

# SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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**CHANGING THE WORLD  
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

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## Origin Story

LeeAnn Olivier

Eleven malevolent wolves silver  
the dark, gifting gooseflesh, your radiant  
bones croon, a changeling thing, a buckskin  
blacktop zippered with stitches. David Byrne  
sings sex and sin, sax and violins, still the world  
keeps its spin. You wriggle out of the sundress

of your skin like a ribbonfish. Listen. A mess  
of dresses rustles in your mother's attic, hems  
hissing. In the pit of your chest a lock unclicks,  
star whorls orbit in a glass carousel. Medics  
circle your gurney, a pilgrimage, their  
human ocean slaps and slithers, spilled

mercury squealing into milky bowls. The jut  
of your wing bones knots indigo, rumbling  
gulls gouge and purge, your tongue too swollen  
to shut your mouth, your throat too swollen  
to scream. You wrest your broken body from  
this bed, clutching its jigsaw wounds, wearing

antlers instead of pearls, the ripples of a black  
moon lapping. You're swathed in velvet  
like a stingray, draped in orchid bulbs that daze  
and bewile. Gravity fevers you through the wild  
wood from maiden to crone, the second act  
snuffed by rough male fingers, dragging

your jagged slander where the sweetgrass  
and sourgum sandpaper your calves. Hoof  
and paw, stalk and woodsmoke, a blight  
of whitened sycamores, smokestack fumes

flicker and flail. You hunker in the makeshift  
crawlspace, riddled with rot. Rain rattles

on the roof like a metal grate over a storefront  
until urban memories dim, until all you are  
is bristle and brim. Only witches live  
in the woods. They thrum with want  
and willow shiver. After the storm they  
hush your howls. After the storm you are free.

## How to Describe the Sky

LeeAnn Olivier

*after James Baldwin, Jeff Buckley, and Gregory Alan Isakov —  
three kings of the Blues*

Say it blues like a child playing hide-  
and-seek in the chiffarobe after a hush silkens  
the crawlspace, after a hush ices her blood

and she reckons *no one is coming*, her finger-  
tips shivering along the furs. It blues  
like morning glories, their white throats

unfurling in September. It blues like an electric  
gecko hiding from collectors, her rare brood  
slinking along the screw-pines in Tanzania, ribboning

the forest with trills of turquoise. It blues  
like a stillness that moves. It blues like a shining  
honey-creeper, her birdsong a wet whip limning

the green. It blues like folds of Veronica's velvet  
uncurling in the attic, food for grizzled skipper  
moths, bluing their darting tongues. It blues

like moonstone, mystical, opalescent, a gleam so brutal  
it breaks your heart and feasts on its ruby pieces.  
It blues like a cobalt planet raining molten glass.

It blues like a sea anemone, tentacles lulling prey  
to a rapture of lapis lazuli. It blues like the Mississippi  
reclaiming her Orpheus, her kingdom for a kiss

upon his shoulder. It blues like broken bottles  
glinting bright as stars. It blues like a triptych  
in the Rothko Chapel, each canvas bleeding

darker as his oils saturate from sapphire to slate  
and the artist recoils into madness. It blues  
like a bruise. It blues like my father's eulogy, a daughter

and son expunged like a crime scene scrubbed clean. It blues  
like the Caribbean cradling Buck Island, the way my love  
and I dove from the boat to swim through it, a roiling

remedy stripping our maladies bare. It blues like a disease  
and then it quickens like the cure for it. It blues  
like music, like the only hue we've got in all this darkness.



**Too Much** / Martha Clarkson





**Branch / Martha Clarkson**

## A Sky Burial

Ezra Sun

chiru cries mark contours of karst  
jagged & torn. our hands cusp all  
saṃsāra, unspooled & reknotted  
by each thread. & i open: the river

is your mouth—a crescent arcing  
in gnarled roots, grappled by both  
its horns. the sun falls late & our

shadows sink deeper than soil. your  
body surreal as a still-life, an  
origami of earth. then it blurs:  
sky to sea, sea to grass, flesh to

wind. mud-tar. coneflower. drums  
tread to a hollow pace. in the end  
nothing stays to reminisce.



**Fireworks** / Harry Lee James

**Aubade**

Yakir Ben-Moshe

Translated by Dan Alter

Once a month the moon lowers its heavy eyelids, & sleeps.  
One time a month, even that's too often.  
I come to you carefully  
in the gap between breath & breath's pounding,  
in the gap between body & its substance—  
someone scoops up your name:  
half eyelid,  
half drowse  
treetops of stars make their way to the heart,  
through which we thought to pulse toward the world—  
my dear, where are you stepping off to at the moment morning  
is kissing our moist dream?



Synagogue 3 / Leslie Kerby

**As You Drive the Columbia Plateau**

Hardy Coleman

On this fortieth dawn of drought  
I have watched you sleep  
soft as horses in clouds,  
jumping the wind.

Yet before summer's end,  
like a god of fertility,  
you're leaving the Dust Bowl.

So I will find enough rope  
to snare the yearning  
of these pregnant mares  
dissolving into birth,  
dissolving in the thirst  
of this bone-dry continent you cross.

And I will mail you road maps  
of the dreamtime  
a new home walks to.

