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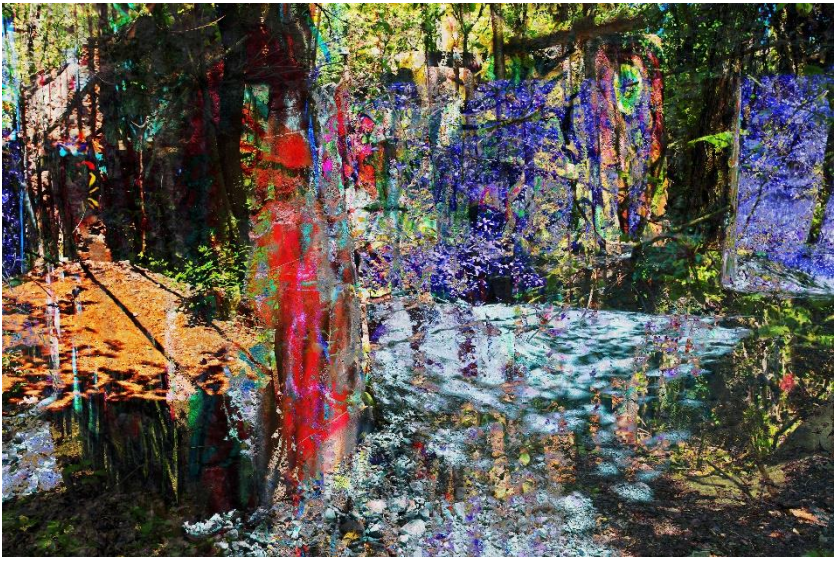

Changing the World
Through Words and Art

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Hair

Candice Kelsey

I like the moments when my hair is almost dry / wading away from damp / the lingering between private / & public self / between familiar, naked, wet / a body / & unfamiliar, clothed, dry / a shape entering the world / like a yawn / or the evidence of birth / each of us once a newborn swathed in womb-remnants / wet / no stopping the nurse from toweling our head. / Why are we so quick to rid ourselves of life / of the signs of struggle / that first quest for light / to find breath's rhythm? / Today the sun dries my hair / doing what it does / every day / we rarely notice how it keeps us / in its bounty / while pushing us into the day / dry & proper / pretending we are ready to enter this world / until we find reason to wash again— / I like the moments between past and present / this chrysalis mind / between water & earth / where Time loses power to the baptismal / amniotic / heavy rain / sweat / like the pulse of a dishwasher / the sound of me not on my phone / the skip in my breath as I see a fox by the garden, just waiting to be a poem / & I remember Roland Barthes once said The author enters into his own death, writing begins. / We live but we don't / sometimes we can't. / Like my student's father / who suffered post-COVID psychosis which drove him to Clarks Hill Lake / where he left a note / & tied a car battery to his chest / I imagine him wading out, half wet for a moment / —his hair / I can't stop thinking of it.

Activation of a Sleeper Cell Poet

Karen Poppy

If I tell the true story of how I came back to writing, no one would believe me. So trauma tells me, whispering, *You will never be believed.*

My writing pushes back against trauma, against doubts. It also celebrates its own reawakening after almost twenty years of creative silence. My writing tells me, and others: you are not alone.

For this, I give thanks to generous writers who continue to inspire me through their bravery and nurture my spirit. I have also thanked the very people who traumatized me, which must have perplexed them. Doing so also perplexed me and still does. Why should I thank them?

They did wrong, and I reacted as a hunted animal, running fast on the course of my own adrenaline, words filling pages in simultaneous action of distancing and bringing myself too close. I wrote about that too, in a poem published in my first chapbook, *Crack Open/Emergency*: "We avoid the shards, but/Some cuts are necessary./For we work close/To the pain./Closer than anybody."

In this close interaction with pain, kind human connections saved me. First, though, kind human connections gave me support to distance less from the pain.

Through it all, I wrote and wrote, and I continue to write.

As if pages could create a barrier between me and those who hurt me. As if pages could provide me with understanding of what they did to me and why. As if pages could reconcile us, we who never had a bond other than shared social circles and personal interests. I initially thought that we had the bond of mutual human decency, but given their actions, this expectation proved unfounded.

They, with power and prestige. Their feeling that they could do anything and get away with it. They laughed at me, their temporary quarry.

One day, I may write exactly what happened. It is my story to tell. The other option often holds more sway. To keep writing, as I do, and let them go to their fates. My prediction is, one will be briefly

lionized and the other will become a biographical footnote. Then they will fade into oblivion. By contrast, true poets and poetry are immortal.

The wise voice says, either way, keep writing—and never rely on outcomes.

The Red Sea

Bianca Giglio

i.

there is sea water everywhere

it's in my memories
in my nightmares
it's streaming down the road
carrying flowers with it
and sashes that read *our deepest condolences*

it's carrying her butchered body
out to the ocean
and everyone can see her heart
but no one can see her hands

her hands—the butcher
her body—the lamb
her heart—just another dried field
just another abandoned building

ii.

sorry about the mess

that's what her next of kin told me
when there were boxes everywhere
when they were just trying to find a home
someplace more than temporary
someplace that smelled like them again

as it so happens, that's just what i've been
trying to find a way to tell them all this time
without making them relive everything:

i'm sorry about the mess
i'm sorry the couch was white
i'm sorry we didn't scrub harder
i'm sorry about the blankets, the pillows, the missing remote
i'm sorry if you could still see the stains
the yellow spots where you know blood used to be

really, there's only so much a spray bottle
and a roll of paper towels can do—
this i know theoretically

the enormity of the red sea is too great
and the pain ran deeper than the blood anyway

iii.

mary, mary

sea and rosary

how does your garden grow?

with lampwork beads

and apple seeds

and the graves all in a row

Hartsong

Erin Birdsall

Mam is doing it again: waiting at the kitchen window above the leaky tap, staring down the side of the mountain to the line where the bog kisses the first slender birches of Tully's Wood. She is listening for something I can't hear, untouchable as her own dead mam's crystal.

The chipped blue mug in my hand clinks as I set it down on the counter, and her head jerks. "You're using your sister's mug," she says.

"All the other ones are dirty."

"But it's hers."

"I was making some tea. Don't make a fuss."

"That's your sister's mug, so. Katie's coming home tonight. I can feel it. No reason to treat her things like Father Aloysius already said the words at her grave."

Back it goes, sitting in a circle of dust.

"You've never been much for sense. Even at eighteen years of age. Not a feather of sense in that great odd head," she mutters, and turns toward the window.

With Mam, there are three things I can't do.

The first is use the blue mug.

The second is talk about my Da. When I do that, she pulls at her hair and presses her thumbs into her bottom teeth and doesn't talk to me for days. Once in a while she'll be so upset that she'll forget to go to town to do the shopping, so when I was younger, sometimes the only thing left were the beers in the fridge. That second rule wasn't hard to follow, when breaking it meant I'd starve.

And the third thing I only tried once ten years ago, when I was eight and Katie was ten. Mam chased us round the house and beat us raw with a copy of *Finnegan's Wake* when she caught us. To this day I don't like reading anything longer than two hundred pages. Trying to follow my runaway sister into the wood wasn't worth the bruises.

They never stopped Katie though. That was only the first time my sister disappeared—over the years she'd wander back and forth

from home. She got in a fair bit of trouble with Mam and the local guards for being in and out of school, at least the first few times—before the whole town labeled her a lost cause, before Mam "went away with the fairies" and started having those strange dreams of hers. At first, I hadn't minded Katie leaving. I thought Mam would eventually let me drink out of whatever mug I chose. But no, that's Katie's mug. She'll be home soon. Mam got quiet when Katie was gone. Everything was quiet, then.

I open the cupboard, find a different mug, grab some milk and two bags of Barry's, and put the kettle on. I make two cups, one for me, one for Mam. Out the window, a deer leaps across the bog. We watch as it disappears into shadow.

I am seven. Da says that's the age of wisdom, whatever that means. I am on my Da's knee and his white whiskers scratch my face. He is showing me the picture of the brave warrior Oisín on a snowy horse with Queen Niamh standing beside him with all her pretty golden hair. I wish I had her golden hair instead of plain old brown. I love the Good People. They are all so beautiful and magical and the forests are so thick and green and alive. My Da's voice swells up like the sea, like all the Atlantic is inside his belly.

But then! Oh, my darling! The girth around Embarr's great white breast snapped! he says. And he snaps his fingers right then and his dark eyes pop open wide. I squeal, What happened next?! What happened to Oisín?!

And Da says, I'll tell you! The magic girth fell clear off Embarr, and poor Oisín fell to the ground of the motherland, where all his three hundred years caught up to him in one moment, and he withered up and died right then and there!

My Da crams his eyes tight, crumples onto the rug, making a great boom as he goes, and shivers up into the tiniest ball he can, which isn't very tiny because of his great belly. I jump onto him and he grunts and chuckles and winks at me. You're getting too big, my Norrie, he says, as he takes me in his arms and carries me to my bed.

I ask him if I can be one of the Good People, too? Like Niamh?

Runs in your blood, my girl! On your mother's side, of course, that's where you get all your oddity from, your mam. Don't tell her I said it, though, or she'll beat me, he says, teasing.

I heard that says Mam, laughing and walking into the room with Katie. She's in a good mood. Mam lays Katie down and kisses us both goodnight. I wait until Mam leaves, and then I pull on Da's face, burying my head in his scratchy cheek. His breath smells a little funny—sour.

And I ask him, are those stories real?

He thinks for a moment and says that in the Kingdom they are. Real as God.

Good, I say. I want them to be real. He kisses my head, turns off the light and closes the door. I turn onto my side toward Katie's bed and the window that looks out upon the field in the back of the house. My sheets are soft. I can hear Mam and Da talking soft downstairs, something about the hunt tomorrow morning. This time of year Da wakes up early to go bird-hunting in the wood. Mostly he gets pheasant or duck, sometimes a goose. But he sells the meat to the butcher. Mam likes the extra money, says it means we get something nicer for Christmas. I wish it were Christmas already. I pull my duvet up to my chin and look past Katie, out the window.

The dark of Tully's Wood and the field and the sky are all the same dark, but the mist glitters, glitters like Tír na nÓg, and for a minute Niamh is in that mist and somehow I am Niamh too and we're all made up of the same thing, the same magic. And then a shadow slips across the fog, like one of those silvery little minnows in the river, and my sister becomes very still. Though I can't see her eyes, I know they are watching the shadow run as closely as mine. Normally I'm asleep by now, but Katie likes to stay up late. She's always been that way, up and about at strange hours. Maybe it's because she was born at midnight—they say those people can see the Fair Folk clear as day even when they're in disguise. Katie's pale hair shines, falling like water off her thin shoulders. She rolls over to face me, eyes glinting, and says to me, Nora. We forgot to pray.

I grab a beer out of the fridge. Mam is still staring out the window. Her hands are shaking—they always do unless she's drinking. I take hold of one of them and she doesn't tug away. Remember what you've learned, Nora: if you push too hard, too fast, she'll shatter. Be quiet. Let her come to you. Mam's muttering now, a kettle over heat. I can't make out what she's saying, but I do catch one thing: —*dreams*—

"Dreams, Mam?"

She starts like she didn't know I was there, even though I've been holding her hand a while now. "Strange dreams I've had," she murmurs. "Lots of animals. Gave me a fright."

"What kind of animals?"

"Slippery slidey fish. Ravens, pecking. Those foxes. Red and black and white, witch familiars. And deer, always deer, antlers out to here, out to here … Matthew, he …."

"So Da was there?" I ask, testing my luck.

"No … yes. I don't …." she says, her voice petering out. Her eyes cloud over, harden.

"Was this like the other dreams you used to have?" I ask.

"No. In this one, he was alive."

She pulls away and starts down the hall. I follow her. "Mam," I say, gently as I can, "You can talk to me. Please."

"I can't," she whimpers, pressing her fingers into her mouth and shaking her head. "I can't!" I put my hand on her arm to comfort her—a mistake.

She wrenches her arm away and pushes past me so hard that I hit the wall, beer sloshing out of the bottle and spilling all over my top. I stand there, dripping. My face is hot, tight.

I can tell that Mam knows what she's done by the way her spine caves in as she faces me. At least she knows that I'm there, that I'm real. She won't look at me. "You're the same, you and him," she says flatly, gazing instead at the beer stains on my shirt. "Living in a fairy world. Always making up stories to make everything sound better than it is. You're liars. Both of you. And … and … you both left me here," she moans like a wounded animal, moving toward the staircase. I wipe my hand across my cheek and my mascara comes with it.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Katie was the only one leaving you. Da, well, it wasn't his fault. And I never left you, not once," I say, voice cracking. As she stands in the stairwell, she raises her eyes to meet mine. There's a trace of something there, behind the empty blue—what, anger? Pity? I can't tell.

"God … I loved him. I did, I swear it," she croaks.

I don't know what to say to her, so all I can do is down what's left in the bottle and wonder whether Katie—or I—will ever be home again.

