

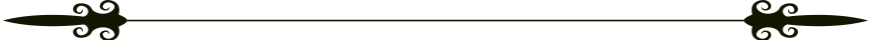
Steam Ticket

A Third Coast Review

Volume 27

Spring 2024

Steam Ticket
A Third Coast Review
Volume 27
Spring 2024



Editor
Sidney Mitchell

Prose Editor
Alannys Cruz Lambert

Poetry Editor
Sophie Byrne

Prose Readers
Sid Diong
Robert Knutson
Isabella Krall
George Robords
Brandon Showers
Ethan Warbelton

Poetry Readers
Julia Bright
Maddie Brunner
Adeline Minett
Eleanor Tezak
Anna Weyenberg

Art Editor
Ethan Warbelton

Submissions Manager
Alexus Wilson

Public Relations & Outreach
Alexus Wilson

Faculty Advisor
Matt Cashion

A Letter from the Editor

Very early in the making of *Steam Ticket* Volume 27, I was told 140 pages was the maximum length I could use for the issue. At first, I thought 140 pages was entirely *too* much room, that I would maybe hit page 100 and be done with the entire thing.

Then my lovely prose editor Alannys Cruz Lambert and her team of prose readers absolutely adored several pieces of fiction that were all over 3,500 words. I loved the pieces too, so I finalized their acceptance. At this same time my poetry editor Sophie Byrne and her team of readers were accepting at least four pieces every time we met to discuss. Faster than I had anticipated, these pages began to fill themselves.

Halfway through the reading process I realized that I would not only *want* 140 pages to work with, but also that I would *need* 140 pages in order to publish all the pieces that were loved by my team. Organizing and formatting this volume was almost as difficult as choosing which pieces to publish in the first place. I spent too much time staring at this document in the past couple months. There were nights after a full day of classes and two shifts at my jobs where I propped my laptop onto my thighs and stared at this document for six hours straight.

I wanted this to be perfect, *needed* it to be perfect.

This is not my first rodeo working on *Steam Ticket*. I had the opportunity to work as a prose reader for Volume 25, so I was a little familiar with the ins and outs of this literary journal. Within days of working on that issue, I knew I wanted to be editor at some point.

When I had the opportunity to work with *Steam Ticket* again, I took the chance with zero consideration. Even though my workload and schedule these last few months has been less than ideal, I couldn't pass up the opportunity.

Volume 27 of *Steam Ticket* includes work from over 70 authors and artists from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Venezuela and twenty-six U.S. States. You will find that the work published in this volume is beautiful, heartbreaking and mesmerizing all at the same time.

I give my thanks to every person who contributed to this issue. Without your talents *Steam Ticket* would cease to exist. A thanks to my team of editors and readers who took everything in stride (even my last minute deadlines and long texts). And to our advisor Matt Cashion, who creates a safe space for the production of *Steam Ticket* and smiles and nods at all my crazy rambling. Matt Cashion is the core of this journal; he breathes within every page.

So here it is. The final product. Months in the making (years technically if you consider my time thinking about it while I was a prose reader two years ago). 140 pages (exactly) full of art that I hope sticks with you at least half as much as it has stuck with me.

Sidney Mitchell
Editor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Steam Ticket is produced each spring by committed UW-La Crosse students enrolled in English 320: *Literary Production and Publication*. We take pride in carefully reviewing all submissions and choosing stories, poems, and art submitted by artists from around the world, celebrating the diversity of our submissions.

Our *Steam Ticket* staff would like to thank all those involved in the creation of Volume 27, including:

Dr. Karl Kunkel, Dean of the College of Liberal Studies, and Dr. Kate Parker, English Department Chair, for their continued support.

Kelly Arnost, our most-exceptional English Department Administrative Assistant whose super-heroic skills we appreciate year-round.

David Piro, Assistant Director of Creative Services, for help in turning our vision on the pages into a real-life publication.

Teri Holford and the staff of Murphy Library's Special Collections for keeping all volumes of *Steam Ticket* safe on the shelves.

Matt Cashion, our creative, supportive, knowledgeable, talented, hilarious, and humble advisor, for his encouragement, insight and jokes. Thanks for your endless knowledge and kindheartedness.

Thanks also to all who submitted work to *Steam Ticket*. We sincerely appreciate the time and effort you devote to your art. It was a privilege to read your work.

And lastly, we appreciate everyone who appreciates these pages. For more information on *Steam Ticket*, visit www.steamticket.org and join our *Steam Ticket* community on Facebook and Instagram.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Fiction

Zach Keali'i Murphy	The Mallards Of St. Catherine	11
Beth Sherman	The Feather	15
Deborah M. Prum	Hazel Moon	24
Heather Bartos	Escape Money	35
Mark Jacobs	Dinner & Heartbreak	43
Thomas DeConna	Merciless Acts	58
Jacob Butlett	Blue Gazebo	82
Kate LaDew	A Group Of Children With Bruises Under Their Eyes	96
Ryan Harbert	Chomp And Model	111
Bien Santillan Mabbayad	Nyūjō Libation	122

Nonfiction

Pina Than	How To Fold <i>Seibon Kibon Kata</i>	105
------------------	--------------------------------------	-----

Poetry

Cecil Morris	The Interviewer Asks Where I See Myself In Five Years, #4	8
Rachel Beachy	Tiny Universe	9
	A Mutual Education	10
Craig Evenson	Faith	12
Diane Webster	Nun None	13
David Sheskin	Gossip	14
Dave Morrison	Too Quiet	16
Alex Swartzentruber	Seriously, What Did You Just Eat?	17
Amy Haddad	This Little Girl Here Being Treated By The Visiting Nurse For Burns To Her Legs, Later Died From Her Injuries – 1932, 2000.1.37	18
Kirk Glaser	The Crossing	19
	I Breathe	21
Diane Kendig	What's To Go On	22
Matthew J. Spireng	That Night	23
Barry Peters	Meeting My Father's Friend For Lunch	31

Kevin Carey	Daisy	32
Robert Herschbach	Named For Swann	34
Jim Stewart	Freeing A Keeper	39
	For The Children To Find	40
Michael Salcman	Cards On The Table	41
Elizabeth Hill	For Jackie - Riverwoods Retirement	
	Community 2020	42
Michael Milburn	Honorary Uncle	55
Joseph D. Milosch	Hobo Lizard	56
	Under The Shadow Of Rain	57
Lia Smith-Redmann	Valmy Thresherec	67
Jake Rinloan	The Spaces Between	68
Michael Waterson	Encore	69
Donald Illich	No Quit	71
	Love Beats Indecisiveness	72
Joanne M. Clarkson	Homeless Stones	73
	Bread Poem	74
John Grey	Danielle	75
Nancy Kay Peterson	The Estate Sale	77
Jonathan Everitt	Mrs. Macdonald	78
Kate Kingston	Notes From The Undertaker	79
Buff Whitman-Bradley	Frog Songs	81
Jesse Millner	Lightning Ekphrastic	89
Sandra Salinas Newton	Universal	90
Josh Mahler	The Sun And The Moon	91
George Freek	Summer's End	92
Deborah H. Doolittle	All Spring As You Wait For That First Person	93
Sam Ambler	Flowers	95
Jan Ball	Easter At The Farm	98
Maureen Sherbondy	Disappearing Game Sonnet	99
Claire Scott	Slipping Through Wormholes	100
E.J. Evans	The Gift	101
Meredith Trede	Beating Against The Current	102
Carol L. Gloor	Long Dance	103
David Sahrner	The Black Dog	107
Julia Dailey	Dear Self	108
Malissa Rodenburg	Twin Flame	109
John Cullen	You Know Where You Should Start	110

Aidan Donahue	Clown Disease	118
Penelope Scambly Schott	Never Believing They Deserve To Starve	120
	Spell The Word Joy	121
Corbett Buchly	The Boys	129
	Wasp Logic	130
Noah Gassman	Eggs	131

Art

Abbie Brandao	Lucy	Front Cover
	Lemons	30
Seth Polfus	Layers of Luminance	Back Cover
	500 Million Years Later	94
Bill Wolak	The Hallucinations Stubborn Scar	20
Natali Herrera-Pacheco	Dogma	33
Hiroshi Watanabe	Nagano, Japan	70
	American Museum of Natural History, New York	80
Rachelle Steele	The Mage	76
Irina Tall Novikova	Snow Dragon	104
Contributors		132

**THE INTERVIEWER ASKS WHERE
I SEE MYSELF IN FIVE YEARS, #4**

Cecil Morris

I will be standing before three-headed Cerberus,
my heavy shield and broad sword discarded, fears controlled,
prepared to face the three slavering mouths, the canines
yellowed, bared, ready to rend my flesh. No camouflage.
No body armor. Animal to animal. Strength
to strength. Like Heracles, I will subdue the hound
of Hades and rescue you from darkened underworld
though you are neither Theseus nor Persephone.
I see myself heroic, robed in the lion's skin,
a figure to be acknowledged, to be carved from stone—
so much more than I am now, supplicant at your table.
I see myself anywhere but here in this beige room
before this panel of interrogating faces.
In five years I will be millions of light years away,
across galaxies, piloting an X-Wing fighter
toward the single weakness on the death star and soaring
with my loyal drone to the pantheon of legends.
Five years from now, I will still be unstoppable Link
defeating Bosses and saving the Princess Zelda.

TINY UNIVERSE

Rachel Beachy

I wanted to know which planet shone
Outside the window where I stood
While the coffee brewed
I would look it up later –
The children were waking and the coffee
Was nearly done
But when I picked up my pen to make note of it
I started a grocery list instead
The apple bowl sat empty in front of me
And the girls would be asking for them
Sliced in the shapes of things like stars
Here was the universe, then
And my place in it
Let me be clear:
It was as bright if not more so
And I was no less amazed.

A MUTUAL EDUCATION

Rachel Beachy

There comes a time to
Teach the baby to fall asleep
On her own
To hold her until her eyes nearly close
But not quite
To make way
For dreams to carry her
So it begins:
A lesson in letting go
At just the right moment.

THE MALLARDS OF ST. CATHERINE

Zach Keali'i Murphy

Stewart came from a town where the water was abundant but never clean. Lillian came from a town where there wasn't enough water to keep the wildfires at bay.

Every Sunday morning they'd meet at a lone, wooden bench by the secluded pond at St. Catherine Trail. In the middle of the pond sprouted a fountain. On those hot days, the wind-blown mist from the glorious spout would make them feel reborn again. A set of weeping willow trees stretched over the east side of the pond, their leaves always on the verge of taking a dip. Wildflowers painted the perimeter, and sometimes, Stewart and Lillian were lucky enough to see a monarch butterfly flutter by.

A flock of mallard ducks made the pond their refuge in the warmer months. It was a frenzy of wet feathers, powerful splashes, enthusiastic quacks, and deep dives. Stewart and Lillian became so familiar with the mallards that they could point out the unique quirks of each one. There was the one with the white spot on its breast that looked like a cloud. There was the one that hopped instead of waddled. And there was the one that quacked in a remarkably deep pitch that always made Stewart and Lillian laugh.

When they sat on the bench, time seemed to halt and zip by in a flash all at once. Some days there were no words needed, and other days all the words were needed. They shared what they wanted to share, and left out what they wanted to leave out. Sometimes, they'd squint their eyes and see a pair of turtles poke their heads out from the pond and greet the sunshine.

Stewart and Lillian thought about carving their initials into the bench, but they ultimately concluded that it would be too cliché. They never exchanged phone numbers, for fear that it would take away the magic of their time at their sacred place. Before the winter showed its harsh might, the mallards would disappear. Stewart and Lillian would say their goodbyes, retreat from the cold, and dream of meeting at the pond once again.

As soon as the snow cleared and the ground thawed, they'd be back sitting on their beloved bench together. Shortly after, the mallards would return. Stewart and Lillian always wondered how the mallards found their way back to the same little pond after being so far away for so many moons.

One sunny March day, Stewart showed up to the bench, his face glowing with a peaceful smile. But Lillian wasn't there. He showed up the next Sunday, but she wasn't there. April, May, June, July, August, September, and October passed, and she wasn't there.

After the winter, Stewart came back to look for Lillian every Sunday. Years slipped by. The mallards returned every spring. And the weeping willows wept a little more.

FAITH

Craig Evenson

It's a Baptist cold call.
He wants to talk about my faith
but all I have to share
is how earlier I'm reading
a good book in my quiet yard
and the light is like wings through the branches
and I can look up
as it pleases
into the light and shadow,
shimmying on the leaves
on their buoyant branches
or light hardening between my fingers,
a god or a cat waking up to itself,
light riding a keyboard of spider silk,
how I set my glasses in the grass
to see better
hear better,
and how I look at my parrot
and he looks at me
and we nod our heads.
I want to say I have faith
in thin air
that host
that body
but he's gone by then.

NUN NONE

Diane Webster

I never met a nun, but Annette reminds
me of one in black and white movies.
I can almost see a godly halo
glowing around her head.

Until one day I step into a conversation,
and she spits, "That flaming bitch!"
Aghast, I laugh witnessing
the pedestal burn and char to ash
blown about by sparks in her eyes.

I see the nun still but beneath
a dragon guards her gates
with eyes flashing at night to warn
predators to back off even as chills
creep down your back, and I'm glad
she's my friend.

Seems you've
Ruined
Or at the very least
Upset
More than a few people's lives
Is what I tell
The large red and green bird
I found napping yesterday morning
In a cage outside my front door
...
Abandoned by my sister
An inveterate animal lover
Who later that day
In a state of hysteria
Screamed over the phone
"That blabbing bitch has ruined my life!"
...
Repeated all the sweet nothings she'd uttered to Carl
To Charlie
To Veronica
And our mother
Repeated them even to the parish priest
...
Now perched atop the chandelier
With more than a few of its feathers
Floating down to the dining room table
The poor thing has obviously been under great stress
...
As it stares at me inquisitively
I feel obliged to say
Yes
Being relocated is difficult
But it's the price one must pay
Even a parrot
For being a
Gossip

THE FEATHER

Beth Sherman

Feather. n. [Old English, from *febre*]. 1. One of the epidermal appendages of a bird, consisting of three parts, the quill, the shaft, and the vane. 2. Attached to the base of an arrow to direct its flight. 3. The foamy crest of a wave (obsolete). 4. That which has insignificant weight, a very small thing. 5. Smaller than the length of you, floating and bobbing, a grainy image on the screen. 6. Also: to feather an oar, turning it gently as it leaves the water at the end of each stroke so it may pass through the air edgeways. 7. Plumage. 8. To glide, airborne and silent. 9. Your eyes flat stones at the bottom of a river. 10. Waiting to surface, eager for light. 11. Your feathers hide what lurks beneath the skin – stomach, intestines, blood. 12. Can you hear the scolding *krak* of the house wrens as we sit on the back porch, waiting? 13. Their feathers an unremarkable shade of brown. 14. Do you sense that soon there will be tubes attached to your body, the whirl of machines forcing your heart to beat? 15. You could have knocked me down with a feather, as in much surprised, astounded. 16. Everything after you will be different. 17. Almost no memories and a tiny wooden box. 18. After, wanting to pluck the wren from the magnolia bush, wring its fragile neck. 19. Dirty spring, the leaves so new it hurts to look at them. 20. You are somewhere colder, the deadening chill of perpetual winter. 21. An object almost without weight, capable of being moved with the greatest ease. 22. Also, to give wings to, for flight. 23. Your little bones placed in a box with no marker. 24. To make a quivering movement (obsolete) while flitting from place to place.

TOO QUIET

Dave Morrison

It's dark, as if someone
has draped a great black
towel over the house.
Inside our little birdcage
the bulbs glow, we make
our little sounds, we move
back and forth.
We have no idea what goes
on in other houses, what
goes on out between the
trees, on the sidewalk.
Maybe something unusual,
maybe not.
I don't remember how things
used to be. I remember how
I felt, sometimes. I remember
cigarettes, and a particular
kind of hunger, worry.
I remember an unrealistic
hope that burned for a
surprisingly long time.
I remember bursts of
enjoyment. I remember
noticing that I was broke.
Out in the dark, green
things are shoving their way
to the surface, birds sleep in
trees, shadows roam from house
to house.
It's quiet – in an old Western
someone would add too quiet.
And then something surprising
would happen.

SERIOUSLY, WHAT DID YOU JUST EAT?

Alex Swartzentruber

Some little parts of your day
you will remember forever.
Crashing your bike,
getting a big laugh,
or learning new music.
But most slips away.
Immediately
and you forget
what you ate for lunch
before you even have dinner.
And after dinner
You watch tv and it goes
in one eye and out the other.
Same with your telephone.
So how do you know if you're
Really living? It's hard.
So pay attention.

**THIS LITTLE GIRL HERE BEING TREATED
BY THE VISITING NURSE FOR BURNS TO HER LEGS,
LATER DIED FROM HER INJURIES – 1932, 2000.1.37**

Amy Haddad

A crib hangs from coarse rope
tied to a crossbeam, over a bed
pushed against the wall where
three of them play and sleep.
The cramped basement holds nine,

dark save the light from kerosene lamps.
An old door slants atop fruit crates,
a makeshift table where bread is sliced,
beans soaked, and the occasional chicken
carved. No wonder the fry pan tipped

off the stove, the hot grease fusing
the muslin dress to her white calves.
This little girl is the oldest, the one who helps
her mother with the six younger children.
She gasps as the pan clatters and splashes,

then nothing, no cries of pain, only a soft sorry
for ruining supper. She crouches to retrieve
the bacon from the dirt floor. Days later,
when the nurse comes, the burns are covered
in lard, already infected. Likely beyond help

but the girl looks strong, face serene
like a Madonna. No chance to heal her
in this squalor. The girl is moved to a clinic
where a photographer takes her picture
for a news piece on immigrants.

The nurse poses at the head of the bed.
The girl has never seen a photograph
but the man behind the camera coaxes
her to look his way. She leans her chin
on her hand, the play of a shy smile

on her lips. She doesn't complain
because the burns are deep, the nerves
numb and for the first time in her life,
she has the whole bed to herself.

THE CROSSING

Kirk Glaser

His final bid to skirt the passage,
a bottle of pills rattling in hand.

Beyond words, he motions you
to place them in his mouth. By the bed
you stand steady as a rock reef, wave
battered, only your head turning side to side.

All his will to spill them in his palm,
cup the vessels as they are tossed
by the trembling surge of fingers.
He raises them to mouth, hand drops,
a dead wife grips his wrist holding
him to life and the torpor of his pain.

A modern, no dread of the nothing
he presumes on the other side,
no fantasy of ancestors or angels,
only indignity he fears:

*Not the way my mother suffered, months
in that hospital booked to machines.*

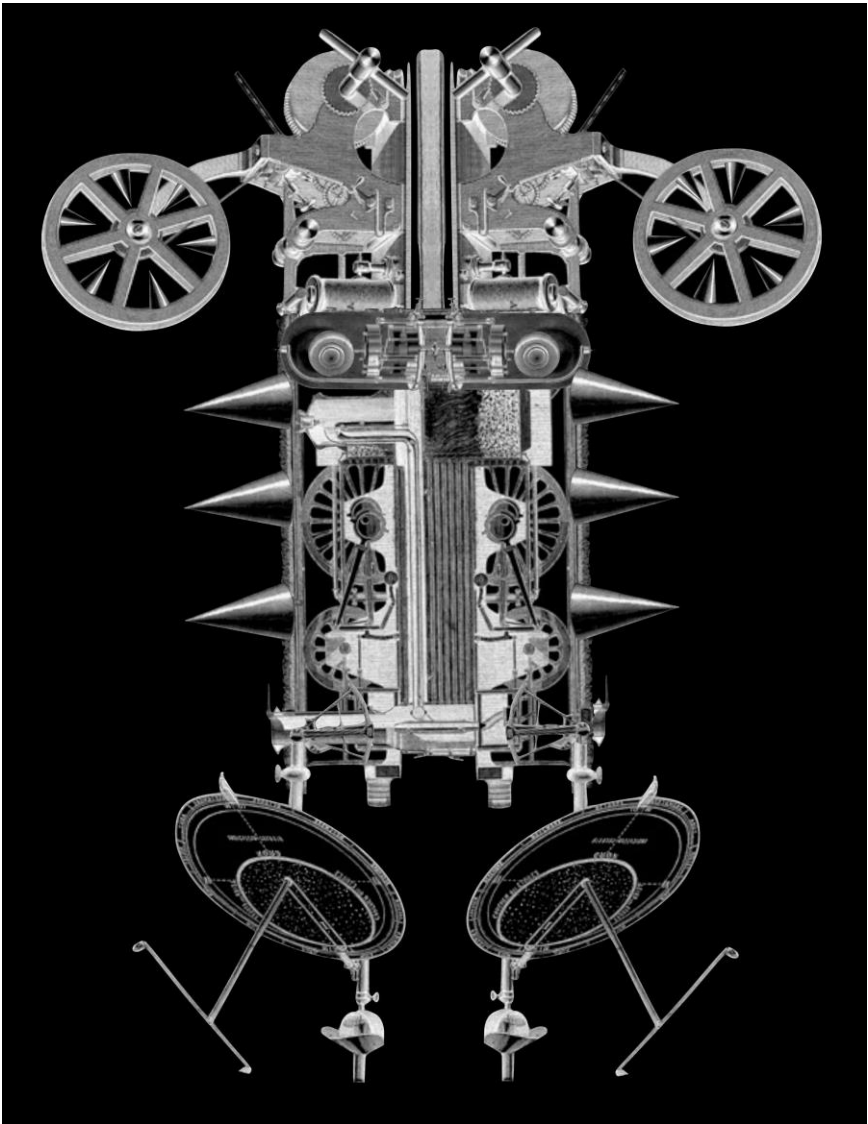
Home, lots of morphine, his last demand,
the powder coin to speed the crossing.

He tries to lift pills to his mouth again,
calculating numbers in nonsense sums:

*How many do I need to fill the sail?
How many to scuttle the ship?*

They spill across the sheets,
minnows darting from his reach.

Fingers flounder blindly for white
on white, until the hand falls still.



I BREATHE

Kirk Glaser

Reek in the doorway
when we enter the house
a waft from rotten
teeth in the mouth

I swell

We scrub log walls
seal cracks in floors
opens windows wide
still flinch at threshold
stench clinging
like oil to skin
forgotten pound of meat
behind cellar door

I seep

Each unknown to
each we dream a woman
in the kitchen 3AM
who hums who leans on
a rod womb speared
blood swirling into batter
she folds with a spoon
baking cookies for no one

I cling

a man at the table
who stitches mouths shut
wife and sons
slumped in chairs

Pass through me

We burn sage
smudge each room
offer prayers for the dead
as if pungent smoke
will close what seethes
hoards hurt creased
in forgotten skin

If you dare

In the house of dream
desire lures
cracks walls
sets hooks
under skin
and pulls us in

To enter my breath

WHAT'S TO GO ON

Diane Kendig

"It is not much to go on, I know." – Ada Limón

Once it was a woman who stayed with me, not knowing
I'd been thinking hard about a razor blade
in the bathroom cabinet. For nearly all that year
it was just that Lake Erie, the smallest of the Greats
hadn't left overnight, still lapped at my shred of beach.

For two years, I tried to be it for my sister.
That still stands for something though little
is left of it, her ashes I keep meaning to scatter
on Sippo Lake after twenty years on my shelf.
Unlike some of my friends, birds just don't
do it for me, but this year, my first in fifty
with no family reunion on the Fourth of July,
it was Karen's invitation to her large backyard.

I try to be it, call Kim to say she'll be okay
if she can't have children, though I have no proof.
I drive the asylum seeker five hours to her next
safe space. I can't pray, so I try to be
a prayer in motion. Not much, I know.
I do go on.

THAT NIGHT

Matthew J. Spireng

Dead. She was dead. On a gurney
in the hospital morgue after the bus
she'd been on slammed into the back

of the flatbed truck and somehow—pale,
pale white in her underwear, not
a visible injury—she was dead. It was

serious, but the cop I was shadowing
as a reporter thought he'd test me, so
I was asked to hold her hand so he could

roll her fingerprints, and I did. I don't recall,
decades later, how her hand felt, or when
I learned her name, which I've by now forgotten.

