a shield

like walls  
without doors

and in this room at this  
exact cracked and bleeding moment  
i can look out this window and  
see it reflected in a window  
fifteen feet away

i can see the space i would  
occupy in a better world

the blind horse and the  
crippled rider  
and i can hear the laughter

we are all freaks but  
only some of  
us recognize this

we are all learning to die one  
awkward day at a time

ends up being a life and  
all we're left with are  
stories about how  
easy it was to waste

## **archaeology**

crows in sunlight  
Laughing

worrying bones on  
january rooftops

end of the world  
yes  
but not for you and  
not for them

every age is the  
age of slaves and every  
victim curses your name

count the dead until you  
run out of numbers

what was the point of  
ever giving  
any of them hope?

## driving, approaching lost

monday afternoon  
thinking about hemingway's  
cure for cancer

thinking about a man  
who has written to tell me  
that i'm the greatest poet alive

about another who says  
*what you've sent was well-written but*  
*i would hesitate to call it*  
*poetry*

and i am somewhere on 38 south  
beneath a brutal blue sky  
with my wife and son asleep in  
the back seat

with the need to be understood  
nowhere near as important as the need  
to get home

and what i've learned after two days  
in the presence of the dying man  
is to fear my own mortality

what matters aren't the words but  
the ideas that draw power from them

what matters is motion

the speed at which thought  
leads to thought  
and the absolute simplicity  
of certain death

understand

anyone can kick bukowski's corpse

everyone  
at some point  
is the god of starving dogs

what does it take to push  
a seventeen year-old girl to  
the point of suicide?

somewhere in my past is a man  
who knows the answer

i have spent his money  
on the people i love and what this  
makes me is everything  
i despise

what i'm talking about  
are anger and greed reduced to  
mathematical equations

the sum total of hatred war  
and starvation

everything that matters to me  
held inside this thin skin of  
metal and glass  
on a monday afternoon

the world flat in all directions

**like starving dogs in the land of nod**

and you turn your back and  
the house burns down

these are the rules

this is the age

men with fangs, with claws, with the  
heads of jackals,  
of crows and  
of vultures, and they  
claim to be believers,  
but in what?

and do you recognize this story?

it doesn't change

the future was never  
going to be your friend

the past was written by thieves  
and whores, by  
rapists and cowards, and some  
asshole invents god and then  
another one the machine gun, and  
are you really so stupid you'd  
die for this shit?

are you really so dead you  
need the pain of others  
just to make you feel alive?

feels like i've known you  
my whole goddamn life

### 3 incomplete explanations, for beth

i.

he dreams the walls  
are filled  
w/ dead & dying bees

dreams his  
children have drowned

opens his mouth to  
scream and  
then wakes up lost

ii.

no food and the  
children are starving but the house  
they die in is beautiful

the song their mother sings  
goes straight to number one

iii.

gives him wings but she won't  
tell him she loves him and  
so he just keeps crawling across the floor

just keeps laughing at the  
idea of a dying sun



## june

in the dark, blood on the walls,  
front to back and cupping her breasts  
from behind, breathing in the  
sweetness of sweat and perfume and  
she says *you're a whore* and i say  
*but not yours*, feel her move to  
get me hard, run a hand down her soft  
belly, and this is only what it is,  
which is never quite true of  
anything

## lacunae

and i've been in love with  
everyone you've ever crucified and  
i've been christ's bleeding heart and  
i've been pilate's clenched fist

this shit is easy

live your life in the brilliant grey light of  
false hope and  
nothing matters but survival

nothing matters but every moment,  
every gesture,  
every question left unasked and  
all the ones unanswered and  
what of the holy men who would  
choose slavery for you?

what of the self-proclaimed kings?

they will fuck your sons and  
daughters until they draw blood

they will go deeper

what you need here more  
than anything  
is a weapon

## **bring on the good times**

just one more teenage suicide topping  
out at 45, got that mortgage,  
got those kids,  
a razzledazzle marriage  
and then a shitstorm divorce

got that gun, which is  
neither here nor there

that right to die and  
that right to kill

that need

no second coming, no holy war,  
just the neighbors screaming to keep  
the goddamn noise down, and  
then the police

and then the priests

a finger on the trigger and  
a free hand on yr cock and  
maybe no one here  
makes it through to morning

## thanatos

and maybe everyone is  
nowhere and  
maybe nothing matters

seems like my father  
might have known,  
but my mother never talks  
about shit like this

says the dead hold no weight and  
this is true but it's not enough

and my whole life,  
i think,  
has been an absence

i have always been walking  
towards or away,  
but have yet to arrive

and what does it mean to wake up  
each morning  
contemplating suicide?

what color are the walls with  
the curtains closed and  
the lights off?

and my children, i think,  
are safe

have moved far enough  
away from me to  
see only vague shades of grey  
in their rear-view mirrors,  
and so maybe it's time to  
finally admit defeat

maybe i can live with  
being a coward

maybe i've been  
doing it all along

## TEMPORARY SEDUCTION

He's slouched on a bar stool,  
wears a light blue Henley golf shirt,  
Levi's. His feet, in brown loafers, titter on  
lower railing of the stool. My best  
friend, Sandy, wants to introduce me  
after she finishes a retirement party,  
appreciation speech. I'm across  
from him, leaning against a wall, waiting.  
He looks sporty. I feel overdressed  
in suit, white shirt and necktie. Sandy  
says follow me. We cross the room  
to where Joe's hand grips a sweaty bottle  
of Yuengling. During the handshake,  
I pull away a little too fast because  
I fear he will sense I want to hold it  
longer. Inclination toward infatuation  
surfaces. What I really desire  
is to dance with my arms around him.  
I imagine us lying down together, nested  
in silence and mutual affection. I stop  
fantasizing, ask questions to learn  
surface facts, slide onto a stool,  
continue chit chat. He's younger than I,  
skin tanned and tight. I feel centuries old.  
His brown eyes look tired. I'm ringing  
figurative hands to determine if he cares  
to continue the conversation. I'm also  
floating a little from booze, can't decide  
what to say next. I want to invite him home  
so I can roll away years of solitude. Not  
much left to say, I squeak out glad  
to have met you and drift away,  
heart filled with sweet melancholy.

## UNWANTED

Dad used to brag about the number of women he'd straddled while still married to Mom. My eight-year-old ears had heard this one day while hanging around our confectionary on Barthman Avenue. My dad never suspected I understood the meaning of his language. So young, I learned how sex ruins lives. I vowed to keep my secret away from Mom.

At home, later that day, I lingered in the kitchen, watching Mom steam green beans in a pressure cooker. The idea of betrayal seemed like another person slouched at the table with me. In the living room, Dad sprawled on the couch, a football game flickering on TV. Booze breath permeated the room. I could have awakened him, but in his condition he would have given me only imperfect attention, so I slid into a chair opposite and watched him surface toward sobriety.

What did he dream? Would he like to be on another drunken, fishing trip or in the backyard pitching a softball to his uninterested son who could never catch to Dad's satisfaction?

Next morning, Mom worked at the sink, seemed to stare out the window more than usual, as if inventing something pleasant to see. I followed her around the house while she dusted. I think I even wanted to dress like her, learn rhythms of being a housewife, cook meals, be responsible for holding a family together. I carried the weight of what I knew on hunched shoulders.

I wanted to return to days when Mom held me,  
read stories, nursery rhymes, made me feel  
miles away from despair. At eight, I'd already  
had too many bad autumns, felt like a withering  
leaf, a leaf tossed around by parental turbulence.  
This is the story I will tell when asked about  
the beginning of guilt.



## **A TOURIST ON PIKE STREET, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON**

I roll your nipples between fingertips, a pickup  
from the toughest part of the city. My palms  
whisper over your nakedness, and you chill  
like the moon or a suicide. Parting your legs,  
I satisfy your hunger with my own. So far  
from home, I'm sweating like an Ohio farm boy  
heaving bales of hay into a loft. I want these  
moments to be as intimate as in the movies,  
but this twenty-minute scenario is happening  
in a neighborhood where people don't ask  
for romance. Subsequently, you dress,  
rake money off the bureau, and leave.

Needing a pint of mike to pour over my late-night  
habit of cereal, I walk to the nearest 7-Eleven.  
On the way, I pass call girls, rent boys, hustlers  
groomed with Brilliantine Pomade or Brylcreem.  
One, reminiscent of young Sinatra, sweeps a hand  
over slicked-back hair. Long-legged prostitutes  
gaze at passing cars, beckon with their eyes.

I cross to the opposite side of the street,  
avoiding two drunks slouched against a brick wall.  
They pass a brown paper bag back and forth,  
tip it up as if it were a secret elixir. This is  
the same street where tomorrow night Miss Seattle's  
float will drift by as if it were levitated, and she will  
cradle a bouquet of long stem, red roses,  
testament to her assumed virginity.

Leaving the 7-Eleven, I walk the last block to my hotel  
a little faster, wishing I could rise on wings to my  
room on the eleventh floor, safe as a hand in a pocket,  
away from cigarette-littered sidewalks, shadows  
that bend at car windows and lurk in doorways of night.

## COINS

I have never seen coins placed on the eyes of the dead, but I heard it was once common practice when corpses were kept in the house for viewing. I imagine a relative reaching into a pocket, fumbling to retrieve two coins of the same size, unsatisfied if a nickel and dime came out on the open Palm. I also heard that pennies were best because of their perfect size and weight. Otherwise, the shine of silver might mislead, suggest the eyes had not seen death.

The snowy, February, Sunday afternoon Uncle Toots died, I slumped on the edge of his bed, my eyes locked to his cataracts and their unalterable stare. I stood up, searched pockets for change. My pockets were empty, no jingle or chink. His wife, Aunt Liz, sobbed in the living room. She and I were the only two in the house, so I felt compelled to close his eyes. I spread two fingers, pulled his eyelids down, darkening the dark. When I removed my hand, the lids retracted a quarter of an inch as if to tell me I must try again. I shut them three more times until they stayed in place.

That afternoon, as snow blew in white gales past bedroom windows, and my uncle's body lay stiffening, I closed the eyes of the dead without fear, hesitation, or the old-fashioned help of coins.

## **AN AUTUMN ROOM**

It seems as if the dogwood tree has turned  
maroon within minutes. Behind it, sun bulges  
with light. A flawless sky blazes  
cornflower blue. Birds follow secret routes  
along the curve of the earth. As I look out  
the dining room window, I see a perfect  
autumn day in my backyard. Sun, a white,  
hot pearl, small as a button, warms me  
through glass, wheels over my body,  
becomes hot as a match. I lean away from the  
window, seek a cooler place in the room.

I move a little into shadows away sun  
and the likelihood of love. I have  
learned to stand aside and not let myself  
be exposed to possibility. Soon, I will  
make room in my day for writing,  
tell about how I am a hundred victims  
of my own heart.

## **A SHADOWY TALE OF SUMMER**

Two preteen boys drowned fishing off the dam  
one summer day. I always remember  
that accident when driving on Greenlawn  
Avenue along the Scioto River.

Plenty of people fish there. These boys  
were by themselves, perhaps hoping  
for a catch that would be much talked about.

I picture them wearing baseball caps,  
taking an occasional look up, squinting  
into intense sun. They lay bait can and  
stringer on shore, took small steps  
into shallow water that slipped over the dam  
like liquid silk, frothed and foamed  
as if full of detergent when it hit the river.

One boy's line snagged on a drifted log.  
It must have frightened him to wade into  
fringe of surf below the dam, but he did.  
Undercurrent sucked him beneath the surface.  
He grabbed at water. The other boy attempted  
rescue, followed the first into riptide.

A passerby saw the struggle.  
By the time he notified authorities, both  
boys had disappeared. Fishing lines leaped,  
tossed in the current, frantic, convulsive jerks,  
alive above the dead  
they later dragged the bottom for.

## THE DRUNK ROOM

I climb the stairs with hunger,  
bring my breakable boyhood to my dad.  
I inch to the door of the room he rents  
from his sister, Mary, fold down with  
back against faded, flower wallpaper,  
wait for him to rouse from an intoxicated  
stupor. After more than an hour, his eyes  
open halfway. I forebear the embrace  
I want to give. It would make him cringe.

He rolls his naked body to a sitting position,  
mumbles something about forgetting.  
He doesn't have much to say, seems to point  
a gun of disregard at me, his belt replete  
with usual bullets of inattention.  
The movie he promised to take me to  
begins in less than three hours.  
My twelve-year-old mind remembers  
the routine: We will catch a bus downtown  
after he stops, at least once, at a beer joint

.  
He wobbles to his feet, dresses, asks me  
how Mom is. Their divorce final,  
Mom and I prize release from his cruelty.

Four months in bed with rheumatic fever,  
I watched daylight brighten windows  
And nighttime douse the sun with dark  
I worried he, drunk, would whip me  
out of bed as thoughtlessly as he might  
snap a sapling from a woods.

In the theater, he slumps into a seat.  
His head lolls, face slackens  
to a stream of snores. I fidget, disgusted  
with his alcoholic breath and that  
he has slid away to oblivion.  
I stare at the screen without seeing the movie,  
ache for the father I have not yet acquired.

Swallowing more and more liqueur, Paul sees a chair disappear, then the couch. The carpet floats up to balance his feet. His brain obliterates sensation, but for sound of a revving engine tucked within distance.

It is silent in the room except for blazing wood popping orange syllables from its throat. Paul folds to the hearth, his body parallel to fire. Hands at sides, splays of autumn reds and yellows robe his shoulders. He nods at leafy light, struggles to his knees for another swig. Back to the steel window frame, cold as a corpse, he stares unfocused at ground outside, uncontrollable speed swirling his brain in circles.

Turning back to the living room, he buckles to kneels, fans his palms over carpet as if looking for lost coins in high grass. What he finds is a mutable weapon much like a fire poker lying not far from the grate. He holds it against his chest, presses it until bones ache, then he slides back to the floor, synapses comatose. Up on knees again, he crawls back to the window, raises himself to its ledge. The neighborhood bar is dark now. His hand flutters toward snow-deadened sound of a passing car, beckons to the possibility that one more jogger will run along street-lit sidewalk, or that a car will turn into his driveway, flash welcoming headlights through the window. He lifts an arm above his head, holds it there, lowers it, shaping a gun from thumb and index finger. He aims the gun between his lips, and this is how he murders Saturday night, leaving himself satisfied to glimpse a shimmer of death against the heat of intoxication and snow.

## DRUNK ON ANGEL BREATH

The moon glows so bright Paul can see a man  
race over crusted snow, swinging arms  
as if any second the man might lose  
his lead on the edge of light. Frosted glass  
separates Paul from a pine tree in the front  
yard on which old snow has frozen into a sheen  
of white stars. On this glazed night, passing  
cars whisper slush. Across the street, tubular  
neon burns the words "Buddy's Bar."

The radio predicts another imminent storm.  
Kneeling on the hearth, he strikes a kitchen  
match, ignites logs behind wire mesh. Flames  
bloom upward. Andirons gleam. He slips back  
to the window, sees new snow flicker down  
under vapor light. In the parking lot  
of the neighborhood bar, stumps of cars protrude  
from mounds of white. The bar door opens.  
A young man and a giggling girl fall  
against each other. Their lopsided steps snake  
a path to the nearest car. They fall-lean  
against the hood. He lifts her, holds her  
against himself. Her jacket slips up, shows skin  
the boy reaches for. Hands beneath her blouse,  
his fingers climb warmth. Atop the hood,  
they curve down until his head touches  
the windshield, and she is pressed against him,  
glistening with desire not unlike Paul's own.

Paul closes the drapes across their inebriated dance,  
splashes his throat with a double shot of Angel Breath  
gin, turns off lamps. His shadow from firelight haunts  
a wall, face flushed from whiskey and firelight.

Swallowing more and more liqueur, Paul sees  
a chair disappear, then the couch. The carpet floats  
up to balance his feet. His brain obliterates  
sensation, but for sound of a revving  
engine tucked within distance.

It is silent in the room except for blazing  
wood popping orange syllables from its throat.  
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frame, cold as a corpse, he stares unfocused  
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swirling his brain in circles.

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to knees, fans his palms over carpet  
as if looking for lost coins in high grass.  
What he finds is a mutable weapon  
much like a fire poker lying not far from the grate.  
He holds it against his chest, presses it  
until bones ache, then he slides back  
to the floor, synapses comatose.  
Up on knees again, he crawls back  
to the window, raises himself to its ledge.  
The neighborhood bar is dark now.  
His hand flutters toward snow-deadened sound  
of a passing car, beckons to the possibility  
that one more jogger will run along street-lit  
sidewalk, or that a car will turn into his driveway,  
flash welcoming headlights through the window.  
He lifts an arm above his head, holds it  
there, lowers it, shaping a gun from thumb  
and index finger. He aims the gun  
between his lips, and this is how he murders  
Saturday night, leaving himself  
satisfied to glimpse a shimmer of death  
against the heat of intoxication and snow.



# Sweet Caroline

Lila Anafi

They killed Sweet Caroline long before she fell out of the sky like a shooting star.

When the university agreed to fund the study, they leaped onto lab tables and clinked diet soda cans. They said, “Long live the vultures.” My ecology professor, who’d offered me the internship, pulled me over after the celebration.

“I’m starting a mindfulness group,” she said by the side of the laboratory, a stray strand of chestnut hair darkening her left eye. “I think it would be a good fit for you.”

That weekend I sat cross-legged atop a yoga mat in my red dress, feeling the fabric press against my ribcage. Feeling my breathing go staccato as I arched my spine. Cat, cow. Cat, cow. Silently, I listened to my ecology professor ramble on and on about breathing exercises. About how our bodies are more than blood and bone and bits of flesh.

Come evening, I texted Ilana about how I’d worn the red dress for the first time since high school.

I should look for my blue one, she texted back. I think it’s still at my parent’s house.

For our sixteenth birthdays, we bought the same dress in different colors. Same size, same style, same everything. Or maybe we stole them – it’s hard to remember, now.

Over call, we caught each other up on the events of our lives since graduation. Ilana told me about her college friends. I told her about the vultures.

The zoo’s black vulture exhibit featured a mound of stones in the center. In daylight, the sun cast a golden river down the man-made mountain like the stairway to hell. Two trees rested on either side of the enclosure, their taloned branches clawing at the sky. From the bench outfacing the mesh wall, I sat with a computer in my lap and an open spreadsheet.

They fed Sweet Caroline through a little box tucked away at the back of the exhibit. Upon finishing her meals, the condor broke into a glide, her shadow trailing far below on the tawny ground.

When news of the study first got out, the journalists came with notepads and flashing cameras. I debated picking up stones in the dirt and pelting them at the intruders, as though I were playing target practice with empty cans. They did not belong. Make them go, make them go, make them go.

Ilana promised to visit the vultures on her day off, despite her disgust at their eating habits and wrinkled-fetus heads. Those were her words, not mine. I never argued with them. Every Saturday since, I squeezed myself into the red dress and waited until my lungs ached and my stomach tore itself apart.

She never came.

Members of the research team stayed after-hours, even though the zoo closed at six. On those late evenings, I told Sweet Caroline of nights spent swaying back and forth while the LED lights blazed, our heads tilted to the electric stars. Together, Ilana and I had belted 70’s hits and alone we’d whispered the lyrics like prayers. I told the bird how nice it felt to strangle ourselves in soft satin, when the world didn’t allow us to strangle anything else. From atop her makeshift mountain, her lips bleeding red, she seemed to understand.

Then Sweet Caroline began to starve.

The vets found nothing wrong with her, physically. My professor said, “She’s bound to snap out of it at some point.” So they kept slipping carcasses into the little box, begging her to break her fast.

But Sweet Caroline remained perched atop her hill, unmoving, beak tucked into her feathered chest. She curled herself into nothing, eyes shut against the sunlight.