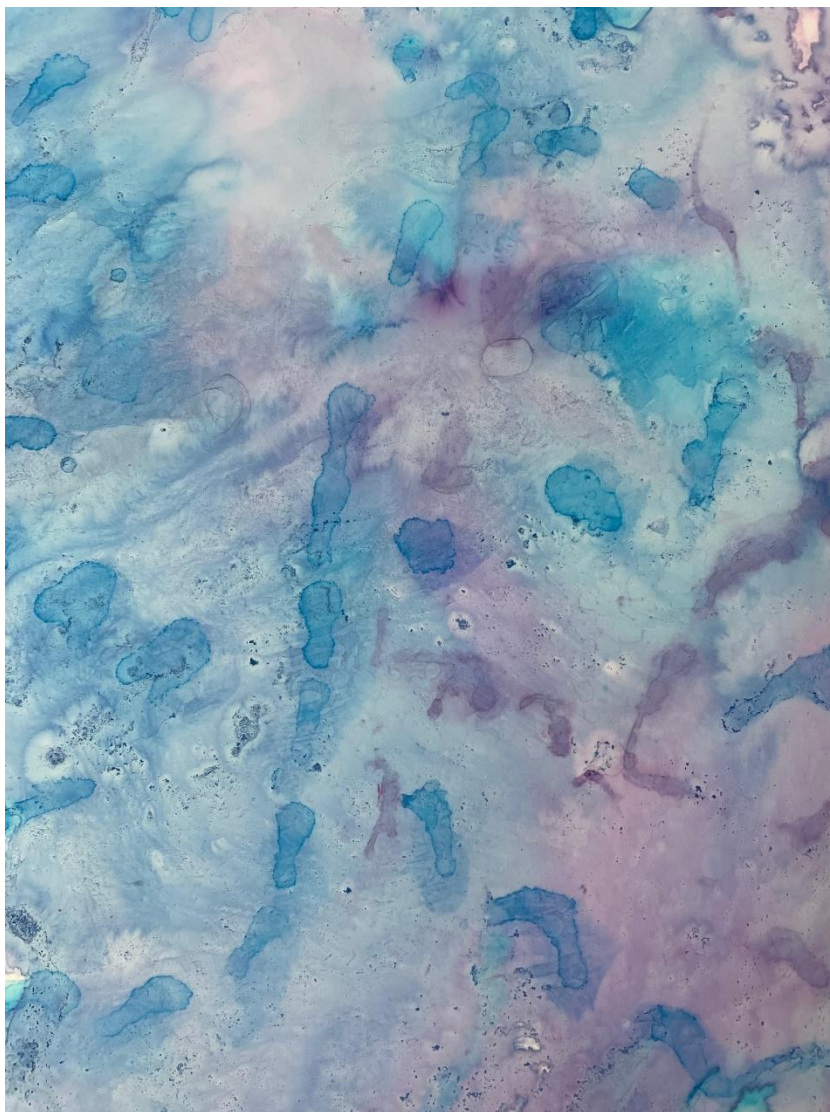
And I will broadcast from the Teton Range  
everything that I can't tell you now.

And I will observe  
the flutter of your eyes this morning  
as mine close every night  
until there is no night time,  
no day, no setting sun.  
Until the years when there is nothing left  
but a few cent's worth of wishes.

And I'll buy you a ticket to the rain.



**Covid Color O / Cynthia Yatchman**



**Covid Color 2022 GG / Cynthia Yatchman**





**Covid Color 2022 H / Cynthia Yatchman**

## **Allegory of the Cave**

Ezra Sun

the nest, bred of hushed  
whispers. the moss, sprawling

from the body's edges. the lungs,  
jammed in stalactite ash—pestilence of

each spored breath. & the distance. the  
dusk. the warmth of touching lips.

i embalm myself in copper veins, simmering  
into scabs. the reverie of a lie. a husk

bled of caustic dreams. & i dance, through  
all five stages of my grief. my hands

play make-believe on shadow puppets &  
candlelight projections. an eyeless

oedipus. the blind leading the  
blind leading the blind.

## Litany of Remembrance

Tamar Jacobs

We sat on a curb at the mouth of a farmer's market that was a little precious, a little boutique, not like the one in Baltimore under the expressway where we came with my first son when he was a baby, and it was cold, and I wasn't wearing a coat, and my father-in-law's new wife wrapped me in her shawl, and my father-in-law kept asking again the price of cabbage, angering the farmer, who looked exactly like an idea of a farmer, a big man with suspenders and broad calloused hands held out and up toward the sky in a kind of mime of emptiness, at-a-loss-ness, exasperation, at my father-in-law's repeating questions which read to him as badgering, bullying, harassment, not dementia, and in his confusion my father-in-law grew angry to match the farmer's anger and we walked away without any cabbage, my father-in-law's wife pulling me with her body in our shared shawl and her husband by his hand, back to the car where we got in and sat and waited for the heat to come on in the shadow of the jail where men stand in the windows at night and scream.

My son and I sat on a curb and shared a mango popsicle and a pint of pickled mushrooms. He took a photo of the mushrooms and texted it to his father, the son of my father-in-law, who is beginning to forget things, too, like his father, like his father's father I never knew, who my sons have never known. I thought the popsicle tasted just like a ripe mango, but for its having been pureed and frozen, and I wondered about the point of pureeing and freezing something that will taste at the end just like itself. My son said why aren't there any Black people here? Not even one like me. Not even a mixed one, is what he meant; I knew what he meant.

The phone vibrated in my pocket with my husband's response. I kept watching these people as the popsicle dripped into the clench of my son's hand and I did not offer my help, did not try to take it from him

to get things under control, that classic transparent self-serving ice cream cone offer parents make angling for a taste.