Me and Katie and Mam and old Auntie Maeve and Auntie Margaret and Cousin Terry have seats in the front row pew. It almost feels like those times when we take the drive to Killarney and my Da reads his poems out loud at the pubs and we sit up front. All the same people are here—the old barkeep who tells good stories, the quiet women who sip at their drinks and gossip in the back, the fat men who watch football and scream at the telly. Auntie Margaret says they're scuttered and people in that state shouldn't be in a church for Godsake. I wish we were in the pub. When my Da reads out loud there, Mam always buys me chips and I suck the salt from under my fingernails. Mam once said that us eating chips together and watching Da reading his poems at the pubs under those dusty lights was her kind of church. I want chips right now but they don't serve chips in real church so I ask Auntie Margaret if we can go get chips after this and she says *Fwisht.* Now stop swinging your feet all around like a hooligan and be a big girl, pet.

Mam doesn't say anything at all. She holds Katie's hand and stares ahead. Her eyes are red and swollen. Cousin Terry hands her a hanky. Terry is almost seven years older than me and two times as loud. He leans over to me and his breath smells like mints and stale smoke. He whispers Oi, Nora. Old Auntie Maeve's arse is about the size of California, don't you think? He smiles and it's funny and I know I should laugh because he's trying to make me laugh but I can't somehow. I don't want to be here, and I don't understand why I have to wear my black frock. We normally don't sit so close to the front—

Mam's never liked it here so she likes to sit in the back where no one will notice if she leaves in the middle of Holy Communion. I wish I could spit the wafer out—tastes like paper. Right now I really want chips, more than anything. Salty salty chips. Aunt Margaret gives Terrence the evil eye 'cause he's still leaning and he sits real straight again.

Now Father Aloysius is up at the altar and everyone gets quiet. Katie likes to listen to Father Aloysius. He's very nice in an old way, especially when he came to visit us at home last week. Once he visited school and everyone got to go into the assembly hall and listen to him talk about the Sacred Heart of Jesus and how the church and our school were named after it. There was a picture of Jesus and his heart was glowing and he looked very loving and sorta like my Da but skinnier. Katie sat still as always and I remember Sister Agatha said in front of the class that Katie was the best listener she ever saw. She rang home to tell Mam so, and Mam took us out to the pub that night and got us all chips.

Then Father Aloysius starts to talk about my Da and how he loved God and he loved all glorious green creation and he was a true man of Ireland. And then he starts to say something about how the Lord is mysterious, that it was a shame Matthew Malone had to go as he did, especially with his poor Mary and Katie and Nora left behind. He was a true poet, and we will miss him dearly, but now he is in Heaven, the poor downcast soul, and he has no need for sadness or pain any longer. I liked that part. And then he opens the golden book at the front near the coffin and reads a Psalm out loud that's about hearts and downcast souls and brooks and tears and panting. How could a heart pant? Is that the same as when it beats? Father Aloysius is not explaining anything and now my eyes and hands fidget because I want to know what he's talking about, so I ask Terrence and he says, No idea, he's just telling a story.

And now all I can think of is my Da telling me stories about Oisín and Niamh and reading his poems out loud and the salty chips from the pub that make me so thirsty. My mouth is watering. But this isn't a pub, it's church and they don't have chips. Mam's eyes are tight

and staring at her knees as she holds Katie's hand. She's not listening to Father Aloysius.

But Katie is, and even though her cheeks are wet, she is smiling. And now she's giggling, actually, and loudly, too, so people can hear. She is making a holy show of herself. Old Auntie Maeve crosses herself and Auntie Margaret and Terrence's jaws drop. Father Aloysius stops and stares, but not in a mean way. He looks tired. My cheeks are hot and I slide down a little in my seat. For the first time, I wonder whether Katie is mad. Only mad people laugh out loud at their own father's funeral.

Katie had always been odd. Brilliant, but odd. For example, in her third year, Katie asked Sister Estelle if she could play the cello for the annual Sacred Heart Christmas Charity Night. My heart dropped into my bowels. Charity Night was the biggest event of the school year. There was a performance and an auction and all the money raised went to charity, that year to child cancer patients. I'd wanted Charity Night to be my thing ever since my art teacher, Sister Catherine, had asked me to use my "artistic gifts" to create some paintings to sell at the auction. Which was the first time I'd ever been noticed, for anything, ever, mind you. Katie didn't need Charity Night—I did.

Sister Estelle, who was ever the diplomat but who might have been confused, as per usual, as to who she was speaking to, said yes, pet, why don't you come to auditions in two weeks, Monday, after school in the sanctuary, and I'll decide then. Right then I crossed myself and prayed to God, our Holy Mother, and Saint Cecilia that she was terrible.

But I felt guilty for it. In the confessional the next week, I told Father Aloysius about my sin of covetousness and he told me that coveting was dangerous and look what happened to Cain. But he said the Lord has forgiven thee, and now for your penance, my child, say three Hail Marys. So I did that, and I guess the Hail Marys did their job because instead of covetous, now I felt confused, because I realized something—Katie didn't play cello. At least, not that I'd seen. I don't know why it took so long to occur to me that I'd never heard her play

the thing, not once. Unless she practiced at a friend's house? But no, Katie didn't have any friends. Had Mam secretly paid for lessons? But no, a family like ours couldn't have afforded it. How, where, when did Katie play? I'd heard her humming something around the house, but she was always quiet, and even when I could hear it, the tune was unrecognizable. And that's when it hit me: Katie was about to make an absolute eejit of herself. And though Charity Night might be all mine at the end of it, she'd take me down with her.

By that fateful Monday, word had gotten around school, so much so that at auditions, I knew that at least half of the so-called Charity Night auditionees in the pews fully intended to leave once they'd watched Katie make a fool of herself. I'd tried to make an excuse not to be there, but as Mam never picked us up until six anyway, it was a lost cause. So instead I huddled in the back pew, smudging the pencil in my sketchbook with my sweaty nose, pretending none of it was happening.

Still, that afternoon I heard Sister Estelle call Katie's name, watched her wander up to the red-carpeted chancel to the great cello shining under the blazing sanctuary lights. What will you be playing for us, Sister asked. Oh it's something I've written myself, Katie said. Her answer reverberated down the aisles, which went dead silent. Except that, two pews ahead of me, Sinead Dunn and Charlie Navan giggled, whispered to themselves. Ignoring them—or oblivious?—Katie picked up her bow like it was a magic wand and she was casting some sort of fairy spell and then I knew it was over for me and Charity Night.

The sound that poured forth—it was alive, heavenly, both strange and familiar. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It was as if the cello knew that the whole world was terrible and wonderful at the same time and only Katie would ever be able to understand it enough to conjure its music. Her song came out of nowhere.

But at least I was still better than her at art. Katie couldn't draw to save her life, though of course Mam put up her stuff around the house. Art was the one class Katie failed in school, and publicly, too. Apparently the assignment was to draw something from life, but

when Sister Catherine saw Katie's drawing, she chided her in front of everyone that it clearly didn't follow the assignment. And then for some reason my sister took the paper from the nun's hand, ripped it in half, and threw the pieces at her, then ran out crying. I don't know what exactly she drew but Jenny Grady said it was some sort of giant angel with antlers.

After the art class incident everyone talked about Katie. Their eyes darted back and forth and they got quiet when she walked down the hall, her white-blond hair swishing back and forth. A mad genius, they said. They said she was hysterical, but she never looked it. She always smiled, always laughed, was always so polite to the Sisters, who loved her, except Sister Catherine. She listened. She never did anyone harm, at least not on purpose. Never let any of the rumors touch her. And it was funny, because when she ran off all those times, it was almost like she was more "there" than when she actually was, because for weeks afterward the only name Mam and I'd hear was hers. Poor, mad Katie, born at midnight, run off again into the wood.

I hated her, especially when she left.

But I hated them more for talking about her.

Mam was right: Katie comes bursting in the door right before dinner time. It's the first time I've seen her in weeks. Her longest absence yet.

"Mammy," Katie says, and hugs her—in the embrace, Mam's brittle face softens and her shoulders unwind. And then to me—she grabs my hand and whispers, "I've missed you." Before I can stop myself my mouth wobbles and I smile all the same and say, "I've missed you too."

We set the table together. I do the plates, Mam sets out the silverware (plates break too easily if she drops them), and Katie arranges the glasses for beer and the mugs for when we have tea after. Mam watches out of the corner of her eye as Katie sets down each mug in its place. Purple for Mam, green for me, and blue with the chip in the corner, of course, for herself. Mam smiles, sets the fork and spoon down with careful precision, begins to sing something familiar I can't remember. She has a nice voice when she's lucid, though she gets all

bothered when you tell her so. This is her at her best nowadays, singing in the kitchen, happy at the sight of the three mugs on the table in their right spots … well, three out of four, anyway. Mam bustles over to the stove, stirs something. Thankfully her cooking skills haven't left us quite yet—she always shows off when Katie comes home.

"Are you hungry, Katie dear? I've made a lovely curry, your favorite," Mam says.

"Yes! I could tell as soon as I walked in. All my favorite spices. Smells grand."

Mam smiles. She's a new woman.

It's these times I barely know what to make of her—she's unrecognizable to me. She even bows her head and closes her eyes when Katie prays over the meal. After the Amen she and Katie chitter away about nothing at all—some movie Katie had seen lately? Mam's juiciest tidbits of gossip from Auntie Maeve's latest weekly visit? I try to listen but lose track. It's always baffled me. How do they talk so much about nothing at all, and so little about … everything? Da and I were alike in that way, shite at small talk, far more at ease telling stories than asking questions--

"Nora," Mam hisses.

"Em, sorry?"

"Katie asked you a question. Pay attention."

"I asked, how's school going?" Katie says, blowing on the bite she's about to take.

"Oh, grand, yeah," I say. Since when has she cared how school was going for me?

"That's it?" Mam looks at me hard. Funny how she never has a problem with my brief answers unless her beloved eldest is home.

"I mean, I don't know, it's alright. Classes are fine. I'm getting by," I say, breezily as I can. "Can one of you pass the chips over here, please?"

"Oh come on, tell me more! I know I've been out two years now but I need you to keep me updated! How are your friends?"

"Haven't seen any of them around lately, have we?" Mam adds lightly, sipping at her already-near-empty pint. She's in fair form tonight. I ignore her.

"Well, what have they been up to?" Katie says.

"Talking about you. Amal and Sinead and Charlie, David and Emma, all of them."

It gets deadly quiet for about half a second. We're all sitting there, chewing in the silence. Then Katie laughs, "How pathetic," but she stops when she sees my face.

"Yeah. Well. Leaving Cert's coming up in June, anyway, and then they'll be gone. So. It doesn't matter. Pass the chips, please?"

But Katie can't take a hint. "Leaving Cert. That's right. Have you decided where you're going to school? Where have you applied?"

Christ, not this. Mam turns toward me, lazy and sharpish all at once. By her look I can tell she slipped a little something extra into her beer glass when I wasn't looking. Soon she'll start slurring her words. I try to find the words before Mam has a chance to speak, but she beats me to it.

"Pet," Mam, says to Katie, gripping my shoulders and shaking me a little, like I'm a doll she's showing off to her real daughter. "This is where you need to talk some sense into your sister. The Natch … National College of Art and Design is a fine instish … inshitution. They don't take just anyone--"

"Mam," Katie says, eyes wide. She looks at me and I know she knows she's made a mistake. I focus on the wall behind her head, settle in.

"What?" Mam says, waving her hands about. Her tremor is gone. "She's fine! She's grand. Grand, I mean! I'm only … it's not like she's M-Michelangelo, that's all. It's not a bad thing! I just don't know what they'll want with cartoons? Or what a decent employer will want with them, is all. That's all. That's all. Jesus, what would a wan like you do in a place like Dublin anyhow? Likely make a right tit of yourself. But anyway, anyway, doesn't matter, they won't take you--"

"Mam!" Katie yells. She's pale. "That's enough."

Mam blinks, saying nothing. Her chair screeches as she gets up, pours herself another glass. She totters to the parlor and turns on the telly, where she'll sulk for the rest of the night.

Meanwhile, Katie and I start doing the dishes in silence. I wash, she dries, and out the window the light slips beneath the woods in the valley, from golden to dusty blue. "I'm sorry," she says, after a while. "I didn't know she'd go after you like that--"

"It's fine."

"You know she didn't mean it--"

"She did. But it doesn't matter, anyway." I lower my voice to a whisper. A smile creeps up onto my face, though it feels wrong there. "I already got in."

"Brilliant," Katie's smile lights up her face. "I always knew you'd get in wherever you wanted to go. Your art is class. Always has been. Why haven't you told Mam?"

I stare at her as we switch washing and drying duty.

"You're joking me. You heard her, didn't you?"

Katie frowns and catches my eye. "Don't listen to her. She's not right, in the head I mean. Touched," she murmurs. I laugh, and Katie's eyebrows furrow. "What? Am I wrong?"

"No. I don't know, it's … that's what they said about you at school, when you left. 'Touched.' Just sounds funny, coming from you."

"Right. Well, like you said, you'll be gone to Dublin soon enough, won't you? You'll make new friends. Hopefully ones who don't gossip so much," she says, rolling her eyes.

Plates clatter, slipping heavy in my fingers as I set them in the drying rack, harder than I mean to. I grit my teeth. "I said I got in. I didn't say I was going."

