

# SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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**CHANGING THE WORLD  
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

## Table of Contents

**The Sky Will Outlast Us** / Tracy Mann / 1

**Conquered** / Mary Senter / 2

**South Road** / Claudia Putnam / 3

**Correlation is Causation** / Heikki Huotari / 21

**Ragamala** / Brian L. Jacobs / 22

**Blue** / Pavle Radonic / 23

**The Bird Room** / Lyndsey Kelly Weiner / 24

**Portal** / Lisa Rigge / 25

**Birthday Wish List** / Sarah O. Oso / 26

**Back Roads** / Summer Hammond / 27

**I (on the Death of My Wife)** / Paul Rousseau / 33

**Dandelion Girls** / Kate Koenig / 34

**Estranged** / Mandy Clark / 35

**Special Editor's Prize: a mascu-poem** / Malick Ceesay / 36

### Inception Contest

**Finalist: Out of the Mojave** / Drew Smith / 63

**Finalist: PASH** / Christie A. Cruise / 64

**Finalist: Blood Creek** / Andy Carpenter / 65

**Finalist: Matrilineal Cubes** / Aylah Ireland / 66

**Finalist: Character Fragments** / francxs gufan nan / 67

**Runner-up: Pica Nuttalli—Yellow-Billed Magpie** /  
Dallas Frederick / 68

**Winner: Our Beloved** / Melisa Casumbal-Salazar / 69

**Culmination Contest**

**Finalist: Oumuamua** / Marieken Cochiuș / 70

**Finalist: Lacquer** / A. J. Bermudez / 71

**Finalist: Tuckamore** / Leah Dockrill / 72

**Finalist: Wet Pavement** / Jasmine Kapadia / 73

**Runner-up: Droplets** / Barbara Ayala Rugg Diehl / 74

**Winner: Outlaw** / Christina Rauh Fishburne / 75

**Contributors** / 76

**Cover: Learning to Make Fire After the Meteor Strikes** /  
Dave Sims

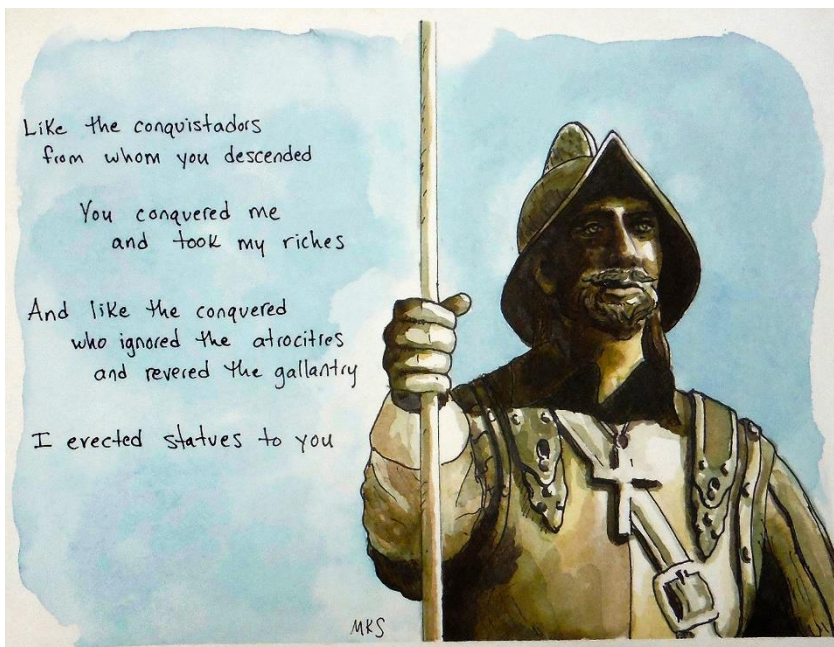
## The Sky Will Outlast Us

Tracy Mann

The dark tangos of Piazzolla are the soundtrack of my dreams. The young soldiers inspecting airport arrivals shift their weight under heavy machine guns. The square in front of Argentina's Pink House, La Casa Rosada, blooms with protesters. Some will disappear. On another night I am in Mississippi, where I have never been, facing off an armed militia of white boys, pushing my collarbone into the butt of a rifle. Yesterday, I ate a slice of pizza in Madison Square, my eyes reaching upward into the blue sky. A few clouds scattered. This sky will outlast us, I thought.

In an earlier dictatorship I developed a taste for Pasolini. I spoke no Italian and only knew *Porcile* by its Portuguese name, *Poçilga*. The pigsty. Outside the cinema, São Paulo's chorus line of skyscrapers flaunted headdresses of twisted antennae against the grey sky. My walk home, preoccupied with nihilist visions of Sicily's black sand and men devouring human flesh, led me past the basement prisons of the Department of Political and Social Order where naked college professors hung upside down, wrists and calves lashed against horizontal poles. Invisible to the street. I did not hear their screams.

You have to answer. You cannot change the subject to memories of a prior reign of terror that may or may not offer wisdom to the present. You must sit with the newspaper photos of the children murdered by a young man lost to his fanaticism. You must see your own daughter, grown now, and your own long-abandoned illusion of protecting her from the world. You must smell the aging dog, drying his wet fur by the fireplace, and brace for yet another loss. You turn, startled by your own misplaced saints who have returned to share the vigil.



**Conquered / Mary Senter**

## South Road

Claudia Putnam

I was on Ranger mountain the night Rusty Chappell killed his wife's prized mare. They tell it like Rusty was this Paul Bunyan figure, able to throw a crazed horse to the ground and strangle it with his bare hands. Just last night I heard another of those tales, pinstriped John Buckley yucking it up while grilling brats next door at the lake. It was hilarious. The horse practically sprouted wings. She was frothing at the mouth. Rusty saved the world, but not before bumbling around like Yogi Bear. My sons and his were wide-eyed, our wives rolling their eyes. The story gets crazier with each retelling, Rusty drunker, his antics more manic, his wife screechier, even though you wouldn't believe it to look at her today. To look at either one of them today, or at this town today. It's like Ireland around here now, practically suburban, practically Connecticut, a round of remodelings now sliding back into decay. Home sidings starting to chip again, SUVs bought new at the end of the Clinton administration rusting. A whole generation sent off to college where their parents never graduated from high school now wandering back jobless.

There are no horses in the Chappell pastures anymore; I heard they were looking at growing Christmas trees. Rusty's joined AA, along with half of the state of New Hampshire, according to Facebook. He's got himself three or four working dump trucks with fading logos; he has exclusive access to the sandpit at the end of the South Road. The Chappell foundation has been jacked up, skylights went in about ten years ago. I don't know what happened to Rusty's daughters. I never ask.

I'm not from here. In 1978, when Rusty killed the mare, I was staying up on Perkins Ridge. After a few postcollege years hitching around in the wake of the Grateful Dead, it had dawned on me that I might have to grow up like every other preppie burnout I knew. I temporized by going to business school first. Partly because my college roommate, John Perkins, lived nearby, I'd picked Dartmouth. It was still possible to choose, yourself, a school like that then, if you had the scores and the grades. We didn't quite grasp that it was

privilege then, especially those of us on the edge of it, the ones who really did have the scores and the grades, and not quite as much money. My buddy John and his wife, Anna Halloran, had taken me in.

Every morning on my way to class, I'd drive out on 107, passing the lower pastures on Ranger where Rusty's wife kept her horses. She crossed Connemaras—a breed I knew from childhood books about a pony named Blaze—with Thoroughbreds. She'd be out there even in the bitter cold, mucking shit, busting hay bales, riding her showy mare at a fence. For my entrepreneurship class, I had a professor who liked to talk about pluck, and I'd think of Suzy Chappell, a woman six feet tall and nearly as burly as her husband, astride that fourteen-hand mare. I wasn't sure which half of that image most captured my imagination: the woman or the horse.

John Perkins would stare down his long nose at it all. White trash dealing in steeplechase horses. But Anna had an artist's eye, drawn to paradox. I'd find her with expedition binoculars trained on the Chappell pastures, then she'd disappear into the converted sheep barn she used as a studio. Shut out, I'd squint across the valley, unable to distinguish much.

Coming home around 3 a.m. at the end of spring semester, I had Zeppelin cranked on my eight-track, the Saab's windows rolled down so I could breathe the night trees. The eastern forest was awesome to me, its rustlings and moistnesses, its varieties of barks and leaves, its peepers and crickets, all of which were absent on my uncle's ranchland in Colorado where I'd grown up.

I turned off 107 onto South Road, thinking I'd circle around to Perkins Ridge the back way. I slowed my car, sucking the humid air. As I rounded the first curve, I realized I was gripping the steering wheel. Through the windows crept what I can only describe as a Bad Vibe. I remembered hearing Anna talk about this place, how she avoided walking or bicycling through it. I slowed more, wanting to roll up all the windows, not wanting to stop the car to do it.

There were no houses along this stretch of the South Road. I pushed through the dark till I crested a hill and nearly ran over Rusty Chappell. He was standing on the yellow line, shouting. I couldn't swerve; the road's shoulder was blocked by a great orange dump truck. I shrieked to a halt just a few feet from Rusty. He reared over my hood like a troll, his shadow stretching far down the pavement behind him.

My headlights brought flame to his carrot hair, bleached the freckles from his skin. He continued to yell, waving at his truck. Though I was tempted to jam into reverse, I climbed out of my sedan instead. I drove a foreign car everyone recognized. There was no way around helping him out.

Rusty went on screaming in a voice strangely high-pitched for such a huge being. “Cocksucka, cocksucka, mothafuckin cocksucka!”

“What happened, man?” I said, when he finally paused for breath. I saw he’d driven the truck into the ditch. The two tires that remained on the road were flat. Scorched oil hung in the air.

He reared around. “Fuckin *beast!*” he said, then fell silent.

I introduced myself, though I was sure he knew who I was. “Ethan Coddling.” He shook my hand and then dropped it. Disquiet crawled over us like fog.

“Damned spot for a flat,” I said.

“Ain’t just flats.” He tugged the shoulders of his t-shirt, as if trying to turn up an invisible collar. “I’d a driven out them. Oil pressah’s gone. I can’t afford to lose the whole rig, drivin’ with the gauge flat as a heart attack.”

“Leave it till day,” I advised. “I’ll drive you back to Ranger.”

“Decent of yuh.” He shook my hand. I felt puny and pigeon-toed beside him.

“You need anything from the truck?”

“Nah. T’morrow.”

I drove him back to 107, turning almost immediately onto the rutted trail that wound up a third of Ranger Mountain to the Chappell spread. Named for Rogers’ Rangers, who camped nearby during the French and Indian War, the mountain rose straight across the valley from Perkins Ridge. It stood steeper and taller than the surrounding hills, its Kojak crown begging for a fight. In winter it was sheeted with sleet; in summer hammered by lightning. In the forest along its flanks, the atmosphere was sweet with horses and centuries of maple sugaring.

Rusty turned and nodded at me. “Better come in for a beer, then.”

*Beah.* I trudged after him, counting as I went. One front-end loader. Another dump truck, this one small and red and loaded with manure. A flatbed truck with one of its wheels jacked up, a thin layer



of hay strewn across its bed. A tractor that looked like it hadn't moved in a while. A looming bulldozer. Three Buick station wagons up on blocks. A rust-spotted horse trailer, a shiny red Ford for pulling it.

The kitchen was lit by a pale and flickering florescent light in the center of the ceiling. The room was spotless, or as clean as anyone could make it, given the bad light, the wood counters that had lost their varnish, the linoleum worn down to plywood. Blue tarp covered a fresh-looking hole in the ceiling, possibly cut for a skylight. Suzy Chappell sat tall at a big oak table.

"Where you been?" She looked at her watch before getting up and marching to the fridge to get our beers.

"Bogwater," Rusty said, raising his can at me instead of answering her. He dragged out two chairs and we sat beneath the bleaching light. With an air of resignation, Suzy packed a small pipe. As we drew our hits, Rusty told Suzy how he'd been stranded, turning to me for corroboration when he got to how I'd come roaring over the hill and almost knocked him down.

"That's not a spot I'd want to be stuck in," Suzy said. Her accent was much softer than her husband's.

"What's wrong with that place, exactly?" I asked. "Is it haunted?"

Suzy shook her head. "Polluted?" she suggested. "Always been that way."

"Yeah," Rusty put in. "Seems like every house around here's haunted, anyways. Ghosts ain't nothin."

"Really? You ever see a ghost?" I took another hit, looked over my shoulder.

"Sure," said Suzy. They traded off stories for over an hour. I didn't believe any of them, despite what I'd felt on the South Road. If ghosts were that common, everyone in Europe would have white hair. You'd never see an *Unsolved Mysteries* show, because we'd take it all for granted.

Suzy got to her feet, thundered to the fridge again. Six feet of muscle was what she was. She wore a halter top that exposed ripples in her upper back. Her jeans cut her hips and squeezed her thighs, not because she was fat but because her pants were small. Brown hair curled down to the points of her shoulder blades. John and Anna had sometimes cracked jokes about the fights that landed these two in the

hospital. Rusty was bigger, but if he were drunker, she might have the advantage.