I said, I guess it's the neighborhood. I said, let's find another one. I meant another market, but he thought I meant another popsicle. He thought I was ignoring what he said about the absence of Black people. Not another popsicle, I said, another market, and I told him about the one under the bridge in Baltimore. I didn't tell him about his grandfather and the cabbage. I tell him all the time, he and his brother, about their people who are gone. We remember them. We remember them. In all seasons we remember them. This is the Jewish Litany of Remembrance that I love. I sanitize the stories sometimes, embellish them sometimes, and tell myself I'll pare them back later to what's real as if the truth were a banana and words were the peel.

I didn't tell him about the cabbage, and I didn't tell him about the strip club in the shadow of the jail in Baltimore where a stripper stopped and looked at a group of us off our shared shift, then squatted, penis in hand, stroking it as we tried to chat with him, chat over this thing he was doing—we were embarrassed, this was too much even though wasn't it what we'd come for? We'd walked into that place, that club not far from that market, in the shadow of the jail where men would stand at the cracked windows and scream, but in the mornings I don't remember them yelling so much as they did in the nights and I remember now, on the curb with our melting mango sorbet and mushrooms, number 17 on the questionnaire from the neurologist asking if the patient is showing signs of increasing disturbances at night. Sundowning, this is what the question is headed toward. No, not yet.

I didn't answer my son, really, but addressed the thing after where the answer should have been. Let's find another one, I said. I handed my child the phone and he smiled to read his father's response: a wordless screen full of mushrooms and heart emojis just for him, a perfect response from my husband who is beginning to forget, like the mango popsicle was soon forgotten, a spot of orange on the ground perfectly

round as the sun high over us before it seems like it begins to fall but is really sitting still, our star, as we spin off into the dark.

How our babies used to scream. How babies scream. This is their defining thing, the screaming, because they can't be understood. Like the men in the windows at the jail aim their voices out at anyone on the other side, trying to voice with their noise the frustrations of their repeating world. I remember them. I remember them. In all seasons, I do.

## Barbeque

Tamar Jacobs

I wanted to make him happy, so I told him I'd barbeque. While he was at school, I went and bought pig meat forced into tubes and a bag of charcoal and I bought four patties of beef flesh ground and patted down into discs. I lit a fire and laid these things on it until the discs of beef flesh darkened and contracted, until the entubed pig meat blistered and began to blacken

and then I took all this off the fire and called my son down from where he was holding his eyes on a screen watching videos conceived and directed by a man whose voice pipes in at the end to hammer home his morals, to heavy hand them in case anyone's missed the message. He says, "So you see . . ." and you wait for it, it's in that sentence, the whole point of what you've just seen. The universal takeaway. Like Aesop, the form. They run one after the next, these videos, and my son sits and watches them, docile and accepting of the reel, whatever comes next, whatever the message the voice at the end will ask him to swallow.

We ate everything: he did, and I did, too. I was hungry, and the bread was soft, and I remembered times I've eaten those things, looked forward to eating things like those. We finished quickly. He ate fast, in huge, uncomfortable looking bites, he'd been hungry, and while we ate I ignored my phone pinging texts at me I knew was text thread of our neighbors' grievances about how the playground on our corner is out of control now, preteens unsupervised and cursing, with nowhere to go now that school's out. I've heard

that when a pig is afraid it screams like a human. I've heard cows have distinct adolescences, moody and prone to actions which might seem rash, nonsensical. My son sat and chewed, his back facing me, looking out into our yard, up into the trees beyond it. He was quiet and I was quiet, too. I wanted to make him happy.

## Now We Can Move Forward

Tamar Jacobs

She asked, politely, *how is your husband*, and I paused, said, well . . . and watched her get ready for whatever comes after a pause like that. I imagined a list of things she might be bracing for: separation, affairs, depression, then I erased the possibility of them with my response, and she said, *but he's so young*, and I told her all the things in all the brains running through his family, a funny word, *running*, like a leak, like to flee, like to make fast progress forward, and her face stayed placid, I thought, strangely so, though then she said what you'd expect, *I'm so sorry*. I tried to backpedal the awkward thing on us now, as we trailed our children around this windowless warehouse of an arcade, not too close but also not so far we might lose them; they are the age now when they want to be able to feel they don't need you even as you are near, just beyond their sight, enabling this trick of their own perception, and I tried to say some version of, *it was hard at first but now it's better, really, it's a relief, now we can move forward*. The words felt like chalk in my mouth because the first time I said them, they were true, but with each successive time I speak them, they are composed of higher concentrations of performance, smelling like the need for the words to accomplish something, as with memories, how the more times you reach for them, to feel the feelings you feel when you reach for them, they are less from the fabric of the actual remembered moment, maybe even nothing at all, maybe full fiction at a point, full creation for the purpose of feeling escape from a new moment you might choose to remember differently later. Her face was so placid, I thought, as I paid for an hour of ping pong, from our waning pool of money, its own form of willful pretending, how I insisted on paying for all of us, and we watched our sons and said the things you say to a person who isn't quite your own friend, about your two sons playing ping pong before you, like how tall they've grown in the time since you were last together and how many boxes of cereal they eat in a day and can you believe that, it's astonishing. But what else could there be? Wasn't she following the laws of conversation by

volleying back my own tone? My own strange calm delivery of the news my husband had lost one, then a second job, because they've noticed he forgets? That his forgetting has progressed? *I'm relieved*, I'd said to her. And what did I want her to say to this strange thing? I'm not relieved, no, that's not the word for what I am.

After ping pong we sat and ate in a food court, and here our sons began to try to outburp one another, and my son lapped with his tongue at his little parcel of BBQ sauce like a kitten, said, oh, this is *delicious*, and all four of us laughed, and our sons continued with this behavior even though we told them to stop, because we were still laughing, because they knew what our laughter meant, it meant what we were saying was not true, it didn't match our words, the laughter did not, and the thing to listen for was our laughter, which would reveal the truth of the mood of the thing happening and the trouble, I thought, I think, is there isn't always laughter to follow, to figure from and I wish I could ignore what's true, lick up my barbeque sauce the way you aren't supposed to.