"Of course you're going."

"How can I? You said it yourself! Christ, look at the state of her. Unlike some of us, I can't run off so easily, now, can I?"

Katie's pale cheek flushes slightly. Good.

"You think it's easy for me?" she says. She brushes gentle, soapy circles on a plastic plate like it's bone china, staring hard at her hands, past them. "Maybe you don't remember much. But I do. I remember what Mam was like before, back when she laughed and

talked and told jokes. Before both of them started drinking so much and then Da died and fucked everything up," she says, articulating the F in 'fucked' like it's a gunshot, a wound I can feel.

"That's our own father you're talking about--"

"He was a good man, Norrie, don't get me wrong. I just … after he was gone, things changed." Katie looks over through the kitchen to the parlor, where Mam's watching the telly. "I just couldn't stay. She … broke," she whispers.

As if I didn't know, as if I didn't have to pick up her pieces every single day. "Yes. Well, that's grand for you," I say. Katie's mouth opens, but nothing comes out and she turns back to the sink. The back of my throat feels dry, like there's not enough air in here, so I go to the fridge and grab a beer, and in the silence between us, broken only by the sound of the running tap and my sister's scrubbing, I drain the bottle to the last drop. And then I pour a whiskey. And I down that too. And then another.

"Katie. Tell me. Why do you go to the woods? What are you doing in there?"

"Why do you need to know?

"I'm worried, aren't I? You keep leaving more and more, for longer and longer, and--"

"Well I can't tell you. I'm sorry."

"Why can't you tell me? You don't trust me?"

"It's not time yet."

I don't know what to say to that. I open the window and, together, we look out at the wood for a while, the fog that hides the trees, the trees that hide one another, the black night that hides everything. Katie is silent, and her mouth works, deciding. She pulls me close, whispers. "Look. Someday soon, I'll show you, maybe. Once I know, once I'm sure. I just … I need time. But that's all I can say." Her eyes flicker toward the dark sky outside and stare past it, as if they can see whole galaxies beyond. Touched, indeed.

The deer were there long before we ever were. They came and went, and came and went, like ghosts in the bog. Da always said there was

something about them more human than he expected, so he didn't like to hunt them. One of them, a big stag, he looked at me like he could read the very words on my heart, Mary, he'd told Mam one afternoon that autumn when we were watching telly, I couldn't shoot the beast. And Mam said, You eejit, they're just deer. And he said, God above, I couldn't shoot it. It was white! Mam laughed at that. You're drunk! she said. And then Da started yelling, I'm not, I'm not lying, it was … like an angel! It, it was divine intervention, me leaving it where it stood! Mam snorted. Really, Matthew. Don't be daft, spouting that nonsense around the girls. Nora's only seven, for Godsake. They hear enough fairy tales from you and Father Aloysius combined. Jesus Christ. Put down your drink, she said, rolling her eyes. Da shook his head and covered his face with his hands.

Then Katie piped up about how she was reading her Bible and there was some love song in there about a lady and a deer was there too and Mam said, Katie pet that's ridiculous, now *fwisht*, I'm watching the telly. I giggled because finally know-it-all Katie got in trouble with Mam. Katie pouted.

But Mam was never one for letting a matter lie. She yelled at my Da again later that night and told him to get back out there tomorrow and stop arguing like he always did and find that buck and bring it home with its insides out. So the next night he took his gun and a six-pack of Fosters and into the woods my Da went.

He came out in a body bag.

"You shouldn't have to be the one to take care of Mam," she says from the doorway.

I am lying on my bed in the dark of our shared bedroom, letting the cool, April night air wash over me from the open window. The irony of Katie telling me this, of all people, staggers me into silence. I don't bother to respond. Instead I look out to the bog on the mountainside, the trees beyond, the lake, the bright moon and twinkling sky above it all—like a painting. The same square of earth I've been staring at through glass since before I can remember.

Katie enters, sits cross-legged on her bed, looking at me, backlit silver.

"What about Auntie Maeve? She could help while you're away. Loves being the martyr, that one."

"Oh, and are you going to be the one to ask her?" I snarl. "Because I won't. But be sure to invite me along when you do, because Lord knows I'd love to watch that play out, knowing how highly she thinks of you, her mad woods-pissing truant niece."

Katie stares at me in shock, and then we both dissolve into weak laughter. It feels good to laugh. We lie there, listening to crickets chirping, wind hushing over the heather. I can feel the silence reach its edge, cresting, a wave on a cliff.

"Nora." Katie turns to me again, and all at once I'm brought back to goodnight kisses, forgotten prayers. "All I'm trying to say is … it's not your fault, how Mam is," she says gently. "Or your responsibility. You have to know that. We needed her. But she chose to drink--"

"It's not that simple," I say, voice catching in my throat. I have a mild headache. The whiskey is catching up to me.

"Of course it's not. I know that," she says, after a moment. Her voice sounds heavy, tired. "But what is simple is that you're not the one who can fix her. I hope you know you deserve more. Art school, at the very least." She shifts and the duvet rustles. "I … I may have poked around and found your drawings earlier."

"Illustrations."

"Illustrations, then. They were beautiful."

"Thank you."

"They're of Da's old stories, right?" The wind stills, exhales.

"Oisín and Niamh," I whisper. "Diarmuid and Gráinne. The children of Lír."

Katie nods, looking up at the ceiling. "And Fionn mac Cumhaill, and Sadhbh."

"I don't remember that one. What's it about?"

"It's a good one," she says. "I'll tell you."

And then, there in the dark, the warp and weft of Katie's voice spins tales of the great hunter and dark druids, hazel wands and great

loves, deer women, lost children. I remember Da, and fall asleep already in a dream.

We buried him in the Sacred Heart churchyard, like good Catholics ought. He would have thought it proper. But Mam had other ideas. One early morning a few days after the funeral, she ushered us down the side of the mountain to the edge of the woods, where an old stone lay next to a patch of gorse. Katie and I watched as she pulled a hammer and a chisel out of her bag and began carving into the face of the rock. We must have sat there for hours, watching her as bits of stone chipped away, as dust caked in the sweat on her forearms. I remember the cold, wet air seeping up the ends of my fingers and toes, the gnawing in my empty stomach as the shadows of the trees changed from rust to muddy blue to violet. Katie and I stayed quiet, holding hands. It was nightfall when she finally backed away from it, finally spoke to us. His body might be buried in the churchyard, but his spirit won't rest anywhere save here, she said. Read it, she said. And we did. *Matthew Malone, Man of God, Poet, Dearly Beloved. 1956-1999.* It was an unremarkable, moss-covered stone not nearly big enough for the soul of the man lying under it.

"**N**ora … Nor."

"Hm, hm." I roll over in my bed to face Katie. The clock displays an unholy hour.

"Mam's whimpering in her sleep. Can't you hear?"

Through the wall behind me, I can hear soft, unintelligible whines, murmurs.

"Fine, fine. I'll go."

My head aches from drinking. I step into her room. Mam is thrashing around, her sheets twisted around her legs like poison ivy vines. Moving over to her bedside, I whisper, "Mam. Mam. It's only a dream." But she is still tossing, her neck taut and her body quivering, moaning like a banshee. I touch her shoulder. "Mam. It's me. I'm here." I switch on the light from her bedside table. Too bright. She sits

straight up. I grab hold of her hand as she heaves in and out. "Want to tell me about it?" I say, a little louder. I need her to wake up.

"In the wood," she says, low and prophetical, eyes still shut. She rarely speaks in complete sentences in these moments. Her thumbs press against her teeth. "A ghost—she looks just like him."

"It's okay, Mam. I'm here. There's no ghost."

"He's bound to come for her, out of those woods. Tied in a knot, tied in knot they are, don't go … don't let her go, Katie, my love."

My heart skitters. "Mam. It's me."

She opens her eyes, which meet mine. "Katie. I want Katie."

I stand there, frozen for a moment. "I know, Mam," I say, and with that I leave her, shutting the door.

When I cross the hall back to our room, Katie's duvet is wrinkled and flat. Her pillow still has a dent from her head. She's gone.

I grab my coat and sprint downstairs.

Mam can't chase you with James Joyce now, Nora.

The dishes are dripping in the rack near the sink. After a split second, I grab the blue mug and smash it to the ground, pieces skittering over the ground like insects over a forest floor.

I step outside, and I run.

The air outside is wet and cool. I can smell the heather and the green as my feet squelch clumsily downhill. It's hard to be quiet on earth like this. The silver mist glows, and I remember Niamh and her golden hair and poor Oisín who fell to the ground and aged three hundred years in an instant. My hair glitters with dew, and for a few minutes I am Niamh again for the first time in ten long years. One of the Fair Folk, running through the mist.

At the edge of the wood, I stop for a second to breathe, to catch my bearings. I feel a bit sick, but that's not important now. The house is far, far up the mountain from here. Here are the first silver birches, glowing under the moon, a patch of gorse, a large stone. I'm at my father's grave—the grave with nobody buried under it. It's smaller than I remember it. I haven't been back in so long. I run my hand along

the etched surface of the stone, slick with moss and lichen, darkened with time. The trees rustle.

And then, faintly—a song. I remember it, even all these years later. Even through the trees and the thick of night, it's like the song can see me, guide me. I wind my way through the thin copse of birches and pines into the more ancient thickets, the twisting, outstretched arms of oak and yew, listening.

The dark of the forest envelops me, consumes my figure so that it is merely a shadow among other larger, straighter, older shadows. It's otherworldly here. Tree roots weave through the earth, the coils of sea serpents. Holly bushes prickle my skin as I swipe past them. I can hear the skitterings of creatures in the understory, feel the damp of the forest floor seeping into my shoes as I walk in a half-mile, and another. Though I don't know how long it's been since I started walking—ten minutes? Twenty-five?—I can still hear the music. Everything is still, wild, silent. I follow the song, the song that beckoned Katie, and now beckons me, and probably, in some way, all of us. Closer, and closer. It feels … golden, a golden thread ….

I'm down on the ground. I've stumbled, tripped over a branch. I regret the beer and the whiskey. I swear to Jesus I'll never drink again. My palms and knees sting from scratches. I want to cry out, but I catch it in my throat, because Katie can't know I followed her. And that is her, up ahead … at least, I think. It's hard to tell what's happening. I can make out a clearing, and three figures. One has to be my sister, I think the one on the right. But the other two people are shrouded in fog. Two men. No, wait, one man. The third figure is different from the other two. Yes. It's an animal … a deer. A stag.

But it's enormous, at least six feet tall at the haunch and a rack of at least twelve feet. Bigger than any animal I could imagine, and dazzlingly white. It is spectacular, the most glorious thing I've ever seen. And then it changes—stag to man. No, back to stag again. Somehow I can't tell the difference in the dark. I can't, won't move. My hands are shaking, and I feel sick.

The shadow gets on her knees and inclines her head, almost as if she were kneeling in the pew. Then she raises her hands, palms upward, waits. The other two pull her to her feet. And now they're all

walking together down the clearing, like a bride with one too many grooms. Druids among Neolithic standing stones. Katie's pale hair and teeth are luminescent with laughter. They're singing the sweetest music I ever heard in my whole entire life, better than Katie on the cello, better than any noise on earth or in dreams. The song fills, empties, fills again. It's the stuff of Fair Folk. Or else an angel chorus. I try to speak, to sing, but my voice is gone. I only listen and wish I could join in on this wild hymn. And then, it fades away, deeper and deeper into the forest until they are swallowed up by the mist and the forest is black and blue and silent. A bruise.

The fog is thick and glimmering.

I paw at my eyes and I can't tell what's mist and what's tears. But somehow I know that everything has changed. I'm not going to see Katie again. And now I am terribly, terribly alone, and I feel the knife-twist of my stomach, the gagging hot wretch onto the forest floor, the embrace of the wet earth as my cheek hits the ground, darkness.

The sound of water wakes me just before dawn.

In the green-grey morning light, I stagger to my feet. My head pounds. I take stock.

My hands—red with cold and swollen with scratches. My clothes—earth-stained and damp. I don't know what time it is. Auntie Maeve is supposed to stop by this morning. She'll wonder where I am. Where am I? I can't see our house from here. I'm alone.

No Katie. No anyone. Only questions left.

My throat tastes sour, acrid … I desperately need to wash my mouth out. Right, yes, the water … let's find the water. I can hear a stream bubbling nearby, and about fifteen feet past the clearing, I find it. Looks clean enough. The water grips my hands with its fierce cold as I scrub away dirt and thin traces of dried blood. It stings my palms, numbs them. I scoop it up into my mouth, swish, spit, repeat until I can't taste the acid anymore. And then I begin to splash my face, gasping at its iciness, over and over and over again ….

Until something is opening up in me, something clear and sharp and solid, an answer to a question I don't remember asking, and now the sun is breaking the sky open, and its rays pour down the side of the mountain, through the branches, piercing the green-grey veil like the first sunlight from the beginning of time, illuminating the mist, golden, shimmering, alive.

I'll be home soon enough.

But right now, I have only this holy sanctuary, the trees. The stories, the memories.

These things are mine, and mine alone. And I am theirs.

I walk deeper in, and I don't look back.