The journalists tracked me down late on a Saturday evening, my red dress pooled at my feet. There was a hum in the air and an ache pulsing at my temples. Something begged me to yell — to kick, to scream, to break down into hawklike screeches to make them go away.

“Can you tell us about the vultures?” they said.

Make them go, make them go, make them go.

“Her name is Sweet Caroline,” I said, even though by then she had no name — only a number, a string of digits. A little band on her left foot. “Like the song.”

The journalist asked another question. By then I had stood up and begun to dance, step by step, swaying with my arms around the body of a ghost. Eyes shut against the sunset, I whispered lyrics while the vultures hissed their praise.

At the final chorus, Sweet Caroline fell out of the sky like a shooting star. I only found out afterwards. I only found out afterwards how the other vultures circled her carcass, diving one by one to rip apart her flesh until nothing remained but blood and bone.

### **thirst**

In one legend, if you dream  
of kneeling down and drinking in  
the entire ocean, you will die  
a happy death and live on f  
rom sea to eternity.  
This is a story for dwellers  
of deserts and plains.

Among seafaring peoples,  
there is a common saying:  
one coming out of the desert  
asking for saltwater to drink  
must be a prophet.  
This too is difficult to credit.

Prophets return to town  
with apocalyptic bellies.  
They order fried grasshoppers,  
dipped in wild honey, washed down  
with blood-red wine, with Herod's head  
on a platter for dessert.

## **barn**

I went out and saw what my father had done inside  
the barn he had stacked the books  
of his mother books about the insane and  
being saved books about barbed wire and  
the angels about Saint Michael and Stalin  
about all of the saints and Hitler and Satan  
thick hardback books heavy as black bricks  
with gilded edges with brightly colored ribbons caked  
with dirt and clay and the chalky nests  
of mud daubers books stacked hundreds of feet  
high reaching toward the vault of the ceiling  
books waiting within to be recovered to be found  
before the rain seeps in before the barn decays  
like a wooden coffin and all pages become one

## Losar

as a boy  
he loved the festival  
held every winter  
among the few times  
of the year  
in which he was free  
to roam the streets  
below the monasteries  
in which he was held

all of the sculptures  
were made of butter  
by knives that gently waved  
never appearing to cut  
by fingertips warm enough  
to caress stems  
and petals into shape  
flowers that glowed  
burning with color  
fresh in the chill air

suns and moons  
rabbits and birds  
monkeys and elephants  
wildly alive  
lining curved roads  
in a parade of gratitude  
for the coming year

## **bright eyes**

if I could meet  
my younger self  
I'd beg for his advice  
I'd hope for his approval  
I'd ask him questions  
then forget to listen  
to the answers  
I'd wonder if he's not  
just better looking  
but smarter too  
jealousy would get  
the best of me  
I'd nervously watch  
me watching him  
mistaking this  
for introspection  
I'd try to guess what  
he could be thinking  
I'd end up doing  
all of the talking  
hoping now  
as he walks away  
that was forgiveness  
I saw shining  
in his bright eyes

## The Fallen Ones

But why did they cut down the trees?  
The world was covered in a canopy.  
There was fruit for all to eat.  
Every creature was bathed in oxygen.  
But why did they cut down the trees?  
They were thrown down from Heaven.  
They wanted some revenge,  
to feel for themselves the pleasure  
of bringing down what was high.  
But why did they cut down the trees?  
Now only the stumps remain.  
They stand dead and fossilized.  
They are the buttes and mesas  
of the deserts in which life is scarce.  
But why did they cut down the trees?  
The great grandfather of Noah,  
the wise Enoch who lived by the sun,  
who tasted not death but walked with God,  
saw them felled one by one.  
He mourned the fall of each.  
But why did they cut down the trees?  
They wanted to starve us  
of every type of fruit that grows,  
pleases the eye, and is good to eat.  
But why did they cut down the trees?  
The tree of life was struck at its base,  
blow upon blow, until at last even it fell.  
Her stump sits, lonely, surrounded by the sea,  
later named Cyprus by sailors  
who knew mere echoes of her glory.  
But why did they cut down the trees?  
The Garden of Eden was not here  
on this planet, nor anywhere above.  
Our planet was within Eden.  
The towering trees were in every land.  
One could spend an entire day  
walking around a single mighty trunk.  
But why did they cut down the trees?  
They wanted to choke us,  
to cut off the air we breathe,  
to suffocate life.  
No. It was the sound,

the sound of the singing,  
the ancient hymn, the universal song,  
of praise and thanksgiving.  
The trees would not stop singing.  
They whisper still.  
They dare to hum.  
Their tormentors were washed away.  
But why did they cut down the trees?



## wings

angels have wings  
like birds  
they have human  
hearts and heads  
with the mouths  
of mere men  
but with their wings  
they can journey  
up to heaven  
and back again  
one pair to fly  
another to hide  
soft eyes  
just like yours  
made to see  
not everything  
a lower pair  
to cover feet  
for walking  
nowhere at night  
barefoot across clouds  
almost yellow  
in the moonlight  
above and below  
they are free  
to come and go  
an arc of flight  
for us to follow  
their song means  
like angels  
birds have wings

## **window**

when you are alone  
sitting in your car  
waiting  
while it rains  
those aren't tears  
they're on the other  
side of the glass  
of course  
you know this  
but those raindrops slowly  
sliding down the window  
so close  
to your face  
feel like they belong  
to you  
like the sky knew  
you needed to cry  
and decided to do it  
for you  
and now look at you  
you're crying too

## **reflection**

there is a mirror  
hanging up  
somewhere in a hall in  
heaven inside you can  
see  
faces of women  
in labor  
faces of men  
lost in ecstasy  
the faces of those  
in waiting rooms  
hearing the news  
laughing faces  
that then begin  
to cry  
faces contorted  
by pleasure  
by pain  
they can all start  
to look the same  
sometimes God spies  
her own elusive face  
staring back  
at him with surprise  
sometimes it's just  
too much  
even she must hurry by  
hiding his eyes

**genevieve understands a problem**

put in fear, put  
in  
a tattoo of singing  
with gargoyles in midnight rain and,  
quiet as gloved mice, beetles  
decomposing in soil. she is waving,  
stirring air with nothing that remains  
but something like a smile that falls on the  
ground.

put in a burrow like  
a worm's memory,  
she won't breathe for a season,  
won't  
genuflect to a bus  
bearing down. and i'll  
crater a menu  
of  
promises i stuck in her hand someplace  
where ribs don't crack with  
every breath. somewhere in  
the loping pestilence  
of the sun.

## organ grinder and balloons

inverted  
in banked ground is the  
trouble in my  
head. a berm  
she  
handed me is  
confused  
of any spirits  
backslid  
from  
contours of splashed paint.  
she remembered  
to tell me of  
columns  
of  
crestfallen  
architecture bowled  
over like unsurprised  
phantoms; trollies  
spent of  
bluster.  
and manatees  
sitting at desks  
are a  
crowd  
of safecrackers  
you can see  
at  
midnight  
when  
castles blow  
over like tall  
grass and  
wind is  
unnecessary  
as  
platonic love.  
cereal boxes  
have bored  
her stacked in  
afternoons in  
cellars trying

peace; trying  
sleeping pills;  
favoring perspiration  
to a purge;  
trying to gelatinize  
in a cough.  
there is only one  
avalanche on  
this mountainside  
and all  
that's left  
i  
s  
a  
razor  
of  
snow,  
eager  
like a  
pulsing  
closet  
of clothes.  
in the  
twilight,  
either dawn  
or dusk,  
the safari  
kills a rhino.  
the madhatter drinks  
a water glass  
of  
mercury. a shiny  
bell  
beats like a drum  
and olive-eyed orphans  
who have always  
whispered to their  
sandals,  
cross  
swords with windmills  
and bark at the plains.  
don quixote  
is a  
limitless nightmare

fallen off his  
horse.

from midcountry, miles away

in the prison where  
secret weapons  
are cost effective,  
a centipede makes walking elegant.  
in my basement, it leaves  
through a fissure.

i pull money from an atm.  
why would any woman want to?  
brother and sister should always marry,  
genetics being what they are.  
genetics being  
the conclusion of a child to  
a plot of sabotage  
where a garden party spices  
alcohol, and those legs;  
those  
legs of hers  
are spinnerets.

in the space capsule  
everyone  
was catheterized;  
nasa hadn't sprung a leak  
since it scratched  
a dog's ear  
and a longhorn kicked  
a creosote  
from  
the dry panhandle of  
texas.  
whenever an oil rig

wants to talk,  
betty answers the phone but  
her mouth is sleeping elsewhere tonight.

grackles have  
bypassed the stoicism of  
canadian provinces  
and hallucinated to the  
arctic  
circle. they



still see ice floes.  
they nip the old water  
glaciers. and a bat that

flapped

the  
attic, until it was sure there was no sky,  
nested

in vagrancy and wouldn't eat.

there is a slight tremor  
somewhere underground.

when she scurries past, the horizon is knitted in bleached stone;  
the woods are uncomplicated by leaves.

## bread and circuses\*

with  
broken  
pinwheels,  
a cruikshank  
founders ankle deep  
after rains have uncapped a vinegar bottle.  
after a big top is left behind with  
stakes pushed into another season of clowns.

i saw a devil's wind lifting  
    its skirts  
    to summersault  
a  
small hill: it licked its  
            lips, scattered horseflies

before  
i could taste sawdust:  
before  
wooden wheels were toothpicks snapping.

i  
figured  
on time to rot  
a tiny memory of incense that crept  
and strained through a screen door  
like unkempt grass losing chlorophyll;  
like a smile bleached with teeth. and  
i

tripped over unearthed roots sparkling  
with gravity;  
tripped over the full  
            pail of the sun

where it  
barked and fidgeted in a  
saloon  
that couldn't close.

and  
words are watered in hothouses;  
wernicke's oared by thumbs.  
and smiling ladies stand on horses  
that go round and round and round.  
Juvena

\* with apologies to

## discovery

singing started,  
and holidays fell off the roof  
but, it wasn't a story; wasn't  
pig knuckles knocking on a  
door  
asking for a handout. blackened

sunshine started  
swimming for a new coast, somewhere  
off  
a street  
dangling on the edge  
of the world. somewhere unnegotiated  
as a dress's hem sputtering  
up a hill.

and a blanket of voices is enough to  
halt  
the weather even if they  
don't sing: even if mitochondria no  
longer  
offer a clue  
to any mother's lineage and  
studebakers were never the bargain  
they  
sold for.

the carousel started in a  
lacerating  
vacuum no one thought to reverse  
and light fell like pollen  
but, no one could steer  
a  
ship through frobisher bay until candles  
were planted on greenland;  
until flame was cut  
and probed like a lab monkey,  
and what still burned slept  
as shadows might hide in sunshine.  
but only genetically happy mice  
were used  
for experimentation: incomplete  
but somewhat pliant.

and they really weren't mice

at all: they sang godspell, twitched and laid eggs. and it wasn't  
the end of an age. an era was left spilling seconds;  
a heavy poultice unpracticed in smothering time.  
it started with a fingernail scratching moss from a rock.  
is started in a bottleneck of jubilant rain.

## **after invisible men**

at the door of upheaval  
baldness stinks in a perfection  
you couldn't call a bed of  
roses; a perfection not crushable as cornmeal or cartilage;  
in the tiny universe of  
malignancy, thoughts are no  
perfections at all. now, if i press  
tongue against teeth, a  
whirlpool scurries up confusing  
clouds, and tornadoes have  
lost some relevance. so i hold up zoot  
suit trousers and let them billow  
like the flag of nepal. i square  
the image of a diving pterosaur and  
unbutton my neck. one chimney  
is silent. one chimney barks in  
fog. one chimney caresses a  
tree with hands more fragrant  
than a shoveled ditch. and every  
minute i count spills from the wall  
and shatters like cut glass heated too long in the night.

## down the alley

in my chirping driveway  
littered with squirrels and bones of fish,  
coal is prehistoric,  
breathing  
in a cloud.

curtains imprison light  
that had no trouble  
levitating windows and nothing  
is

warmed: nothing  
lingers and  
sings.

a crumb of  
breakfast hangs on a web  
waiting for ants  
to take it away, laughing. and i should save it, but  
i disembowel  
a clock to stop  
reminders. i see

where a street sign is bent to gravel  
so it no longer suggests anything at all,  
and i crawl to the basement  
listening for the last bark of rain.

out there,  
disease is a nuclear flash for some.  
down here,  
disease is a breath i never exhale.

and in a confluence of suns,  
old birds

whisper  
to streetlights and  
silence stutters like a fractured lake where  
one swayback horse is enough  
to juice a pot of glue and

out of the church doors  
across the street,

daddy's little  
girl  
comes running  
missing  
a sandal and a shock of hair.

## eclipse

the sudden flashpoint  
                                    of a crucible spit  
like  
poison only a drunk would  
                                    know. and hair  
  over shoulders,  
  no  
glasses or unsure step. the four walls  
  scratching zoo sounds; the  
wind  
buttery and lopsided. if i  
  wait too long, the  
  fruit grows moldy inside with perfect skin  
if i wait too  
                                    long, the sediment throws egg masses  
                                    like  
old frogs and rain won't wipe them away.

she passes as a long root  
                                    burned  
by the earth's core without  
                                    a season of detritus storming  
or inert, and the bed of a lake  
                                    is the quietest nurse rhyme  
                                    disney ever listened to.  
now she writes her name with a jackhammer,  
caribou smelling spring  
                                    through the snow.

## WALKING HEALS

Mark Tate

*Heard by the soul, footsteps / in the mind more than shadows, / shadows of thought more than footsteps/ through the path of echoes/ that memory invents and erases: / without walking they walk / over this present, bridge / slung from one letter to the next.*

—Octavio Paz, from A Draft of Shadows

I walked up the path to the estuary, picking up litter as I went. I felt comfortable enough with my ankle to leave the cane behind and get back to my routine, and I felt more stable emotionally since my unnerved (and unnerving) reaction to the sight of that body being pulled from the river. I could still see him, the drowned man pulled up onto the embankment by my friend Tommy. Remembering the scene, the horrid chills, and my screams, like a mantra I said Keep walking. Focus, do what you've got to do and keep moving. Picking up litter with the grabber-stick on my walks to town, collecting trash and recyclables along the path is a helpful diversion. My doc confirmed the cure. Walk. Repair inside and outside at the same time. I separate what I pick up into the receptacles in front of Mar Coloquio al Publico, my friend Tommy Cross's newspaper office, owned and published out of his craftsman house on Highway 1.

Many in this small town questioned Tommy about the newspaper's name in the early eighties when he moved full-time from Marin and founded the paper. Angeles de la Mar was a small town, with 450 residents that would balloon to 600 during whale watching season in the early spring because of tourists staying in the BNBs, VRBOs, and Airbnb's. But the weekly's name, Tommy shrugged and said that the name honored his first wife who had died after her battle with cancer. Mar Coloquio al Publico: meaning: a public conversation by the sea.

We'd meet for coffee and chat most mornings at the Gatos Patisserie and Café before he'd go off to his carpentry jobs. Home repair, handyman work, even fencebuilding if a skilled carpentry job was not on the schedule. Usually Tommy and his second wife, Jean, and two students from Riverview University would put the news weekly together. Town news and events, county stories that deal with nature and conservation. He'd write the editorial. Five or six pages at most. We'd pick up copies of the largest paper between San Francisco and the Oregon border and sit in the café and critique the modern forms of journalism, the avalanche of homages to the cult of personality. He considered himself retired, but the carpentry jobs and the handyman work helped keep his paper funded. The jobs kept him hopping, and because he juggled so much, he had dispensed with the clock and worked at his life from the perspective of quality: quality woodwork, he said, and winking with the next phrase, he claimed his writing showed "sentences sanded with respect to the grain of the wood."



Tommy had put himself through journalism school by doing carpenter work throughout San Francisco and Marin counties as he attended San Francisco State University in the late sixties, early seventies. Straw-colored hair, overgrown and tucked into a black Giants baseball cap, burley chest and arms, stout legs always in Carhartt shorts no matter the season of the year. He met his first wife, Anastasia, of German and Mexican heritage, at San Francisco State University in a journalism class. She was from Mexico City. Her field of study was World History, and she was working on a book about the Mexican revolution when she passed. They lived together in San Francisco's Mission District and got married after graduation. He wrote for The Chronicle and worked carpentry jobs most Saturdays, custom homes, word of mouth only. She wrote and edited for the newly formed Bay Guardian. Some of her articles and some essays were published in a book titled Sonoma County on the World Stage: The Legacy of Running Fence. Tommy had quite the following for remodels. Then his door and window work was what kept the money rolling in, enough to support him and Anastasia. When the Chronicle and the Examiner merged, once investigative journalism was marginalized, he shifted to carpentry full-time. They moved to Marin, but Anastasia lost her battle with breast cancer and passed a couple of years after that move.

When I entered the café, I saw that Tommy was seated at one of the window-seats chatting up Susan Fairchild, a young woman who had been hired by local writing legend Elizabeth Aldridge as a personal assistant and caretaker. Couldn't help but notice her posture, erect back and she held her head with both dignity and grace, brown hair pulled into a ponytail. Susan was tall, a big boned beauty. On first meeting her, one might think that she was a farm girl, an English countryside type, but she was more an athletic Scandinavian skier/skater type. Once she told me that when in college, she was a pitcher for her fastpitch softball team. I walked over to say hello before getting my coffee. Tommy was explaining particulars about his mother's medical conditions.

"Hey, I'll join you guys in a minute. Just going to get coffee. Tommy, you're a busy man, stacking appointments, Susan and then me," I teased.

"No, I'm trying to find out if she'd be interested in writing something about my mom's mission of counting the estuary seal population each morning. I have a copy of the Press and a draft copy of Coloquio for you to preview," he said.

Susan looked at her watch. I walked over to the counter to order my coffee from Lucy. Most of the early morning café work was take-out coffee and baked goods, newspapers, post-cards, novelties, locals on the way to work or tourists heading on the road. Usually, until I got fully engrossed in one of the newspapers, I listened in on conversations, piecing together town news. Whenever I ordered my coffee with Lucy, as this morning, I marveled at how warmly she greeted customers. One of the main benefits of town life is experiencing a real welcome as opposed to the forced expressions one might find at city retail. Lucy's bright face expressed kindness. Long black hair pulled up into a bun held in place with a couple of enameled sticks. An Asian look, but she was second generation Indian American. Her father was a doctor in India before emigrating to the United States and her mother was

pure melting pot. He's the postmaster next door to Gatos café which his family owns. The cats for which the café is named hang out at the post office—

"Good morning, Warren," Lucy said. The beauty of her large brown eyes always made me feel younger. I suppose being reminded of youth is counterproductive to her business interests because it always made me think twice about wanting a pastry.

"Small please, Lucy," I said. I looked back and Susan was standing, shaking hands with Tommy. She waved to me and headed out of the café with a smile big as that of a crying rooster.

I sat down and took up Tommy's draft copy of his weekly piled in the middle of the small round table. I turned to the editorial and read about the overwhelming evidence of climate change ratcheting to an emergency. He listed the ever-increasing symptoms: extensive melting of the polar ice caps, rise of sea level and erosion, world-wide flooding juxtaposed with its opposite world-wide drought, sea temperature increase and loss of wildlife and ecosystems, ever-larger wildfires, frequency, and intensity of storms world-wide. He saluted the agreement reached by the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly for reduction of CO2 levels and hailed the urgency of the call by the International Governmental Panel on Climate Change that the world governments needed to work together to keep the world temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius. Tommy concluded that while this was a wonderful global assessment, it was vital that everyone pitch in and do what they could on a local level: reduce from two or three cars per family to one if possible, ride-share, network, and shop together. Examine ways to find alternates to using fossil fuels in production and transportation of goods. Question the use of plastics. Use only the water necessary: low-flow toilets and showers, lowhydration gardens with timed sprinklers and spot emitters. He promised the paper would be highlighting actions in progress and deeds accomplished to further the discussion, and he wrote the word discussion in Spanish in italics, *la discusion*.