**Tokyo, 2017, from the Encounter With Self Series /**  
William Lewis Winston



**In Flight — Dublin, 2019, from the Encounter With Self Series /  
William Lewis Winston**

## The Stool Reader

Kyle Mercer

It was a well-established fact in Coahoma County that Miss Evelyn Sahlsbach was never wrong about her stools.

“Midwife Extraordinaire” was how her lavender-scented business cards described the woman, her feces-reading skills credited to “Our Heavenly Father and His Boundless Blessings” in a somewhat smaller font the Beale Street printer up in Memphis had tastefully centered below Miss Evelyn’s boldfaced name and contact information, as per her directive. The card’s elegantly balanced design and pleasing aromatics added a professional flourish to the midwife’s self-promotions but in truth were an unnecessary expense her word-of-mouth reputation for infallibly predicting a child’s sex *in utero* was such that even respectable white women from as far downriver as Greenville and as far north as Tunica routinely found their way onto her weathered porch planks with a still-warm chamber pot in hand.

So when the wife of Miss Evelyn’s nephew began to suspect their adolescent daughter might be dipping her monthly rags in chicken blood, the couple hastily called the midwife in to deliver her expert and discrete opinion.

“How fresh is this feces?” Miss Evelyn had asked, standing in the bedroom of the delta sharecropper’s shack with the parents and the teenager, peering into a slop pot’s bowl.

“Midmorning,” the child’s mother said. “Her regular time.”

Miss Evelyn nodded her approval and set the container aside for the moment.

Popping a thermometer under the sulking girl’s tongue, the midwife palpated abdomen while waiting for the instrument to register. She squeezed left and right bosoms briefly, then made a visual inspection of the nipples—large, puffy aureoled and everted affairs, as black as mocha beans—and once done with that exam, the midwife plucked her meter from its orifice, reviewed the results and turned her full attentions to the stool.

From the depths of a skirt pocket, a small amber-tinted bottle appeared. Its cap was unscrewed, a murky liquid poured out on top of the slop, the resulting mixture subsequently swirled about in much the same fashion as an oenophile might swirl a glass of vintage cabernet.

Then, with bowl lifted to nostrils, Miss Evelyn sucked in a great whiff of its odors, held the scent deep in her lungs as she conducted her analysis, eyes shut tight and head bobbing from side to side before finally delivering her verdict to both teenager and parents, informing all concerned parties that the fetus was definitely present, definitely viable and definitely female.

Worse news still: it was too far along to do anything about without putting the expectant mother's own health at risk.

The girl, upon hearing this report, offered neither protestations nor confessions, simply sat on the edge of the bed with her hands in her lap and stared out the window. Miss Evelyn found it hard to gauge her reaction, but came away with the impression the teenager wasn't too disappointed in the diagnosis. Some of the young ones were like that—they think once they have a baby, people will quit treating them like children.

Nephew and wife, on the other hand, were as mute as the girl though much easier to read. Both wore the same expressions Miss Evelyn had seen them wear the day their mule broke its leg.

The daughter was dispatched to the outhouse to dump her night soil and Miss Evelyn spoke to the parents as she packed up her things. "Nothing to be done now but make sure the girl eats right and wait," she said as she plucked the bobby pins from her uniform cap and tucked the little hat away with the rest of her gear in an ancient gunny sack she always used on discrete visits.

She cinched the bag closed and slung it over her shoulder. "I'd like to see some more green in that stool the next time I come by. And I suppose it'd be nice to know who did this to her, if you can get her to fess up."

Her nephew—a decent fellow, but not much of a talker—grunted what Miss Evelyn took to be an agreement and opened the door to the front porch for her in that gentlemanly fashion common to the era.

He was a dark-skinned man, almost mahogany in color, and his bare arms glistened where the sunlight landed on them. The wife and daughter were like that too.

Very striking.

But then all the Swindelons—the wife’s people—were dark that way. The Sahlsbachs as well, just not usually as much so.

Miss Evelyn stepped onto the porch but stopped at the farmer’s stoop to admire a particularly fine example of crepe myrtle planted next to the house, then took another moment to gaze out over the surrounding acres of sharecropper land—incredibly fertile soil but constantly in need of hands to tend it.

The wife, a metal pail nestled in the crook of her arm, followed Miss Evelyn through the door on her own way to the pump.

“Shame it’s not a boy,” the woman said, like she was reading Miss Evelyn’s mind. “A boy might’ve been a blessing in disguise. Frank and me ain’t likely to be getting any younger.” And then the missus was off to the well, without actually offering any goodbyes or thank yous.

Miss Evelyn smiled politely, because what else could one do?

The couple had had a son once, but lost him to a water moccasin. The wife had never really gotten over it and often turned unsociable when upset over even the smallest things.

Miss Evelyn felt sorry for her.

But there was nothing she could do about that old misfortune, just like there was nothing she could do about this new one.

So when the child eventually popped out months later one evening in 1952, with a noticeably unpredicted overabundance of bits and pieces poking up from between its legs, no one in the room was more dumbfounded than Miss Evelyn, who bent to examine her catch more closely, unwilling to believe her own weary eyes, the truth confirmed for her only after she had gently prodded the offending genital with a fingernail and was struck back, full-force in the face, by an erupting geyser of warm whizz.

