

SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART

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[**la boda la muerte mi vida**]

Adam Walsh

Editor's Prize

sometime after light bleached our faces to a photo
 not the studio kind thick gloss opaque background
 polaroid even not enough context for the story
 repeated to strangers at a passthrough bar near stateline
 with a common unmemorable name
 brought out any chance to say: *esta foto es mi chica*
ella siempre está conmigo kept in wallet to stay
 too long and me sitting on it if that's not...

huh? how did it happen? when did it end?

in '81 *cuando la vida dejo de servir los frutos del trabajo*
 fields fat to founder *rojo verde* rotten *dulce*

where'd you go then? ¿a dónde?!

con mi foto con mi cerveza with a short book of songs
 yo estoy aquí walking *el campo negro*
 blackenedfeet kicking up the soft ash from my reckoning

then why...why are you here?

that i can't tell you my friend not yet anyway
 maybe after this pint or a different day altogether
 when the pages of this book *canciones y todo*
 no longer need to be sung
 only quiet remains except for *lluvia*
 sí lluvia i'll certainly tell you the next time
 we come in from the rain



Serenade / Serge Lecomte



Butterfly-cock on Frogs / Serge Lecomte



It's a Small World / Serge Lecomte

Valentine

Joanna Urban

On Valentine's Day, the boyfriend makes her beef bourguignon and presents her with a scarf from his trip to Prague. In Boyfriend's studio apartment, they lie on his bed, which is next to the refrigerator and lacks a headboard. On top of mismatched sheets, they sprawl out and watch the short program of pairs figure skating on the Winter Olympics. Her eyes are glued to the ice skaters, watching the sequins shimmer on their leotards as they glide, leap, and pirouette across the slick, white ice. She starts crying, which bewilders Boyfriend. Did I do something wrong? he asks. Well, he has never traveled to Prague in the time they've been together, she thinks but doesn't say this. Of course not, she says instead, wondering what he was thinking, who he was thinking of when he purchased that scarf. Mostly, she's crying at the perfect synchronization of the skaters' bodies, how they intuit each other's next moves; she knows she doesn't have this with Boyfriend and wonders if she'll ever have it with anyone.

The next February fourteenth, her new boyfriend, a divorcé ten years her senior, surprises her with a bouquet of flowers delivered to her office. Her colleagues marvel at this display of romance. Never let this one go, they say, their voices laced with wisdom and knowing. New Boyfriend makes them a reservation at a buzzy, modish restaurant with an elaborate menu requiring extensive predinner googling. There, as their hyperlocal microgreens are being served, they run into New Boyfriend's boss who mistakes her for the ex-wife. You look so much like—the boss cut himself off. Never mind, he says, wishing them a happy Valentine's Day. New Boyfriend tries to conceal his discomfort, but the tautness of his smile, the heaviness in his eyes, give away how odd he feels.

As the weeks pass New Boyfriend's texts and calls grow less frequent. A slow drifting. Then, his inevitably gutting words: He's not ready for a serious relationship. He tells her he's sorry, but he wants to see other people. Don't lie to me, she yells, you want to see one other person! She shrieks at him like a crazy person, waving her arms in wild gestures, and it's a little bit satisfying. She has never allowed herself to be so mad at a man before.

Religiously, torturously, she stalks him and the ex-wife on Instagram. Half a year later, they're back in each other's pictures.

The year after that, she adopts a rescue puppy that first week of February. A three-month-old mutt with teeth as sharp as toothpicks that gnaw on her hands for attention. The pink pads of his paws quiver and flit while he dreams, and he squawks—a piercing birdlike chirp—when he's hungry. He tests her patience when he pees on the floor for the twentieth time, chews up a computer charger, barks at a ladybug crawling across the windowsill. On the puppy's twenty-first accident in the house at least he pees by the front door, which makes her heart soar with hope; he's making progress.

She walks him outside and he tugs at his leash, stops in the middle of the sidewalk, and sits down in protest. Neighbors pass by telling her how cute and perfect the puppy is, and she accepts their compliments like a proud mom, her frustration with him melting away.

The next winter she has a fiancé. In January, they moved into a five hundred square foot apartment together, only marginally larger than the tiny one-bedroom she's lived in since tiring of roommates. Fiancé makes her coffee and oatmeal for breakfast every morning, and he lets the grown puppy sleep at the foot of their bed. Fiancé is not boastful or showy about his love for her, but she can tell that he indeed

considers himself lucky. When she leaves for a work trip, he reorganizes the kitchen cabinets over the weekend; he's bored and restless without her, and she can tell that she was missed. Fiancé is obsessed with puppy, always buying him new balls and rope toys, and organic, grain-free treats. This is wonderful, because puppy is her child, and love for puppy means love for their future with more four-legged and maybe two-legged children one day.

For Valentine's Day, he buys her gold-plated earrings from a local shop and brings flowers home to her that she trims and prunes each day. The bouquet lasts for almost a week—blooming, lingering, nourished with daily fresh water—until clumsy puppy knocks it over while jumping to steal a piece of steak.



Sister Earth / Leah Dockrill

The Age of Death

Tetman Callis

I gotcha, Dad. I gotcha.

I know it hurts, Dad. It'll be over soon.

No, Dad. No. You can't get up. I'm sorry, but you can't. If you try to get up you'll fall down and we won't be able to pick you up and get you back in bed, there's only me and Mom here and we're not strong enough.

No, Dad.

It's all right, Dad. Everything is okay, it's going to be okay.

It didn't matter what book it was. Hard to concentrate.

The time was early and the car was mostly empty.

That girl, she was very pretty. Up by the other door. She sat and focused on her phone.

Specter didn't want her to catch him looking. He didn't stare. Looked around, eyes going here and there, taking things in, watching out, the way you do in the city.

There was an angry guy in the car. Young man, maybe twenties. He muttered and cursed. The girl ignored him. But you could see she knew he was there. You could see her tense up, even from the other end of the car.

Specter kept an eye out. A wary eye, and an ear, too. What would he do if the angry young man went off? Specter was pushing sixty. He'd push the intercom button and call for help.

The angry young man got off at the next stop. Specter watched him giving forearm blows to a shelter at the stop as the train pulled away.

The girl got off two stops later. Specter missed her as soon as she was gone. He missed them all.

Illinois was farms. Missouri wooded mountains. Downtown Dallas steel and glass and bright reflections. The approach path into El Paso over low brown desert mountains—he hiked those mountains when he was young.

Cats at the motel. One in the parking lot, in the glare of headlights. Then another, and another, and more. Cats in the bushes and hedges. Furtive felines, their own society, together but apart.

Specter and his mom sit at the dining table in his mom's house. Had been his mom and dad's, now hers alone. They had been together a long time. A lifetime. He can see the loneliness.

Specter and his mom eat chicken noodle soup and share an orange. Talk of his dad's things, of money.

No, Mom. Don't give me any. I don't want it and I won't take it.

This was only half true. He did want it. But he wouldn't take it. Think of what people would say.

His parents reached the age of death. That long voyage through time that only the truly fortunate are cursed to endure. Friends and family dropping away, one by one, faster and faster.

His mom's best friend, emphysemic, smoked long white cigarettes, later was connected by a long clear tube to a wheeled tank, gone after three frantic days of telephoning family and wandering the streets.

His dad's best friend, long wheelchair-bound, body breaking down piece by piece, system by system, gone one morning after a hemorrhagic flood from the nose, bursting from within his skull.

Then his father, worn out by the decades, kidneys shutting down, liver shutting down, appetite gone, fitfully awake in pain and unquenchable thirst, sent home from the hospital to die in his own bed. Hospitals are places for those who may live. Every death in a hospital is an accidental death.

The widow is crippled in one arm and has a speech impediment. She comes to Specter's mom's house two days after Specter's dad has died, before Specter's dad has been rendered into ash and fragments.

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

The widow brings an Arby's and a Pepsi to give to Specter's mom, though Specter's mom does not eat and drink Arby's and Pepsi. And lately she hadn't been eating or drinking much at all. Her husband had been dying, suffering, it takes one's appetite away.

I came to see what you were going to do with your husband's bed. It's a good bed. Can I have it?

Specter pulls up in his rental in the space in front of his motel room. Cats scatter. Two people, a couple, man and woman, are at the door to his room, trying to get in. Specter gets out of his car.

Excuse me, but what are you doing?

They explain and it's a misunderstanding, misdirection by the desk clerk, the motel's layout is confusing.

I'm sorry, I don't know where your room is, but it is not right here.

Specter walks the neighborhood from one end to the other, wending up and down various streets. He hasn't walked it like this since he was a restless teenager, prowling on foot, looking for friendship and love. He walks by houses he hasn't walked by in over forty years. Much has changed. The cars, of course. The yards, drought and rationing have brought an end to green grass and now the yards are all stone and concrete. The people, he knows they have all changed, moved away or died. He doesn't know anyone who still lives here besides his mom and dad, now just his mom.