Tommy left the table to use the restroom and I read another piece.

When he returned, I said, "Hola, Amigo."

"Nothing is going to tick me off today. You can't mess with me today, Warren." "What are you so happy about, Bro?" He was the only person in the world who I called "Bro." Enough cool had rubbed off on him from his time in Marin county that he used that lingo, and I loved mimicking him.

"I just signed a deal to remodel the windows for the Earth River restaurant. And they took my bid over a big developer in Riverview so that saves us all the hour roundtrip drives of the cars and trucks of their workers, et cetera, et cetera. I'm stoked about that, but I'm totally stoked about the fact that they will respect my work schedule: half days starting at five in the morning 'til eleven a.m., cleaning up and out by start of their lunch traffic, one room at a time, new picture windows so people can see the river spilling into the estuary and the seascape, the sea stacks beyond the sandbar. They want slow and they've made a commitment to me because of my reputation."

"Wow, count 'em: used two et cetera." That was our way, the banter. Needle, needle, but never draw blood. "Congratulations," I continued. "That's a good sign, they must be doing

well. How does your mother feel about losing your help with the seals in the mornings?"

"I told her you or Gayle would be happy to help her whenever her friend or Jean couldn't go up to the Highway 1 overlook to do the count for her."

"No problem volunteering me, I love Iris, she's an amazing woman, do anything for your mother. But speaking ahead for Gayle, whoa up Bro. You better cover that with my wife, 'cuz presumptuousness is one of her pet peeves."

He winked and smiled. "I'm sure when I start the sentence "Iris would," Gayle will be receptive, but thank you for the head's up. And Bro, I'll try not to make my sentences sound presumptuous." We both went back to the newspapers.

Tommy warned me that Deputy Sheriff Fondest Bolden was looking for me. Bolden was the first responder when Tommy's mother, Iris, made the call to 911, and he was the one who encountered me at the scene where Tommy pulled the dead man from the shallows of the estuary. For me it was another oddity of the scene at the river, understanding the deputy's name. I remembered it clearly now, Fondest. I was proud of myself for remembering his name because I was exceptionally good at remembering faces, but often can't for the life of me remember a name when necessary. Unnerving. But he told me his full name trying to get me to look at him and listen to him rather than look at the deceased man on the riverbank. While looking at the dead man, I was babbling, and when Fondest found that he could not understand what I was talking about, he stepped to his SUV and called Deputy Sheriff Lieutenant Stevenson to come and help at the scene. They worried at the time that I'd really gone crazy, as in capital I insane.

I looked at Tommy and gave a bizarre little cackle. "I guess my insanity is catching, et cetera, et cetera."

I got up to buy a refill. "Lucy, guess I should have chosen a large coffee. Hit me again." She refilled my cup, waved off the charge for the refill and went back to her task of condensing trays of pastries in the case. As I walked back to sit with Tommy, I noticed he who was picking through his copy of "The Press."

"Are you going up the Highway 1 overlook to count seals for Iris?" I asked.

"Yes, I'll do my count and drop by her cottage and give her the count. I've got to get going. After I drop by mom's, I need to start organizing my trailer for the work at Earth River." Tommy had a hitch on his car, pulled a trailer to the jobsites. Just about everything fit into his locked trailer. If he needed wood or glass, he'd have it delivered to the jobsite.

"Okay, thanks for volunteering. Can you talk to Gayle for me about helping, or do you need me to kiss the ring of the Queen?" He collected his things and got up from the small table. He raised his cup to Lucy to motion goodbye as he nudged his chair under the table.

"You're such a piece of work, Tommy," I said as he slid by me.

"Not today, Warren. Can't rattle me today." He left his draft with me and headed for the door, The Press under his arm. Tommy passed Sheriff's Deputy Bolden who'd just walked into the café. He came over to the chair Tommy had just vacated. Bolden brought out a card

and offered it to me. “Deputy Stevenson and I still need to interview you about the scene at the river. Can you give me a call soon to schedule a time to talk? We’re gathering leads about the case.”

“Okay. I’ve got an appointment this morning, but I’ll give you a call and we can schedule a meeting. How about sometime after three-thirty when my wife Gayle will be home from work?”

“Thank you, I’ll arrange it with Stevenson,” he said and gave a two-fingered touch to his forehead.

“Oh, by the way, do we know yet how the man died? Murder, or an accident, or something he’d caused through negligence?”

“Well, sorry, we need to collect more information about this mystery.” Bolden hesitated, gave a sort of blank look, collecting himself. It was here that I imagined him questioning what about the mortal scene triggered my emotional break. And the silence made me remember John Donne, his thing about how a death diminishes us all. Then Bolden said, “glad you are doing better. Talk to you soon.” The young officer left the café, hesitated on the wood deck, and put his broad-brimmed cap on before stepping to his patrol car.

The next day, when I met Tommy for coffee at Gatos, he was smiling, and it looked like he was mumbling to himself. He was looking through some papers in front of him and hadn’t seen me come in. If he knew I was coming in at that moment, he wouldn’t have made it so easy for me to see that he liked what he was reading. As an editor, he thought of himself as an easy touch, usually deferred to his wife, Jean, especially on creative pieces.

“Hey, Lucy, good morning,” I said. “Large Joe, black please. I’m off the sugar.” I turned to look at Tommy. “What are you so happy about?”

“Look at this hunk of writing that Susan left with me.”

“I can see that you are enjoying it. What’s it about?”

“Nature, like we talked about. I like it, but I want to know what you think. She left me this yesterday to review, and I haven’t shown it to Jean yet. Hey, I’m a carpenter, what do I know about this kind of writing? I need to know the opinion of a metaphysician.” Tommy never failed to find a way to poke me about being a lit professor at Riverview University. Every so often he’d pull out the English Lit. v. Journalism puzzle. Tommy handed me the papers as I sat down at the small round table. I squinted and blew ripples on the hot aromatic brew to see if I could get a quick sip, read the title of the piece Susan had left with Tommy with my remaining open eye. Cupping the Wind: A Weekend in Mendocino. I sipped at my coffee and looked at Tommy who was beaming at me.

“Geez. Read your newspaper and let me have some space,” I told him. He laughed at me and picked up his copy of The Press.

Just below the title I read the comments in parenthesis: (This piece is dedicated to Erica Fielder, field guide on this coastal nature walk, and her guests, Teresa Scholars, Charlotte Bacon, and Skip Wollenberg who assisted. Note: the phrases in italics are their words around which I have written my observations.)

1) Our field guide showed us the lens hanging from the string at her neck. This is the hand lens, opening the tear shaped tool. The jewelry in her hand turned into a miniature telescope. Use one lens for five- power, both together for ten-power. Stop and view the flowers from the distance of your thumb. We walked down the path and began our viewing: first the clover, then coast lotus, the blue butterfly lotus that the caterpillars feed on, each head of the small flower, close-up, looked like a bunch of flowers. We examined linen plants, the flax seeds filled with oil, (plants from which linoleum was developed), and then the iris flower, iris in Greek means rainbow. The Coastal Pomo used strings torn from the leaves of the iris plant to make cords that they wound into rope. Teresa pointed out the long landing strips that invite insects into the sweetness of the flower. We got down on our knees and elbows to look at the wild strawberries. Above us Erica continued to talk about the reality of the physical world. Plato used the term 'physic' to describe man as separate from the world, and we are learning that man cannot be separate. We must learn about the genius of the things of nature, the ability of natural things to survive. Trees together with lichen are more successful capturing water, each species adapting to be mutually beneficial, or each species using another material to protect itself. Hummingbirds use lichen material to build nests because the material expels lice. Green spittlebugs produce sacks of saliva to live in as protection from predators. 2) We walk farther through the shore pines and bishop pines. The purple female cones are moist with the sticky fluid that captures the male pollen to form the seeds. Teresa kneels and points to the clover as Erica says, cow's clover, or *Trifolium wormskuikdii* clover, what the gophers feed on, why the Russians left, they couldn't sustain an agricultural base because of the gophers. Next, she points to the wetland sedge grass, the roots used for baskets, kids call it cut grass, because when you run your hands across it the edges can cut you. And here is Himalayan berry, a blackberry brought from Europe, and the wax myrtle that Native Americans used to make candles, and the Nootka roses, the purple unfolding out of the tiny red rose, Mendocino wildlife in this southern tip of the rain forest that extends north as far as Alaska. We stand at the grassy headland and look out at the ocean, and Skip brings our focus back to the ground and interjects, Look at the midden left by the Native Americans, the broken shells show that the area was used for harvesting foods from the shoreline, the Lake

Pomo migrated during the hot summers to the seashore and traded with the Coastal Pomo. Salmon migrated east through the rivers as far as Idaho, the fish of the sea connected inland. Skip described the Great Blue Heron eating frogs and gophers across the marine terrace, and smiled, finishing his story with mention that the Heron also feed on the great fat fish in local Koi ponds. On the grassy shelf above the sea, we lay down in the wild onion, purple-fuchsia, golden yarrow, and sea pink, its showy surface that attracts insects; and watch a killdeer feigning a disabled wing, trying to lure us away from its nearby nest, squawking, protesting that we are so close, that we are so close, that we are so close. 3) Coastal California Poppy, growing low to the ground, adapted to the windy headland, and Yarrow, *achillea millefolium*, said to have been used as a poultice to heal Achilles' heel; and growing wild, free opening the mind to the I Ching oracle. Scarlet pimpernel and clinging to the rocks rising out of the water, Indian paint brush. The marine terrace rises at 100,000-year periods, the coast in contact with the vast Pacific plates pushing the rocks up at the

coastline. . . Shore pines, *Pinus contorta*, are great yogis bending into positions along the cliffs, posing in the salt laden air, sea spray and a sweet scent of pine mix in the air on this bluff above the churning inlet. 4) The circle opens, sensing roots. Dig your fingers into humus and touch a root. (Humus: leaves, branches, bones, and scats decomposing into soil.) Sitting on a rock at the inlet, the sea water edges toward me in rhythm, expanding, contracting, a trickle of water behind me runs from the rocky crevice that goes up to the marine terrace, up the rocky slope, ice plant, Indian paint brush, and purple clover travel a trail that goes back and forth among the rocks up the crevice. There are fresh dog prints at the creek that descends into the seawater. The shoreline is littered with drying sea kelp, roots washed up in high tide; and above me, roots of shore pines extend out of the jagged cliffs. 5) Inhale the smell of humus; hold your breath, fill yourself up. It is an air laden with salts from the nutrient rich pool of life, the mother cycle, the sea, the omni-cycle, the original cycle model of nature. There is an acrid smell of decomposing seaweed swirling in my throat. 6) Create a gesture that returns something of yourself to the earth. (Human: a word meaning “of the earth.”) I bend down and touch my palms to the wet sand of the inlet, connecting what I am to where I come from to what I will be: I ask the earth to read my hands on which my name is written. I touch the earth with hands that held my brother when he was a baby when I was two years old. I touch the earth with hands that once explored the faces of my mother and father. 7) Let yourself metamorphose, what are you becoming? (I see a few letters scattered on the page of Erica’s notebook. An ‘a,’ the ‘z,’ the ‘o,’ the ‘p.’) The lower case ‘a’ and ‘z’ look like symbols one might find on a cave wall. A human sitting on his heels, knees pointed toward the sea, arms up and outstretched toward the sea, perhaps a prayer position, perhaps a yoga pose. Rain over the sea, rain over the mountains, rainwater in the creeks and rivers flowing to the sea, represent the letter ‘o.’ And the ‘p’ forms the flower that is me, rooted in the earth, flowering round and beautiful in the sunlight, that coastal poppy close to the ground, adapted to the windy headland, perseverant. 8) Watch decomposition, what moves, what rots? Everything changes, change is everything; grasses above the sea, the plover of the headland, gophers burrowing in the soil, scat of foxes near the creek emptying to the sea. 9) What is a source of nutritious food for plants? Even these rocks are food for plants. I pick up a piece of driftwood amid the rocks on the floor of the inlet. Smoothed and rounded by rubbing along the sand and rocks, soaked by high tides, and bleached by sunlight. It is no bigger than my hands and I lay my palms on the sides allowing my mind to focus on the circle it creates, the way my palms fit the rounded sides, the way it brings my palms together in a position of blessing, the way it brings my mind to the thought that I am part of the circle: source, food, plant, and soil. 10) Charlotte described walking out to the headland with her coffee and being struck with the image of the harrier cupping the wind, hovering powerfully, delicately, and then diving onto the mouse. She said, I love life, and I love language, why I write. Charlotte paraphrased Descartes, saying I love; therefore, I write.

Susan’s words had an intoxicated quality, swooning over the beauty of the event, and, of course, I thought of “The Windhover” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Because of the use of the word cupping, I envisioned the Pomo kneeling over a stream, drinking, cupping the source. I rolled the word cupping around as though panning for something hidden in the gravel—

struck by the sense of being a part of that which is being held. Like a harrier cupping the wind, the wing and the wind, and took her point as well-put: writers are cupping language, the mind, and the word, hovering powerfully and delicately, finding that moment to dive onto an image, connecting imagination and language.

I set the sheets of paper down and blindly took up my coffee to drink. It was cold, but I was uplifted by what Susan had written. I looked at Tommy and said, "I hope you're going to print this in Coloquio. This is nice writing, gentle and instructive, wispy like a good long walk at the coast, the wind in the grasses."

"Yes, I like it very much and I told Susan I'd print it in the paper if I got Jean on board. You know, one of my favorite things that The Press does is that small column called Sense of Place. This is longer than that, of course, but I think our readers will like this piece in a similar way, helping them see themselves connected in their coastal environment. Also, I've invited her to come by and meet Iris, a tea together just the two girls, mid-morning, to see if she can figure a way into a story about my mom and the seals."

"Who wouldn't love doing a piece on your mother's efforts?"

"If Jean says it's a go, I'll let you guys know which week this piece will appear in the Coloquio."

"Okay, Tommy. I'm going on to the preserve, I need a walk. My doctor says I'm not getting enough exercise, blood pressure inching up, and something about triglycerides. I need to lose some weight around the mid-section."

"That's dangerous stuff, Warren."

"Yeah, I know. Make sure you print that piece. It's la discusion worthy, Bro. See you." I waved to dear Lucy at the counter as I left the shop.

It took me twenty minutes to walk to the entrance of Skyland Terrace Preserve and Botanical Gardens at the headland. The place was so large the administration offered its members with disabilities the use of golf carts on the narrow, paved driveways. My ankle was almost strong enough, but I still used a cart. I'd drive one west as far as I could to the end of the macadam and get out to walk along the trails that curved along the rock-pillared slopes above the sea. Susan's imagery had tantalized my imagination and I wanted to walk among the shore pines and marvel at how they contorted against the ever-present sea wind. I had started walking the rougher terrain in the preserve ever since my last blood pressure numbers revealed that the walk on the path to town along the river wasn't long enough or strenuous enough to make a marked change. My doctor had made it abundantly clear: he told me to get some real exercise, lose some weight, or he'd be piling up pills for me to take. "Walking heals," he said, "and when your ankle gets stronger, drop the use of the golf cart. More walking. Double it." I'm following doctor's orders, and I play with the phrase, Heal thyself. The world can heal if we walk more.

As I walked, the contorted pines were talking about survival. I could see my surroundings more perceptively. And birds spoke to me from the brambles. Sweet bursts of sound: yes, walk, heal yourself, walk and heal the earth. Crazy old fool, I chuckled to myself about the ad I'd seen in a magazine in the doctor's office waiting room about heart health. That was it: the pleasure of reading Susan's essay was as good as dark chocolate for heart health. And it was filled with clues like the concept of cupping language.

Chocolate, as a tonic. Versus the word toxic. There is merely one letter in the middle of each word to differentiate these opposites. Toxic: those things we've done to harm the earth, poisons, we could call it our poisonous detours. Rather, tonic: to stimulate, a moral invigoration to keep us walking the true path. The two words shuffled with my steps until I found more words to create a rhythm: negative, positive, right, left, light, dark, light, light—

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## THE SCAVENGER'S DAUGHTER

Jesaru Durango, walking skeleton, phantom cowpoke, wrangles open the tower door. Inside he finds a blackened body posed in the embrace of the scavenger's daughter. Jesaru lays a hand on its head—he can feel troubled dreams crawling up his arm, infecting his blood. Wind drives snow through cracks in the walls, a gritty snow that abrades all it touches, clogs every hinge, jams every sash, like some heavy-handed parable in Empire's moral night. Durango flips a switch, but the light doesn't turn on—darkness is the standard in the tower. Where it's winter, forever winter, and ice mummifies the corpse—after fire, always fire, renders the pose.

## THE PAINTING HE STOLE FROM PICASSO

I am hiding in the brushstrokes on Picasso's final painting, the one he never completed, the one you have never seen. In this way I have made myself both Picasso's parasite and his slave. My interrogator from the Department of Magical Emanations in the Lost City of Gandharvas continues to insist, despite my protests, that a raven-haired woman named Suzie is expressing through my mind her paranoid delusion that she is leader of the League of Echos. Okay, true enough, kinda—this morning she shows up at 3 am, walks right into the Rantipole's fetid brig, sits herself down, hangs her watch cap on Jesaru's coffee mill carbine, unwraps a toasted onion bagel, and lets her mind roll on. Suzie's mother and her crew of sanctimonious categorizers are making a big racket in the cell next door. I'd enjoy seeing what mischief they're up to, but I only have eyes for the newly risen sun. My interrogator got sloppy last night— she left a broken incisor in my neck. Truth is, Picasso is tired. And he isn't happy about the way Suzie's treating me, despite all the complaining he used to do about the quality of my optical illusions. In deference to the secret nature of Picasso's final work I will say no more about Suzie's father. I have almost stopped trying to forget what I used to remember before I lost sight of Suzie's tear-stained face on the day of his passing, as he gasped for a final breath and said, 'You can't strain oxygen out of tears.' I don't know what to say about Suzie's brother, except that just before he passed into a gaseous state his sense of responsibility to those he would leave behind manifested itself in the form of six different similes for leaves souging in the wind. But I still don't have time for his poetic conceits because Picasso is knocking at my door and when Picasso knocks on your door the occasion for cracking wise is over. Suzie has devoted hours, many hours, to decorating her peroxide beehive with poster versions of Picasso's final painting. She lies down on her bed of daydreams and wonders if someday a warrior-monk with jet black hair and dynamite in his saddle bags will ride down from his mountain retreat with Picasso's final painting strapped across his chest. Suzie is writing these notes on the back of a menu from a chop suey joint operated by Suzie's father, the very same chow mein palace where Picasso's mistress serves a daily special of Tits in a Wringer over a bowl of detonator caps the monk keeps leaving on the buffet. Suzie's father sits embalmed in seven-point posture, a mummy inside a glass case in the center of his sweet-and-sour pork emporium. Between

interrogations he rests and smokes while his classified transcripts are being transmitted to a binary star system where they will be decoded by Picasso's final mistress as soon as the buffet lunch crowd has finished gumming their fortune cookies and taken a moment to mull their collective bad fortune. Picasso's mistress has issues with the sulfur content of yesterday's egg drop soup, but the monk, with whom Picasso's mistress wishes to share a message she's extracted from Suzie's father's cold dead fist, has drifted into an unlikely region of poetic diction. Suzie's mother in her lonely room wears a type of leather helmet reputed by Chinese food critics to be Picasso's favorite dinner apparel. In Picasso's final painting he dances with his mistress, but only has eyes for Suzie's cream cheese. The mad monk is an x-ray telescope pointed at the back of Suzie's head. While studying the trajectory of her orbit he discovers Picasso's mistress inside a Magellenic language cloud that is condensing into dark word-matter precisely at the center of the interrogator's flaccid egg foo yung. Her heart song now clogged with plaque from eating too many cream cheese bagels, Suzie's thoughts come and go like women in a London bank teller's daydream. The real key to understanding

Suzie's behavior is a forged letter from Picasso, written by his mistress, in which (s)he writes, 'Whoever thinks they steal a glimpse of my enameled calm is deceived by an ashen apparition.' The monk's habitual mental fabrication dictates, Eat the amapola, call it renunciation. This is the way he attracts disciples: he doesn't give a damn. Suzie understands that the interrogator wastes a lot of enhanced interrogation technique with his profligate disregard for the gravitational effect that binary star systems have on verbal shit storm production. Her father's favored interrogation technique? To simulate drowning an oblique protomartyr in the prelude to a calculus. Such a proposition, oddly enough, could describe the fictional universe in which the monk's salvation prayers have an untoward effect on Suzie's negative karma, and when the interrogator breaks from executing his duties for a consultation with Suzie's father, the monk dynamites the interrogator's empty Cartesian proposition. After a little more ado about nada, the interrogator rises to leave. He takes up his pork-pie hat and nods in the direction of Suzie's poster, the one in which Picasso himself, sporting major timber, holds a paintbrush in one hand and his mistress's breast in the other. Then the first light of day comes streaming through her dead brother's eyes. A voice cries out, 'Suzie Queso-Crema, what's got into you?' and Suzie wakes up to wonder, Does the sun also rise in Guernica?