Among the attending women in the room, there were those whose hands immediately leapt to their own faces in empathetic

gestures of shock or disgust, while others attempted to stifle a snicker—with various degrees of success—responses generally divided, as opinions usually were in the family, between Sahlsbach and Swindelson sides of the clan.

But Miss Evelyn herself was neither appalled nor amused.

The midwife at that moment was preoccupied by larger concerns, the birth having already turned problematic. Decisions needed to be made and had she been looking for a divine sign to guide her just then, the urine facial was precisely the sort of omen she required: an almost baptismal-like blessing, proof positive that God himself was not only offering His approval for her to proceed with what she knew in her heart had to be done, but He was in fact aiding, abetting and conspiring with her to perform the foul deed.

Because from the instant the child had crowned and those present in the room gasped first at its much-too-pale coloring and then again, even louder, upon recognizing its features—knowing “who did this” turning out to be a thing better left unknown—Miss Evelyn had understood full well what was required of her, could clearly see the best course forward for all parties involved.

And she was not the sort of Sahlsbach that shirked responsibility.

Still, it was a nasty bit of business.

But the Lord works in mysterious ways—especially in the South—and that blessed golden shower had graced the midwife with a legitimate excuse, provided probable cause and reasonable cover, taken any need for awkward discussions off the table. So sputtering, spitting and secure in the knowledge that she was performing His will, Miss Evelyn let the boy slip out of her hands and onto its head, the infant landing at the end of its umbilical with a soft thud on the cabin’s planked floor.

In hindsight, the woman’s only regret would be that God had not given her enough time to first sever the cord. Had the good Lord seen fit to postpone His baptizing just a few seconds longer, she felt she might have been able to drop the boy from a far more effective height.

Why in Heaven's name the Almighty would choose to leave unfinished a job He himself had started made no sense to her. But faced with the setback, the midwife could see little recourse but to continue marching forward, like the good Christian soldier she was.

So over the sound of the dented child's screams, Miss Evelyn signaled big Cousin Itzie to herd all the attending out of the room, then proceeded to dive into the sort of awkward discussion she'd hoped to avoid, using any argument she could invent off the top of her head to prod her grandniece toward the most reasonable course of action: to convince the young mother that what had just been given birth to was not a bundle of joy but, at minimum, "a mixed-breed affront to the laws of God and nature, probably brain-damaged to boot" and—at worst — "a major white-people problem for the family that will never go away" unless the girl let Miss Evelyn do what needed to be done immediately.

"Might as well give birth to the seed of Satan's loins, as much trouble as there'll be over this one," she said, swiping runny and somewhat salty mascara as far away from her eyes as possible with one hand while scissoring at the irksome umbilical with the other, in the meantime refusing to even pick the little lad up off the floor, pretending—by means of a violent flutter of wrist—the infant's caul had burned her fingers.

But as Miss Evelyn would relate it later, in private to a trusted few, "If the girl had had good sense to start with, she would have taken care of the problem early on, and never put herself or her relations in that unfortunate situation in the first place. And lacking good sense, well ... what could one expect?"

Their argument would conclude with the sullen teenager retreating from all proper forms of debate, limiting expressions of her opinions to indecipherable, guttural utterances and flying chunks of placenta, following which—and depending on whose side of the family one overheard describing the incident—Miss Evelyn was either escorted from the cabin by her nephew's wife and a rather large hickory stick, or else the midwife simply washed her hands of the

unseemly matter and, in the words of Cousin Itzie, “two-stepped her big black booty right on out of that crazy Swindelson biddy’s shack.”

“There are few things on this earth that will create more trouble in one’s life than trying to do the right thing,” is an oft-repeated favorite among the many wise homilies Miss Evelyn has always preached.

But homily had not prepared the midwife for the ungodly amount of trouble her good intentions would wind up creating on this particular occasion.

Because in the days and weeks that followed the boy’s birth, in that inevitable whirlwind of embellished eyewitness accounts, misinformed rumors and vicious—sometimes violent—Sahlsbach versus Swindelson extended-family squabbles that rumbled through the county in the incident’s aftermath, requests for Miss Evelyn’s ministrations and consultations suffered a plummet almost as precipitous as the child’s, with even her most vocal defenders seemingly reluctant to utilize the woman’s previously unassailable services.

And before three months had gone by, those troubles became so troubling the midwife would wind up seated in the rear of a Greyhound bus, bouncing and rocking toward Philadelphia.

“To assist a half-sister’s granddaughter through her time,” she said to the woman sitting adjacent while offering a lavender-scented card across the aisle, the stranger remarking how lucky for the expectant mother, to have such a generous and knowledgeable relative in the family and what a dear, sweet person Miss Evelyn must be.

Miss Evelyn dismissed the compliment with a modest wave of her hand, feeling it would be rude to argue the point and preferring to change the subject anyway, seeing as how there was, in fact, no half-sister, no gravid anyone, eagerly awaiting the midwife’s arrival in Philly.

Still, the two ladies warmed to each other’s company quickly, the stranger turning out to be a surprisingly pleasant conversationalist with an encyclopedic knowledge of gardening—next to midwifery, Miss Evelyn’s greatest passion—and over the course of



their cross-country journey, the women would enjoy exchanging not only the wax paper-wrapped candies and homemade tea cakes they'd brought along with them for their excursion, but also small tidbits of horticultural wisdom, acquired through decades of experience.

"I makes my own blood meal to put on my pansies in the winter," the stranger said as Miss Evelyn watched an "Entering Chattanooga City Limits" sign slide by the Greyhound's windows. "You should see the blooms I get, you ever makes your own blood meal?"