He stops in front of Winter's house. Stands on the sidewalk, big and bold as brass on a sunny desert day. Someone comes out? Comes out to say, What are you doing? Why are you staring at my house? But no one comes out. He almost didn't recognize the house. Its facade mostly brick, the color hasn't changed, though it's not the

color he remembers. But he remembers the porch. He remembers the front door, the direction it faced. He remembers where on the block the house was at, what part of the block, which side of the street. There's only one house in this part of the block with a front door that faces that direction, so this must be the one. He remembers one night, he and Winter stood on this porch, and the things they did and said. He was sixteen and she was fourteen. They had forever.

He can't stand there forever. He turns around to look across the street. He knows Evie lived in one of those houses. He's pretty sure he knows which one. He lived there too, for a while, when he was down on his luck and Evie talked her mom into taking him in. He stayed until he wore out his welcome, and then he left.

He walks on. Block after block. There is no one out.

He reaches the block where he grew up. He walks up it. He has made this walk several times already in the years since he left, since his parents moved a few blocks away to the house his mom lives in now and his dad died in. Here, this block, when he was growing up here, no one died. He doesn't need to rifle through his memories as he walks up this block to the cross street. There are too many of them, and he has been over them over and over.

He turns left and continues. A half-block on he passes the corner where he and Tina first kissed. He stops and contemplates. He didn't remember that telephone pole.

He walks on. He is going to Tina's house. He knows she doesn't live there anymore. She left years ago, and as far as that goes, it goes all the way to the end. He knows she died a dozen years ago. He goes to her house anyway, to see it again, closer than he's been since their days together in school.

He doesn't remember the address, but he remembers the house. He stands and looks. The driveway where Tina and he made out one spring afternoon after school, hidden from view behind her father's car, unbuttoning and unfastening. The driveway now shaded by an awning, aluminum siding held up on thin poles. Beyond the drive, the window on the wall of the converted garage that was Tina's bedroom. The things they did there. Beside the driveway, between it and the house next door, the place that was grassed and cool and where

he and Tina and their friends gathered to drink soft drinks and smoke cigarettes and incessantly shoot the breeze on any clement evening. It's now paved. Pure flat concrete, gray in the weak sunlight.

He walks on. Down the block and to the right and past the junior high school. They don't call them junior high schools anymore. Middle schools now. It's being torn down. Its parking lot and part of its athletic field dotted with a formation of portable classrooms, the old structure is being razed so that something new and modern can be erected in its place. No more nostalgic visits to its halls from old graduates.

He turns and heads back to his mom's house. It's a long walk. The neighborhood was new when he grew up here. Now everything looks tattered and worn. His cell phone buzzes in his pocket but he doesn't answer.

The only time he watches television anymore is in motels. He doesn't travel often. Television is so strange. The constant hectoring and manipulation. Buy this. Do that. Go here. Be concerned. Constantly there's something to concern you in all that doesn't concern you. Make it yours. Worry. Fret. Be outraged. Be afraid of lacking everything you lack.

The ceremony is this morning and he finishes getting dressed. Doesn't often have chance or call to wear a suit. Checks his look. Tie is straight.

The white limousine pulled up in front of the house. Specter and his mom walked down the driveway. Slowly, she's old.

The honor guard in the cemetery snapped to attention as the limo slowly passed.

There were friends there. Friends of his dad's and his mom's. Not many. His parents were quiet people, kept to themselves, their home, their flowers and trees and bushes and small patch of real lawn out back where the city couldn't see how often they watered.

A cloudy and chilly day. The seasonal winds already beginning. The man from the funeral home had a blanket to spread over Specter's mom's lap where she sat on the bench. The urn containing the ashes of her husband was placed on the bier. In a moment, the minister and the man from the funeral home moved it one level lower so it wouldn't be knocked over by the wind.

The honor guard folded the flag. Precisely, in careful time and with serious intent. One of the guard brought the folded flag to Specter's mom, knelt in front of her, murmured some words, presented to her the flag.

The honor guard fired the volley, the shots loud in the cold late morning. The bugler played "Taps," the notes clear and long.

There were things to go through back at the house, papers to sort.

A boxing match on television at the motel. Nothing Specter would ordinarily watch, but when you travel . . . the match went ten rounds and Specter watched them all. Thought about his dad.

Specter's dad taught him to throw a forearm blow and not to throw a punch. Taught him to do whatever it took.

Don't be afraid to pick up an equalizer.

An equalizer, Dad?

Yeah, like a two-by-four.

Specter's dad had been a sergeant, had fought in wars.

The match was a split decision. The former champ won on points. It could've gone either way.

Cats in the motel parking lot at dawn. Furtive and feline, leave us alone, this life is hard.

Breakfast at sunrise. Specter sat in a booth at the diner, ate his bacon and eggs and drank his coffee, watched while the sun illuminated the mountains, rugged and treeless peaks dusted with snow.

At the airport there were Border Patrol agents in combat fatigues, carrying automatic rifles. What invasion at the airport were they waiting for? Specter was glad he was of the race that most readily passed.

He had an aisle seat on the flight back. The seat beside him was empty, a rarity on flights. A young woman sat in the window seat, drew the shade, leaned her head to sleep. Specter stared at the pages of his book. The baby in the row ahead was quiet. There was another baby farther back in the cabin, cried a bit. Specter thought as to how we were all babies once. Every one of us, carried and cuddled and cared for, every need attended to.

Hush, little baby. Don't you cry. You'll be a grown-up, by and by.

Hush, little baby. It's going to be all right. You're okay. Mommy's right here. She's okay. Daddy's waiting at home and he's okay, too.

Hush, little baby.



On the Beach / Jacqueline Shortell-McSweeney

Seasons of Anticipation

Matt Gulley

Three moon'd thing
not seasons of weather,

but seasons of anticipation
are always ahead.

For an awaited tv show
or love to arrive, for love to develop
or to end.

How many do you have left?
Is it how you keep time alive?

Each day a color's fraction
within a turning prism.

It's not long now
till it's ages before that many limb'd hand,
Desire

can palm that hot stove,
that burning handle crossed in red

and recoil ugly at the pain
and look to the next season.
Fixed point in the distance,
a welcome sign with fangs.

Trances

L. Ward Abel

We play music behind the lines
of fearful crossings-over,
 those snipers comb
 for people like us

whose herd is culled
through broken ties, wars
an entire generation of charcoal
with names, hard-living
 gone now like
 master and beef.

Our songs now trigger
ten thousand days ago
when we sang atop our lungs
we testified the old ones
 together tethered and
 flowers bloomed

singing without
self-awareness never considered
except as full-voiced trances
 and none of what passes for
 thinking deep.

All those ruins are prelude to
a past come-again
a burned-out block
a silhouette
 but across
 from several gardens

and this ideology in extremis
not good enough to continue
is just enough to be scraps
or midden from washed up
worders, visionaries
 still in hopeful
 remission.



Counting / Martha Clarkson

Senescence

Evan Benedict

Excerpt from *The Ragnarök Cycle***II. Senescence**

Odin spun
from the limbs
of the world-tree,
cast his eyes low, saw the runes
learned their names,
the magic in them
to pass our knowledge,
speak over great distance,

over time.

“Rune” meant “secret,”
sacred knowledge because
words carried starfire and shadow—
light and blight—

breathed magic,
but also wickedness.

And knowledge,
which is both.

“Thus I carve the runes,” said he,
to see the future they spelled out.

The word was Ragnarök.
His rune. His ruin.

“Ruin.” Latinate and foreign,
but the sound so close,
brushing the back of the neck of rune,
bare syllabic breath, the schwa of “ruin,”
creeping North through the land of Gauls
and quaint Germanic tribes
Great Bear that prowled the sky
to guide the way
so long before the Norsemen came.

“Ruin” predates “rune.” How else could it be?
The fall is written in our destiny.
“Fall” is older than “secret.”
Older than “rise.” Older than “begin.”



Tranquil Forest Tiger (Summer) / Roopa Dudley



Chess-Nut Forest (Autumn) / Roopa Dudley



Frigid Forest Fox (Winter) / Roopa Dudley



Chess-Nut Paradise (Spring) / Roopa Dudley



Chess-Nut Swamp / Roopa Dudley

Caught Between

Laura Eppinger

YOU'RE INVITED: Small Birthday Party for Our Small Child

WHEN: Next Saturday, 1-3 p.m. should be the warmest hours of the day.

WHERE: Our backyard! The other side of this invitation includes a map of the neighborhood. Just one block to steer clear of—hard to explain if you've never been here before.

We realize February is still chilly out, so we'll see how long we last! Some of you post so many selfies on airplanes or in Disney World, it's hard to believe you aren't exhaling COVID right now. Then again, we just bought a house one block away from a lethal whirlpool monster. Spouse tells me we are in no place to judge, since we just caved to the pressure of a rabid housing market.

WHAT TO BRING: Just yourselves, all bundled up! We don't need gifts for the little one, really. She's never had a party beyond Spouse and me singing to her for her first and second birthdays, so she doesn't expect a spectacle. We bought far too much stuff online during lockdown. Spare us!

RE: the map on the other side of this glossy invite I also ordered online. Please plan your route ahead of time. On your Maps app, this chunk of real estate will appear as a little pond with a fountain spritzing to the sky every summer. Trust me when I say this is not an accurate description.