She took out more beers, looked at the man's watch at her wrist again, sighed. "No sleep again tonight." She slapped a frying pan down on the stove, started cracking eggs into it. Rummaging in one of the plywood cabinets, she pulled down a box of brownie mix and dumped its contents into a bowl. By the time the eggs were scrambled, she'd slipped a pan into the oven.

She plopped steaming brownies down on the table, clearing away our plates, emptied of eggs. Striding to the door, she pulled a pair of Wellingtons over her bare feet.

"Want a hand?" I asked.

"Sure, if you're offering."

We left Rusty nursing on another beer at the table. "I thought you were going to chop off our heads when we came in," I said, as we walked toward the barn. The vehicles and equipment we passed seemed dull in the brightening light.

Suzy didn't seem quite as large. "I was pissed because I figured he'd been to the Rooster Tail. Then he makes such a racket when he does come home. I don't want him waking our girls so they can see him all wasted like that."

I was surprised to hear they had children. I thought if they did, the kids had probably already seen all there was to see.

Inside the barn, early light streamed through the high windows, setting off gleaming brass hinges and door latches. Dark, oiled beams began to glow, cobweb-free. The floor boards were swept. The only smell came from fresh straw and sawdust, from horses fed on sweet grass and good corn. My Colorado uncle mostly kept his Quarter Horses outside, letting them grow coats as nature intended.

Suzy clucked her tongue. Four heads appeared over the stall doors. "Morning, hons," she cooed to them. "These are the ones I keep aside. For breeding, but in the end they're really for my daughters."

"Do they ride?"

"They don't want to," she said. "But that's not the point."

She gestured back through the doorway toward her husband's disabled fleet. For a split second I could almost envision it all becoming, if not a bluegrassed horse farm, at least one of the more prosperous estates you passed on I-89 closer to Hanover.

“Which is the famous horse?” I asked.

Suzy picked up a grain shovel and moved toward the first stall, the only one that didn’t have a horse head sticking out of it. When she approached, I heard a stifled giggle.

“Mice!” she cried.

The giggles turned to shrieks. She stomped toward the stall.

“No!” came a voice. “We ain’t mice!”

“What are you then? Rats?” She growled.

“No, not rats either!”

“Oh, it sounds like children. My favorite! Fi-fie-fo-fum!”

Two heads, one orange like her father’s, the other darker than her mother’s, popped up over the stall door, grinning. The darker was older; she had a baby tooth missing. The redhead couldn’t have been more than four. She looked a little scared.

“What are you two doing up so early? What if you got stepped on?”

I didn’t think the anxiety in Suzy’s voice came from fear for the girls’ safety. We’d just been talking about the things she didn’t want to her children to see, and it had turned out that the kids had been awake for quite some time.

“Lady would never step on us!” said the darker girl.

“We were surprisin’ yuh!” said the younger. She backed out of the stall, dragging a shovel loaded with manure.

“And we wanted to say good mornin’ to Lady,” her sister added.

I looked into the stall. The bay mare gazed after the children. I am not an expert on Connemaras, but even pregnant, this mare exuded grace. She was smaller than any Quarter Horse—more the size of a small Arabian. But her legs were strong and long for the rest of her. There was no question that she was bred to jump.

“Say hello to Daddy’s new friend, Mr. Coddling,” Suzy said to the girls.

The older girl, called Amber, came to shake my hand. “Look what I got for my birthday!” she exclaimed. “That was yesterday!” She reached with her left hand to pull a pendant from beneath the collar of her t-shirt.

I stepped back.

“Don’t you like it?” she asked. “It’s just an old nugget. I have it because of my name.”

My unease faded like *déjà vu*. The pendant was the kind of thing you could buy at any tourist trap up north, small and cheap. Sometimes they sold them with bugs inside, though I had never understood the appeal of that. This one might even have been plastic.

Suzy ushered the girls out of the barn, murmuring something about swimming lessons at the lake. Amber called out, “See yuh, Lady!” blowing a kiss.

I felt a bit let down by the banality of the mare’s name, until Suzy returned and explained that it was short for Lough Conn Lady, which meant, roughly, Lady of the Lake. I could get into the mythological overtones, not to mention the reference to the heart of the local geography, Big Shire Lake. I looked at Suzy anew, wondering if she’d read Mallory, or Scott.

“When’s she due?” I asked.

Suzy clipped the horse to the cross ties in the middle of the aisle. “She’s still got a little more than a month left.”

When we hiked back up to the house, we found Rusty dozing on the couch while his daughters sprawled and rolled on the rug, manipulating Barbie dolls on Tonka trucks. In sleep he looked smaller, more vulnerable, a freckle-faced boy perhaps too restless for learning well in school, but earnest and striving all the same. Suzy bent to kiss him.

His daughters began climbing over him. I expected him to toss them aside as an awakened giant would, but instead he gathered them into his chest, resting his chin first on one head and then the other. “Squeezin’ us!” the darker girl, the one with the necklace, cried.

He stood them on the floor, his hands trailing through their hair. “Daddy’s got work.” He looked at me. “Time to check on that truck.”

I hesitated. I’d been planning to go home and sleep for several hours. But I found myself repeating the offer I’d made to his wife. “Want a hand?”

“Appreciate it. Know anythin’ bout engines?”

“Maybe a bit. Let’s go take a look.” I did know a little, from my uncle’s ranch.

I followed Rusty out into the yard, waited for him to select a vehicle. To my surprise, he chose the front-end loader. As we wobbled and bounced down the driveway, Rusty handed me a plastic bag and a packet of papers. “Roll a doob,” he said. “Needs cleanin’.”

I spent about five minutes picking oily seeds out of the crumbly Columbian Gold or Panama Red or whatever throat-scraping weed we smoked back then. He took the sloppy joint from me with a skeptical grunt, pinching it between thick fingers. “Thirsty? There’s Bud in that cooler.”

I found two sandwiches, more brownies, a twelve of Bud. “Seems early,” I said.

He shrugged. “We’ll get to it one way or another.”

So I cracked one. It calmed my scorched throat. When we hit the pavement, he accelerated. The jouncing grew more pronounced. I grabbed the door handle. It didn’t help. We turned up the South Road. Normally I took these turns at warp speed in my Saab, so now I had a chance to stare around me at the landscape. Accustomed to the grandiosity of the Rocky Mountains, I had never fully absorbed the local beauty. Perkins Ridge rose to our right, a grassy hillside with a blue smear of duck pond at its bottom and John and Anna’s wide-porched house at the top. Through the trees I could glimpse bus-sized boulders dropped by the last glacier. All the history—geology, woodland Indians, Rogers’ Rangers—felt beckoning, mysterious.

Until we pulled in behind the dump truck. The vibe settled around us again.

Rusty got out and circled the behemoth three times counterclockwise. I dropped out of the loader, went around to the hood of the truck, wishing I were wearing long sleeves. “How do you get it open?”

“From the side.”

I climbed up on the wheel and groped for the catch, heaving and grunting until the fender swung open. Rusty bent at the rear of the vehicle, examining one of the flats. “I can’t see what caused ‘em,” he said. There was a whine in his voice.

“Maybe there’s nails or glass under the wheels,” I suggested.

“Helluva nail,” he replied, standing.

While I stared into the engine, he strode back to the loader and yanked out a red toolbox. Veins stood out along his freckled arm. “See anythin’ yet?”

“Not sure what I’m looking for.”

He climbed up on the running board beside me, reeking of grease and sweat. “I’d guess the gasket’s blown. Hope that’s it, anyhow. Top half’s cheaper to fix than the bottom.” *Cheapa t’fix.*

“Can’t you call a tow truck?” I wondered where you’d find a tow around here that could haul a rig like this one.

“Nah! All’s we got to do is take this head right off, get her back to my shop. I ain’t takin her to no garage. Highway robb’ry.”

Later he added that a boy from down in the village of East Enshaw, Billy Tanner, would come to Ranger to fix the engine head. I nodded. I had already heard of Billy Tanner’s ability with motors.

When I wasn’t fetching tools or beers, or rolling joints, I worked elbow-to-elbow with Rusty. There was something satisfying in the sweaty labor; I couldn’t help respecting his knowledge and his strength. I enjoyed the movements of my muscles, the rhythm we fell into despite the thickening humidity and the uneasiness that seemed to permeate this section of woods. Rusty breathed hard through his nose. He twice dropped tools. The socket wrench didn’t go far, but the smaller one clattered all the way through the engine cavity. I had to crawl underneath to get it. I felt as if I were pulling myself out of something sticky as I climbed back up beside Rusty. I wondered what it did to people, to live for generations along the South Road.

“Ha!” Rusty pushed off the truck as if it were a boat. He hurried over to the loader, where he rigged up a mess of chains that enabled him to winch the engine head from the truck and hang it off the teeth of the shovel. Practically next I knew, we were rocking down the South Road with the engine penduluming a few feet from the windshield.

I rolled another joint. “So the truck’s all right sitting there till you get the engine fixed?”

“If I say so. Who’s gonna tow it away?”

“The load doesn’t matter?”

“Nah. Was just takin some gravel over to Blake’s. Fill in that old well before someone else gets hurt.”

I nodded. Charlie Blake, aged five, had fallen in the well the previous week. Luckily it was a dry well, and somehow he’d come out

with only a broken leg. This was another side to Rusty that Anna had mentioned. He was prone to dropping off free gravel, or a load of firewood, in the yards of people who needed help. Though ... why at 3 a.m.? I never did figure that out.

After he got back on 107, Rusty drove straight past the turnoff to his house, keeping his foot nailed to the floor, his eyes straight ahead. The engine head swung on its chain, adding to the lurching of the vehicle. I just accepted the situation.

After a mile or so I praised his wife's horses. Rusty stiffened, as if I'd mentioned something embarrassing. "Lotta work."

"Do you like the horses?" I ventured.

Massive shrug, followed by a sigh. "Kinda scared of 'em," he admitted. We sat in shocked silence over that. "And I can't see it getting us anywheres," he added after a while.

I thought about the fine condition of the barn. I'd figured that despite her excessive care for the mares—my uncle would say that was a waste of money—Suzy had to be making some kind of profit from the operation. I didn't want to ask: the one thing you never mentioned in northern New England in those days was money. "Seems like Suzy has a big dream."

"I got one of my own," he said. "But she don't like it a'tall."

He didn't elaborate. I supposed it had to do with all his equipment. And gravel.

He pulled into the Rooster Tail's parking lot. Suzy's complaint about bars seemed distant. As we trudged through the dust toward the front door, a faded black Ford truck came skidding into the lot. "Now you get to meet Billy," Rusty said.

Billy Tanner was about ten years younger than I was, muscular but short, with an imitation of Rusty's swaggering walk. His dark eyes were quiet. He took my hand firmly.

"Billy's working for me this summer," Rusty said. He turned to me, doing an exaggerated double take. Perhaps carried away with the camaraderie of the afternoon, Rusty asked me if I wanted a *real* job. "Could use more goddamned help runnin' the skidder up to the woodlot. Above my house. Fifteen bucks an hou-ah," he said, sticking out a filthy hand as if we'd just met. Rusty leaned into my face to see if I were man enough to take it.

It astonished me to know it, but I wanted to be. He'd made me feel small, the way my uncle did, summers on the ranch. At any rate, saying no never occurred to me. I already had a summer job teaching sailing at the lake. But sleep-deprived, hungover, stoned, also fascinated, I clasped Rusty's gnarled fist. I imagined that that once I finished business school, I'd be stuck inside offices for the rest of my life. I suppose I saw Rusty's offer as my last hurrah.

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The painter known as Anna Halloran, then my landlady, did some of her finest early work during the month I spent with the Chappells. When I had a break from the blitz of blind-sweating labor, beer, and doobs, I'd go home to shower. I'd reverently bring Anna coffee in her glass-walled shed. In contrast to my relationship with Suzy, this would be all the access I would get to Anna's inner space. John would be off at the real estate office in nearby Kensington, where he transformed bits of his family's Colonial land grant holdings into retirement properties. I didn't quite allow myself to lust after his wife—John and Anna, as a pair, were too holy in my imagination. I don't remember much lust from that summer at all, for the record. Probably the pot.

Anna's studio was not an analogue of Suzy's barn. While the stable was churchlike, Anna painted in a mess of heaped rags and knocked-over jars. Yet the same light that gilded the interior of Suzy's barn filled Anna's canvasses. A pitchfork shadowing a dappled mare's fetlock. A freckled bicep bulging over the dark well of an engine. I brought stories home the way a cat delivers songbirds. From beneath her brown fringe of bangs, Anna's eyes lasered onto that canvas what I hadn't known I'd seen. Even now, when I come across one of those paintings in an art magazine or a *New Yorker* review, I'm disturbed by how little I saw.