Dead. She was dead. And there were people
who cared, people who could tell us her name
without the need for me to hold her lifeless hand,

but they were not there. We were. I was.
And she was. And she was dead. And I was
asked to help by holding her hand. And I did.

HAZEL MOON

Deborah M. Prum

One blistering hot day in June, eleven-year-old Hazel found herself waiting on the sagging front porch of her Grammy Moon's ramshackle rambler. She'd never met the old woman. Furthermore, she hadn't even known she had a grandmother until the week before when Hazel's dying mother whispered, "Your father has a momma. Living up north, Ashburn way. Be sure to remember that now."

The night after cancer stole her mother, Hazel's drunk father skipped town. The next morning, the mailman discovered Hazel crying by the rose bushes in the yard. He drove her to Child Welfare who wasted no time tracking down Grammy Moon.

Two days later, there stood Hazel, feeling equal parts numb and glum, watching as her caseworker lifted the nicked brass knocker on Grammy's splintery red door. The woman hadn't made it to a second knock before a tall, skinny lady with flyaway Einstein hair burst out. "My grandbaby! I've been waiting for this day!"

Hazel jumped a half step back, clutching a paper sack filled with all her worldly goods: three dingy white shirts, two pairs of patched denim shorts, ragged pajamas, a long plaid dress, and a hairbrush missing most of its bristles.

Grammy Moon drew Hazel toward her. She kissed the top of her head then gave her a bone crushing hug. "Come in. Come on in. Let me show you your room."

Her grandmother led Hazel to the back of the house. "Your daddy stayed here." A cotton quilt covered a twin bed. Each square pictured an old timey cowboy riding a horse, or herding cattle, or sitting by a fire. Nothing much on the walls except a couple of black and white photos of a small boy. The child resembled her father, his prominent ears being a giveaway. Out the window, beyond scrubby bushes, she saw train tracks.

That next morning, while standing in the kitchen, Hazel discovered that when the 7:00 freight train roared by, the dishes trembled in the cupboard. When Hazel looked at the shelves with alarm, Grammy launched into a history of the plates.

"My brothers and sisters gave me and your grandfather those dishes as a wedding present." Grammy Moon paused. "They saved up green stamps from the A & P. Then when they had enough, redeemed them for a whole set." Her grandmother showed Hazel the plates: beige with green line drawings of American patriots, images of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and other guys with pigtails.

Those first few days, Hazel held her breath, waiting for what seemed inevitable: Grammy losing her temper or taking a swat at her or drinking herself into oblivion. Even though the inevitable never happened, Hazel kept

her head low. She didn't side-eye her grandma or back talk in any way. She also never relaxed enough to read a book in the living room or jump in any puddles just for the joy of jumping.

One August evening, after dinner, Hazel sat wide-eyed in front of a three-layered red velvet birthday cake decorated with hot pink roses, lime-green leaves and thirteen blazing candles, the thirteenth added for good luck. Grammy Moon slid the cake onto the table. "Surprise! Happy birthday! Make a wish, baby."

Hazel could not muster up a wish, not even a low expectation wish, because she felt unable to imagine anything good could happen to her. Hazel's face must have reflected that emotion because her grandmother said, "Don't live life looking at a half-empty spoon. Live big, sweetheart. Think of it as half-full."

With great effort, Hazel did not roll her eyes. "Not a spoon, Grammy. A glass. A person sees a glass as half-full or half empty."

"You talking about glasses? My glass is overflowing. So is yours. You just don't know it yet."

Every morning, Hazel started her day with hot cocoa and either eggs and crisp toast or oatmeal and blueberries served on the patriot plates. That September, when Hazel climbed onto the yellow bus, she realized it was the first time she'd ever attended school with a full stomach. That warm, satisfied sensation in her belly tempted her to feel almost happy and almost safe.

On weekends, they both slept in, then by midmorning ate pancakes, heavy on real maple syrup. They took their meals on green stamp plates but used fancy silverware from Grammy Moon's grandmother's silver chest. "Makes me feel as if every meal is a celebration," Grammy told Hazel.

One day at dinner, as Grammy served Hazel a fried chicken cutlet and mashed potatoes, she said, "This was both your father and your grandfather's favorite supper."

Bracing herself, Hazel asked questions that had been bothering her since she'd arrived months before. "Why don't you ever talk about my grandfather? And why didn't I know about you until now?"

Grammy spooned buttered peas onto Hazel's plate. "Your daddy walked out at eighteen. Never came back. Didn't call. Didn't write. Broke my heart." She pulled up a chair and began to eat.

Hazel waited for her grandmother to continue. When she didn't, Hazel asked, "Why?"

"I'd rather not say. It's not right to speak ill of the dead."

Hazel tried to keep her voice steady but didn't succeed. "Dead? What do you mean?"

Grammy Moon sighed. “Your grandfather was a complicated man. He’d spent fifteen years in the Marine Corps before we married. Your daddy and he tangled a lot.”

Hazel understood that her grandmother couldn’t bear to think of her spoon as anything but half full, never wanted to admit any situation could be less than wonderful. However, she needed to know the truth. “Tangled?”

“Lots of shouting and fighting. My husband believed that roughing up our boy would straighten him out.” Grammy shook her head. “I should have stepped in.”

Hazel watched Grammy’s eyes brim with tears. “I begged him not to go. But on his birthday, your daddy walked out the front door and down the path, without so much as a glance back. Two years later, your grandfather’s heart gave out.” Grammy’s face looked sad, her smile wrinkles curving downward. “Some days I miss him, but most days I don’t.”

Hazel never brought up the subject again. Instead, she eased into Grammy Moon’s comfortable and comforting daily rhythm. On Fridays, they’d rent a movie, being careful to choose films that made them both laugh and cry. Grammy would say, “A good cry at the end of a movie is like somebody giving your achy soul a hug.” On those nights, Grammy Moon would pull a stainless-steel pan of brownies out of the oven eight minutes early to preserve their inner gooey-ness. She’d scoop a high-quality vanilla bean ice cream on top. Then, they’d settle in, two silver forks and a pan of warm deliciousness between them.

On weekdays, all the way through high school, Hazel would come home to a plate of saltine crackers smeared with chunky peanut butter and homemade blueberry jam, stacked on a TV tray. Grammy Moon sat in the front room, feet up on a lumpy, green hassock, sitting on a lumpier brown couch, looking at her shows. Hazel would snuggle up to her grandmother, first watching a soap opera, then a game show called *Queen for a Day*, Grammy’s favorite. They’d both cry when a contestant’s hard luck story won them a new washing machine or stove or a bus trip to see an ailing relative. On more than one occasion, in fact on many occasions, Grammy would say, “You see, life works out.”

Hazel would nod but felt torn. She wanted to embrace her grandmother’s theory that life always worked out, but she wondered if Grammy’s optimistic view caused her to ignore reality. Maybe Grammy’s relentlessly positive spin blinded her to her husband’s meanness. Would Hazel’s father’s life have turned out better if Grammy had stood up to her husband? Regardless, each day with Grammy Moon enticed Hazel to tamp down her own pessimism and instead lean toward the belief this world might hold good.

At age twenty Hazel met Lonnie, some guy in her community college business math class. After their Tuesday and Thursday morning sessions, they'd sit on a wooden bench in the school lounge and eat lunch. Without varying, Lonnie brought a smelly tuna sandwich and three Hostess chocolate cupcakes, the kind with the white squiggle on the frosting. He never offered her one, which she should have taken as a bad sign but didn't.

Often, Lonnie would pull out the class homework and point to a problem. "Hazel, I don't get this."

Hazel soon realized that his rudimentary questions were not a flirtatious ploy, he truly did not understand the basics of business math. She'd use parts of her lunch as visual aids. "Look here. Ten almonds, four pieces of cheese, and six grapes. You have a total of twenty items. What percentage of those items are almonds?"

A blank stare.

However, Hazel overlooked all the red and pink flags that life unfurled within plain sight. No fan of Lonnie, Grammy Moon once asked, "Do you love the man? Can you see yourself spending your life with him?"

Hazel said, "He doesn't drink, smoke or gamble. In fact, Grammy, he reminds me of you. Lonnie feels safe. Consistent." Not wanting to offend her grandmother, she didn't add, "He's the opposite of your son, my deadbeat father, who abandoned me."

Lonnie took Hazel bowling on Saturday nights, they'd hug (chastely) when he dropped her home. One night, instead of bowling, he took her to Applebee's where, after a barbecued pork chop dinner with two sides, he asked, "Will you marry me?"

She said, "Why not?" Later, she decided she should have explored her own question more thoroughly.

Lonnie came home from his line supervisor job at a ball bearing factory by 5:19 pm every night. He never smiled, laughed, or veered from his daily routine: work, wordless supper and then an hour of building models of Civil War models in the basement. Hazel realized she hadn't married for love; she'd married Lonnie for his predictability, which, after six months of marriage, she loathed.

Their passionless union produced Hazel's one child, Jonah. Lonnie hated that the baby's presence meant they lived on a roller coast of uncontrollable events, croup, spit up, sleepless nights, and blown out diapers.

One morning, after eating his whole wheat toast (no butter, no jam), he said, "I am not a good fit for fatherhood."

He left town that day, heading to his mother's house and another factory job in his hometown, five hundred miles away. Hazel agreed with his assessment and didn't miss him a bit. Instead, she felt grateful that he had the minimal decency to travel by bus, leaving her their beater Pontiac Tempest.

Hazel and baby Jonah moved into her old room at Grammy Moon's, then she quickly found good paying work as a bookkeeper for several small businesses in town. Over the next four years, Hazel became a certified accountant. Unlike Lonnie, she proved to have excellent business math skills.

The significant bump in salary enabled Hazel to take out a low-interest mortgage and build an addition to the house: a wing for Grammy that included a spacious bedroom and bathroom, large bay windows on all sides and large skylights over her bed and bathtub. At night, Grammy could watch the movement of the constellations and the next morning would report her sightings. At breakfast one day, she told five-year-old Jonah, "Baby boy, I saw a shower of shooting stars last night! I made a wish on every one—blessings abound, blessings all around!"

When Grammy turned ninety and her arthritis set in, knees and hips giving out, Hazel renovated the kitchen, added another bedroom and bath, then built a wrap-around deck across the back of the house. French doors from Grammy's room opened to the deck and to a view of the loblolly pines, yellow poplars and red maple trees that had grown over the tracks after the freight trains stopped running. Evenings, Hazel and Jonah, who was now in high school, would hear the bird report of the day: "A Carolina wren, fisher crow, mourning dove and one HERON sitting at the top of a loblolly pine for most of the morning—me staring at him and him staring at me!" From spring through fall, over the next two years, that heron or one of her heron buddies, spent mornings perched in the pine, communing with Grammy Moon.

At ninety-two, the summer after Jonah's high school graduation, Grammy Moon's aging body betrayed her in earnest. Within weeks, she went from using a walker to a wheelchair, until, near the end, she took her meals in bed. Hazel watched with panic as Grammy shed weight, losing muscle mass and strength. One evening, hoping that Grammy would be able to eat the soft, nourishing food, Hazel made a shepherd's pie with ground beef, mashed potatoes, carrots, and peas. Her grandmother barely touched the plate. Before she drifted off, she looked up, her brown eyes shining bright, "Baby girl, I cried myself an ocean when I thought I'd never get to meet you. Hazel Moon, you were a gift dropped down from heaven, the best blessing God ever gave me."

Hazel could only say, "Don't go. Don't leave me." Hazel slept in a chair by the bed that night. The next morning when Hazel woke, she saw Grammy Moon, looking upward and smiling.

"While you were sleeping, my heron visited me, up there in the skylight. She said she'd hatched three chicks. Three chicks! Life marches on, my dear Hazel."

Hazel glanced up. No heron. Given the pitch of the roof, the heron would have had to have been a stellar acrobat to perch for even a second.

The next morning, when Hazel walked into her room with a tray of hot oatmeal sprinkled with blueberries and a heavy glug of real Vermont maple syrup, her grandmother had passed, her face tilted toward the skylight. Grammy Moon's only granddaughter curled up at the foot of the old woman's bed and wept hard.



MEETING MY FATHER'S FRIEND FOR LUNCH

Barry Peters

He flew over the hump in the war, my father says. The Himalayas! China! The Allies!
We look in each other's eyes, the pilot and I. Egg salad sandwiches arrive, egg salad leaking out the sides. The pilot chews in silence. My father: *More napkins, please!* Out the window, in the parking lot, rows of classic cars. Pastel hoods propped on struts, angled like wings. Men dipping their heads, examining the mechanics. Men nodding, impressed at all the old parts.

DAISY

Kevin Carey

We planned on sprinkling your ashes
on the beach where you loved to run
but they're still sitting in a box on my bookcase
next to the folded American flag
from my father's funeral.
The last time I took you to the beach
we went up and down once,
the cold wind, the waves tall and
breaking white,
and I saw you standing in a shallow puddle
by the rocks, your skinny black legs shivering.
You looked toward the car like
you'd had enough.
That last night covered by a blanket,
worn out after fourteen years
and the hard work of being so good.
Later I was talking to a friend on the phone,
all she ever wanted, I said,
was to go where I was going.



NAMED FOR SWANN

Robert Herschbach

They wouldn't have put it there if they didn't want us
to get wet, you'll argue later,
meaning the stone toad that shoots out a jet
quick as a real one's fly-bound tongue.
They wouldn't print NO SWIMMING
on the basin if they didn't want kids
paddling with finesse above
the submerged letters.
There wouldn't be a clear day
and a popsicle truck, and the promise of fun
among the reflective skyscrapers,
and the fountain's rim wouldn't be wide enough
for a pair of pink sneakers
to rest on, warming in the sun.
Daughter who doesn't listen,
flouter of admonitions,
you'll have no end of explanations
later, all of them true. I can see
the fountain needs you in it,
for it is a work of contrasts:
the giant, muscled figures at its center
and the mythical creatures
whose motion they arrest--a pike, a swan--
invite an anarchy of children,
heedless of rules or historical allegory,
ignorant of Mr. Swann and his tenure
as Philadelphia Fountain Society president.
When you're done, we'll be waiting for you
without a change of clothes, towel-less,
and you'll walk, dripping, along with us
in the summertime heat,
discomfort an afterthought,
having done your part.

Jamie rocked back and forth in the rocking chair. Everything was done, all ready for Mom to come back home. She'd be happy. The dishes were drying on the rack, gleaming in the late afternoon sun, the dish towel damp with her efforts. The wood paneling and fake wood bookshelves smelled like gooey lemon furniture polish, the kind that oozed out white and smeared the dust away. Jamie liked that smell, like the filling in a jelly donut, all sweet and clear and transparent.

Luke made a face from where he was lying on the floor, flipping through his book. She'd have to take him to the library again tomorrow, so he had something to read. The teachers all said reading was good for him.

"That stinks, Jamie," he said. "It smells like...something died in here."

"It does not!" said Jamie. "How'd you know what something dead smelled like anyway?"

"I know," said Luke, narrowing his eyes into squints of mystery. "I don't have to tell you."

Jamie shrugged. "Can you take out the garbage?"

"Why?"

"I did the kitchen, Luke. And the furniture. And the breakfast and lunch."

"You're the oldest. You have to."

Jamie continued rocking back and forth. "And what's the youngest supposed to do?"

Luke thought about this for a minute. "Be cute."

Jamie smirked. "You failed doing that a long time ago. Take out the garbage, please. Mom'll like that."

Luke sighed and stood up. "I'll do it in a minute." He moved a few feet closer to the trash, sat back down on the floor, and opened his book.

It was Jamie's turn to sigh. "You really are pathetic, you know that?"

Luke looked up. "Huh?"

"The house is going to smell. You realize that, right? Mom's going to come home and this whole place will stink to high heaven."

"I said, I'll do it," Luke muttered.

Jamie rocked back and forth. She liked how the world moved, side to side, swaying back and forth until there was a sweet sliver, a little fragment in time, where you were in the middle, in the center, and all motion stopped. Nothing changing, then and there.

Mom was at work. Except that she wasn't at work. Jamie had walked by the diner on her way home from the store, earlier this afternoon. Mom's car wasn't there. Not that was why she had walked home near the diner, but she did notice it wasn't there. She should have gone and asked Mr. Avers when

Mom left yesterday, what time her shift ended. She had told Jamie she would be home by eleven, but then it got to be 2am and Jamie fell asleep, and then light seeped under the blinds in the living room and the birds started calling and cheeping outside. Jamie woke up with lines pressed into her cheek from sleeping on the couch, the fabric baking itself right into her flesh.

Nothing bad had happened to them without Mom being home. Friday quietly emptied itself into Saturday, and then now here they were melting into Saturday night. She knew what channels to watch and which ones would be too scary tonight. There were two more TV dinners in the freezer, with the little cherry pies in the corners. Luke liked the crumbly part that was on the top.

“What are you reading?” she asked Luke. She was supposed to do this too, ask what he was reading, to help him.

He looked up. “These guys went into a bank and pretended to have a gun and ran off with a bunch of money.” He scooted forward on his stomach. “I could do that.”

Jamie snorted. “I don’t think there are a lot of eight-year-old bank robbers. Don’t they have anything else they can give you to read at school?”

“I mean when I get older, I could do that,” said Luke. “And you could drive the getaway car. We could go somewhere good with the escape money. And you could pick where, since you’d be driving the car.” He looked up at Jamie. “Disneyland?”

She kept rocking, her eyes closed. The light painted the pictures on the wall, highlighting the one of all three of them taken at Sears, with a coupon one Christmas. Their mom, grinning from ear to ear, arms around them both.

It had felt like her reach was bigger then. She got bigger the closer Jamie rocked towards the picture and smaller the further Jamie rocked away.

“What’s for dinner?” Luke asked. They heard the slam of a car door and sat still, listening for footsteps. But it was quiet.

“Hungry Man,” said Jamie. Was it her mind playing tricks on her, or did her foot look swollen? Maybe one of those spiders outside had bitten her. Maybe she was coming down with a disease nobody had ever heard of before, one that would make her foot turn black and fall off. She wouldn’t need new shoes if that happened.

Luke flopped onto his back and scratched his stomach. It was so quiet. Where had everybody gone?

“We could call her again,” he said. They had called her this morning, and again around 11am, and then again after lunch. All three times they had heard their mother’s voice, and all three times it had gone to voice mail.

“She knows,” said Jamie. “She’ll be home soon.”

“But what if she’s not?” asked Luke.

Jamie closed her eyes. The ceiling fan stirred the air into a whirring, cycling breeze, not a real straight across breeze that moved things forward, but the same air, in and out, over and over again.

“I told you,” she said. “I already told you.”

There was another thump in the driveway, the thud of a car door slamming, an exclamation mark, a question mark, an ending.

“That’s her!” yelled Luke. “That’s Mom!”

Jamie continued to rock, back and forth. She would come back, and she’d see how well Jamie had managed. How Jamie always managed to manage, no matter what and for how long.

She wasn’t going anywhere.

The key scraped in the lock. Luke bounded forward like a puppy. Jamie slunk deeper into the rocker.

“Mom!” yelled Luke. “Hi, Mom!”

Their mother leaned in the doorway. She wasn’t holding anything, no bags or boxes, but something pulled on her, made her shorter than she had been just the afternoon before. Her hair was yanked back in the usual way, a sand-colored ribbon teasing her collar, a few tendrils escaping the rubber band that gripped them tight.

“Hi,” she said. Her walk was rocking, back and forth, like Jamie in the rocking chair. At church they talked about Jesus walking on the water and Jamie had wondered why this was seen as a miracle. She had seen her mom walk on the floor as if it was water, unsteady, as if the waves trembled and parted and pulsed under her feet.

Her mom’s breathing was labored, as if she was climbing a flight of stairs, but the ground they were covering was the same old flat ground they had crossed again and again.

Anyone could keep moving, anyone at all. Stopping and being still was way harder than moving. Standing on those waves was harder than walking on them.

Jamie’s mom cuddled Luke, who made a face and pulled away.

“You stink, Mom,” he said.

Jamie usually helped then. She usually walked over and asked if she needed help getting to the shower, with taking off shoes and socks.

Jamie sat, still, in the middle, between back and forth.

“Hi, Jamie,” her mom said. Could smiles be ghosts? Her lips lifted, showing her teeth, but her cheeks and eyes were stiff.

“Hi,” said Jamie, and nothing more.

“I’m going outside,” said Luke, pushing past their mom. He tried to slam the screen door, but it only whispered behind him, pulling itself slowly to its frame.

It was quiet. Just as quiet as it was before Mom came home.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” Mom said.

Jamie rocked.

“Okay,” Jamie said.

“I lost track of time,” Mom said.

Could time be lost, wondered Jamie. Could it be left behind, like a set of keys, like an unraveling sweater? How did you lose something that could be counted and measured in little slices, pinning a clock to the wall?

“It’s been three weeks since last time,” Jamie said, after a long silence.

“Oh,” said her mother, round and empty. She started with a cough, which turned into a heave, which turned into a sprint for the garbage can. And out all the poison came. At school they had read about the Greek myth where Cronus threw up after he ate all his children.

She waited until it was quiet to speak again.

“Luke didn’t take out the trash yet,” said Jamie.

Her mom made a sound between a laugh and a moan. She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her uniform and her head drooped forward.

“I need something,” she whispered.

Me too, thought Jamie.

“Do you remember that money I gave you?” Mom asked. “The change from the store last week. Do you still have that, Jamie?”

It was in her dresser, under her socks that curled into little balls like snails, that tucked in their heads like turtles.

“No,” said Jamie.

Her mom moaned again. Tears sparkled at the corners of her eyes.

“Please,” she said.

Jamie stayed in the middle, in the spot that didn’t move.

“No,” she said. “I have to get dinner for me and Luke now.”

Her mom lay down on the floor. Her ponytail flopped against her neck.

Jamie was supposed to ask if she needed a glass of soda. Jamie had bought it at the store earlier. Jamie was supposed to take her hand and help her sit, help her stand.

Jamie sat still in that rocking chair.

“I’m sorry,” her mom repeated, quieter this time.

“Me too,” said Jamie. A minute later, she stood up, her feet firm on the floor, not falling off, not being silly and catching some disease. She walked away from her mother and into the kitchen, towards dinner. And she did not look back, even when she heard the shushed shriek of the screen door as it whispered itself closed.

FREEING A KEEPER

Jim Stewart

When consciousness becomes burdensome—
is that depression?
Perhaps working on something
that might become art awakens
the best Solitaire game,
losing yourself in the gyre of creation:
all you are is the doing,
the being,
the making.
With some luck,
you might free a keeper
to warm your wintered heart.

FOR THE CHILDREN TO FIND

Jim Stewart

He feels the shells flash
in his pocket
and knows they are
eager for sand.
His hand slides in
and cups them like
the jewels they are,
each asserting a light
in the gray of this dawn.
Out they come, vibrating
on his palm.
He smiles as they glow.
With a long sigh, he
scatters them at his feet
to await the children
who will find them
as the day warms and
the sun dazzles.
He nods his satisfaction
to the sea and the sunrise,
while he turns to get more
for the children to discover.

CARDS ON THE TABLE

Michael Salzman

When they ask what kind of tumor they have
Inside their head they're really asking me for time:
Enough to say goodbye, put their papers in order
Or visit a special place other than heaven.

They're not asking for the truth you know
Or at least not the kind that will make them cry
In front of a stranger in white who remains the Other
Though also their counselor and protector.

Only the boldest think like a riverboat gambler
Playing this game, asking you to turn up the faces
Of all cards on the table, betting their last dollar
As if negotiating the future with you playing God.

But the moment you twitch they know it's a tell
Hope has had a small chance and no one holds aces.