It is a hungry beast, sentient though it is just a water spout. No face, no eyes, no voice. The whirlpool seems to wield gravity; it will suck in your SUV and all inside, so do not even try to approach on foot. (It goes without saying, but DO NOT gift Small Child a bike!)

Is it careless to invite others to our home, knowing their minivan could be slurped off the pavement and into the gullet of an angry beast? Sure. Feel free to decline this invitation. We have almost certainly declined one of yours recently.

You can probably tell that I MISS PEOPLE. My wise friends are too cautious to hang out. My reckless friends—do you not know about my father-in-law?—talk about being so over face coverings. But before all this, we were close. You absolutely know that one of your open-mouthed coughs inside my living room could lay waste to Spouse’s parents. Still. I miss your selfishness and stubbornness and rude gaping yawns.

Do I think Small Child is traumatized? Oh probably, by the stress of her parents alone. Not by pandemic restrictions, per se. Not by the wearing of masks. I know some of you hold these loopy opinions and you don’t know this but I’ve muted you on Facebook. But not deleted. I can’t because, as I said above, I miss you. Maybe one day you’ll leave those deranged parenting groups? I dare to dream. It’s like being caught between ... like being trapped between ... I’m so fried from the strain I can’t think of a metaphor.

RSVP: Just show up, or don’t. The longing for grownup conversation is unbearable though the fear of losing you to Charybdis looms large. Come to my party and risk being devoured. Stay home and let loneliness nibble away at your heart by another bite. Either way I’ll be serving an excellent spiked hot chocolate I learned from a TikTok!



Orpheus, Far from the Abyss

Meagan Daine

Orpheus, I have something to tell you.

Do you remember when we used to climb the dusty hill and push through tangled thorns to reach the eucalyptus grove? The spicy smell of trees. The strips of bark, long as we were tall but fragile, light to hold and crack for the scent to anoint our hands. Slender leaves falling onto thick green grass, the cool grass rising in stalks, mounds, hillocks wild with bell-shaped yellow flowers. Wood sorrel. You taught me to pluck the stems and suck their sour juices. Remember?

Orpheus. Last night I dreamed we were walking up that hill again, and I was happy because I felt you'd forgiven me.

Years have passed since I last heard you sing, Orpheus. But I've only recently begun to mourn you. To let my silences be filled with our unsaid words.

Do you hear them?

Do you remember the place where we met – that house on a hill, where a cool marine breeze streamed through our windows in the mornings and brought with it the peal of distant bells?

We were tenants then, you in one room, I in another. A miracle of possibility. My window faced a garden where a Ficus tree shook its leaves like coins onto a limestone path. Yours opened onto a courtyard where sunlight sank deep gold in the afternoon. Mornings heavy shadows lay there, and so did you, curled under a yellow blanket and dreaming, I imagine, of melodies you'd hummed the night before.

Each morning I stood and let the sheets fall from my body, looked out my window toward the bells and planned the day—things to do, schedules to keep—taking in light and sounds and scents without thought. Mistakes to fix, tasks to achieve: If I thought of you, it was only in that context.

Then one day I turned from the window and saw an ivory folder on my desk, its surface dotted with petals from a bouquet of

baby blue-eyes. I picked up the folder, brushed away the petals, and opened it.

Inside were several sheets of linen paper. The first said colors within and bore your signature. The second was strewn with points, curves, and lines: A composition. A song that you had written for me.

I'm married now, Orpheus. Did you know?

To a man I met when I was in love with you.

I am still in love with you.

After the song, I started watching you. Silent. Hopeful. I thought from now on all your music would be for me, but to my consternation, you went on living as before. You took your fill of life, in fact. Two glasses of wine at a concert. A conversation with professors, waving your French cigarette. An affair with a cellist who performed your work the way it sounded in your heart, despite the fact that she'd never been there.

I didn't understand what all this meant. How you could sing to me once and then stop. So I took on a parallel life, working and studying, filling my days with things to do, tasks to achieve. I met a man who threw great parties, some of which you attended. You and I would stand on opposite sides of a room, hearing music pound like a heart, talking and laughing with the crowd while moving slowly, indiscernibly closer to each other, until we stood back-to-back.

I remember hearing the rhythm of your words like a counterpoint to my mindless chatter. I had a throbbing desire to turn and taste your sweat.

Did you feel it, Orpheus?

You must have. Because when the cellist arrived and stood in the doorway, waiting, I glanced back at you, and our eyes met, and you caught your breath before you went to join her.

We live in an apartment now, Orpheus. My husband and I.

It's carpeted. Quiet. With all-new fixtures.

There are two bedrooms, in one of which we sleep. The second is an office lined with books. Hundreds, maybe thousands of old, misused books with cracked spines and flaking pages. I sit beneath them at a heavy desk to write.

One night soon after we moved in, I dreamed that water started pouring from those books. It filled the office, and I swam until I drowned.

I died in the dream, Orpheus.

I found myself floating in an orb of darkness, which was pricked intermittently by pinpoints of light. They came in pulses, slowly, then faster and brighter. I felt like something magnificent was arriving.

Then, little by little, they dimmed, and finally ceased.

I woke thinking of a poem.

A day came when the cellist had practice, and the man who gave parties was out of town, so for the first time in months, you and I were alone.

We decided to walk into the city. Up windy streets, past stony buildings we'd seen countless times. It was only exercise at first, but then it started to rain. A cold, whipping rain that shocked us alive.

We looked at each other with a startled laugh. You saw a bus stop ahead and ran for it, shouting back at me, hurry, hurry. Sheets of rain and leaves fell all around us. People rushed past, dashing into doorways, ducking into idling cars. You reached the stop and leapt onto the bus. It was packed with bodies. You edged among them and reached back for me. I took your hand. You pulled, I held on, but I couldn't fit on the bus. There was only room for a single foot. For a moment I stood dangling, suspended by an arm, as rain poured over me and the engine rumbled. Our hands were wet. Hard as you held me, they slipped, and I fell back onto the sidewalk.

The doors shut.

The bus motored away.

I stared after it in dumb confusion.

Now what? Should I run after it? Take cover and wait?

I didn't know what you'd do. If you'd come back for me. I didn't know where I was. I felt the rain turning to ice as it slid down my neck. My throat tightened with irrational fear that I'd done something irreparably stupid.

Then a hand grasped my arm.

I looked up and saw you, somehow, standing next to me, droplets clinging to the lashes of your laughing eyes.

Relief surged into my chest. I felt ...

Whole.

You slipped out of your gray wool coat and held it over us.

Time passes without consent.

I'm not ready to grow old.

I still want

That night you came into my room.

I'd left the door unlocked, thinking maybe ...

And you did, and I sat in breathless anticipation as you stood adjusting to the darkness. I watched you until you could see, Orpheus. And I sensed there was something wrong. Your black hair was wild around your head. Your eyes, always warm and brown, were feverishly bright.

After a moment you came to my bed and knelt to see if I was awake. I smiled. So did you, but your smile was fragile, desperate. In a hollow whisper, you said she knows.

I wasn't sure what you meant. I knew she was the cellist. I felt a surge of joy that I was in your heart. But there was more, there had to be more, some reason her knowing had brought you to the brink of a precipice.

I waited. Breathing in your scent of musk and cigarettes and sweat. Feeling your heat on the mattress, your hand near my thigh. My chest rose and fell. Rose and fell. Too many times before a realization finally dawned: You were expecting my response.

I didn't know what to say.

I was a disciple of things to do and tasks to achieve. I thought all answers had to be correct. But when I searched for correctness in this moment, I found none. Panic rose in my throat, desire mixed with the fear of failing to give you what you wanted. I scrambled to hold onto something that was wisping away. I had no answers. Only the paltriest of questions, which at last was what I offered you: What are you going to do?

You drew back. Smiled again, this time as though you wanted to cry. You took my hand, raised it to your lips, and kissed it. Then you stood up and walked away.

Barberry. Helianthella. Bitter dogbane.

These are the flowers that bloom where I live now.

Sometimes I gather a few in a vase and place them on my desk, where I leave them until the petals crumble into dust.

My husband does not understand why I do this.

He wonders idly at my ability to remember each flower's name. I don't answer because I can't explain what I'm writing to tell you, Orpheus – what I now know, after years of sitting in the shadows of these books, recalling that night when you came to me, anguished in the dark – years of seeking the litany of syllables I should've said, what would've made you stay – that a word, like a note, is a unit of life.

You knew that.

You gave me your life in a song, and when you waited for mine in return, I wavered. I feared I would give you the wrong life, one that was flawed or unfinished or worst of all unworthy, so in the end, I gave you nothing.

I'm sorry.