The morning everything changed, I hadn't been home to shower or speak to Anna in two days. It started, as so many mornings did, in the barn. After a couple of weeks, I'd groggily realized what Rusty was doing—using me as a shield against his wife. We'd go to the Rooster Tail, then stagger into his kitchen at one or two in the morning. Suzy would be waiting up, she'd douse her angry fire when she saw me, lighting our bowls, cracking our beers, serving up our late snacks, sometimes sullenly, sometimes cheerfully.



As the nights flicked by, I began to sense a sadness beneath her heat, as if all her feelings toward her husband boiled down to disappointment. I'd occasionally catch her gazing at Rusty before she left for the barn. I began to think that I was a second choice, that she wished it were he, rather than I, who would take up the pitchfork alongside her. Then she'd look away from him as she snorted up her line of black beauties and pulled on her mucking boots.

Even though it left me feeling inexplicably hollow, I kept accompanying her to the barn. I realized what she was doing, too—using me as a way of keeping her husband relatively tethered.

“You want to ride?” Suzy asked, after about a month had gone by.

“Sure,” I said, stoned as usual.

She pulled a saddle off the wall. As she tacked up, she mentioned that later in the day she'd need me and Rusty to help her bring Lady down from a higher pasture. “I'm concerned she'll foal soon. I want her kept nearby, barn and paddock only, till then.”

We saddled the ponies, led them outside. I mounted tentatively, expecting the small English saddle to spin upside down on its flimsy girth. I took the reins, doubting also the lightweight bit.

“This way,” Suzy called, pointing Skylark toward the top of the pasture. Suzy's long legs were so far doubled up that I half expected them to hit her chin. I began composing descriptions for Anna. It occurred to me that Suzy was something of an artist herself, trying to forge something beautiful out of her life. In the process, raising up a host of paradoxes for Anna to harvest in her own art. Whoa, that's intense, I thought. I had a moment of panic, as if I were trapped like an insect or a bird in Suzy's barn.

I had work boots on, the wrong kind of jeans for riding. The inner seam chafed my knees. The horse's small size had led me expect a choppy gait, but the animal moved smoothly. When the ground leveled out, Suzy sprang off to open a gate, then we were following an old two-track into the forest. “Cow path,” she said. “There used to be a big pasture up ahead. Now it's all trees and stone walls.”

We cantered beneath the web of branches. Stone lined both sides of the path. I got off on watching all the different kinds of leaves—raggedy oaks, broad maples, flickering elms—flutter and bow in the breezes that seemed to come from all around. Then we turned a

bend and came into a small meadow. Suzy's girls strolled ahead of us, holding hands and carrying plastic sandbox pails. I blinked at the bright colors.

With a whoop, Suzy was off her horse. "What're you two doing here?"

"Surprisin' yuh!" They both held up their pails. The redhead offered her blue bucket to her mother, who took out small, red berries.

"Delicious," said Mother Suzy. "Wonder if you could surprise me getting up early for swimming lessons one of these mornings." She gave the older girl a light shove. "Give some to Mr. Codding."

Amber lifted her red pail. I carefully removed a handful. They were much smaller than any strawberry I'd seen. I put one in my mouth and sat in rapture. Sunshine and sugar and Jerry Garcia tunes wrapped around my tongue, sank down through my body.

"Never had wild strawberries before?" Amber asked, watching me.

I shook my head.

The girl bent to pick more berries at her feet.

Suzy said, "You two go home and get ready for swimming, okay? Put the berries up on the counter and I'll stew them for shortcake."

"Shortcake! All right!"

I turned in the saddle to watch them as they darted back down the path with their Rockwellian burdens. Kids. I shook my head. A part of Suzy's life, like the mares, but alien to me. I was always pretending to myself that the Chappells had no children inhabiting the margins of our inebriated lives.

"Come on," Suzy said to me. "It's just a little ways up the path." She gestured toward the meadow. "We're not using this for pasture. Rusty wants to grow Christmas trees. I figure, why not?"

I gave a thought to the regularity, to rows and rows of perfectly round trees for Massachusetts and Manhattan weekends. I couldn't suppress a shudder. Something there is that does not love a row. But why not? Perhaps it was the kind of blight along the South Road that conspired against rows and walls, and Frost's neighbor was right to struggle against that.

Ahead, the air glimmered like rain. As we drew closer, I realized that the trail ended on the side of Ranger Mountain, an

outcropping known as Eagle's Nest. We came out into the sun. Big Shire Lake stretched beneath us, flecked with white from the wind that also tore our hair. All that water. I hadn't seen it from above before. I thought of the berries in the meadow. No matter what had driven the original colonists west—winters, stones in the earth, blights like the South Road—this land had its abundances, too.

There were hikers out already, staring at Suzy as if she'd emerged from a parallel dimension. Ignoring them, she sat her pony and gazed past the granite cliff. Her dark eyes shone with the wet of the lake. I thought I would bring that image, along with the tiny red berries in their sky-blue pail, back to Anna. These secrets of the land delivered to the one other person I knew who would see them.

Eventually Suzy pulled Skylark around. We galloped back down the path and through the strawberry meadow, slowing only to let the horses calm themselves in the last stretch before the barn. In the yard, Rusty had the girls up in the loader. The younger one sat in his lap, beaming, pretending with both hands and all her might to work the enormous shifter. Her father grinned and waved at us as we dismounted.

Suzy scowled, looking up at him. I felt, in that way you feel sure of the thoughts of those around you when you're stoned, her grief that her daughters were in the truck and not riding at her side, in place of me.

Billy came spinning up the driveway in his Ford, and the three of us went up the mountain to log, after Suzy reminded Rusty that she'd need help later. As we worked, Rusty outperformed us all. He truly was Bunyan-like in his strength, no matter how stoned or drunk he might have been. And all day as I skidded logs to the truck that would carry them to LaValley's lumberyard, the lake lay there before me, as if framed in my third eye.

I had a headache when we quit for the day, just a few minutes before eight. Rusty beckoned me up into the cab of the truck. Around the scalped clearing, blue diesel smoke hung. Why the hell had I given up a summer of sailing for this?

The three of us piled into the logger. The right-side mirror lay on the floor in front of the passenger seat, because we routinely used it for snorting "cocaine." Raunchy stuff, mostly speed, but I'd been drinking Rusty's beer and smoking his hooch all summer. I wasn't

getting picky now. A cassette tape hung out of the deck like a tongue. Billy punched it in. Aerosmith, local summer kids made good; there was a lot of pride about that. Our hearts were racing as Rusty barreled down the rough road until we reached 107. We were about to turn toward the Rooster Tail—it was too late for LaValley's after all—when Suzy came flying up the highway in the shiny red pickup.

“Shit,” said Rusty.

“She wants help with the horse,” I remembered.

She got out of her truck, leaving the driver's door open. Rusty got out, too. They stood on the roadside, nose to chin. I thought Rusty might strike her. I thought she might strike him. Rusty suddenly slumped, hands in his pockets, looking down. Then he climbed back in with us. “Could use a hand, guys,” he said.

Rusty turned the music down, maneuvered the logger to the side of the road. We piled our sorry asses into Suzy's truck. When she got to the house, she pulled a hard right, heading down a rough two-track that I hadn't seen used before. Driving was mainly a formality, I think, because I doubt we'd gone two hundred yards before she pulled over at a gate and Rusty got out. Suzy stalked up behind her husband. Invisible punches whistled, Rusty wanting her to leave him alone so he could go the bar with us, and her wanting him to do what she'd asked without her ever having had to ask it.

“Where's the horse?” I said.

Suzy struck out across the field. The rest of us followed, the lowering sun splashing our boots.

“How come Suzy didn't just bring Lady down herself?” I asked Billy.

“Bitchuva pony goes nuts sometimes. Unpredictable. But we four can handle it, by Marg'ret.”

I recalled Suzy's anxiety when she found the girls in Lady's stall my first morning at the Chappells'. But she came as easy to us this time as she had then. We practically walked into her. Or she walked into us. I had a hard time believing she would resist the lead, especially when she thrust her head forward for the halter, nuzzling Suzy as she secured the buckle. I swear that mare kissed the woman's face.

“How's Mama's best hope?” Suzy murmured.

Suzy caught a loop of the rope. I took its very end. The two of us led the horse, graceful despite her broad belly, past the truck, down the road, toward the paddock.

Rusty went ahead of us to hang a trouble light off a pole in the paddock. I hadn't noticed it was getting dark, but somehow the artificial light bled out the day.

Then I tripped. I nearly went down on my knee.

Lady reared back. Suzy instantly dropped the rope, yelling for me to do the same, but my reflex was the opposite. I jerked back as hard as I could. The rope seared through my palms. It must have been the alleged coke combined with the roar of pain: I suddenly wanted to break that horse's neck. Her eyes whitened the trouble light as she reared again, jerking me to the ground. Billy ran forward, only to take a hard kick in the ribs. Suzy tried to drag him free. "Let her go, let her go," she said to me.

It was then that Rusty did what killed the horse. Despite the way people tell it, it was a small thing. It's not supposed to be possible by hand, or with a horse that's rearing out of control, but the act itself, it was small.

Rusty shoved Suzy out of the way, rushed that horse like a berserker, coming in under her hooves. He got hold of Lady on the front of her face, where the nasal bone ended. He pinched her airway shut. A man just a fraction less strong, a more ordinary man, a man you wouldn't tell a story about, it would have been nothing.

Lady threw her head, half-rearing, but Rusty held on. Suzy got to her feet, grabbed at Rusty's shoulder. He threw her back. I clung to the rope.

Lady sagged. Rusty sagged with her.

Rusty and I half dragged the stumbling horse to the paddock before she collapsed. The trouble light shone dimly in the blood beneath the mare's lowered nose. Suzy punched us both to the ground. Rusty's head cracked against mine. I turned, punched his shoulder. It's a reflex when my head gets hit. I've punched car roofs, door frames, tree limbs. Rusty didn't notice my fist.

Lady's eye clouded, her breath racketed. Billy stopped moaning about his own pain. Suzy kicked at Rusty where he lay, in the balls, again and again in the face.

“You did it on purpose. Motherfucker. Motherfucker. Motherfucker.”

\*\*\*

There was only one horse vet this side of the lake; by the time he arrived, Lady and Suzy had long gone quiet. He ran gentle hands along the mare’s neck, listening through his stethoscope to her chest.

“I’m sorry,” he said, after a long silence. She had hemorrhaged into her lungs. Apparently there was no way to reverse the damage. He said an artery in her airway had ruptured. A small one, but “that’s all it took.” Applying his scope along her swollen belly, he again shook his long narrow head. The foal too was dead.

Suzy knelt by the horse. Rusty stumbled to her side, his face swollen and hideous, and laid a hand on her shoulder. She didn’t shake it off.

No one paid any attention to me. I shuffled over to where Billy slumped against the barn’s wall.

“I can drive you to the hospital,” I offered. “Or just to your house. We can take your truck. I’ll walk up Perkins Ridge from there.” I was anxious for the whole adventure to be over—not just the night’s, but the whole month’s worth. I wanted Lady’s last struggles and everything else about these people’s lives to fade into nightmare and be gone. I didn’t have to live with this forever. Whatever part I might have played, I told myself it was still their drama. Let John Perkins smirk over my association with white trash. Anna could find herself a new source for her painting subjects. I put my arm out to support Billy.

But it wasn’t over yet.

“Hey!” said Rusty. “I got to clean this up before the kids wake up.” I looked up at the attic windows, astonished at his delusion that the children might still be asleep.

Rusty shook the vet’s hand and sent the skinny man off. Then he began marshaling his fleet. The loader, which kept stalling. The dump truck, its engine now repaired by Billy, but its tires still flat. And a bulldozer with a whirling orange light on top.

Rusty directed me to the cab of the ’dozer. I figured out what he wanted. I laid my palm, oozing with rope burn, against the knob of the shifter, jammed it in gear. Pushed Lady into the shovel of his loader. Her head dangled free when Rusty lifted her into the air. Her

coat still shone. I rubbed my eyes as his stuttering machine swung around and crawled up to the dump truck. Maybe it was the exhaust smoke and the weird orange light, or maybe Rusty forgot to account for the truck's list. But when he lifted the loader as high as it could go and eased back on the lever to flip the shovel downwards, he missed.

I climbed out of my cab; Rusty leapt out of his. Even Billy lurched forward to have a look. Blood oozed onto the gravel, and one small hoof stuck out of the belly.

We all heard Suzy say it: "You've done it now, Rusty, you've really done it." Until I turned around, I thought she was talking about the horse.

Her daughters stood behind us. The older, dark-haired girl came to peer at the mare. Her solemnity swallowed the engine noise, our breathing, even the pace of our hearts. She dropped to her knees, one hand going to the necklace at her throat. She pulled the gold chain over her head and draped it onto Lady's. It only reached around the mashed ears, forming a halo in the whirling lights.