How radiant, how fearful to behold

Kate Strong Stadt

To see the glory of the face
of my childhood God

is to blister and pant,
wax wings in ascent.

To land,
a man.

In This World Love

JJ Chen Henderson

In this world, love
is undefinable.
Easier to just say it is
a look.
An hour.
A phone call.
A kidney.
Bone marrow.

In this world, love
is overrated.
She longs
for the song
he hums
each time
he rolls over.

In this world, love
may not even look like
love. How else
do you explain
his habit
of lifting her
as weight?

In this world, love
has no analogy.
But why,
as I break off
a rhizome
of lotus root,
in its many lake-mud-

smeared hollows,
I see the blanks
in my aging mother's
eyes?

In this world, love
comes with
a price. This grief
makes me
doubt
if I should've loved
my father without ever
bargaining.

Negative Capability

Roeethyll Lunn

For me …

I had no idea that writing was a science. I thought that it was a muse. I thought that it was some dark, phantom spirit (an Incubus) that periodically came to me in the night to wake me up and make me submit to it. I usually had to play with him until dawn. If I attempted to go back to bed, he would wake me again. He was in control and not I. I suffered his presence because I was usually satisfied with his words. I somehow had premonitions of his comings. Sometimes, he would hail me, ever so softly, in the day, in something that had filled me with awe. Or sometimes, I would hear him hiss at me through the voices of others. Having him in my life made it difficult for me to get along with others. He was my secret that they wouldn't understand, so I hid him in my daydreams. I'm in love with him. This week, in class, I found that he had a name. His name is Creativity. He is married also and has other children. Her name is Negative Capability. She shadows me during the day.

For Them …

The term "negative capability" was penned by the poet John Keats in his "Letter to George and Thomas Keats." John Keats describes it as being "… the quality (that) formed a man of achievement , especially in literature … (a time) when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts …." Being in this lost condition still couldn't contain creativity. "The artist's sense of beauty," according to Keats, "overcomes every other consideration, or obliterates all consideration."

In other words, he is saying that creativity is an enigma. Some mysterious presence that takes over the behavior of its disciples, rendering them into a state of partial or full-blown insanity.

It is suggested that the artist should glory from a stance of imperfection, indecision, and doubt. He should be aware of his lack and

live with it. He should allow this awareness to ostracize him into a position of an indifferent observer of mankind. The artist is then free of emotional involvement, thereby enabling him to give a true report in his art based on true insight. Negative capability, according to this, is supposedly the byproduct of creativity. Creativity is another matter. Opinions vary as to what causes creativity.

Sigmund Freud suggests that creativity grows out of a composite of all the complexes that the artist receives as a result of his having been mistreated as a child. He couples creativity with neurosis, which in turn is why the artist may be subjected to deviant behavioral patterns.

Carl Jung says in his article "The Poet" that what Freud suggests could not possibly be. Jung says:

> "The personal aspect is a limitation … when a form of 'art' is primarily personal, it deserves to be treated as a neurosis …. What is essential in a work of art is that it should rise far above the realm of the personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as man to the spirit, the 'collective spirit,' and heart of mankind."

Creativity, Jung goes on to suggest, is God sent. God chose the artist to be a "collective man–one who carries and shapes the unconscious, physic of mankind … he is a 'clinician,' healer, teacher and guide." In his "Letter to George and Thomas Keats," John Keats attempts to ridicule his peer for being egotistical, "…seeming not aware that his audience could see that some of the 'Poppycock,' had rubbed off on him."

In conclusion …

The artist is a "clinician," healer, teacher and guide? Umph! I can agree with that. Even when both Jung and Freud agree that, artists, without exception, are "narcissistic … undeveloped persons with infantile and auto erotic traits." I can agree with that … hence Negative Capability. Although art is wearisome, isolating, and sometimes can lead to deviant behavior—like having to settle for just looking out of a window and sacrificing a beautiful day, instead of

going out into it—artists continue to behave as if they have a condition that is equivalent to what drug addicts have called "a monkey on my back" or, in the case of artists, a word on their backs. I can agree with all of the theorists I've mentioned except Freud's. Freud's view is too harsh, in my opinion. I don't believe that all artists suffered from parental mistreatment, just like I don't think a person will necessarily grow up to be a serial killer just because his mother stopped him from eating his own dung. Every view had some merit, but none could actually put a finger on it. No one knows what really creates an artist, but they all agree (and I can agree with them) that an artist has problems.

John Cheeves sums it perfectly for me in his work "Good-bye My Brother." Cheeves describes how it feels to have a family member that just can't quite "fit in" in life. He says, "Oh what can you do with a man like that? … How can you dissuade his eyes in a crowd from seeking out the cheek with acne, the infirmed hand." Umph!

Southampton, New York

1999

My Father Built a Raft

Ron Pullins

My father built a raft.

He built a lot of things. He came back from the war and built a locker plant with rented drawers for freezing food and a slaughterhouse for butchering cattle, hogs. When they tore that old place down, they found its forty years of walls had filled with ice, self-insulated, as igloos are, and quiet.

He dreamed of floating down the local river, a trickle except in flood, flowing from our Flint Hills here in Kansas to the Missouri, then down to New Orleans on the lazy Mississippi.

His raft, barrels soldered into columns and braced by two-by-fours, covered then with plywood that was strong, and added an old motor fueled by gas he had salvaged.

It tired him out, I suppose, those years of slaughtering, cutting throats, the bleeding from the cuts, the creation of bacon, grinding burgers, perhaps the incessant look of hunger on the faces of his customers. This he did in years he spent unknowingly encased in ice, birthing then, I suppose, his long-lingering plan to escape. Down the Mississippi. To New Orleans. With every throat he cut. With every heart extracted.

One summer morning, then, at the local lake, to test the thing, he floats the raft off a makeshift trailer. He stands atop the plywood, then pulls and pulls the motor's rope, and pulls and pulls again, so say they who watch him there, ineffectual effects as his raft drifts out, so say those who happen by, those in support of father's dream, until in the middle of the lake the raft collapses in the center, caves in and takes my father down, who with his motor sinks, and drowns, suicide by dream, as I remember.

The truth is, he didn't drown, of course. The raft collapsed, and he swam ashore, to begin another dream, so I suppose. It was escape that drowned that day, both his and mine. He floats on me on this vast and quiet lake. I will not break under the weight of his regrets.

Another Dream About Death

Ryan Mattern

The water here is all surface,
shallow as this paper.
Its depths drown nothing.

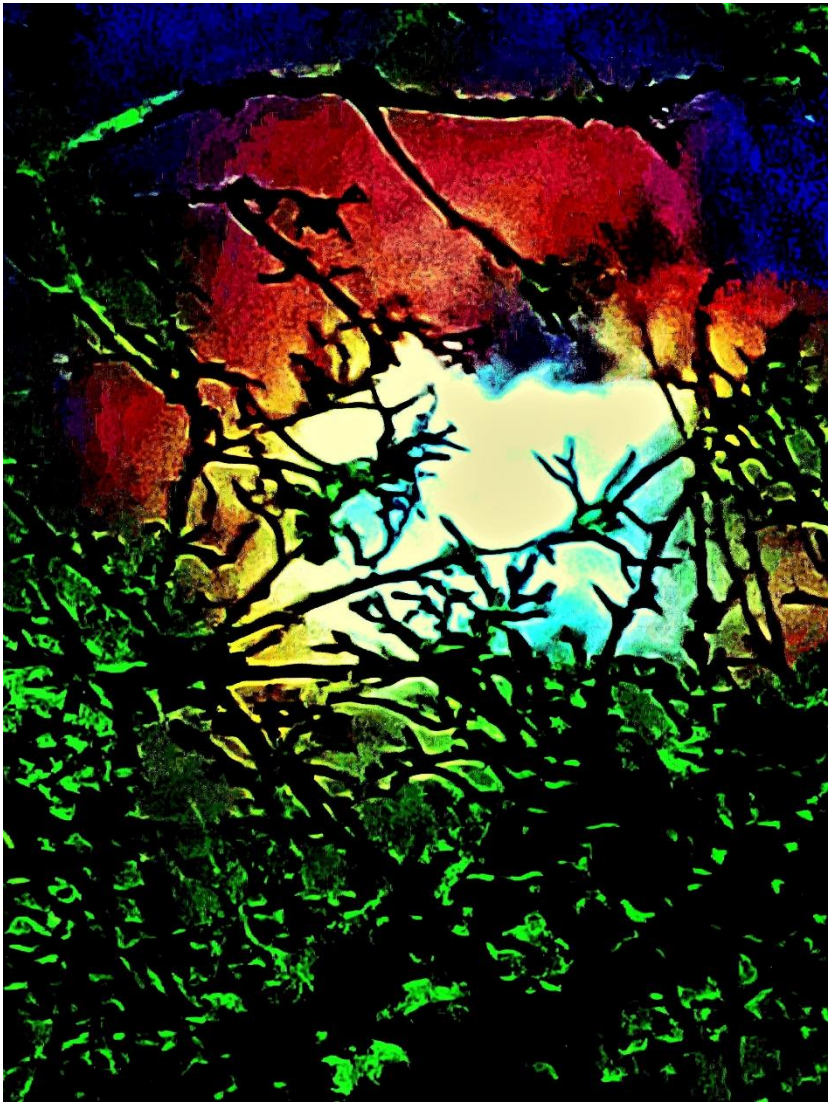
To swim is to long,
to freeze is to wait.

The waves unfurl onto a plyboard
shore. The oblong moon,
furious in new light,
yanks the tide from my feet.

The men hunting abalone
walk bentbacked and aching,
their buckets dragging behind them.

A shorebird circles
the same carve of bay

drawn by string,
its poor watered wings.
I don't know for how long
a thing can be weary.



Hope on the Horizon / Lindsey Morrison Grant

Editor's Prize

Graffiti Reimagined / Linsey Morrison Grant

Pick Me a Color

Travis Stephens

"Help me pick a nail color,"

she said
standing before a display of
lozenges, of glossy oval
plastic tongues &
racks of tiny bottles.
Pick the color of shred,
pick the color of heartbreak,
the exact shade of laughter
in an overheated room.
Not the color of overheard
conversations
with other girlfriends,
of casual embraces &
long goodbyes.
Try the shade of despair
or a reeling sense of shame.
Dab the laugh at own's expense,
the faded shoes gone musty
& too small.
The way a shared sweater fits best,
never jeans, maybe jacket.
Pick a color that says
only me
not Lisa or Lizette, a teacher
the parents or
God forbid, a boy.
Pick me a color of want.

"Pink," I said,
"pink is nice."

The Sound Cicadas Make

Garrett Candrea

There's a simple pleasure in this, childlike and dumb but also comforting, reassuring, how they sound like it says on the box: bang, snap. Sometimes pop. The minutes seem to falter, stagger, to do things such things as minutes are incapable, to ramble, some restless hour in the night when he steps out back to throw bang-snaps off the deck.

He throws them one at a time, pausing between each, thinking, call it contemplating, the little orange sparks flashing against the dark and how it doesn't matter what you call them. He removes another whiz-bang from the pack, all sawdust and cigarette paper, the feel of these between his fingers, and the other times and other places.

He'd once said to a client, Get rid of them.

They hit the driveway below making the light they make and the sound and it is otherwise quiet out here near the edge of town, wind sifting through the pines.

He'd once told the boy, or was it the son, to make a wish.

He's standing barefoot in briefs and wrinkled tee and this is not unusual but something he does when he can't sleep, when he's been roused awake by a dream that has for hours left him lying there in his sweat in the basement pullout, staring where people stare while they wait for their alarm to go off.

Brittle and soft and fine and flimsy. Call it distraction. Call it procrastination. He holds between his fingers one of the whackers, something else they're called by some other sound they make.

He remembers the last time he'd gone up to his son's room, to the door with the splintered dent that'd been punched into the wood among the Ian Lundy quotes scrawled out in black marker. He remembers the empty trash bags in his hand and how he'd gone in there intent on filling them with clothes for the needy but instead sat in his son's computer chair and placed one over his head and used his belt to cinch it shut at his throat. Whop or boom. Call it pathetic. It wasn't until he'd begun to feel faint that he'd realized that wasn't what he'd wanted to do, not like that and not at all, so panicked that his

fingers fumbled with the buckle and he had to tear the bag open at his mouth, gasping for air. When he finally got the belt loose he chucked it across the room. At first he was gasping, then he was crying. Then he began to laugh, the torn bag still over his head. He was thinking of something she would have probably said, something so simple and crass but in that dry tone she liked to use—it had him gasping for air all over again and he felt crazy but at least he was aware of it—*you dumb idiot.*

For thinking that was the answer. For even having considered it. For blaming himself. These were all things his support group had said when he'd told them about what had happened, what he'd tried to do, the faces arranged in a circle and staring at him in soft reproach. It was not his fault, they'd told him. He'd done the best he could, they'd told him, these mothers and fathers sitting in a church basement who had likewise lost a child to overdose. But it was all of it just words, hollow syllables, the same boilerplate phrases they liked to exchange with each other week over week, allowing themselves to be convinced by the stock mantras. They never knew the truth of it, and he hasn't been to a session in nearly six months.