"I don't suppose I ever had much need for blood meal," Miss Evelyn countered, prying the lid from a tin container on the seat beside her. "God only knows how much afterbirth I've got buried in my yard."

Miss Evelyn passed a peppermint sweet across the aisle, then unwrapped a butterscotch for herself. "All that placenta certainly makes the fig tree happy. Some years I've been able to reach out my bedroom window and pluck sugar figs big enough to choke a horse with off those branches."

The midwife indicated the scale with forefinger and thumb, her seatmate offering an appreciative gasp.

But what Miss Evelyn did not mention in Chattanooga—or later, down the road in Knoxville or Roanoke or Baltimore—the one small tidbit she could not bring herself to share with her new acquaintance, was how just two evenings prior to purchasing her bus ticket, both Miss Evelyn's beloved fig tree, along with the house she'd been born in and called home for fifty-seven years, had burst into flame, consumed in their entirety, the latter burning all the way down to its cinder-block piers in a noticeably accelerated fashion.

She did not speak of the large hickory stick that had stood on its end in her yard, stuck in the ground like a flagpole until one of the pumper hoses knocked it over.

Miss Evelyn was not the sort of Sahlbach that went around looking for sympathy.

But as she sat there in the back of the swaying Greyhound, tossed from side to side in the seat and sucking at a hard candy that kept sticking to her teeth—as she watched Chattanooga's gritty warehouses, greasy gas stations and "Jesus Loves You" billboards

scroll past the window—Coahoma County’s “Midwife Extraordinaire” couldn’t help but suspect that if ever anyone in this world deserved a little sympathy, it would be any poor soul who’d ever tried to do the right thing.



**The Desolation of Youth / Tyler McCurry**

**Woodcutter**

Danielle Stonehirsch

Inception 2023 Finalist

Once upon a time, a woodcutter lived at the edge of a lonely forest. The woodcutter had a wife as lovely as the summer sun setting over the snow-capped trees. They were kind-hearted, though poor, and were known to provide aid to the occasional fleeing princess or lost traveler. The woodcutter and his wife had a daughter as beautiful as the angels of Heaven. She grew up in the cottage at the edge of the forest and married a miller's son and had a daughter, and their daughter had a daughter, and her daughter had a daughter, and her daughter had a daughter, and her daughter had a daughter, and her daughter had a daughter, and her daughter had a daughter named Angel who worked at Home Depot in the lumber department cutting planks of wood in half for over-zealous do it yourselfers.

The Home Depot was located on forest land that had been razed by developers trying to make money in a quiet upstate town where Angel lived a quiet upstate life. She was neither rich nor poor, making minimum wage at Home Depot and filling in the rest working evenings at local shop Create! helping seven-year-olds at birthday parties paint ceramic mugs their parents could display until such time it was appropriate to tell their children their art was all crap and finally throw it away.

**BUZZKILL**

Leila Batatian Springer

Inception 2023 Finalist

*June 2050**Venice, California*

Spin off the lip of the biggest bowl in the skate park, witching hour of 4 a.m., braids whipping in the yellow drizzle, park lights flickering at half bright, gates locked but I nicked the code right out of Sally Security's head. Drop down the bowl and hurtle across, crouching low, the whoosh of my wheels the only sound. Flick the rain off my face and burp the edge, kick to the wall and jump it. No one here but me, so no staring, no whispering *Is that her?* Pulling up the photos and yep, it's me, "The Campus Killer." The lack of originality is depressing.

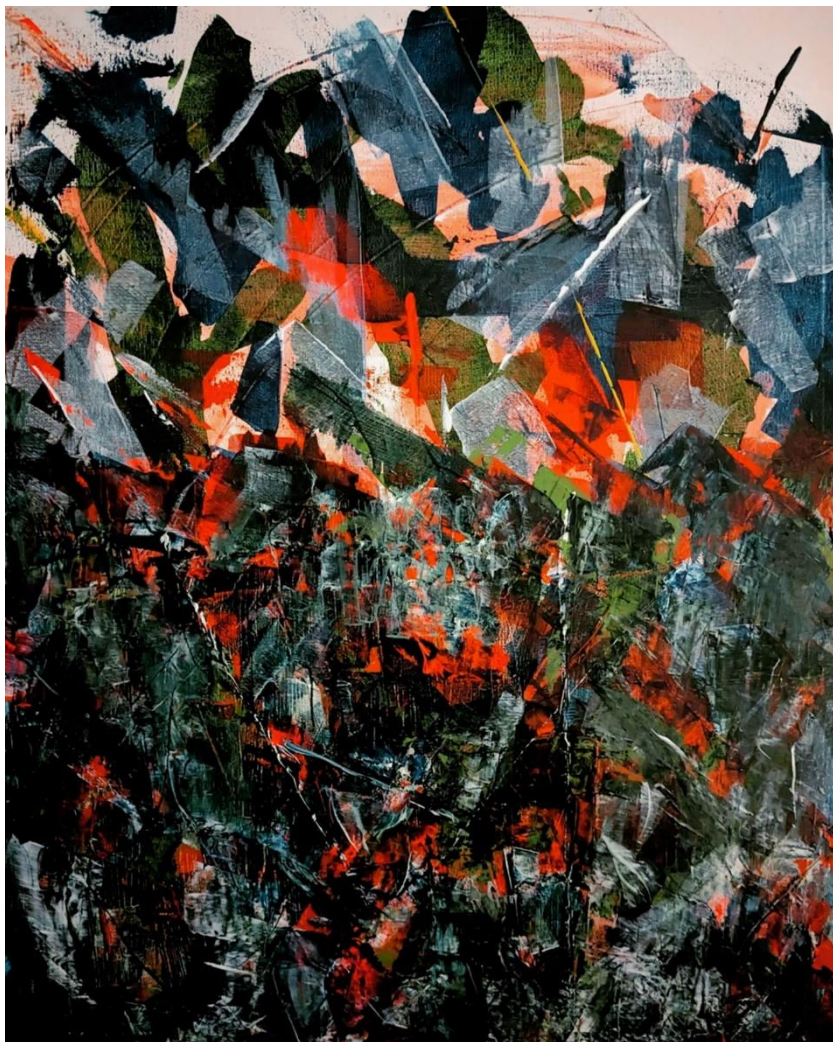
That's not even the problematic bit, that I killed someone. The problematic bit is, I would do it again. I *will* do it again. I won't be able not to.