It called to me, that shiny bit of resin. It wanted me to be the fly, it was begging me to climb inside. Any number of summer people do that, get jobs with the locals, start drinking, start shooting cocaine, never come back out. I kept staring at the horse, at that little hoof sticking out, at that pendant. I was already polishing it. I was letting it harden. It was my cheap little souvenir. It's the reason I'm here, sitting on the porch of my summer camp, listening to the mosquitoes whine on the other side of the screen, watching the red and green of the port and starboard lights on the motorboats far out on Big Shire. It's reason I'm telling you this. You can't really tell a story unless you were passing through it.

The girl stroked the mare's twisted neck, her eyes moving across us all, grave and sad in their wells of broken sleep. Under that gaze the harshness fled from her parents' faces, leaving only ruin behind.

## Correlation is Causation

Heikki Huotari

To the horseless carriage I say get a horse.  
The naked eye sees two of everything but averages  
the brace of quail. Dear Liza, in this galaxy there's  
no black hole, dear Liza, with what should I fix it?  
As distracted, these contributors are mere  
participants. Their honorifics migrate night and day.  
They're oppositely gendered of their own volition.  
Innocently and or legally, their names have  
changed. One twin surrounds another in a glut of  
love. As my convergence is conditional, to sum to  
any number I'll be reconfigured. Stake your claim;  
I'll cry for me and mine. As fear is focused barely  
satiated taste buds blossom and as sunburn and  
consumption of ice cream are correlated correlation  
is causation.



## Ragamala

Brian L. Jacobs

I never wanted a home  
nor a *Lotus Sutra*  
I am not a lotus eater

a home  
is a place

to hang  
history

floating  
in etymological  
*soundfacts*

a privilege  
that is created

by language  
illusions

orange heavily  
hung my welcome'd neck

my funeral  
sewn into scented *mala*  
pollinated bead *mantras*

un god'd  
in which I gallow

## Blue

Pavle Radonic

Delectable enough to make you gasp going by drinking it in. Rarely was a stretch of water ever sighted as fulsome as that standing like an offering on a saucer. (In Singapore adults often slurped runny eggs from saucers.) Years ago an art teacher friend had memorably characterized blue as a cold color, when you had thought the beach, sky and even pictorial representation as warm and inviting. Baby blue. Egg shell. The soft pastels in the Derwent standup box. Certainly not cold. Further along grades of navy began. There was only light overcast. By the time the beach was reached a spattering of rain had begun to lash briefly, angled from clouds that stood away from the path. Further along again another couple of kilometres near the mangroves snot in the tone and all the lusciousness gone. After days of shirt-sleeves—or single layer thermal at least, with tee & sleeveless hoodie on top—the chill of the morning arrived with a wallop—sitting up in bed after brekkie the second doona had needed fetching. Five degrees it had been at departure midafternoon. Last week on two consecutive days blowies had buzzed through the window behind the bed, though certainly they had quickly disappeared. Last week a *YouTube* interview from the 80s had featured a novelist and writing teacher whose one and only rule for students had been no weather in the compositions. Understandably, especially in the US, that earlier generation had no call for that kind of thing. You had to take big salty gulps wheeling by, as usual recalling Knut Hamsun after his TB diagnosis on the train going back to Europe refusing to accept the fate the doctors had tried to hang on him. State of disaster officially declared. Last week Georgina in Darwin, originally a Melbourne gal, who had also cared for an aged parent to the end, remarked in a mail that the oldies in the homes would now confuse their periods with the presence of the fatigues. In the pic of the middle-aged blonde Greek wife of the nursing home mogul responsible for so many of the deaths the dame sat in her leathers on the bonnet of a *Lamborghini*, turned aside as the wind blew her hair.

## The Bird Room

Lyndsey Kelly Weiner

our third pass  
through the bird room at the zoo  
trailing our boy with his fistful of seeds

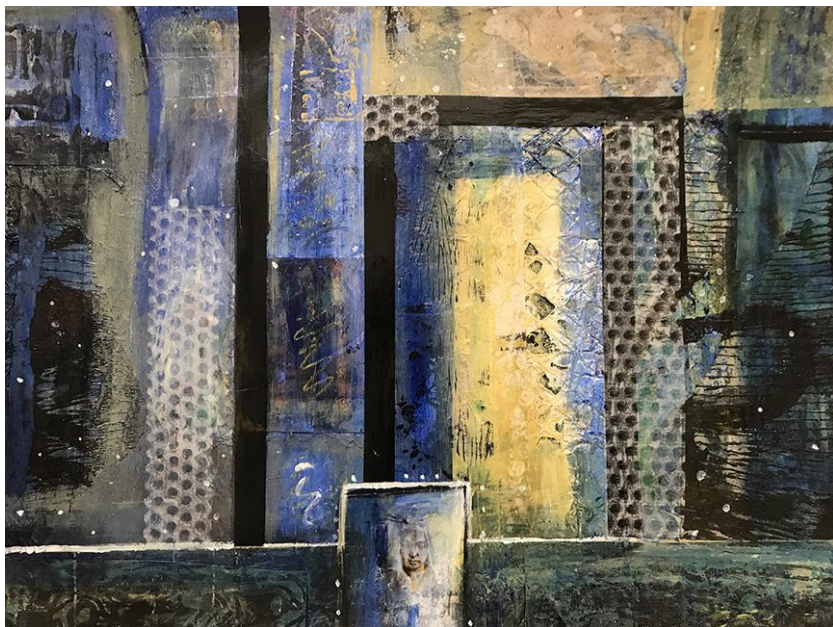
acid humidity clings  
to our winter coats and hats  
toes slick in the front of my boot

Luzon Bleeding-Hearts  
white chests with a running wound-mark of red  
the placard says not to worry

our boy points at his father's wool jacket  
a brown and white smear by the zipper  
drips onto his jeans and leather boot

lifting antibacterial wipes from my purse  
I kneel  
wadding the smeared ones in a pile on the water-beaded floor

it's been half our son's life since I've touched his father  
Boobys and Birds of Paradise cock their heads and blink their  
beady eyes  
*there* our son says



**Portal / Lisa Rigge**

## Birthday Wish List

Sarah O. Oso

A porcelain pot for the geraniums at my window  
who tilt their pink little faces toward what shines  
I want three days in the life of a bluebird,  
    a coffee-maker,  
breath for my chest's ardent heart

One conversation with Ms. Gwendolyn Brooks  
and a trip to Maine, up spiral stairs, to the top  
of any lighthouse born to beam the savage sea

A way of lassoing back those words I don't mean

Bring me a sandalwood guitar with strings that sing,  
two packs of cigarettes from Seville

I'll take a sweater that fits—in sophisticated rouge red,  
and your remembering me as love outlasting a season,  
    a few new dance moves,  
the heavy of a grandad's hand on shoulder

    Been dreaming of  
knowing the difference between practical & pragmatic,  
a sudden discovery of all lost socks,  
one circle of incense from a place that's not here,  
    the kind that, not too fast,  
burns and burns through passing nights,  
without ever turning to ash

## Back Roads

Summer Hammond

Our first truck.

I'd like to tell you it was badass.

That it was black, with two chrome smokestacks, curved like bull's horns, and a grill decked out in fangs.

But it was fuchsia.

I didn't know 18-wheelers came in fuchsia.

It was bright, the color of strawberry bubblegum, and glossy like nail polish.

We were in our late twenties, and so poor we couldn't keep the utilities on. We lived in a 125-year-old Victorian we'd inherited, or been left with, or, as it felt when the \$600 utility bill arrived, were crushed beneath.

We were in our late twenties, both raised in extreme religion, Jehovah's Witness and Pentecostal-Charismatic respectively, taught well how to sublimate worldly desire and please God, live for Armageddon or the Rapture, and no clue how to live inside the real world.

We were in our late twenties and Aly's small carpet cleaning business, also inherited, had taken off during the summer, and nosedived during the winter, extinguished entirely after the cleaning equipment in the van froze and he didn't know how to fix it, and we couldn't afford repairs. He'd scrambled to find work, while I hung on to the fast-receding hope of finishing my teaching degree, while assistant teaching in a special ed elementary school classroom.

We were in our late twenties and our parents were gone, taken by death, or by mental illness so incapacitating they could barely function as humans, much less parents. After intense questioning, and a grueling soul search, we'd left our religions. We felt free and yet, no longer had a faith community to reach out to for help.

When the first snowstorm arrived, and we couldn't afford to heat the falling apart Victorian, our utilities were shut off. I didn't know toilet water could freeze, or olive oil, my breath taken by the gleaming golden statuette encased in a glass jar. In the mornings I leapt from bed, a frenzy of cold, teeth chattering, bundling into a

winter coat to get ready for work, fogging up the mirror with my smoky breath, hands shaking so my eyeliner was all over the place, and I was ashamed. My coworkers went out to lunch and I stayed behind, claiming I'd brought mine. I didn't have a lunch. Famished, I once poured Ranch dressing from the workplace fridge straight into my mouth. I was ashamed.

At home, Aly and I stared down one bag of microwave popcorn, fallen over, all that was left in our cupboard besides an antique cobweb. We headed out, propping each other up along the icy sidewalk, and asked permission to use the microwave at the convenience store. We shared the last bag of popcorn for dinner, fingers greedy, warm with butter, and wondered what to do next. Huddled beneath blankets, we shivered in the dark and cold, staring out cracked windowpanes into another round of fast-falling snow, trying to figure out how to make it another day in the world.

The next morning, the teacher I assisted chastised me for being late.

She had no idea about the crumbling Victorian, the failed business, no family, no utilities, the golden olive oil statuette, the winter coat in the mornings, the last bag of microwave popcorn, and not a single dingy penny left in the couch cushions. She chastised me and I broke down, weeping into my hands. She looked at me with wide eyes, a little scared. I was ashamed.

This to say, neither of us cared that our first truck was fuschia. For us, it was nothing short of a gorgeous palace on eighteen wheels. It had a fridge and a microwave. It had bunk beds! An enormous steering wheel fit for Paul Bunyan. And an air horn. Best of all, most decadent, melting my heart with love and gratitude...it had heat.

A month into the trucking life, and I learned:

Pigs shriek like demons in the trucks parked at Gwaltney Hotdog Factory in Smithfield, Virginia. The sound, and the smell, will keep you awake at night. Don't go out, don't try picking your way through the darkness to find a restroom. Do *not* go out. Pee in a cup. Otherwise, you might trip over the horror of an empty pig skin, laying there, deflated like an unzipped purse. Trucks pulling out of Gwaltney sometimes leak, slim red waterfalls jewelling the pavement. You will

wince, turn away. One night at Gwaltney will teach you more about the real world, its barbarism, than all your years in college.

There's nothing, no magic in the world to rival Highway 71 through Colorado. Nothing to compare to the quiet elation of traveling alongside a rocky mountain stream mile after mile, watching it glint and glimmer in morning light, dazzle playful in the afternoon, then simmer in sunset, and at last, the full moon, a luminous wavy reflection, held gently in that ribbon of silver. You forget the road. That stream carries you. You can almost forget how far you are from a home that's stopped being home. You can almost forget your parents, dead or estranged. Forget how there's no one out there, in that big map somewhere, worrying about the two of you driving that big truck god knows where. No one out there, lovingly tracking your journey across the map, praying for you at the witching hour, 4 am to sunrise, praying your head stays up and your wheels stay steady. Your heart will splinter, when at last you must part ways with the faithful water. You'll blink back tears, flicking that turn signal, taking that exit, gazing in the rearview mirror. You didn't know a mountain stream could become beloved, a fellow vagabond, a friend.

**B**eware the shower rooms at truck stops. Much as you crave your *own* space, your *own* damn shower, at the Love's outside Nashville after an all-nighter. Nothing like being lost in an eighteen-wheeler, finding yourself on a road forbidden to trucks over a certain weight, running over a poor befuddled possum, before finally making it back onto the highway just in time for a weigh station that tickets you for being over, and you want to lose it, yell, *it's ice cream, dammit! We're bringing you people ice cream!* Nothing like that stress building in the cab, so flammable you should have the hazard tags out, finally exploding in egregious blaming, name-calling. At least, in the fiery heat of the brawl, the miles fly past. Now all you want is to be alone with your numb, weary heart and aching knees. Your baboon legs, and what you thought at first gasp was a beard, but is actually grease, and an accretion of sweat. But beware the shower rooms at truck stops. Even when you've locked the door and checked it once, twice, three times, pulling and twisting, just to be sure. You can't *ever* be sure. You didn't factor in the cleaning crew. Trust me, you didn't even think about the



janitor's key ring, jangling with keys to every shower room, and the possibility of grave oversight. Your all-nighter sweat pants will be puddled around your ankles when the door swings open and swiveling in your undies, you will scream, he will scream, and truckers will bound from shower rooms, including your husband, wrapped up in a towel, and there will be an overwhelming flurry of apologies as you gather up your clothes and duffel bag and run, fast as your baboon legs will go, back to the truck, shaking, swearing, pummeling the Paul Bunyan wheel with your fist. You hate this life. You *hate* it.