**FOR JACKIE—
RIVERWOODS RETIREMENT COMMUNITY 2020**

Elizabeth Hill

I was obliged to visit her when I saw Dad,
an imposition on the comfortable doldrums.
I grumbled.
The mother of my childhood friend,
and Dad's bridge partner, she would lean forward,
asking about my life, perhaps because her daughter,
who lived abroad, rarely visited.
But all this made no dent. I'd cut
my visits short.
The last time I saw her,
I mentioned that I had won a prize.
She rose half-way up to congratulate me,
drawing on her failing strength.
But I was already at the door,
waving good-bye.
She faded back into her seat, exhausted.
Now she is gone, I miss her face, known all my life.
There's a hole in the heavens, day after day.

DINNER & HEARTBREAK

Mark Jacobs

Lying in bed, watching a stink bug climb the blue wall, Meg Whelan admitted that her life was a disaster. For years she had lurched from calamity to catastrophe, getting the big stuff wrong, not to mention a lot of the small stuff. Now, stink bugs invading her apartment. Where in hell did they come from? Somebody drilled a tunnel back to dinosaur days, and out crawled stinkers to remind her that her ancestors had personality flaws. She did not need reminding. Will Whelan, her father, didn't he count as an ancestor?

Back in September when she rented the place Meg had not noticed any bugs. Only in late November did they start appearing. Lately not a day went by but she found one climbing a wall or a window, clinging to a lamp shade, lying on its back like a dry little turd squeezed from the ass of a constipated devil.

She sat up. She reached for a sneaker and threw it at the bug. Nailed it. She got up and wiped its stain from the wall, scooped up the dead bug with a piece of toilet paper, flushed it down. Felt better. You didn't have to be rich to enjoy a sense of purpose.

Meg never met the woman who had lived in the apartment before she did. Victoria, she had gotten into the habit of calling her, picturing a woman whose life was a masterpiece. Victoria had poufy dark hair, and ambition, and knew how to shut down drunks hitting on her in a bar. One poison-tipped sentence from her shapely lips, and a scuzbag dropped to the floor. Victoria had moved to Montana, for the mountain views. Wouldn't you? Meg wished her every success in her new life.

She showered and cleaned up, taking the time to do her hair. It was on the big side and always a project. She had her mother's milk-and-ginger look. Irish as the day is long was how her father used to put it. Back before Will Whelan's heart hardened to a chestnut, he had sung and sung again the hundred songs of her beauty. All that was gone. After it went, she had learned the hard way not to beg.

She made coffee, scrolling through the messages on her phone. She called Angel's mother.

"Good morning, Momma Lillian."

"Go on, tell me what's good about it."

Meg visualized her on the couch, wide haunch comfortably underneath her big body, running a finger through her hair staring at the television screen and not seeing anything. Lillian had that sort-of-orange hair that used to be popular with some Black women, back in the day.

"Arthritis kicking your butt today?"

"You might could say that."

"Angel around?"

“Guess you’re talking about that worthless eldest child of mine.”

“Yeah, that one.”

“If you ain’t seen Angel what makes you think I have?”

“He’s fading on me, Lillian.”

“What you mean, fading?”

“You know what I mean. He’s fine for two weeks, then bam, he disappears. Even if he’s sitting right there in the room with me, I can’t touch him. Why is that?”

“His way, that’s all I can say. What you call fading, Angel’s been doing for a long time.”

“If he calls, tell him to come by the house, I got that thing he wanted.”

“You better hope he keep on wanting it.”

“I’m not talking about that.”

“You most certainly are.”

“I’m working tonight. It’s tomorrow I need to see him.”

Meg had lucked into a job waitressing at an upscale restaurant. It wasn’t forty hours, but the nights she did work the tips were solid. She said goodbye to Angel’s mother and hung up. Even this much forward movement was a win. It made her hungry for another one.

She went out and started the car, letting it warm up. To call her mother she went back into the house because she didn’t want to be seen in public using a flip phone. Like sending a letter by Pony Express. Lynette no-longer-Whelan lived in Fort Myers with a retired city clerk named Biff who had a knack for managing money. Since migrating south the two of them had grown fat and happy. Afternoons they drove his sparkly green Jeep to the beach and played gin rummy at a little table with low legs they stuck in the sand, a thermos of margaritas between them. Jimmy Buffet was a constant possibility. The last two words Meg’s mother wanted to hear were Will and Whelan.

“I’m on my way up to Dad’s,” Meg told her.

“And you’re telling me this because?”

Everybody knew Will Whelan was difficult, but only his ex-wife truly understood what a bear he had become.

“He won’t sign the insurance papers, so they can’t process his settlement.”

“That’s not my problem, Meg, and I’m having a hard time seeing how it’s yours. You won’t see a penny of that money.”

Months shy of retirement from the Troy police force, Will had been shot responding to a home invasion. By an African American man, of course it had to be a Black man who shot her racist father. His days as a police officer were over. Refusing to sign the paperwork for the settlement he had coming, he was making a point. What that point was, he kept to himself.

“If it was you,” Meg said to her mother, “how would you get him to sign?”

There was silence on the line, meaning Lynette intended to help.

“Sideways,” she said, finally. “Whatever you do, sweetie, don’t go at your father head on.”

It was solidarity, and good advice.

“Okay, thanks. Say hi to Biff.”

“He brought me orchids yesterday. Orchids. Can you believe that man?”

Meg went back outside reluctantly. Winter in upstate New York. Not much to commend it unless you had skis and disposable income. A crust of prehistoric snow lay on the dead yellow grass of the lawn. There was a large oak tree in the side yard. Most of the shriveled leaves still hung on the branches, waiting to be pushed out by spring growth. Alongside a thick cluster of them at a branch near the top sat a hawk of some kind. Scanning the neighborhood, looking for victims, it made her feel vulnerable.

Her first sweet short months with Angel, he had been every good thing. Boy meets girl, sweeps her off her feet; the way it was supposed to be. How come he had to fade on her? And then the idea was there, like a present you did not expect, showing up in the mail: get them in the same room, her father and her boyfriend. It would be the little victory she had a taste for.

Never mind her crummy phone. Sitting behind the wheel of her 2003 Hyundai she called Angel’s cell. Amazingly, he picked up.

“Hey, baby.”

“You’re up,” she said.

Not a smart way to open a morning conversation, but he let it slide.

“I got class.”

He was still registered at RPI. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Even the name was impressive, conjuring pictures of scientists in lab coats inventing gizmos with curlicue antennas.

Angel’s mind inclined toward math, and he had done well the first two semesters, made the dean’s list and got some scholarship money. After that, the fade. He had started late, so he was older than the other students. That was hard on him. Also, he had been hanging out with Ray-Ray Agnello lately.

“I want to see you,” she said.

He made a noise low in his throat. It was open to multiple interpretations.

“I work tonight,” she told him. “Will you come to dinner tomorrow?”

“I’ll do my best,” he said.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“What?”

“Fading. Are you tired of me?”

“I’m not tired of you, Meg.”

“Then tell me what’s going on.”

“What I’m tired of is being the Black guy who does math. I’m too old to be that cool thing they want me to be. Need to make some money. I’m putting something together.”

“Is it legal?”

“It should be.”

“Tomorrow is important to me, Angel. I need a promise. Six o’clock.”

“I’ll be there.”

She heard in his voice something like the Angel she had fallen for a year ago, and decided to believe he meant it, he was not tired of her. When they said goodbye she drove out to her father’s.

Will Whelan lived in the country. Her parents had bought the place when Meg was a junior in high school so she did not have lots of memories associated with the house. It was run down. It sagged where it ought to stand true. A few thousand bucks and some elbow grease would do the property a world of good. Wasn’t going to happen. But the situation was terrific, going up a hill past fields full of milk cows.

When he did not answer her knock she pushed her way inside.

“Dad?”

No answer. In the living room she scooped up the insurance papers, which were lying in a pile on the end table. She had gone through them before so knew there were three signatures required. They needed to be dated, too, but she could take care of that herself. She put the three sheets needing his signature at the top of the stack.

“Dad?”

“In here.”

She found him in the sun room, which had an expansive view of the back yard sloping toward winter woods, feeding logs into the open mouth of a Franklin stove. He was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt. The get-up looked unnatural on him, like a costume. She always pictured him in uniform, hat on his head, behind the wheel of his patrol car looking efficient and tough, a man who would take no lip from miscreants. Now, out of the job, he only looked old. Threads of white laced his thick black brows. His shoulders had gone round. His complexion was pasty from too much whiskey, not enough walking.

“What do you want?”

She did not rise to the bait. When he sat on a wicker sofa she sat next to him, but not too close. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to be hugged. But asking, even hinting, was against his rules. It had been worse since she started dating Angel. He was punishing her for dating a Black man.

“You hear about that gang thing in Albany, Dad?”

He shook his head. At a certain point in his slide he quit trying to hold up his half of a conversation. Talked out.

"This Mexican girl died," Meg told him. "Nineteen years old. Got pushed off a bridge or fell, depending on who you talk to. The paper said it was an initiation rite for their gang. They arrested four guys."

Turbulent waters, what she was stepping into. Her father had no better attitude toward Mexicans than he did toward African Americans. He was capable of coming out with something atrocious and hurtful but only shook his head and said, "Poor kid."

Meg casually made an 'x' on the first paper he had to sign and handed it to him with a pen. He signed. She took it back. Show nothing, say nothing.

She talked a little more about the Albany thing. When the moment felt right she handed her father the second paper to sign, and sign he did. But she had made all she could make of the poor misguided Mexican girl who fell from a bridge. She had to come up with a new topic of conversation if he was going to give her the third signature.

"I saw Chief Hurley last night."

"Oh yeah?"

Turbulent waters indeed, and now an undertow. It was a contest. Father wanted to know if daughter had the nerve to bring up a subject that might unleash his fury. If she didn't, she didn't deserve the cooperation neither of them was talking about. *This is fucked up, Meg thought, this is completely and totally fucked up.* Her mother had made her feel bad, reminding her she would see none of the settlement money. How could Lynette think she wanted it? Meg was doing this for her father, trying to protect him in his unhappy old age.

"Him and his wife came into McCluney's," she said. "He made a point of coming by my station to say hi. He's sweet. Kissed me and said I looked like a million bucks."

In the old days, Will would have said, *Chief got that wrong, didn't he? You look like two million.* Now he stood up. The way he took hold of a log, for a moment Meg thought he was going to brain her. But he threw it onto the fire in the stove. Poked more than was needed. Speaking to the fire, said, "Hurley used to be a good cop."

"He said you told him you didn't want to know what happened with Harris."

Antrell Harris was the kid who had shot him. He was a loud wannabe thug in extravagant sneakers. Respect was the one thing he wanted, the one thing he would never get, not from anybody on either side of the law.

"What do I want to know about that fucking Black bastard for?"

"He pled out."

“Course he did. Goddamn public defender saw the writing on the wall. Get caught in some citizen’s home, and then shoot a blue suit while you’re running away? Jury’s got no patience for that.”

“He won’t be out any time the next fifteen years, probably longer.”

“That supposed to make me feel good, Meg?”

Here came the moment of truth. She handed him the third piece of paper, the pen. A pause. The burnt smell of his anger hung in the air. But he signed. He handed her the pen, the paper. She took them without looking. An unusual sense of purpose drove her forward.

“I gotta work tonight.”

“It’s a job.”

“I know, I’m not complaining. I was just thinking.”

“Not something you want to do too much of?”

“Tomorrow night I’m off. Come to my place. For dinner.”

He looked at her, dumbfounded. “Why would I do that?”

“Just because.”

“I’m busy.”

“No, you’re not. Come at six.”

“What the hell’s got into you, Meg?”

She stood. He was smaller than he used to be. The ordeal of being Will Whelan was too much for his body. She wished she could shake him up, say something like I’m sick, Dad, I don’t have long to live. Absent useful melodrama, she fell back on the truth.

“I really want this, Dad. Don’t let me down.”

She had no idea, walking out, whether he would show.



That night at McCluney’s a buff patron dressed like money couldn’t keep his eyes off Meg. Not good, because he was dining with his girl friend. Meg did not mind the attention, although she was past the stage at which she felt flattered. The problem was, men who liked her undertipped if they were with a woman. Overcompensation, or did she mean undercompensation? She was pleased and surprised when the guy left her thirty bucks.

Back in the kitchen, she stepped outside for a quick smoke and was dismayed when Ray-Ray Agnello came toward her out of the shadows.

“Hey, girl.”

“Don’t you hey girl me.”

Ray-Ray was the kind of lowlife Will Whelan said was born with the larceny gene. He made a big deal out of growing up in a tough neighborhood in Albany, making it sound like combat in Afghanistan. Hip-hop culture had the kind of stranglehold on his imagination it sometimes did on white guys who wished they were Black. He wore his dyed yellow hair in cornrows, and a medallion around his neck. He moved his mouth and his hands imitating the

gestures of the life, or what he thought the life must be. It didn't work. He was a cartoon.

"Angel says give you this."

He handed her a small bouquet of flowers. In the dark, she could not tell what kind they were. For an instant, the tenderness of early times returned.

"He can't deliver his own flowers?"

"You know Angel's got a plan, girl. The man is busy. He loves you. You're the only girl in the universe for him."

Meg's gut clenched. "What kind of plan?"

Ray-Ray made matching pistols of his hands, pulled the triggers the funky way he'd seen guys do in videos.

"The kind of plan make money for me and my man, movin' fast as we can, we ain't no flash in the pan, couple of businessmen on the lam."

"This plan of yours have anything to do with selling products that are against the law?"

Ray-Ray shook his head. "Not for me to say, Meg, that is definitely not for me to say."

She gave up. Her break was over. She had tables to wait on.

"You give Angel a message."

"Straight on, sister. What's the message?"

"If he's not at my apartment tomorrow at six, my heart breaks."

"Got it."

"You sure?"

"I am damn sure, girl, no 'bout adout it."

Before she punched out that night she watched the head chef wrap a plateful of New York strips for the cooler. Marco Slivovitz was too good to be true except that he was. His was the face toward which you swam in your finest wet dream. He was sculpted and smooth skinned and had achingly blue eyes. He shaved his head and wore a manly silver earring like Mr. Clean. His voice took you right up to the edge of a cliff you wished you could jump over. He came from New Orleans and had first-hand information about voodoo.

"Those are some mighty handsome steaks you got there, Marco."

He winked at her. Not every man of forty could wink without looking ridiculous.

"Hey, Meg. Enough of this restaurant shit for one day, right? I tell you Mr. McCluney called?"

"He's in the Bahamas, I heard."

He nodded. He opened his phone, showed her a picture of McCluney on a yacht, sunburnt belly to the wind, sappy smile on his face.

"Boat's bigger than my apartment. McCluney's all right, though. I've worked for worse."

"Such as?"

He thought for a moment, or pretended to.

“Guy named Earl Derringer, down in the French Quarter. Earl had a food-o-meter installed in the kitchen. Before you left every night you had to step into the food-o-meter. There was so much as a French fry in your pocket, the machine nailed you. You got booted out on your ass.”

This was Slivovitz humor, and she liked it fine.

“What did Mr. McCluney want?”

“He said if Meg Whelan happened to admire the beef tonight, I should use my judgment. How many you need?”

“Three,” she said. “It’s kind of important.”

He picked three prime steaks and wrapped them like valentines. She kissed him on the cheek. At home she put the meat in the fridge. It was ten o’clock, but she got into a cleaning frenzy and spent the next couple hours making the apartment look better than it had since she moved in. It felt good. She stopped when she noticed a dead stink bug belly up on the coffee table. She sat down, instantly depressed.

Back when life with Angel was good, he had invited her to go with him to campus. Not once, a bunch of times. He was involved in some sort of club for what he referred to as people of color, meaning not just African Americans but pretty much anybody who wasn’t white. The members wanted him to run for club president, and Meg liked the fact that he was willing to show up for a meeting with his white girlfriend on his arm. He spoke well. Anybody who heard him could not help believing he was a man with a future.

So she could hardly be blamed for building a dream house, where she lived with Angel and they had good jobs and beautiful kids, and her father made his peace with them, coming over in the evenings to give his biracial grandchildren horsey-back rides, and when Meg’s mother visited from Florida she had the sense to leave Biff the orchid-bearing money manager at home.

Then Angel started fading on her, and her father got shot.

He won’t come.

She was exhausted and went to bed.



In the morning the spruced up apartment disoriented her. Who the hell lived here? When she remembered why it looked so good, the thought came: He won’t come. Who, her father or Angel? All morning long she toggled between He won’t come and They won’t come. In a way, it didn’t matter. She drove to the Star Market and picked up the groceries she needed, along with two bottles of red wine. She did not know how to buy wine, but there was a Merlot marked down from \$17.99 to \$9.99, and that seemed like a deal. At the last minute she picked up a bouquet of flowers for the table, daisies and something purple.

She stopped by the station with the insurance papers. It was easier for her to be there now that her father no longer worked in the department; why, she couldn't say. When Chief Hurley asked her how she'd managed to make her old man finish the damn paperwork, she lied. When she got to his place the papers were already signed, she said. All she had to do was bring in the package.

He won't come.

At home, she called Marco Slivovitz and he talked her through the recipe for potatoes au gratin that he had made McCluney's famous for. She went all out on her menu items. Homemade onion rings, green beans with slivered almonds, a vegetable salad with the ingredients arranged the way the sous chef did at the restaurant. Oh yeah, and garlic bread.

By five o'clock she was ready, except for the steaks. Neither man had called, but she hadn't expected them to. She opened a bottle of the Merlot and poured herself a small glass and sat in her living room overwhelmed by sadness. It was as though the evening were already over, and it was a flop.

At five minutes to six there was a knock on the door. It terrified her. Stepping into the hall, her father frowned, blaming her for not leaving him alone.

"I don't get this, Meg."

But he had shaved, and he was dressed up in khaki pants and a blue shirt. He did not look as much like an ex-cop as he usually did. She knew better than to compliment his appearance. She sat him in the living room. From the sofa, he could not see the table set for three.

She asked him, "If you hadn't been a cop, what do you think you would have been, Dad?"

The question threw him. He was saved having to answer when a stinkbug lit on the coffee table.

"Goddamn filthy creature," he said, squashing it with the heel of his hand.

Meg disappeared the little mess, brought him a paper towel to clean his hand. She was worrying about Angel's so-called plan. How would she explain it to her father if her boyfriend got himself arrested?

Then Angel was knocking on the door, and she was no longer in control of events.

"What's all this about?" her father said.

Coming into the living room, Angel handed her two red roses and kissed her on the cheek, a move perfectly calculated to gall her father. His daughter. A Black man. Skin touch.

Angel knew what to expect and did not put out his hand to shake. In a crew-neck sweater and round-rimmed glasses, he had the advantage of looking like a young professor. He was on tonight, she could tell. He was definitely on.

“You’re Mr. Whelan, I guess.”

Meg’s father shook his head, denying his name or else Angel’s right to ask the question. “Meg.”

“Sit down, the both of you. I’ll get you a drink and put the steaks on. Everything else is ready.”

They sat, refusing to look at one another. They accepted the wine she brought, although all the time she was in the kitchen, not a single word passed between them.

When they finally sat to eat, Meg could not help being pleased with the amazing meal she had put on the table. It looked as good as it did at McCluney’s, just homier. In a healthier world, one of the men would have said something encouraging.

“I can’t make all the conversation by myself,” Meg warned them, passing the plate of steaks to her father first.

“Meg tells me you got shot, a few months back,” Angel said, trying to be amiable or incendiary, she wasn’t sure which. “I was sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, I got drilled all right. By a brother of yours. He was breaking into a house over on Painterly, and I took the call. It was a through-and-through, so I guess it could have been worse.”

“I don’t have any brothers, Mr. Whelan. Three sisters, but no brothers.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I was speaking... it’s a metaphor. Tell me something.”

“What?”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m at RPI.”

“How many classes you taking?”

“Right now, two.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s supposed to mean what I said.”

Their voices were rising. Meg said brightly, “Did I tell you, Dad? Angel is going into business.”

For a disconcerting instant the surprise on the men’s faces made them twins.

“Oh yeah?” said her father. “What kind of business would that be?”

Angel knew what Meg was getting at. This was her way of finding out what he was up to with Ray-Ray.

“I had an idea,” he said, looking at her while supposedly talking to Will. “An invention, I guess you’d call it. But I’m going to finish my degree first.”

Her father understood that something was going on that he would not be part of. He might not care. Meg wanted him to. She wished she could let him know how relieved she felt, knowing Angel was staying in school.

They ate in silence for a few minutes until Will asked Angel, “You grow up in Troy?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought so.”

“You don’t like African American men very much, do you?”

“Should I?”

“This is the twenty-first century.”

“So I heard.”

“One thing is obvious.”

“What’s that?”

“It bothers you, Meg and me being together.”

Her father cocked his head to one side so you couldn’t tell if he was nodding.

“You want to know what grinds me? I’ll tell you. My daughter wasting her time with a deadbeat. Two classes.” He shook his head. “That’s what sticks in my craw. What do you do the rest of the time, sleep?”

Up went the voices again. There was more than hostility in both men now, there was real hate. Meg was afraid something was going to happen that could not be fixed or forgotten. Angel would not hit her father. He was twenty five years younger and stronger, and though he sporadically disappointed her he was a decent man. But Will Whelan was capable of provoking him, and things could get out of hand.

She pounded the table with her fist. “Anybody want more wine?”

They looked at her as though they couldn’t make out her words. Spanish? Russian? Swahili?

She told them quietly, “There’s another bottle of Merlot in the kitchen.”

“I’ll get it,” said her father.

“No,” said Angel. “I’ll get it.”

They were both on their feet. It was like one of those nature shows on public television when the two male animals faced off. Meg blinked, trying not to see their antlers.

“Sit down,” her father said to Angel.

“You sit down,” Angel said back. “I’ll get the goddamn wine.”

Here it came, the confrontation Meg had been dreading. A terrible roaring was coming from her father, aimed at her boyfriend at the other end of the table. Not words, but the ancient grandfathers of words. Ideas in sound. The tirade went on, and then on a little longer.

When it was over, he calmly asked Meg, “You got more garlic bread?”

“It’s in the oven, in foil.”

“I’m getting the wine,” he said to Angel. “You get the bread.”

It could have gone bad. There was every reason for it to go bad. It didn’t. Angel let his self-control kick in. He nodded. “Okay. I’ll get the bread.”

Her father made Angel go into the kitchen first, expecting to be knifed the instant he turned his back. But they went. They stayed a while, and Meg got up from her chair. She went to the door and eavesdropped.

“So what’s this invention of yours?” her father was asking Angel.

“If I tell you, what’s to stop you from stealing my idea?”

“I’m retired.”

The conversation was going better than she had any right to expect. The whole evening was. She had baked a pan of brownies, and there was vanilla ice cream. It was nice, really it was better than nice, to be thinking only about dessert.

HONORARY UNCLE

Michael Milburn

I was low on the list
of anyone expected

to escort a four year old
around my yard that day,

but her father was eating
when their dog needed peeing

and she clambered down
the back stairs behind us,

wedging herself between
in full coming with mode,

one hand on the dog's back
and the other in mine.

Then the questions,
another and another

as if I was an encyclopedia
she was reading.

She asked her way
around that yard.

She asked the hell
out of that yard.

She gave it a
good scouring.

Not even the dog
was so thorough.

HOBO LIZARD

Joseph D. Milosch

Because loneliness is nothing
but the start of a sadness
we can hardly bear, I choke back
the pain from the hard work
of living and the lost experience
of love. What good would it do
to moan when neither angels
nor men enter my room, and I sit
at my desk looking out the door
at parked cars? Then, like
a wayward vagabond, a lizard
slips under the screen door
and enters this house carrying
all his belongings on his back.
From the floor, he surveys
this room with its desk, bookcase,
and collection of beach rocks.
Inside, he is free from the owl
and the road runner.