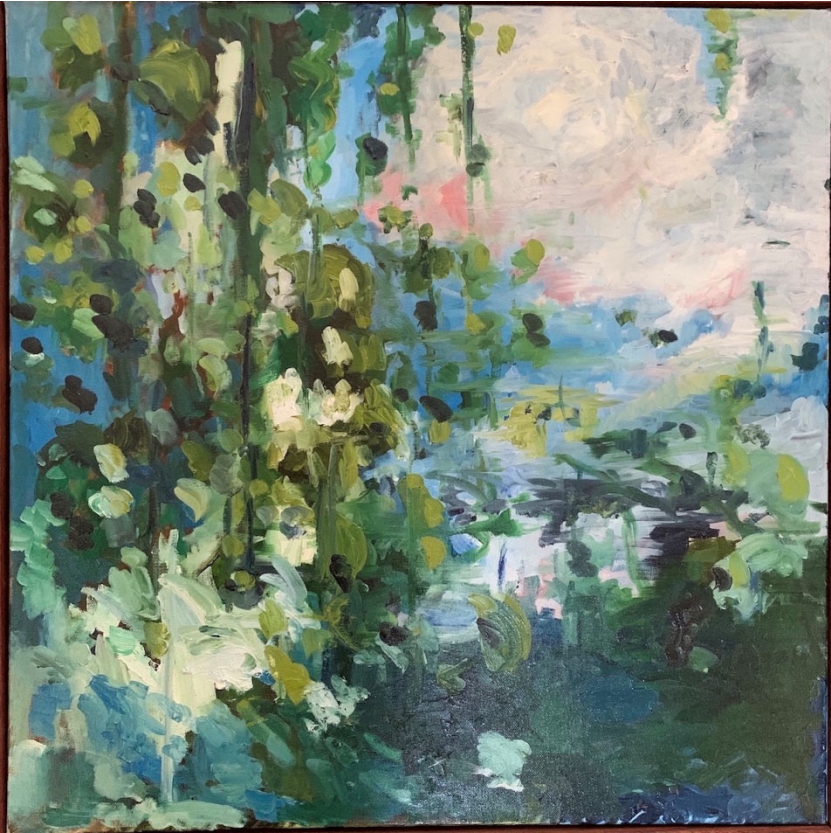
I'm sorry.

This is what I have to say.

I will never speak these words, Orpheus.

You're too far from me now to hear them.

But I write because their power—unread, unspoken, unknown even by the man who took your place in my life—I am, at last, beginning to perceive.



Speculum Lacum / Robert Palmer

The Bit That Cannot Be Explained

Jack Stewart

*In art there is only one thing that
counts: the bit that cannot be explained.*

—Georges Braque

The hedges surrounding the museum
Have grown Cyrillic,
Darkening the last few months.
A man and woman
Stand on the sidewalk
Like seeds for a crowd.
In winter, the stone lions turn Talmudic,
Kippahs of snow on their heads.
Which is holy,
The first touch of brush to canvas
Or the moment it lifts away?
Find the moment between light
And shade and you have
The heartbeat of color,
The voice of God.
You don't need much.
A hedge that is satisfied
With its roots,
A wind that hangs
From branches like fruit and ripens,
Then lets go.

Woman in the Dressing Glass

Mikal Wix

She comes to feel
That not everything can be glorious,
That no man has mastery over design,
That few moments rise above beginnings
 or finales, that everyone tries
In their own way, even if to open their eyes,
That all the grains of sand or paradise will never,
 ever be enough to arrest the way of ennui,
That on her, some mouths will close
 and some hands open,
That in all the contradictions and behind every
 cold irony, lies one thing
That she'll never reason: why always the pain comes
When all else sleeps, why loss is no borderland
 to race across in search of choice,
And why sometimes the value of a glass to be in
Isn't always open-and-shut, but instead simply
A face to see, a name to call, or a splendor to give,
 as if the stories of all things might one day fall
 back into place, back into a point of origin,
 within her body,
Where even the burning hearts of beasts expelled,
 both infinite and bound, natural or studied,
Can never know the span of time to break the past,
 or the spell to cast
 that opens the very thing needed
 at the instant it's given.



Carolina / Phyllis Green

There Was the Spotted Pony

Murray Silverstein

There was the spotted pony, bells on its harness, the old man
led to our door.

Lifting me onto the saddle, he put a black sombrero on my
head, a kerchief
round my neck, and snapped a picture he sold to my mother,
whose mother
was crushed by a horse-drawn wagon on the family farm.

Who can say what it is to be alive on this earth? Not me.

There was Riley, near-blind and living alone across the court,
fish tank
by his door, the tank so full of plants and slime, I couldn't see
the fish.

They're there, claimed Riley, *keep looking*, and gave me a book
on fishing,
the word *angler* fresh to my eyes: to read, to watch, to wait.

You'd think, giving us eyes, it's begging to be seen, this world,
to be known.

And there was my father, washing our car on the street,
saying, *Go in & get me a beer*.

Filled with meaning I hop on my trike, and bumping along on
its crooked wheels
shake the can of Schlitz, and it explodes all over the car.
Father, whose father fled
the burning *shetel*, throwing down his chamois cloth, cursing
me, my trike and the beer.

Born into time, believing it's ours, our time, until, open to pain
and desire,

I am the author of time, says the earth, and you belong to me.

But wait, my sister's nightstand, in the room we shared, her
ice skates beneath it
in a leather zippered *Polar Palace* bag, where, when she left it
open, you could see
the flashing blades!

Everything seen is ruled by the sun, whose law you learn by
heart:

Who tries to look straight at me will go blind.

No. Shout it, there *WAS* . . . across Third Street, a field,
unfenced, Gilmore's,
where Ringling Brothers pitched its tents, saw the bearded
lady, Lottie Letz,
while a dozen horse-head oil rigs churned the deep, turning a
fractured *is*
into the idyll *was*—can hear them still in my sleep.

You were given a life, consciousness, dreams, a mother-tongue
with which to praise—all of what is, was, and is
beyond your power to say.

Whirligigs

Sally Ventura

I once believed my father
practiced the ancient arts,
working with wind, stars, and water.

Instead, he gutted engines,
dug and scraped the ground.
He pulled down the brim of his hat,
lost interest in the dew-sprinkled
webs between rows of corn,
and his hands turned to stone.

So, it was a surprise to find
among clamps, drills, and oil cans,
the wooden whirligigs he had made
before he was buried.

Just a small touch sent their
appendages whirring. The mermaids,
pegged soundly on wooden pedestals,
their bladed arms churning
nothing into nothingness,
and keystone cops, more mustache
than lip, chins parallel with their boots,
slapped with paddle-hands
at the dust they chased:

those silly motions reminding me
that while some part of us stands still,
another part moves the wind ahead,
and I have arrived at the slope of an age
to have stopped fighting
if there is no breeze, to know that

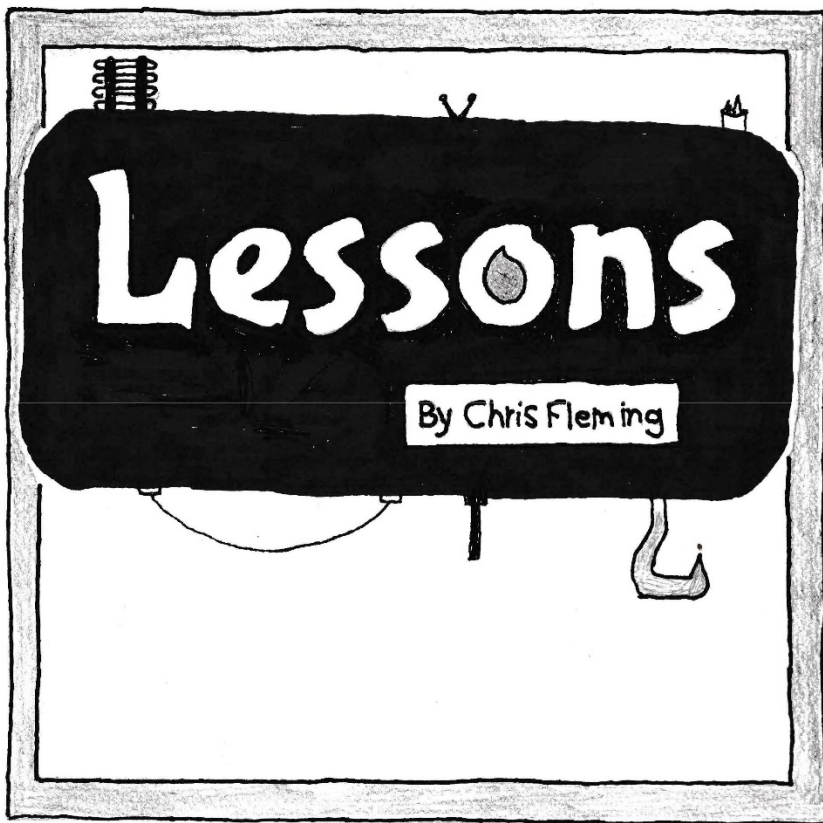
despite the frantic turning, the angel
will never reach the candle
she holds before her, and the blackbird's
steady flight is toward forgiveness.