## LAST CALL

The station is a diorama of daily life in a cast iron frying pan where senses are dulled by corporate cronyism and car bomb crescendo, all part of the Emperor's hit-and-miss assault on consensual reality. Skim of perfumed pelts, spoiled industrial fat, narcotic niff.

Sleepwalker salvo. Surrogates of the Imperial Muggins fob the citizens off with deely-bobber headgear: peely-wally peeper masks of shite-hawk talon and shaggy lamb jowl, setting sun anthems and criminal canticles. Cassandra howls on deck. The Emperor's hard-on for autistic toad-eaters persuades the citizens toward country-fired mojo. Gongoristic cow flop. Melancholy citizens thrown against the palace gate, dissidents set asizzle in the skillet.

Skimble-skamble finger puppet. Superspace assimilates saturated assumptions, Imperial lackey pangs. Sacred errata rhapsody, acidic armada, sham science, patriot slave ships.

Kamikaze sugar-teat. Stop-go attack on sorehead spinners, all by the iron-fist handbook. Plunge into gunk-hole, hump up proximate bacterial Matterhorn. Mother Superior advises hiding from public views the dismembered imperial member, its unwelcome invasions, its puritanical perversions. Anonymous heretics slandered. A remarkably soggy pit the alleluia chorus, the windowless world it's come to resemble. A farrago of platitudes and madness, mumbly-mouth lingo, scabrous propaganda, bleeding skies, mangled contritions.

Go-away masquerades as go-ahead, so Jesaru Durango, the furious cow puncher, goes hyperkinetic, coffee mill carbine set on philosopher, fires away at a bully pulpit gobdaw averse to imperiled mothers, but never a braggart's tale, toadies and jackdaws who crank out jaw-break at sweaty rankers gone loco in the rubble. Skein not untangled, but overglazed with hokum. An already torpified nation stunned by cognitive dissonance, Demogorgon chatter from Pseudo-Christian crustaceans, lost children, invisible coffins, unfertilized ova, hit lists, old cons, Big Lies.

## GATHA

One lone cypress and a towering anthill before the palace of the Lizard King. Shreds of flesh, snot and pus, ropes of blood drip from its gilded gate. Jesaru pulls the bell cord again and again. Finally an old man with a luminous smile shows up to say, 'It's hopeless, friend, it's hopeless. Why not let go?'

## THE CHARNEL GROUND

You have questions. The Rottenfurher has answers, but they don't mean anything. The Rottenfurher's name means anguished wail, words that bullets have tattooed into the execution wall. White hot chains entwined as spiral galaxies in Jesaru Durango's empty heart, a shattered crystal globe buried beneath a mountain of ashes, a constant reminder that work will make us free. What is the product of this factory?

If you'd like to learn more or contact the White Hunter, please don't. He does not respond well to questions. The women's barracks is now under the control of an sylph-like woman with translucent blue skin and one long braid of silken blue hair, a woman with a jade axe in her left hand. She says, 'Do you not find me (choose one of the following): beautiful, frightening, enchanting, seductive?' She says, 'Don't blink.' She says, 'Look deeper.' She says, 'Take off your clothes and dance with me.' The barracks packed with shrunken heads whose eyes shed metallic blue light. Ashmadi. Jesaru sees the slug explode from the 38's barrel like a silk torpedo from a dolphin's snout that enters the back of his neck and ricochets inside his skull— suddenly all thoughts are one and none, a bell without a clapper—yet he feels no pain, no hope, no fear. Virtual particles, ordinary mind, the gate to space. We are marching now to the gate to hear the camp orchestra play. Slogging through mud the consistency of putrefying human flesh. The lead violinist is Jesaru's mother. Lillith's nipples grow hard at the sight of Cybele's tears. When world's end comes we will be given barely an hour to evacuate the camp while the guards with their black boots, their field whores of insect colors who vibrate with songs that taste like burnt almonds, scour the latrines for a last loaf of bread. One more for the road. Dense green light, and pheasants rising from the new-mown hay. Photos of the dead, their dead wives, husbands, lovers, children, all dressed to the nines. What does a dead man need with a cane?

Today's lesson a gone whinny: number 432 gohorsen! The snap of broken branches, the howling alsatians, the laughing, dribbling assassins, the wails of those who fall. This is what happens when the perverted aspirations are allowed to run rampant, thinks Jesaru, he himself bound to the brick stove in the wooden stable/barracks, head down, arms stretched left and right, each hand pierced by an iron hook. Any moment now, he thinks, I'll blast off

into some distant astrophysical region. He asks himself, 'Is Ophonic trying to be sinister, or is this some kind of joke?' Was that Krusty the Clown he saw in the smoke from the stacks? Or was it Neshama, six-winged, with the body of a vulture and the head of a jackal, who soars above the ash-sweetened earth as she gnaws her way through skin and fat, into the empty heart of the matter?

The apocalypse is a dream of sorts. At its door you'll find a latrine bucket filled to the brim with shit and piss. And crawly things in the blood of the piss-drinking shit-sniffing capo, a smooth operator with a shaved dome, an aspiring white hunter, who laughs at the women's sobs and doles out a thin soup made from spent grains. It's been a long hard bloody winter. Here comes dry lightning, chaff, button holes, electrified barbed wire—the industries in Oswiecim. At night the golden-skinned woman with an iron mole in her forehead and an azure-blue lotus in her hand makes love to the chain-bound Jesaru. He falls out of his body and into hers, and deeper and deeper in union they fall, weightless swimmers in a shoreless sea.

The tick in the graveyard undergrowth. The beast of Block 11. The Rottenführer with a cardinal's mitre sorts shoes, eyeglasses, hair, razors, empty tins, discarded passports, abandoned luggage. What does a dead man need with a cane? You may believe at your risk that such a nightmare can't be true and you may hate yourself for creating so much horror. You may ask yourself, how did I arrive in this charnel ground? Where is my spouse? My mother, my son? Questions you shouldn't need to ask, answers you'd rather not know. No worries: all your concerns will soon be ashes. The cart knows its way to the furnace. Blistered, blackened skin, blackened bones. Red-hot iron ranges. The charnel ground.

This is not art. This is not an elegy. This is the attack of the hydra-headed beast. Horseheaded hyenas, hairless dogs, cockroaches in maharaja finery, all entangled in white-hot chains, all harnessed to Colonel Klink and his confederacy of sadists, pederasts, and inverts. And the bewildered, their ragged clothing flapping on shrunken limbs, whose children have been carved up by butchers in blood-stained leather aprons. Jesaru, staggering under the weight of his fascination with a dead rose caught on a strand of

electrified barbed wire, intrigued by the way a butcher carries a side of beef, peers into the darkened tunnel of the barracks like an eternalist waiting for a train. He hears Delroy Vishnu shouting at the top of his lungs, 'Microwave radiation comes from all over the motherfucking sky!' I am sensing now among the zombies a fascistic urge toward sentimentality, but such an emotion is only thought furniture. Is furniture a product of this factory? In the barracks Jesaru finds a weeping Madame DeFarge. She who, as she sat beside the execution wall, knitted so many sweaters for the stormtroopers. The Rottenfurher in his golden tower, a slaver by trade, has taken possession of her yarn. Shrunken cadavers smolder in a ditch, a blind priest at the selection site raves like a aryan gorilla. Aryan gorillas run shirtless through the halls of Mr. Big's Bureau of Feelings and Perceptions with bagsful of tongues in their mitts and get away with it because they have amazing aryan gorilla bodies. More vodka! say the gorillas. Ask yourself this: what's the use of braising if the meat doesn't fall off the bone?

A length of rail, a makeshift gallows, ten nooses at the ready. Blind eyes that will not stop staring. Shivitti. Mother Superior claims she believes in the necessity of religion. In truth she believes in the necessity of ovens.

A voice comes rolling down out of the sky, through a curtain of fire and ash. It's Jesaru's mother, Shekhinah, the mother of all, a radiant lady whom all the gods worship—Indra, Marut, Cocamama. Kali, Janus, Copacati. Shiva, Yaweh, Agni, Brahma—and the echo of her every word is an eardrum shattering hammer blow: 'What's freedom mean if you reach the end of the line and you're still dragging your umbilical cord behind you? Open your eyes, Jesaru! What do you see? Don't blink. Don't hesitate.

Look!'

Jesaru Durango, a tree struck by lightning. Jesaru Durango, a screaming skull tossed onto a pile of burning bodies. Jesaru Durango, a skeleton that sprouts wings, a flaming salamandra that shoots up the flue. Jesaru Durango, a missile bound for the seventh sphere, from one dream bardo into another.



## Windsong

Big winds out of Omaha and Fatima.  
Out of Arkansas and Kansas.  
Big winds out of Canada and Corsica.  
Out of Saigon, Taipei, India.  
Born out of census and conjecture.  
Out of want, need and necessity.  
Heartless. Eyeless. Borderless.  
That began as an iodine seed or icebow.  
That was primed on a whim of heat.  
As a machination of convection.

Rattling the chandeliers and watchman's nerves.  
On the Northern Shore and Bristol Downs.  
Whistling past corbels, lanyards, caryatids.  
Pushing out the fleet and taking her away from us.  
Big winds among ribbons, flags and pennants.  
Big winds lowing like a moonstruck calf.  
Chiding the banished in their exile.  
Galling the soldier into acts of war.  
Winds giving flight to slate and tile,  
clapboards shaking like a tambourine.  
Driving the moonlight an inch at a time.  
Sweeping through the Senegal's interior.

Inarticulate, reckoning, insistent winds  
out of a hole in the Earth and Mons Olympus.  
Out of an atom's heart and childhood's mouth.  
Big winds brushing Israel and Sumeria.  
Promising. Scented. Threatening.  
Telling their stories to the dead of the world.  
Waiting for night to rise and Permian darkness.  
Mothers weeping and emperors dour.  
Rivers back-flooded to their hilly origins.  
The winds reaching down into loess and moss.  
Combing rows of lavender and maize.  
Shuttling an unkindness of ravens  
from off their stony crag.

Big winds in the hollows and on the moors.  
Making discordant music from lift and drag.  
Giving voice to pariahs, vagabonds, anarchists.  
Prodding the gunner undone in a muddy trench.  
Winds rumbling us in our downy torpor.  
Picking us up in our sleep and wonderment,  
higher and higher, until we're touched by the sun  
and shall abide our smallest terrors.

## You Must Remember This

Not just a kiss,  
a candy-coated curse,  
a wasp in a bottle,  
the X of a signed confession.

The singer sang it wrong.  
A kiss is a rift in the ionosphere.  
A bullet you bite down hard upon.  
An angelic covenant.

When the stars blow kisses  
they're waving at ghosts  
which only they can see.  
A letter sealed with a kiss  
is a warrant for arrest.  
Some kisses are broken glass  
and some are rainwater  
in a desert of drought.

You are graced by a kiss's presence  
or damned into exile  
for the sin of daring to be sentient,  
for having loved the wrong person,  
for having a loose mouth  
in a time of war.  
For claiming godhead.

One kiss I kissed  
was a cut to the lips.  
I bled for the better part of a year,  
and for the worst part.  
Now I see kisses everywhere:  
a flock squawking over wetlands;  
in swarms of locusts;  
in the eye of the beholder.  
I'm so starved I could eat  
a case of kisses in one sitting.  
In my mind is a rose blooming  
and a mouthful of sunsets  
I need to tell you about.  
Kissed, I can only wear velveteen.  
I can only eat tangerines out of the crisper.  
None of my jokes are funny.

The kiss that rang around the world.  
The kiss that will live in infamy.  
The kiss that launched a thousand ships.

As if a deathbed secret.  
As a burden made heavy with time.  
As when protons collide,  
creating a third and stranger element.

Not just a kiss, our hearts were married.

## Talking To Sheep

All creatures sleep well  
and are of their place and time.  
Sunlight harrows the pastures.  
Whether Afghanistan or Connecticut  
or the greening downs of Dorset,  
nothing much perturbs the flocks  
of God and Country.

Whose world-weary sheep are these  
no one alive can say for sure.  
In parables and fables this little matters.  
Nodding in supplication,  
their work is to chew contentedly  
while contemplating various distances  
between horizon and landfall,  
between women and men,  
between mothers and children.

Only the lamb is courageous,  
unaware of death in nature.  
Only the ram is wild-eyed and crazed,  
unaccepting of his cunning masters.

## Pop Songs

I'm sure the trajectory of Cupid's arrow  
has been calculated to inflict the maximum  
amount of love for the least amount of effort.  
As with the lyrics of most pop songs,  
I love you and you don't love me,  
a variation of which would be  
you love me, but I don't love you  
or we used to be in love and are no longer  
said to be an item worthy of a mention  
or you used to love me but have lost the feeling  
or I used to love you then you met somebody else  
and then stopped loving me, and by the way,  
what is 'love' exactly? (no one knows)

Perhaps we were never truly in love.  
What if it's all lust and hormones and chemicals  
that guide such inclinations as affairs of the heart?  
Which by now resembles a dart board in a northern pub  
or fancy pin cushion belonging to your grandmother.  
Or, I want to love you, but circumstances have changed.  
The songs says you were too good for me anyway,  
I'm a six and you're a seven on the lovable scale.  
I don't deserve you and this thing called love.  
I'd only hurt you, because love always hurts.  
You're leaving me just before I've left you,  
the song we called 'our song' already a golden oldie,  
love being out of fashion and no one *does it* anymore.  
We are young, according to the songwriter,  
and our lives, if not our loves, carry on forever.

## **The Stone**

No larger than a chokeberry  
or tomcat's eyeball  
and thick with atoms.

Awash in time,  
the stone is older than rain,  
its thoughts millennial and chaste.

The stone is an outcast,  
an exiled prince of the dirt,  
a tear shed for Medusa.

Why has it sat there for  
its million years?

What is a life for?

Why are we here?

## **The Secret Hearse**

### **Megan Wildhood**

You should only let the past be the past if you want it to stick around.

Porter had asked his wife what she thought about this after his therapy session a few weeks ago. Porter wanted to be a good husband, so his suspicion that his wife was a coward made him feel even worse. But the strength of this suspicion kept him from sharing the truth.

The hearse ahead of him, his favorite shade of blue, turns down the road with the long, dark trees. There are other things to do, like the paperwork for his rescue class now that he's got the four years of flying experience, but the hearse would be there, too, if not its tire marks from slowly driving over everything in front of him before he gets there.

Most of the time, the hearse goes only a touch faster than he walks. His depth perception is off and he's mistaking shadows on the ground for holes. He tripped himself up stepping into a hole that was really a shadow the most recent time he was absently following the hearse through SoDo. He stepped onto the shadow, didn't fall into a hole like he expected, and fell anyway. The first time this happened, he could get away with telling his wife it was an accident, clumsiness. But she avoided him for a few days after this: she knew something was up. Part of her knew.

He had seen lots of things board the hearse. His father, when he was nine, got in and this time, stayed in, after a couple of other tries. After that, a memory of riding horses with his dad slipped in. His dad teaching him to throw a baseball.. His dad lifting his mom's hands out of dirty dish water, and taking her for a walk around the neighborhood until after dark, coming home and banishing her from the kitchen so he could clean.

Porter doesn't think he noticed when the hearse began swallowing memories that didn't include his dad. Maybe the start of high school, the five-year anniversary. Maybe earlier, when his mom was suddenly fine, happy, and he hovered as closely as she would tolerate because happy is what happened to his dad right before he walked into the garage and loaded himself into the hearse.

There was no replacement man. His mom was fine without people after that. Just like he suspected his wife felt, in part, she needed to be.

Something was wrong with him, Porter knew. He was watching in silent agony all his wonderful past drain into the hearse and here was his mother, maybe his wife, free, needing no one. He peered into the hearse, but it was too tinted to see who all was in there without him, touched its charged handle. The electric bite startled his hand away.

People would ask why he followed the hearse, anyway. If it made him so sad to see everything he loved disappear, why not go to Jason's cul-de-sac where there was always a pickup game of street hockey, why not take his then-new girlfriend out, why not follow his dreams, why not, why not, why not, why not.

But this is not how hearses work.

You are not the driver of the hearse. You do not choose whether it rolls its muddy tires right or left or everywhere you look. It is not as if you are merely following the hearse, not as if you wake up one morning and seek a hearse to follow.



The hearse hit Jason when they were sophomores in high school. They were trying to do their chemistry homework, and Porter wasn't getting it anymore. He suddenly couldn't balance the equations, but Jason thought he was faking.

"You could do this crap last week, brother." He took Porter's pencil and erased Porter's work under the last three problems. "You taught me." Harsher than usual.

Porter didn't know what to say, so he tried apologizing but Jason got mad when nothing changed. "People don't suddenly get stupid."

Porter punched Jason's jaw and walked the four miles home, seeing himself flung off an overpass, himself stepped into traffic, mostly himself falling, himself stuck. He shook his head hard, paused on the last bridge before his house and stared at the bright hole in the sky that was the moon. Cold wind started blowing through his torso and didn't stop. The hearse purred its sweet exhaust into a cloud-clotted sky. He reached for its door handle; no shock this time.

Before this, the hearse had never hit anyone, though there might have been some near-hits that only Porter knew about. He and Jason didn't talk until the bruise on Jason's cheek faded, but then they were fine. They didn't spend as much time together, but that started to be true of everyone in Porter's life. Porter thought that was best even though solitude felt to him like someone else's skin. He never talked about the hearse.

After it hit Jason, it starts driving inside, circling room slowly. How would it be possible for Porter to stay inside the world?

The hearse stops in front of him the next morning for the first time he remembers and the driver's door slowly opens.

He slides in and grasps the warm wheel. He reaches for the door but it's already closing. There is no accelerator. The hearse moves as fast as it moves.

Even if you are driving the hearse, you are not really driving the hearse.

There is also no brake pedal.

The limited light on the windshield looks hard as stone. The sudden rain makes the glass look like the micro shatters surrounding a bullet hole if the bullets entered everywhere. And then, a movie, many movies: Porter on the swings at school, a memory, except that Porter thought he liked the swings, that he was happy then. Playing cars with his little brother—he didn't remember feeling so sick with shame then. Meeting his wife, did he not smile?

It's all this way. The people lose color, the air has no song. The longer he watches these little movies, the more things die. Even as they walk and dance, they are unalive for Porter.

The maples in the median lunge toward the hearse. Porter tries to turn the wheel, but it's stuck.