Climbing the desk's leg, he pauses
between a short stack of books
and a picture of the Great Wall
of China. There are no flies for him
to eat, but he seems unperturbed.
Scampering up the books' bindings,
he stands on Gulliver's Travels.
As the two of us sit, the street lights
turn on and cast a slotted shadow
through the blinds. Somewhere
a dog barks and a car slows
in front of the neighbor's drive.
Within this room, I sit in my chair
watching the stoically poised stranger,
and while we share this quiet space,
I ask, *Are you as lonely as me?*

UNDER THE SHADOW OF RAIN

Joseph D. Milosch

In old age I tire of cities
and their nightlife witchery.
My desire focuses on beachfront villages
like this one on the shores of Lake Quitana.
During the off-season, lights are off
above the six-room hotel.
Built in 1900, the place looks
abandoned with its paint flaking
and porch chairs leaning against its rail.
I imagine wealthy patrons dressed like Teddy
Roosevelt, complete with a monocle
and watch chain. They sip highballs
as their children run, laughing
and screaming until their sleep
reveals the soft lapping sound
of waves rolling across the sand.

This morning I'm the old man
in his raincoat, walking with an umbrella.
On the beach, I feel a kinship
with the unkempt, aging building.
Near the forest's shade, I listen
to the rain on the lake.
As an egret hops from the boulder,
a raccoon dips its muzzle
into the water and drinks under
the shadow of rain. The truth is,
I'm just tired of cities and tell myself
I need not worry about ownership
or turning a profit from every exchange.
I want to live a life that's whole.
So, I come here, hoping to heal my heart.
Then, the sky opens to allow a shaft
of sunlight to touch the tracks
of egret, raccoon, and man.

MERCILESS ACTS

Thomas DeConna

Once upon a time, not terribly long ago, there lived a family of four: a father, a mother, and two sons. One day the father, mother, and younger son set out on a car trip to Cooperstown, New York. The older son, who did not care for family car trips, stayed behind. He was fifteen years old, and everyone thought it best that for a few days he should stay with the mother's sister—a no-nonsense, practical person—who kept a tidy home, remained unmarried, and held no interest in children whatsoever. To balance the scales, the mother had baked a ginger cake, the boy's favorite, and he was certain to have it all to himself because the mother's sister loathed ginger.

Note: For this type of story, it's best when things happen in threes.

So, the three set out in the family station wagon, and the trip—for once—had been without conflict, squabbles, or chaos. True, as the miles rolled along, each family member periodically pictured a terrible, gruesome scene, and it was ironic that, unbeknownst to each other, they shared the same image. However, like signs passed along the highway, the horrible image slipped from their minds, and the father, mother, and son did their best to leave it by the roadside.

In the back seat of the Chevrolet station wagon, the son sat alone and read a large, softbound book about baseball. Cooperstown, as everyone knows, boasts the Baseball Hall of Fame, which the eleven-year-old longed to see. After the family had driven many miles, the boy's mother draped her arm over the car seat and turned to her son.

"How are you doing back there?"

"Fine."

"You've been so quiet."

"It's easy without..." He stopped, catching himself. The mother gave a knowing look. "Yes, well..." Absently, she touched the odd-shaped scar on her cheek. "Do you like your new book?"

"Absolutely. I'm reading about the 1927 Yankees. Do you remember that team?"

The mother's mouth hung open in mock exaggeration. "Say, how old do you think I am?"

"Just kidding."

She laughed and then the boy laughed, and it felt good to laugh.

"Well no, I don't remember that team or any team. I never followed baseball. But I'm glad you do. That's what a boy should do."

"I don't remember the 1927 Yankees either," the father chuckled, "but I've read about them. That was the year Babe Ruth hit sixty home runs and Lou Gehrig hit forty-nine. There wasn't a match-up like that until 1961."

“That’s when Roger Maris hit sixty-one homers and Mickey Mantle hit fifty-four. Of course, they played 162 games instead of 154.”

“Of course,” the father and mother said at the same time and exchanged smiles.

“I’m glad you like the book,” the mother said, “but you should look out the window now and then to enjoy the beautiful scenery, especially on such a gorgeous spring day.”

“All right.” Dutifully, the boy looked out the window.

The mother had chosen the baseball book because she knew it would occupy her son during the long car trip, but now she didn’t want him to miss what was around him. While flipping through the book at their local drugstore, she liked how stories intermixed with crossword puzzles, word searches, and other activities. One challenge in particular caught her eye. A page showed six sketches of the same baseball player—or so it seemed—but only two were exactly alike. The other four players had a slight deviation in their cartoon portraits: a shadow beneath one eye or a line missing from an earlobe or a slightly different grip on the bat kept the player from being a correct match. As the woman studied the illustrations, she thought how most people look ordinary, just like everyone else; however, if examined closely, you would spot a difference. And the difference could be dreadful. You might not notice the deviation at first, but it was there and it would always be there.

The father turned his focus to driving, the mother turned her body and sank against the car seat, and the son turned toward the window and noticed ripples of pastel colors: greens, yellows, and pinks. He didn’t know the names of the trees, shrubs, or flowers, but even at his young age he appreciated their beauty on such a gorgeous spring day. And he couldn’t help but notice the calmness among his family. Then, with an anxious twitch, he thought of his brother.

His brother terrorized him daily, physically and emotionally. Although they were brothers, they couldn’t be more different. The younger brother was small, slight, and agile; the older brother was tall, corpulent, and clumsy. The younger brother was shy and tender-hearted; the older brother was brash and cruel-hearted. So cruel, the boy often wondered if his older brother were thoroughly human.

If being abused physically were not enough, the boy was subjected to many merciless acts. Once his older brother “accidentally” ruined the boy’s guitar. He loved that hollow-box, acoustic guitar—secondhand but quality-made—and somehow his older brother managed to step on the instrument’s base with enough force to crack the wood and damage the guitar thoroughly.

On another day the older brother stated that he was a master mechanic who could take apart and put together anything. The boy did not care about his older brother’s brag until he set out to prove his words. The brother

began to disassemble the boy's bicycle. No matter how desperately the boy begged, the brother ignored all pleas and took the red Schwinn bike apart piece by piece. Of course, when it was time to reassemble the bicycle, the older brother left all pieces on the ground and capered away. Now the boy had no easy way to deliver newspapers, so each morning he rose extra early and walked his entire route. Meanwhile he waited one week for the bike shop mechanic to repair the Schwinn, which the boy paid for from his paper-route money.

Merciless acts. Which was the worst? Well, there was no question, no question at all. One day the mother, after surveying the bedroom the brothers shared, said, "You boys have too much junk in here. This weekend the three of us will sort through everything. Some things we'll keep, some things will go to Goodwill, and some things will go to the trash heap."

The older boy waited until garbage pick-up day, waited until no one was watching, and waited until he saw the big truck rumble up the street. Clandestinely, he snatched all three shoeboxes from his brother's side of the closet, took them outside, and tossed them into the truck's maw while the compactor made its distinctive crunching sound. The older brother didn't know how many baseball cards fit into a shoebox, but he did know those boxes contained his younger brother's entire prized collection.

"We'll stop for gas soon," the father announced. "There's a rest area too, so we can eat and take a half-hour break."

"I packed sandwiches, juice, and a Thermos of coffee. Everything's in the wicker basket." The mother turned to her son. "Will you be in charge of it?"

"Sure, Mom," the boy answered with a smile.

The woman turned forward and thought how well the trip was going—how easy it was—and wondered why things weren't always this way. Unfortunately, she knew the answer. For a long time she had chosen denial, refused reality, and rationalized her older son's bizarre behavior as accidents or as foolish pranks a boy might do. But she had another son who didn't do strange or harmful things.

She remembered the day all her house plants—plants she spent an hour each day watering, feeding, and tending because she loved having a bit of nature near her, particularly living in a winter climate—had a glossy sheen to them. Magically, their leaves looked so lush and beautiful, she wondered how it was possible. The next day every leaf on every plant turned yellow-brown. The following day every plant died. After some coaxing and bribing, her older son confessed that he'd sprayed furniture polish on the plants to make each leaf shimmer; he thought she'd like that. So. But it was the boy's unsettling grin that caused the woman's stomach to churn.

Over the years the mother had become a talented cook and baker. Each week she'd read three or four women's magazines. Cooking, of course,

was her favorite subject within those magazines, and after seeing an enticing recipe, she would attempt the meal, often using produce from her garden. Being an excellent gardener, she understood how one herb or plant interacted with another. She understood how a plant's physical makeup could or could not be enhanced.

One afternoon her older son noticed that the glass canisters sitting on the kitchen counter needed to be refilled. To save her the trouble, he chose to do it. Later, after trying a third time to bake her special Christmas cakes—the ones meant for gifts—the mother understood what must have happened. Perhaps because all the ingredients were white, her son had confused cornstarch with flour and flour with baking soda. She convinced herself it was a silly mistake, as silly as crying over such a thing. But crying was a safe release.

Merciless acts. Which was the worst? Well, there was no question, no question at all. Years ago, because her parents couldn't afford a four-year university, she attended a community college and majored in business. After graduating, she landed a secretarial job at a university where she met her future husband, a young English teacher. She had always been a pretty girl—the girl-next-door pretty—and one day, while in school, a classmate showed her an ad for a campus modeling job and told her she would be perfect. After hesitating briefly, she applied.

To her surprise and delight, she got the job and everything went smoothly. The photo-shoots were held on campus and the pictures filled brochures that advertised the school and attracted new students. The work took just three weeks, and the extra cash helped pay tuition. The job continued each year until she graduated.

Although she was pretty, she was never vain. In time, she knew her features would fade. In time. Once in awhile on special occasions, such as a faculty event at her husband's university, she used a curling iron to give her straight hair a touch of bounce, and she wore a black evening gown adorned by a simple but elegant pearl necklace. She felt flattered to receive more than her share of compliments.

It was four o'clock on a lazy afternoon when her sons were napping, and because it had been a tiring day and because she had a long evening ahead, the mother also decided to nap before attending the mid-winter faculty dinner. She set out clothes, makeup, and accessories before lying in bed, and soon she drifted off. If she dreamed, it may have been about her school days when she was young and excited for the future. Then, something hot—hotter than the sun—pressed against her cheek. Her head jerked back; her eyes popped open. The older son held a red-hot curling iron inches from her face.

"I wanted to fix your hair, Mother," he said with dull, lifeless eyes.

The woman jumped from bed, raced to the bathroom, and splashed water over her scorched cheek, but no amount of water could soothe that

awful, odd-shaped scar. Stumbling from the sink, she doubled over and couldn't catch her breath. Unconscious, she collapsed.

At the rest stop, after filling the car with gas, the father sipped coffee and chewed a turkey sandwich. He liked road trips because they broke the routine of teaching, of grading papers, and of writing his manuscript. But the manuscript was his passion, and according to the university's press, his first published book should have a sizable audience. But now, the father wasn't so sure.

Sitting at a picnic table, he pushed uncertainty aside with a deep breath, as if inhaling the gorgeous spring day. His wife and son worked on a crossword puzzle. They smiled. They offered answers and laughed when they filled in squares. Before marriage, if the man were asked what family life would look like, this image would personify his reply. Of course, he had another son.

The father remembered when his older son somehow managed to snap the shank and stem of his favorite pipe—the pipe that his father had smoked. He also remembered when the boy somehow splintered his expensive fishing rod, ruining his one pastime. And he remembered holding the pieces, and then, sensing a presence, turned to see his son watching him with a mannequin-like expression, as if his face were a mask.

Merciless acts. Which was the worst? Well, there was no question, no question at all. For six years the father had worked on a manuscript that began as a scholarly piece, but even with a wealth of research, his writing style was accessible to a large audience. The university press's editor was so excited about the book's possibilities, he forwarded a small advance. So, on weekends, between semesters, and through summers, the man produced a fine manuscript that traced the literary American hero from Brom Bones to Huckleberry Finn to Tom Joad. By establishing the protagonist's ability to seek justice as a linking trait, the father deftly analyzed the fictional hero.

As mentioned before, these events happened not long ago; however, it was a time before personal computers or storage clouds, so the father's labor consisted of typed pages—hundreds of them—with ink from spooled ribbons and indentations from metal keys. When the father asked his older son why he had set fire to the manuscript on the backyard patio, the boy said, "I wanted to watch something burn." With his labor destroyed, it took several days for the man to regain his wits. Eventually, he bolstered himself by knowing his research and notebooks remained. He hoped, perhaps within a year, he could piece the project together. Then he would need at least three months to retype the manuscript.

"What do you want to see most at the Hall of Fame?" the mother asked her son.

"Babe Ruth's bat," the boy said, "and then Hank Aaron's."

The father said, "Hank Aaron not only broke Babe's home run record, but he also showed courage in doing it."

"This book says he got death threats."

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Different reasons." The father chewed the last of his turkey sandwich and washed it down with a gulp of coffee. Meditatively, he said, "Sometimes people don't want change because they think it isn't right or because they're afraid of it. But sometimes things need to happen. And after the change, after awhile, people find that the world keeps spinning. Afterwards, most times, people find they're actually better off." He nodded and spoke deliberately. "Yes, there are different kinds of change and different kinds of courage."

The mother's gaze turned blank as if she saw a dim and distant image, but the image was neither dim nor distant. Three days ago she had driven to the town's village square where a wooden gazebo stood within a grassy field bordered by stores: a bakery, bank, florist, hair salon, barber shop, grocery, diner, and hardware store. First she stopped at the grocer's and bought ingredients for her ginger cake; then she stopped at Wilson's Hardware, which was next door. Besides carrying staples like saws and shovels, it also carried household goods. It was one of the last old-fashioned hardware stores.

When she entered, as a few customers sauntered around, the owner greeted her warmly. With a smile she replied, "Hi, George. How are you?"

"Can't complain. Too soon in the day for that." He laughed. "Say, you're out-and-about early."

A sudden chill made her shiver. "I had to slip away," she said quickly. "I can't be in that house twenty-four hours a day, always watching. You know?"

The woman and shopkeeper had been acquainted for years. It would not be untrue to say that George Wilson kept a tender place in his heart for this woman. So, without words, something may have passed between them, some dark communication.

Wilson said, "Yes, I understand." He waited a moment, but after a silence, moved on. "Can I help you find anything?"

"Oh no, I have my list," she pulled a slip of paper from her pocket, "and I know where everything is."

In a few minutes she rounded up the items, and the shopkeeper met her by the register. By now, fortunately, the other customers had departed. On the counter, the woman laid out a curious cluster: a pad of thumbtacks, an oven mitt, a mousetrap, and one tiny bottle of poison.

"Are you having rodent problems?"

"Rodents?" She looked confused but then said, "Oh, yes!"

He took the bottle and rang it up. “You have to be careful with this stuff. It’s lethal.”

“I know.” Without thinking, she brushed the odd-shaped scar on her cheek.

The man sacked all the items. Because he held a soft spot for her or because he knew the face of a forlorn woman or because he himself knew despair too well, something definitely passed between them. With genuine concern, Wilson said, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

The woman’s thoughts splintered. She knew something was wrong—irreparably wrong. After years of uncertainty, she was certain now. Plainly, a person may look to nature for answers. From gardening, she knew that with proper care and attention, most things grow in a healthy way. Other things, no matter what care and attention they receive, grow in a sickly way. They benefit no one. In her mind, this fact held for people, too. Besides, she had read about such things in magazines. No matter what interventions well-meaning people tried, the unhealthy individual often dismissed those efforts, conversely growing more abusive, more cruel, and more powerful. She realized a deviation within nature is easy to eliminate like pulling a weed, but she often wondered what to do with a human being.

Her eyes met George Wilson’s. “Yes,” she said, “I know what I’m doing.”

He nodded and handed her the brown paper sack. “You know, I get so many customers, I never keep track of what they buy.”

“Oh?”

“That’s right.” He leaned toward her. “So, if anyone should ever ask me what you bought today, I wouldn’t be able to tell them.”

The woman clutched the bag to her bosom. “Thank you, George.”

At the rest stop, after gathering their belongings, the wife asked her husband, “When do you think we’ll reach Cooperstown?”

“We’re more than halfway there.” He tightened the Thermos’s lid. “I’d say by six o’clock.”

“By supper time,” the boy said with a smile.

“That’s right.”

But then, all three stopped smiling.

In their kitchen the day before, the mother had laid out baking ingredients and utensils. After spooning liquid from a small dark bottle into a Pyrex measuring cup and mixing in molasses, she opened a tin of cloves but found the container empty. Somehow, probably due to a moment’s haste one afternoon, she had returned the empty tin to the shelf. She didn’t let this ruffle her because her neighbor next door, who also enjoyed baking, would surely have cloves. Before leaving, the woman placed the bottle she had purchased at Wilson’s Hardware in the cabinet above the oven.

Curiosity can be overwhelming. The younger son who had, for boyish pleasure, been spying on his mother, waited until she left the house to grab the step-stool, position it by the oven, and reach the square cabinet door. A moment later he found himself grasping the curious bottle, holding the measuring spoons, and adding drops to the mixture within the Pyrex cup. After putting everything back in place, he hurried outside.

The father, who had just topped off the station wagon's oil in preparation for their car trip, stepped inside the kitchen and opened the cabinet door above the oven to find his Thermos, something he seldom used but came in handy when needed. A small dark bottle caught his eye. After reading the label, he glanced at the baking items, the measuring spoons, and the Pyrex cup. Before his wife returned, he played his part, restored order, and then rinsed his Thermos in the sink.

As the Chevrolet station wagon rolled on, the wife said to her husband: "You've been to Cooperstown."

"Yes, when I did my original research. Now I need to verify some details about James Fenimore Cooper."

"Right. But I was wondering if you know a good place to eat."

"I do. It's a Mom-and-Pop place that serves a terrific beef stew."

"Beef stew? That's strange. My sister said she would make beef stew tonight."

"Is that so? Too bad your sister isn't a good cook like you."

For a moment the woman thought how little she had in common with her sister, but on life's main points they shared similar views.

The sister—a no-nonsense, practical person—could not imagine how her sibling put up with such a miscreant of a son. After dinner, she left her nephew to the ginger cake, walked straight to her bedroom, shut the door, and turned on a television. True, having hearing aids would make listening to the programs easier, but she found the cost prohibitive. Besides, it was easy enough to raise the volume to enjoy her Western reruns where bad guys lose and good guys win. But now, after three satisfying shows, it was time for her medication. Nothing serious. Just a blood pressure pill.

Standing in the kitchen, she noticed her nephew lying face-down on the dining room floor. When she reached the polished table, she noted the lifeless body and partially eaten ginger cake. Adding up the evidence, the aunt understood what had happened. She knew a merciless act when she saw one.

Immediately, she realized not to call anyone. Not the police. Not an ambulance. Not a neighbor. By herself, she would lug the body into the garage. No need to leave the house cluttered, and she surmised when her sister returned, her sibling would have a plan regarding how to proceed. Of course, this sister knew the remaining cake must be washed down the disposal. That would be a merciful act.

“No, she isn’t a good cook,” the woman said at last, “but at least I made the dessert.”

Three family members looked covertly at each other and each envisioned a terrible, gruesome scene. However, as their destination drew closer on this gorgeous spring day, they sat quietly, picturing things to come. The son would visit the Baseball Hall of Fame, the father would reprise his research, and the mother would visit a skin care clinic that claimed to minimize the appearance of scars. She had read about the clinic in a women’s magazine.

Indeed, soon enough this family lived happily... ever after.

VALMY THRESHEREE

Lia Smith-Redmann

Her interest in going was like a raccoon at the bird feeder. Where it came from, I didn't know: probably out from under the porch where it had been hidden, this strange vexation, scared of being fed or finished off. After crunching through the buzz-cut straw fields out where the centerline disappears, perhaps she found part of herself: the log-cuttin', orchard-pickin', ditch-diggin', tractor-lovin' part a' her. She's soft for Fords, my Uncle was a John Deere man. The men concern themselves with the tractor-pull while the women ready for mud pig-wrestling. Dust yellows the brim of every ballcap as their metal beasts chug, and cahoot, and perfume you with diesel. The polka band sets up in the barn, their pearlescent drums and glittering brass blinking. Brats and hotdogs tumble out of a shack out back into the hands of toothless overbaked grandparents in circular specs and their doughy grandkids, while the Amish sell homemade doughnuts on the edge of the woods. Some guy on a lawnmower tows children in his MacGyvered "barrel train". Some young bull without sleeves or an ounce of beer belly fat, red above the collar, is demonstrating for onlookers how to work an antique hay-baler. He's been throwing that yellow straw for hours now, like he means it. The mud pit, knee deep with substances you don't want to know, looks cool and sludgy from here. Looks like fun.

THE SPACES BETWEEN

Jake Rinloan

Between the freeway and the fence
Where candy wrappers tumble in the breeze
In vacant lots
Where dry, gangly weeds grow
Along the scruffy edges of alleys
Where possums scuffle by

Sandwiched by places
Of Importance
The spaces between are the second-class citizens
Of geography
Not maintained, yet not entirely ignored
They live in limbo
Neglected and unappreciated
The in-betweens deal with the world
As the world treats them
With steadfast indifference

Unlike most outcasts
The in-betweens don't struggle
They are a passive bunch
Who enjoy a certain freedom
To be as disheveled as they want
And express themselves as they see fit
In ways a groomed golf course
Interstate highway
And apartment complex
Cannot even begin to imagine

ENCORE

Michael Waterson

In the theater it's a tradition
to leave a bare bulb burning center stage
called a ghost light; there's a superstition
that phantom thespians will vent their rage
unless they can perform in dead of night.
This showfolk lore prompts several questions:
What plays do wraiths put on out of our sight?
Do they mount such obvious selections
as the Scottish play or, say, Blythe Spirit,
with meaty roles for an apparition?
If the dead applaud can others hear it?
Is the bar three-deep at intermission?
Despite its cast and patrons being gone,
the show must, even after death, go on.



NO QUIT

Donald Illich

I fell through the window, hit thorn bushes before I tumbled to the ground. Then a wandering dog bit me in the ass, and a rabid racoon chomped my hands. I wouldn't give up, though. I saw neighborhood bullies cross the street and I ran past their hefty brawn. The bullies couldn't catch me, but a car did, materializing in front of me like a ghost. I managed to hang on to the hood. The driver tried to knock me off by taking ridiculous, hairpin turns, the kind one sees in action movies. When the car crashed into a hydrant, I tumbled to the sidewalk, while water sprayed in the air. I wouldn't stop. Then the police sang their sirens on the block, and the officers jumped out and pursued me down an alley. I climbed a fire's escape on a building, racing just past the officers, then leaped between buildings to lose the fuzz. I refused to surrender. A few hundred feet away you ate an ice cream cone in a park, ready to leave if I didn't make our date. When I caught up to you, I was out of breath. When I saw your smile, I decided I could give you all I had left.

LOVE BEATS INDECISIVENESS

Donald Illich

The maybe people can never be turned into yes people. The maybe people equivocate about going for ice cream, or fluster about buying a new silverware set. There's nothing too small for them to worry about. Whether to swat a fly or drink a glass of milk, they are unchangeable in their wishy washiness. Of course, love is the rare exception. The maybe people will hit the bars and see a redhead across the tables, drinking a whiskey sour, quoting a Neruda love poem. They can't resist striking up a conversation, and that leads to a decision: whether to accompany the stranger to their home, or to stay with their friends, making fun of a local politician with a weird shaped beard. Soon, they're in bed, and they just remember how to do this thing called sex. The maybe people say yes to whatever the lover wants. Their brains are scrubbed of indecisiveness, as if a janitor swabbed the place with his faithful mop. The maybe people's friends are dismayed, because they depended on the maybe people to put the brakes on doing anything foolish or dangerous. Now the maybe people say bungee jumping, hell yes! They drop down and spring back up, smiles on their faces, their hearts beating beyond their limits; they finally feel real in the universe.

HOMELESS STONES

Joanne M. Clarkson

Half-acre empty as whiskey bottles
and a used syringe. Free from tents
and grocery carts. No black garbage
bags dragging down the wind.

We stand in the Hobby Lobby
parking lot and watch cranes
hoist huge stones onto the space
that last month was a homeless
camp. Deterrent. Project
reported to cost \$671,761.00.

How many tiny houses would that be?
How many warming shelters, bathrooms
in Hobby Lobby off-limits.

The woman next to me with the sack
of knitting supplies mentions
how sad it used to be on Thursdays
when Children's Protective Services came
to round up the young ones.