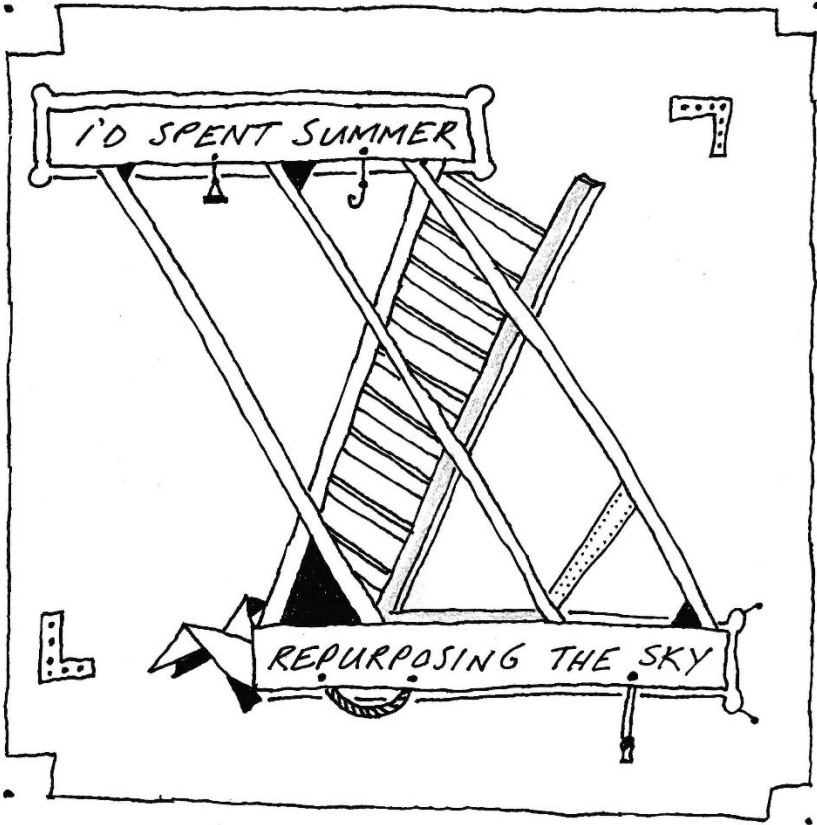


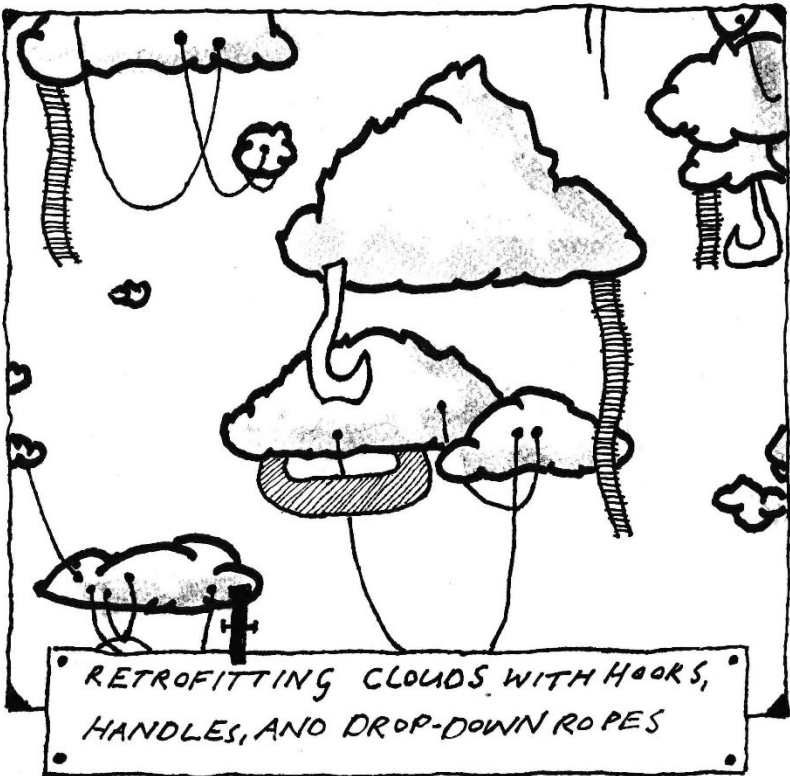
No. 965 from Series *Random Thoughts in the Waiting Room* /
K.G. Ricci

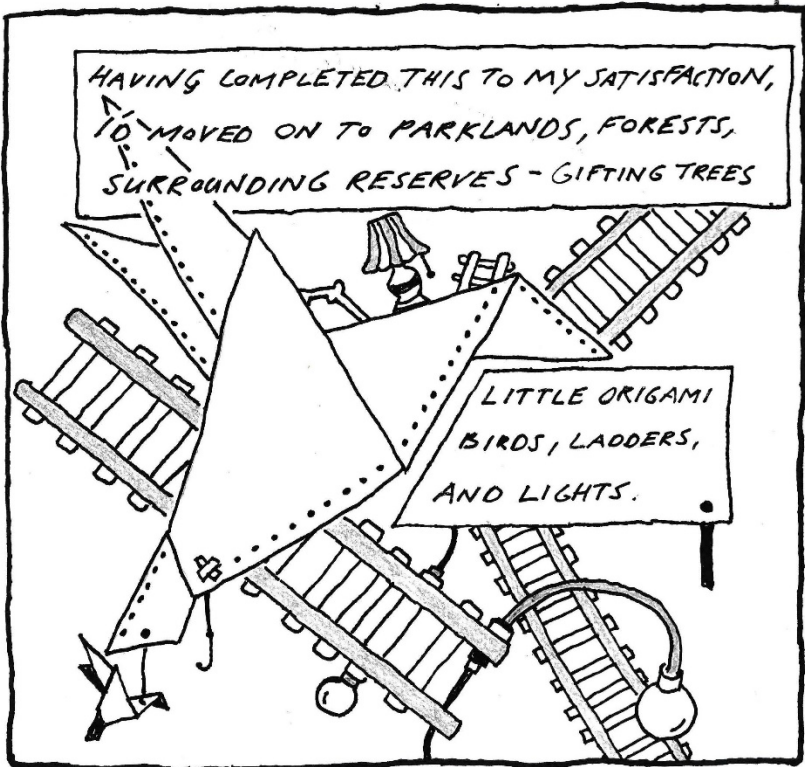
Lessons

Chris Fleming



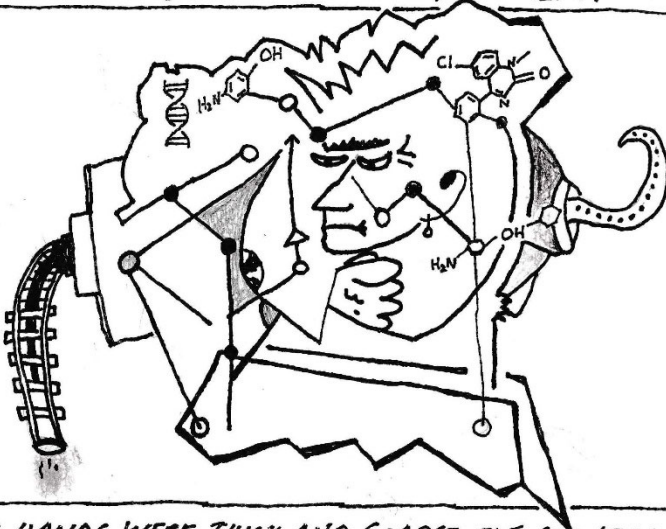






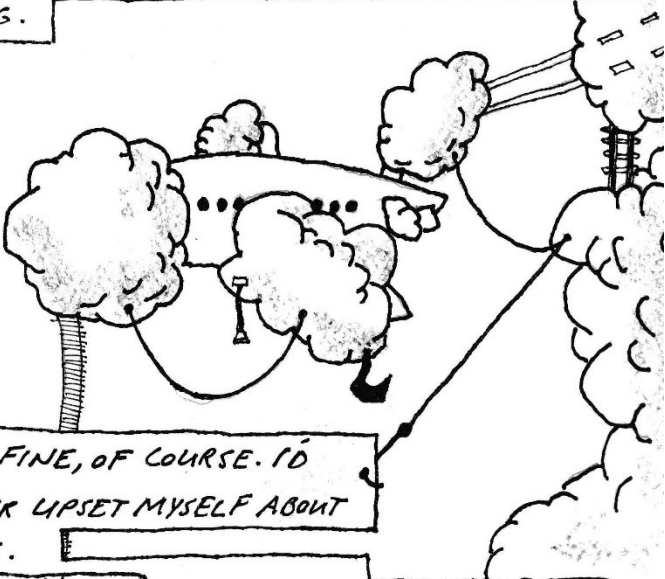


THEN SOMETHING SHIFTED UNDER THE SKIN, SOME DARK CHEMICAL UNCOUPLING, TITRATION OF WILL. I CLIMBED DOWN, PACKED MY THINGS, AND RETURNED.