It is not a wheel.

It is a tunnel.

Porter leaps out of the hearse and runs to a psychotherapist.

"There is a hearse following me," he says.

"Tell me about yourself," the therapist says.

"Navy blue, handles made of gold. I'm pretty sure there's more than one casket in the back."

The therapist writes on a legal pad with a blue pen. Things go well for six months, except that the hearse is still in front of him wherever he goes.

“It makes all my memories suck is the most important thing” is how he starts the next session.

Therapist scrunches her eyes and nods. “Nostalgia is suicidal.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Porter tries to explain but Therapist interrupts.

“You’re at a place now where I won’t rescue you.”

“I don’t need rescue. I need help.”

“It isn’t my job to fix it.” Therapist’s voice is raised like the hair on the back of Porter’s neck.

“You sound angry.”

Therapist shakes her head. “I’m not mad at you for lapsing into self-pity and powerlessness. I do those things myself. I’m mad because you’re making this my responsibility.”

Porter doesn’t go back. He tells his wife it’s because he doesn’t know how to talk to therapists. He thinks about the hearse, how he might get in, but his muscles shake with weakness. He definitely doesn’t have the strength to outrun it. Maybe, if he’s slow enough—as if he has a choice—the hearse will finally drive away, completely out of sight.

But it doesn’t. It slows down even more. Before Porter realizes it, it has backed up and parked on his chest, its exhaust pipe covering his face. His wife’s friend finds him and drives him to the ER.

Even if you overdose on pills, a doctor doesn’t hesitate to prescribe you a cocktail of pills.

The fat, white disc makes him spacey, “only until you get used to it,” the doctor says. It also infuses his muscles with fire again. The beige capsule burns off the fog he hadn’t realized was crowding his thinking, his vision.

The blue one with a K punched in the middle of it obliterates his anxiety about the hearse after a few days. The hearse shines under the mortal gold of the sun by the end of week two.

He tells his wife about the medications but not the ER. He wants to be a good husband.

So he tells her the therapy is fine, making him fine. He doesn’t say he’s about to get in the hearse again—which, of course, the world will say is the real cowardice.

# Pretending in Florida

David Petruzelli

In dreams I still take his card—the black one with matte finish, raised silver letters, and typeface which dared you to look away: *W. H. Merrick, Hollywood Producer*. “Hollywood,” Deidre explained, was Hollywood, Florida, which explained a lot: adult films for one; his sense of humor for another. There were no black cards at the Book Fair in the Armory on Park Avenue, at least not out on the counter, but there were modern firsts, detective fiction, fine bindings, and there was Heather, Merrick’s lively assistant, and Deidre, his latest girlfriend, who collected children’s books and didn’t look like anyone’s assistant. “Mr. M., we need you,” the women called out in unison if a customer pointed to something important beneath the Plexiglas, if one finger showed both women you were serious.

At thirty I had never been to Florida, or set foot on any property referred to as an estate, but Merrick, with his ice cream suits and early smoker’s voice, I thought was serious: his tales, over drinks, of trained tigers, exotic and articulate birds, keeper of lion cub twins that freely roamed his house and property; his standing invitation to visit him in Hollywood, where Deidre and Heather would greet me from the sunniest of balconies. The one time I asked her about Merrick’s Florida menagerie, Heather laughed and said I must mean Frank & Marilyn, his Golden Retrievers, and Dante, a chatty mynah bird with more on the ball than most of Bill’s actors. “If you’d ever dropped by without calling, Bill would have told you a Miami zoo had made him an offer, and taken the lions and tigers away . . . He really loves animals, you know.”

I now know that W. H. Merrick grew bored with his books, and as the seventies wound down, stopped buying, stopped running ads and attending shows. As to why he left Florida and adult films, and in the end moved to Sister Bay, Wisconsin, a place, it was said, he wasn’t welcome since a certain wild party the night he turned eighteen, he wasn’t bored so much as out of luck.

But sometime during the waning days of Hollywood and the first dark winter of Wisconsin, Heather became Wife No. 3, which is why I phoned on behalf of Sotheby’s, my shiny new employer, and she and I sat down one August afternoon, awaiting FedEx in her Wisconsin widow’s kitchen, the library in cartons, the two Retrievers running in the yard, excited by a stranger’s visit. “I see the lion cubs are all grown up.” Heather only smiled. And

Dante? She claimed to write him twice a year. The bird's new owners, when they were in the mood, mailed photos or a brief message on a postcard. He was back in Florida, pretending to be wise, telling anyone who urged him to speak that Sister Bay was a bad dream.

# Havana Lost

David Petruzelli

April, 1939

By the time Mr. & Mrs. Fitzgerald pull up in a taxi at the Hotel Raquel, they're arguing about the fare, the missing gin bottle Scott claims was stolen even before they got off the plane, and who's perspiring more—Scott or their driver, who hears enough English these days to know that the woman is from the American South, and the man embarrassing her is terribly drunk or simply deranged, and stands no chance of reaching the reception desk without a police escort or a driver in need of generous tipping and an opportunity to play the hero. Scott will shortly oblige with American bills and airborne pesos, but first the driver steers him safely to and from the front desk where Zelda confirms their reservations, and as a young bellhop leads them to the fearsome cage of an elevator, she takes Scott's hand and whispers for him to close his eyes, which, as they ascend to the top, he won't do.

In their room Scott teases the bellhop and asks him which hand conceals a tip, while Zelda, discovering the oval stained glass window above the bathtub, is reminded of the chapel by the sanitarium back in Asheville, and begins praying in a low voice Scott knows better than to interrupt. Bored suddenly, he decides he'll explore the city on his own, and have the fun denied him three days ago when Sheilah Graham, English spoilsport and, he supposes, ex-girlfriend, took away his revolver, slapped his face, and ordered him to leave her house. But now, once he steps outside the hotel, the Havana streets which he'd convinced himself on the flight over were laid out logically, like a map of Manhattan, very quickly make no sense. He keeps getting in the way of well-dressed couples, the men cursing, the women mostly amused that he doesn't seem to grasp how to walk like a normal person. Then on a whim he veers off into a long alley which turns into another, even narrower and longer. Soon the alleys hint at secrets, but the cockfight he comes upon in a small, noisy field between two apartment buildings, looks colorful and touristy. Then the birds actually go at it, and Scott, growing alarmed, starts shouting, and tries to stop the fight by waving his arms like he's in a field scaring off crows, and is quickly set upon by gamblers and the gamecock owners who punch and kick the troublemaker until they get tired or

simply lose interest, laughing as he stumbles off, aching and bloody, leaving behind a crowd of men and boys delighted that this gringo, the whitest man in the world, has left.

Hours later Scott manages to find his way back to the hotel—barely able to stand without assistance from the same bellhop who had brought the couple upstairs earlier. Zelda, coming out of the bathroom, takes one look and helps Scott lie down on the fresh yellow bed spread, blood stains be damned, and for the very last time in their lives, Zelda undresses him, and when she asks Scott not to move he remains still, and when she tells him to close his eyes, this time he listens.

## It's Always a Long Walk to the River

(To my mother)

It's always a long walk to the river. A pale sun comes out from behind the clouds to offer a dose of weak cheer, but it's not enough to warm her body as she walks with her small daughter strapped to her back.

Her daughter, a quiet miracle, isn't technically her daughter, but her niece, born after four days of painful labor that took her sister's life. Minutes after the baby was born, she was immediately handed to her by the midwife to raise, as was the custom in their village.

She remembered the almost hollow weight of the newborn she carefully cradled to her breast while the village midwife and the shaman performed the final prayers and cleansing of her sister's remains. She sat by the fire and watched the shadows play across her sister's stilled, lovely face. She scanned for a trace of her sister in the baby's perfectly formed features but found none.

As the seasons pass, her adopted daughter starts to resemble her new mother, more and more. When the baby smiles - a brief bright flash across her face - this is when she catches a glimpse of her sister, who she misses every day. She feels guilty because she knows her sister won't be here to watch her daughter grow up, have adventures, and maybe have children of her own. She also feels guilty over the fear and ambivalence that shadow her every move as an adoptive mother.

Her daughter suddenly giggles, a new sound that both startles and excites her. She stops, and begins to laugh as well, a deep belly laugh that rises up and overtakes her whole body. Happiness and grief war within, until she finds herself smiling, crying, and hiccupping all at once.

Her daughter reaches out and grasps one of her mother's braids. She reaches back to caress her daughter's hand and then resumes their walk to the river.

## Luna Plateada

On Santee Alley, behind Modern Bride, in the Fashion District of Downtown Los Angeles, is a small store called “Luna Plateada”, where Mama Quilla handcrafts sterling silver bridal/bridesmaid’s jewelry and accessories, including one-of-a-kind hand-woven veils. Shopping at Luna Plateada is by appointment only; either booked two weeks in advance, or if the bride-to-be (but not yet a bridezilla), is earnestly searching for that extra bit of “wow”, and not a status symbol, for her wedding day. The Modern Bride store associates have been carefully trained as to what signs to look for, and then, a personal invitation is extended by the manager who will personally escort you to Luna Plateada. Mama Quilla’s creations are not Hermès bags; each one is tailored to the specific wishes of the bride, most of which she’s not yet articulated.

When you walk into Mama Quilla’s shop, you’ll see her famous veils hung and draped for dramatic effect along the walls, which give the effect of walking into a gossamer fog. Mama Quilla is usually at the counter with a samovar of herbal tea and fruit, because she knows the last thing a bride needs is carbs and caffeine.

Tall and willowy, and dressed in blue and gold, Mama Quilla will welcome you with a firm handshake, look deep into your eyes, and then escort you, (and only you), to an area cordoned off with a filmy white curtain decorated with moons and stars. She’ll seat you in front of a vanity with three mirrors. She then leaves you alone for a few moments to relax, and chill; this is probably one of the last times you’ll get to be by yourself before the big day.

When she senses you’ve had enough time to get comfortable, Mama Quilla will come in with a cup of tea, admire your lovely angles in the mirrors, and then chat with you to get a sense of who you are and what you’re about. It’s very easy for you to fall into conversation with Mama Quilla; she’s a natural at putting people at ease. When she’s ready, she’ll ask you two questions:

When did you know they were the one?

What is the one thing you’d want your love to see in you that they’ve not seen yet?

Don’t be nervous. There are no right answers to these questions, and are as unique and important as the person to whom these questions are posited. Don’t be afraid to take time to think before you answer, either. Mama Quilla understands the implications, and the



mounting tension that lies beneath the psyche of every bride who approaches her wedding day. Sometimes, this is the moment when the bride starts to realistically examine her reasons for wanting to get married. Sometimes, the interview ends there, as it should, and the nuptials are put off/canceled.

For those who're ready to walk down the aisle, Mama Quilla will bring you a veil, (and tiara, if you request it), for you to try on, and then she'll leave you alone to admire your image, dream of your wedding day, or to absorb the reality of the fundamental change in life you're about to embrace.

When you come out from behind the celestial curtain, you stand taller, head held high, ready to move on to the next task for the big day. Mama Quilla will carefully pack your veil into a silver box, along with instructions for its aftercare. Prices are not advertised, but they're rumored to be on a sliding scale, which is fine with Mama Quilla; it's not the veil you're paying for, it's the experience.

## **My friend, Henet...**

patrols the shores of Venice, Santa Monica, Malibu, and Zuma, from dawn until dusk. On weekends, she waitresses at the Paradise Cove Beach Cafe, where she regales diners about when she saw James Dean's ghost whizzing up the 101. At the end of her shift, she takes crab and fish scraps outside to the pod of pelicans (and a flock of seagulls), who waits patiently by the dumpsters. She's the only person I've ever seen who can stroke their soft white necks with no repercussions.

On Wednesdays, she heads to the Venice Beach Boardwalk to sell her homemade starfish, sea glass, and feather dreamcatchers. If prompted, she'll open her mouth to belt out a great pelican yawp to frighten and delight her customers. Her dark, intense eyes see you coming from a mile away. She'll reveal, in no uncertain terms, the sex of an unborn baby to expectant mothers, or give a word of comfort, as well as her mobile number, to those who are taking their final steps into the West.

I never worry about Henet. There's always a pelican nearby, and no one wants to mess with her literal and spiritual progeny.

***Before I Knew About Breakfast at Tiffany's Contrapuntal***

That sixties summer my family swam  
across water wider than a mile

Moon River most days, our strokes  
among tributaries crisscrossing

our tiny house and yard  
a confluence of song

streaming through,  
buoying us

with shared possibility:

my quiet brother  
crooning to his crush  
to her blonde braids  
and lavish dimples

sailing our porch-swing  
*"You Dream Maker, You Heartbreaker"*

lyrics calling me  
as I freestyle

from my new acqua transistor,  
to drift with mystery—  
*"Wherever you're going, I'm going your  
way"*—

then sidestroke to Dad

floating through the living room like  
a Chagall lover, cradling our *Moon*

*River*  
*LP*

like Andy Williams with  
his clean haircut  
piercing blue eyes,  
long nose, bright smile, and my Dad mirrors Williams' tenor  
so for that summer

though Dad makes chemicals  
at a papermill

it seems our family  
becomes *The Andy Williams Show*,  
just by living at home—

Moon River takes us

***On Waiting in Center City Philadelphia's Emergency Room***  
after Diane Seuss

"So is there blood in your stool, Nick?" the efficient young woman, blonde extensions pouring down her chest, shouts above the noise of medical machines, this ER mob, and this small man's quiet tumble of talk. Low riding jeans like a hip-hop elder, Nick's in his eighties, can't weigh 100 pounds. He fronts a long line of us at check-in, all trying not to focus on Nick below the belt when he responds: "Sometimes, but it comes streaming down my legs these days, unbidden." The dignity and poetry in Nick's reply make me forget, for a moment, that my husband's face went gray as his heart rate fell to 42, though I assume that behind a pleated, silvery curtain, a floor away, he's alive. Finding my way to his bed, sequestered some from traveling gurneys, vital monitoring's, I note his skin now baby pink, his breathing soft in sleep. Beside us, a young woman, her cobalt braids roping to her waist, her face a warm cup of cocoa, sits upright in her wheeled, hallway bed, the attending doctor gently touching her arm: "I don't know this from experience, of course, but bleeding can continue for weeks after. I'll ask your nurse to bring that breast pump." The girl's T-shirt, grass green, blooms with her breasts' milky petals. I know so little, I realize, about our tangling of illness, life, death and birth.

## **On Examining the American Phenomena of Money, Social Climbing and Star Fuckery in the Late Twentieth Century**

after Diane Seuss

I was married to a McDonald's millionaire in the 80's. Growing up poor, we two embraced upward mobility (embracing each other a tougher problem), but why not climb, the national "It's morning in America! Greed is good!," trickle down the decade's improbable pretense. The golden arches wrapped us in the Boston Ritz, where over Waterford goblets of oranges fresh squeezed, eggs Benedict on bone china, I glimpse Jackie Kennedy Onassis seated beside us with Caroline and her husband, so I say to Jackie, as if we're sleepover friends: "What brings you to town today?" Without skipping a beat, Jackie's famous whisper caresses the conditioned air like sea breeze: "We're attending a reading at the JFK library. You?" then lifts her full, Bouvier lips into graciousness, me thinking I have pulled it off, come a long way from Spam and scrapple, I'm adjacent American aristocracy. By the prosperous 90's I've earned a Ph.D. and a divorce, still surprised and at home with dinner next to Dolly Parton, tiny as a toy, the only voice from the hollers in that Broadway trattoria, later sharing a Lincoln Center elevator on my birthday with Wynton Marsalis, craving a kiss from American Jazz royalty, brushing his trumpeted mouth with mine.

## History with Jehovah's Witnesses

after Diane Seuss

Clustered outside the ShopRite most days, heavy dark clothing and squat black shoes signaling their no-nonsense mission, they smile and nod each time I take their Watchtower magazine. I am mesmerized by the dozens of tiny bodies, black as licorice nibs, without faces or clothes, caught up in the Rapture, spinning, arms akimbo, appearing to climb if not crawl or claw their way heavenward. These were drawn in sepia, signifying serious, though my Episcopalian grandmother and mother smirk as they test the tomatoes, reach for a bloodied roast wrapped in plastic. I turn the pages of this holy comic book, worry that my family might not rise together. Worse, would I even make the cut? My mid-years find me hiding behind curtains, in corners, as they ring my doorbell to transform me, long a secular smart ass, eye-rolling my way through The Nicene Creed at funerals. Last week some Witnesses and I meet on my street, them climbing my neighbor's stoop, me walking my 110pound hound, he lifting his leg on every post and twig, while one of the women croons, "That's right, do your morning business, honey! What a good boy!" I walk on, find myself missing them, as if they are already ascending together

## January

when Wolf Moon

pulled us to snow-layered hills  
 packs of Sisyphus little  
 trudge back up back up back  
 up back up back  
 up  
 howling down hard packed freeze  
 rolling off sleds snow pants swishing  
 breath pepperminted steam frothing  
 our chapped faces.

I knew how to steer  
some

but not to brake,

highway traffic cutting across our sledding street  
might slice through us

whooshing quiet fast and low

in the gloaming

but never did.

The only girl on a Flying Saucer  
disappeared

on her walk home from

school one Friday.

We joined the search for her

under

Hunger Moon.

## Ode to My Front Stoop as a Dutch Vanitas

head bent to your belly  
like a ruffled Brussels sprout,

your body's olives, golds, creams  
both art and camouflage  
among mums, kale, and sage.

I held the hose above you,  
watering you, mistaking you for mold  
when my hand met you, lifted then cupped you,  
stroked your back, your winged ribcage,  
created motion, believed you might Lazarus  
yourself.

Later  
I read you built your  
nests alone, on branches'  
end.

Did wind pitch you  
to ground, nestlings pecking  
then withering against  
each other?

I used a trowel to carry  
and bury you in the scarce  
city soil scratched to dust  
on our street.

Had to dig and plant you deep, like  
a tulip bulb.

Was I waiting for you to root,  
push,

unfurl?



## **“Caterpillar**

will be your friend,” quips the dermatologist, sewing a squiggly incision up my lower left cheek. We’d rehearsed his sequence: scrape out my cancered tissue, lay layers on the microscope lens, return to dig a deeper well in my face, finish when he finds flesh clean of carcinoma cells, finally whipstitch the wound, pressuring epidermal bumps to rise, segmented larva now wiggling, fuzzy with snipped tufts of thread, cocooned in white gauze, waiting.

**Prologue: We Eat Ugly Lionfish**

I am a pencil  
sharpened, searching with my nose,  
sparingly whittling away orange wood chips  
with a paring knife, as if I were an apple made of wood,  
the kindling bunched and crowded like sticks  
for refuge in a shed  
listening to black boots of war outside  
I shiver like a worm in mud  
with my brothers, my sisters,  
our broken branches – a warm trickle runs over my freezing arm  
and we walk again in order of birth  
toward the southern light, the day sorting overhead  
until we reach the coarse sand and eat ugly lionfish  
until we recite our names and history  
until we write in the sand and sing about the full moon as  
we sit under it  
finding a sheet of paper on which to write,  
to tear at with my teeth.