I wonder if the great, grey rocks
were mined from a mountain icon,
god of no-man's-land sleeping above
a winter city? Beauty's hunger
of hopelessness.

I am ashamed that my taxed work as a nurse
paid even a penny toward this earth
re-purposed into another form of eyesore.
Inhuman this time, near a free-way
off-ramp. Passing drivers

turn to gape, then accelerate
trying not to think of a brother,
an addict, maybe living in his car,
maybe replaced by a stone.

BREAD POEM

Joanne M. Clarkson

For the sake of health we have gone
gluten-free and keto. Have forsaken slice
and loaf. We go bun-less even
in public. A bakery is Eden to temptation.

I have always loved the crust. For two
years, when my young daughter,
a picky eater, refused them, I lunched
every day on peanut butter edges.

My favorite scents are sourdough and
morning glory muffins, blended
in childhood kitchens. I learned to knead
young. Savored Sunday morning cinnamon
and butter flake suppers. And now.

And now I am proud I fit into skinnier
jeans, have ankles and some semblance
of a waist. But what crumbs remain
these days, to put out for the birds?

Are dreams of biscuits forbidden?
And what are rainy Saturdays without
plates of toasted cheese? Give us this day
our daily kale, but only bread is sacred.

DANIELLE

John Grey

Danielle, I left you
behind in Santa Fe
so I could learn
more about you.

Providence has become a combination
of your personal history
and a psychologist's insights.
Everywhere I go

I see places you've never been.
Every new feeling
is one I never had toward you.
And I don't answer your emails,

don't even read them in fact,
because they would just fog up
this amazing clarity
my head has taken on

since I returned to my old hangouts.
And please stop calling.
The sound of your voice
is not helping your cause any.

Only silence can do that.
Your total absence
really is a great teacher.
Did you know that

Danielle 101 is a walk
along the riverbank,
taking in the sights, the sounds,
that are there for my enjoyment,

not my indictment.
It has occurred to me
that we never were
meant for each other.

Providence is more than a city.
It's a conclusion.
I'm living on my own.
It's like I'm really with someone.



THE ESTATE SALE

Nancy Kay Peterson

Not until I'm inside
do I realize I knew this man,
an old river pilot
who retired from the barges
to captain a small tourist boat
around hometown waters.
He was the proverbial character,
entertaining passengers
with stories of races and wrecks,
river rats and con artists,
and granting small favors,
like letting me steer once
many years ago.
Now all his treasures
look lost and lonely
like driftwood or stray cats.
So, I buy keepsakes,
a barometer in a ship's wheel,
an empty bottle of cologne
shaped like a steamboat.
I adopt them, polish them,
put them on display at home,
and when I notice them,
wonder who will buy them next.

MRS. MACDONALD

Jonathan Everitt

The first witch I ever feared: A gruff old girl
in a barn jacket who tooled around in a rusty jeep.
She'd sold her house in the woods
to my father but continued to prowls the grounds.
So mean, she grew flowers just to slice off
the blooms, I'd been told. Mrs. MacDonald,
a legend my sisters conjured just for me.

Along the walkway to the honeysuckle trellis,
the row of bearded iris was her favorite bed of torture,
Be careful playing in the woods alone.
She's watching. Watching through the trees in her
binocular-thick spectacles and gray pageboy hair.
Lurking with her curses. Shears in hand, hungry to cut
the fresh blossom of grade-school skulls from soft shoulders.

Who she was, I'll never know for sure. Mother
of children long nest-flown? Broken widow?
World-weary botanist? Retired spy? To me, she
was only symbol, channel for my terror
of a demon-haunted world whose only hope
for rescue was to genuflect and grovel at
Golgotha. She may as well have nailed the spikes.

Of course, this was all wrong. Like Santa Claus
and Satan, there was nothing there to see,
no one coming for me. Every good gardener
deadheads spent blooms to foster further growth.
But when you're born into suspicion,
even lonely widows are witches watching
in the woods, waiting to devour little boys.

Sweet old lady whom I never really knew,
forgive me for believing evil hides behind every iris.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERTAKER

Kate Kingston

For all the witches, burned and hanged

I enter the wound with a switchblade, discover

lumps of albino coal feeding her veins. Ash white briquettes
smolder in a matrix of sapphire. I discover
snapping turtle eggs, dragonflies, the swamp of her veins.

Grackles nestle in her rib cage. In her right eye, a magpie,
in her left a boa constrictor, in the nostril
an army of ants, in the ear, a hornet's nest.

When I open her up, I discover cattails in her lungs,
their downy interior splitting into feathers.
When I dissect her heart, I discover earthworms so plentiful,

I feed the robins through winter. When I dissect the spleen,
blue eggs spill onto the blade.
When I dissect her liver, rabbits are set free.

When I open her up with this blade, I witness the turtle's eye
make its way into her thicket of memory.
I begin searching for all the time she lost.

I'm sure it's in there somewhere alongside the time she wasted.
When I open her up groin to chest, clocks
spill their dented hands onto linoleum in a pool of chiaroscuro.

I place a drop under the microscope, watch tadpoles
percolate into frogs. When I close her up,
the stitches keep her world a secret.

At the viewing they make the sign-of-the-cross over her body
and say how peaceful she looks. No one suspects
the tongue that gyrates beneath her formaldehyde breath.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, NEW YORK

Hiroshi Watanabe



FROG SONGS

Buff Whitman-Bradley

In the marsh
The frogs are unperturbed
By the cold, wet weather.
Quite to the contrary
They are celebrating
With songs of jubilation,
Choruses of alleluias,
Joyous cantatas
Of incomparable beauty
That continue hour after hour
Even as the rains
Pelt the murky standing waters,
The large patches of mud,
The matted reeds and grasses.

In the marsh
The frog songs rise
Up through the nearby trees
All the way to amphibian heaven
Where all frogs
From the immemorial past
Sit quietly in ethereal muck
Listening to the primeval tunes
That they themselves sang
When it was their time,
Their turn,
To bless the world with the music
Only they could make.

In the marsh
As night rises
Out of the murky standing waters,
The large patches of mud,
The matted reeds and grasses,
Little by little the darkening sky
Embraces the melodies and harmonies
Of ancient and holy frog music,
Finds a place in the firmament
For each and every note,
And each and every note
Becomes a star.

BLUE GAZEBO

Jacob Butlett

Early-morning Iowa fog gathers on the back lawns, still damp from last night's cold rain shower. In the blue gazebo, my father takes a seat on a bench and rests his cane next to me. I'm talking, but he ignores me, gazing across the landscape. When he sees nothing, not even a doe resting in a wayward sunray, he doesn't hide his boredom.

Then he shudders, his eyes trained on a border of scraggly willows and oaks. I look on as he points at something beyond wisps of loon shadows hurtling across the foliage. He lowers his hand.

"Dad, what did you see?" I ask.

"I thought I saw your mother." He laughs. "Why would she be out in this fog?"

"She wouldn't be," I mumble. Then, nervous, I clear my throat. "Dad, I want to talk to you about something serious. Terrence and I've been talking. And I was wondering whether you'd consider living with—"

"Whose idea was it to sit out here? I can't think with all this fog."

"We can head inside if you want," I say. "I can get your nurses—"

"You hungry? Your mother's baking apple pie."

"Mom's not in the group home."

"Group home?" he exclaims. "What are you talking about?"

"Mom passed away years ago."

He considers this, glancing at the marigolds around the gazebo as if they're little stars tucked among the weeds. I want to talk to him about moving out of the group home, but since it takes him anywhere from seconds to minutes to regain any semblance of lucidity, I wait for him to say something, anything.

A minute passes. I shift impatiently in my seat.

His face hardens as if the wind, cold and sharp, is scraping his cheeks. "Of course, she isn't baking apple pie," he exclaims. "I'm not an idiot. She's out getting groceries."

I take a deep breath. "I came to talk about you living with Terrence and—"

"Did I tell you the story of how your mother and I met?" Smiling, he gazes into the fog.

"Yes, Dad," I grumble. "Many times."

He starts, "I was mowing her father's lawn every week during my senior year in high school. Your grandfather didn't pay me much, but he took pity on me since I was new in town. Your mother, who was the same age as me, watched me work from the porch, smiling every now and then because she knew I wanted her." He looks wistfully into my eyes. "Strange how things like that happen. One moment, you're existing, and then the next, you meet a

woman who makes you realize just how special you are. Then life feels less...horrible. At least for a little while.”

I’m glad he still remembers most of his past. I can’t help but smile back. He pats me on the knee, and without thinking, we share a laugh.

I remember when I was a kid growing up on the farm. Those long summer nights on the porch. The two of us drinking warm beer or fresh lemonade. Making each other laugh until my mother called us to bed. I would do anything to get back those nights with my father, still untouched by illness.

“Speaking of your mother,” he continues, reclining back on the bench, “she keeps telling me I should schedule an eye appointment. But I’m too busy on the farm. Tom, did you fix that tractor? You keep forgetting to fix it.”

“We sold the farm, Dad.” I don’t want to sound robotic, but I can’t help it—I’ve said it dozens of times before. “We sold the farm over a decade ago.”

He glares at me. “Why in the hell would we do that? The farm’s been in the family for over six generations.”

“You and Mom needed the money. And with your illness—”

“Did you persuade her to sell the farm behind my back?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why?” he demands. “Why would you do that? To spite me?”

A loon weeps from the trees. We pause to look, as if we might find the bird perched on a branch, gawking at us. My father peers through scraps of fog pawing at tree trunks, and without warning, he sighs with confusion. I wait for his mind to catch up with the present.

I clear my voice again. “I came to talk about your living situation. Terrence and I thought it would be best if you came to live with us. I would quit my job and take care of you full time. Would you like that?” Despite his mood swings, deep down, I want to spend as much time with him as possible before his illness worsens. Quitting my job would cause huge financial pressure on Terrence, but he said he wouldn’t mind—he’d do anything to make his father-in-law happy.

“Terrence?” my father mutters. “What do you mean?”

“Terrence and I live in Minnesota. Do you want to live with us?”

“No,” he snaps. “What I mean is, who’s Terrence?”

“Terrence and I met in college,” I say. “We’re married.”

He raises his right eyebrow in curiosity, a look that says, Do you take me for a moron?

I open my mouth to speak, but he mutters, “Is this Terrence person a faggot?”

My father’s homophobia doesn’t bother me as much anymore. “We prefer gay,” I reply.

“What do you mean we?”

“As I said, Terrence and I are married.”

“You like...to fuck other men?”

I tighten my lips in frustration. “Let me finish—”

“Is that why you’re here, Tom? To tell me you’re a faggot?”

“Dad,” I say, growing more impatient, “I’m here to talk about you.”

He raises his voice. “Does your mother know about you and

Terrence? If you care about your mother, you’d never mention him around her.”

“She accepted him,” I say.

“I doubt that.”

“I know your memory’s failing, but try to understand that—”

“My memory’s ironclad,” he declares.

Another loon cries out against the sky, smeared with blue-black clouds, mottled with faint constellations. A part of me wants the conversation to end and let the moment naturally carry my father into gentle forgetfulness. The fog overtakes the marigolds, turning the lawns into a darkening river.

My father yells at the ground, “I know everything that’s going on with this family because it’s my responsibility to know everything.”

“I don’t know why I bother telling you anything,” I say under my breath.

“Your cousins used to say you were queer long before I enrolled you in high school. I didn’t want to believe them...But it’s true?” He starts to cry.

“Tell me it isn’t true, Tom.”

My eyes, too, fill with tears. “I’m proud to be gay. You came around to it too.”

“Did I fail you as a father? There’s nothing worse in this world than a bad father.”

I take his hand. “I want to talk to you about your living situation. The group home has been great to you. But I miss you so much. I don’t think Terrence and I can afford to take care of you on our own. Still, I want you to live with us. If Mom were alive, I’d help her take care of you and—”

He yanks his hand back. “How could you say that?” he demands. “She’s in the house baking apple pie.”

“We’re not on the farm anymore.” Unable to make him understand like he used to, I pant with dismay, my heart thundering, sweat prickling my arms. I should be used to my father’s illness—an unpronounceable, nonhereditary disease not that many people get. I want to reach out and touch his shoulder, as if I could heal him. I want to say the right thing to lessen his hurt—the doctors say his spells make the backs of his eyes itch, as if his memories are attempting to claw out of his skull—but I keep my hands to myself, knowing better, knowing the limits of a person. Even an only son. “We’re outside the group home,” I explain softly.

He looks around but notices only the fog. “Where am I? Jesus Christ, Tom. Where am I?”

“You’re in the blue gazebo, Dad,” I reassure him. “You’re safe. You have me.”

He looks around frantically. “Where’s your mother? You said she was dead, but how is that possible? I just saw her.”

“She died years ago.”

“I just saw her! She promised to bake you a pie. She’s always baking pies.” Trembling, he chuckles to himself. I chuckle along to make him feel better. “Where is she? I want to see your mother.”

“It’s okay, Dad. Please—”

“Jesus Christ. I feel like I’m drowning in a river.” He clutches my hand harder. “Tell me what I should do. Where’s my wife? Have you seen my wife?”

“Dad, I’m here.” I squeeze his hand harder, feeling his wrinkly flesh and tenuous bones under my palms. “You’re having a spell, that’s all.”

“Where is she? Where is she?” He shoves me away, but I manage to stay on the bench.

“Dad,” I say, “I’m here to help you. Can you hear me?”

He studies the trees again, his eyes widening with fear, as if he’s imagining the branches reaching out to grab him. When he notices me shuffling closer to him, he spits in my face.

Not knowing what to say or what to think, I wipe the spit off my brow. I scowl at him with sorrow, my face burning, my lips trembling. I force back the part of me that wants to blame him for “getting” sick. But I know better. The doctors say the illness doesn’t discriminate against already healthy or unhealthy people. That fact doesn’t make the sting of his spit any less torturous.

He bangs his cane on the ground. “You’re not my son, faggot.”

I beg, “Dad, please—”

“Back in the day, a man knew his place in life: to start and protect a family at all costs. A good man makes sacrifices for his family. A good man will sacrifice himself if it gives his wife and kids a greater shot at happiness. It’s hard being a hardworking man. It’s hard keeping the farm running. All you need is a loyal woman and a big farm.” He glances around frantically again. *“Why do I feel like I’m drowning...?”*

The sky, now a smoldering torch, hangs above the grass, so motionless, so soundless. Not even another loon call breaks the fog. All I can hear is my father’s raspy breathing: breath in, breath out...breath in...breath out...

“Let me help you up,” I say. “Dad, we can—”

“I’m not your fucking father.”

I shoot out of my seat. “I can’t go on like this, Dad!” I say. Suddenly dizzy, I grab onto the gazebo’s railing, covered with chipped blue paint, old age revealing unvarnished yet beautiful wood underneath. “Every time I visit, I don’t know how lucid you’ll be.” I weep, refusing to face my father. “Your doctor keeps telling me to stop expecting you to remember everything good about the past. But I don’t want to lose you, Dad. I want to take care of you...but I know, financially, Terrence and I can’t.” No longer dizzy, I turn toward my father in desperation. “You need to remember how much you love me. I know that’s selfish. Possibly stupid. But I don’t care. *I want my father back.*” I hesitate before whispering: “Dad...you know you can live with me, right? Would you like that?”

He’s fixated on the fog. I join him on the bench and wait for him to say something. I need to reconnect with him before I lose him forever. Foolishly enough, I want to be perfect in his eyes—the smartest, kindest son in the world. More than ever, I realize my desire is impossible, yet I don’t care.

“You can live with me,” I repeat. “I’d do anything to ensure your happiness.”

He eyes me, as if finally understanding. Crying, I smile the biggest smile of my life.

But when he shakes his head, my smile falters.

“Are you sure, Dad?” I ask. “I can take care of you.”

“You’d be a lousy nurse.” He chuckles. Out of habit, I chuckle too.

“You can’t save me, Tom.”

The assertion stabs me in the stomach. “I know I can’t save you.”

“Maybe,” he says. “I’m not going anywhere. You know I’m better off here. At the farm.”

“But I want you close, Dad.”

“We all want things,” he snaps. “I’m better off here. Jesus Christ.” He lowers his voice to a cold murmur: “I shouldn’t have to explain the obvious to a grown adult.”

“I just want you to be happy—”

“No!” he exclaims, waving his cane in anger. “You want me to be *well*. You want me to be *fine*. Well, I’ll never be well or just *fine* again. I can’t be the father I used to be, so *move* on.” There are tears in his eyes.

“I love you, Dad. You know that...right? Tell me you love me. *Please...*”

Large patches of fog limp away into the undergrowth as we sit in silence.

Then, in the distance, I overhear leaves and twigs snapping and rustling, and when I turn around to face the lawns, I gasp in awe. A doe emerges from the darkest bank of trees, staring in our direction. Freckles of sun and rain trail down its back. Legs wobbly, it struggles to stay standing. Yet it

watches us, becoming more and more intrigued. I don't want to scare it off, so without looking at him, I just wave my hand to grab my father's attention. When I turn back, I see him already gazing at the doe. My father's eyes gloss over for just a second as the doe bows to munch on a row of yellow zinnias.

"You remind me a lot of my boy," my father says to me, his voice low, almost conspiratorial. As far as I know, this is the first time he has forgotten me entirely. "My son's so smart, so sincere. My wife and I suspected he was fruity as a kid, if you know what I mean. But he's a man of integrity. I think he met someone?"

I say, "Terrence."

It's like talking to a stranger who neither loves nor dislikes me.

"That's right!" he says with joy. "I don't know how certain men can have feelings for other guys, but I try not to judge."

"Dad—I mean, Charles...?"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't be speaking on behalf of Tom, but—"

"You do know my boy! How is he? I haven't seen Tom in years."

I don't feel bad pretending to be someone else, so I say, "I've—he's been better."

"What's wrong?" he demands.

"He told me...he's worried about you."

"Why's he worried? I'm great. He hired special nurses to take care of me."

"Are you happy?"

"I'm not unhappy." He laughs as if he's chatting with a childhood pal. "Tell him to lighten up."

"He wants you to live with him and Terrence."

He shakes his head. "My son should be living his life to the fullest."

"You sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure." He pauses to think. "Tell my son that if he dares to take me away from the farm, I'll...smack him."

I detect sarcasm in his voice, reminding me of those nightly conversations on the porch. We grin at each other. I wonder whether he's thinking about those nightly conversations too. "You'd hurt your own son?" I ask.

"Yes, but not in a bad way," he jokes. "I'd whack Tom with my cane and say, *Visit me whenever you can, but don't give up.*"

"Give up?"

"Yes," he says. "I'd say, *Don't give up on the life you're still creating for yourself and the man you love.*"

His words crawl deep inside my heart. I can't stop thinking about them as he continues to talk about how much he enjoys living on the farm. He even cracks a joke about one of the nurses, and we laugh boisterously.

Fearing that we might have scared the doe, I turn toward the lawns: the doe has walked several feet to another patch of zinnias but otherwise has not heard us—or at least hasn't been startled enough to flee. I turn toward my father, who doesn't seem to notice the doe anymore. Several sunrays breach the fog, bathing the blue gazebo in tawny light.

My father's words continue to echo throughout my mind: *Don't give up on the life you're still creating for yourself and the man you love...*

"Promise," he insists.

"Promise what?"

"Tom, promise you'll live your life. Go to Terrence. I'm going to stay on the farm. I hope you can accept that."

I touch his hands. They feel firmer now. "I respect your decision. I know you're right. If Mom were here, she'd—"

"What about your mother?" he murmurs. "I'm sorry, Tom. I think I dozed off. Did you say something? You look awful." He brushes a tear off my face. "You shouldn't cry just because you're back from college for the summer. Your mother's missed you so much."

"I miss her too." I hold back tears. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too." He grabs his cane. "Help me back inside the house."

I take my father by the arm, and we rise from the bench together.

LIGHTNING EKPHRASTIC

Jesse Millner

At this very moment, my upstairs neighbor
Is yelling at his wife to stop doing whatever
It was she had been doing. I'm sitting here,
Quietly reading poems and now everything
Feels different, as though a storm is about
To come. There's thumping upstairs
Like things are being thrown around
And outside the cumuli are billowing
In the soft morning light. Somewhere
Boats with billowing sails cross a blue
Lake. Somewhere the world begins
With a tiny wave slipping into foam.
Now I am imagining a painting of a lake,
Filled with sailboats. In the distance
A storm is gathering and somewhere
West lightning cleaves the stunned
Air that had been still with summer
And is now ionized, electric, promising
The kind of strikes most trees fear, which
Humans hide from, lost in their Old Testament
Memories. A single bolt is five hundred times
Hotter than the surface of the Sun.
Maybe I made that up, but if you're
Struck, the math won't matter.

UNIVERSAL

Sandra Salinas Newton

Your embrace filled my arms with stars
My mouth with the galaxies of the Milky Way
And my body with the universe of crowded space

I tasted all the world's knowledge in your kiss
And learned the history of affection in your eyes
So was I nourished and nurtured and grown

To become the vessel of your love
To be filled with all your days
And drained each night in thirsty desire.

All that was long ago
When the sky was new
And crisp and blue
When just we two
Were a world apart from
Ordinary life.

So now stretch your arms wide
To enclose the skies of memory
Float in the comforting caress
Of soft, luminous clouds
And remember:
We once were everything.

THE SUN AND THE MOON

Josh Mahler

The last of the sunlight seeps in thru the blinds—
thin slits, a steady glare. I wait for the moon,

soft eye of the universe. Wherever we have been,
wherever we will go, witness or intruder, we

have yet to learn. The moon like a thumbprint,
the curve of a woman's neck. In time she

might forgive me and hang a white bedsheet
on the clothesline. If the stories end up true,

time will eradicate the wounds over my eyes—
sleep the remedy prescribed in this life, hereafter.

SUMMER'S END

George Freck

Summer's flowers are gone.
All that is left are
the decaying remains.
The trees are also bare.
In the garden an empty hammock,
where my wife used to lie,
creaks in the bitter wind.
Like a brazen thief
winter boldly approaches.
I talk to my ancient cat,
to the moon and the stars.
They have nothing to say.
As clouds slowly disintegrate,
like the leaves at my feet,
I try to think of
the aroma of roses.
For a moment, it's sweet.
But I can't make it stay.

**ALL SPRING AS YOU WAIT
FOR THAT FIRST PERSON**

Deborah H. Doolittle

to bring you the news that you have survived,
you watch the cherry tree bud, then blossom,
the daffodils sprout by the front porch steps.