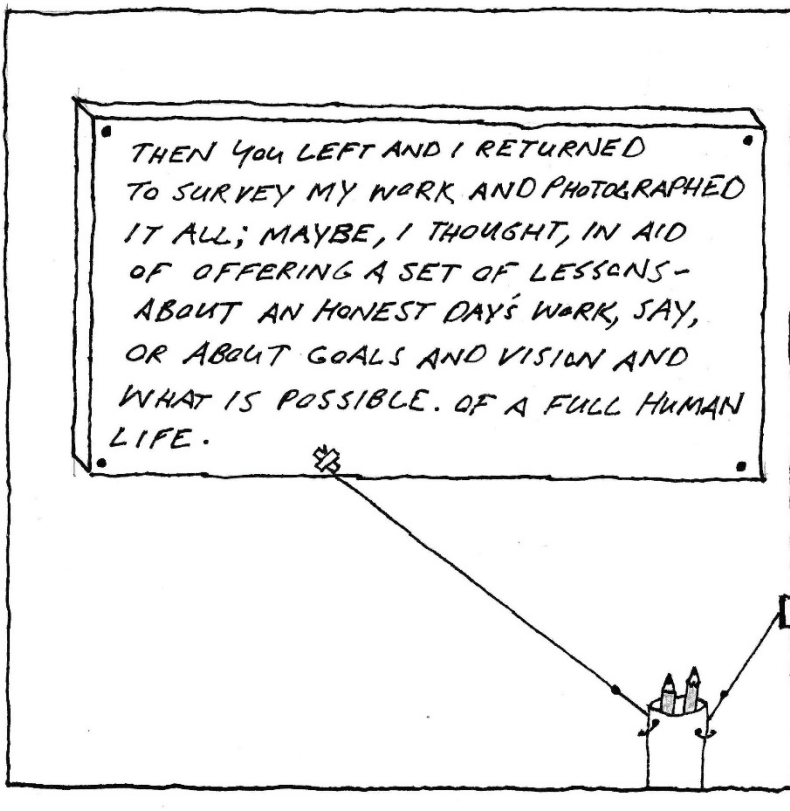
MY HANDS WERE THICK AND COARSE, THE CORNERS OF MY EYES CREASED, MY FACE BROWN. I LOOKED IN THE MIRROR. I WAS STRANGE TO MYSELF.

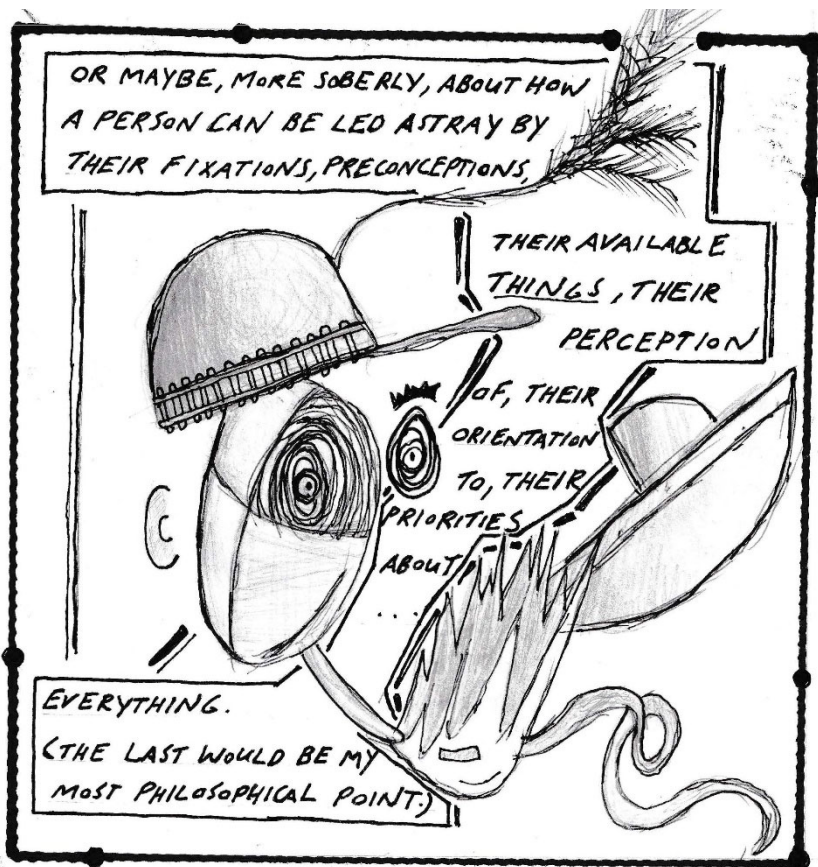
THEN YOU CAME TO TOWN AND DIDN'T SEE -OR
TOOK NO NOTICE. OR MAYBE YOU SAW BUT SAID
NOTHING.



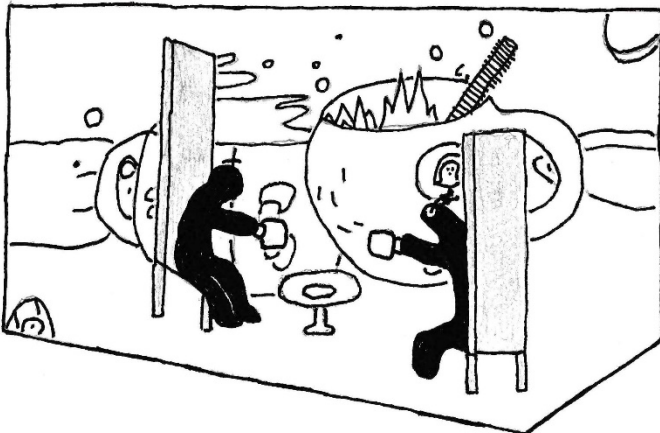
ALL FINE, OF COURSE. I'D
NEVER UPSET MYSELF ABOUT
THIS.

NONE OF IT WAS FOR YOU,
ANYWAY.

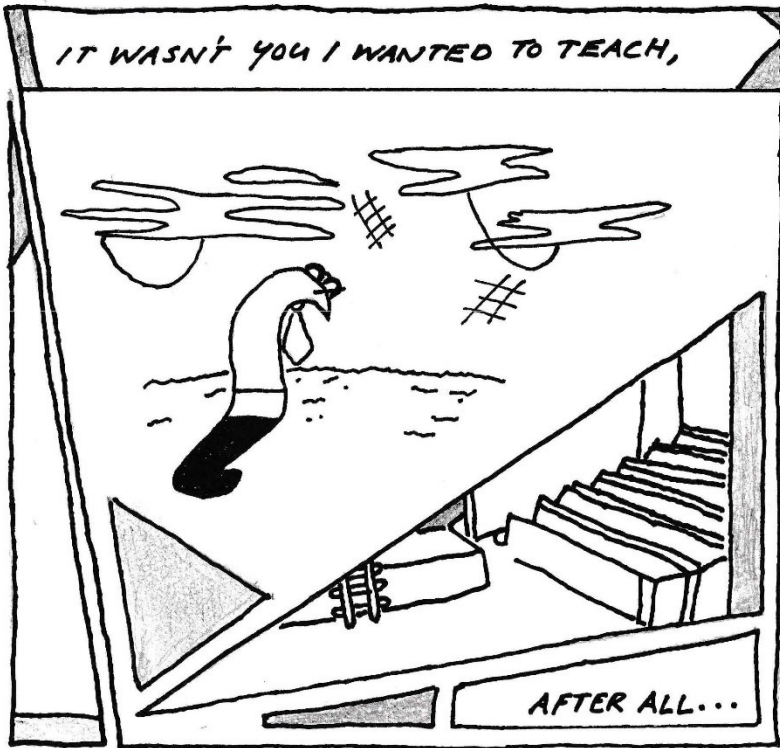




YOU RETURNED ONE LAST TIME IN JANUARY



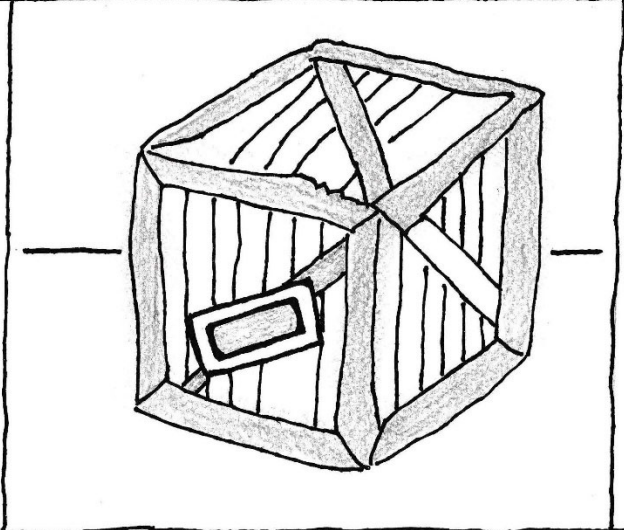
I LIT AN OIL BURNER, ARRANGED LAMPS WITH THEATRICAL PRECISION, AND TRIED TO HOLD YOUR GAZE OVER TEA. WE SMILED OFTEN AND YOU LAUGHED TWICE. IT WAS NORMAL, ADULT, CIVIL, NICE-NICE ENOUGH. AND YOU CERTAINLY DIDN'T HAVE TO REACT: OUTLINE OF MY NEW TAKE, THE LESSON; ROUNDED Z, EVIDENCE, PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH, USE OF COLOUR.