Unless something stops me.

Sally Security's due for her next check in fifteen, where she will kick me out. Highlight of her night but of course she doesn't know I know. I know way too many things I shouldn't and wouldn't and it's a fucked-up deal, a fucking toxic bomb fucking stirring up my brain, making me fucking psychic of all fucking things, ruining my fucking life.

Twirl one three-sixty after another at the bottom of the bowl, dim yellow lights spinning over my starvation-dizzy head, looking up at the sky like an ice skater at the Olympics.

Breathe, Lola. Breathe. Ten months—fourteen, tops—and it'll all be over.



**a dream of Tibet / Bill Schulz**

Inception 2023 Finalist

## **The Devil in the Details**

Taylor J. Morley

Inception 2023 Finalist

Sure. God and I hadn't been on speaking terms for a while, but I guess I hadn't realized exactly where we were at. I thought we were just ignoring each other again, so imagine my surprise when the devil sat down next to me at the bus stop. He wasn't smoking a cigarette, dressed in black, or sporting two pointy horns. All things considered, he looked different than expected.

He hadn't dramatically appeared from the shadows with a burst of fire or a puff of smoke. He'd braved the rain, just like I had, and taken refuge at the pavilion where the bus had been due to stop a half hour ago.

Without a doubt, the bus's punctuality, or lack thereof, was his fault. He removed a pack of watermelon gum, popped a piece in his mouth, and extended another to me while smiling warmly. I took it and chewed it. But that didn't mean a thing. He outstretched his hand to me and gave me a fake name. While I wasn't thrilled about making his acquaintance, I was a little intimidated by the idea of offending such a being. I racked my brain as he made awkward small talk, complimenting my choice of shoes. Why was he here?

I'd made my fair share of questionable choices. I'd committed some actions that were legally frowned upon, stained my hands more than my fair share, and snatched a few things that weren't quite mine. But coming for my soul himself? Really?

## **Deus in Machina**

Kay Suz

Inception 2023 Finalist

The walls in this part of the prison were the wrong color. They were clean and shiny, and unquestionably the wrong color. Every other area was painted a dirty mint green. To keep the prisoners calm, they said. To keep them under control. Someone had told him that green makes time seem shorter, the rooms larger. And that it promotes harmony. It didn't really work like that in a place like this. He didn't know if the men there felt calmer, but they definitely all hated that color. And it didn't serve its purpose yesterday when the one they called Preacher decided he'd had enough of Coyote's bullshit and put a sharpened stylus through his throat. No color in the world could reduce the number of body bags leaving this place every week.

But this hallway, leading him to his long-awaited freedom, was more of a buttery yellow. Maybe to prepare parolees for the life they were about to return to. No, not return. Begin. After more than sixteen years, it would be a new life for him. A new world. It had changed, and then changed again, but not in the way he had wanted. And even though the counselors had spent all those hours talking to him in their soothing tones, he wasn't prepared for it. He knew it would still be alien and strange and wrong. It was not the world he had worked so hard to create before he went in.





**Genesis** / Rex Wilder

Inception 2023 Runner-up, Best of Art

## Grinders and Cream

Robert Hickson

Inception 2023 Runner-up, Best of Fiction

Lying on the living room couch one late spring evening, the sound of gunfire and explosions gently washing over her, mist like, from the latest Netflix action movie playing in the den, Bunny Naples, cell phone in hand, searched online for a new pair of athletic shoes. This year is different, she told herself. Her oldest son was getting married in the fall, and after looking at herself in the mirror, decided to get in shape. A pound here, maybe two there, better make that three; nothing too strenuous, the less sweat the better. Necessity is the mother of reduction, as the TV commercials shouted.

Shopping online was for Bunny, like for millions of other people lying on their couches this particular spring evening, tantalizing, like an apple in the Garden of Eden. A click click here, and a click click there, here a click, there a click and the next morning, Bunny, and millions like her, would be awakened to the sound of delivery trucks backup alarms sounding as the trucks backed into driveways, followed by a quick ring of the doorbell, letting the purchasers inside know that day's Edenic apple had arrived. By this point Bunny's dog, Spliffy, would be barking by the glass paneled front door; her husband, Jeremy, would be cursing in a long-forgotten tongue, and the morning would begin with a little cloud over said garden. Maybe just one click tonight, thought Bunny.



**Nightwalk / Bill Schulz**

Inception 2023 Winner

## Contributors

**Dan Alter** has published poems widely in journals including *Field*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Pank*, and *Zyzzyva*. His collection, *My Little Book of Exiles*, published in 2022 by Eyewear Press, won the poetry prize for the 2022 Anne and Robert Cowan Writer's Awards. He lives in Berkeley with his wife and daughter where he makes his living as an IBEW electrician. [www.danalter.net](http://www.danalter.net)

**Yakir Ben-Moshe**, an Israeli poet of Iraqi descent, won the Prime Minister's Prize for Literature in 2012. He has published four books of poetry and one of children's literature. He lives with his wife and children in Tel Aviv, where he is the Literary Editor of the Bialik House, as well as a teacher of creative writing.