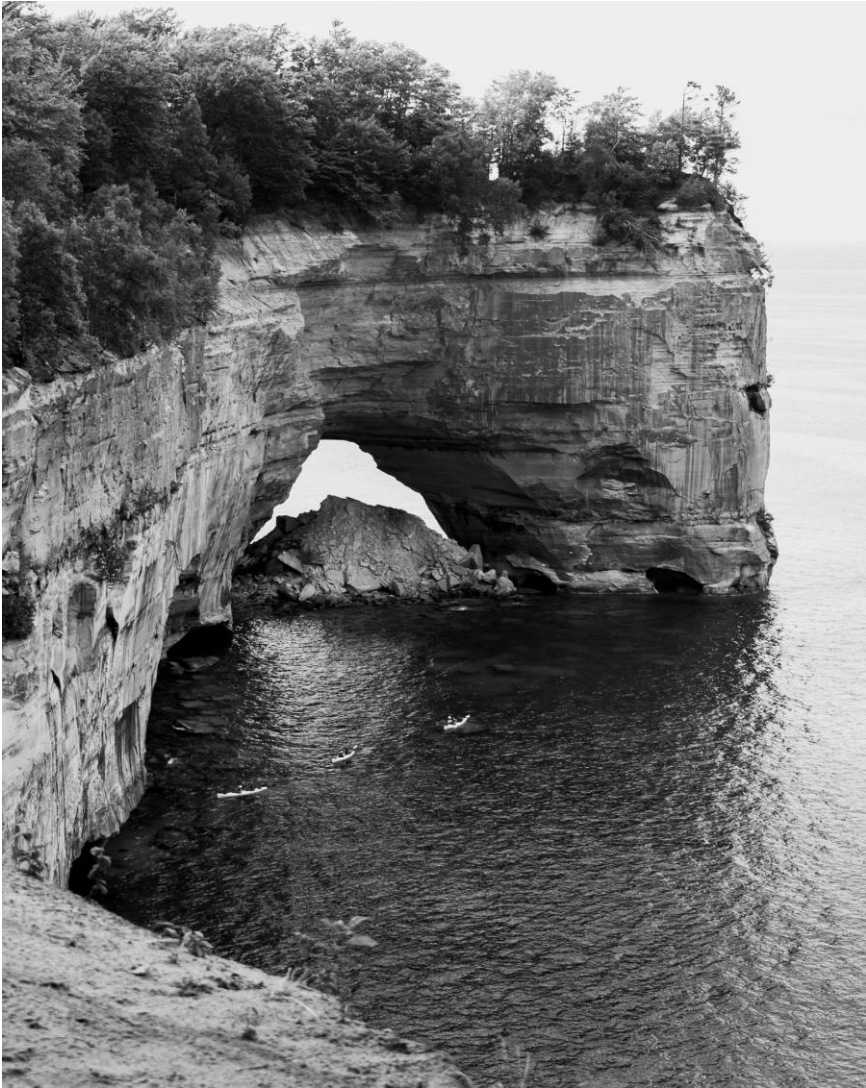
You do not hold your breath. The newspaper
and all the songbirds arrive earlier
and earlier each morning. You eavesdrop

on their gossip and serious chit-chat
that remind you how refined the sunshine
can be. A butterfly, looking lost, bumbles

between the branches and leaves. You could sit,
do nothing but wait through that slow parade
of magnolia, redbud, dogwood, azalea.

When hydrangea demands your attention,
you finally stand up and shuffle back through
the rooms of your house to your spouse sleeping late

in a jumble of blankets and linen,
you realize you could be that first person
to climb back in bed and snuggle instead.



FLOWERS

Sam Ambler

flowers shine from the eyes
of small children,
who haven't learned to talk
and have not the time to live:
and so, they give the unknown words
of their hearts
with their eyes—

like the sun,
they offer passionflowers,
like the moon,
bouquets of nightshade.
they do not voice
the tender glory,
but they live it.
their little toes root
in the warm brown earth.
and from the earth
their thin, frail bodies grow
like lilies of the Nile;
to stem the tide of tears—
they do not cry, but sway,
happy in the wind.

their gifts are great,
but delicate,
made of their very souls—
you can see it in their eyes.
and when small children
close their eyes...
flower petals fall.

**A GROUP OF CHILDREN
WITH BRUISES UNDER THEIR EYES**

Kate LaDew

Teenagers, barely, never been to a museum. They are too tired to be young.

The teacher asks, "Why do you think?" pointing to a painting of a woman. "Why do you think he painted her hands this way?"

She already told them in class about him, not an assignment, just talking. Whenever she just talks it's usually about art, about colors and feelings and the smell of paint. She told them the artist had a favorite picture of his mother, and, after she died, decided to paint the picture, almost exactly, except for the hands, white and fluffy, like cotton, like mittens, like clouds. She said one afternoon, when she got permission, she would take them to a place to see this painting, and, after months, here they are, in a big white space that makes you nervous, everything perfect and clean with ceilings that go on forever.

"Why do you think he painted this at all, when he had a photograph just like it?"

The boy who missed two days of school last month to attend his mother's wake and funeral says, quietly, softly, "Maybe," and everyone looks at him. He never speaks, mostly, unless he has to for group, but they are only surprised, not angry or bored, and wait, watching him.

The teacher, depressed and wanting not to be, had, after a week or two of angry, bored faces, decided to try jigsaw learning, splitting her class into home groups, each member of the home specializing in one aspect of a topic. Say, Martin Luther King's childhood, another, Martin Luther King's letters from prison, another, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. They met with members from other homes learning the same aspect, and, after mastering it, returned to their group to teach everyone else, every child a piece of the puzzle, integral, necessary, working together to complete the final jigsaw.

So, no, they are not angry, have not been bored for weeks, only surprised, wondering if this is a part of a puzzle, one they don't remember being asked to learn, if the boy with the dead mother is teaching them something they'll need to know, later.

"Maybe," he is looking at the painting. "Maybe he remembers her hands, his mother's. Maybe he remembers her hands as so soft, so gentle, they felt like cotton to him, like fluffy clouds. But, in the photograph, he can only see them, and, in his mind," the boy is holding up his own hand to his face. "In his mind he feels them, and so, he made the painting, to remember how she made him feel."

All the children too tired to be young are very quiet, very still. It goes on, everyone looking at the boy with the dead mother looking at the painting, his hand placed softly on the side of his face. And then, the biggest of them,

the tallest child who is never mistaken for one, weaves through their group, puts his arm around the boy with the dead mother, pulls him into his chest and holds him there. It goes on, everyone watching. And then, the rest of their group, slowly, like clouds converging to create a piece of shade, weave their own arms around the tallest of them and the boy with the dead mother, a ball of hoodies and sneakers and warm hands and hearts. And if the teacher were to take a picture, she would call it "home," but her phone is in her pocket and her fingers are wiping under her eyes. So she opens them wide, snaps them shut, watches the backs of her eyelids, a picture she can feel.

EASTER AT THE FARM

Jan Ball

Not an easter bunny day for us, if I could shoot rabbits I would, those furry friends sneak through my budding flower garden chewing tender ratabida stems before hopping into the cornfields probably excreting on the lawn along the way but maybe that is good for the soil, anyway.

Still, the grandchildren have face-timed from “other Grandma and Papa’s” in Texas and Connecticut. They wave to us as they climb on play equipment. Carolyn pulls down her bottom lip to show us that she’s lost another tooth.

No hiding easter baskets for us, but this morning we did exchange serotonin boosters: I gave Jim a bagful of Cadbury’s caramel Easter eggs, not realizing I was ticking a two pound bag of them when I ordered off Amazon and he gave me a smaller bag of Belgian truffles tied with a pink ribbon.

After lunch, we’ll go to the County Market in town for mulch that Jim will spread on his salvia garden while I read our sad book, *No Children Here*, for book group, then Jim will prepare the rack of lamb he brought with from Chicago and we’ll toast being alive another spring.

DISAPPEARING GAME SONNET

Maureen Sherbondy

As toddlers the disappearing game
entered our house when Father crouched
down behind the long brown couch
or hid in the dining room. We thought *gone*
because at two vanished from view
meant permanent. All we could do
was cry, reach out young arms
to empty air. And here we are again.
This time our father has climbed
beyond that oak tree in the yard,
risen in the sky like a star. Our mouths agape
crying *death*, as we suck in our breath.
But this time when we hold out flailing arms
to be lifted up, no one is there to reach back.

SLIPPING THROUGH WORMHOLES

Claire Scott

The smell of lilac and I am eight again
my face buried in purple flowers, lost
in their perfume, not noticing the bees

Some scientists say time is not linear
like an army marching in lockstep
hay foot, straw foot

time folds in on itself, creating wormholes
spacetime tunnels that unlock
the past like Proust's madeleine

or geraniums in a window box and I am
holding an armful, roots and all
my bare belly covered with dirt

a red offering to my mother
who planted them just that morning
but looks simply delighted

wormholes essential to the world
of poets and prophets, painters and playwrights
who mine the memories of the past

I will smuggle Calamine Lotion
to that eight-year-old and bring back
a sprig of lilac to put on my walker
next to the flaming red geranium.

THE GIFT

E.J. Evans

There was a trail I walked alone
through wooded hills and meadows for so long
I forgot everything behind me
and my walking felt like sailing.
When the trail unexpectedly opened out
into a long sweep of grassy field,
sloping up to a barn and the tops of silos, under wisps of cloud.
in a moment I saw myself at the clear center of the world,
a place wild with emptiness
and in all directions charged with unlimited possibility.
From then I kept that place in my heart,
until we met, and I could finally offer it to you.
Here, this quiet space of our life
we cross together each day.

BEATING AGAINST THE CURRENT

Meredith Tred

Framed by the window behind my desk
the breeze that barely ruffled the crown
of the browning oak strengthens and descends
to sway slender birches, reeds, and rushes.
I yank back to work—all this unauthorized activity:
daydreaming, lollygagging, leaf-loving.

Here I go again: straining against time as if
it were tangible, a dense, enveloping essence
to be conquered and expanded at will.
Chronically short-breathed from piddling
chores that burn away my finite hours: trying
to stay on top of time, fearing to be drowned
by what was and may be, instead of learning
to drift within the streaming ticks of time.

LONG DANCE

Carol L. Gloor

The elders have all gone to ground.
Now it's our turn to die.
The news used to come
in calls at three AM
in strangled words.
Now it comes in soft texts,
just a beep on the phone:
Eileen, Dennis, Julie, Ed,
and now my cousin Colleen,
of the high cheekbones
and goddess body.
At her wedding
we danced hours past
the full moon's setting,
our muscles loose with youth.

I pull out a Beatles vinyl,
find *A Hard Day's Night*,
dance through my arthritis,
dance you, Colleen, into a heaven
I do not believe exists,
dance the whole album
because I am not reconciled,
will never be reconciled.
I am not resigned.
I am not at peace,
will never be at peace.



1. Valley fold, bisecting the paper diagonally corner to corner, and unfold to reveal the V-shape.

I travel from a familiar corner of my world, home, to a new one, an origami festival. I am excited because, at seven-years-old, origami is not something my older sister and I have tried. Laughter from a hundred children folding a new kind of paper, *washi*. The six-inch-by-six-inch squares, every color of the rainbow, are scattered across dozens of tables. Giant thick green paper is in the corner, too big for a table. The Wang Center floor is cool against my sunburnt skin as we press forcefully to create sharp creases. I misalign a fold, but my sister tells me to leave it. *Wabi-sabi*, I learn, is about embracing imperfection. Our giant *kame*, or turtle, is complete.

2. Connect the opposite corners in another valley fold and unfold.

At home, I fold and unfold squares of *washi*. Yet, the creases leave an imprint. Our giant *kame*, pinned to the wall of the playroom, inspires me.

3. Mountain fold from one side to the opposite, halving the square and forming a peak.

At school, I am queen of the two-finger munchies and the four-finger fortune tellers. I alternate between folding them and telling my classmates that they will eat chocolate tomorrow.

4. Unfold again.

Our *washi* squares are full of creases that I can follow. Folding brings me and my sister closer, filling a table in the playroom with waterbombs, fezzes, penguins, and ninja stars. *Kame* watches us concentrate, create, and laugh.

5. Valley fold aligning the two opposite sides that have not met yet and unfold.

I decorate my high school graduation cap, hoping for an in-person ceremony. A huge origami flower grows from a full hour of folding, and I plant it in the center.

Four basic folds. Each crease leads back to the same basic square. Each crease lays one part of the foundation. All I need is a little push to make the creases pop into place.

6. Valley fold diagonally and push-in the endpoint of the crease until three corners meet.

I dorm at Stony Brook University and meet Elizabeth. She can fold a hedgehog with a hundred prickly pleats and a star with eight points and four different

colors. Together we sit in the common room and fold bats, Santas, and hearts. Everybody that sees us asks to join.

7. Push in the other endpoint of the crease until all four corners meet and flatten.

In the spring, we launch Cranes for a Cause. Between a Crane-In in the common room and students hooked on folding, we collect over four hundred for cancer patients and the Girl Scouts. When Elizabeth says, “Let’s start an SBU Origami Club,” I say, “Yes.”

8. You created *seihou kihon kata*, the preliminary base.

Folding, returning to the base, and re-folding brings new forms to life.

I fold the opposite sides of my *seihou kihon kata* to the midline and a familiar crane takes shape. By the second meeting, the club has more than fifty students. I refold the crane into a lily, helping twelve new Origami Teachers bloom into instructors for our regular meetings. I refold the lily into a frog, leaping at the opportunity to collaborate with the Center for Prevention and Outreach on campus and hold a de-stress-and-fold workshop for students. I refold the frog into a star box, partnering with the Society of Women Engineers to show off the mathematical joys of origami. I refold the star box into a flapping bird, planning with Student Accessibility Services to create fidget tools. We work in the tradition of *Tsuru wa sennen*, but instead of a couple folding for a good marriage, we are a community folding to understand and help each other.

Finally, I refold the flapping bird into my old friend, *kame*. There is a hole, now, where the folds have pivoted so many times. Some may say the washi is worn-out, but I say it is well-loved— *wabi-sabi*. The hole is the perfect imperfection, the point around which every form pivots. Origami is the point around which I pivot. It centers me. I love the partnership, leadership, and friendship origami has helped me experience. I may refold the *seihou kihon kata* over and over, but there is always more to learn, always more to share, and always more to love.

9. Continue folding.

What will you make with your *seihou kihon kata*?

THE BLACK DOG

David Sabner

draws a paw
in forest snow
leaving his curse

a graven cut
which until the thaw
scars though

you might unclean me
winter dog

that is to say
if you find ample cinder
to clothe me
and fill my skull with fog

each year
your inscription
melts to feed a river
that gurgles in May

and each year
I am made
to go to that way

the way toward the river
and (clean once again)

to return to a field of cowslips
quivering on plump green stems

DEAR SELF

Julia Dailey

We are a river—our own current is exhausting.
I've tired creating space for us to rise,
but you fear the flood. Still and calm, you reserve
part of us and keep moving along.

You meander—change the shape of the land.
We live with it for so long
we don't remember how it started.
I've watched you carve bedrock—mold the clay.
You're a sorcerer of time.
I'm just along for the ride.

Yet here I am ready to
seep silently into the meadow,
rest on the hay—willing to dry out—
you've shed me like an old skin.

I watch as you ebb and flow,
As the moonlight reflects off
your ever-growing soul.

You wade cautiously into the mud,
rubber boots squishing,
an excavation of what we once were—
only you are miles away.

TWIN FLAME

Malissa Rodenburg

I've always burned, just a little. A controlled flame like a scented candle confined to a short wick in a chic tin. Don't mind me and my dancing heat—notes of nutmeg, lemon, rose make my danger tolerable. I am tolerable. From my little tin, my tiny acceptable tin, I watched you burn with licentiousness—no wick, no boundaries. Homes gone. I thought you were careless. Couldn't you see what you were doing? How could you continue to spread your insufferable heat, licking the drapes like a dog with peanut butter?

I wondered; all the while the air smelled of luscious vanilla, clove, and amber, so much you could choke on it. While I was watching you, I hadn't seen myself—spread beyond the teeny tiny tin, climbing up the walls. Smoke and sandalwood surrounding the room.

YOU KNOW WHERE YOU SHOULD START

John Cullen

Kelly cracks, “New girl’s sweeeeeet,”
when the office hires a summer temp.
First thing, he asks her to add paper
to the xerox machine so he can watch.
It’s Monday, and the new hire is, surprise,
Angela, your daughter’s best friend,
the one who drove her home
after the car accident last Spring.
Now, they’re summer interns.
One of the guys snorts, “We may need paper!”
Down the hallway in receiving, Kelly’s laugh
cranks up, sounding now like broken glass

I wake up with a throbbing in my face. The flesh around my eye has swollen into a hot tumor that reminds me of how blood, skin, and membrane I am. She hit me harder than I've ever been hit before. Her nails left stinging red tracks down my cheek. I want to look at my injuries in the cheval glass, but I can't. The woman with tiny eyes and a moon face waits for me in the reflection.

My feet are cold flounders when they touch the floor. A little pacing warms them. Holly put up more of a fight than I expected. The drugs wore off too quickly. Maybe she didn't drink enough for them to dig their claws into her system. There's a metallic taste in my mouth where blood pools around my gums. She would have busted my eye socket if I hadn't put her down with the stun gun. She was already fully conscious by the time I got her out of the trunk.

The house stands quiet: no screams, no cries for help. Most women would have worn themselves out thrashing and shouting, but not this one. She saw the miles of empty hills when I took her out of the trunk. Screaming wouldn't do any good here. I know she's still in the basement, silent as moth wings. All the doors are nailed shut. The windows are sealed. Any breaking glass would have interrupted the scant minutes of light sleep I caught. The only way out of the house is through my bedroom window.

I can't put it off any longer; I need to look at my black eye. I shuffle to the long mirror in the corner. There's a tablecloth draped over it that rustles at my approach. I grab its edge and hesitate. I can sense Moonface standing behind it. She lurks in all the reflective things in the house. Her smile wrinkles and her head turns whenever I move. But the throbbing in my face intensifies. I hold my breath and pull the cloth back a few inches.

She's crammed against the glass, beaming at me. I cover it before my knees give out. It takes several minutes for my breathing to steady.

When I leave the bedroom, Chomp is crouched by the door. He spider-walks behind me as I head down the stairs. His teeth make a cracking sound as he thuds from one step to the next. All the joints in his legs complicate the crawling process. We reach the bottom, and he follows me into the kitchen. I throw a copy of *Vogue* on the floor and walk away. He gnaws on it for a while.

I finally make my way into the basement to see my new client. She's stretched out on the bed, still wearing the red dress and black leather jacket from last night. Her wrists are bound to the bars that make up the headboard, and her ankles are tethered to the bed's legs. She watches me come down the stairs with her big, brown eyes. Her lips curl with *schadenfreude* when she sees the damage she did to my face.

"Good morning," I say in my secretary voice. "I'm sorry if you didn't get much sleep."

I make my way to the bed and sit down. She tries to pull away from me, but the ropes stop her. Her clothes smell like stale perfume and the ashy breath of a smoke machine. Somewhere under it all comes a whiff of sweat. She's been panicking. I see it in the way her hair sticks to her forehead. My fingers brush her bangs to the side, but she turns her head away.

"I'll kill you," she says. "I swear to God I'll kill you."

"You're going to be down here a while, Holly. A little professionalism would be appreciated."

Her throat contracts as she swallows down the sticky fear that's built up there. Whatever courage is left in her wobbles to the surface. "I think you need a plastic surgeon for that eye—if you can afford one."

I sigh. It's time to establish dominance.

There's a shovel in the corner. I spy it and get up from the bed. It feels strong in my hands. I hold it pertly, shoulders squared, back straight. I've dealt with unruly clients before. Be firm but not unkind.

"Do you know who I am?" Holly shouts.

I bang the shovel on the bed's metal bars. Holly shrinks from the sound. Her eyes squeeze shut. I can almost feel the ringing in her eardrums.

"Bad," I say. "You're being a bad client."

The shovel bangs on the bars again, close to her fingers. Holly gasps to avoid screaming. Her breath shudders when she draws it in.

"Are you going to be professional now?" I ask.

She gives a stiff nod.

"Good. I'm Diane. I'll be taking care of you."

Holly ignores me. "I'm thirsty," she says.

"It's the drugs I gave you last night. It doesn't help that you had four Jack and Cokes."

A darkness seeps into Holly's glare that doesn't particularly thrill me. I move the shovel into her line of sight as a friendly reminder that I have it.

"But that doesn't matter," I say. "You won't have to party like that anymore."

I bring her a bottle of water and tip it into her mouth. She coughs and spills some down her chin but quickly comes back for more. I decrease the angle of the bottle and let her drink for a while. Eventually, I take it away and dry her face.

"That's enough for now," I say.

"Why am I here?" Holly asks.

"I guess everything would make more sense if I were a man; wouldn't it? But I don't think you were ever marketed to men."

Holly looks confused. I can't tell her the real reason. I saw her in a magazine. She reminded me so much of the people we used to treat—or change. I didn't want that for her. I didn't want her to change.

I glance at the stairs and find Chomp stumbling down them. He plants his feet awkwardly in front of his hands and picks his way to the bottom. Holly notices how my gaze follows him. She arches a perfectly penciled eyebrow.

“You can’t see him,” I say. “The clients never can.”

Chomp is all teeth as he crouches in the corner. His bony fingers bend their five joints into a springing position. He wants to get at her, but I won’t let him.

“That’s part of why you’re here. You can’t see the danger, but I can.”

I stand up and let the shovel hang in one hand. “If you’ll be so kind as to wait here a moment,” I say, “I have an outfit for you.”

#

My closet smells like mothballs. I’ll be forty-four in August. Maybe my closets are supposed to smell like mothballs now. A black dress slips easily from its hanger. I hold it against my torso and pivot toward the back of the door. Four screw holes stand as the last reminders that a mirror ever hung there. It’s been seven years since I’ve seen my full reflection, but I still look for the old mirror every time I open the closet. Phantom limb syndrome, or something like that.

The dress feels like lingerie beneath my fingers. It’s silk, and it shines when I hold it up to the window. The California sun is burning strong through the trees. It’s good that I bought Holly a light dress. She’ll overheat in that leather jacket she’s wearing. The dress is black to go with her smoky eyeshadow and mussed-up hair.

I pull a pair of new shoes from the closet. They’ll fit Holly as long as she didn’t lie about her measurements on her profile. I found out everything about her: height, weight, astrological sign, cup size, blood type. It wasn’t even difficult. She sacrificed privacy for fame. Why do they always do that? Why do they always throw themselves away? I can’t tell you how many pieces of them were in our trashcans at the clinic.

I dig out another dress. Gingham. Holly could never wear gingham. I don’t know what I was thinking. It’s not her style, but it might look okay on me. I take off my clothes and suck in my stomach so the dress fits. Diane in a gingham dress. My feet turn light as the sun warms the hardwood beneath them. It feels like climbing into a new body and being too much for it to hold.

Chomp watches me. I wish I could see myself. The throbbing pounds behind my swollen eye until it becomes a tomato in a skillet just before it bursts. In another moment my vision is blurring and the room spins. I sit on the edge of the bed, head hung low. That was stupid of me. I can’t start changing. The whole point is to stay the same. But Holly changed my face. I can’t deny that. She started the process.

Shaking, I hustle back into my normal clothes. Chomp follows me out of the bedroom, slapping his hands on the floor like he always does when he’s

frustrated. The cracking of his teeth makes me cringe. I stop outside the bathroom and brace myself. Moonface is strongest in there. There are water drops and faucets for her to hide in. Her white fingers can reach out of the chrome towel rack if I'm not careful. I duck in and try to steal a glimpse of my eye reflected in the faucet. She's there. Of course she's there. I have to leave. She won't let me see how much I'm changing.

I reach the top of the basement stairs when Chomp decides he's had enough. He latches onto my arm and tries to climb me. I fight him off, but he clings to me like a naked ape made of stilts and false teeth. His heaviness weighs me down. I pry at his wrists, and he chokes like a garbage disposal sucking down slop. His hand slips just enough for me to break away. I try to close the basement door, but Chomp grabs its edge.

"Get out!" I scream. I know he wants Holly, but he can't have her.

Holly, from below, raises her voice. "Is someone up there?" she asks.

Chomp and I pause at the sound. I take the opportunity to ram my shoulder against the door. Chomp falls backward, barely retracting his fingers before I crush them. Several locks keep him out.

"Down here!" Holly yells. "I can't move!"

"It's just me," I say. "You're safe."

Holly ignores me and continues crying out. I straighten up and try my best to look presentable. I still have a job to perform. Down I go, smile molded onto my face. Holly's disheveled and kicking, the ropes twanging as she stretches them to their limit. I hold up the dress like I'm dangling keys in front of an infant. Holly goes quiet, then spits at me. The restraints are scraping her wrists raw. Her breathing is becoming labored. Too much time in one position, too much thrashing around. I look at the foaming patch of spit on the dress and sigh.

"You were so quiet earlier," I say. "I really hoped you would be a good client."

Holly snarls. I grab some chlorhexidine wipes from the makeshift first-aid kit I have on standby. She lunges when I touch them to her wrists, but the fight gradually dies out of her.

"See?" I say. "It doesn't sting at all, does it?"

Holly gives me a sullen glower. She tolerates my doctoring. The tenseness relaxes from her muscles, coil by coil. Soon she's breathing normally and watching me like a skeptical child. Clients always need a little pampering. Their egos are fragile, hence why they come to us in the first place. Or used to come. I don't do that anymore.