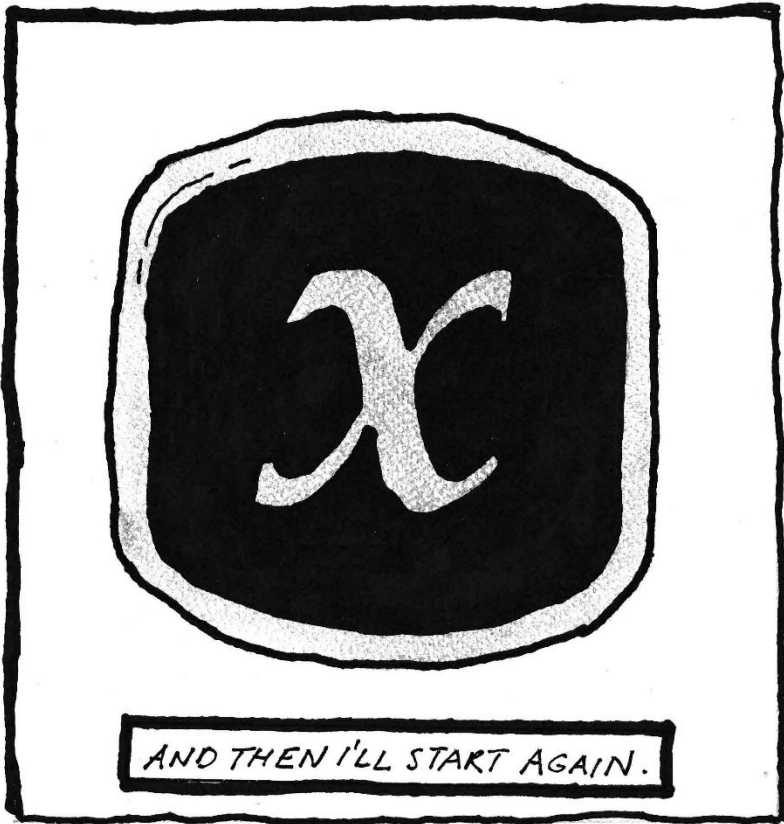
I DONT KNOW WHY I MENTION IT.

(EVEN SO.)

I'VE DECIDED I WILL TEAR IT ALL DOWN
ONE YEAR FROM NOW. I WILL PACK IT AND
STORE IT IN THE FLAT WHERE WE USED TO
LIVE, AND PEOPLE CAN COME AND LOOK.



THERE WILL BE NO ADMISSION CHARGE.



Suffers Patiently

jessica ross

Geminga Finalist

Her parents follow her home from the wake.

“There is a desert in my head,” she says. “There is nothing.”

Her mother reaches across the table to her. Her mother looks understanding and adoring and, surprisingly, determined.

“There is life in deserts, too,” her mother says, stubborn. A child of the playa, hardy and enduring—she makes it sound so simple. “Even there, it endures.”

Endures like the unwelcome silence. Endures like the emptiness of her bed. Like the heartache. The quiet.

And she endures like her husband’s voice in her memory, reminding her there is life in deserts, too.



Get All Your Ducks in a Row / Pamela Viggiani

Geminga Finalist

Some Days I Can Taste

Atma Frans

Geminga Finalist

the sweet cotton candy
of the one white cloud

floating all on its own
not minding

the lightning popping
and crackling

the storm
moving in on me

Rest Stop, Mile Marker 173

Jen Payne

Geminga Finalist

The Garden State Parkway rest stop was halfway to my grandmother's. We'd pull off the exit and shuffle into the rose-colored stalls of the Ladies Room.

Inside, near the pink-vinyl couch, a pull-knob vending machine sold hairnets, bobby pins, and rainhats neatly folded into pastel plastic boxes.

The rest stop burned down in '91, years after we'd stop traveling as a family. But in my mind, it's all still there—the soft golden light and tiled floors, the vending machine, my sister sleeping, Dad singing “I Got You Babe” to Mom in the front seat, his hand on her knee.

Analogy

JJ Chen Henderson

Geminga Finalist

In this world, love
has no analogy.
Then why,
as I break
a rhizome
of lotus root,
its lake-mud-
smeared hollows
remind me
of the blanks
in my aging mother's
eyes?



Broken Heart / Paul Milligan

Geminga Finalist

Candy Crush

Jacqueline Schaalje

Geminga Finalist

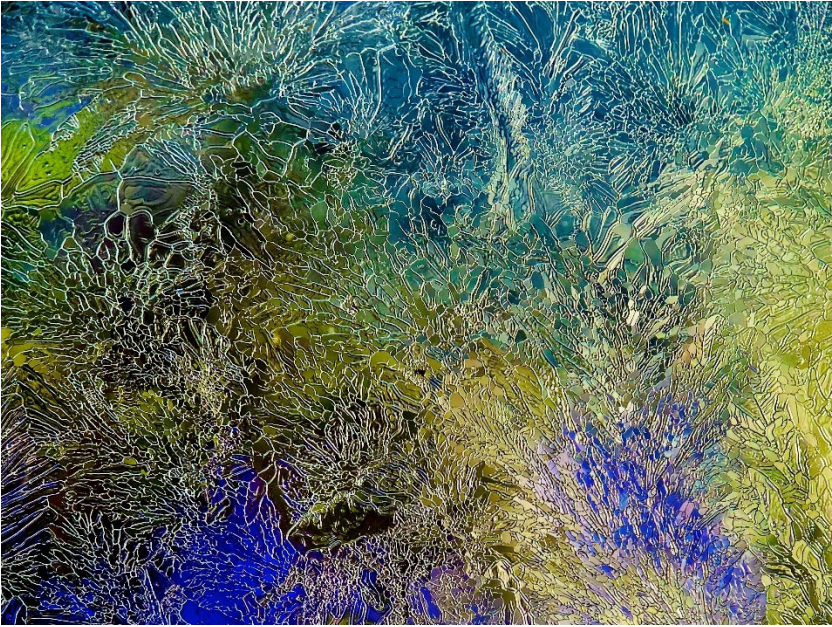
There was that bf who killed his avatar
with a tear in his pc cooling water.
He drank tea with my parents
and daubed my tongue in candy crush.

Fall Tanka

Sarah Kersey

Geminga Finalist

In between frosts, leaves
sweat, dampen the dying grass.
I almost forget.
Nothing lasts and everything
aches: like a wet metronome.



Her Wildest Dreams / Martha Nance

Geminga Runner-Up

Kishimoto

Rain Hou

Geminga Runner-Up

Kishimoto belongs to the bay, in a knitted dress, willow blue color showing through her palms—hair rolled up as ebb tides. I played her Suite Bergamasque : it sounded like Europe, rhetorically, in my mind, which corresponded with her hands, whispering. The flowering season broke its promise in one night. Only emptiness is stable, with her violin bow changing like a full moon. I named her beloved boy sunflower and connived his name to sprout like a seed. Why the weather cleared up each time I saw him—with sunshine flooding at the back? Flood as a deluge, as an overtone.

Tax Season

Tifara Brown

Geminga Winner

6 million bodies on the ocean floor. Fulani. Colored and cursed. Akan.
Counting the cost of our reparations. Wolof.
Compounding daily.

Contributors

L. Ward Abel's work has appeared in hundreds of journals like *Rattle*, *Versal*, *The Reader*, and *Worcester Review*, and includes a Pushcart Prize nomination. He is the author of three full poetry collections and ten chapbooks, including *The Width of Here* (Silver Bow, 2021). He is a reformed lawyer who writes, plays music, and teaches literature. Abel resides in rural Georgia.

Evan Benedict is a high school English teacher at Norfolk Collegiate in Norfolk, VA. He writes poetry in his spare time, which he has because he neglects other things. His poetry has been featured in *Silver Rose Magazine*, *Flying South*, and *Wild Roof Journal*.

Tifara Brown was born and raised in the Deep South, and has been writing original poetry since 2013. She has shared her poetry on the TEDx stage and competed across the country in the art of spoken word. Her work appears in various magazines, and she published a book of poems entitled *Honeysuckle: Poems and Stories from a Black Southerner* in memory of her ancestor, a victim of racial violence. She is passionate about storytelling and uses her words as a vehicle for youth advocacy and the reduction of violence.

Tetman Callis was born in the Northeast and raised in the Southwest; his father a soldier and his mother a homemaker. His short fiction has appeared in *NOON*, *New York Tyrant*, *Best Microfiction 2019*, *Atticus Review*, and *Writing Disorder*. He is the author of the memoir *High Street: Lawyers, Guns & Money in a Stoner's New Mexico* (2012, Outpost 19), and the children's chapter book *Franny & Toby* (2015, Silky Oak Press). He lives in Chicago with his wife and their two cats, and makes his living as a paralegal.

Martha Clarkson's writing and photography can be found in *F-Stop*, *Seattle Review*, *Portland Review*, *Black Box Gallery*, *Tulane Review*, *Seattle Times*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Feminine Rising*, *Nimrod*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Rattle*, and many more. *Her Voices*, *Her Room* won the short story prize from Open City/Anderbo. She has two notable short stories in *Best American Short Stories*. <https://www.marthaclarkson.com>

Meagan Daine is a multimedia storyteller specializing in alternative coming-of-age tales about diverse characters in extraordinary circumstances. Born and raised in East Texas, she moved away to attend the all-female Mills College in Oakland, CA. She worked as a waitress, an ESL teacher, a "jolly" in a Roman dance club, a theatre manager, a magician's assistant, and a private investigator while establishing her writing career. Her stage plays

have been performed at various venues. Her first feature film, contemporary Western thriller *West of Redemption* (Kairos Productions, starring Billy Zane), won multiple festival awards. She is a staff writer on the one-hour television drama *Games People Play*.