Your first paycheck is deposited and you will always remember. After months of flinching against the computer-automated voice, whom you call Ms. Bank of America, informing you with what you swear is a small cluck of scorn, "Your balance is negative..." You listen to her tell you a new balance, an honest to God number, a number like nothing you've ever seen, or dreamed. You call again and again, just to hear her say that number. You and your husband trade the phone back and forth, listening, shaking your heads, laughing. The last time you listen, you're headed deep into rural Georgia, pine tree perfume thick inside the truck, and Ms. Bank of America's voice breaks up, then fades. You know why. It's because she knows how much this means to you. She knows better than anyone how far you've both traveled. You kiss your phone. You *kiss* it.

You might have to climb out at six in the morning in downtown Erie, PA, to midwife the truck through that tiny bridge. What is known, in industry lingo, as a *truck-eating* bridge. The bridge sign says 13' 4" and your truck is 13' 6". But this is the only route to the orchard where you are scheduled to pick up a load of apples in exactly twenty minutes. So, you hop out into the chill, stand on the side of the road and wave the truck forward, inch by agonizing inch, while early morning commuters crawl by. Their eyes pop at the eighteen-wheeler that's about to get its top scraped off like icing, and the wild-haired girl in the Wonder Woman pajamas whose fault it will be. Well, you are giving the good people of Erie a story to start their day. And that's better than coffee.

At three a.m. don't expect to sleep. Instead you'll pull a trailer, packed to the gills with twenty tons of beer, up an endless

mountainside in West Virginia, your truck heaving and straining, snorting bull-like, a fuschia bad ass. *Go, girl, go, you got this.* Glued at the hip, literally, you'll develop an intimacy with your truck, talk to her, coach her through these difficulties. You'll gaze into the side-view mirror, check on your lit-up trailer, hazard lights blinking, your new starry sky, the constellation that follows you down every interstate, through the night. You'll remember what it was like to be asleep at three a.m. The circles under your eyes will deepen, engraving into your skin the culmination of a lifestyle, twelve- to sixteen-hour days. Surging down the mountain, the Jake Brake will jolt you with its lioness roar. You'll lick your lips, inhale and exhale, eye the escape routes for runaway trucks, and you'll wonder, dear God you'll wonder, what are other twenty-somethings doing to survive, stay warm and fed, get the debt collectors to stop screaming at them. You'll wonder, the two of you, will you ever figure out this life. How long will it take.

Another thing you'll learn: highways are faster, smoother, safer than backroads by far.

Somewhere in Ohio, we're late to deliver because, yearning for countryside, I talked Aly into taking a back road. I feel bad, and even worse when we get behind an Amish buggy going roughly ten miles per hour. The buggy swerves a little. The horse's hooves kick up clouds of dust.

"Aly! Don't scare them," I screech. We're keeping a respectful distance but still, I can imagine how alarming it must be to have a fuchsia eighteen-wheeler trailing you on your normally peaceful clip-clop home.

Aly slows the truck even more.

The buggy veers, then turns onto a lane leading to a stately gray two-story farmhouse. Giant sunflowers droop in a lush country garden. A clothesline reaches from the house to the side of the big, red barn. Rows of dresses sway, long to short, along with a row of trouser pants, large to little.

Aly slows to a stop, and we wait as Bantam hens scurry, fluffy-headed, across the road. He grimaces, his hands a white-knuckled clench on the wheel. At this rate, we'll be at least an hour late. Walmart is strict about arrival, and punitive. An hour late, we won't get these

frozen pizzas unloaded today. Out here, losing time means losing money. We can't afford that. It's taken us six months to pay off credit cards, past-due bills, and begin to crawl out of debt. Our last paycheck, we finally indulged, treating ourselves to a truck stop buffet. Thick ribs drenched in sauce and whipped mashed potatoes swimming in pools of butter and gravy, hot and gooey macaroni and cheese, warm peach cobbler, heaven, sheer heaven piling up on our plates. In a red vinyl corner booth with the stuffing poking out, we'd scooted in close, our knees pressed together, feasting like royals.

The cracked window panes, the swirl of snow and ruthless cold, one bag of microwave popcorn, we'll never forget. We're still fleeing.

We should've taken the highway.

If we want to get there on time, and be okay, we should *always* take the highway.

It's then that we see them. They've leapt from the buggy. They are running toward us across the big yard. The little girl holds her long dress above her lace-up boots. Her baby brother scrambles beside her, in suspenders, one hand planted atop his wide-brimmed hat. Before we know it, they've scrambled atop the split rail fence. As our engine thunders, they wave at us wildly, and then pull the air. A signal to trucks around the world. One we've been waiting for.

Our very first request.

My seatbelt is off in a flash. Aly and I take turns yanking the air horn. It bellows like a water buffalo across the countryside. The children leap from the fence, laughing and cheering. They are beside themselves. They jump up and down, clapping, then grabbing hands, dancing together beside the sunflowers, in the late golden light.

Clasping the air horn, Aly's hand finds mine, and our fingers twine. It's a pact.

We'll find our way, together.

And for the rest of our lives, we'll choose back roads.

They make you late. They cost you money.

And in return, they give you this.

**I (on the Death of My Wife)**

Paul Rousseau

1. I tread on paper-thin hope.  
She is sick.
2. I behave as though the days are routine.
3. I am in denial.
4. I am an asshole.
5. I hear the coughs and hard breaths, like stones  
cluttering her throat.
6. I slip behind closed doors to confess my fear.
7. I weep in darkened stairwells.
8. I lean on lavatory sinks and stare into mirrors.
9. I am lost.
10. I want to disappear.
11. I hear, "All organs have failed. It's just a matter of  
time."
12. I am regretful.
13. I am helpless.
14. I am alone.
15. I am grieving.
16. I know she is dying.
17. I know her dreams are as far away as forever.
18. I know the thump of her heart will cease.
19. I know the silence will be loud.
20. I know the silence will be death.

## Dandelion Girls

Kate Koenig

Mama scooped my tongue out with a melon baller,  
licked my tears away with the swipe of her worn thumb,  
and told me that tongues were for ladies  
with mouths that grew flowers.  
And my mouth was full of weeds.

She added my tongue to a mixing bowl of skinned knees,  
peeled off from last weekend after I wrestled the neighbor boy,  
who lived in the house that smelled like honeysuckle  
and who rained firefly light into my fists.

Mama warned me enough to mind my mouth,  
pouring soil down my throat 'til I swallowed Midwest sun.  
A lady speaks in perfume whispers  
and blushes sweet cherry cheeks,  
and I was old enough to bloom my garden.

Oh, I cried as she fed my tongue to the hounds.  
They could holler all the words now lost to me,  
and in turn, all the skinned knees I grew were devoured  
until I forgot how it felt to plant my shin against earth.

In the quiet afternoon while Mama was inside,  
I consumed dandelions by the fistful,  
watered my mouth with tears that tasted like echoes  
until my mouth sprouted a golden halo,  
and feasted yellow until my head sprouted florets.

Dandelion girls don't need tongues to spread testimony.  
They carry their stories in the veil of wind,  
voices molting golden bursts to white wisps  
that only know how to spread, to spread, to spread.

Watch me bloom, Mama.  
Watch me bloom.

## Estranged

Mandy Clark

Sometimes I pretend I don't have enough memories to write a book about you. Everything I know wouldn't even fill up a short story. On days I'm very angry, I couldn't even sport a flash piece about you if I tried. That saying, "kill your darlings?" I try not to create them.

I've turned you into a superhero in some early pieces: Narcissist Man. And your only superpower is to squash insects. But then I remember you were almost an entomologist—and even if you tried to pretend you didn't care about insects—I'd know you were lying. Especially the way you crafted your own butterfly nets or showed your only daughter how to swoop swallowtails on the trails into the net to preserve their wings. How to paralyze them by gently pinching the midsection of their bodies. Keeping them beautiful, yet still.

You know that time you embarrassed mom about walnuts in cookies? I wasn't there. She told me you and her and Tim and Cindy were sitting on the back patio and Cindy brought cookies and when she said, "They have walnuts in them." Mom said, "Oh, Mike doesn't like walnuts." But you said, "Of course I do." You ate several and declared they were the best cookies you'd ever had. Even though in thirty years of marriage no one could pay you to touch a walnut.

I googled you last March, a Washington state phone number came up. It wasn't free. I logged on to PayPal and sent \$9.99 to this WhitePages.com website. Now I get notifications about once a month, even though I didn't sign-up for continuous reminders of your absence. You've moved three times in the past six months and you got yourself a speeding ticket down towards Eugene, Oregon this past August. The website tells me I can find much more information if I pay a one-time sum or a monthly fee. But it won't tell me what I want to know. It won't tell me what that is, either.

**a mascu-poem**

Malick Ceesay

Special Editor's Prize

*This play, this body of movement, is a self-exploration of the body of a Black man. In all of the Black man's complexity, agility, and boldness, comes many features that are kept trapped. That being weakness, feeling sorrow/grief, and playing with the femininity that co-exists with the testosterone inside ourselves.*

*This is dedicated to my mother. I love you beyond the universe.*

**a mascu- poem.***an original screenplay*

<b>Created by</b>	Malick Ceesay
<b>Choreography by</b>	Rayna Howard
<b>Sound by</b>	Saberina Calle
<b>Music Score by</b>	Malick Ceesay Jahi Davis

**CHARACTERS**

WAKE

SANE

NEED

SIDE A

SIDE B

**EXTRAS**

DATES

FATHER

YOUNG SANE

CROWN BOY

BULLIES

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*A special thank you to Red Eye Theater, Ambiance Theatre Company, Studio Gradient, and for your gracious support, feedback, and essential resource that*

*played a role in both this writing and performance process. I am forever grateful.*

## ACT I

*Burying the feeling\**

### SCENE I: HORIZON

#### EXT. MAILBOX - EVENING

**Sound: Outside noise**

*There a truck shot of WAKE walking to a mailbox. He reaches the mailbox and pulls out all the loose mail, until he reaches a small packaged item.*

#### WAKE

*(walking with sadness.)* What the...?

WAKE takes all of the mail and examines the package as he leaves out of frame.

#### INT. LIVING/BEDROOM - EVENING

**Sound: Inside noise**

WAKE opens the package. He pulls out a phone and a letter conjoined by a rubber band. WAKE opens the letter. After taking a moment to read, WAKE places the tape inside a player and presses play.



## SIDE A

*(from cassette.)* Son ... I know it seems odd receiving this after all this time. I made a promise with a friend to not send until you turned a certain age. Hopefully they listened, as this was a dying wish... I wasn't there— for you. Wasn't there enough to show you the proper way to be a man. This tape is the answer to all. If you don't think you need it, change your mind. We come from a history of strong Black men ... not no sissies. Ignoring what's on this tape is like removing your manhood—

During this letter, there is a montage of WAKE putting on a durag and taking pills, but hesitant. (INT. BATHROOM). WAKE begins part of the voicemail and then suddenly turns it off. WAKE goes to sleep.

## EXT. LAKE - DAY

**Sound: water washing on a shore.**

**Music: "Calling" (Crescendo into the scene)**

WAKE is woken by the sound of his father's voice echoing the words, "removing your manhood ..."  
WAKE wakes to a body of water in front of him. He wears a mask. He slowly takes it off and dreams of a dance, dreamlike sequence. SANE and NEED join him. In that dream, WAKE is reciting:

**WAKE (voiceover)**

*I wake  
Sleep away my demons  
Quantify the word relax  
and sink into a head of satin  
my breaths beg for change  
but I'm too tired to listen  
crazy... I wake  
each inhale*

*\*breaths*  
*feels like my freedoms*  
*are getting handed back to me*  
*but its fantasy.*

*I fantasize a freedom.*  
*bury a time-capsule called, "feeling"*  
*And put my insincerities deep*  
*Deep*  
*Deep*

*I want to climb out*  
*I prayed air*  
*\*breaths*  
*Where I, be I and nothing else*  
*\*breaths*

### ALL (Voiceover)

*\*calm*  
*where I, be I and nothing else*

SLOW MOTION ON:

There is a shot of SANE coming up from underwater.

BACK TO DANCE:

### WAKE

*yet the systemic is the very thing*  
*keeping me from being ... me.*  
*From being free*  
*I bleed a Black waving goodbye*  
*A boat load leaving on*  
*An ocean of man keeping me*  
*From me ...*  
*I check the horizon for depth,*

*But my mother ...  
Told me a long time ago ...  
That this depth is the step into  
A dreadful learning curve,  
And I didn't listen ...  
I slapped dread in the face  
And said ...*

## SHOT CHANGE TO:

A shot of the sky and clouds moving.

**ALL**

*Give me man.  
Give me man.*

**WAKE**

*a boy is a waste of time.  
A boy takes too long to grow,  
But I know a man is pivotal to mold  
And the waters in the horizon  
Beg for my love ...*

**ALL**

*I walk forward ...  
touch the water ...  
open my arms ...  
fall forward and ...  
\*beep*

The ensemble shakes, studders, and murmurs as though a voice is interrupting their movement.