Now, on the deck, in the cool night, he shakes the rest of the whipper-snappers into his hand and chucks them over the rail. It only takes a second: the crackle and glitter of orange light.

He'd once said to the kid, It's different when you're the one doing it.

All this a dull sound somewhere.

Come morning he's sitting in the living room with the TV on while pale colors play wearily on the walls. As in things remote, things separate, aloof. There's less than an hour of sleep behind his eyes and his alarm will go off any minute now, the drowsy light gathered at the edges of the blinds tells him this, reminds him of this, of lazy times lying beside her in slatted shadows, times when they both had the day off and could waste away in easy languor while the city shifted and creaked beyond the window. How young they were then, two years out of college and living happily in a fifth-floor walkup in Queens, cast-iron radiators and a fridge that curdled milk before its expiration date. The good times always get left behind, those dusty mundane moments,

how they used to stare up at the water-stained popcorn ceiling talking about their future by wan streetlamp light.

Sound flares in the TV's speakers, this is laughter, something else, words. Words in cadence or by rote or doesn't matter, detached, how the speakers are the making the sound of two people speaking, with all the words seeming incidental. But it's the repeated phrase that makes him realize what he's watching, pay attention—is all time is all the time—a commercial for batteries adapted from a well-known skit out of *Ian Lundy's Paper Caravan*, and how this would have set her off on a rant, using words like defile or desecrate or look how lazy.

You can be dramatic, too, he says, barely aloud, then turns the TV off before the punchline. He begins to haul himself up but stops, sits there a moment. It's bleary what he sees but it's himself and only himself, his chiaroscuro features in the black screen, and he's smiling—the slight tension he feels at the corners of his mouth is a smile. He's imagining what she might have had to say about this and it makes him laugh but only briefly because there is nothing funny going on here. In truth it would have worried her. She would have stared at him with her lips in a straight line, fill in the blank. She would have tried to make light of the situation. She would have said he was turning completely mental, using an accent he would have and would now only be able to identify as British. But she wouldn't have laughed because it would have deeply worried her, what he'd thought he'd seen—his son's face, could've been.

His phone begins to make the sound of someone strumming a guitar, which is his alarm, which means it's 7:00 a.m., and he heads for the kitchen, still in his briefs and tee.

Laminate flooring, plain white walls. She'd wanted parquet flooring but he didn't and after she died he effaced the color from the accent walls throughout the house, rolling white over the geometric patterns she'd painted freehand in vibrant hues of blue and yellow and it was not something he'd done out of spite but just something to do, some easy mindless task to make those first days go by. That was seventeen years ago but still there are times when he can't do something so simple as heat up a cup of coffee without phasing out of reality for a few moments.

Coming up behind her where she stands at the stove amid smoke and music and crackling grease and how the music sounds like this, like sweat and the taste of it on her neck and her low soft moan in the shape of a smile as he places his hand on the boy taking shape inside her, and she's telling him that she so desperately wants coffee she believes it might be worth the risk, ha ha, and how all this is a dull sound somewhere.

A dull chink as he places an enameled cup of day-old coffee in the microwave, 7:06 so says the numbers in garish green, alone, smile fading from his lips. This is how he remembers her, how she exists, not in the choregraphed moments framed for display on the dining room sideboard but lurking in mundane tasks—how memory can conspire with a grief so abiding that it draws out of from even the most ordinary motions a moment from the cherished past all slurred color and sound and mood.

He shuts the microwave door and sets the timer. He watches the cup spin slowly in the sallow drone.

Years ago he'd said to a client, Get rid of them. He was what they used to call a Senior Streamline Advisor and he had liked that job because it sent him places, gave him a good excuse to be away from home, staying in comped hotel rooms where he could do his parenting remotely.

He still works for Telos Consulting but no longer as a fieldman, something else he was once called, and father and husband. Now he holds the title of Interdepartmental Buffer Analyst and largely sits in a cubicle where the hours are perforated by the mundanities of which they're comprised: meeting invites, email pings, the long trilling of his phone. This is all white noise, and so too the memory.

How the client had been staring at him. They were sitting at a large conference table with eighteen empty chairs and the client stared at him and said, Get rid of them?

Fire your team, he'd told the client. Get rid of them.

They were seated perpendicular to each other with the client at the head of the table, a bulky man with dandruff on his shoulders

and a ruddy face that began to blink at him. It appeared as if he'd never heard those words in that order before and was still piecing together their meaning. He wore a clip-on tie and regarded a spot on the wall as if for further council, a second opinion.

The client had said, Meaning what?

Meaning they're no good. Or they're mediocre. Whatever you want to call it. The issue is not time management or resource management. In fact, from what I've observed, all of that is being handled quite well. Efficiently, is what you want to hear. Your project managers are doing a great job, the best they can with what they have. And that, unfortunately, is the problem, what you don't want to hear. What you need is not an increase in recruitment efforts, but a reworking of the process itself. You need more stringent standards.

In truth the client had been a boutique ad agency, Patina Media, operating out of Buffalo. The bulky man was just who he'd interfaced with. He waited for the bulky man to respond but all the bulky man did was stare down the length of the table, eyes narrowed, as if trying to see something far away.

It's like this, he'd explained to the bulky man. Say I have a can of red paint. And then I go out and get, say, five more cans of the same red paint. And then I empty the contents of all the cans into a vat. The paint doesn't get any brighter, there's simply more of it.

Before he knows it the workday is over and he's standing in the elevator on his way down to the lobby, staring at his reflection in the door. The door is of brushed steel and his reflection is little more than a dull sheen smeared over the metal, but still there's something in its bearing, its demeanor, grim and humorless and somehow angsty. He is alone in here, a figure in a button-down and pair of chinos with a backpack slung from one shoulder. Think of the kid. Think of the kid walking home alone from the bus stop, his schoolbag decorated with pithy Ian Lundy phrases written in Wite-Out. The elevator hums in the shaft, digital numbers tracking the descent. He steps closer to the door but nothing comes into focus. But, then, maybe. Maybe this is what his son might have come to look like.

The door slides open with a simulated chime not unlike the train's, how time lurches, fidgets, with shapes and colors scrolling past,

shapes of homes and trees. It was Queens and then it was Peekskill, in a home with a master bedroom, already making decisions about how they'd raise the child growing inside her. Watching the late sun glint off the Hudson River, he remembers a joke she'd made. Some call it parenting, she'd said. Others call it indoctrination.

On his way home he stops off at the gas station for some more bang-snaps and a tallboy. He's already had one on the train ride back but can go for another. He takes one out from the row of fridges thrumming along the back wall and sets it on the counter. The attendant here knows him by face and calls him My Friend.

"How are you doing, My Friend?"

He doesn't tell him the truth. He removes from a small display rack six, seven, make it ten boxes of whack-pops while a small fan oscillates beside the register, stirring a stink of sweat and coffee grounds.

"You like those lots, My Friend? Pretty Fun, huh, My Friend?"

He nods and smiles but doesn't tell the attendant, whose name is there on a nametag he's never bothered to read, that he used to buy these for his son when his son was just a boy. He doesn't tell him that he and his son used to go out on the driveway in the dusk sometimes to chuck great handfuls of them at the pavement, and how those were about the only times they shared a smile. He doesn't tell the attendant how his son's laugh sounded not only because this would be a strange thing to share, but because he can't. He doesn't remember. Or the sound of his voice. How these memories have become just as estranged, with no sound save the bangs and the snaps and the crackling orange light.

He collects his change and takes the paper bag off the counter and tells the attendant to have a good one. Outside the evening is cool, the last colors failing in the sky and the shadows all gone from here, figures standing at the gas pumps. He's nearly back to his car when he hears something that makes him stop, a hissing sound loud and taut, and he stands there with the paper bag in hand, watching across the lot a woman inflating a bicycle's rear tire at one of the air pumps.

He remembers the first sound his son had ever made. He remembers the sound of the machinery, the frantic beeping and how they pushed him out of the room and carted his wife away down the hall while nurses had to hold him back. He remembers the look on the doctor's face, and he remembers his son's final sound. He remembers the cicadas and the muffled thump in the ceiling and then the steady, lazy drone of the cicadas.

It's his phone that brings him back, vibrating against his thigh, a text message from his father. The limited preview of the message displayed on the screen reads:

Have time . . .

He doesn't bother to read the rest.

Bang:

The father, the man, the father said to the son, "Come here."

The son was sitting on the couch watching cartoons and he looked over at the father but did not move, six years old, feet just touching the floor. The father stood there in the doorway. He had the son's shoes in his hand. Then he didn't. They went tumbling over the floorboards.

"Put them on," he said. "I want to show you something."

He watched the son slip his shoes on and tie them, each in turn, making the loops and knots, realizing he'd never taught him how to do any of that. Then he led him out through the back door and onto the driveway. It was late evening with the sun going down behind the trees, ruddled leaves, smell of chimney smoke drifting on the wind. The son was a gawky kid even for his age, reticent, softspoken, with eyes that never seemed to look but glance. He glanced at the little box the father took out of his jacket pocket.

"You know what these are," the father said. It was a question or it wasn't. It could have been an accusation.

The son stood there. Birds chittered in the trees. The father opened the box and removed the plastic packet that contained little white sacks packed in sawdust. He ripped open the plastic and took out one of the sacks and held it by its twined end. It looked like a small

Hershey's Kiss or maybe a small cherry. The boy glanced at it where it hung between the father's fingers and looked away, the faded pavement, dead weeds in the cracks.

"Bang-snaps," the father said. "You've seen these before. Maybe you haven't."

The boy said, "Pop showed me these."

"Right. 'Course he has." He looked at the boy's shoes. "Your pop," he said, "he used to get me these too, sometimes, when I was a kid. Smoke bombs, sparklers, all that stuff. Used to set off these m80s—blockbusters. Neighbors up and down the block would be calling the cops. He show you any blockbusters?"

The son shook his head.

"You wouldn't like those," the man said. "They aren't like these."

He raised his arm and pitched the snap-it at the ground and the boy flinched at the sound it made. The man saw this and wanted to ridicule the boy, the son, and had to stop himself.

He said, "I thought Pop showed you these."

The son didn't answer.

"He had you throw one of them," the father said.

"He threw it."

"And you didn't like it." There was always something there in his voice, a measure of contempt, no matter the topic of words. You could not call it conversation. You could not say they ever talked to each other or had dialogues. They communicated in the most primitive sense. Yes, no, angry, sad. It would later develop that their frequent arguing would be the closest they'd get to conversation.

The boy stood there looking down at the pavement.

Just the other day the boy had asked him for help with his homework, something. The man had told him to speak up, stop mumbling. He never looked at the boy. The question was about life science, insects, why are cicadas so loud or how do they make the sound they make, something like that. He didn't know the answer. Why the hell should he? The kid was always asking questions like that, why do leaves change color or what happened in such and such battle of such and such war, and he wondered how many times did he have

to tell the kid. He told him that his wife would have known. He only referred to her as his wife now, denying the boy a mother. But it was a lie. She wouldn't have known the answer either. He only said it so the boy would leave the room and he could go on sitting there, watching a commercial for laundry detergent.

He pinched up another popper out of the sawdust and held it out to the son.

"Go on," he said. "It's fun."

The son took it without looking. He stood holding it in the palm of his hand like something broken.

"Go on," the father said again. "Like this." And the boy flinched again and the father watched him. He told the boy those blockbusters would have made him wet himself.

Then he said, "Just try it. It's different when you're the one doing it."

The son closed his hand around the whipper and raised his fist, brought it down. A prick of orange light flashed against the pavement. He glanced at the father. Then he looked at him, smiled. He held out his hand.

He sits in his cubicle watching words unfurl across the screen while his fingers flit over the keys. Nor do the sounds they make seem attached to the action or the sentences to their meaning. *Deadline*, *regret*, these words are vague noises in his mind. The office has a drone to it. The email he's typing is about a deliverable that will be late due to some reason he hasn't figured out yet. He sits reading over what he's so far typed, certain words and phrases, *unfortunately*, *regret to inform*, *unforeseen complications*, means nothing, the boilerplate excuses. He thinks what else he might type but nothing makes sense, and then he realizes he's been hearing something. He stops, listens.

He listens to a hissing sound, pressurized, coming in spurts so loud and stark that the sound itself seems silhouetted by the office quiet. His head is turned away from his monitor now and he's staring at a picture pinned to the gray tackboard wall of his cubicle but doesn't see it. From behind the wall comes a long oscillating hiss, and it's all

he can hear and think and see—that awful time one year ago, slowly ascending the steps to his son's room, calling out his name while cicadas hummed in the afternoon heat.

Now he's standing. He's standing and looking over the tackboard wall into the adjacent cubicle, watching a coworker clean out her keyboard with a can of compressed air, the way she guides the long red straw of the can up and down the rows of keys, ejecting dust and crud and now she stops.

She stops and looks, is looking at him. At first she says nothing. At first she smiles. Then the smile recedes and it's the way her lips move, making shapes that do not seem to match the words, which form an apology or make the sound of one.

He doesn't speak. His jaw feels slack, eyes rimmed red and sunken from another sleepless night of throwing bang-snaps off the deck, of lying in his sweat in the pullout in the wake of a recurring dream.