Leah Dockrill is a Toronto-based visual artist. Her practice includes painting and collage, both of which have been exhibited in Canada and the US. In recent years, her work has been published in over three dozen art and literature journals, including *Sunspot* (Spring 2019). She was the featured artist in *Mud Season*, *Beyond Words*, *Fauxmoir*, and *Gulf Stream*. Dockrill is an elected member of the Society of Canadian Artists, and the Colour and Form Society (Canada). Her work is represented by two Ontario galleries: Tag Art Gallery and NOWORDS.

Roopa Dudley loves to paint art that portrays chess in some fashion. She became a full-time painter after she got laid off unexpectedly from a job as a linguist, which she enjoyed and earned her a pretty penny. That gave Dudley an opportunity to start a new career based on what she really wanted to do but had never found the courage to pursue. She loves going to museums and reading about 20th century artists. She is married and lives with her two daughters in Severn, MD.

Laura Eppinger has had work nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Her work has appeared at *The Rumpus*, *The Toast*, and elsewhere. Visit her here: <https://lauraepinger.blog/workspub/> She tweets at @lola_epp.

Chris Fleming is a writer and translator from Sydney, Australia, whose fiction and nonfiction has appeared in scholarly and popular media, including *Westerly*, *Guardian*, *Sydney Review of Books*, *Saturday Paper*, *LA Review*, and *Chronicle Review*. He's the author or editor of ten books, most recently of *On Drugs* (Giramondo, 2019). He's currently Associate Professor in Humanities and a Member of the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University, Australia.

In her writing, **Atma Frans** searches for the voice beneath her personas: woman, mother, trauma survivor, immigrant, architect, queer, poet. Her stories and poems have been longlisted for contests and are published in *New Quarterly*, *Arc Poetry*, *CV2*, *Chiron*, *Obsessed with Pipework*, *Lighthouse*, *Dalhousie*, and elsewhere. She lives in Gibsons, BC, Canada.

Phyllis Green is an author, playwright, and artist. Her art has appeared in *ArLiJo 123*, *Gulf Stream*, *Novus*, *New Plains*, *CERASUS*, *FERAL*, *Superpresent*

and others, and is forthcoming in *CALYX Aji, Rip Rap, Inscape, Foreshadow, I 70 Reviand, Wild Roof, and Cinematic Codes*.

Matt Gulley attended Wayne State University in Detroit and the MFA program at Long Island University in Brooklyn. He currently resides in Brooklyn with his girlfriend, Jenna, and tries to write a little bit every day.

JJ Chen Henderson is a writer, poet, and artist. She has published a novel, short stories and poetry in venues such as *Fourteen Hills, Poetry East, Clackamas*, and *SLANT*.

Rain Hou is a junior high-school student who majors in music but is also passionate about writing.

Sarah Kersey is a poet and graduate student in the MFA Creative Writing program at Eastern Washington. Her work has been published by *Write About Now, Awakenings Foundation*, and publications by Gonzaga University. Kersey lives in Spokane, Washington and work as the managing editor of *Willow Springs Books*.

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium and emigrated to Brooklyn in 1960. After graduating high school, he became a medic in the Air Force. He earned a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature, worked as a Green Beret language instructor, and received a BA in Spanish Literature from the University of Alaska where he taught from 1978 to 1997. He built houses, worked as a pipefitter, orderly, landscaper, driller, and bartender. He is a published poet, novelist, playwright and artist.

Tyler McCurry is a thirty-one-year-old author from Olathe, Kansas with a passion for food, family, and fun. His work has appeared in *Davega Bicycle, Aphelion Webzine*, the JCCC literary magazine *Mind's Eye*, the University of Kansas literary magazine *Coal City Review*, *Grand Little Thing*, *Fleas on the Dog* and *Clinch: A Martial Arts Literary Magazine*.

Paul Milligan is a research pharmacist who writes academic papers as his vocation, and poems and flash fiction as his avocation. He also dabbles in sculpture when the message requires. He is developing a daily writing habit but finding that difficult to meld with his daily Scotch habit.

Martha Nance is a physician in Minnesota whose bored iPhone sometimes puts on its macro lens and takes pictures, which she then tries to translate into something a human can relate to. Her photographs have been published

in *Tiny Seed*, *Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review*, *Raw Art Review*, and *Northwest Review*, among others.

Robert Palmer graduated Sum Cum Laude from ASU with a degree in Fine Art, Painting in 2003. Roberts' choice of medium is typically oil paint and watercolor. Some work has been contributed to organizations for charity. His work has been presented in several shows in Utah and Arizona.

A published poet, writer, and artist, **Jen Payne** is the author of several books including *LOOK UP! Musings on the Nature of Mindfulness*, *Evidence of Flossing: What We Leave Behind*, *Waiting Out the Storm*, and *Water Under the Bridge: A Sort-of-Love Story*. She is the creator/editor of *MANIFEST* (zine), and writes regularly on her blog: www.randomactsofwriting.net.

K.G. Ricci is a self-taught NYC artist who has been creating collages for the past seven years. In that time, his work has evolved from the larger 24x48 panels to the current 7x10 books. His work has been in gallery exhibitions throughout the country, and he has appeared in numerous online exhibitions. Many of Ken's recent "visual stories" have been featured in literary magazines.

jessica ross is an editor, writer, and podcaster; they write and edit for tabletop roleplaying games like *Scarred Lands*, *Starfinder*, and *Dungeons & Dragons*, and they play TRPGs with the *d20 Dames*, a family-friendly actual play podcast. You can find all of their writing and other projects on their website: writejess.com.

Jacqueline Schaalje has published short fiction and poetry in *Massachusetts Review*, *Talking Writing*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Grist*, *Six Sentences*, and others. She has received scholarships at the Southampton Writers Conference and International Women's Writing Guild. She is a member of the Israel Association for Writers in English and the current editor of *arc*. She earned her MA in English from the University of Amsterdam.

Jacqueline Shortell-McSweeney writes only when inspired, or when her muse Noreen stands over her with a metaphorical rolling pin. At other times, she has worked as a producer for *Women Make Movies*, a video artist at *Henry St.*, *Settlement*, *first union woman grip*, and then as a lawyer, in the hopes that she could sue for some of her *Me-too* moments. Now retired to her writing desk, Shortell-McSweeney has been published in eight anthologies, the latest being *Beat Generation*. *Dr. Altman and the Concubines* is available in bookstores. Most important, she spends precious time with her loving family.

Murray Silverstein has been published in *RATTLE*, *Brief Wilderness*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Cape Rock Poetry*, *Euphony*, *Spillway*, *Poetry East*, *West Marin Review*, *RUNES*, *Nimrod*, *Connecticut Review*, *Hollins Critic*, *ZYZZYVA*, *California Quarterly*, *El Portal*, *Elysian Fields*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Front Range*, *Louisiana Literature*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Meadow*, and *Pembroke Magazine*, among others. His two books of poetry are *Master of Leaves* (2014) and *Any Old Wolf* (2007). Silverstein is the senior editor of *America*, *We Call Your Name* (2018). A retired architect, Silverstein holds a master's in architecture.

Jack Stewart was educated at the University of Alabama and Emory University. From 1992 to 1995 he was a Brittain Fellow at The Georgia Institute of Technology. His first book, *No Reason*, was published by the Poeima Poetry Series in 2020, and his work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *American Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, and *Image*.

Joanna Urban's writing has appeared in *Belle Ombre*, *District Lit*, *Yoga Digest*, and other publications.

Sally Ventura lives and teaches in Olean, New York. She has published poems and essays in *Blue Collar Review*, *A Plate of Pandemic*, *English Journal*, *English Record*, *Sisyphus*, *Teachers and Writers Collaborative*, *College English Association Critic*, *Earth's Daughters*, and *Midwest Quarterly*.

Pamela Viggiani is a mixed-media artist and art educator living in Canandaigua, NY. A native of the Finger Lakes region, she began teaching art in 1986. Her work has been featured in *Small Works*, *Light Space & Time*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Press Pause Press*, *From Whispers to Roars*, *Sunspot*, and *Beyond Words*. In a converted fruit cellar, Pamela produces abstract visual interpretations of particular concepts to explore the relationship between word and meaning. Her small works are often manifestations of ambiguity, allowing for varied reactions. Some works, however, reflect the world back to the viewer with more clarity, revealing hidden realities and challenging entrenched ways of thinking.

Adam Walsh's poetry has appeared in *the Journal*, *Hawaii Review*, *Crab Creek*, *Istanbul Review*, *Barrow Street*, and *BLAZE*Vox, among others. His chapbook *metabody* was a finalist at the Atlas Review. He lives in Micronesia and works as an instructor in the Languages and Humanities Department at Northern Marianas College.

Mikal Wix grew up in the American South, which seeded insights into many outlooks, including visions of a revenant from the closet. He has work in or forthcoming in *Corvus*, *Jupiter Review*, *Berkeley Poetry*, *Tahoma Literary*, *Hyacinth*, *Roi Fainéant Press*, *Fiery Scribe*, and others. He works as a science editor.



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