**SIDE A (voiceover)**

Hello? ... hello? Are you there, son?

*\*beat.*

Yeah ... I can feel you breathing. I get it.

I know she's no longer with us, but  
be strong!

To be a man ...

**WAKE**

*(running to the edge of the water.)*

*is as though the water is concrete.*

*never falling through ...*

*But ...*

*I lay there and wait for*

*my Black to liquefy ...*

*Sleeping away my demons*

*Quantify the word relax*

*and sink into a head of satin*

*my breaths beg for change*

*but I'm too tired to listen.*

*\*mask back on*

**SIDE A**

You wanna be a man? Ha ... well. Here's the first step ...

*\*beat*

Stop being a sissy.

*\*beep*

WAKE is woken by his dreams in the early hours of  
the night.

**Scene II: REFLECTION**

**Music: “No Need Baby, I Got This”**

**INT. COFFEE SHOP**

NEED is sitting, staring into the camera visibly upset.

**NEED**

*(to his date.)* Calm down? Huh ...  
You don't know who you're talkin' too ...

NEED takes a sip of water.

You know what a sissy really is?  
sissies, are people who are dishonest  
with part of themselves.  
And *I am* 100% real ...  
    \*beat  
with 100% of my feelings.  
You know why?  
'Cause I'm a man.  
A real man will tell ya how he feels ...  
No hesitation.

Another sip of water.

Is you confused?  
I'm not ...  
    \*beat  
Is a REAL man, a “sissy?”  
    \*beat. to self.  
Listen, I'm uhh ...

There's a shot of NEED's date, staring at him weird.  
NEED makes a clinching face.

This shot rewinds into a black screen. The music shifts.

**Music: "Second Choice"**

## SIDE A

\*beep

See younigin ... you just gotta ... *ease* a woman into your world. Don't rush. This the second step, son. The wrong story, the wrong body language ... shit ... the wrong breath will end your chances in milliseconds ... *milliseconds* younigin ...

**EXT. Sidewalk** - NEED is walking, prepping for his date. He stops and checks a window with his reflection. In the reflection is NEED with a mask on. As the reflection turns back, all three of the men are together, ready to begin another dance.

If you respectful, polite, looking deep in her eyes, so she knows you there, you'll get her hooked. That's just level one though ... don't think it is easy sailing from there ... this just mean she cares long enough to continue the conversation ...

\*beep

BLACK SCREEN

## INT. COFFEE SHOP/RESTAURANT

NEED is on a date with a black woman. On this date, there is a series of back-and-forth closeup shots between NEED and his date. However, on occasion, each time it returns back to the shot of NEED's date, the woman changes. There's at least three to four different women in this seat with NEED to signify the amount of times he has started, continued, and ended his dates the same way.

**NEED (Voiceover)**

*She sat right there.  
Staring at me ...  
It seems the conversation faded  
Now we only talking with our thoughts.*

*It was a staring contest ...  
I stare at her, she stares at me  
I stare at her, she stares at me  
I stare at her, she stares at me*

*We both stubborn to converse ...  
She sat right there.  
Staring at me ...*

*Sipping her drink ... all careless like ...  
As though her cares are not in this room ...  
Her thoughts on any stressor is insignificant ...  
She mediates in pride ...*

**ALL**

*Greedy for some voice ...  
I ask ...*

**NEED**

*(to the date.) Well ... this is ... hmm ... a nice spot, yeah?  
\*shakes head*

**ALL**

*She stares differently ...  
She won the game.  
I look down in defeat.*

*A headshake ...*

*A ...*

The date smacks her *lips*.

**NEED**

*Her lips bring me closer to what I want, but ...*

**ALL**

*Intensifies the silence.*

**NEED**

*But then ... as though the motion shifts ...*

*She looks at me ...*

*And says ...*

**ALL (speaking as the date)**

*(giggling.) Hmm ...*

**NEED (Voiceover)**

*I've had trouble with ... love.*

**EXT. SIDEWALK/ INT. COFFEE SHOP**

This shot returns to the three men on the sidewalk. They begin a dance. Much like the back-and-forth shots with NEED and his date(s), this sidewalk dance will be added to that back-and-forth, moving from NEED, to his dates, to the sidewalk dance, and returning.

*So troubled, that it feels as though God*

*Says, it's never meant for me ...*

*So troubled, that I be Thinking,*



*But, I be ready at every turn ...  
 Moment I can embrace a heart.  
 Shower in the gift of intimacy  
 Hold hands down the park of requited hugs ...*

*Kisses weaving through the branches  
 As though quarter notes building a harmony  
 A measurement of this faith in us  
 A testament of all the  
 carnations, the chocolate, the cards ...  
 the "cares"*

*I thought this time ...  
 I found that heart,  
 Those quarter notes,  
 The cares that could  
 Baptize a true relationship  
     \*beat*

*between us ...  
 but ... I just had to say that ...  
 "impatient ass" they call me ...  
 that you are magic to me ...*

*You are extraordinary ...  
 Like no one else ...  
 I just ...  
 Love everything about you I say ...*

## **INT. COFFEE SHOP**

### **ALL**

*I think I can be with you forever.  
     \*beat.  
 She says ...  
     \*a record scratches.*

**NEED (as the date)**

*I only known you for a week.*

*Calm down.*

*\*Shakes head*

**NEED**

*(to his date.) Calm down? Huh ...*

*You don't know who you're--*

*(he wants to respond, but is tired of explaining.)*

**SIDE A**

*\*beep.*

*You just gotta ... ease ... ease.*

**EXT. SIDEWALK**

NEED is still looking at his reflection in the window.

**SCENE III: A JUNGLE AHEAD**

**Music: silence.**

**INT. LIVING ROOM – EVENING/NIGHT**

SANE enters the living room. In front of his eyes is his father, sitting on a recliner, watching something on the television. He is deeply distracted, while SANE is deeply in need to open himself up.

**SANE**

*Father ...*

FATHER turns his head slightly, to show his side profile silhouetted in the television lights. In addition, there is a closeup shot of SANE going back and forth.

**SANE (voiceover)**

*If only a conversation  
Separated the feeling ...  
of hesitation.  
potential pain ...  
predicted neglect.*

*If only this conversation ...  
Could separate the negative  
Could bring proudness  
Bring contentment  
To the seed  
That you birthed ...  
Father. If only--*

**SANE**

*(spoken aloud.) Father?*

FATHER turns again. We see more of his face. This time the glare remains.

*Listen, I want you  
To know that--  
\*beep*

**EXT. PARK - DAY**

**Music: "New song" - not created yet.**

There is a shot of a young boy, a younger SANE, hanging upside down from a monkey bar. This a rotating shot, starting as though he is right side up. The rotation happens throughout the voicemail.

**SIDE A**

*Listen boy ... you want to be a man? Second step, you need to show yo confidence. Everybody wanna be real until the real hits you in the jaw with fear itself. Realness does this to see if people hide who they, really, are. Be confident in front of everybody. Whether it's that new girl, yo best friend, boss, me. Yo daddy. Always show you got the confidence to do what you do. NEVER display weakness. If you do ... people will take advantage of you instantly. Instantly! I promise you, at that point, yr strength to them is no longer relevant. They will take and control. Question is: when you gon' push back? Show yourself what you are capable of? How do you challenge the perspective in front of you? Even if it's been there for a long time?*

*\*beep*

In the same rotating shot, at the end of the voicemail, YOUNG SANE turns his head in a direction.

**EXT. GRASS HILLS - DAY**

There is a closeup shot of SANE in a mask, slowly taking it off. The camera zooms out to the three men, again, preparing another dance on some grass hills.

**SANE (voiceover)**

*It was the jungle gym.*

**EXT. PARK - DAY**

Returning to the park, there is a shot of a different young boy, hanging on top of a jungle gym or playground. He fusses with a crown and eventually puts it on. He then, after a moment, looks at YOUNG SANE, hanging from a monkey bar. During this shot, the dialogue below continues.

**SANE (Voiceover)**

*I felt it for the first time  
That feeling ...  
My friends kept telling me  
how they had that feeling  
for a girl*

*Almost a spontaneous  
Jump into doing anything for them ...  
Yeah, I never felt that ...  
At least ...  
Not for a girl, per say.  
Honestly not for anyone ...*

*Until ... well.  
The jungle gym ...*

*There he was  
Upside down  
Much like how grade school felt*

During this sequence (much like the coffee shop/sidewalk scenes) there is a back-and-forth between the PARK and GREEN HILLS where the three men are dancing.

*My heart felt the same.  
But my barrier  
Was girls like boys  
And boys like girls*

*There's never an in-between  
No alternative  
No other option*

**EXT. PARK** – a group of different boys, some bullies, are playing catch until one notices YOUNG SANE on the monkey bar ready to jump down.

*The boys in the field  
Saw it before me  
They saw my intensity for  
A boy, before a girl  
Was even thought of ...*

**EXT. PARK** – YOUNG SANE on the monkey bar jumps down and stares back up at crown boy.

*I tried to lie using my  
Body*

YOUNG SANE tries to walk “like a man.”

**ALL (voiceover)**

*walk with a heavy heel  
shoulders closer to my ears  
chest as though a rope is pulling  
me into a masculinity*

**SANE (voiceover)**

*I've always hated ...*

*Before I could  
Reach the jungle gym  
I felt a hand on my shoulder*

YOUNG SANE tries to approach crown boy, but is stopped by the bullies.

*They turned me around  
And ask ...*

**ALL**

*“You fruity, huh?”*

There is a menacing shot of two to three bullies  
staring down at YOUNG SANE.

**SANE (voiceover)**

*If only a conversation  
Separated the feeling.  
of hesitation.  
potential pain ...  
predicted neglect.*

*I feel it come  
Before it even approaches*

**ALL**

*The beating  
Of feminine out of me.*

**SANE**

*I never understood  
Why I always had  
An issue  
How is it INSANE  
to be this ...?  
Why couldn't I be I and nothing else?*

**ALL**

*I, be I and nothing else ...*

SANE

*But before the  
Jungle gym  
I get taught a lesson*

The bullies, as though the POV is YOUNG SANE, grab toward the camera as though they are grabbing him.

*About my existence  
Who I soon will become  
A dagger to the heart  
Of my father.  
\*sounds of fighting  
A waste of time.*

The bullies, in a similar POV, are punching, kicking, harming YOUNG SANE from the view of the camera looking up at them.

*Yet wasted  
Blood  
Scrapes  
Torn shirt*

*I stare at the jungle gym  
I see it personifies me  
A boy  
In an upside-down world*

There is a shot of YOUNG SANE sitting up from the beating. The rotating shot returns, but in reverse, so that it ends with YOUNG SANE upside down.

*Surrounded by chain and metal  
That represent a masculine frame  
I will soon leave after recess.*



*Every day I come home to myself ...  
But my father won't see  
Until the gym comes home  
In hopes to fill a voided room*

**EXT. LIVING ROOM – EVENING/NIGHT**

**Music: silence again**

Music is cut out. A closeup shot of SANE staring at his father.

**SANE (Voiceover)**

*For my father's son.  
Me.*

*Yet, I--  
(spoken aloud.) Father ...?*

**FATHER**

*BOY! What you want?*

His father stands and steps to him. SANE runs away, out of frame.

**SANE (Voiceover)**

*I--  
I forgot  
How cold jungle gyms are ...*

There's the slam of a door that transitions into a ...

**INTERLUDE: "AHHHHH"**

**Music/Sound: This scene has a crescendo of breathing throughout the entire interlude.**

**EXT. WATERS - DAY**

There is a zoom shot of a body of water, slowly zooming in to show more detail of the waves (most likely from a bridge). As this shot is zooming in, we hear the voicemail return.

**SIDE A**

This is the last thing I'm gonna say before you flip the tape. Another thing you got to learn is reserving your emotions. Releasing too much causes a man to become nothing ... but a shrimp.

**EXT. BEDROOM - MORNING**

WAKE is staring across the room.

**SIDE A**

Save it for when loved ones die. Or when you need that anger, that *drive* to beat the competition. Don't make them about yourself. Emotions lead you to a softer shell.

**EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT**

NEED is sitting by a bus stop, looking both ways of the street.

**SIDE A**

Softer shell smells danger. Mm, hmm. It's a perilous decision. You'd reek a burden that many people would absolutely hate. And worse: what nobody wants anything to do with.

**EXT. PARKING LOT/DRIVEWAY - NIGHT**

SANE is outside of his home, head in his lap.

**SIDE A**

I say this, not to hurt you, I say this because that is a part of growing up. It's a way of life for a Black man. You have to have a hard shell. You need to be tougher so that they never assume you aren't. One of the leaders of the sea, not just one that inhabits it. Not a shrimp, but a whale.