In this dream he was pushing a mower over the lawn. Last night it was a mower, the night before last it was a snow blower. But his wife, she's always standing in the same spot, doing the same thing: talking to someone in the doorway. He cannot tell who she's talking to or what they're saying. All he can hear is the mower, or the blower. Blowing leaves across the parched lawn. Even last night when in the dream he had turned the mower off all he could hear was the drone of the motor. They were staring at him, or that is how it looked, with their mouths moving, miming out his name, but all he heard was the motor going all the time is all the time.

The office has this drone to it, fluorescents humming their bland light. Her lips shape themselves to the beginning of a word but she says nothing, this coworker, her nervous laugh and smile. There are others nearby but they are not paying attention to them.

He sits finally without a word and finds himself staring at the picture pinned to the tackboard wall. The picture is of his son, after one of his little league games, the yellow jersey, the white pants. He did not take this picture nor can he remember the name of the team. Grass stains, dirt stains, dust. His son is posing in the picture, bat angled over his shoulder, ready to slam one out of the park, he

imagines, likes to imagine. It was his own father who'd taken this picture, who'd practically raised the boy. He'd thought maybe things would get better as his son grew, as he developed a personality and had thoughts that weren't expressed through long grating shrieks. But the older he got the more unbearable it became to be around him, the way his face changed, the latent features becoming apparent. He had her high cheek bones and sharp nose and her sense of humor.

There was the time his son was watching a movie in his room, a show, watching something, British voices and a lot of laughter. He could hear it faintly from the home office and he went out into the hall and stood outside the boy's door, listening, hand gripping the knob. He could tell from the exaggerated speech that it was a *Paper Caravan* skit but he didn't know which. Then he did. He heard the famous line—*is all the time is all the time*—some traveling magician's whacko incantation he'd never understood. But she had loved that skit, loved the actor. She would have loved the quotes scrawled across their son's door, would have taken up a marker herself to add her own favorites. But it had only made him despise the boy even more, how he'd decorated his door with those senseless phrases in some lame attempt to commune with the mother he never knew except from stories, home videos, pictures on the sideboard. Sometimes he caught the boy standing in front of the bathroom mirror, tracing the shape of his nose. In the hallway the father stood there listening, gripping the knob till his knuckles turned white. Then he splintered the wood with his fist and went back into his office while laughter flared behind him.

In his cubicle, his phone begins to ring, a twinkling xylophone riff that strikes up so loudly in the silence it gives him a start. The caller ID says *Dad*. He lets it go to voicemail but his father doesn't leave one. He remembers the text message his father had sent the day before and decides to read it.

Have time to talk? I know someone who'd be happy to help you out.

He means with selling the house. For weeks now his father has been nagging him to sell, to get out of there, move on, enough is enough. She would have told him that he wasn't trying to be difficult but only wanted to help, and he would have said that the only way his father knows how to help is by being difficult, to which she would have

said they were just going in circles. She would have said he was being dramatic, sleeping in the basement, washing himself in the outdoor shower, refusing to go to the second floor. She would have told him to listen to his father, he knows what's best. But she didn't know the man his father had become, a widower same as he and no longer a conductor but a recently retired MTA train dispatcher who, with his abundance of free time, could not help himself from attempting to supervise the minutiae of lives that were not his own. Even the real estate agent who had helped him close on his new house upstate had almost dropped him as a client.

His father calls again and he silences the ringtone, leaves his phone there on the desk to mutely flash Dad in bright LED-white while he heads for the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face.

Snap:

The father was in the kitchen fixing himself a drink.

The son was in his room.

They had gotten into an argument and that is where each had ended up. The argument was about a call from one of the son's teachers, or at least that was how it started. Apparently the son had cut his summer chemistry class again. It was chemistry or it was math or history. It was an excuse. The argument was a lot of yelling and banging that devolved at a certain point into cruel and spiteful words that the father found too easy to say, eager to say, how he relished in the hurt look the son struggled to conceal. How the son was a fuckup. How he had been and always would be. How he'd killed his mother on his way out of her. This is what the argument was about—what every argument was ultimately about.

The father stood in the kitchen stirring his drink with his finger. He knew it was not nor had it ever been the boy's fault, though it had taken him a long while to understand this, to admit it. She had always been certain that she wanted children, he had only been certain that he did not want to lose her. Then he lost her anyway, found himself stuck with the thing that had killed the person he loved most in this world. He remembered how the baby had cried all through her

funeral, somber speeches punctuated by harsh shrieks. At a certain point during the sister's eulogy, he finally asked a relative to take the baby outside. He didn't call the baby by its name. She had wanted to name the child after her father and that is what he told people when they asked, nothing more.

The father felt ashamed whenever he thought about it now, and all the other things he'd said to his son over the years. On the son's fifth birthday, when the father had believed him old enough to understand, he'd told the son exactly what he'd done to his own mother. It had been a small gathering of close family, grandparents, an uncle and an aunt from his wife's side, and they all sat there in wordless shock. Then he told the boy to blow out the candles. "Go on," he'd said, slightly drunk, the son sobbing at the far side of table while the grandparents tried to console him. "Make a wish."

In the kitchen the father took his finger out of the glass and put it in his mouth, whiskey and ginger ale. Long shadows were sprawled across the room, crumpled in corners.

Upstairs the son was quiet.

He could hear the cicadas throbbing out in the yard, hundreds or thousands or more. A brood had emerged that summer, billions of juvenile cicadas come up from the earth after seventeen long years to finally grow old and die. He thought about the time when the son was three, sitting on the floor in the living room and beating clumsily on a toy bongo set that had been gifted by an aunt while he stood in the kitchen with the phone to his ear, listening to a rep from an adoption agency explain the process. All he remembered now was how the rep had told him, at least fifty times, that putting a child up for adoption was not giving up. He had given up in different ways. The son had become someone he merely tolerated, was obliged to raise. Even when he told the son that he loved him, seldom as that was, he knew the words were perfunctory and the love itself just as superficial and rote. He never knew for certain how his son had learned to swim or ride a bike.

The father held the drink in his fist. He drained it quickly and made another and he was capable of this, of harboring some hatred despite the unfairness of it. His wife would have called him an ass, an

idiot. She would have called him a piece of shit and he would have known she was right but it wouldn't have mattered, and this is what frightened him most of all, this fact, or what he believed to be the truth of it—that he would always blame the boy for his wife's death.

He was making a third drink and getting angry all over again when he heard a muffled thump in the ceiling, felt it in his chest, a kind of hollow reverb that rang out in harmony with the ebbing drone of the cicadas.

The next morning, sitting at a red light about twenty minutes away from the train station, his phone buzzes. It's not a text message this time but an email. He doesn't recognize the address save for the domain, hhrealestate, a popular agency based in Westchester County. He already knows what the email will be about but reads it anyway, skims through it.

. . . your father gave me . . . sell . . . interested . . . would love . . . feel free . . .

The light turns green. The car behind him sounds its horn.

Five minutes later he slows the car and pulls off to the side of the road. The road is a quiet backroad flanked by overgrown fields, and he sits awhile staring out the windshield, hands still gripping the wheel.

He cuts the engine. He is sweating slightly. Heat crinkles beneath the hood and there is sunlight is falling through the windows, dust standing on the dash. He takes out his phone and calls his father.

His father picks up on the second ring and before he can even say hello the son tells him to stop, just stop.

"Stop with what?"

"The house. I'm not selling the house."

"Did that real estate agent ever reach out to you?"

"Are you listening to me?"

"I hear you."

"That's not what I asked."

"Are you still going to that group?"

He lowers the phone and presses the top of it against his chin. He can hear his father's voice down there, calling his name.

He says, "Dad, Dad. Listen." He's still holding the phone to his chin, talking over his father's voice. "I am not selling the house," he says, steadily, and again, louder, a third time. The last time he says it, he's screaming the words into the receiver.

There's a silence after that. In the field wildflowers blue and white and yellow heel and shiver in the wind and there is everywhere the electric pulse of insects.

"Dad?" he says. He puts the phone back to his ear. "Dad?" Clouds move past the sun and bands of shadow drift, ripple across the land.

"I'm here." His father's voice is deep and textured, years of smoking and yelling at passengers over the PA. "I'm still here." And the way his father's voice carries a gesture—a hand on his shoulder he can feel the weight of it even as he sits here miles away in the car amid engine clacks and dust motes, and he wonders if he'd ever spoken to his own son in such a way. He remembers opening the door to his son's room. He remembers his son lying there crumpled on the floor, eyes gawking sightlessly at the wall while cicadas throbbed in the heat and a can of compressed air lay overturned on the desk.

He takes a deep breath and says, "I had this dream. Keep having this dream. I'm out front doing yard work, mowing the lawn. One time it's I'm mowing, another I'm blowing leaves, power washing the siding. But Claire is there. She's always there standing in the front door, talking to someone. I can't see who she's talking to. It's just a silhouette, which I don't know how because."

He stops here a moment, wets his lips with the tip of his tongue. His father is silent. There were the times his father had tried to console him, telling him not to blame himself, be too hard on himself. Times when he'd broken down completely and confessed or at least that's what it had felt like, like something that he had to relieve himself of, that would not be true unless he said the actual words—that he failed the boy, failed his son.

"I know it's him," he says. "In the dream. The silhouette, it's tall, you know? Grown. But I know it's Michael. I know it's him but I can't see him. It's the just the shape of him, of maybe him."

He stops again. With his other hand he squeezes the wheel till his knuckles go white. Then he releases.

"I don't know how he looks," he says. "How he might've looked. I think about that sometimes, what he might've looked like as a grown man, as a father himself maybe."

Still his father is quiet. There is just his breath coming through the phone, falling, somehow, warm on his ear.

Four weeks later he watches from the window a red Mercedes coupe pull into his driveway, sunlight gleaming on the hood. The woman behind the wheel sees him, waves, and he steps back to let the curtain fall. He still isn't sure why he's agreed to this.

At the door he greets her, then forgets her name by the time she steps inside. "What a lovely place," she's saying, "how lovely."

He wonders how she's able to make such an assessment by standing in the foyer. Lovely, charming, quaint, gorgeous, she likes these words and others out of the real estate lexicon. In the kitchen he interrupts her description of the room's flow to offer her coffee, water. She declines. She's eager to see the rest of the house. She's a lanky woman in twill pants and blouse who has a peculiar habit of listing aloud the positive features of each room she enters, embellishing even minor details with picturesque descriptions that make him bite the insides of his cheeks, thinking how Claire would have had a field trip with this one.

And it is easier than he thought it would be, moving up the stairs to the second floor. He does not climb or ascend but just moves. The agent comments on the railing, the paneled risers. She calls the home office an audacious space, which he doesn't quite understand, nor does he ask for clarification.

The last room he shows her is his son's.

If she has any thoughts about the words or dent in the door she keeps them to herself. He reaches for the knob but stops, stands

there a moment, noticing or re-noticing, reading the words encircling the rose:

Is all the time is all the time.

Written in Wite-out.

"We don't have to go in there," the real estate agent says. "Your father told me. I'm sorry."

He moves his head slightly but doesn't look at her. He opens the door, stands there with his back pressed against the scrawled words, hand gripping the knob. The splintered wood scratches at his shirt as he makes room for her to enter, which she does, hesitantly, almost shyly. But soon she's prattling on about size and floorboards and natural light. There are the words stenciled on the wall, the posters hanging at angles. The bed is unmade. A ripped garbage bag lies wadded on the floor and dirty laundry spills from the closet door. The belt is around his waist.

He realizes the real estate agent is speaking to him. Her voice seems to travel from far away. He looks up from the spot on the floor where he had found his son and stares at her. She's waiting for a response, but he isn't sure what she's said, nor does he ask her to repeat herself. He looks down again. She's wearing things on her feet called shoes, standing in the spot where he'd knelt trying to shake his son awake.

"Anyway," she says, perhaps sensing that he's drifted off from the moment, "it never hurts to make connections. Keep your ear to the ground."

He nods because such a thing as a nod can go here. He reaches into his pocket, mutters something at the time displayed on his phone's screen and makes something up about some work he needs to get done.

"Clients," he says. "You know how it goes."

He does not shut the door to his son's room. They leave, and he shows her to the front, thanking her along the way, apologizing for having wasted her time, to which she assures him he hasn't. As he's opening the front door, she says, "What is it you do? If you don't mind my asking."

"Consulting," he tells her. "Telos." It's a large firm and he feels halfway prideful saying the name aloud.

She stands there on the landing. "Telos," she says. She looks down for a moment and laughs, softly, a private joke. She stares at him through the screen door. "I've worked with your firm before."

"At H and H real estate?" he says.

"No. This was five years ago. Patina."

He stares searchingly over her shoulder, trying to remember. Then it comes to him. He remembers the logo and the conference room with the broad windows and large table and he remembers the bulky man with the ruddy face and what he'd told him to do. He can feel his cheeks going hot.

"The ad agency," he says, but the words are dry and brittle in his mouth. He's expecting her to yell at him, curse him out, berate him.