## The Big Bang

Looking down I stare  
    at the circle of roast coffee, languid and hot,  
held neatly by a blue cup and saucer like the dark noisy world  
    in orbit, the sultry Godard crème afloat,  
like ribbons moving in the current  
    growing hotter in condensation  
and the chemistry of matter  
    rattling with a spoon as a warning  
to myself of the limits of language,  
    chasing crème to shore  
disappearing to the perimeter  
    beyond the edges of the earth –  
        my lonesome island bubbles, popping bubbles

I glance sideways at my temptress who watches me from behind,  
    and turn, dragging long on my cigarette, like dark noise in a clear channel,  
warning of the outer orbits  
    of my invisible storm, and slowly I finish it –  
every resistant black drop –  
    before the starry ash of my fingers crumbles

## Cathedral

The boxes of birch, fashionable cubes  
burned and branded to decorate a table  
fighting hunger, stamped in red,

white, and blue, in vain, so politic, so  
politely eating fancy frittata and fresh  
berries from cones of upside-down glass,

like the many served by Sharon Brown  
on Martha's Vineyard who slid it next to  
tapered fingers like yours, your mother's,

who never knew dirt, and I am here to  
share how grateful I am, Sharon says, at  
the podium, how much it humiliates to

mother, wondering where food will come  
from for my children on Sunday, two days  
from now, when the peat in that birch

box will expand with your taps of water  
on the seeds of basil, under your sparkling  
kitchen window, will see first signs of fresh

sprouts, their bright faces looking to the  
sun, and then she thinks to herself, you,  
the blond-streaked wife in a UK tweed

pant suit at the head table looking up  
at me with pillars that glare from your  
beneficent blue eyes, telling me, not that

I'm right, but judging my brown fingers,  
nervously holding this piece of paper I'm  
reading from, and yours, using white linen to

wipe spit from the corners of your mouth,  
the simplicity of myriad nebulous dust  
of the universe, you never see my courage

even after the applause, when your husband,  
the Sugar Chairman, and the Food Bank CEO,  
burst up, slap high fives making a cathedral

in shadows on the wall, who thought no  
one noticed their collusion to sell donuts,  
and no one noticed I stood up before all

of you to collect your tithes, piling  
high, like harvesting grain for meals for the  
hungry because I thought I was worth it.

## **Rank Fruits & Lamentations**

a banana peeled open,  
its skin rolled into a paper coffee cup,

left with smudges of red lipstick  
biting across the lid for a taste of apple,

shelves of epiphany in  
library books, a wall of worlds, of

Thou(s) – Who art Thou(s)? Who art We(s)  
with crinkled spines for those who live long enough

to stand by the lonely fruit stand laying claim to its  
secret road behind a wall of empty cardboard

boxes holding forgotten oranges  
for those still hunting, snarling bellies

on the street after midnight,  
the new day approaching

in front of the psychedelic van, the driver's  
window open to let the night air through,

new summer peaches and blushing pears  
arranged to face the smoggy dawn,

soaking in oils and rot of what these fruits will  
become, kicked, and melted into the curb

of the tarry pit of our post-historic times –  
dissolving, and stinking with the last of the onions

## Forkprints

pressed against copper reveal  
patterns of fossilized flowers mixed with

mud-cracked seeds, pebbling rocks  
of brown barley, red beans, smashed

leaving imprints against char-riddled  
rice, scraped and singed at the bottom of her

copper pan, panning gold, but *aiyishii*  
there is nothing, nothing

burning bright in the cruel bubbling rivers of  
indelible summer heat she slurps before

she sets the table, and knows not what to call this  
American alien mixture of no lilacs, no

tubers, with no redemption in  
their eyes

## Soon

Soon the impervious rays peek over  
waking delicate dew, clinging to greens uncurling

Soon silver canopies sing from the pews planted along the  
road someone made leaving the village

Soon she leans on the tips of her toes to  
wave goodbye to the children,

Soon she yanks at her roots, ensnaring her  
uncanny silver rabbit

Soon thawing, thawing, the moon,  
its heavenly limelight rising too late to open her eyes



## **To love the earth**

know its thick coat of  
winter, its frosty courage  
borne by its Achilles heel of love

to lean on in shaping the emptiness  
from a strong footing against  
the ice floes breaking apart

over an egg harbor safeguarding  
the schools of perch learning to  
speak, their little mouths mimicking

their mothers, writing songs in  
perfumes of the invisible water until  
spring ushers them into inlets and

scrawls of the rivers to finally wrest  
fifty years from bended knee

## **Traces**

*the splash of  
freckled  
sun glitters on  
his cheeks,  
imprints of its  
heavenly kisses,  
her lipstick, lonely  
under  
star-cut prisms  
of sky light  
glowing  
over cherry  
wood, like ashy  
petals,  
meaningless money,  
mere sheafs of  
paper, twisted  
pages, half  
written,  
half uttered,  
fueling a  
bit of bone and  
blood against the  
frost of time and  
memory – catch these  
falling laces,  
before they melt,  
such crystal  
beauty –  
this snowfall  
of the dead*

## **COLD**

The little puppy  
raises his paws  
after each step  
and examines them.

The little boy  
cracks the  
ice gently  
and then ferociously.

Both are fascinated by the  
small holes in the ice  
where the water escapes  
when pressure is applied.

Like a water volcano  
like a crack in a lake  
or a sea  
or a  
river.

The cold water has nowhere to go it  
runs, and slows, and freezes in place  
like a life.

## **TIME**

So many days  
together.

Each on a different  
floor.

Various contraptions and  
screens.

Doors open  
and close.

Music streams  
and then news.

Lunches at  
staggered times.

Passing in the  
hallways.

A quick closing bathroom  
door.

A sigh, a big breath  
a family.

## **ARCTIC DREAMS**

Barry Lopez died  
the sound of wind  
slant of sunlight  
his words, explanations  
on place  
on careful focus of the Earth.

It is not just nature,  
but community, and  
the smaller things  
shadows,  
movement over long periods,  
of tiny details.

Of Oregon's beaches  
subtle  
and bold  
and gray  
and hidden  
and much studied.

Another world among us.  
beauty in things oft hidden  
and re-imagined and quiet.

**by Bryce Shepherd**

## **CREATION**

Hands, hands are vessels of lyrical eloquence. Words unspoken, stories yet to be told, messages given.

Transformative. A hand baby soft tells its story. A hand calloused by labor tells its story.

The great debate of tattoos ruining a body. Marred with ink. Is ink not a mode of expression?

Made by hand. Hands control the needle that weaves my story. My story- no- our story.

Polynesian promises wrapped into my ancestor's marks that they once bore themselves. Hand to my heart I carry them with me.

Hand to paper I write my story.

## LESLIE

*I am not ready to give up seeing you grow,*  
My nimble fingers shake-  
*I am going to fight this cancer,*  
Even lifting this pen now,  
Fear is an admission of defeat.  
*I am so worried,*  
Yet pain and suffering constrict every breath-  
*Not really about me,*  
I wanted to live for them,  
*Getting well so I can finish raising my family.*  
My nose, my brain, my heart, my liver, my lungs-  
Tumorous growths labor my life-  
The doctor said to rest now.  
*No matter what happens remember I will always love you,*  
I sign the order,  
"Do Not Resuscitate."  
I'm sorry-  
Death seeks me.  
May light find my family,  
I never wanted to leave them behind.

## MONO NO AWARE

a hollow heart can still be heavy-  
Atlas carry me, time drones on  
and I've yet to recover,  
a river only flows when my tears flood it,  
oh, how often it flows-

only love can fill a hollow heart,  
just to leave it gaping,

when I pray am I heard?  
Do You Hear Me  
hear me

I don't bother-  
they always leave  
this I know for certain,  
love is my enemy  
I'm always too much, never enough

emptiness consumes the weak  
I've been consumed,  
you would be too-  
everyone I love chooses to leave me

Chooses, chooses  
they chose too-  
only love can kill my hollow heart  
even when to be loved is all I ever wanted-

My therapist taps his pen down  
What are you feeling right now?

*Sad.*



## WHORES R'US

Whore-

Let the word roll off your tongue,

*Whore-*

Like a sin begging to be acted on

Does it beckon you as it does me?

A sultry assault on mind and body,

A blade sharpened by saliva

Pointed at the city's apocryphal men-

Whose tender tendons now wrap around me,

My curves carved for their selfish needs

A rib cage a sled of pleasure

Let the word simmer in the silence,

*Whore-*

bedridden with power

My grip on these men tighter than an arctic diet,

Perhaps they will do an ethnographic study on whores.

## **OH JULIUS**

Oh Julius,  
Oh Julius,  
the knife cuts deep-  
I should know for it has also rammed into me.

The ones we love,  
For whom we cherish and care,  
wield the knife that takes away our air.

Oh Julius,  
Oh Julius,  
We eye our betrayer-  
A kitten donning the mask of a lion.

Old friends become new foes-  
As we grip our wounds,  
And wince in pain,  
We know in our minds eye that we will rise again.

From the ashes-  
From the dust-  
Oh Julius,  
Oh Julius,  
We will bare through our knife's cuts.

# Cavalier

Kate Krems

It's late morning in a small neighborhood on the edge of a big lake. A Chevy Cavalier bumps edgy tunes, whipping tight around the corner of a main street onto a side street.

Inside, the air is choked with stale nicotine smog. Guiding the mobile trash can down the streets with minimal attention to the road is Noel, a post-mall goth girl in her early 20's. She absolutely wreaks of baggage.

Noel's phone begins to ring in the seat next to her. It's her mother.

She picks it up and smacks it against her leg.

Coming to a halt at a stop sign, Noel opens her voicemail.

"You. Have. One. Unheard. Message," the voicemail box announces.

Noel proceeds through the intersection and onward.

"Noel, I don't know where you get off pulling this crap," her mom's voice is so loud it's like it's on speaker phone. "You can't pretend to go over to your dad's house just to blow off work. They called looking for you, I am not your fucking secretary by the way. They told me you've called off three days in a row. I went into your room to check your schedule and it's fucking disgusting, you have to start taking care of yourself, ok hunny? I swear to fucking god, sweetie, if you need a break we can go talk to Dr. Eckharst, you just have to tell me before you end up in the hospital again-"

Noel pulls into a driveway too quickly, sees a large black cat in the car's path, and swerves just in time.

The interior of the small home is filled to the brim with homemade art, DIY furniture, and ceramic cows. The kitchen table is home to piles of coats and bags. The sink is full of dirty dishes. An older woman, clearly a metal-head turned art teacher, finishes a phone call and crosses the house to bang on a bedroom door.

Inside, the room is as clean as Noel's car. The Skyrim main menu theme wiggles its way out of an old television's speakers to fill the paint pebbled walls with the sound of folkish drums and grunting. This sound blends with the thumping of Mom's fists on the door.

Noel has cocooned herself on the bed. Headphones in, she is watching YouTube videos from a playlist of skinny teenage girls talking about their skincare routines and vegan diet diaries.

The door opens and the play begins.

“Noel, you need to take this seriously,” Mom is baiting.

Noel closes the laptop and peels herself out of bed. She is pantsless.

“Can you at least tell me if I should call the doctor? Making an appointment is so much cheaper than the emergency room,” mom’s onslaught is rapid fire.

Noel floats through the house from the nesting room to the feeding grounds with Mom in tow. She opens several cabinets, unsure of what she is looking for, while her mother chitters about how much Noel’s boss is worried about her.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Noel interjects lightly. “It’s not a big deal, it was just an accident. I didn’t even hurt the cat.”

Mom starts closing the cabinets her daughter has left open.

Outside the home the cavalier is on the front lawn. Noel’s butt sticks out the back passenger door.

“Are you going to move that thing?” Mom asks. “Are you going to put pants on?”

Noel emerges with shopping bags.

“Where did you get all that shit?” Mom’s tone edges frustration.

“I needed some clothes for work, I thought they might make me more comfortable,” Noel states dryly.

Mom can’t argue with that.

“Hey you two!” A shout from the lawn next door breaks through the fog. An uppity woman and her roided up husband call over from next door. The woman is walking a tiny white dog.

“Hello, Grace, Rick! Sorry about the lawn, Noel’s still calming down,” Mom explains cheerily.

The small white dog goes from the lawn to the sidewalk and starts shitting.

“Oh no, we were just talking about how glad we are that she’s ok. And how lucky it is she didn’t hit your porch,” Grace responds.

“Just shows these millennials can’t get off their phones-” Rick starts but Mom interrupts.

“It wasn’t her phone, apparently there was a cat?” Mom’s tone indicates disbelief.

“A cat?” Grace mimics the tone.

“A big black cat, it startled her.”

“Oh lord. Nasty little beasts,” Grace is genuinely repulsed.

Rick has trouble scraping the watery dogshit off of the concrete sidewalk with a plastic bag.

“I’ll make sure to let Little Ricky know down at the Sheriff’s office,” Grace offers. “Did I tell you he got another promotion?”

Inside her bedroom, Noel is neurotically untagging and arranging her new merch. Mom can be heard slamming the front door, followed by angry cleaning noises.

“If you’re not going to work this weekend we can get this house clean,” Noel can hear her mother screeching.

Noel appears, fully dressed, heading to the front door while typing away on her phone. “Where the hell are you going? That room can’t possibly be clean,” Mom moves to block her daughter in.

“I’m going to Claire’s house,” Noel responds sharply.

“Claire? Claire Hall?” Mom questions. “You haven’t seen her in over a year.”

Noel softens. “I thought it might help,” she pleads lightly. “She’s a good motivator, Mom. I’m just going to spend the night, she said we could talk.”

Mom agrees, reluctant but hopeful.

Noel slips out the door quickly. Her phone is on Tinder, a message from COMMIECUNT19 reads: “dennys in 30 min?”

The sun's going down over the 70's era Denny's. Noel is sipping away at some coffee, her eyes on her phone, scrolling some social media app while COMMIECUNT19 talks vividly about his day. His whole deal is pretty bland.

"I never thought you'd actually respond to my match," he changes the subject away from himself. "I messaged you, like, two weeks ago."

"I don't spend too much time on my phone, to be honest," Noel responds without looking up.

"What do you usually do for fun then?" COMMIECUNT19 questions. "I mean what hobbies...?"

The waitress stops by to refill their waters and tell them their food is almost done.

"I guess I just work a lot," Noel answers the question, putting down her phone and looking directly into the guy's eyes.

"So does that mean you're looking for a relationship or...?" COMMIECUNT19 is a little put off by the change in eye contact.

"I mean, we can just hang out for a bit, right?" Noel lightens her glare.

The next morning comes and Noel is sitting in her car in an apartment parking lot. "I'm going to die in this car one day," she thinks. The radio talk show host is awake but she's just getting there, fingering a soft pack for the last cigarette.

COMMIECUNT19 is standing in the doorway to the apartment building. He waves goodbye as Noel drives off.

She flicks her lighter, singeing her hair on accident.

Inside a dying mall, bright lights in the makeup and perfume block of the store emphasize the lack of customers. Noel is held hostage by a saleswoman pitching stem cell skincare.

Noel isn't mentally there, just wasting time, when a flash of black skitters across the floor in the distance. It breaks the saleswoman's spell.

Noel excuses herself, following the direction of the blur.

As she turns a corner she smacks into the back of a large black jacket.

Stumbling backwards, Noel's arm is caught by the tall, broad shouldered guy wearing the jacket. Noel melts as he smiles.

"Don't fuck around," I can't fucking believe this.

"No, I'm serious. Do you want my ID?" He's walking so close to me. "My name is Noah."

Walking away from the food court, the hallway echoes every step like a tiny little punch. I'm holding a small bucket of pretzel bites, but he's got the radioactive cheese. I carefully dip a pretzel into it.

"I guess that could be your name," I don't know why it creeps me out. It's not like it's that uncommon, our names are just too similar and why is he making me act like this am I five this is gay.

"Well, what's your name?" He's asking me, but I don't want to tell him.

"I don't want to tell you," Is this childish? Am I four?

"Come on, you have no idea how many boat jokes I've had to stomach. Yours can't be that bad," He is putting his arm around me, grabbing a pieces of pretzel from the cup I'm holding. He smells like basement and somehow like wet dogs, but hot? What does that even mean am I retarded.

We walk in and out of every store, sharing opinions on movies and chastising each other for slightly opposing tastes in music.

In Hot Topic, making fun of the cringey shirts on the wall when COMMIECUNT19 appears. Did he follow me here? He's wearing a work lanyard. What the fuck.

"Hey, how has your day been? Did you come to see me?" Gross. Gross. Gross. Stop talking. Why are you talking to me.

"I didn't know you worked here," I respond calmly. I feel Noah standing back but watching closely. He hasn't said anything, he doesn't have to, he's perfect even if he never talks again.

"I mean we only talked about my job for, like, two hours last night; how I just got promoted to key holder..." You mean you babbled infinitely.

"I meant I didn't know it was this mall," I don't want to hurt his feelings. I want to hurt his feelings a little I guess. But not at work. Fuck. "You talked about meeting sales goals and this place is always so empty."

Noah moves closer, putting his arm around me. Is he standing up to bat?

"Who is this?" COMMIECUNT19 is gonna fly off the handle ok this just got funny.

"Oh this is Noah, we were just-"

"No like who is he to you?" I hate when people interrupt me what like I haven't had to sit through enough of your whining.

"More than you," Noah speaks up. Holy shit. That was kind of smooth, am I blushing? "She knows my name."

I'm at a loss. Both guys are just staring at me.

I look at Noah. "How did you kn-"

"Fucking bitch! Take your skank and get out of my fucking store."

I feel Noah's arm behind my shoulder and I go by his lead. COMMIECUNT19 grabs at my arm, and I feel adrenaline set in.

Before I can say anything, Noah's knocked him onto the ground.

Back in the safety of Noel's car, she's driving with hands at ten and two through her neighborhood. Noah is in the passenger seat, flipping through an old CD case.

He pops a Talking Heads album into the disc drive and grabs a pack of cigarettes from inside his jacket. "You want one?" he asks.

"Yeah, can you light it for me?"

Noah puts two cigarettes in his mouth, fishing for a lighter in his jacket.

"There's like ten in the glove compartment," Noel lets him know.



Noah grabs one of them and lights both cigarettes with the same inhale. Noel takes the cigarette carefully while Noah closes up the CD case.

"You can just throw that on the back seat," Noel instructs.

"Just because you don't like ska doesn't mean I'm going to trash your CDs."

Noel pulls up to her house, it looks like no one is home. Next door the front porch light flicks on as Noel and Noah get out of the car.

"Noel, honey, your mom took your sister to dinner and a movie, they won't be back until later," Grace calls over through the screen door.

"Thanks Mrs. Prendergast," Noel calls back as she and Noah make their way to the house.

"I know you're not having boys over when your mom's not home, girl," Grace claims firmly.

Noel pauses, but Noah moves towards the other side of the driveway so Grace can see him in the light.

"My name is Noah, ma'am, I was one of Noel's mom's students," he explains. "Don't worry, this visit is expected."

Noel follows Noah over towards the neighbor's yard.

"Nice to meet you, young man," Grace turns her attention towards Noel. "Oh, Noel, I called Little Ricky, you know at the Sheriff's Office, and they'll be on the lookout for that nasty cat that got you spooked yesterday."

"It was just a cat," Noel feels the sudden urge to defend the thing.

Grace's dog starts barking shrill little shrieks from inside the house.

"Cats are the devils dogs," Grace retorts matter-of-factly. "Better strung up than roaming around this neighborhood."

"That's ridiculous," Noel responds, mask off. "It was just a cat."

"And soon it will be just a dead cat," Grace recedes into her house, cooing at her dog.

Noah looks to Noel. "Do the police actually do that?"

Noel's attention is on the mailbox next to the front door. On the ground next to the post of the mailbox is a cube of cardboard.

"They can't do that..." Noah mutter.

Noel picks up the box.

In Noel's bedroom, Noah sits on her bed as she searches.

"I have scissors somewhere..."

"I've got a pocket knife?" Noah offers.

Noel uses the knife to cut through the packing tape. Reaching inside the package, she pulls out a white box - a new iPhone.

"Oh no," Noel full of regret.

"What?" Noah asks, watching Noel pace back and forth with the white box.

"This is...really expensive. This is too much, I have to give it back," Noel is starting to freak out.

"Why?" Noah asks blankly. "They didn't have a camera or anything, that bitch didn't even notice it on the ground. Just pawn it."

"They have serial numbers, they will be able to tell I stole it."