There is a sudden weird cut, a *skip* in the cassette player.

Not a shrimp, but a whale ...

Not a shrimp, but a whale ...

Not a shrimp, but a whale ...

This line is repeated over and over as the breaths have reached a high volume. WAKE doesn't notice as though it is a line in his head and not an error in the tape. It escalates into the three men doing a collective:

**ALL**

AHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!

As the men yell, there is a sudden sound from the tape, almost a mechanical sound, as though a ghost tampered with it. As it happens, you hear:

**SIDE A**

(*a different voice.*) Baby ...

**INT. BEDROOM**

WAKE, feeling confused, he walks to the recording. He takes a moment to wait for a voice, but the tape

cuts off. We see a shot of WAKE flipping the tape and placing it back in.

*Click\**

## **EXT. WATERS**

We zoom away fast from the waters into a black screen. The three men let out a large exhale.

## **ACT II**

*Dig it back up\**

### **SCENE IV: SIDE B**

**Music: “Avenue Eatery”**

SANE is standing by the waters. SANE begins to dive into a spiritual/freeform dance with the mask on from previous sequences. WAKE and NEED are on opposite sides. During this moment, there is a back-and-forth with all of the following:

### **INT. LIVING ROOM (WAKE) - MORNING**

A quick shot of the tape recorder with the new voice. There is a shot of WAKE pressing play, tearing up in the process. As he presses play, you hear:

### **SIDE B**

*(with a soothing mezzo-soprano voice.)* Baby, it’s me. You know who it is. I just want you, first to know, that I love you. Second, I tried to save this before the fragile masculinity that is your father came to give you

false thought ... false *hope*. I listened to it all and was appalled he'd give you this, so I wanted to stop him before.

### **EXT. PARKING LOT/DRIVEWAY (SANE) - NIGHT**

SANE is looking out and hears someone coming from the door behind him. It's his father. They sit together.

#### **SIDE B**

But ... even if you did listen, I'm glad you did. Because you may know every *wrong* way to approach life. At least, before I can get a chance to tell you myself. Baby ... I want you to write this down for me. Promise me you'll keep this with you everywhere you go.

### **INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING**

WAKE grabs a piece a paper (or his phone) and begins to write.

#### **SIDE B**

You do come from a history of strong men. But those men were once boys too. They were once fragile and small and weak. Many grew to men still carrying those same traits, but, that did not make them any less of a man.

### **EXT. OUTSIDE (NEED) - NIGHT**

NEED has gone on an exploration somewhere. At this moment, he is on a bench staring out at water. As this is taking place, there is a car that pulls up behind him. He looks back almost instantly.

#### **SIDE B**

It is okay to be weak. Just teach yourself how to be strong at your pace. No need to prove anything. Next, I'd say, ummm .... Your father was

right, you should take your time with a woman, but—also give her a voice in the same space. Don't make it all about you, otherwise by the end of the first date, she is certain she won't want to explore you as you didn't make time for her.

### **INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING**

WAKE takes a moment to stop and begins to get prepped to go outside. He leaves as SIDE B continues to speak over.

### **SIDE B**

You can be awkward. This is a way of life. We can't ever move it, therefore, embrace it. One more thing is—be unconditionally emotional. For a young man ... at one point a young boy ... you need to release in order to grow, release in order to learn, release in order to *heal*. You are young, but even if you're old, don't rest in the uncertainty of how you *should* feel because masculinity has told you not to.

### **EXT. PARKING LOT/DRIVEWAY - NIGHT**

SANE and his father are talking, it seems as though they have been for a while. Suddenly, SANE's father embraces him and they share that moment. The camera slowly zooms in on them.

### **SIDE B**

Baby, the sea ... *the waters* ... is one large ecosystem in itself. Every species, one way or another, need each other to survive and live the cyclical process that helps every invertebrate grow. Maybe you are a shrimp, but you are also eating a bacterium that could possibly save an entire coral reef army. You just don't know ... but, look at how God can work.

### **EXT. OUTSIDE - DAY**

WAKE is on his way to the waters.

**SIDE B**

I want you do this for me. I want you to walk outside and find ... the waters. Then look into that ecosystem.

**EXT. BENCH/CAR - NIGHT**

NEED looks by the car. It is a previous date; she waves him over. There is a shot of NEED walking toward her; he walks out of frame.

**SIDE B**

Stare real close. And when you get to a moment, you see something interesting ... do you see it yet? Yeah ... isn't it beautiful? You know what makes it beautiful? It's because of imperfection, mixed with confusion, with a lot of things that still need to be figured out.

**EXT. WATERS - MORNING**

WAKE is by the waters. Similar to the one in his dreams. He stares hard and sees ...

**SIDE B**

You know what is in common with this? You. It is enough to say that you are NEEDED. To say you are loved. To say you are a SANE human being. But you must WAKE up to who you are: A Black man in a society that pushes an agenda on you. It's time to be free from that.

*To be a man ...*

*to be a BLACK man ...*

*can feel like ... like ...*

*a weird nightmare.*

*Like yr mind is soiled with antagonism.*

**EXT. PARKING LOT/DRIVEWAY - NIGHT**

SANE leaves inside with his father. As they go inside,  
SANE remains slightly behind and looks around.  
After a moment, he leaves inside as well.

*That the moment we see yr true selves,  
yr true revelation,  
We beat them up before yu get a chance to ...*

*\*breath*

*Breath.  
And smell the fresh water.  
glaze at all that is beautiful in the oxygen.  
Hmmm ...*

**EXT. CAR - NIGHT**

NEED is driving in the passenger. There is a shot of  
his arm flowing out of the window to the wind.

*The Black men yu idolize,  
WE idolize,  
Push so hard to bury the feeling.  
That, it feels like we  
Should be stoned to death  
To ever want that in our lifetimes.*

**EXT. WATERS - MORNING**

There is a shot zooming in on WAKE with his body  
facing the waters. We see a silhouette of his body and  
you can tell he is weeping.

*To ever get a bite of love.  
Feel full from the appetite for flowers.  
Just to say that  
beauty, herself, can love a MAN too.*



There is a quick shot of each of the men's faces, before  
the ending ...

*Can love you.*  
*Yes, you baby.*

BLACK SCREEN.

**END OF FILM.**

## Out of the Mojave

Drew Smith

Inception Contest Finalist

In the emptiness of Pinto Basin I sense the gods. Not the austere jealous gods of the Book. Nor the jolly gluttonous fornicating gods of Olympus. Not even the Piute man-eater Tse'nahaha. I'm talking about the gods that came before. The ones that never speak to humans, never notice us at all. The ones that devour their own children in blind eruptions of rage and lust. The ones that lie mute and formless beneath the sand and rock. Wholly beyond human comprehension, we ignore them in hope that ignorance will save us from a humbling.

I have entered the Basin and Range country of the Mojave Desert, following a route called the Desert Trail. It is not actually a trail, just a set of directions for walking through the deserts of California and Nevada, should one wish to do so. Aside from a few abandoned jeep tracks, the travel is cross-country. It is a full immersion into the desert.

I walked some 50 miles to get here, starting at the Mecca Hills north of the Salton Sea. I intend to walk another hundred miles north to the Marble Mountains and the highway that twists around them. There I will return to society and a world which believes it controls nature.



**PASH** / Christie A. Cruise  
Inception Contest Finalist

**Blood Creek**

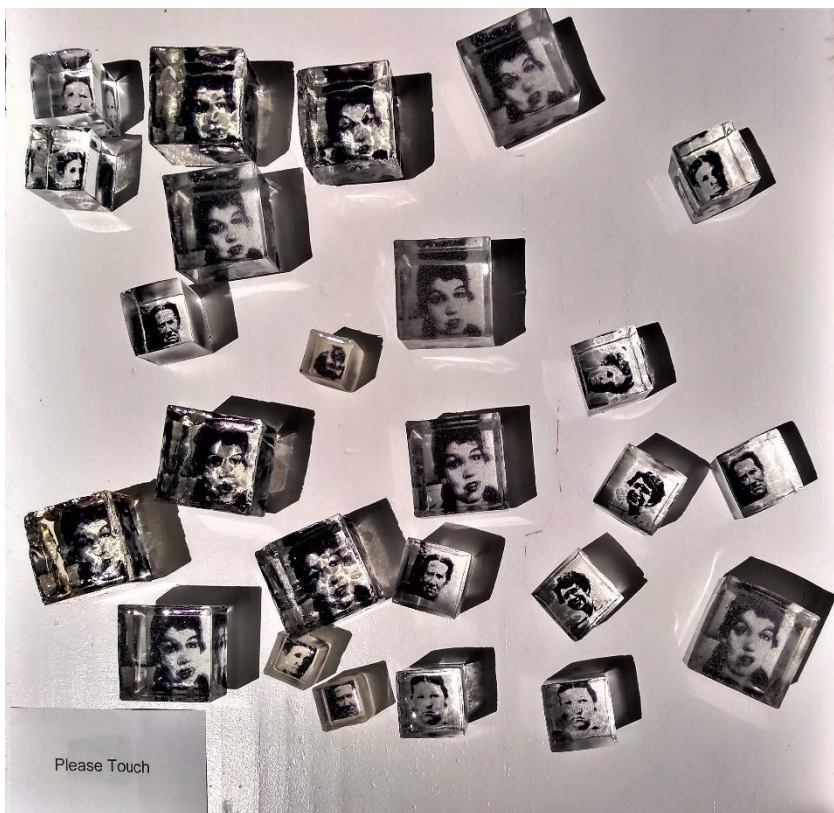
Andy Carpenter

Inception Contest Finalist

Indian Summer fades—Same as us—Even if we ain't ready.

Come late November, the sun walks herself out backwards to wherever she lays low. This land gives way to the early reaches of winter. All around us the water drops. Cricks thin out. What was for most of the year, deep pools, usually too deep to wade, narrow down to resemble the closing eye of some old serpent with scales made of stones and polished threads of exposed minerals. Brittle leaves shuffle along the sediment, catch in runs, and swirl across the top of the water akin to caddisflies. Some springs run unbothered by events occurring outside their purpose.

Late Fall has always been my favorite turn of season—a final appearance of regal autumn corn stalks standing erect—a faithful and contemplative congregation. Knuckled leaves fold like hands clasping just-closed hymnals, waiting for the last soft echoes of a beautiful hymn to fade away. The stalks wait patient as their tough summer limbs get whispery and hollow and bow under the weight of the heavy husks. A hush will settle before the preacher's harsh words warn of what might befall us if we ain't careful in the ways we account for ourselves.



**Matrilineal Cubes / Aylah Ireland**

Inception Contest Finalist

### **Character Fragments**

francxs gufan nan

Inception Contest Finalist

Tell me the textures you were made to forget:

soot            musk   oil        camphor        black ink brush  
a sea    of wet strands            thick bound  
   horsehair waltzing



**Pica Nuttalli—Yellow-Billed Magpie** / Dallas Frederick

Photographer: William Bazargani

Inception Contest Runner-up

## **Our Beloved**

Melisa Casumbal-Salazar

Inception Contest Winner

### The Descendants

The Nanays hadn't yet decided on us, so we were still only perfect in form. Do you remember that time, *kapatid?* The time before body?

It was here, right here, by the water. This is where it all went down.

You don't remember, do you?

Listen, when the Nanays tell the wedding story, it's all *ube* and ocean and ancestors. It's messy as fuck, so you have to pay attention.

But if anyone asks, you didn't hear it from me. I'm no *tsismosa*.





**Oumuamua** / Marieken Cochijs  
Culmination Contest Finalist

**Lacquer**

A. J. Bermudez

Culmination Contest Finalist

When the bottle of polish spills, a lagoon of Peach Side Babe No. 909 on hardwood, it is not only the shade of her toes but now the soles of her feet, carving rivulets in the skin of her heels and the pads beneath the toes, leaving ghosts of pink footprints en route to the kitchen. There, amid a junkyard of ceramics and utensils, beneath a spiral of light from the overhead bulb, she locates a towel. She has not consulted the literature, does not know whether the bar soap in the half shell on the edge of the sink will do the trick. She will clean through the night, not because of the polish but because now, on her knees, she sees it is already a disaster—flecks of plaster and hair, crumbs and dust and detritus of unspecified origin. She will see herself in the mirror, amid the half loaf of bread and the candlesticks from Spain and the cup with the chip and the towels that should really be replaced, the needles and thread and waffle iron and flat iron and from her vantage on the floor, it looks as though she is holding all these things aloft, a caryatid of unwelcome history. She will finish her work, extinguish the bulb, and tread back to the bedroom, slick with error, over a floor that has never been so clean.



**Tuckamore** / Leah Dockrill  
Culmination Contest Finalist

**Wet Pavement**

Jasmine Kapadia

Culmination Contest Finalist

bury me. bury me & be gentle but *tian ah*, bury me bury me bury me.  
here: the angel is pulling at his leash.