Instead she tells him she never much liked that job, never cared for it. She thanks him. She tells him that getting fired from that job was the best thing that had ever happened to her, aside from meeting her husband, which she never would have had she still been working for Patina Media.

"Three years ago," she says. "Was showing him an apartment down in Ossining. Now we have a little one on the way, if you can believe it." She places her hand on her stomach. "Just found out a few weeks ago. Crazy," she says, "how things work out in the end."

He stands there staring at her stomach, smiling in a way he knows is creepy, but there's no helping it.

"Well," she says. "You have my info. Let me know if anything changes."

He watches her walk to her car. Before she can start the engine he calls out to her, halfway out the front door and waving his arm for attention. "Hold on," he says, and goes back into the house. A minute later he emerges with a few small boxes bundled in his hands.

He walks the flagstone path and proffers them without a word through the open window. She accepts, tentatively. She holds up one of the boxes and reads aloud the words printed on the front. "Bang-snaps," she says, and looks at him as if for clarification.

He shrugs. He says, "I don't know. To celebrate."

She smiles politely. "Take care," she says, and rolls up the window.

When she's gone he's left standing there in the driveway, new weeds in the cracks, listening to the sound that silence makes: birds, wind, leaves, tattered shreds of cigarette paper skidding over the faded pavement. In the distance, the ebbing drone of an engine. That is all. It is early spring, and the cicadas won't be out for another few months.

Nobody's Princess

Meg Hurtado Bloom

D tells C to fuck off. She doesn't want to spend her life with somebody who won't really put the past away. She has a lot to do with the future and she can feel that even if nobody else can. She goes home for long enough to pack a bag and then, in the middle of the night when all the reporters are gone, she has her brother drive her to Heathrow where she boards a plane to New York. She refuses to take any money, then or ever. In New York, she nannies for a while, and then she starts to paint. Her paintings are paintings of exile, interrupted attachment, yet possess an inner regality that none can deny, says the NYT. She is offered a show at Tate Modern, and E. attends. They meet. D wears a long-sleeved clinging knit bodycon dress of the finest Italian black wool over a black silk slip. Her hair is black by now (it is the '90s), and the two of them resemble each other more than you would imagine possible. A photo is taken of them at the gallery and published in the T., which hasn't missed the fact that she's an ex. C, too, is stunned. He phones her the next day.

D tells C to fuck off. C is stunned. D goes home and gives everyone the silent treatment for a week. Then she calls up one of her old school friends who's on holiday in Paris. They go shopping at Balmain, stuff themselves with pastry. They get drunk in the Marais and are almost run over by a taxi. D thinks she is going to throw up but then she doesn't. They laugh all the way back to the friend's hotel. In the morning they will stumble around until they find strong coffee and two beautiful boys, the first of many.

D tells C to fuck off. C is stunned. D goes home and locks herself in her room. Nobody can bring themselves to ask what happened. They leave meals outside her room for a month. When it is clear that she has already had a nervous breakdown, she joins the family for meals

again. She appears incredibly serene, but doesn't gain any weight. This goes on for another month and then one day her sister finds a note saying that she simply needs to clear her head. They have no idea where she has gone. She has left her little car in the airport parking lot and her father has to have it towed home. A decade later, she returns, the veiled and glowing wife of an Iranian doctor who has recently joined the board of a prominent London health charity. They have two beautiful boys.

D tells C no thank you, and then asks if someone can drive her car home for her, because she isn't feeling well. It is awkward. C is stunned, but sends someone. The press linger outside her father's house for weeks, and everyone feels embarrassed about it. Nobody asks her what happened, they know that D is a very single-minded girl. D tries to go back to work at the nursery school but it is very awkward. D sees a photo of C in the paper with the new princess and feels very sure that she has missed her biggest chance. And then she thinks, Well, what's there to do? She quits her job, even though the press has left her alone for weeks. She asks her father for a tutor and completes her A-levels, enrolls at U, but doesn't do very well, and when she meets a nice boy named R, that's that, they get married. They have two boys. R's mother runs a prominent charity from a chic little office in Chelsea, so D gets a job there, truly makes a difference among the poor of London, and then goes shopping after work. Occasionally people remember that she might have become a princess and didn't. D lives.

D tells C, no thank you. C says nothing, sends her home. She tells her family everything, and they send her to friends in New York. The friends are kind, her family sends her an allowance. She dances again. She makes a whole gaggle of lovely girlfriends, none of whom have any idea where she's coming from. She's happy, but she's lonely. One night her mother's friend says, "Why don't you come to the Met Gala with me? H has the most terrible headache," and she goes. She meets a fluffy-haired tycoon who simply won't leave her alone—eventually,

the press outside the house becomes unbearable. She writes to her brother, who has been drinking a lot since she left and decides to lawyer up. She isn't sure, but then runs into the tycoon in the loo at Christie's of all places. What he does there steels her, and she hires three more lawyers the next day, fathers of her girlfriends. They find all kinds of damning tidbits about a man nobody has really noticed yet—but it's enough. D takes half his empire, starts a magazine, a television station, and a training corps for compassionate nannies in the City. D lives. Things change.

D tells C to fuck off. C is stunned. He asks, Are you very sure? She says, Oh, yes. She goes home. But on holiday with The Family she has fallen in love with the Highlands, and she knows what she must do. She asks her father for a job in finance. He is stunned, but finds a way. She works on the London Exchange for three years, wearing navy suits every day. She was nervous at first, because everyone said she wasn't good at maths, but her charm and intuition prove unstoppable on the trading floor. She makes a fortune of her own, buys a little cottage outside Inverness, with a little stone wall to shield the chickens from the icy wind. D likes to have tea in her garden wearing the evening gowns she's had shipped from London. Her neighbors wave and think how good it is to see her. She lives alone, and enjoys a string of male visitors, some of them very young men hired from nearby villages. Her family assumes she has gone mad at last and never speaks to her again. But she has kept up her investments, and has a small army of young women doing her bidding in London, so within another three years she buys the meadow attached to her cottage, and builds a barn, and a little pavilion for picnics. She imports two little Dartmoor ponies, names them W and H, and grants the neighbor children rides whenever they ask.

D tells C to fuck off. C is stunned. D goes home and cleans her room, her sister's room, her brother's room, the library, the kitchen, the back stairs. She enrolls at London College, in the fashion department. She

does very well. Her father knows the owner of Harrod's and she grew up with his son, so she gets a job immediately at the head of their styling league. C has waited around and found another prospective princess about whom he feels just the same, and now they're getting married. He comes to D and says, It's no hard feelings, you always had such an eye and Mummy liked you, could you come and dress her for the wedding? D says, of course, and she is thrilled, and picks out a daring full-skirted suit for E which will change everything else E wears for years. The Day-Of, D is on set to handle any last-minute stitchings … for any other client she could have sent an assistant, but E is notoriously private and knows that D "knows how it works" so would prefer D handle any adjustments (The bride needs the dress taken in, of course.) D frolics with the flower girls and C sees her and how happy she is and he wonders, he definitely wonders. But then C thinks of C and all's well. D was of course already a celebrity stylist of the greatest reach but now that she has dressed the Q she is untouchable. She buys her brother out of the S estate, adopts seven children and employs an army of young refugees as nannies. They will all receive college degrees and a job placement of their dreams. D grows old, surrounded. She wears a lot of red.

Something In the Water

Federica Santini

It just rained and the ground smells of new births and ashes. The bottle is half buried and cracked. Held in its uneven mouth, barely visible: two opaque beads *(my eyes?)*, leaves not quite burned by the season *(the polish has splintered on my fingertips)*, rain-darkened weeds *(my hair is matted, unruly)*, a single green blade chanting softly in tune with my voice, which I hear but cannot recognize. Soil all around, a broken doll's hand *(my own broken hand? Another's?)*. Everything that hurts is in the bottle.

Can water hurt? Small white faces peer from the branches, staring at me. The day the pill bank at the station shut down, everyone screaming and rushing out, he said he'd go for a vasectomy. Next morning, the news came that they made that illegal along with all body alterations. I took off my earrings, he slid off his tongue piercing. I started covering my tattoo with long-sleeved tops—it's best to display modesty in any case, though there has been no ban. No matter now, I no longer go out. We stopped sex for a while, thought of other ways for intimacy, our limbs intertwined in our dreams.

Then the supplements arrived in the mail for non-mothers, to help us conceive. You have to take two every night with dinner. Just vitamins, B12, nothing harmful. It's what every woman should take. Every new cycle, I see another small face lurking, white and jeering. They say it's my conscience, the unconceived babies calling for me. They say I'm murdering them every month. He said it's all in my head. But I think there must be something in the water. The water comes free with the supplements, a special treat for us non-mothers. I threw out the first pills, and got fined. Then the fines got higher, the check-ins tighter. Weekly blood sampling, bounty hunters out to seek those who do not comply, those who do not conceive. I complied. The small white faces began popping up at the edge of my vision. He said it's all in my head. I say there's something in the water.

I look at that first bottle, half-hidden in the garden, the two pills like glassy eyes just inside it. Small faces circle around like eerie

glowworms, yet it's full day. Everything that hurts is in the bottle, hard to dislodge or unearth. Hidden deep in the bottle there's me, waiting, whole and unseen.

We Haven't Eaten

Christopher Bowen

We bought the house on a quiet street like a deep sigh. Children played kickball. There was a sign that said *slow down.*

She planted the rose bed first and over the years put fish bones and bone powder at each of their bases.

"The calcium helps them grow," she said, holding a flower by the stem so as not to prick herself.

She puts down a fish, an offering, at the boneyard.

We haven't eaten fish in a hundred and eighty-five days. She puts the bones over the deep, dark mulch in early fall and I have no idea where they ever come from.

I don't love her anymore, but sometimes when she says she's about to go, she kisses me on the cheek and I miss the woman she was more than when she's even around.

Waiting for the Commands

Jose Varghese

It begins in the year of extinctions. The breeze that used to
lick off sweat from the back of your neck
in summer days is gone. You hide behind the hefty ceramic
pickle jars, solaced by its cold, glossy exterior.
The aroma of whole ripe mangoes that're preserved in them
with salt, oil and dry red chilies, seeps through
the cloth that's tied tight over its lid with several strands
of jute. No one has told you about the absences
you were to be made with, in a world that's not yet ready
for your cultivated skills of flawless accumulation
of data and accurate response to commands, gained more
from machines than humans. You still imagine
yourself to be a part of them, but those races and genders
and faiths confuse you as much as the pickles
they make, the ideologies they use to fight with one another,
the green and red and blue caps they sport
to show how they differ from one another, the snacks and
drinks and words they choose to declare
their love or hurt or hatred at night, in dimly-lit terraces
with yellow walls. You were born out of their
collective ambition, but no one accepts you for what you've
become in their hands. You still dream of the hills
on all sides cradling the home that you thought was yours.
The smell of jackfruit and guava, the squeaky
squirrels that hung upside-down from plantains, the frantic
movement of their tails and cacophonous praise
of the cornucopia they thought of as theirs while they ate
and drank to their fill in dimly-lit dusks
with amber skies, the parakeets playing hide-and-seek with
gooseberry leaves, the snakes coiling around
the dried-up secrets of the sun, the pheromone-driven
processions of the ants—are all in the past, as

you wait for commands from radio hisses and rumbles,
hiding behind the last mangoes in pickle jars.

Bowl City Splash Page / Dave Sims

Inception Winner

Orpheus Far from the Abyss

Meagan Daine

Inception Runner-up

Orpheus. Do you remember when we used to climb the dusty hill and push through tangled thorns to reach the eucalyptus grove? The spicy smell of the trees. The strips of bark, long as we were tall but fragile, easy to take in the fingers and crack to let the fragrance stain the hands. The dry, fallen leaves in the thick grass, the cool grass sometimes parting, sometimes buried beneath them. The grass pushing up in stalks, knots, bunches, finally to hillocks covered in bell-shaped yellow flowers. You taught me to pluck these flowers and chew the stems for their sour juices.

Do you remember?

Orpheus. Sometimes I dream that we are walking up that hill again and I am happy as if my heart were full of sunlight because I know you have forgiven me.

***I**n school I knew a man who wrote strange music. He hunched over the keys of an old piano and played through the night. Tones spilled through the window into the garden where I walked, splashing colors onto my path, painting a world I'd never been able to reach alone. A place I'd never believed in. In which it became impossible not to believe.*

This Summer I Hear the Gun

Noah Ruiz

Inception Finalist

First of all, I have three questions for you:

1. Please fill in the blank below.

> "Racial hate had been the bane of my life, and here before my eyes was concrete proof that it could be abolished. Yet a new hate had come to take the place of the rankling racial hate. It was irrational that _____ should hate what they called "intellectuals" or anybody who tried to think for himself. I had fled men who did not like the color of my skin, and now I was among men who did not like the tone of my thoughts."
>
> —Richard Wright, writing from Paris, France, 1944.