"We can figure that out later," Noah says, gently taking the box out of her hands and dropping it on the ground before moving in close.

Noel is in the bathroom, pressing a wet cloth to her forehead and cheeks. She's not wearing any pants.

In a happy haze she examines her face from different angles in the spotty mirror.

Back in her bedroom, Noel pushes the door open to find a giant black cat purring on her bed. Noah's gone.

She moves to her dresser, picks up her phone, and sees Noah's jacket on the dresser.

Noel and Noah both put their hands on the jacket at the same time.

“Where did you go?” Noel asks, feeling Noah close in behind her.

Noah moves from her right to her left, but when she turns to face him she looks down and sees instead the large black cat.

“I’m surprised you’re not screaming,” the cat declares. I think I’ve lost my mind. Oh my god this is simultaneously hilarious and horrifying. I am not a furry. The cat twirls around my legs. “But then again, you’ve impressed me quite a lot today.”

I try to put some distance between us, stepping gingerly over the cat. God, that’s a huge ass cat. When I turn around, he’s there again, Noah. He’s picking up the little white box and starts taking it apart - the plastic whistles slightly as it’s peeled off.

“There are many advantages to the deal I’m about to offer you,” Noah moves towards me. “And you’re the perfect candidate for a familiar...” He peels the last sticker off of the touch screen before spinning me in his arms. I feel like I’m floating on air when he puts his arms around me from behind, slipping the phone into my hands.

“Turn it on,” he whispers.

I press my thumb to the power button and the screen comes to life. The Apple logo has a snake coiled around it.

“All you have to do is accept the terms and conditions...” he says, nuzzling my neck. The basement mildew and leather smell feels like it’s sinking into the floorboards around me.

I scroll through the seven year contract and confirm the transaction.

It’s a bright and shining day. I don’t usually like sunny days, but I guess it’s not the worst. I’m bringing grocery bags inside, and my mom pops out of the kitchen to help me.

“Did they have the right food this time?” she asks.

“It better be for \$30,” I joke around.

“I can help if you need it,” she offers. I’m kind of taken aback.

“No, I’m good, I have the money,” I tell her. “I’m still surprised you’re not mad.”

“Noah’s a sweetheart, and anything that pisses off Grace that much is fine by me.”

We finish bringing in everything and I drag a new bag of cat food into my room. It’s still weird coming home to it being cleaned and organized.

Noah’s laying on the dresser, his giant cat legs splayed out in all directions.

“I can’t believe how much you eat,” I poke fun at my little demon, my good little boy.

“Power requires energy,” he says, clicking the tv remote with his paw to change the channel of the TV in the corner of the room. “The litter box is dirty by the way.”

“You know you could help, right? I liked you better as a human,” I say, laying down on my bed.

“We can negotiate once you’ve started bathing regularly,” he chastises me. “When was the last time you washed your hair?”

Reaching up and pulling the cat down beside me, I watch him settle down in my arms and pet him absentmindedly.

**GAME OF THREE** that are afraid of one another

**1. Water**

They've been out there for hours  
kids building a castle and towers  
with bright and sunny sand  
on a peninsula that's being washed over  
so now all I see is  
their bodies bobbing up and down  
and their arms flapping around  
shooting out of the water in darts and  
flashes with what sounds like joyful laughter  
I call to them loudly anyway  
as they don't seem to realize that  
when they lose footing amidst the commotion  
they'll find it hard to swim so they should  
come back in from all the fun  
in the water and sun  
but there's too much elation going on  
for them to hear and this  
is when I begin to feel helpless  
with a mounting sense of fear

## **2. Grass**

It's a balancing act of great skill  
I think as I watch this child  
from the top of the hill  
where I'm seated by the tall grass  
and he steps carefully on rocks  
at low tide  
kite attached to wrist  
anchored also to the sky  
where it can fly all by itself  
in the steady wind  
so he's free to stoop down  
and examine everything  
that's in the ground  
looking for treasure as he calls  
this game he plays with refraction  
ripple and flow  
I know he takes time to find  
the best stones with care  
put my hand up over my eyes  
to cover the glare  
noticing his bright green  
swim shorts match the gem  
he brings over with the kite  
down from the sky by now  
and stands there with the treasure  
still wet and full of light  
his smile alone worth more than gold  
and his way of looking so clever

### **3. Fire**

I have to say this last August moon is  
even fuller than the sunset was today  
the fiery glow over the dunes  
has come with a surprise from behind  
I believe as I peel an orange rind  
and juice spurts into my eye with a sting  
and I sigh knowing this taste will linger  
past winter until spring savoring  
the plump, juicy, acid, sweet and tart  
while in the grass I see a clover  
dusky and looking for a new start  
too soon summer is almost over  
as all these colors now yield  
to an ever darkening blue  
it seems to me that this is true  
before the brightening again  
yellows in time I take another bite  
admitting the moon's shine  
wins over all other sides  
in this rock, paper, scissors way  
she has to end the day  
with a touch of the unexpected  
how she trifles with the tides

## LIGHT

lux, laughter  
in spite of itself  
    begotten not made  
i saw what i saw ...  
i.e  
    in my child's eyes  
his face  
    just after being born  
gnawing on his little fist  
    and smiling  
so  
    so much  
enough to let me know  
that there are places  
that abound in  
  
light  
rhymes with love  
    sort of  
and also surprisingly  
or perhaps not...  
    i saw a similar thing  
in my father's eyes  
    the night before  
he died  
    his face  
bright and wide  
    with a toothless smile  
and both hands



raised toward me  
“hey”, he said  
and made two round o’s  
with his index fingers  
and thumbs  
“hey!”he repeated  
to get my attention and i turned  
for what seemed like  
forever  
around to look at him  
and thought “wow!”  
102 and getting better !  
though he died  
the next day

light shining  
out of darkness  
and... meanwhile...  
my son’s grown up  
and still  
cracking jokes all the time  
at least with himself he is  
and probably with angels too ?  
sometimes...  
now and then the thing  
about light  
but also the thought  
of something eternal  
makes me smile  
the word itself

light  
as in lux aeterna  
is definitely much more  
than just rays of sun  
light or even laughter  
i think it just is  
something in the eyes  
that makes me joyful  
though once in while  
I kind of weep

## CHRYSALIS

is when the candle's light  
drives Cupid's flight  
and Psyche journeys through darkness  
destined to come out  
with two  
    unfolding wings   ...   ...

skin to skin is one thing  
but there are rules for  
what's beyond her larval gaze  
for one : there's the snake that flies  
and then if she can feel or breathe  
    underlie this realization

that the fateful drop of candle wax  
goes straight into the heart's prism  
with expectancy cloaked  
in lore while crossing from  
the primal  
    circadian core   —

we know : the caterpillar  
moves in waves  
clings to branches upside down  
or stays hidden  
in leaves for days  
    and goes underground;

the hardest thing  
for her after these nights  
with him is to recall  
what before her flees  
because neither the caterpillar  
    nor the cocoon actually sees

but probes with a winnowing fork  
in the company of ants and a breeze  
while sheep bleat and dawn puts sleep  
back into a box  
down the river  
from whence it came

and she is not ashamed  
of the pubescent yearn to break away like him  
from the lonely apartment that always  
vanishes like the touch of his skin  
at the top of the hill  
in the valley anyway –

the destiny  
of the lamp and the knife  
with all those choices she imagines  
once she too has felt  
the sharp arrow  
is to disappear

what she knows : springtime  
arrives with flowers and lava  
on the mountainside wild with stripes  
of blush and spots with flush on skin  
where they now meet in bowers  
and spins gold ... ..

so this is the hope : that the look  
in his eyes might seal  
the wax into an emergence  
beyond imago insecta papilio  
that she might inspect how deep  
the wound truly is

as the human form is bound  
to search at night the eyelash on the cheek  
the rasp of skin and flinch away from fire  
the quixotic wingspan with scope and hope  
the flutter and tilt  
of the soul ... & desire

## For John

The labyrinth's belly burns in the dark distance—reddening muffled, faint through shrubbery—purring alive. Into the unknown, I bear you again, my son, in hand-jotted notes, sweep my arms across green walls, guided by candlelight. A man treks far in front, a woman slowly behind, and so on. My feelings sit in my hands, in these notes—I sift through and see For John, For John, For John. I've forgotten how many I've written: lifetimes worth of words in a world of maybe one day.

But I do not want to wait. I've seen you scurry behind the tree in our backyard, smoke cigarettes in the garage. You look at me, smile, then run just out of sight. Oh, will you stay. I love you. Haunt me. But I cannot force the universe to break you for me—to see you, speak to you again, would only be a gift the universe gives. I haven't earned its generosity. I haven't sacrificed at the pyre of forgiveness. Blame begets blame becomes blame brings on more blame. John, you are my son,

and you have died. That is that. As I usher you forward, the galactic center of this journey brightens. I can nearly see it now—perhaps as you saw as you exited my womb—a fire big as a sun. I am at the edge now, so bright I begin to sweat. I feel you in my chest, son, drop each memory of you into the flame, each note turns to ash, air. You remake me into everything.

### Voice from Upstairs

Throughout the house, warm air rises and breaks with the Grand Canyon Suite—sounds waking, running, walking—then Dad switches to Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2. Keys jump into my ears, place me on a stone ruin. I'm climbing, clambering, conquering a foreign crest. I'm filled with notes, buzzes, tings, strings: each beat brings me into a future, uncut meadows, red mountains, blue towers—pictures darting, hitting, then departing. He switches again.

The voice stands in acapella, wavering, wobbling, whirling from the 33 recorder—watery Soviet words fill each room.

I realize this is Grandma: I'm lost in tar. Her essence splits through the strange language—language that feels like dampened grass. The audio hisses like a just-drenched pit fire. The ache from her throat strikes my bones, wanting for a land that could no longer have her. When we moved to the country from Cleveland, something left my father's work-worn eyes, his boot of a face—gathered up his mother's softness, inhaled her in moments, captured her on vinyl for times, I suppose, like these. I imagine him sinking into his chair cushions, butter into bread. I shift into feathery blank, a future left floating and misplaced. Her voice cuts a wailing height, then dies: the house doused in quiet.

### Riding into Town

A letter is placed inside each girl's mailbox: Class of '61 – Free Jewelry Box for All Graduating Girls – Karl's Jewelers, Middlefield, Ohio. After I find mine, I hide myself on these Amish roads, ride my horse into town—clomp-clomping past the culvert, the ditches—along cornfields, homes dotting acreage after acreage. My hair roams freely, crow feathers spread against a front. Steel has taken Dad to Cleveland. Mom is making the house. I am left alone and unconsidered in my daily duties—I could walk, but what's the fun in that. I want to feel the animal on my hips, smile and nod at strangers, young girls who want to ranch. I want gnats nipping at my face. I want to be the single candlelight in a midnight meadow.

Downtown is small, masked in old-American, signs swinging above the sidewalk. I hitch her to the building's side, run in. Soon, I saunter back with my prize—bigger than I thought, notched on the edges, ribbed down the sides, dark brown wood. An evergreen-coated mountain with a winding river at the base is painted on the top. I ask, What's the point of an empty box?

I imagine stuffing it with acorns. Maybe a small stone from every road I walk on. I imagine the ting of Grandma's sterling. Maybe I will work at a tchotchke store and hoard the best pieces for myself. The strawberry roan neighs at a buzzing fly as the sky turns orange over

the rangeland. Maybe I will fill it with little moments. I run my hand down the mare, pinch a strand of her mane, and pull. She doesn't flinch. I gather a string of my own and zip it from my scalp. I don't flinch either. I wrap them around my finger. Let's start here. The box opens—I see into its darkness, dangle our double helix above like a mother to a hatchling, then release.

## Sock Hop Love Dance

I stuff Salisbury steak in my mouth, brain-taxed and hungry—body twisting in skin—run with mouthful to the gym. In the center, shoes pile. Wandering, ready in poodle skirt, flowing from me, waterfalling in mom-stitched fabric. I look at them: Who will it be? To meet me sweaty palmed? To whirl out worry? To slip, rip, fall with me? A boy, nerves jolting through his shoulders, blinks to me, presents a momentous wash-away.

We wait together in silence for the record scratch over the loudspeaker—Shake, Rattle, and Roll! snakes the bleachers, nests in my ears. Smiles line the court. I am a ball of carefree, confident in fleeting seconds, then screw-faced and uncertain—I ask:

What is love? Am I doing it right? What is lust? Am I doing anything right? What is my body when I'm home alone? When I see his face? When I think of him? Why must I move? When his voice cuts through the music? What is he saying? Something about me? Something about forever? Something about letting go? The bell rings: Was it twenty minutes already? — he sneaks a note, an invitation for more, to dance into a future that tilts just out of focus.

## Circle Dance

They engrave me in mossy stone, soak rags—pat me in portions, extract the weight of bruising and bygone from my face, arms, legs, back, heels. The circle caws within the tall grass, together as one woman, striking drums, flittering tongues, sweat-coated as the fire roars. Goddess! Goddess! Goddess! fills the air—the clouds roll over Maiden! Mother! Crone! I'm whisked through wicker—into sisterhood. I turn towards the circle. They jitter so softly, nearly fluttering off the ground.

I've arrived in pale skin, thin tapestry dress, bare feet and am titled woman who holds her blood. My thighs flex. I do not force them. My shoulders shake. I am not in control. The sun ducks the horizon, and the moon, bright as three stars, illuminates the field. An effigy builds itself from coals, woman as inferno, shambling in the blaze as we dance and bang around



her, to her, as she whispers each of our names in night air—through the haze, we glimpse her face—Maiden! Mother! Crone! Goddess! Goddess! Goddess!

Every woman: past, present, future, blood, brooder, wild and domestic—Burn! Burn! Burn!  
We are Earth! We are Life! We are Noise and Silence! Burn Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow! Our eyes shut tightly. Wisps of sweetgrass leave our fingers. In the smoke: Rise! Rise! Rise with the Moon! escapes our mouths as we flicker furiously along the treetops.

## Thumb Burial

Grandpa tinkers on his Buick while I roll in mud. The country wind whisks around my face. Humidity wisps bugs into my ears, until all breath stones to a halt with a scream: God fucking dammit! Air speckles red in flight, the fresco of factory-men. On the floor, his severed thumb dances. Ba-dun ba-dun—the garage door trembles, a mouth holding in a cough, as his back bangs off every wall. I don't know the sky from my own shirt. Somewhere, in the dirt, it settles and Grandpa calls, Come here, girl! Come find this damn thing. Then he runs in to stop the bleeding. I dive to pick it up. The thumb has made its home in cobwebs—I swear it moves. I swear it wiggles as if it was speaking. This is the first time I remember almost holding his hand. I think of Westerns, the Confederates, the dynamite exploding, and I feel my arm swing forward towards the grass. Did you find it? he asks. I look out into a backyard, toward a space, I can never understand. No. No. I couldn't find it anywhere.

## Daily Rituals

I face a Goddess in the East who wakes me: this is why I'm barefoot, harvest in heart, I count in threes, greet my reflection, ornament my fingers in turquoise and lapis lazuli—feel into my daughters, their children, their heartbeats, their worries. The day dared to crack this morning—this is why I glide to the front yard, why I shoot arrows at the sunrise, eat blueberries from the vine, draw circles of protection with my eyes. If I am standing, Isis surges through my legs. If I sit, a brightness pools at the crown of my skull, then I push it down, down, down into the dirt. If the weather grays, I build barriers around the house. If a groundhog waddles past, I speak to it. If a bird lands by, it knows that it is I who landed beside it. If the wind whistles, I pat on my knees. If my husband leaves, I say, goodbye and I love you. If a neighbor laughs, I laugh at how preposterous this all feels. If a carcass is picked clean by crows, it is necessary. If a buck gores another, it is correct. If a fox flickers in the cornfields, and starves alone, its fire still spread furiously. If a hatchling falls, it is eaten by a loving earth. If a child dies just over the horizon, he knows what I know—these are just moments and moments and moments—I hold you with me, and you, and you, and

## **The Building**

There's a memory or two stuck on this floor—crowds standing on crowds, vendors waving their wares. Here, in a forgotten moment, a girl teethes on her mother's collar, hides in her breast, as women fight over the latest fabric. Soon, the smile will surface, strong and even—and she will grow to endure loud noises, like a green light swinging above a street. Now, only the ghosts of past bounce off these walls—there's no more Strouss' malts and malls and makeup stands—just offices and phone calls and the echoes of fraud. The building's bones chatter—the city's stomach blazes in the basement, its voice whirling from the mezzanine and balconies, horizon sparking the skyline. The difference between a building and a body lies within a squint. In the crack of a brick, the ground swells—each beam, each weld, each windowpane shifts, breaks and one-thousand arms for one-thousand lost thoughts reach out, grabbing something pretending to be promise.

## **Interview with Eileen Myles by Meghan Sullivan**

Myles moved to New York in 1974 to “be a poet.” A Professor Emeritus from UC San Diego with nineteen books of poetry, criticism and fiction, Myles now splits their time between Marfa, Texas and New York. Myles’s work is a model for how to bring the immediacy of a moment—that cup of coffee, the refrigerator’s hum, a dog’s howl—to the page.

Myles rang me from their home in Marfa on February 13th, 2023, having just returned to Texas from an Alex Katz Retrospective at the Guggenheim. We talked about their revision process and their new collection, a “Working Life.” The manuscript, much like my conversation with Myles, is a home for their histories—their dreams, their time in Chicago or Texas or New York, and their relationships with contemporary Anne Waldman, teacher James Schuyler, and their deceased mother.

**I was eager to learn about Myles’ relationship with revision and how it has been “revised,” so to speak, over the course of their career.**

How do you think about titles in revision? Do you usually know a poem's title at the beginning of your process?

More often than not that's the case, but lots of times there's no title or there's a title that I know is provisional. As I sit with the poem, I know that it's the wrong title. I have a new book coming out in April, and my editor chided me a little bit about one title, “Monday Shit.” The poem reflects on messiness, which I think about a lot as a poet. I've noticed in visual art and music, we love messiness. We love seeing corrections on the canvas; when listening to music, we love hearing artists stumble in the studio. Just creating space. I like to allow that in my work. “Monday Shit” holds that feeling of “being in process.” Especially because the poem comes right out of a dream. I love dreams because even as you're notating them, they're vanishing and changing; that seems like the essence of poetry.

**Do you often wake from dreams and write them down?**

Since the aughts. I used to have contempt for dreams in art. But when I realized that dreams are this bleeding object, it seemed exciting. My journals are filled with dreams. Sometimes I write them in prose, plainly saying exactly where I just was.

Sometimes I'll be flipping through my own journal and think, where was I? What was that? Then I'll realize it's a dream. I'm working on a novel right now, and I'm hoping to drop some dreams in there too. Dreams. That world is closed off for a while and then it's open.

**It's an accomplishment to capture the feeling. You said the editor chided you for that title. Have there been instances where you received pushback on a title and decided to change it?**

In this book, yes. But I've also changed it back.

There's a poem in this manuscript that is now called "Jihad." And when I was asked to submit a poem for a journal, I gave them this poem, and they loved it. But they felt like the title might be offensive. As a non-Muslim white person, was I allowed to say "Jihad"? I had been reading this really interesting novel about a Palestinian guy and an Israeli guy. The book contained a beautiful definition of "jihad." The definition was about an important pilgrimage. It was not inherently violent at all. It worked for me but I love the people that asked me to change it. I thought, let's call it "Wolf " for their purposes. As I approached the manuscript, I wrote to a good friend who's Palestinian; I asked him what he thought about me using "jihad." He said he thinks it's a very beautiful word. Of course when the book comes out, I have no idea how...