**Droplets** / Barbara Ayala Rugg Diehl  
Culmination Contest Runner-up

**Outlaw**

Christina Rauh Fishburne

Culmination Contest Winner

The refrigerator buzzes like the giant bees that terrify the woman's children. Giant bees hold no power over Robin Hood Bunnykins. Something fills with water. Or drains. A hose is involved somewhere near the refrigerator. Birds call to each other in the garden. The clock ticks. The clock face has a wrong Roman numeral. The "four" is incorrect. Robin Hood Bunnykins cannot tell the time without first telling the clock it is wrongly made. He hears *mistake* with every tick. But he makes due. As he must. As the woman does when there is no half and half and she must make it with heavy cream and milk like some sort of peasant.

Robin Hood Bunnykins watches the woman swallow ghosts of composed coffee in her soft ugly chair beneath him. Everything is beneath him. The spirit world is awake at this hour when undisturbed floorboards pop. The monitor in the child's unseen room is silent, becomes more silent the harder anyone listens for him. No books fall from his bed. No words fall from his sleeping mouth. Prince John, his hands on his hips, his tail puffing proud behind him so that it casts a shadow, surveys the shelf with pointless self-importance. Will Scarlet sits stupid and still, his bag of gold coins between his legs. Everyone is behind glass now, poised for assault but with no reason to move. Robin Hood Bunnykins can smell yesterday. Yesterday is still here. Yesterday is the same as today.

## Contributors

**A. J. Bermudez** is an award-winning writer and director based in Los Angeles, California. Her work has been featured at the Yale Center for British Art, the LGBT Toronto Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, and in a number of literary publications, including *McSweeney's*, *The Masters Review*, *Hobart*, *Columbia Journal*, *The Offing*, and more. She is a former boxer and EMT, a recipient of the Diverse Voices Award, and currently serves as Artistic Director of The American Playbook.

After **Andy Carpenter's** high school run-ins with the law, a couple visits to juvie, foster care, rehab, etc., he pursued a career in substance abuse counseling, child protection and suicide prevention. Those work experiences, and the rural and urban places he invested himself in, left lasting impressions about the hardships and triumphs of the human experience. He sustains a deep love for the land and people he met along the way. Andy is a member of the Atlanta Writers Club, the Columbus Writers Guild, facilitator of the Strong Land Writers Group, and has a website, [strongland.live](http://strongland.live).

In 2019, **Melisa Casumbal-Salazar** resigned an academic appointment as an assistant professor of politics to enter the writing MFA program at the University of California San Diego. She is the daughter of post-1965 Philippine migrants, and has been active in Filipinx and queer people of color community arts and organizing since the 1980s.

**Malick Ceesay** is a playwright and music producer from the Twin Cities. His play, *Waiting in Vain*, was workshopped and produced at Augsburg University with Ambiance Theatre Company. He was a finalist for the Many Voices Mentorship through the Playwrights' Center (Minneapolis, MN) in 2018. His work has been featured in the digital anthology *Black MN Voices* (published in 2020), and he has written for The Plugged App. He currently resides in Los Angeles where he is pursuing his MFA in Playwriting at UCLA as a Graduate Opportunities Fellow. Synopses and samples of his plays can be viewed on New Play Exchange.

**Mandy Clark** graduated in 2012 from Pacific Lutheran University with an MFA in Creative Writing. Her fiction, nonfiction, flash fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Whitefish Review Literary Journal*, *RWW Soundings*, *100 Word Story*, *High Shelf Press*, and *Third Point Press*, and are forthcoming in *Sad Girls Club*. She lives in Corvallis, Oregon, and loves pizza and rain in no particular order.

**Marieken Cochijs** is a Dutch-born artist whose meditative and intuitive work often explores growth forms, movement of light and wind, root

systems, and animal architecture. In 2017 Cochius completed a public sculpture commission for the Village of Wappingers Falls, NY with a grant from the Hudson River Foundation. She is a 2020 recipient of a Foundation for Contemporary Arts (FCA), as well as others. Cochius' work has been exhibited in numerous national and international galleries and institutions. Her work was recently featured in *Willard and Maple Magazine*, *Sunspot*, *Columbia Journal*, *Superstition Review*, *High Shelf Press*, *Tule Review 2020*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *Art for a New Earth*, *DeLuge Journal*, *Alluvian Environmental Journal*, and *Raw Art Review*.

**Christie A. Cruise**, PhD is an author, educator, and social justice advocate with a passion for empowering Black girls and women to speak their truths boldly and unapologetically. In January 2019, Dr. Cruise released her first book of prose and poetry, *It Don't Hurt Now: My Journey of Self-Love & Self-Acceptance*. She has contributed to blogs for the Black Mental Wellness Corporation and The Healing Collective Global. In February 2020, her thoughts on colorism were published in the inaugural *Gumbo Magazine Black Edition*. Dr. Cruise writes a monthly blog that discusses a variety of issues and includes some of her self-portrait photographs.

**Leah Dockrill** has been a visual artist for over thirty years. She has exhibited her work in Canada and the US, and has earned many awards. Her art has been published in art and literature journals including *Sunspot* (2019), *Split Rock Review*, *Unlimited Literature*, *Mud Season Review*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, *The Scriblerus*, *Glassworks*, *Marvellous Art*, *ArtAscent*, and *Beyond Words*. Leah is a featured artist on Camelback Gallery's roster. Leah is represented by Tag Art Gallery, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, and nowords Gallery, Cambridge, Ontario. She is an elected member of the Society of Canadian Artists and the Colour and Form Society, (Canada).

**Christina Rauh Fishburne** has an MFA from the University of Alabama and is at work on her third novel. Find her at [www.christinarauhfishburne.com](http://www.christinarauhfishburne.com).

**Dallas Frederick** studied Visual Arts at a small liberal arts school in the Pacific Northwest and has shown in various exhibitions and group shows. The sculpture in this edition is a statement on how global warming will negatively impact the habitat of endemic species. He hopes this work provides the space for further dialogue on climate change, its causes or solutions, and its impact on our environment and people (particularly for communities of color). Find him on Instagram: [@dallasgriffinfrederick](https://www.instagram.com/dallasgriffinfrederick).

**Summer Hammond** has traversed every state in the continental USA in a fuchsia eighteen-wheeler. This is her go-to "surprising and unusual" fact. She and her husband Aly earned bachelor's degrees online while long-haul



trucking. Summer went on to teach ninth-grade reading in Austin, TX. Her most recent back-road adventure was moving cross country with Aly and achieving her MFA in Fiction from the University of North Carolina Wilmington at the tender age of forty.

In a past century, **Heikki Huotari** attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. He's a retired math professor and has published poems in numerous literary journals, including *Crazyhorse*, *Pleiades*, and the *American Journal of Poetry*, and in three collections. A fourth collection is forthcoming.

**Aylah Ireland** is a conceptual artist, photographer, and curator. She received her MFA from the University of Maine in 2020 and a BA in Art from UMA in 2017. Aylah was awarded the 2020-2021 Dick Higgins Fellowship to aid in her Ph.D. research. She has received several intermedia grants from the University of Maine, and curated the UMA Alumni Art Exhibition in 2019 at the Harlow Gallery in Hallowell, Maine. Aylah has exhibited in solo shows and group art shows throughout central Maine and has been a guest speaker and artist mentor at UMA.

**Brian L. Jacobs** resides with his husband in California, has been teaching English thirty years, and is working on his PhD. Brian was the assistant to Poet Allen Ginsberg while earning his MFA. During that time he walked halfway around the world while on a peace pilgrimage. Brian is also a three-time Fulbright Scholar, a NEH grant recipient, and renewed poet.

**Jasmine Kapadia** is an Asian-American teen from the Bay Area. She has work featured or forthcoming in *Same Faces*, *The Daphne Review*, *Malala Fund's Assembly*, *Cathartic Youth Lit*, *Potted Purple Mag*, and *The Rising Phoenix Review*, among others. Find her on Instagram: [@jazzymoos](https://www.instagram.com/@jazzymoos).

**Kate Koenig** is a queer writer and photographer living in Houston, TX. She is a current Creative Writing MFA candidate at The New School and earned her BA in English and History at the University of Pittsburgh. Her work has previously been published in *Gulf Stream Literary Magazine*, *Three Rivers Review*, *La Picciolletta Barca*, and *Vita Brevis Press*. On most days, you can find her watching dog videos online when she's supposed to be writing. Find her on Twitter here: [twitter.com/KateK\\_Writing](https://twitter.com/KateK_Writing).

**Tracy Mann** is a contributor to the John F. Kennedy, Jr. anthology *250 Ways to Make America Better*. She has written lyrics for Grammy Award-winning albums by the Manhattan Transfer and Sarah Vaughan, and has been a scriptwriter for the children's television series *My Little Pony*. Her writing has

appeared in *Adelaide Magazine*, *Earth Island*, and the *Sarah Lawrence Writing Institute Journal*. She is currently at work on a memoir about Brazil.

**francxs gufan nan** is thirty and an emerging poet currently living in Sunnyvale, CA. Recently, Ada Limón selected their *balding haibun* as the winner of the inaugural Pigeon Pages NYC 2020 Poetry Contest. They also won second place in Artblog's 2019 Music Writing Challenge. Their favorite of their five tattoos is a red topographic map of a mountain across their left acromion, or shoulder top.

**Sarah O. Oso** is a Nigerian-American writer, poet, and storyteller. A first-generation immigrant and proud Atlanta young person, she commits to honoring the human experience through highlighting the importance of spoken and written expression. Numerous local readings and art events, including the annual AJC Decatur Book Festival, Poetry at Tech, and 2019 Agnes Scott Writers' Festival have featured Oso's work, and her poetry has been Pushcart Prize nominated. Currently her work is appearing in *New Ohio Review*, *Rigorous*, and *Helen Literary Magazine*, among others.

**Claudia Putnam** has prose in *Confrontation*, *phoebe*, *Cimarron Review*, and elsewhere. She has received residency support from Phillips Exeter Academy, Kimmel Harding Nelson, and Ragdale. Her poems appear in dozens of journals, including *Rattle*, *Spillway*, *Literary Accents*, *Tar River*, and *Poetry East*. She lives in Western Colorado, where she is a craniosacral therapist. More info: [claudiaputnam.com](http://claudiaputnam.com).

Australian by birth and Montenegrin origin, **Pavle Radonic's** eight years of living in southeast Asia provided unexpected stimulus. Previous work has appeared in a range of literary journals and magazines, including *Ambit*, *Panoply*, *Citron Review*, *The Blue Nib*, *Ginosko*, and *New World Writing*.

**Lisa Rigge** has been involved with photography since the early 1980s. Her schooling includes two years at the MIT B & W Photography Lab in Cambridge, MA, courses at Chabot Community College in Hayward, CA, and workshops through the University of California, Santa Cruz and Santa Fe Photographic Workshops, New Mexico. She has studied with many nationally known photographers, including Kate Jordahl, Al Weber, Holly Roberts, Kathleen Carr, Mark Citret, and Debra Fleming Caffrey.

**Paul Rousseau** is a semiretired physician and writer published or forthcoming in *The Healing Muse*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Intima*, *The Human Touch*, *Please See Me*, *Months To Years*, *Sleet*, *The Examined Life*, *Burningword*, *Cleaning Up Glitter*, *The Centifictionist*, *Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Tendon*, and others. Lover of dogs.

Originally from Nevada, BARD (**Barbara Ayala Rugg Diehl**) currently works and lives in Massachusetts. She brings her diverse backgrounds into her art subject matter and processes. She received her BA in Theater and English from Brandeis University and her MA in Sustainable International Development from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management. Her art has been featured in solo and group exhibits in seven states. BARD most recently completed a residency with the Cordial Eye Gallery, exploring how joy is formed and shaped by the senses.

**Mary Senter** writes in a cabin in the woods on the shores of Puget Sound. She earned certificates in literary fiction writing from the University of Washington and an MA in strategic communication from WSU. Her work can be found in *Ponder Review*, *Cleaver*, *SHARK REEF*, and elsewhere. She is the graphic designer for *Crab Creek Review*. Visit her at [www.marysenter.com](http://www.marysenter.com).

**Dave Sims** makes art and music in the old mountains of Pennsylvania. His traditional and digital paintings and comix appear in dozens of tangible and virtual publications and exhibits, while his totem carvings continue to catch the eyes of many strangers and his songs still leave listeners shaking their heads in disbelief. Experience more at [www.tincansims.com](http://www.tincansims.com).

**Drew Smith** is a PhD molecular biologist and long-distance hiker. As a scientist, he developed first-in-class rapid tests for diagnosing infectious diseases. As a hiker, he completed the Colorado Trail, the Arizona Trail, and most of the Pacific Crest Trail. He has been published in *Aeon*, *Undark*, *New Scientist*, *Trail Groove* and *BackpackingLight*.

**Lyndsey Kelly Weiner** is a graduate of Stonecoast MFA and teaches writing at Syracuse University. She blogs at [haikuveg.com](http://haikuveg.com).

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