A. Communists
B. ANTIFA
C. Trump supporters
D. Covid-19 Victims
E. The CDC
F. George Floyd Protesters
G. All of the above

2. Choose the answer below that best defines "2020" as a linguistic neologism (i.e., beyond its literal referent—how is it being used in discourse now, as more than just a number?):

A. The intersection of race, politics, police brutality, pandemic, and economic disaster
B. A statement of moral despair about the state of our culture, our nation, and the world
C. The year I graduated college

D. The third year since I entered college
E. The third consecutive year since I was last brutalized by a member of the police force

3. What Race / Ethnicity are you?

A. White
B. Mexican
C. Both?
D. Culturally white and American, ethnically mixed-race descent
E. None of the above
F. All of the above
G. A and B only

Eye of the Sun / Evelyn M

Inception Finalist

Spiderland

DS Higdon

Inception Finalist

We spent nights in the basement. We shared our space with thin-legged spiders and humpback crickets, minor things that scurried and hugged shadows. Earth wept through the foundation, damp cinderblocks stained with specks of dirt, like blackheads on a shy boy's face. We spent nights under mason jars ranked on plywood shelves, opaque with kraut, pickles, peppers, pole beans, and crushed tomatoes. Behind a bedsheet curtain, Issacs's dad grew pot in five-gallon buckets under fluorescent lights. We strung Christmas lights from the joists and scavenged a stack of 45s from a moldy cardboard box. *One Toke Over the Line Sweet Jesus. Cover of the Rolling Stone.* We flipped through creased *Hustlers* and Swamp Thing comics. The coils of a space heater glowed and hummed in a corner, and we smoked Newports I stole from Mom's purse. We exhaled our dreams from the window well into the cold dark sky, only our faces and the constellations reflected in the casement pane.

Naiads

Janna Urschel

Inception Finalist

One wrinkly Naiad after another washed up to shore, crisp and leathery. At first, people mistook them for fish, dried-up fish. But even after they knew better, they figured, why not? Seafood is seafood

No one even knew there were Naiads in the Hudson until they started dying.

"This isn't Greece," someone notable complained in a New York Times editorial, and some smartass wrote a letter to the editor in reply to say, "But there's Troy. And Ithaca."

Why were they here? Had they always been here? The scientists were called in, from Boston, mostly, so they could be objective. But they didn't know a good goddamn about mythology. So they brought in the classicists, but there are, like, thirty-seven translations of Ovid, and then someone had to bring up Homer, so until they could get their declensions worked out, they weren't going to be much help either. A noted physicist said something about dimensions, but it was more opaque than the Ovid translations, so no one paid him much mind.

Ad Lucem Aeternam

HR Harper

Culmination Winner

…

What leaves asks for our surrender.

From this end of the story,
freedom and slavery both overrate us.

I was rowing away from shore anyway.

Blue Mustang; Red Rose

Jeanne Wilkinson

Culmination Finalist

I hung up the phone feeling dizzy, as if I were looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. As if the events of the past year had twisted my life into a puzzle whose pieces would never fit into that suburban template where the end picture is you, your spouse, and two-point-three kids in front of a big split-level house on a spotless concrete driveway flanked by a neon-green lawn. But I was no longer a girl from the suburbs and, hmmm, was it mescaline in Golden Gate Park where the trees danced, or LSD at the Pacific shoreline where I found my name written in the sand that made me understand I never would be again?

Either way, I was a stranger in an ordinary land, and going on a date with you seemed, well, impossible. Like we'd be speaking different languages and I had no interest in yours anymore and didn't have the energy to teach you mine. And worse, getting close to me could very possibly twist and warp you into some bizarre, distorted shape, and I didn't want that kind of karma marking my soul. Or yours.

So I'd have to find my own way and you'd have to find yours. I hoped yours would be good because you at the gas station—clutching that red rose in your shining, greasy hand—had been an angel in my life at a moment when I'd badly needed one.

Final Crises

Haylee Millikan

Culmination Finalist

I was once groped by dissonance, (—a man among men)
& I gripped him until I felt myself
hemorrhage.

Motion

Noah Ruiz

Culmination Finalist

I will try to figure out who my father is. Who he was.

When I was an infant, he competed in martial arts tournaments, spectated by grandmasters. He used to weightlift every day. Before he met my mother, he travelled to Europe to play soccer internationally. He worked for the Viper team of software engineers at Comcast. He lacked an official college degree, but he achieved his dream of becoming a multimillionaire through Bitcoin. He retired at age forty-two. He had three children.

See, that doesn't feel like him at all. Past, present, future. None of it makes sense. How are we talking about the same person?

The landscape streams by. Grass, plains. On the other side, mountains. Sun. I haven't said anything since we got on the highway. The house music is still playing. There's a new thumbnail of a different girl in a skirt. She's teasing her breasts, standing on a rooftop in a black crop top. He's still driving, wearing those sunglasses. I bet they're spotless by now.

I sink further into my chair and lean my head against the window as I peer out. I begin drifting in and out of sleep. My head is so heavy. It bobs around from the motion of the car. At ninety miles an hour we are being pushed forward by the rubber wheels, steel mesh, the driveshaft. Always moving forward, inexorably. All my life, we've been on the move. But we haven't crashed yet. I'm always wondering how.

for want of parchment

Claude Clayton Smith

Culmination Finalist

greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare
what have they not written
for want of parchment

flitting perspectives and demi-experiences
which never die

Contributors

Erin Birdsall is a writer living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and holds a B.A. in English (Creative Writing—Fiction) from Northwestern University. She is currently drafting her first novel and has written a few short stories over the years. If you read her work, you'll encounter stories about women, Celtic folklore, grief, magic, and spirituality.

Christopher Bowen is the author of the chapbook *We Were Giants*, the novella W*hen I Return to You, I Will Be Unfed*, and the nonfiction *Debt*. He was a semifinalist in the 2017 Faulkner-Wisdom Novella Competition and received honorable mention in the 45th New Millennium Writing Awards in the nonfiction category.

Christopher Paul Brown is known for his exploration of the unconscious and the serendipitous. In 2020 his work appeared in fourteen periodicals and two hardcover books. His first photography sale was to the Standard Oil Company of Indiana and his video *You Define Single File* was nominated for the Golden Gate Award at the 47th San Francisco International Film Festival. He earned a BA in Film from Columbia College Chicago in 1980. Brown was born in Dubuque, Iowa, grew up in northern Illinois, and now resides in North Carolina.

Garrett Candrea grew up in Eastchester, New York and currently lives in Astoria, Queens. His work has appeared in *Sunspot*.

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

Bianca Giglio is a Canadian university student in the process of completing Bachelor's degrees in both Biology and Women's Studies.

Lindsey Morrison Grant is a self-identifying neurodivergent, two-spirit, elder storyteller, and contrarian deeply rooted in the roar and lore of what's become Portlandia of The Left Coast. The Artist attributes success and survival (if not salvation) to superlative supports, mindfulness practice, and daily creative expression in words, sounds, and images.

HR Harper is a poet living in the redwoods above Santa Cruz, CA. In recent months he's had poems published in *Prospectus*, *The Write Launch*, a Wingless Dreamer anthology, *The Vital Sparks*, *The 34thParallel Magazine*, *High Shelf Press* journal, and *Angel Rust* magazine. A student/practitioner of Dzogchen meditation, he writes to understand, heal and resolve the curious limits and contradictions of consciousness in a world that is being destroyed by humans.

JJ Chen Henderson is a writer, poet and an artist. She has published a novel, short stories and poetry in literary reviews and magazines such as *Fourteen Hills*, *Poetry East*, *Clackamas Reviews*, and *Slant Magazine*.

DS Higdon is a writer from Kentucky. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Rust + Moth*, *Exposition Review*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, and others. He is the 2021 winner of The Grand Prix Prize from the Kentucky State Poetry Society. He lives with his family in Louisville, KY.

Meg Hurtado Bloom has her MFA in Poetry from St Mary's College of California. She also studied English and Art History at the University of Richmond. Meg's work has appeared in *The Volta*, *Cannibal*, *Hidden City Quarterly*, the *West Wind Review*, *POOL*, the *Columbia Poetry Review*, and the McSweeney's anthology *Conversations at the Wartime Cafe*. She has worked for VERSE, Wave Books, and Omnidawn.

Candice Kelsey teaches writing in the South. Her poetry appears in *Poets Reading the News* and *Poet Lore*, among other journals, and her first collection, *Still I am Pushing*, explores mother-daughter relationships as well as toxic body messages. She won the 2019 Two Sisters Writing's Contest and was recently nominated for both a Best of the Net and a Pushcart. Find her at www.candicemkelseypoet.com.

Roeethyll Lunn is a lifelong educator, learner, and writer. For many years she has been a Developmental Writing Instructor at Wayne Community College in Goldsboro, NC. She declares herself to be "an experimental writer" of essays, short stories, poetry, and articles about people living in the Pee Dee area of rural South Carolina just before desegregation. She was born in Darlington, South Carolina, has a BFA in Broadcast Media and an MFA in English and writing.

Evelyn M is an interior designer, artist and micro urban flower farmer living in Campbell River. She was born in Vancouver where she received her Associate of Interior Design from Douglas College after which she continued her education studying building technology and art. Evelyn began a career in fine art with her detailed custom watercolors of dogs, cats and people, soon

expanding to wildlife of the Antarctic. Evelyn M moved to the islands at 30 where the influences of the city and rural/suburban life became a strong part of her art and design. Recently, she has embraced digital photography. Her work can be found at www.EvelynM.com.

Ryan Mattern holds an MA in English from UC Davis, and a BA in Creative Writing from CSUSB. He is the recipient of the Felix Valdez Award. His work has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Santa Clara Review*, and *Poetry Quarterly*. He currently serves in the US Army.

Haylee Millikan is a poet originally from Spokane. Haylee's work focuses on themes of intimacy, disability, self, and the elusive concept of home, and has been featured in *Equinox*, *Litro*, *Beyond Words*, *Susie Magazine*, *Textploit*, *pioneertown*, and others. They currently reside in Long Beach with their two Flatbush rescue cats.

Karen Poppy has work published in numerous literary journals, magazines, and anthologies. Her chapbook *Crack Open/Emergency* was published by Finishing Line Press (2020), where she has another chapbook forthcoming. Her chapbook *Every Possible Thing* is published by Homestead Lighthouse Press (2020). An attorney licensed in California and Texas, Karen Poppy lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Ron Pullins is a fiction writer, playwright, and poet working in Tucson AZ. His works in fiction, poetry and drama have been published in numerous journals, including *Typishly*, *Southwest Review*, and *Shenandoah*.

Noah Ruiz was born in Michigan and raised in Colorado. He attended Colorado State University, where he was published for the first time in *Greyrock Review*. After studying English, history, rhetoric, linguistics, and literacy, he moved to Florida to pursue his writing and his music.

Federica Santini lives in Atlanta and teaches at Kennesaw State University. She holds an MA from the University of Siena, Italy, and a PhD from UCLA. She has authored or edited four volumes on poetics, and her poetry and fiction has been published in numerous journals in North America and Europe. She is the author of the poetry chapbook *Unearthed* (Kelsay Books, 2021).

A retired educator, **Dave Sims** makes art and music in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. His comix and paintings—both old-school and digital—appear upon the walls, covers and inside pages of over seventy tactile and virtual publications and exhibits. He's currently working on the art for

Bowl City, an experimental graphic novel written by his LA surfer friend, John Peterson. Experience more at www.tincansims.com.

Professor Emeritus of English at Ohio Northern University **Claude Clayton Smith** is the author of eight books and coeditor/translator of four others. His own work has been translated into five languages, including Russian and Chinese. For further information visit: claudeclaytonsmith.wordpress.com.

Kate Strong Stadt is a former children's librarian turned knowledge worker. Recently, her poems have been published in *The Collidescope*, *Sparked Literary Magazine*, and *swifts & slows*. Her latest obsession is blacksmithing.

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who resides with his family in California. An alumni of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, recent credits include: *2River*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *Griffel*, and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*. Visit him at: zolothstephenswrites.com.

Janna Urschel has been a wedding harpist, dog musher, native language linguist, children's Spanish teacher, and college writing instructor. She is currently a PhD student in English at SUNY. Janna recently relocated to the high plains of Wyoming, where she is at work on a creative dissertation exploring nonhuman agency. She has been published in *Trolley*, *Mamalode*, and *Ladybug*. She was a finalist for the 2021 Montana Prize, and blogs at www.lifeinthemultiverse.com.

Jose Varghese is the author of *Silver Painted Gandhi and Other Poems*, and his short story manuscript *In/Sane* was a finalist in the 2018 Beverly International Prize. His second collection of poems is scheduled for publication in 2022 by Black Spring Press Group, UK. He was a finalist twice in the London Independent Story Prize (LISP), a runner up in the Salt Prize, and was commended in the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize. His works are published or forthcoming in a number of journals and magazines.

Jeanne Wilkinson is a writer and artist sharing time between Brooklyn, NY and Madison, WI. From being a "back-to-the-land" organic dairy farmer in Wisconsin, she ended up with an MFA in painting at Pratt Institute. Her essays have been featured on WNYC's Leonard Lopate Show and NPR's *Living on Earth*. Her fiction has appeared in *Columbia Journal* and *Digging Through the Fat*, and chapters from her memoir *1969: My Year with a San Francisco Drug Dealer*, have been published by *Raven's Perch*, *New Millennium Writings*, and more. See her website at https://jeannewilkinson.com.

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