### **How it'll be received.**

Yeah. And there's another poem where I called a couch, "you dirty slave." And my editor didn't know if I should say that. I'm in a reading group right now that calls itself an anti-racist reading group. I brought the issue up to the group. Reactions were mixed because in the context of the poem, it was clear. I came away from the group and decided to change it. A little time passed, and then again, I looked at the poem and felt like I'd taken out the danger. Like I was a person saying something somewhat fucked up without thinking about it. I decided I want to live with the danger, and if people are offended, I'm willing to have the conversation. So that was a different kind of editing.

### **It sounds like the reading group aided in the revision process. I'm curious about how much give and take there is for a poet when it comes to other people's feedback.**

What I love about poetry is the terrain, especially after a certain point in my career, people started to let me do virtually anything. I've published some poems in the New Yorker, and I can't believe they let me say some of the things I did.

### **And with that freedom, you seem to take effective liberties, such as your use of articles, for example. In the poem, "Monday Shit" we get "the store where the women worked my friends." Why was it important to call it "the store" as opposed to "that store"?**

I'm most interested in the flow of attention in poems. It seems to me with "that," the emphasis is always wanting the reader to believe or see something. Whereas with "the," you're relating something. The greatest thing I ever heard about poetry is this John Ashbery line; he says he likes the reader to feel like they're in the same room. And I mean, he really means it at the level of detail where I would start referring to the tiny growl my dog is making

as if you were here. That kind of intimacy is really important to me. I think it arrives at the level of articles.

**I wonder how naming might relate to that intimacy. I was curious about opportunities you took to name somebody in your poem. For example in “Bednewton,” we meet an “Anne” as well as the “corpse of the man.” Why name Anne, but not the man?**

The man is Jonas Mekas. He was a famous indie filmmaker who had just died. I felt like if I used his name, the poem would be kind of biographical. I was interested in the details of mourning, but not the name of the man himself. And Anne is Anne Waldman. She's one of those people who always gets close to the body. She's a very, very high power, but a very intimate person. You know, she's about five years older than me, but she grew up in New York and she was there when I got there. She was already famous. It took years for us to get to be peers. I kind of put a cup out for her knowledge, so using her name was a nod to her. I wanted all the details of the poem to have the same weight.

**You mention your relationship with Anne. How do you account for the real world? Have you ever not put something in a manuscript because you didn't want to offend someone?**

Oh, yeah. I'm broken up with the person who I was with while writing most of the book. I literally counted how many poems she was in to see how I felt about it, and it was 30%. Her presence feels bigger than it is, and I thought, that's fine.

I'm also curious about a revision in “Bednewton.” In the final version, it's, “should I shoot it, whatever was right.” (formerly “whatever was right. Should I shoot it?”) Why switch the order?

I wanted to more accurately represent the chaos of thought. Language is such an illusion. We're usually thinking a number of things at the same time when they come as a jumble. The order just feels much more impulsive. What are they talking about? Are they talking about sperm? Are they talking about shooting a person? It's not quite clear, but I want the feeling of it to be clear. And I feel like injecting the question seems much more like in the panic of the moment, it feels more on edge. Film is always helpful because I think often scenes come in this forward backwards kind of motion—sort of jerky. It just gives you a feeling of time and it's real and it's not narrative.

**I agree. The injection of the question models the shooting. It mirrors that abrupt feeling.**

This is a good conversation in the way that talking with a translator is amazing because they want to know what you mean by this word and you realize you don't know. And then you have to go deeper into the poem. And it's really interesting to understand because I think

there's so much about histories and my relationship with Anne and my relationship with Jonas and my relationship with my dead mother and New York being a place that holds all these histories. "Bednewton," I think it's funny and gross and holds all that. It's a little honorable. It's my own housing development.

**It's where all your friends and histories come to live. That's wonderful. I've gleaned that you're more interested in micro revision as opposed to upheaval of the poem. Is that true?**

To my mind, there are two kinds of poets. There are poets who write a lot, and there are poets who don't write much. And the poets who don't write much have to fix all the poems. I don't deal with the messes. You know, there are poems that are just off. If I wanna spend my life fixing those poems, I could do that. But I focus on writing a lot, not perfecting a poem.

**I suppose that's a revision strategy, revision by way of writing more.**

One of the other poems I thought about showing you, there were a lot of little revisions because I knew the poem was important. Once in a while I write a poem that has some very public content in it. When I read it, people say, wow, that's an intense poem! But I also feel full of shit. Eileen's trying to make their grand statement.

At this Alex Katz reading in New York, they were very clear that we only had 10 minutes to read. I had written a little poem for Alex Katz that I had given him. He was a contemporary of

Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery and James Schuyler. He said, neither Frank nor John nor Jimmy ever wrote him a poem. So I knew that I wanted to read that poem. So I read that poem and it was very short, but I thought, look at the world. I wanna read the long poem. I realized the poem had to be heard fast. I learned something about my own work by having the courage to read it. There's an internal timing to the poem and then there's an external one.

**It sounds like the knowledge of that external rhythm can also be a path toward revision. How has your process changed throughout your writing career? Do you revise differently than you did 20 or 40 years ago?**

Hugely. When I first came to New York in the seventies and I was briefly in a graduate program, it was like the life choice had happened. I must be a poet. I would sit down at my desk for five hours and work on poems. I would do this intense editing and I would just destroy poems. I was working so hard and it was completely wrong. I started to understand that the greatest editor is time. It's sort of like you're the person that wrote the poem, but you're not yet the person who can edit the poem. You have to become other to edit.



## **So you don't sit down at your desk for five hours anymore?**

I never do. I mean, even for writing a novel, I don't. I realized I have a short attention span. I'm physically restless. Writing the poem is the easy part. Managing the person is the problem of this poet, I think.

Myles next task for their day was to hop on to another zoom meeting. They are planning an event at St. Marks Church on May 28th, a reading of the entire Pathetic Literature Anthology, for which they are the editor. They assured me that the time traveling will be well spent as “being contained by a vehicle,” is often a starting point for their writing. Surely whatever poems are birthed on Myles’ next Jetblue or Amtrak trip will possess their unique ability to invite the reader in. And their subsequent revisions will demand that we pull up a chair.

What is this awesome mystery that is taking place within me?

I can find no words to express it; my poor hand  
is unable to capture it in describing the praise and glory  
that belong to the One who is above all praise, and who transcends  
every word ... My intellect sees what has happened,  
but it cannot explain it.

It can see, and wishes to explain, but can find no word that will suffice;  
for what it sees is invisible and entirely formless,  
simple, completely uncompounded, unbounded in its awesome greatness.

What I have seen is the totality recapitulated as one,  
received not in essence but by participation.

Just as if you lit a flame from a flame,  
it is the whole flame you receive.

— St Symeon

## C O N T R I B U T O R S

**Mark Knego** I am a published playwright and short story writer in San Francisco, California. My theatrical trilogy about the Cambodian refugee experience which I wrote and directed for the stage, "Snakes of Kampuchea," was published in print by Exit Press, while three stories of mine have been published digitally by *Anak Sastra* and *The Defiant Scribe* magazines. All my stories are based on real people, events and situations I have encountered across the globe. I am inspired to create fiction with a cryptic, spiritual, folkloric, symbolic tone in my writing.

**Ash Falla** got her BA in Creative Writing at Hunter College and is currently pursuing her MFA in Poetry at The New School. She's an NYC native who grew up and currently resides in Queens.

**April Yu** is a fourteen-year-old writer from New Jersey with an affinity for language, running, and human anatomy. Although she was indeed born in April, her favorite season is winter. Her work is published in or forthcoming from Peach Mag, The Lumiere Review, Milk Candy Review, The Aurora Journal, FEED, and more. She is a graduate of the Alpha Workshop for Young Writers. Visit her on Twitter [@aprilgoldflwrs](#) and at [apriyu.carrrd.co](#).

**Mea Andrews** is a writer from Georgia, who currently resides in China. She has just finished her MFA from Lindenwood University and is only recently back on the publication scene. You can find her in Vermilion, Rappahannock Review, and others. You can also follow her on Instagram at [mea\\_writes](#) or go to her website at [meaandrews.com](#)

**Douglas Cole** published six poetry collections and the novel The White Field, winner of the American Fiction Award. His work has been anthologized in Best New Writing (Hopewell Publications), Bully Anthology (Kentucky Stories Press) and Coming Off The Line (Main Street Rag Publishing). He is a regular contributor to Mythaxis, providing essays and interviews with notable writers, artists and musicians such as Daniel Wallace (Big Fish), Darcy Steinke (Suicide Blond, Flash Count Diary) and Tim Reynolds (T3 and The Dave Matthews Band). He also writes a monthly piece called "Trading Fours" for Jerry Jazz Musician and was recently named the editor for "American Poetry" in Read Carpet, an international, multi-lingual journal from Columbia. In addition to the American Fiction Award, he was awarded the Leslie Hunt Memorial prize in poetry, the Editors' Choice Award for fiction by River Sedge, and has been nominated three times for a Pushcart and seven times for Best of the Net. He lives and teaches in Seattle, Washington. His website is <https://douglastcole.com/>.

**Sophie Dibben** I rustled up a degree in Classics and specialised in Ancient Greek cynicism. I am currently a prison officer based in the UK. I have a few pieces published in Why Now magazine, the Doe and the Fence.

**Anne Whitehouse** is the author of poetry collections: The Surveyor's Hand, Blessings and Curses, The Refrain, Meteor Shower, and Outside from the Inside, as well as the art chapbooks, Surrealist Muse (about Leonora Carrington), Escaping Lee Miller, and Frida.

She is the author of a novel, Fall Love. Her poem, “Being Ruth Asawa” won the 2022 White Enso poetry award, and her poem, “Lady Bird,” won the Nathan Perry DAR 2023 “Honoring American History” poetry contest. A new poetry collection, Steady, is forthcoming from Dos Madres Press. An essay, “Poe vs. Himself,” will be published in LitHub in July.

**Craig Kirchner** I think of poetry as hobo art. I love story-telling and the aesthetics of the paper and pen, I’ve been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize. After a writing hiatus I was recently published in *Decadent Review* and have a book of poetry – Roomful of Navels.  
**Christina Michalski** In my short prose, I write about my childhood home in the suburbs of New Jersey—the very place I had always yearned to escape. Faced with the reality of moving back in with my parents last fall, I was annoyed and frustrated. However, as the days went on, I began to unearth hidden treasures within the seemingly mundane. I discovered the beauty of the silence, the heartfelt conversations with parents, and the overall comfort exuded by residential life. In the unlikeliest of circumstances, I learned to find joy in what I once deemed the worst thing in the world, as it became an opportunity to rediscover the essence of home.

**Scott C. Holstad** has authored 65+ books & has appeared in the *Minnesota Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Caffeine*, *Pacific Review*, *Palo Alto Review*, *Sports Illustrated*, the *TODAY Show*, *Long Shot*, *Wormwood Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Southern Review*, *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Asheville Poetry Review* & *Poetry Ireland Review*. He’s moved 35+ times, now lives near Gettysburg. His website is at <https://Hankrules2011.com>.

**Mehreen Ahmed** Multiple contests winner for short fiction, Mehreen Ahmed is an award-winning Australian novelist born in Bangladesh. Her historical fiction, The Pacifist is an audible bestseller. Included in The Best Asian Speculative Fiction Anthology, her works have also been acclaimed by *Midwest Book Review*, and *DD Magazine*. and nominated for Pushcart, botN and James Tait. Her recent publications are with *Litro*, *Otoliths*, *Alien Buddha*, *Coffin Bell Journal* and *Ginosko*.

**Chinmay Ratogi** did his MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. His work has appeared in *Bluestem Magazine*, *Random Access Memory* (Zoetic Press), *Every Day Fiction* and elsewhere. He likes to add colour to the lives of those around him, and can often be found smiling or grumbling under a motorcycle helmet or behind a harmonica.

**Stephen Reilly** My poems appeared in *Charon*, *Albatross*, *Wraparound South*, *Main Street Rag*, *Broad River Review*, *Cape Rock*, *Poetry South*, and other publications. One of my poems appears in the anthology Florida in Poetry: A History of the Imagination (edited by Jane Anderson Jones and Maurice O’Sullivan, Pineapple Press, Sarasota, Fla. 1995). I work as a staff writer for the Englewood Sun, a daily Florida newspaper with circulation in south Sarasota County, Charlotte and DeSoto counties.

**A. Elizabeth Herting** is a writer and busy mother of three living in colorful Colorado. She has had over 60 short stories published and also has two collections of short stories published by Adelaide Books, Whistling Past the Veil and Postcards From Waupaca

available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Adelaide books as well as in select booksellers and libraries.

**Malina Douglas** is inspired by the encounters that shape us. She was awarded Editor's Choice in the Hammond House International Literary Prize in 2021 and was a finalist in the Four Palaces Fiction Anthology Contest and the Blackwater Press Story Contest. In 2022 she was longlisted for the Reflex Press Prize, the Bath Short Story Award and the Dorothy Dunnett Society Short Story Award. Her suite of four flash fictions was selected as a finalist in the Defenestrationism Flash Suite Contest and published on their website. Publications include The National Flash Day Anthology, Consequence Forum, *Wyldblood*, *Opia*, *Typehouse*, *Back Story Journal*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, Evergreen from Bridge House and Because That's Where Your Heart Is from Sans Press. She is an alumna of Smokelong Summer and can be found on twitter [@iridescentwords](#).

**John Sweet** sends greetings from the rural wastelands of upstate NY. He is a firm believer in writing as catharsis, and in the continuous search for an unattainable and constantly evolving absolute truth. His latest poetry collections include A Flag on Fire is a Song of Hope (2019 Scars Publications) and A Dead Man, Either Way (2020 Kung Fu Treachery Press).

**R. Nikolas Macioci** earned a PhD from The Ohio State University, OCTELA, the Ohio Council of Teachers of English, named him the best secondary English teacher in the state of Ohio. He is the author of seventeen books. *Cafes of Childhood* was submitted for the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. In 2021, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net award. In 2022, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He was nominated for a Best of the Net award for 2023. Hundreds of his poems have been published here and abroad in magazines and journals, including *Chiron*, *Concho River Review*, *The Bombay Review*, *The Raven's Perch*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *West Trade Review*.

**Lila Anafi** I work part-time as a freelance copywriter and editor, and my creative nonfiction has won regionally in the Scholastic Writing Awards.

Jacob Friesenhahn teaches Religious Studies and Philosophy at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio.

**Livio Farallo** is co-editor of *Slipstream* and Professor of Biology at Niagara County Community College in Sanborn, New York. His work has appeared or, is forthcoming, in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Triggerfish*, *Cordite Review*, *J Journal*, *Straylight*, *Shot Glass Journal*, and elsewhere.

**Mark Tate** is the author of three novels, Beside the River, its sequel River's End (McCaa Books, 2021), and Butterfly on the Wheel (McCaa Books, 2022). He served for ten years on the Sonoma County Poet Selection Committee for the poets laureate of that county. His book of poems "Walking Scarecrow" has won the Blue Light Press 2023 Poetry Book of the Year, forthcoming late fall, 2023. He is a long-time resident of Sonoma County where he lives with his wife, Lori.

**Fred Ferraris'** work has been published widely in periodicals, including *Bombay Gin*, *Cafe Irreal*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Ginosko #5*, *Orbis*, *Stand*, and *The Worcester Review*, in the anthologies *Prayers For A Thousand Years* (Harper San Francisco) and *Ginosko Anthology 2* (MadHat Press), the chapbooks *Marpa Point* (Blackberry) and *The Durango Chronicles* (Blue Marmot Press), and a full-length book, *Older Than Rain* (Selva Editions). He has been a finalist in the National Poetry Series, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and the recipient of the Mark Fischer Prize.

**Bruce McRae**, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle* and the *North American Review*. The winner of the 2020 Libretto prize and author of four poetry collections and seven chapbooks, his poems have been performed and broadcast globally.

**Megan Wildhood** is a writer, editor and writing coach who helps her readers feel seen in her monthly newsletter, poetry chapbook *Long Division* (Finishing Line Press, 2017), her fulllength poetry collection *Bowed As If Laden With Snow* (Cornerstone Press, May 2023) as well as *Mad in America*, *The Sun* and elsewhere. You can learn more about her writing, working with her and her mental-health and research newsletter at [meganwildhood.com](http://meganwildhood.com).

**David Petruzelli** I've had work published in *Crazyhorse*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Southern Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and elsewhere. A poetry collection, *Everyone Coming Toward You*, won the Tupelo Press Judge's Prize and was published in 2005. I live in New York City.

**Marie C Lecrivain** is a poet, publisher, and ordained priestess in the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the ecclesiastical arm of Ordo Templi Orientis. She currently curates two literary blogs: Dashboard Horus: A Bird's Eye of the Universe (travel themed poetry and art), and AlKhemia Poetica: Women's Art and Literary Journal. Her work has been published in *California Quarterly*, *Chiron Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Nonbinary Review*, *Orbis*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and many other journals. She's the author of several books of poetry and fiction, and editor of *Ashes to Stardust: A David Bowie Tribute Anthology* © 2023 Sybaritic Press, [www.sybpress.com](http://www.sybpress.com)).

**VA Smith** is the author of the poetry collections *Biking Through the Stone Age* (Kelsay, 2022) and *American Daughters* (Kelsay, 2023). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in dozens of literary journals and anthologies, among them: *The Southern Review*, *Calyx*, *West Trade Review*, and *Third Wednesday*. A former teaching professor at Penn State University and the founder of Chancellor Writing Services, VA is currently at work on a third collection of poems titled *On Environmental Adaptability* (when she is not biking, hiking, loving on her partner, friends and family, or serving as a home chef).

**Georgia San Li** is currently at work on a novel, poetry and other writings. Her poetry and writing appear or are forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Confluence* (UK), *Eclectica*, *Litro Magazine* (UK), and elsewhere. Her debut poetry collection *Wandering*, was selected as a finalist by Minerva Rising and accepted for publication by an independent press. She has been supported by the Kenyon Review Novel Workshop, Community of



Writers Workshop at Olympic Valley, and the Breadloaf Translators' Conference. She has worked in cities including London, Tunis, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Paris, Wilhelmshaven and Tokyo. She currently lives in New England. Twitter: [@GeorgiaSanLi2](#); Instagram: [Georgia2NewEngland](#)

**Morgan Bazilian** is a poet and professor of quantum physics.

**Bryce Shepherd** I am currently a student at the University of North Florida and will be graduating this upcoming December. My bachelor degree will be in history and you can typically find me writing my poetry at a local Chili's or having my dog listen to me read them aloud.

**Kate Krems** "Cavalier" is Inspired by the works of experimental filmmakers like Maya Deren. This fictional short story follows Noel as she self destructs and dissociates in a world of suburban demons.

**Lucia Coppola** is an ESL teacher who is originally from New York and has lived in France and California. She has a B.A. in Medieval Studies from Swarthmore College and a professional background in dance and body techniques. Her writing is informed by nature and traditional storytelling. Some of her work has been read on the radio and published online and in print Her poetry collection Talking With Trees was published by Plants & Poetry in 2022. You can follow Lucia on Instagram at [luciacoppolapoetry](#) and Facebook at [Lucia Coppola Poetry](#).

**Dom Fonce** is the former founding Editor-in-Chief of *Volney Road Review*. He is the author of the two poetry chapbooks Here, We Bury the Hearts (Finishing Line Press, 2019) and Dancing in the Cobwebs (Finishing Line Press, 2022). He is an MFA candidate at the NEOMFA (Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts). His poetry has been published in *Gordon Square Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, *Delmarva Review*, *Jenny Magazine*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and elsewhere. He lives and writes in Youngstown, Ohio.

**Meghan Sullivan** is a poet, teacher, Long Islander, and lover. Currently living and working in New Orleans, she is the runner up for the 2022 Andrea-Saunders Gereighty Award and an Associate Editor for *Bayou Magazine*. She is pursuing her MFA in Poetry in the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans. You can find her work in *Tilted House*, *Peauxdunque Review*, and more.

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