When I finish tending to her wrists, I notice a welt on her neck where I hit her with the stun gun last night. I apply some chlorhexidine to that too, just to be safe. Then I pick up the black dress and shimmy it like a curtain. Holly narrows her eyes.

“I already have a dress,” she says.

“This one is lighter. Aren’t you hot?”

Holly thinks before answering. “Why a dress though? Why not something more casual?”

“I thought you’d like to wear something you’re used to. It’s designer. I got it at a boutique on Santa Monica.”

Holly studies me. “So models always wear designer dresses? In bed?”

I admit, I don’t know what models wear outside of magazines and billboards. I’m used to seeing them in blue hospital gowns. Those are their two sides: the runway and the operating table—making themselves into Moonfaces with plenty of scraps for Chomp.

“Don’t you like the dress?” I ask. “I want you to be fully satisfied with your experience.”

Holly lets out a bark of laughter. “Yeah, my ‘experience,’” she says. “What ‘experience’ is that, exactly?”

The ropes are slack. She isn’t struggling anymore. My smile grows less forced.

“I’m keeping you,” I say. “I’m keeping you the same.”

“I wouldn’t call this ‘the same.’ I’m not normally tied to a bed, unless it’s a really good Friday night.”

“Let’s keep things work appropriate,” I say.

“I didn’t realize this was a job.”

“It’s a place of business—in a way.”

“What business?”

“Preservation.”

Holly doesn’t respond, but she gives me a look I don’t appreciate, like she’s talking to a crazy person. I don’t want to be patronized. People can’t walk all over me just because I answer the phones, just because they’re expensive and glamorous and I work at a desk. I know what they’re like inside. I’ve seen it.

“Well,” I say with a smart clap of my hands, “let’s change your clothes.”

I grab her left shoe and pull it off. The size stamp says 8½. Her modeling profile said 7. She lied. The shoes I bought won’t fit her now. I kick them under the bed, feeling my cheeks grow hot with embarrassment. It makes the swelling in my eye ache. I’m supposed to be better prepared for clients. I know what liars they are, what Photoshopped worlds they inhabit.

I pause. The ropes. I’ll have to untie them to dress her. Why didn’t I think of that before? I’m slipping. These are rookie mistakes. Then again, this is my first client of my own. There’s no way around it; I’ll have to undo the ropes. One arm at a time. Never both. She can’t be trusted with both.

I set to work. A groan of relief flows out of Holly as the knot loosens and her elbow bends. I bring her arm down slowly, letting the blood pressure adjust. She looks at me with softness in her big, doe eyes. Stockholm syndrome? Or is that just what she wants me to think?

“Can you move it?” I ask.

“No.”

She can’t move her arms. It’s the first break I’ve had all day. I go for the second rope. I’m not thinking clearly. Maybe I’m tired from so much adrenaline, so many days spent planning.

“We’ll get this jacket off,” I say. “You’ll feel better soon. The beginning is always rough.”

“How do you know?” she asks. “Were you a model when you were younger?”

Younger. “No. I was a receptionist for one of the best plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills.” It’s all I can get out before a thunderclap explodes on the side of my head. Holly’s face, snarling, disappears behind a veil of reddish black.

#

The dim shape of a broken lamp forms in front of me. Something rings on the other side of an ocean full of constellations. The ringing gets closer, and I realize it’s in my ears. I’m drifting back into myself after a silent voyage through numb blackness. Something warm and wet soaks my hair. Holly. She hit me with a lamp.

I pull myself aching to my knees. A hatchet has split my head open. Wasps have made a hive in the swollen tissue. I stagger up, blind in one eye, and immediately fall over. The room is tilting. I spit out the taste of iron in my mouth and feel it seep down my nasal passage. It produces an uncomfortable sensation that makes me gag. My swollen eye won’t open—or, if it is open, it doesn’t function anymore. I feel cold. No, not cold. That’s shock talking, and I’m not going into shock. I’ll throw up if I have to, but I won’t go into shock. Not vomit, just blood. Fine, spit it out and stand.

The room rocks again, and I stumble against the wall to steady myself. Holly’s loose. The ringing in my ears fades into a loud gnawing. Chomp is on the bed, grinding Holly’s new dress between his teeth. At least it’s the dress and not Holly herself. Stupid girl. She has no idea how dangerous this is. I slide along the basement wall and leave behind a streak of blood.

The stairs are torture. Each step is a balloon swelling in my brain. I reach the top and stumble into the living room. Footsteps travel across the ceiling overhead. Holly. I groan and mount the next set of stairs. My legs are limp bodies washed up on the beach. I’m pulling them with ropes and watching them flail. The shovel waits for me on the second floor where I left it earlier. Good shovel. Good cane.

I plod down the hallway and stop outside my bedroom. There's Holly, standing in front of the cheval glass, examining the red mark on her neck from the stun gun. Idiot! She uncovered the mirror! Moonface is out!

I surge forward with an energy straight out of Bedlam. My shovel blasts the cheval glass into a scattering of jagged reflections. I use the shovel like a ram rod and force Holly back. It jams under her chin and pins her to the wall. She struggles, delivering a series of sharp kicks to my knees. I fight through the pain and keep pinning her, cursing her, sobbing into her face. Holly stops when she sees my eye. The color drains from her cheeks.

"What was in the mirror?" I scream.

"Your face—"

"Why'd you let her out?"

Holly drops her arms. My shovel is the only thing holding her up.

"I did that," she whispers.

I see something pale and eyeless reflected in her tears.

#

It's midnight. Holly's gone. I didn't bother closing the window after she climbed out. I'm taking a broom to the pieces of broken mirror on the floor, trying my hardest not to look at them. Chomp's throwing a tantrum in the corner. He won't have anything to eat now. Good. Maybe he'll starve to death. But there are lots of Chomps in the world, and Holly can't even see them. She was stupid for leaving me. Stupid for changing us.

The police are here but they'll have to wait. I'm sweeping up a thousand cutting Moonfaces in the blind darkness.

CLOWN DISEASE

Aidan Donabue

Litigation

falls

through but the restraining order's still a problem

Carlile the Clown

can't be within

300 ft of the

kids but

“Carlile

and Kids” is worth too much to

the network

So, we get this idea to lock

him

in a room across the lot because

Mommy Agent is just dying to get her kid Man in the Mirror'd

we lock

the door from the outside

you're not getting

on 60 Minutes,

he

never touched

your ugly-ass kid

Carlile video-calls in to the set every

week with a new Clown Disease

Fun-monia Handkerchief Nose

Wack-leaf's Foot. Silly-titus B (we scrapped this episode)

Half a season of

Juggalo Jaundice

until,

one taping

cigarette butt gets too friendly with

the shag carpet next to the monitor setup.

Though we were

pretty sure

he

was not sick,

it was best to stay

distanced

(for the kids, you
know), so
we watched

Him
Try to smother it with an
impossibly
 long
 pocket handkerchief

NEVER BELIEVING THEY DESERVE TO STARVE

Penelope Schott

I lie near the mattress edge.
My husband sprawls in his sleep

and I scoot farther over,
folding both arms under my pillow

to stay small.

Too many women are just like me,
saying *sorry, sorry, so sorry*

for the space our minds take up.
Some nights I envy

the crass bravado of raptors
spreading wide wings,

never believing
they were meant to starve.

SPELL THE WORD JOY

Penelope Schott

J-O-Y. The word ought to be bigger.
Longer. Taller. Wider.
Written in crystalline drops
on the back of a shovel
after the rain.

Joy when the skin of a loved one
is known by your hand.
Joy of a dog rolling on a cow pie.
A baby first finding her toes.
Or your same hand when a ripe plum

drops into it.
Your lips, teeth, tongue
savoring that plum,
and you forget what day it is
because it's now. N-O-W.

And now,
the joy of spitting the pit.

NYŪJŌ LIBATION

Bien Santillan Mabbayad

Breathe.

Relax.

Focus.

Let the calm feeling wash over the body.

Tyler lay in the middle of his bedroom floor, meditating. He never felt so calm, so at peace with himself. He had never felt like this since taking M-Cat with Doug while hanging out at the cemetery.

Tyler came across this meditation while searching the internet. He's been searching for something, a meaning, an escape for quite some time. Tyler had been searching for peace. Perhaps this time, he has found it through this meditation, his breathing.

So, breathe.

Feel it flow.

He felt his breath pass through him. His breath is his prana, his life force. It is the first act when one is born. It is the last act to do before dying.

Every breath has a beginning and a subsequent end.

Just like Doug, his best friend. His only friend.

Tyler's dad never approved of Doug. He called him weak. Pathetic. Then again, he never approved of anything that Tyler does. He was never man enough for his dad. Whatever Tyler did was never good enough; the perfect dad. He'd work all day fixing cars at the shop and sometimes come home at night drunk. At those times, he'd be complaining about his life, would flex his muscles, and say something stupid.

See? This is what it is to be a man, working with your hands. This makes you strong, your arms firm. But you're nothing like me, aren't you? Is school making you weak, boy?

Oh, indeed, he'd say things like that to Tyler. His words alone don't make him weep. It was his dad's strong arms.

Mom had always kept quiet about it with a bleeding lip. But with a shot of vodka and some valiums, everything went okay. Good old Mom and her home remedies. The bruises finally stopped appearing on her skin. The bleeding of her lip was gone. Tyler watched her lie in the church while all the neighbors lined up to peer into her coffin. The mortician hadn't done a better job at making her beautiful again. Sleep well, Mom.

Still.

Empty the mind.

Concentrate.

It was getting harder for Tyler to concentrate. The guide in the article said it was normal. But with practice, Tyler could let go of everything. So, he lay

there in the middle of the room. His hands to his chest, letting it rest, letting his hands feel his prana flow through his body. Waiting for the exhale. Eyes closed, he concentrated. It's not like it was the first time Tyler tried meditating. He'd been practicing breathing for some time now. It was his emotions. He couldn't control it at times.

And as he faltered, memories flooded in.

There was a girl named Jessica in school whom he liked from a distance. Tyler couldn't control his emotions back then, either. How could he have been so stupid writing all those letters and putting them in places she could find? Doug said it was dumb. The popular girls wouldn't date guys like them. Besides, Jessica was already dating Raymond from the basketball team. But Tyler didn't care. He knew Jessica was different. She was the school president and top grader. Jessica helped Tyler in class once in a while. She even became his partner in a class project once. She was sweet to him. And the way she smiled.

Seeing her smile down the hallway as she read his poems was initially sweet. It contained nothing but words of simple admiration. Her head moved about, searching for that secret admirer. Her friends swooned over the letters. For a moment, Tyler was happy, watching from a distance.

But he kept at it. Tyler wrote more letters. They became frequent, more daring than the last. Then, one day, one of Jessica's friends caught him slipping a letter in Jessica's locker. It was an awkward moment seeing her friend looking at him incredulously. Then she turned away, stifling her laughter. It was too late for Tyler to retrieve the letter. It had dropped all the way into the cold darkness of Jessica's locker.

Everyone was talking about him the next day. They stole glances at him wherever he passed. Some held back a few giggles. But some burst out laughing. How his letters were scanned and shared through social media was unbelievable. He thought Jessica would understand him and see him for who he was. But Jessica avoided him ever since, letting friends surround her. Safety in numbers, they say.

Then came Raymond and his gang. It was around lunchtime that Tyler felt the pain in his gut as Raymond punched him. While he reeled over the floor, he heard Raymond telling him not to go near his girl again. Everyone recorded with their phones as he lay there, writhing and gasping. They did nothing but watch and share their video of him with everyone. Jessica looked at him, too. Tyler couldn't tell what she was thinking. He was too busy sputtering and heaving. Then, his body relaxed as he lay there on the floor. Eyes closed, breathing.

Slowly now.

Let the *prana* flow.

Relax.

Doug was right. Places for them were growing thin. He said this once while playing around with his dad's gun. He and Doug were at the cemetery on the outskirts by the woods when he said it. He pointed at the woods with the gun and said the weirdest thing.

What do you think is beyond those woods?

That's the highway, stupid.

Yeab, I know, but figuratively.

Figuratively. That was how Doug put it. The forest used to be big, but now it's just a cluster of trees partitioning the highway from where they were. You can barely call it a forest now. Delinquents have overtaken all the places they used to hang out: the school grounds, the park, the mall. There's little place left to call their own—even their homes. They've been thrown out. Rejected. Sure, they still had the cemetery. But the cemetery's for the dead.

You know, Tyler. One day. Just one day. I'll be able to go beyond those woods, reach the highway, and drive to sunset.

Doug, your dad only has a police mobile. Besides, you don't even know how to drive, man. I can learn. But you'll come with me, right?

How Tyler wished he could. It happened one night. A few hours after a heated argument with his dad about grades and drugs, Doug went into his parent's room while they were downstairs, took the gun his dad kept in a hole behind their family portrait, and went out with a bang. Tyler couldn't put himself up to it. He's too afraid to follow. Since that night, Tyler had been alone.

When he was a kid, Tyler used to cry each time he couldn't see anyone with him. He would always ask Mom to be with him, no matter which part of the house he was in. This annoyed her greatly. He was even spanked many times to make him stop being afraid. But Tyler had been fearful of so many things. Death was one of them.

For most of his life, he'd been surrounded by death. Even before Doug, there was Cathy from 9th grade. The popular kids poke fun at her for wearing baggy jeans and loose sweatshirts over her plump body. She had no friends in school, but all the kids knew her from the memes that the popular kids made for fun. Tyler had seen her memes a few times. They weren't pleasant. It wasn't that he was insensitive or anything for not befriending or standing up for her. There's this unspoken rule everyone in school was following: to each their own. Tyler felt safer with a low profile than making himself the next target. Somehow, he regretted that after learning what happened to Cathy.

Cathy's parents were always away at work or on business trips, and it was only after getting a complaint from the neighbors about the smell of fumes from their garage that they found her in the car. The fire department was there, and so were the paramedics. It was too late. Cathy had placed a tube from the exhaust and shot it up through the window with duct tape.

Kids these days know how to drive someone.

Barely a month later, that beautiful blue house down the street was left for sale. Cathy's parents never wanted to come back.

There were other deaths besides Cathy and Doug. There was this older guy named Mouse or Bruce, who used to be Doug's supplier. He lived in another town, somewhere only Doug knew. He died of a drug overdose. His rotting body was found weeks later in a shabby apartment. It was horrible even to imagine the pain in your insides as you drown in your frothing bile.

Tyler also once saw a video spread on the internet of a hit-and-run victim. He died twitching in agony while a woman knelt and cried hysterically near him. The video got about a thousand hits before it was flagged down.

Miss Hernandez, Tyler's batty old math teacher, was gunned down at a convenience store two years back. The gunman turned out to be one of her former students. It was a horrible sight. All those breakfast cereals scattered in a pool of blood.

But of all the deaths he knew, he couldn't forget that one thing he witnessed.

Tyler was only nine when his grandfather died. He loved his grandfather. He shared all his tasteless jokes and told him of his life in the Sixties. He said it wasn't all fun, but it was different. People actually cared. When his grandfather was already very old and frail, he got sick. Tyler was on his deathbed when it happened. Nobody cared he was there. Tyler's mom stood crying by the foot of the bed. Her three estranged siblings — who never visited — along with their spouses, were also there. His cousins sat at the room's far end, their faces glued to their phones. His dad was outside puffing smoke. When his grandfather took his last breath, it was only Tyler who laid his hand on him. When his grandfather exhaled, he felt something leave. His grandfather's heart beat slowly, faintly, then stopped. Tyler couldn't understand why he was the only one who heard something crack from his grandfather's skull. When he took his hand back, he saw his grandfather lying peacefully on the bed as the sun's rays from the window made his grandfather's face glow.

It was only now that Doug was gone that it hit him. Tyler also wanted to leave now that he felt truly alone. But he wanted it to be as peaceful as his grandfather's passing. He was eighty-four when he died. Tyler couldn't wait that long. He wanted to leave, but he was too afraid to commit suicide. It's too painful, too messy and disgusting. When people get hanged, their eyes bulge, their tongues stick out, and they die pissing in their pants. Slicing your wrist reminds him of Miss Hernandez and breakfast cereals. And he never wanted to overdose on drugs and die drowning in froth intentionally.

Tyler saw Doug's body at the funeral. He never looked peaceful. His face was contorted somehow, and the mortician failed to hide those bullet holes in his temples completely. Poor Doug. He was gone too soon. He lay

there in the coffin, entirely still, just like what Tyler was doing right now in his room.

Lay still.

Feel the body's heat radiate.

Feel it touch every part of the room.

Let the heat linger as it turns cold.

Let it radiate, then fade.

Tyler felt his extremities tingle a little. Meditating, Tyler thought, was a great idea.

The idea came to him in Mister Garcia's class, where Buddhism was being discussed. The conversation touched upon monks who possess a profound appreciation for mortality, acknowledging the gradual deterioration of the body during the process of dying. This intrigued Tyler so much that he approached Mister Garcia to discuss it further after class.

There are monks in Japan, Mister Garcia said, that once practiced *sokushibutsu*, an act of self-mummification that aims to achieve "a Buddha in this very body." Tyler got interested in the story of Kōbō Daishi, who founded the esoteric Shingon school of Buddhism in 806. According to legend, after a long particular diet and meditation, he entered his tomb and went into *nyūjō*, a state of meditation so profound that it induces suspended animation.

It took a while to learn more about *sokushibutsu* on the internet. Central to this preparation is a diet called *mokujikigyō*, literally "tree-eating training." Initially, it was hard to understand how it was done, but Tyler finally traced it back to the Taoist practice of abstaining from cultivated grains. Tyler limited himself to unprocessed foods. By then, he only ate a few types of vegetables and selected fruits. An article he stumbled upon said that the severe diet rids the body of fat, muscle, and moisture while withholding nutrients from the body's natural biosphere of bacteria and parasites. The cumulative effect was to arrest decomposition after death.

The diet was easy enough as he never shared a meal with his dad. They never talked much after Mom died. Most of the time, his dad would leave money on the table under the coffee tin. For Tyler, this was fine. He never mattered much to his dad anyway.

After a few months, Tyler's body grew thin. The diet was working, but it was his meditation that needed refinement.

One day, while researching more about meditating, he stumbled upon a video of a monk in Thailand who achieved it. Instead of sitting in a lotus position, the old monk lay on a mat at the center of a small temple while four other younger monks meditated with him. The monks chanted as the old monk lay down in silence. Tyler looked closer at the old monk's chest; it was barely moving. And after six minutes, the chest stopped moving. The younger monks kept quiet and started to mourn. Gently, they covered the old monk's body

with the extension of the mat, carried him ceremoniously to a coffin, and laid him to rest.

Watching that footage made Tyler realize what he was doing wrong.
It's all about the breathing.

Tyler knew it would be near-impossible to complete the thousand-day ritual of the *sokushibutsu* without stopping. He only meditated when he had time. His room was the perfect place, especially at night, but doing it at school was hard. The popular kids poked fun at him when they saw him sitting quietly with his eyes closed. It wasn't easy to concentrate whenever they slapped him on the head. He found himself frequenting the cemetery more often. He'd sit on the ground, surrounded by the dead, meditating. He mainly concentrated on breathing, emptying his mind of things, and letting everything go.

Let go of the bad memories.

Let go of all emotions.

Breathe.

In time, Tyler managed to do walking meditations. He read about it on the internet somewhere and started to adopt it every single day. His pacing was slow and deliberate, aware of his every step. The kids in school may have found it amusing to see him walk that way. But for Tyler, it was fine. He didn't mind anymore.

Soon, he realized it could be done besides walking. He purposely paid attention to his every movement, his surroundings, and the sensations he felt. Tyler knew it was all in the breathing and his mindfulness of things.

As he meditated in the cemetery, he felt a sense of peace. Death, he knew, is inevitable. We can go at any moment in so many ways. In his meditation, he accepted it and was no longer afraid. Death is but letting go.

And that's what Tyler did.

He first let go of what he ate and only drank salinized water for days. Abstinence was the next level of his meditation.

While sitting, walking, or doing things, he was in constant meditation.

And through his constant meditation, he mastered the mindfulness of things.

Most of his fat was gone. His muscle tone decreased. His skin felt leathery, and it looked taut. Nobody in school noticed, of course. But for Tyler, that was fine. Gradually, it became harder for him to do things as he lost strength. He knew this would happen eventually. It was part of the process.

Tyler was waiting for his big day.

The day finally came when Tyler made his preparations. Without hesitation, he walked up to Jessica and her friends at school, apologizing for the letters and how they made her feel. He expressed his feelings, letting her know how much he liked her, and then said goodbye. Talking to her made it feel like

he was going on a long journey. Perhaps he was. Jessica's friends giggled and laughed, but he didn't care anymore. Tyler was leaving.

When he had the chance, he talked to his father. It was a long time since they last spoke. Tyler told him everything with all honesty. He said he might never understand why his dad never loved him, but Tyler forgave him. Dad kept quiet as he stood skeptically, eyeing him by the foot of the stairs. Tyler doesn't mind anymore. Tyler already had set his time for departure.

+++
He lay on the floor in the middle of his room that night, meditating, concentrating on breathing, letting go of everything, and feeling the warmth radiating. He never felt so calm, so at peace with himself. He cleared his mind of thoughts, breathing in an empty, grayish space behind his eyelids.

Slowly, gradually, his breath became shallow.

His heart pulsed to a moderate rhythm.

At first, there was nothing. Then, a light appeared somewhere. He remembered locking his doors before turning off all the lights. Still, that light gradually turned from blue to yellow, white, and blue again. The light was as warm as a gentle embrace. It overpowered all his other sensations. The smell of his room was gone. He couldn't focus his eyes anymore, so he let them close again. He felt the floor beneath him fade as if he was being lifted. Everything quieted down as the moments passed.

Then he realized he was no longer breathing.

His heartbeat still pulsed, but it, too, was fading, slowing.

The light shone brighter with its welcoming warmth.

He felt happy. Secure. It was the first time in years he felt that way.

Then, the light slowly shrank into a ball, and Tyler felt the warmth inside him ebb away.

There was no heartbeat anymore. No breath. Only his consciousness was left.

At that moment, he understood everything; all the pain he experienced was pointless now; the deaths around him were only natural. Death is but letting go.

The light became the size of a small marble.

Then, it faded.

The last thing he heard was a faint crack from somewhere.

Only the darkness remained.

Tyler lay on the floor in the middle of the room.

He is now at peace.

THE BOYS

Corbett Buchly

agitated serpents empty from the steel doors
twist through the knots of girls, tumble over one another
this pack of laughing, shrieking creatures
shouldering with quick strikes into bushes stones mirth
all joke and fervor these pre-adolescent energies
the fathers stand, crossed arms, shoulders back
finding this fierce exodus all growth and nature
how do they not detect the dark seed in gleeful gaze
the future rage and sexual frustration seething
like a bed of long moss and crimson bodies
writhing like boiled sea struggling
to crash over each others' waves or break into vapor
to rise like hastily cobbled machines
spitting oil and steam into sky
where one can study the shape of terrain
and understand what it is to bear life

WASP LOGIC

Corbett Buchly

the wasps are at it
stabbing us, pushing toxins
through our bloodstreams

carrying us off to their nests
they appropriate our flesh
as a course of legislative matter

our freshly stacked corpses
lie tucked away in cells
of wood pulp and secretion

lie in honeycombed labyrinth
brain dead and nutrient rich
fodder for their young

the wasps claim they thin the herd
make our species stronger
the world a little healthier

the wasps point to their two-party system
claim we have as much power
over our bodies as anyone
their abdomens fat on our protein

EGGS

Noah Gassman

I am out buying eggs today
And I pick up the free range because
The chickens get more space than the cage free
Who get more space than those ladies
Who can only spare cheap white porcelain.