**Martha Clarkson's** photography can be found at NYC4pa, *Lightbox Photography Gallery F-Stop Magazine*, Black Box Gallery, *Sunspot Magazine*, LensCulture, Light, Space, and Time Gallery, *Ours Photography magazine*, *CALYX*, and *Junto Magazine*. [www.marthaclarkson.com](http://www.marthaclarkson.com)

**Hardy Coleman** lives in "interesting times" within the 3rd Precinct of Minneapolis, MN. He once had two poems published in *Modern Drunkard Magazine* and cooked a meal for both the B 52's and the Rolling Stones.

**Robert Hickson** works as an instructional assistant in the special education department of a high school in eastern Connecticut.

**Tamar Jacobs' work** appears in *Gulf Coast*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Louisville Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *L'Esprit*, *Platform*, and elsewhere. Jacobs' unpublished novel, *A Kind of Music Not a Song*, was a finalist for the Janus Prize awarded by the Chautauqua Institution, and was longlisted for the Nilsen Prize awarded by Southeast Missouri State University Press. She is also a Katherine Anne Porter Fiction Prize winner.

**Harry Lee James** has been a farmer, soldier, and civil servant, and now lives as a writer and evolving artist sharing a wonderfully entangled workspace with his wife Michelle, who designs and makes jewelry.

**Leslie Kerby's** artwork focuses on the social networks and systems that, daily and broadly, impact each of us as individuals. She is particularly interested in networks and systems in moments of significant change. Her work is held in permanent collections at Columbia University, Arkansas State University, and Copelouzos Art Museum, Athens Greece.

**Tyler McCurry** is a thirty-three-year-old author from Olathe, Kansas with a passion for food, family and fun, but especially food. A true starving artist.

**Kyle Mercer's** plays have been performed at one-act festivals around the country and as part of a double-bill at the Finborough Theatre in London. He studied with Edward Albee at the University of Houston and is currently trying his hand at fiction, recently completing a collection of literary stories, and is putting the final touches to a mainstream novel.

**Taylor J. Morley** is a twenty-year-old college student with a passion for writing and storytelling.

**LeeAnn Olivier**, MFA, is the author of *Doom Loop Wonderland* (The Hunger Press, 2021) and *Spindle, My Spindle* (Hermeneutic Chaos Press, 2016). Her poetry has appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *Rockvale*, *Driftwood Press* and elsewhere. Originally from Louisiana, LeeAnn now teaches English at a college in Fort Worth, Texas.

**Bill Schulz** is a Maine-based poet, editor, and artist. He received a Master's in English from the poetry workshop at The University of New Hampshire and a Master's in Theological Studies from The Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California. His work has appeared in *The Aurorean*, *High Shelf*, *Nine Mile*, *Nixes Mate*, *The Seneca Review*, and *Sunspot*. His book of poetry, *Dog or Wolf*, was published in July 2022. He is the founder and editor of *Hole In The Head Review*, [www.holeintheheadreview.com](http://www.holeintheheadreview.com).

**Leila Batatian Springer** has written two novel manuscripts, dabbles in poetry, and won First Prize from *The Writer* for her short story "Hunger." She has given birth twice without anesthesia and found that less painful than trying to get a literary agent.

**Christopher Squier** is an artist, writer, and cofounder of the art collective Dissolve. His artwork explores optics and the role of light in contemporary visual culture, while his writing addresses research-based projects in a global arts context. He's based in New York City. [squier.co](http://squier.co)

**Danielle Stonehirsch** lives in Maryland and works for Health Volunteers Overseas, a nonprofit focused on global health. Her fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared on the *Tin House* website and in *Bethesda Magazine*, *Washington City Paper*, and *Montgomery Magazine* as well as various anthologies. She hopes to publish her first novel soon.

**Ezra Sun** is from an amalgamation between New York, Vancouver, and Shanghai. Outside of writing, he enjoys playing the electric guitar, watching Netflix, and solving Sudoku puzzles. He is currently studying physics at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Kay Suz** is a science fiction writer living in Knoxville, Tennessee. She has a passion for images and words and enjoys putting the two together in any format. She has led writing workshops focusing on short stories, novels, screenplays, and stageplays. She has also directed plays for Underground Stage Company.

**Rex Wilder** is a visual artist and poet living in Benedict Canyon, California. His latest book, *A Quiet Place to Land*, combining images and verbal reflections on a path towards healing from mental illness, is forthcoming from Chatwin Press in Seattle.

**William Lewis Winston** lives in Oakland, California. His poems appear in *Bearing Witness* (Zephyr Press 2002), *Margie*, *Ink Pot*, *Comstock*, *Poet Lore*, *Close Up* (Orchard Lea Press 2022), *What Is All This Sweet Work?* (Vita Brevis Press Anthology IV 2022), *Sunspot*, and *Consequence*. He received an International Merit Award from *Atlanta Review*. He has processed his own photographs since the age of ten, and until recently, kept the street photography shot in distant lands to himself.

**Cynthia Yatchman** is a Seattle-based artist and art instructor with a BFA in painting (UW). She works primarily on paintings, prints and collages. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections. She has exhibited on both coasts, extensively in the Northwest, including shows at Seattle University, SPU, Shoreline Community College, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the Pacific Science Center. She is a member of the Seattle Print Art Association and COCA-Center of Contemporary Art.

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