But then I saw the pasture raised close by for the second
or maybe third time, and pull up the legal difference since
I've been trying to be decent
Pasture Raised requires 108 square feet of pasture per hen,
Free range asks for 2.
I feel bad, but

I place the free-range eggs in my bag thinking
How hopeless am I, how fucked are we
Because often it seems the only way to be good is to be God
And the jury's still out on that.

even if i buy pasture raised, i won't be saving any boy chick lives/ and the girls
in ohio are still left with parasites/ the kids in arkansas are still unprescribed/
the boys in florida are still gonna die/ and the children in ukraine and gaza and
the school up the drive/ still fear for the man with the gun and that glint in his
eye.

And I'm buying eggs
pretending that could change something.
I leave with a dozen either way.

Contributors

Sam Ambler's work appears in *Apricity Magazine*, *Avatar Review*, *Brushfire*, *Christopher Street*, *City Lights Review Number 2*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *El Portal*, *Euphony Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Glint Literary Journal*, *Headway Quarterly*, *Hearth & Coffin*, *The James White Review*, *Mount Hope Magazine*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *The Phoenix*, *Plainsongs Poetry Magazine*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, among others. He was featured in the anthology VOICES OF THE GRIEVING HEART. He won the San Francisco Bay Guardian's 6th Annual Poetry Contest. He earned a BA in English, specializing in creative writing of poetry, from Stanford. He delivered singing telegrams and sang with the Temescal Gay Men's Chorus in Berkeley and the Pacific Chamber Singers in San Francisco. He has worked in nonprofit theater at Berkeley Rep, Geffen Playhouse, Actors' Equity, and The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. He lives in California with his husband, visual artist Edward L. Rubin.

Jan Ball has had 390 poems published in U.S. and international journals. *Finishing Line Press* has published her three chapbooks and first full-length poetry collection: *I Wanted To Dance With My Father*. She has had two poems nominated for the Pushcart as well as two nominated for Best of the Net.

Heather Bartos writes both fiction and nonfiction. Her essays have appeared in *Fatal Flam*, *McNeese Review*, *LitroUSA*, and elsewhere. Her flash fiction and short stories have appeared in *Baltimore Review*, *Ponder Review*, *Orca*, *Relief: A Journal of Art and Faith*, and elsewhere. She is working towards an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of New Orleans.

Rachel Beachy is a graduate of the IU School of Journalism (2014) and worked in broadcast radio/tv before several years in marketing. Since 2020, they have worked at home and have enjoyed finding an enthusiastic community of writers and readers. They are currently in Louisville with their husband and two daughters.

Abbie Brandao (cover art) works as a documentary-style family photographer in New Orleans, capturing the beauty of everyday life for her clients. The photographs she takes of her own children are little meditations on the wonder and mystery of ordinary childhood moments.

Corbett Buchly's poetry has appeared in *SLAB*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Plainsongs*, and *Barrow Street*. He is an alumnus of Texas Christian University and the professional writing program at the University of Southern California. He resides in Northeast Texas with his wife and two perfectly unusual sons.

Jacob Butlett is a Pushcart Prize-nominated author with an MFA in Poetry. He has been published in many journals, including the *Colorado Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, and *Into the Void*. In 2023 he received an Honorable Mention for the Academy of American Poets Prize (Graduate Prize).

Kevin Carey is Coordinator of Creative Writing at Salem State University. Books include: *The Beach People*, *The One Fifteen to Penn Station*, *Jesus Was a Homeboy*, *Set in Stone*, *Murder in the Marsh* and a new novel *Junior Miles and the Junkman* (September 2023 from

Regal House/Fitzroy Books) and a new co-written poetry collection *Olympus Heights* (October 2023 – Lily Poetry Review). He is the co-founder of *Molecule: a tiny lit mag*.
Kevincareywriter.com

Joanne M. Clarkson's sixth poetry collection, "Hospice House," was released by *MoonPath Press* in 2023. Her volume, "The Fates," won *Bright Hill Press'* annual contest and appeared in 2017. Her poems have been published in such journals as *Poetry Northwest*, *Nimrod*, *Poet Lore*, *Alaska Quarterly Review* and *Beloit Poetry Journal*. Clarkson has Masters Degrees in English and Library Science, has taught and worked for many years as a professional librarian. After caring for her mother through a long illness, she re-careered as a Registered Nurse working in Home Health and Hospice. See more at <http://joanneclarkson.com>.

John Cullen graduated from SUNY Geneseo and worked in the entertainment business booking rock bands, a clown troupe, and an R-rated magician. Recently he has had work published in *American Journal of Poetry*, *The MacGuffin*, *Harpur Palate*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Cleaver*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *New York Quarterly*. His chapbook, *TOWN CRAZY*, is available from *Slipstream Press*. His piece "Almost There" won the 52nd New Millennium Award for Poetry.

Julia Dailey is a paralegal who lives in Northern Virginia with her husband. Julia has a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Central Missouri, where she was an assistant editor for *Pleiades: Literature in Context* and Editor-in-Chief of *Arcade*. She also has an Associates of Applied Science in Paralegal Studies from the Northern Virginia Community College. Julia won the 2014 David Baker Fiction Award and the 2016 David Baker Poetry Award. Julia has been published in *Angel City Review* and *The Laurel Review*.

Thomas DeConna has stories published in *Mobius*, *The Long Story*, *Wild Violet Magazine*, *The Write Launch*, *Good Works Review*, and *Evening Street Review*. A novel, *Season of Restorations*, was published in February 2022, and a second novel, *Accustomed to the Dark*, was published in November 2023. They live in Colorado with their wife, Sheryl.

Aidan Donahue is a writer out of western Wisconsin with an interest in the macabre and sublime. His goal is to always make readers ask: "Wait, what?" For him, each piece is a terrifying, sob-inducing venture, and he swears he will never write again. He enjoys the violent overuse of commas.

Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of places (including the United Kingdom and Japan), but now calls North Carolina home. An AWP Intro Award winner and Pushcart Prize nominee, she is the author of *Floribunda* and three chapbooks, *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, and *Bogbound*. When not writing or reading or editing *BRILLIG: a micro lit mag*, she trains for running road races, or practices yoga, while sharing a house with her husband, six housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

E.J. Evans is the author of *Ghost Houses* (Clare Songbirds, 2021), *Conversations with the Horizon* (Box Turtle Press, 2019), and the chapbook *First Snow Coming* (Kattywompus Press, 2015). He has poetry forthcoming in *Innisfree Poetry Journal*, *I-70 Review*, *Amethyst Review*, and *Worcester Review*.

Craig Evenson is a public school teacher. They live in Minnesota in an old yellow house with a cat, a woman, two dogs and three birds.

Jonathan Everitt's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Laurel Review*, *BlazeVox*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Small Orange*, *Impossible Archetype*, *Ghost City Press*, *The Bees Are Dead*, *The Empty Closet*, *Lake Affect*, and the *Moving Images* poetry anthology, among others. His poem, "Calling Hours," was the basis for the 2015 short film, *Say When*. Jonathan lives in Rochester, N.Y., with his partner, David Sullivan.

George Freek's poem "Enigmatic Variations" was recently nominated for Best of the Net. His poem "Night Thoughts" was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Noah Gassman is a writer and administrator currently living and working in the perfectly fine city of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He often writes long and rambly essays in his spare time, but also writes an average of seven poems a year. When not writing or administrating, Noah also enjoys biking, cooking, and reading.

Kirk Glaser's poetry has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Nimrod*, *Split Rock*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Catamaran*, *The Worcester Review*, *The Cortland Review*, and elsewhere. Awards for his work include an American Academy of Poets prize, C. H. Jones National Poetry Prize, and University of California Poet Laureate Award. He teaches writing and literature at Santa Clara University, where he serves as Director of the Creative Writing Program and Faculty Advisor to the Santa Clara Review. He is co-editor of the anthology, *New California Writing 2013*, Heyday.

Carol L. Gloor has been writing poetry since they were sixteen. Their poetry chapbook, "Assisted Living," was published by *Finishing Line Press* in 2013, and their full length collection, "Falling Back," was published by *Word Poetry* in 2019. Their work has appeared in many journals, most recently in "Visions International."

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Lost Pilots*. Latest books, *Between Two Fires Covert* and *Memory Outside The Head* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *California Quarterly*, *Seventh Quarry*, *La Presa* and *Doubly Mad*.

Amy Haddad is a poet, nurse and educator who taught at Creighton University for 30+ years. Her poetry has been published in the *American Journal of Nursing*, *Janus Head*, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, *Touch*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Aji*, *Oberon Literary Journal*, *Abandoned Mine*, *Rogue Agent*, *Intima*, and several anthologies. Her chapbook, *The Geography of Kitchens* (2021), was published by *Finishing Line Press*. Her first poetry collection, *An Otherwise Healthy Woman* (2022), was published by *Backwaters Press*, an imprint of the U. of Nebraska Press. *An Otherwise Healthy Woman* won first place in the Creative Works category of the American Journal of Nursing Book Awards 2022. (www.amyhaddadpoetry.com).

Ryan Harbert graduated with a BA in English from Kent State University, where he attended poetry readings with speakers such as Yusef Komunyakaa and W. S. Merwin. His work has appeared in *Umbrella Factory Magazine*. He's worked as a waiter, a fast-food cook, a veterinary receptionist, and a night janitor. His hobbies include running, video games, and petting every cat he meets.

Natali Herrera-Pacheco is a Venezuelan artist and scholar that works on the intersection of music with other expressive forms. Natali holds a Doctorate in Latin American literature from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, Spain; and a Masters in Ethnohistory and a Bachelors in Art History from the Universidad de Los Andes in Venezuela. Natali has taught at the University of North Texas, Texas Christian University, and Texas Woman's University.

Robert Herschbach is the author of *Loose Weather* (Washington Writers' Publishing House, 2013) and has published their poetry in journals that include *The Southern Poetry Review*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Fugue*. When they are not writing, they compose music, some of which has been performed and recorded. They live in Maryland and work in college communications.

Elizabeth Hill was a Finalist in the 2022 *Rattle* Poetry Contest, with their poem also appearing as *Poem of the Day* on February 20, 2023. They were nominated for the 2023 Pushcart Prize by the *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*. Their poetry has also been published in 34th *Parallel Magazine*, *Boomerlit*, *SAND*, and *Catamaran*, among other journals. They are a retired Administrative Law Judge who was responsible for suits concerning learning disabled children. They live in Harlem, NYC with their husband and two irascible cats.

Donald Illich has published poetry recently in *The Southern Review*, *Gargoyle*, and *The Louisville Review*. His book is *Chance Bodies* (The Word Works, 2018). He lives and works in Maryland.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 190 stories in magazines including *The Hudson Review*, *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, and *Evergreen Review*. Their sixth book, a novel set in the Congo called *Silent Light*, is forthcoming from Evergreen Review Books. A full list of publications can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

Nancy Kay Peterson's poetry has appeared in print and online in numerous publications, most recently in *The Bluebird Word*, *Dash Literary Journal*, *HerWords*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, *One Sentence Poems*, *RavensPerch*, *Spank the Carp*, *Steam Ticket: A Third Coast Review*, *Three Line Poetry* and *Tipton Poetry Journal*. From 2004-2009, she co-edited and co-published *Main Channel Voices: A Dam Fine Literary Magazine* (Winona, MN). Her work has been included in two anthologies: *Haikus for Hikers* (Brick Street Poetry, Inc.) and *Play* (Outsider Press). Finishing Line Press published her two poetry chapbooks, *Belated Remembrance* (2010) and *Selling the Family* (2021). For more information, see www.nancykaypeterson.com.

Diane Kendig's most recent of five poetry collections are *Woman with a Fan: On Maria Blanchard* (Shanti Arts), and *Prison Terms* (Main Street), and she co-edited the anthology *In the Company of Russell Atkins* (Red Giant). For eighteen years she directed creative writing at the

University of Findlay, including a prison writing program. She then taught in Boston. Now back home in Canton, Ohio, Kendig curates “Read + Write: 30 Days of Poetry,” to 7,000 subscribers for the Cuyahoga County Public Library. dianekendig.com

Kate Kingston is the author of five books of poetry, most recently, *The Future Wears Camouflage*, forthcoming from Salmon Poetry in 2024. She is the recipient of the Karen Chamberlain Award, the W.D. Snodgrass Award for Poetic Endeavor and Excellence, the Ruth Stone Prize, and the Atlanta Review International Publication Prize. Kingston has been awarded fellowships from the Colorado Council on the Arts, Harwood Museum, Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, Jentel, Ucross, and Fundación Valparaíso in Mojácar, Spain, among others. Several of her poems have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Arts. She lives in Graham, NC with her cats James Cagney and Janis Joplin.

Bien Santillan Mabbayad is a literature teacher at the University of Santo Tomas seeking to further develop their craft in creative writing.

Josh Mahler lives and writes in Virginia. His poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Quarter After Eight*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Potomac Review*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, from *Texas Review Press*, and elsewhere.

Michael Milburn teaches English in New Haven, CT.

Jesse Millner's poems and prose have appeared most recently in *Grist* and *Book of Matches*. His work was included in *The Best American Poetry 2013* and *Best Small Fictions 2020*. His latest poetry book, *Memory's Blue Sedan*, was released in March 2020 by Hysterical Books of Tallahassee, Florida. Jesse teaches writing courses at Florida Gulf Coast University and lives in Estero, Florida, with his dog, Lucy.

Joseph D. Milosch has four books. The San Diego City Library selected his latest book, *A Walk with Breast Cancer*, for a Local Poet Book Award. His book *Homeplate Was the Heart & Other Stories* was nominated for the American Book Award and the Eric Hoffer, Best Small Press Publication award.

Cecil Morris retired after 37 years of teaching high school English, and now he tries writing himself what he spent so many years teaching others to understand and (he hopes) to enjoy. He has poems appearing or forthcoming in *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *Rust + Moth*, and *Sugar House Review*, and other literary magazines.

Dave Morrison's poems have been published in literary magazines and anthologies, and featured on *Writer's Almanac*, *Take Heart*, and *Poems from Here*. Morrison has published seventeen books of poetry - *Another Good Day Begins* (Soul Finger Press 2022) is his most recent collection.

Zach Keali'i Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in *Reed Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *The Coachella Review*, *Raritan Quarterly*, *Another Chicago*

Magazine, *Flash Frog*, and more. He has published the chapbooks *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press) and *If We Keep Moving* (Ghost City Press). He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Barry Peters lives in Durham, NC. Publications include *Barrow Street*, *Grist*, *Image*, *RHINO*, and *The Southern Review*.

Seth Polfus (back cover) received a camera for Christmas when he was ten years old and has been taking photos ever since. Today, the photographs he took back then tell a story and the timeless value of photos is what has propelled him to take up photography. An appreciation for nature and a love for adventure was implanted in him while growing up in the wilderness paradise otherwise known as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. His work is reflective of his passion for photography, love for variety, and his longing for adventure.

Deborah M. Prum's stories have appeared in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Across the Margin*, *The Virginia Writers Centennial Anthology*, *McQueen's Quinterly* and *Streetlight Magazine*. A full publication list is available upon request. Her humorous radio essays have routinely aired on NPR. Non-fiction has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Southern Living*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Huffington Post*. Her articles on the craft of writing have been published in *Brevity*, *The Writer*, *The Writer's Handbook* and the *Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Bulletin*. She teaches at WriterHouse in Charlottesville, Virginia. She has been a guest lecturer at the University of Virginia, James Madison University, the Virginia Festival of the Book, and many other places. To see writing samples, look here: www.deborahprum.com.

Jake Rinloan is a native Californian who has lived much of his life in Washington State, with stints in Finland and Canada. He is a University of Washington graduate who is passionate about reading, writing and outdoor recreation. Most recently, Jake worked as a project director for the California chapter of The Nature Conservancy.

Malissa Rodenburg is an emerging poet with her first poem forthcoming in Hog River Press. Malissa holds a bachelor's in fiction writing from Columbia College Chicago and a master's in science writing from Johns Hopkins University. As a science journalist she is a master of facts and figures. Poetry and fiction is where she can play.

David Sahner is a scientist and poet whose poetry has appeared in journals on both sides of the Atlantic, including *Tears in the Fence*, *Agenda*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Connecticut Review*, *Catamaran*, *The Sandy River Review*, *Van Gogh's Ear*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Blackbox Manifesto*, *Mudlark*, *The Raven's Perch* and elsewhere. Their book-length collection, *Hum*, was published last year, and their work has been anthologized in several multi-author collections, most recently in a release from Anhinga Press.

Michael Salcman is a poet, physician and art historian, was chairman of neurosurgery at the University of Maryland and president of the Contemporary Museum. Poems appear in *Arts & Letters*, *Barrow Street*, *Café Review*, *Hopkins Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *New Letters*, and *Smartish Pace*. Books include *The Clock Made of Confetti*, *The Enemy of Good is Better*, *Poetry in Medicine*, his anthology of classic and contemporary poems on doctors, patients, illness & healing, *A Prague Spring*, *Before & After*, winner of the 2015 Sinclair Poetry Prize, and *Shades*

Graces: New Poems, inaugural winner of The Daniel Hoffman Legacy Book Prize in 2020. *Necessary Speech: New & Selected Poems* was published by Spuyten Duyvil in 2022.

Sandra Salinas Newton is a Filipina-American professor emeritus of English. Her works include introductory texts, fiction, and arts reviews. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Brushfire*, *Cerasus*, *Courtship of Winds*, *Decadent Review*, *El Portal*, *ellipsis...literature & art*, *Etched Onyx*, *Evening Street Review*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Hedge Apple*, *Hyacinth Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Multiplicity*, *Native Skin*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *New Note Poetry*, *OPEN: Journal of Arts and Letters*, *Poetic Sun*, *Ponder Review*, *Provenance*, *Sage Cigarettes Magazine*, and elsewhere. She was a finalist in the 2022 Writers' League of Texas Manuscript Contest (Historical Fiction category). Her chapbooks were finalists or semi-finalists at Kallisto-Gaia Press, Brick Road Press, and Elixir Press. She earned her B.A. from The City College of New York, her M.A. from Hunter College, and her Ph.D. from Fordham University.

Penelope Scambly Schott's work appears in *Adanna*, *American Poetry Review*, *CALYX*, *Cider Press Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Gyroscope*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Miramar Magazine*, *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Panophy*, *Passager Journal*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is a recipient of the Oregon Book Award for Poetry. She's the author of twenty poetry books, including *On Dufur Hill* and *Waving Fly Swatters at Angels* (Turning Point Publishers), and *Sophia and Mister Walter Whitman* (The Poetry Box). She lives in the wheat-growing town of Dufur, Oregon (pop.: 632)

Claire Scott is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work appears in the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

Maureen Sherbondy's work appears in *Southern Humanities Review*, *NY Quarterly*, *Calyx*, and other journals. Her forthcoming book is *The Body Remembers*.

Beth Sherman has an MFA in creative writing from Queens College, where she teaches in the English department. Her stories have been published in *Portland Review*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Tangled Locks Journal*, *100 Word Story*, *Fictive Dream*, *Flash Boulevard*, *Sou'wester* and elsewhere. She is also a Pushcart Prize, Best Small Fictions, and a multiple Best of the Net nominee. Beth Sherman can be reached at @bsherm36.

David Sheskin is a writer and artist who has been published extensively over the years. Most recently his work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Superstition Review* and *Cleaver Magazine*. His most recent books are *David Sheskin's Cabinet of Curiosities* and *Outrageous Wedding Announcements*.

Lia Smith-Redmann is a Wisconsin-based writer, dancer, and artist. She is currently pursuing her undergraduate degrees in English and Dance at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Matthew J. Spireng's book *Good Work* won the 2019 Sinclair Poetry Prize and was published in 2020 by Evening Street Press. Their book *What Focus Is* (2011) was published by WordTech Communications. Their book *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published in 2006 by Bluestem Press. Their chapbooks are: *Clear Cut; Young Farmer; Encounters; Inspiration Point*, winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition; and *Just This*. Poems appear in *North American Review, Tar River Poetry, Rattle, Louisiana Literature, Southern Poetry Review, Prairie Schooner* and *Poet Lore*. They are an 11-time Pushcart Prize nominee and winner of *The MacGuffin's* 23rd Annual Poet Hunt Contest in 2018 and the 2015 *Common Ground Review* poetry contest. matthewjspireng.com.

Rachelle Steele is a Master Photographer and Professor who is based out of Northern California. She carries with her the adventurous and fighting spirit of the sea that was embedded in her from her 9 years as a sailor in the US Navy. She passionately undertakes photography expeditions around the world on her veterans quest for the human spirit. Rachelle is lucky enough to have exhibited her work near and far including Morocco, Nepal, NYC Times Square, and the International Photography Hall of Fame. Passion and kindness lead the way in her work as she encourages others to experience a deeper level of empathy through her lens.

Jim Stewart's work appears in *The Alembic, California Quarterly, Cantos, The Licking River Review, The Opiate, Orange Willow Review, Orion Magazine, Pennsylvania English, The Phoenix, The Blue Hour, The Progenitor Art & Literary Journal, Rattapallax, Smokebox, Tulane Review, and Wild Roof Journal*. His novel, *Ochoco Reach* (2016), and a short story collection, *White Ravens: And More Stories* (2018), were both published by Word Hermit Press. His short story "White Ravens" was a finalist in a *Glimmer Train* open fiction contest. Jim's music has been featured in the films *Pacific Vibrations* and *Dancing on the Edge*. He rides motorcycles and plays golf badly. He figures he might grow up someday, but is in no hurry. jamesrichardstewart.com.

Alex Swartzentruber is a poet from Indiana. He is the author of "It's a Beautiful Day in the Gulch" and co-host of the podcast "It's a Beautiful Day in the Gulch"

Irina Tall Novikova is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren.

Pina Than is pursuing a career in biomedical engineering. Their photographs have been displayed in local art shows, and they have performed with a small musical theater troupe. In addition to painting and crafting, they write about their creative journey as it unfolds through their passion for the global phenomenon of origami.

Meredith Trede has three poetry collections: *Bringing Back the House* (Broadstone Books); *Tenement Threnody* (Main Street Rag Press); *Field Theory* (SFA State University Press) and, as a Toadlily Press founder, a chapbook, *Out of the Book*. Extensive journal publications include *Barrow Street*, *The Feminist Wire*, *Friends Journal*, *Gargoyle*, *A Gathering of Tribes*, and *The Paris Review*. They've held Blue Mountain Center, Ragdale, Saltonstall, and VCCA (Virginia and France) residencies. They live in New York City. www.meredithtrede.com.

Hiroshi Watanabe was born in Japan. He graduated from Department of Photography at Nihon University in 1975. He moved to Los Angeles after graduation and became involved in the production of TV commercials for Japan. He later established his own production company and produced numerous commercials. He received an MBA degree from UCLA Business School in 1993. In 1995 his passion for photography rekindled, and since then he has traveled worldwide extensively photographing what he finds intriguing at that moment and place. In 2000 he closed the production company in order to devote himself entirely to the art. Since then, his work has been published and exhibited around the world, and received numerous awards. His work is in the permanent collections of many art museums such as Philadelphia Museum of Art, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, George Eastman House, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, J. Paul Getty Museum, San Jose Museum of Art, New Mexico Museum of Art, North Carolina Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In 2016, He received the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant.

Michael Waterson is a retired journalist originally from Pittsburgh PA. His career includes stints as a seasonal firefighter, San Francisco taxi driver and wine educator. He earned an MFA from Mills College. His work appears in *California Quarterly*, *Cathexis Northwest* and *The Bookends Review*. He is Poet Laureate Emeritus of the Napa Valley. His website: michaelwatersonpoetry.com. His first collection, "Cosmology of Heaven and Hell," was recently published by The Poetry Box.

Diane Webster's work appears in *El Portal*, *New English Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Verdad* and other magazines. She had micro-chaps published by Origami Poetry Press in 2022 and 2023 and was nominated for Best of the Net in 2022.

Buff Whitman-Bradley's poetry has appeared in many print and online journals. His latest book is *And What Will We Sing?* (Kelsay Books) and he has a book forthcoming from Finishing Line Press, *A Friendly Little Tavern Somewhere Near the Pleiades*. He podcasts at thirdactpoems.podbean.com and lives in a small town in northern California with his wife, Cynthia.

Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.